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# What is immediate perception? The Buddhist answer

Is the immediacy of our knowledge an epistemological ideal or merely a psychological reassurance that our senses don't misguide us? If we disregard immediacy in favour of other means to determine all of our knowledge including sensation, how can we discern sensation from knowledge? Conversely, if we regard immediacy as a physiological event (sense stimulation), how can we prove that it's part of the cognitive process? Immediacy-related problems arise in any epistemological discourse – Western or Eastern, ancient or modern. What is immediacy according to Buddhist epistemological tradition (*pramanavada*) represented by Dignaga (480-540) and Dharmakirti (600-660)?

Victoria Lysenko

According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (henceforth, the SEP), immediacy requires two criteria: 'The first one appeals to the idea of *inference*: something is immediately experienced or is given if the cognitive consciousness of it is not arrived at via any sort of inferential process. The second one appeals to the idea of certainty: something is immediately experienced or given if the awareness of it is certain, incapable of being mistaken' (BonJour: Fall 2001).

In their disputes with Brahmanical thinkers the Buddhists tried to exclude any kind of mental construction (*kalpana*) from the realm of the immediately given. But, deprived as it is of mental construction, immediate perception becomes automatically incapable of providing any cognitive information about its object. That is why Buddhist thinkers had to prove that immediate perception (*pratyaksha*), in spite of its non-conceptual character, is still a genuine instrument of knowledge (*pramana*). How did they manage to reconcile the 'blindness' of pure sensation with its being part of the cognitive activity?

