

# *Ālambanaparīkṣā*: Dignāga's Phenomenalism

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Dignāga's Phenomenalism is explained in a short and relatively simple treatise called *Ālambanaparīkṣā*, according to which, we cannot directly know the external world and it is possible for us to have experiences even in the absence of external stimuli, as there is a discrepancy between what we see and what is given. In other words, there seems to be an unbridgeable gap between reality and appearance (*pratibhāsa*). Thus, the *Ālambanaparīkṣā* is devoted to a criticism of the belief in a material object existing totally independent of human experience, it is in no sense claims at eliminating the world of objective experience altogether. The *Ālambanaparīkṣā* is a treatise of eight verses and it follows out a number of ideas from the tradition of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*. The treatise is divided into two parts: The first part (1-5 *kārikās*), sets up the views of the realists, which may be broadly classified under three groups as follows: (1) The advocates of atoms as direct objects of our consciousness (Sarvāstivādins and Vaibhāṣikas). (2) The advocates of the aggregates of atoms (*saṃghāta*) acting as before (Sautrāntikas). (3) The advocates of the atomic integrated forms behaving so (Vagbhāṭa, etc.). And in the second part (6-8 *kārikās*), Dignāga's own opinion about the issue is presented. Furthermore, it is generally presumed that Dignāga's idealistic position is

well established by his categorical refutation of the external world in the *Ālambanaparīkṣā*. The term '*ālambana*' is translated as 'external object' and the work is taken to refute the external world. But the treatment of *ālambana*, if carefully analyzed, relates to the object in the sense of the object of consciousness (*vijñānālambana*) not that of the object of the senses (*indriya-viśaya*, unique particulars=*svalakṣaṇa*).<sup>1</sup> Dignāga criticized Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika concept of *ālambana* in *Ālambanaparīkṣā* as being external and not the existence of external reality. That is why there is a need to study and examine Dignāga's argument in the *Ālambanaparīkṣā*. Therefore, I propose to focus on the significance of this treatise in order to show the discrepancy between the nature of the object as perceived in our awareness and the nature of the external object as it is. In order to show this, my procedure will be twofold: First, I shall explain the meaning and the criterion of *ālambana*, and second, I shall discuss the eight *kārikās* of the treatise in detail in order to understand the true nature of the *ālambana*.

### **Meaning and Criterion of *Ālambana***

*Ālambana* is the immediate source of knowledge of an object to be known, which generates perception. It is not the sense-datum (sensation), but rather the foundation or objective support of a perceptual sensory experience. In other words, it is the supporting element in the process of cognition. Moreover, according to Dignāga, an *ālambana* of a perceptual consciousness must fulfill at least two conditions: (1) Causality (*hetutva*) – It is causally responsible for the arising of that piece of consciousness (*tat-karaṇa*); and (2) Image-imposing – It is also what constitutes the appearance (*pratibhāsa* or image) of that piece of consciousness (*ākāra-*

*arpaṇa*). Of these two the first criterion has been accepted by all schools of Buddhism and it is brought under the category of the four conditions: *Hetu*, *samanantara*, *ālambana*, and *adhipati*. And the second criterion of *ālambana* is a new element introduced by Dignāga. Moreover, *ālambana* (field of support), *viṣaya* (field of operation), *pratibhāsa* (appearance) and *artha* (knowable aspect) are taken by Dignāga as synonymous to each other. In order to understand this synonymity, we have to examine each *kārikās* of the *Ālambanaparīkṣā* in detail. With this much of background, we can now turn our focus to Dignāga's *Ālambanaparīkṣā*.

### **Dignāga's Ālambanaparīkṣā**

Dignāga begins his examination of objective support of consciousness, after a salutation to all of the Buddha's and Bodhisattvas. As mentioned above, the treatise is divided into two parts, the first part sets up the views of the three realist groups. We will take each group one by one in detail, in order to have a careful understanding of the treatise. Dignāga says, those who postulate that the *ālambana* is an external thing (*bāhyārtha*), consider that either the atoms or the aggregates of atoms (*saṃghāta*) are the object of consciousness, because former serve as causes of the consciousness (*viññapti*) of the sense-organs and later because consciousness arises representing the image of the aggregates. Dignāga rejects both the views, on the following grounds. For the former, he says even if the atoms are the causes of the consciousness, since the cognition does not bear the representation of those atoms, the atoms are not the field of operation/content (*viṣaya*) of that cognition, just as the sense-organs are not the cognition's object.<sup>3</sup>

