1 The perceptual process

Amongst the world religions, indeed in history itself, the first theory of perception is found in the Buddha’s teachings—as in his analysis of sense-perception (saññā) found in the Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta (M 18).¹ This canonical version differs in some important aspects from the more developed Abhidhamma and Commentarial version, but one feature is common to both, that is, that an act of complete perception does not arise as an immediate result of the contact between the organ and the sense-object. Perception is regarded a process of thought that begins as a simple sensation and ends up with the complete apprehension of the object.

The canonical theory of the perceptual process comprises six stages:²

1. The first stage is sense-consciousness, for example, visual consciousness (cakkhu, viññāna), which arises with the eye and visual object as its conditions. At this point, it is bare sensation before the object is fully apprehended (which is similarly understood in the Abhidhamma).

2. The second stage is the process of sensory impression or sense-contact, for example, eye impression or eye contact (cakkhu, samphassa or -phassa), defined as the coordination amongst the sense-organ, the sense-object and sense-consciousness (tinṇaṁ saṅgati phasso, M 18.16/1:111).

3. The third stage is feeling (vedanā), which refers to the hedonic tone or emotional value of the resultant experience.

4. The fourth stage is perception or apperception (saññā). The fact that viññāna (bare sensation) occurs before saññā [bare reaction] shows that saññā represents a more complex form of awareness. While viññāna refers to mere sensory awareness, saññā “suggests a state of awareness obtained by introducing distinctions to the earlier stage of bare awareness” (Karunadasa, 2001:211).

5. The fifth stage is thinking (vitakka, often translated as “initial application (of thought)”), suggesting a stage where the perceived object is interpreted.

6. The sixth and last stage is called mental proliferation (papañca) that “hints at the tendency of the individual’s imagination to break loose” (Nānananda 1971:4). This is a very complex level of experience that is coloured by one’s desires and prejudices.³ The last stage of this process is clearly detailed in the short Cetanā Sutta 1 (S 12.38):

Monks, what one wills, and what one plans, and what lies latent—this is a support⁴ for the continuation of consciousness. When there is a support, there is a basis for the establishing of consciousness. When consciousness is established and increases, there occurs further rebirth. When there is further rebirth, there arise further birth, decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, anxiety and despair. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

² Discussed in greater detail in Saññā = SD 17.4. See also Analayo, Satipaṭṭhāna: The direct path to realization, 2003:222-226.
³ Karunadasa argues that in this sixfold process, the final stage of perception is not “mental proliferation” (as proposed by Sarathchandra, 1958 & Nānananda 1971:5 ff) but actually “perception” (stage 4) since “what follows saññā could be understood not as a process of sense-perception but as a purely ideational process set up by a process of perception. In point of fact, both Sarathchandra and Nānananda (1971:5 ff, 41 ff) explain the stages subsequent to saññā as a process of interpretation and judgement.” (2001:212).
⁴ “Support,” ārammaṇa, also tr “object,” that is, one of the 6 sense-objects, forming the external support for sense-perception, and without them there is no sense-perception.
2.3.1.7 Saṁyutta Nikāya 2, Nidāna Vagga 3, Dhātu Saṁyutta 1, Nānatta Vagga 7

Yañ ca kho bhikkhave ceteti yañ ca pakappeti yañ ca anuseti. Ārammaṇam eta hoti viññā-nassassa thitiyā. Ārammane sati patiṭhiṭā viññānassato. Tasmiṁ patiṭṭhitte viññāne virulhe āyatiṁ puna-bhavābhīnibbatti hoti. Āyatiṁ puna-bhavābhīnibbattiyā sati āyatiṁ jarā,-maranāṁ soka,parideva,dukkha,domanass' upāyāsā sambhavanti. Evam etass kevalassa dukkha-khandhassā samudayo hoti.