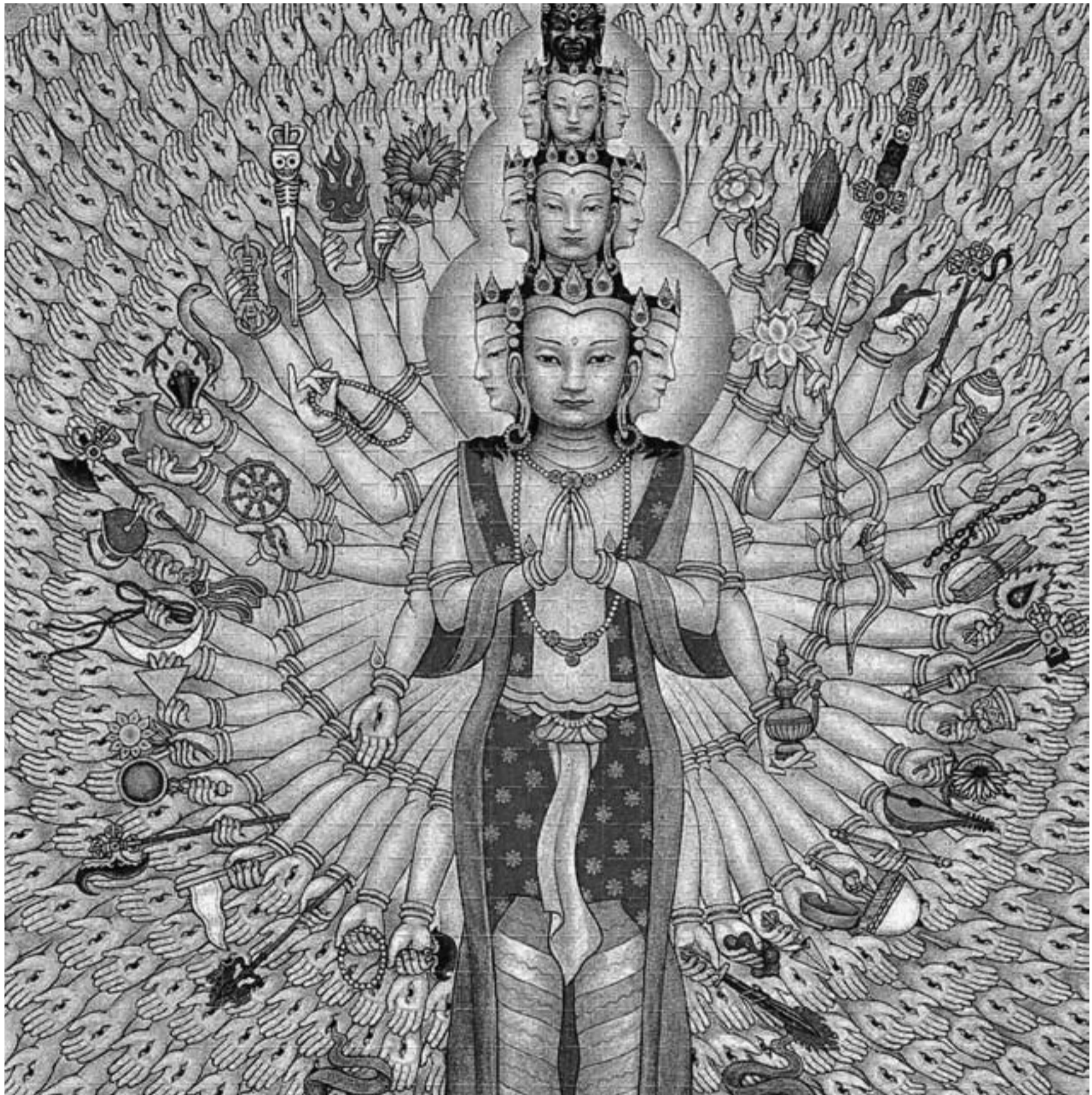
## Units of becoming

The main goal of knowledge from the Buddhist point of view is to know things the way they are (*yathabhutam*) or to know reality as such (*tathata*). What then constitutes reality? For the Buddhist the essence of reality is impermanent (*anitya*); to exist means to change, because nothing has any enduring essence (*anatman*). Existence is being reduced to a stream of discrete momentary *dharmanas*.

The term *dharmanas* (in plural form) has no equivalent in Western thought; it has been interpreted in many ways: 'phenomena', 'point-instances', 'units of becoming', 'properties', 'tropes' etc.. To know reality as it is means to know it as a series of *dharmanas*. For the Buddhist this kind of knowledge is obtained in meditation and has a totally immediate character. In this way immediacy is obviously related to the religious soteriological perspective of the Buddhist tradition, but it is the immediacy of the common cognitive experience that was a subject of epistemological discourse and controversy among philosophers of different Indian schools and traditions – Buddhist as well as Brahmanical.

## Particulars and universals as subject-matters of *pratyaksha* and *anumana*

According to Dignaga's major epistemological work *Pramanasamuccaya* ('A Collection of Instruments of Knowledge', henceforth, PS), only two



instruments of valid knowledge (*pramana*) exist: *pratyaksha*, or perception, and *anumana*, or inference, and each of them has its own subject matter. *Pratyaksha* deals with what Dignaga calls *svalakshanas*, literally, that which characterises itself, a particular characteristic or pure particular – something absolutely unique, singular and, most important, momentary (*kshanika*). As *svalakshanas* are ultimately real (*paramarthasat*) and inexpressible, to experience them means to experience reality as it is. The object of the other *pramana*, inference (*anumana*), is constituted by conceptualisations, verbalisations, reflections and other products of mental construction (*kalpana* or *vikalpa*)

that Dignaga calls *samanyalakshana* – a general characteristic applicable to many objects or distributed over many instances. *Samanyalakshanas*, generally translated as 'universal', are enduring and not subject to change – for this reason they are regarded by Buddhists as only relatively real (*samvritisat*).

The term *svalakshana* does not easily lend itself to interpretation. Its understanding is still a highly controversial matter among scholars. The problem is that its ontological status is quite ambiguous in our authors' writings. The reason for this ambiguity was formulated by George Dreyfus: 'Dignaga and Dharmakirti...are ontologists

only inasmuch as their epistemology requires them to be. They even seem to feel free to alternate between several conflicting metaphysical standpoints. For example, in most of their works, Dignaga and Dharmakirti adopt a so-called Sautrantika standpoint, presupposing the existence of external objects. In other parts of their work, however, they shift their ontological frameworks and move to a Yogacara rejection of external objects...Commonsensual levels are introduced for the sake of convenience and withdrawn to be replaced by higher but more counterintuitive schemes' (Dreyfus 1997: 49). A choice of ontological positions is equally applicable to *svalakshana*: it may be either

mind-independent or mind-dependent. As far as immediacy is a kind of inner experience of mental actuality, it will be natural to accept that *svalakshana*, at least in some of our authors' texts, is regarded as a sort of sense data.

## Is *pratyaksha* a cognitive event?

To Dignaga, a *pratyaksha* (etymologically, 'before eyes') is above all an immediate experience, and its immediacy proves its veracity and certainty. This immediacy is so important that he defines *pratyaksha* through the exclusion of mediacy in the form of mental constructions. Thus he calls it *kalpana-apodham*, 'free from mental constructions' (PS: 3c). In this

way the first criteria of immediacy from the SEP is strictly observed.

If *pratyaksha* is construed by Buddhists as a direct experience (*anubhava*), does it mean that its immediacy consists in the activity of the sense faculties (*indriya*) or in the contact of the senses with their object (*indriya-arthasannikarsha*)? Buddhists accept neither of these alternatives. That a sense faculty cannot by itself possess cognitive activity was acknowledged by all Indian epistemologists (*pramanavadins*). And the majority of Indian philosophers, except Buddhists, saw in the sense-object contact the main condition of sense perception. Why didn't Buddhists? First, for them not all senses could enter in direct contact with their objects (they insist on non-contactualness of certain senses – the visual and auditory). Second, *pratyaksha* is not necessarily a sense perception. Among its manifestations Dignaga lists mental perception (*manasa pratyaksha*), yogic perception (during meditation) and self-awareness, which have nothing to do with senses. Thus we could safely say that immediacy of *pratyaksha* is not reduced to any sort of direct sense stimulation.