It is said that since the atoms are not cognized directly, the consciousness does not represent the image of the atoms. Just like the sense-organ, though it causes consciousness, it is not at all cognized by it, i.e., its image is not reflected in the later. It is the content (field of operation), whose self-being (*svabhāva*) or essential nature (*svarūpa*) is asserted, while consciousness arises in its image. That is, content is that whose characteristics are specified by the knowledge; this is so because the knowledge appears in the form of content. Consciousness cannot discharge any function of determining its object beyond representing its image. Therefore, consciousness having arisen in the form of a blue-patch is spoken of as that it has determined the blue patch. The atoms cannot behave like that, hence cannot be the object of consciousness.

Regarding, the advocates of the aggregates of atoms as the object of consciousness, because the cognition bears its representation. Dignāga demurs to it: 'Consciousness doesn't arise from what is represented in it (i.e., aggregates of atoms), because they don't exist in substance (*dravyatan*) just like the double moon. What is substantially non-existence is incapable of causing any effect; example, double moon, it is perceived on account of ones own defective eye (*tīmira*). Because, when the eye has its sight disturbed by cataract and other diseases, then there arises the appearance of the double moon in a person of defective sense-organ; and that too is not as a real entity. But this perception is not caused by the double moon, as there exists no object like the double moon. So, just as the double moon is not spoken of as object of its consciousness though the later is endowed with the image of the former (i.e. double moon); because this does not produce it consciousness. Similarly the aggregates of atoms cannot

act as producing factor of consciousness, because they are not a substantial entity. They are phenomenally true, hence cannot serve as the object-cause.

Thus, both the external things are unfit to be the real contents of the consciousness, as both of them are deficient of one or another criterion of *ālambana*. The atoms, lacks the second criterion, i.e. bereft of the image-imposing and aggregates of atoms, lacks the first criterion, i.e. bereft of causality. Therefore, both are defective.<sup>4</sup>

The last group of realists holds the integrated form of atoms (*sañcitākāra*) as the object of consciousness, because they exist in atoms. Whatever exists in the atom is all a substantial entity (*dravyasat*), hence capable to impose its image on the consciousness. Dignāga's reply to it is: The atomic integrated form is not perceivable like solidity, hardness, coldness, etc. Though they are in the atoms are not perceived by our eye-consciousness, because the perceptive powers of the senses are assigned to their respective domains of objects. So is the atomic integrated forms.<sup>5</sup> The author's weightily argument here is: All gross things like pot, bowl, etc. would be seen identical if the integrated form (*sañcitākāra*) and the atomic form (*pārimandalya*) are one and the same. Of course there are differentiations in their size, but they are related to things which are only phenomenal entities (conventionally real) and which cannot be regarded as causal factors. For, if we eliminated atoms of the empirical things one by one, we shall have no more the experience of such things. Whatever is substantially true and existent never ceases to evoke its perception; for example, color, etc.<sup>6</sup>

Now, in the second part of the treatise, the author set forth his own solution of the problem: It is the content (*artha*) which exists internally in

the knowledge as a knowable aspect appearing to us as if it exists externally (because of human intentionality – *viṣayomukhata*). When, for example, a patch of space being reflected in the well-water appears as if it exists on the surface of the water. Or the image of the moon, being reflected in the mirror appears as though it is in the mirror.<sup>7</sup> Though; no external thing is admitted as *ālambana*, there is, nevertheless, something internal serving as the object condition (*ālambana-pratyaya*). That is, the knowable interior form (*antaḥ rūpa*).