(S 12.38/2:65 f)\(^5\)

2 The dependent arising of perception

2.1 The perceptual processes given in the Saññā Nānatta Sutta is here tabulated for easy reference:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diversity: (nānatta)</th>
<th>Perception (saññā)</th>
<th>Thought (sankappa)</th>
<th>Desire (chanda)</th>
<th>Passion (pariḷāha)</th>
<th>Searching (pariyesanā)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form</td>
<td>Perception of form</td>
<td>Thought for form</td>
<td>Desire for form</td>
<td>Passion for form</td>
<td>Searching for forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound</td>
<td>Perception of sound</td>
<td>Thought for sound</td>
<td>Desire for sound</td>
<td>Passion for sound</td>
<td>Searching for sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smell</td>
<td>Perception of smell</td>
<td>Thought for smell</td>
<td>Desire for smell</td>
<td>Passion for smell</td>
<td>Searching for smells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taste</td>
<td>Perception of taste</td>
<td>Thought for taste</td>
<td>Desire for taste</td>
<td>Passion for taste</td>
<td>Searching for tastes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touch</td>
<td>Perception of touch</td>
<td>Thought for touch</td>
<td>Desire for touch</td>
<td>Passion for touch</td>
<td>Searching for touch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mind-object</td>
<td>Perception of mind-object</td>
<td>Thought for mind-object</td>
<td>Desire for mind-object</td>
<td>Passion for mind-object</td>
<td>Searching for mind-objects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^5\) See S:B 757 n112.

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The Saññā Nānatta Sutta is found in the Nānatta Vagga (the chapter on diversity), the first section of 14th saṅyutta, the Dhātu Saṅyutta (the connected discourses on the sense elements). The Nānatta Vagga is divided into two pentads (pañcaka): an “internal pentad” (ajjhatta pañcaka), dealing with the sense-faculties, and “external pentad” (bāhira pañcaka), dealing with the sense-objects. ⁶

The first sutta of the Nānatta Vagga is the Dhātu Nānatta Sutta (S 14.1) of the internal pentad, and the Saññā Nānatta Sutta comes seventh. The latter shows how each of the six sense-objects, wrongly perceived, leads to further thoughts (sankappa) for it, which in turn turns into desire (chanda) that is reinforces itself into passion or “fever” (pariḷāha), resulting in the searching or “quest” (pariyesanā) for the sense-object. ⁷

2.2 EXPLANATION OF TERMS. This sequence effectively constitutes an equivalent to links 3 to 9 of the better known twelve-link dependent arising formula, seen from the sense-object (“internal”) perspective. In the Mahā Nidāna Sutta (D 15) has a ninefold sequence, ⁸ and a secondary sequence that gives another variation of the Saññā Nānatta Sutta sequence, namely:

[Diagram of the 12-link dependent arising]

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⁶ See S:B 527 f.
⁷ Taking form as an example, Comy explains, “having grasp the sight (ie sign, nimitta) of one’s companions, when the passion arises, one searches in order to obtain that form” (pariḷāhe uppanne sandiṭṭha,sambhate gahetvā tassa rūpassa paṭilābh’ athāya pariyesanā) (SA 2:133).
⁸ Consciousness → name-and-form → contact → feeling → craving → clinging → existence → birth → decay-and-death. See SD 5.17.
Craving → searching → gain → decision-making → desire and lust → attachment → possessiveness → stinginess → safe-guarding → various evils, unwholesome phenomena (violence, quarrels, etc),

(M 15.9-18/2:58-61) = SD 5.17

In an email of the Buddha-L website, LS Cousins makes this observation, commenting especially on “desire” (chanda):

As regards chanda, it is rather frequent in the term kāma-chanda, normally used as a name for the first of the five hindrances. In the Saññā Nānatta Sutta (S 2:143 f) we see it in a type of conditioned arising:

- dependent upon the visible object element arises labelling of visible objects,
- dependent upon that arises thinking based upon visible objects,
- dependent upon that arises chanda for visible objects,
- dependent upon that arises feverish concern about visible objects,
- dependent upon that arises searching for visible objects.

[The same is true for the other five kinds of object.]

Therefore it is due to the variety of kinds of object (of sense and mind) that the varieties of labelling, thinking, chanda, feverish concern and searching occur.

