

The Mode of Perception in the *Visudhimagga* – a Contrast to the
Chengweishi lun's Perspective

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This paper argues for the importance of the qualities or nature of the rūpic dharma in its impact on the citta/caita dharmas, especially in terms of the yogic perception, which in its turn is critical in transforming an ordinary mind to a higher or even liberated mind. This paper will show why this is so by examining the perception models found in the *Visuddhimagga* and by contrasting these models with those found in the *Chengweishi lun*. The major part of the paper teases out as thoroughly as possible the perception models offered by the *Visuddhimagga* and the concluding section shows how the perception models found in the *Chengweishi lun* lack the mechanism by which a mind can be transformed, and by which true knowledge (yathābhūta jñāna-darśana) can be established. Thus, although towards the end of the *Chengweishi lun* there is a mention of three kinds of meditation (dhyāna 靜慮) among the ten advances practices (十勝行), its theory of perception does not seem to allow there does not seem to permit an active role of the meditation practice in terms of transforming the “consciousness to wisdom.”

Introduction – Philosophical vs. Epistemological Theories of Perception in Buddhism

In Buddhist theories of perception, that is, how the external world is perceived, can explain how exactly the ordinaries are caught up in the material world and how exactly the practitioner can develop the “pure perception”, which enables one to see things as they really are (yathābhūta jñāna-darśana). However, with respect to how things are perceived the sūtras tend to focus on the nature of the perceiving side, that is generally speaking, our mind and thus has less

to say about the nature perceived objects. In my view, we can say that this emphasis on the nature of the mind is a philosophical approach. In other words, the sūtras are concerned more with the problems of our mind that sees things and the final problem-free nature of the mind characterized by insight (*prajñā*).

Therefore, Buddhism is customarily conceived of holding the notion that the mind (*citta*) plays the predominant role in both ethical and soteriological cultivation. For example, in the opening verses of the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha stresses that the mind is the foremost among all other phenomena and the most decisive factor responsible for happiness or suffering in one's life.¹ Moreover, the *Citta Vagga* of the same text states that while the body is as trivial as an earthen pot, the mind is to be guarded with care.² Thus, the notions of cultivation (*bhāvana*), purification (*visuddhi*), shining (*pabhāsara*)³ and liberation (*vimutti*) are all compounded with the word *citta* but not with the word *rūpa*, which refers to the material world. Such doctrine if taken to its extremism will run the risk of leading to a kind of reductionism: How the material

¹ *Manopubbaṅgamā dhammā, manoṣeṭṭhā manomayā |*
manasā ce paduṭṭhena, bhāsati vā karoti vā |
tato naṃ dukkhamanveti, cakkamva vahato padaṃ ||
Manopubbaṅgamā dhammā, manoṣeṭṭhā manomayā |
manasā ce pasannena, bhāsati vā karoti vā |
tato naṃ sukkhamanveti, chāyāva anapāyin ||

All dhammas are having the mind as their forerunner, predominated by mind, and mind-made. If one were to act or speak with a defiled mind, suffering will follow him/her just like cart wheels follow hooves (of the bull who drags the cart); if one were to act or speak with a purified mind happiness will follow him/her just like one's inseparable shadow does. (*Dhammapada* 1.1-2)

² *Dūraṅgamaṃ ekacaraṃ asarīraṃ guhāsayaṃ |*
ye cittaṃ saṃyamessanti, mokkhanti mārabandhanā ||
 The mind goes far and wonders alone. Incorporeal, it dwells in the cavern [of the heart].
 Those who keep it under control escape from Mara's bonds. (*Dhammapada* 3.37)
Kumbhūpamaṃ kāyamimaṃ viditvā, nagarūpamaṃ cittamidaṃ ṭhapetvā |
yodhetha māraṃ paññāvudhena, jitañca rakkhe anivesano siyā ||
 Seeing your body as an earthen pot, and setting up your mind as a fortress, make war on Mara with the sword of wisdom, defend what you have won, and free from attachment. 40

³ "*Bhikkhave cittaṃ pabhāsaraṃ idaṃ*" "Monks! The mind is essentially luminous." (*Anguttara-Nikāya* I, p. 10)

world is perceived is sheerly a matter of the intention or the mental quality of the perceiver. The Vijñānavāda is one of the most notable later Buddhist schools for presenting such view.