Moreover, because consciousness existing internally becomes endowed with a form on the model of an object (*arthakarāṇa tadākāraṇam*) and this form of object evokes the consciousness, that consciousness becomes in possession of two characteristics of *ālambana*; hence it is said to be the actual *ālambana*.<sup>8</sup> To this the opponent says: The knowable aspect (*grāhyabhāga*) and the knowledge are one and designated differently. How can the principle of cause and effect relation be admitted between them? Dignāga answers this question in two ways: The first answer is: Though it is only a part of consciousness, it becomes a productive factor of the later because it is invariably and simultaneously associated with the later. The second answer is: It becomes so in succession by transmitting the force (*śakti*) in the store-consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*). In support of these two answers, Dignāga cites the authority of his earlier Rationalist's saying: In the presence of cause is the presence of its result and in the absence of the cause is the absence of its result; this is the characteristic sign of what is the cause and what is the result, even if they happen simultaneous or in succession. This saying proves beyond doubt that there is possibly a cause-effect relation between the two simultaneous events if there is concomitance

between them. For example, like in between existence and non-existence (*bhāva* and *abhāva*), mind and mental state (*citta-caittā*), and a favorable example of lamp and light (*pradipa-prabhā*).<sup>9</sup>

Further, the opponent ask – If only the knowable aspect (*antaḥ rūpa*) is the cognition support, how does the visual consciousness arise relying on that knowable interior form and on the eye?

Dignāga replies, if the sense-organ is a derivative element (*bhautīka*), then there may be a serious objection. We, however, desire to say that what force is accessory to objectivity (*viśaya-sahakārin*) that is regarded as the sense-organ. Thus, in our system just as *rūpa*, color exists internally, so also the eye exists internally. Therefore, how does the above stated flaw incur?<sup>10</sup> Moreover, we shall take this point of visual organ and visible object giving rise to consciousness again in the chapter of perception, at greater length, while explaining the process of perception. Further, Dignāga says that either the force (*śakti*) exists in consciousness or exists in its own indescribable form, in both the cases there is no difference in the production of the effect. Thus, the objective aspect (*viśayarūpa*) of consciousness and, the force (*śakti*) called sense-organ go mutually conditioned from immemorial time.<sup>11</sup> Thus, having demonstrated that the perceivable object (*ālambana*) is truly interior, the author in conclusion, says the following: The interior object, which is not different from consciousness is endowed with two factors (image and cause) and therefore, it is logically concluded that consciousness alone is transformed in to external object (*viśaya*).

### **Concluding Remarks**

Thus, we may conclude from the preceding discussion that this treatise is commenced in order to refute the external objectivity and to establish the internal subjectivity. This is the purpose and the treatise is its devise. In reality what actually causes a sensation to arise is never that about which we have awareness, so there is an unbridgeable gap between reality and appearance (*pratibhāsa*), which leads to the discrepancy between the nature of the external object and the nature of the object perceived in our awareness. According to Buddhist, reality is constantly emanating data and these data stimulates the cognizer's senses and get transformed and structured as an idea or image in the mind of the cognizer, which is only an appearance of the given object. That is, object is constructed and structured at the mental level, so subjective, but because of the inherent nature of intentionality it is projected outside as an external object. So what is grasped by our sense-organ say eye is a patch of color and not the reality, because eye is capable of receiving of data in that form only. Then this patch is the content (*viṣaya*) for the activity of the mind. Thus, this patch (*viṣaya*) is the immediate source (*ālambana*) of consciousness, which is internal and subjective. Whereas according to the realist, we can directly perceive the external reality and it exists independent of perceiving mind. So according to them object is external therefore its immediate source is also external. It is this external *ālambana* which is criticized by Dignāga in the *Ālambanaparīkṣā*. Moreover, once we understand this difference of *alambana* (internal-external) then we can understand the difference of the concept of reality, according to Buddhist and realist. Realist gives explanation at ontological level, whereas according to Buddhist there is no need of externality or ontological commitment, even without it we can have explanation.



**Notes and References**

1. For details see Amar singh, (2004), p. 61.
2. Cf. *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, II, 62
3. *Ālambanaparīkṣā*, ka. 1.
4. Ibid., ka. 2.
5. Ibid., ka. 3.
6. Ibid., ka. 4 – 5.
7. For details see, Tola, F. and Carmen, D. *JIP* 10, pp. 105-129, (1982).
8. *Ālambanaparīkṣā*, ka. 6.
9. For details see, Tola, F. and Carmen, D. *JIP* 10, pp. 105-129, (1982).
10. *Ālambanaparīkṣā*, ka. 7.
11. Ibid., ka. 8.