This particular discourse is part of a series of linked discourses (the Nānatta Vagga) which effectively constitute a presentation of an equivalent to links 3 to 9 of the common twelvefold version from various angles. The sequence from feeling through craving and searching and ultimately ending in quarrels, disputes, etc. is partly also derived from the Mahānānāna Sutta.

(L S Cousins, Buddha-L email, 2nd Feb 2006)

The term “thought” (vitakka), too, needs some explanation. Bodhi translates it here as “intention,” but this is normally reserved for cetanā. Let us first examine the meanings of these two important terms. The Buddhist Dictionary defines vitakka as follows:

“Thought,” “Thought-conception,” is one of the “secondary” (not constant) mental concomitants (see Table II), and may be either karmically wholesome, unwholesome or neutral.

- There are 3 karmically wholesome (akusala) thoughts: sensuous thought (kāma-vitakka), hating thought (byāpāda-vitakka), and cruel thought (vihiṁsā-vitakka).
- There are 3 karmically wholesome (kusala) thoughts: thought of renunciation (nekkamma, sankappa), of hatelessness (avāpāda-vitakka), of not harming (avihimsā-vitakka).” [A 6.109/3:446]

The latter three constitute “Right Thought,” the 2nd link of the eightfold path (see magga 2).

(Buddhist Dictionary: vitakka)

The Buddhist Dictionary defines cetanā as follows:

“Volition,” will, is one of the seven mental factors (cetasika, qv) inseparably bound up with all consciousness, namely: sensorial or mental impression (phassa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), volition (cetanā), concentration (samādhi), vitality (jīvita), aversion (manasikāra). Cf Table II, III.

With regard to karmical volition (ie wholesome or unwholesome karma), it is said in A 6.13:

“Volition is action (karma), thus I say, O monks; for as soon as volition arises, one does the action, be it by body, speech or mind.”

For details, see paṭiccasamuppaṭā (10), Karma. (Buddhist Dictionary: cetanā)

Clearly, “thought” (vitakka) in the Saññā Nānatta Sutta refers to the three karmically unwholesome thoughts (akusala, vitakka). Volition (cetanā) underlies these unwholesome thoughts, but it is the condition behind the action as well as the action itself.9 Here, in the Sutta, the emphasis is on the action itself.

9 Comy says that “thought regarding form” (rūpa-sankappa) refers to the thought associated with three mind moments (citta), namely, the receiving, (investigating, and determining) mind moments (SA 2:132).
not just its psychological quality. After all, volition underlies all the other links of the diversity chains presented in the Sutta, but it aims at presenting an “external” view of things, of how wrong perception leads to searching for more of the unwholesome object.

3 The methods of unity and of diversity

According to Buddhism, impermanence and continuum can be properly understood by way of these two complementary methods of investigation. The method of unity (ekatta, naya) discloses the coherence of the succession of discrete conscious moments making up the continuum (santana).\(^{10}\) It shows them as connected in a single series, “participants in a process of transmission and development, interconnected members unified through a law of conditional dependence.”\(^{11}\)

The method of diversity (nānatta, naya) balances this approach by pointing out the difference. Though unified, the current of conscious moments is still a chain of discrete links, some of which function as causes, other as effects, or working as effects, and then as causes. Sometimes, the continuum is interrupted: the death-moment and the rebirth-linking break it up into separate life-terms which show marked differences despite being part of the same series. They are the same yet not the same.\(^{12}\)

When the method of unity is misunderstood or misapplied, it generally leads to the view of an identical self, leading on to a view of eternalism. A wrong understanding of the method of diversity misleads one into viewing the apparently discontinuous process of existence as being absolute, and so leads to annihilationism. A proper understanding of both methods will reveal

the continuum to be a causally connected succession of momentary processes, which continues so long as the causes retain their efficacy, and ceases when the causes are deactivated, in either case without harbouring a persisting core to be grasped as a personal self. This is the middle way which avoids the two extremes.