Epistemological Theories of Perception in Buddhism

In the post-canonical materials one begins to find more technical explanations of how “wrong” perception can be rectified. Notably, the Visuddhimagga emphasizes on the impacts the material world has on the worldly as well as the religious life. The circumstantial descriptions of how one should choose the meditation environment and how one should select and configure one’s meditation objects for the cultivation of the mind indicate that the nature of those objects does matter one’s perception of the objects. If we grant that the nature of external objects on its own shapes the way of one’s perception of them, we run a risk of imposing value judgment to the object being perceived, which is often criticized as a heretic view. For example, in her article, entitled, *From The Buddha to Buddhaghosa Changing Attitudes Toward The Human Body in Theravada Buddhism*, Sue Hamilton argues that according to the Pāli *suttas*, body as matter should not be conceived of as something desirable or repulsive. She then vehemently criticizes Buddhaghosa for his imposing negativity to the body and thus Brahmanizing Buddhist teaching.

For example, she quotes *Visuddhimagga*:

So men delight in women and women in men without perceiving the true nature of [the body’s] characteristic foulness, now masked by adventitious adornment. But in the ultimate sense there is no place here even the size of an atom fit to lust after. (Vism 4.92)

She then comments:

Buddhism certainly teaches that lust, or desire in general, is misplaced. But not because the body is foul. It is misplaced because insight into the transient nature of all things brings the knowledge that what one is desiring is momentary, impermanent, and therefore unsatisfactory. Buddhaghosa appears to have missed this point altogether. What he is doing is Brahmanizing Buddhist teaching. (Hamilton: 60)

Hamilton is right that Buddhaghosa reiterates the repulsive nature of the body in the sections where the meditation on foulness and the mindfulness occupied with the body are instructed. He even goes so far as to say that the repulsiveness in the form of a group of bones is what is really there (*tattha bhūtaṃ*) in the body.⁴

Yet one should also take into consideration that Buddhaghosa also gives analytical description of the body. In the sections on the perception of the elements, Buddhaghosa states how the same thirty two parts of the body should be perceived. Therein, no trace of repulsiveness is imposed to the body. (Vism 11. 48ff.) To be sure, the statement that body is by nature repulsive is not Buddhaghosa’s final word. A more advanced perception yet to be developed is understanding (*paññā*), which is the correct perception that perceives things as they are. It is a haste conclusion to say that Buddhaghosa conceives of the body as categorically negative. The most penetrative perception according to him is understanding, through which one sees that all the phenomena are subject to impermanent. In fact, how to obtain such correct knowledge of and vision is the central project of his *Visuddhimagga*. In the very outset of this work he acknowledges just that:

My task is now to set out the true sense, (*yathābhūtaṃ atthaṃ*),

 Seekers gone forth from home to homelessness,
 And who although desiring purity
 Have no right knowledge of the sure straight way (*yathābhūtaṃ ajānantā*)

 To them I shall expound the comforting Path of Purification.” (Vism 1.4)

⁴ “He does not apprehend the sign of woman or man.. he stops at what is merely seen, nor the particulars: hand, foot, smile..ect. He only apprehends what is really there. Like the Elder Mahā-Tissa... He saw the bones that were her teeth...” (Vism 1.54-55) Also note that Buddhaghosa uses *tattha bhūtaṃ* instead of *yathābhūtaṃ* in this case. The English translation, however, fails to convey the nuance.

Since there is doubt regarding Buddhaghosa’s view on the true nature of the body and the material objects alike and how they are to be perceived I will try to tease out what he means by see things as they really are. However, the task is not simply a matter of finalizing Buddhaghosa’s view on the status of the object of perception – whether the material world should be viewed as positive, negative, or neutral. My main task here is to demonstrate and theorize the various roles the external objects play in different modes of perception. The status of the material matter will be analyzed in terms of the three modes of perception that I suggest in this paper. The three modes of perception are karmic perception, yogic perception, and insight perception, which, in a sense, are resonant with the three themes of virtue (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and understanding (*paññā*) in the *Visuddhimagga*. In different modes of perception the relation between the nature of the object and the ways of perceiving them varies. Not all objects of perception are material and not all objects of perception possess essential natures, and yet different modes of perception have different perspectives and mechanism in interacting with its objects. Based on such analyses my paper will try to demonstrate “what is there” that different modes of perception see.