Then how is it produced? Dignaga is not clear about this question. According to Dharmakirti, a *svalakshana*, or particular, possessing its causal function (*arthakriya*), can produce its own image or aspect (*akara*) in our mind. Does it mean that we really apprehend *svalakshana* at the moment of perception? Taking into account that all of our own cognitive devices – images, conceptions, words, etc. – are products of mental construction, how could we say that immediate perception of particulars or of their aspects is a cognitive event? For Dignaga and Dharmakirti the answer to this question is not simple. Being Buddhists, both of them reject the existence of *Atman* or Self in a role of a permanent cogniser. For them there is no subject of knowledge apart from the knowledge itself, which is a flow of momentary point-instances (*dharmas*). So what makes an instance of *pratyaksha* a piece of knowledge if sense-object contact is not cognitive and conceptualisation is cognitive but not immediate?

They might propose an answer connected to their concept of *svasamvedana*



as a variety of *pratyaksha*. Literally, *svasamvedana* is a self-awareness, not the awareness of the Self as *Atman*, but the awareness of the cognitive event itself, or self-reflective awareness. Dignaga distinguishes between mental perception of the object, such as colour and other sense qualities, and self-awareness of desire, anger, pleasure, pain, etc., which for him constitute mental events not dependent on any sense organ. *Svasamvedana* is a sort of intuitive experience (*anubhava*) that accompanies all kinds of mental activity, being itself free of any conceptualisation. It is sometimes rendered by the term 'apperception', introduced by Leibnitz in the sense of the reflexive awareness of our personal cognitive experience as desirable or not. But that does not mean either that cognition is cognised by a separate cognitive act (otherwise, there would follow an infinite regression) or that *svasamvedana*, being a sort of introspection, has other mental states as its objects.

### Is *pratyaksha* a true or an instrumental cognition?

When Dignaga defines *pratyaksha* as

exempt from mental construction, does he mean that the *pramana* of *pratyaksha* is a true cognition? The confirmation that *pramana* is not tightly associated with truth lies in the veridical status of *anumana* (inference). Being a mental operation dealing with mentally constructed objects, it could not grasp the true nature of the object and for this reason is regarded as *bhrranta* – erring or subject to errors. Nevertheless, it is still a *pramana*. Why? Because, according to Dharmakirti, it may reveal something previously unknown and may lead to a successful action. It is *pramana* because of its instrumentality with regard to practical tasks, including final emancipation (*nirvana*). Thus we may safely add instrumentality to what we suppose may be the Buddhist definition of immediacy.

### Sketching a new definition of perceptual immediacy

Dharmakirti argues that when we think of an object, we have only a blurred cognition of it, whereas when we see it we have a vivid apprehension. But for him simple seeing and 'seeing as', (perceiving an object as

something), for example, a jug, constitutes two different cognitive events that have different contents. One is perception without mental constructions, the other is perceptual judgment somehow caused by this perception and assisted by memory. For Dharmakirti the perceptual judgment 'this is a jug', unlike inference (*anumana*), is not a *pramana* because it deals with something already apprehended by perception. But how does he explain our experiencing immediacy with regard to seeing something definite, like a jug? For him it is because of the *kalpana* (mental construction) that a cognitive image appears for us as a totally external thing (*Pramanavarttika* III: 359-362). One more distinguishing feature of *kalpana* owing to its mediate character is its lack of vividness (*Svavrtti to Pramanaviniscaya* I. 31). Accordingly, *pratyaksha* is distinguished by its vividness (*spashta*), which may be construed as our fourth criterion of *pratyaksha's* immediacy. To this set of criteria one may add another: *sarupya*, the congruency of internal image with external object, or the fact that the knowledge takes the

form of its object. To exclude the possibility of interpreting *sarupya* in the sense that knowledge may have only the form of the object, but not its own form (*nirakaravada*), we should add to our criteria the self-reflexive character (*svasamvedana*) as a confirmation of the fact that cognitive event has its own form as well.

Thus, we can single out six criteria of immediacy from the works of our authors: 1) non-inferential character (*kalpana-apodham*), corresponding to the first point of the SEP definition; 2) non-erring character (*abhrranta*), corresponding to the second point of SEP definition; 3) instrumentality (*pramanatva*) with regard to practical tasks; 4) vividness (*spashta*); 5) congruence (*sarupya*) with its object; and 6) self-reflexive character (*svasamvedana*). In this way, an acquaintance with Buddhist epistemology may suggest new perspectives for our understanding and interpretation of perceptual immediacy. ◀

### For further reading

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