(Bodhi 1978:20)

\(^{10}\) A “continuum” (santāna) means a single beginningless series of life-processes extending into the indefinite future, and contains within itself a number of individual life-terms. The word “continuity” (santati) is used here for this individual life-term, with its distinct birth, life and death. Each continuity, in turn, comprises of a rapid succession of dharmas or momentary mental and physical factors, held together by laws of causal relationship. How the methods of diversity and of unity, when misapplied, gives rise to the wrong view of annihilation is explained in Bodhi 1978:20. (Summarized from Bodhi 1978:192 n1.)

\(^{11}\) Bodhi 1978:20.

\(^{12}\) There is the sandy beach simile: Seen from afar a sandy beach appears to be smooth and flat, but on careful examination (especially with a magnifying glass), the beach is seen as made of discrete particles of sand, which on a microscopic level actually do not touch each other.
The Discourse on the Diversity of Perception
S 14.7

1 At Sāvatthī.

Summary
2 “Bhikshus,
dependent on the diversity of elements,
there arises the diversity of perceptions;
saññā

dependent on the diversity of perceptions,
there arises the diversity of thoughts;
sankappa

dependent on the diversity of thoughts,
there arises the diversity of desires;
chanda

dependent on the diversity of desires,
there arises the diversity of passions [fevers];
pəriləha

dependent on the diversity of passions,
there arises the diversity of searching.
pəriyasəna

Analysis of perception
3 And what bhikshus is the diversity of elements (dhātu nānatta)?
The form element.
rūpa,dhātu

The sound element.
sadda,dhātu

The smell element.
gandha,dhātu

The taste element.
rasa,dhātu

The touch element.
phoṭhabba,dhātu

The mind-object element.
dhamma,dhātu

This, bhikshus, is called the diversity of elements. [144]

4 And how, bhikshus, is it that
dependent on the diversity of elements,
there arises the diversity of perceptions:
saññā nānatta

dependent on the diversity of perceptions,
there arises the diversity of thoughts:
sankappa nānatta

dependent on the diversity of thoughts,
there arises the diversity of desires:
chanda nānatta

dependent on the diversity of desires,
there arises the diversity of passions:
pəriləha nānatta

dependent on the diversity of passions,
there arises the diversity of searching?
pəriyasəna nānatta

The reflection
5 (1) Dependent on the form element,
there arises the perception of form;
there arises the thought regarding form;
there arises the desire for form;
there arises the passion for form;
there arises the searching for form.13
(2) Dependent on the sound element,
there arises the perception of sound;
there arises the thought regarding sound;
there arises the desire for sound;
there arises the passion for sound;
there arises the searching for sound.
(3) Dependent on the smell element,
there arises the perception of smell;
there arises the thought regarding smell;
there arises the desire for smell;
there arises the passion for smell.
(4) Dependent on the taste element,
there arises the perception of taste;

13 Comy uses form here to explain the psychological process here: see (2.2) above.
dependent on the perception of taste, there arises the thought regarding taste; 
dependent on the thought regarding taste, there arises the desire for taste; 
dependent on the desire for taste, there arises the passion for taste; 
dependent on the passion for taste, there arises the searching for taste.

(5) Dependent on the touch element, 
dependent on the perception of touch, there arises the perception of touch; 
dependent on the thought regarding touch, there arises the desire for touch; 
dependent on the desire for touch, there arises the passion for touch; 
dependent on the passion for touch, there arises the searching for touch.

(6) Dependent on the mind-object element, 
dependent on the perception of mind-object, there arises the perception of mind-object; 
dependent on the thought regarding mind-object, there arises the desire for mind-object; 
dependent on the desire for mind-object, there arises the passion for mind-object; 
dependent on the passion for mind-object, there arises the searching for mind-object.

Closing refrain
11 In this way, bhikshus, 
dependent on the diversity of elements, there arises the diversity of perceptions, 
dependent on the diversity of perceptions, there arises the diversity of thoughts; 
dependent on the diversity of thoughts, there arises the diversity of desires; 
dependent on the diversity of desires, there arises the diversity of passions; 
dependent on the diversity of passions, there arises the diversity of searching.”

— evam —

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