The Relation between the Natures of the Objects and the Ways of Perception

A. Karmic Perception

This mode of perception happens to most of us in a normal situation when we see, hear, smell, taste, or touch things. The reason for which I call such perception a karmic perception is that it is karma-oriented. It is commonly held that different people perceive things differently, and the theory of karmic perception would show the reason for that is partly because the ways in which things are perceived are variously tied with the individual’s karma, which in turn is uncannily connected with the nature of the objects being perceived. What follows is the analysis

of how, according to *Visuddhimagga*, the process of perception actually occurs and how the natures of the objects determines or at least shapes the way of perception through the work of karma.

k1. In a normal situation, when a sense object comes into the sense organ's focus the passive resultant life-continuum-consciousness (*bhavaṅga citta*) is disrupted and one of the two types of consciousnesses arises. These two types of consciousness respectively called by the name of *mano* and *manoviññāna* in the *Visuddhimagga* are functional (*kiicca*), without root-cause (*ahetuka*), and accompanied with a neutral feeling.⁵ (Vism 14.116) They arise before the rise of the sense consciousness to advert the mind (*citta*) to the respective sense-door.⁶ (Vism 14.115-116) In the case of adverting of the consciousness, *manodhātu* arises when the sense object enters the focus of one of the five sense-doors, and *manoviññānadhātu* arises when the object enters in the focus of the mind door.

(Vism 14.97,98,106,107)

k2. Next to the adverting consciousness, there arises one of the sense consciousnesses at the respective sense-door (Vism 14. 117). The sense consciousnesses both profitable (*kusala*) and unprofitable (*akusala*) are resultant consciousnesses (*vipāka citta*) without root-cause (*ahetuka*) and therefore indeterminate (*avyākata*). (Vism14. 94-5) When the sense object

⁵ Bhavaṅgacalanānantaraṃ bhavaṅgaṃ vicchindamānā viya āvajjanakiccaṃ sādhamānā ahetukakiriyamanoviññānadhātu uppajjati (Vism 14.116) Both the *mano* and *manoviññāna* are treated here as types of consciousness (*citta*). In the *Visuddhimagga* there are three types of consciousnesses that take the name of *manodhātu*, namely the five-door-adverting consciousness and the two receiving consciousness (one profitable and one unprofitable). Of the 89 types of consciousnesses, except for this three types of *manodhātu* and the ten types of the resultant sense-consciousnesses (*cakkhuvīññāna* etc.) the other 76 types are called *manoviññānadhātu*. (See Vism table III)

⁶ Broadly speaking it is granted that when there is contact of visible data and the eye faculty there arises the eye consciousness, same with the other five senses. However, this the process of perception seems to have a slightly different theory. According to this process, when there is a contact between the first five sense faculties and the five sense object it is *mano* that arises first, when there is a contact between *mano*, the sixth sense faculty and ideas (dhamma-element) it is *manoviññāna* arises first.

perceived is desirable the sense consciousness that arises to cognize it is profitable, and vice versa. (Vism 14. 117) This logic might appear paradoxical, because we will not know whether the object is desirable or undesirable until the process of perception is complete and the object has been cognized. The possible explanation would be that the desirability or the undesirability is an intrinsic nature to the object, which is independent of the intentionality or deliberation of the individual who perceives the object.

Buddhaghosa has elaborated on this point in his commentary, the *Sammohavinodanī*, on the *Vibhanga*, one of the seven Abhidhamma texts of the Theravada school. He states that the distinction between the intrinsically desirable and undesirable obtains by way of the average being (*majjhima-satta*) – “It is distinguishable according to what is found desirable at one time and undesirable at another time by average men such as accountants, government officials, burgesses, land owners and merchants.”⁷ 8 (Smv. 10-11)

k3. The next two stages are the process of receiving (*sampraticchana*) and investigating (*santīrana*) performed by the indeterminate causeless resultant mind-element and mind-consciousness-element respectively. They are profitable when the preceding sense consciousness is profitable and vice versa. (Vism 14.119) What the investigating consciousness do precisely on the object is not clear in the text. The meaning of the Pali word *santīrana* is given in the Pali-English dictionary as investigating or judging.⁸ From the literal meaning of the term, one tends to think that investigating or judging would involve value judgment to the object, and thus the understanding of the object would be colored by suppositions as a result of investigation. However,

⁷ See also Bhikkhu Bodhi’s *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* p. 172-3.

⁸ Buddhaghosa in the *Saratthapakāsinī*, the commentary to the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, defines the meaning of the *santīraṇa* as thorough measuring, deliberating, and examining. “*sammā tīraṇaṃ santīraṇaṃ tulaṇaṃ vimaṃsanaṃ ti attho.* (Saratthapakāsinī vol. 2. 227.)

according to the Visuddhimagga the investigating *manoviññāna* is invariably associated with joy when the object is desirable and with equanimity when the object is desirable-neutral or undesirable. (Vism. 14.119) This suggests that the nature of the object still predominates the consciousness that investigates it. *manoviññānadhātu*

k4. Next to investigation arises the consciousness of determining (*voṭṭhabhāna*), which, like the mind-adverting-consciousness, is only functional. Neither is it the result of karma nor does it create karma.

k5. Next to determining there arises a series of homogeneous consciousnesses usually numbered six or seven called the impulsion-consciousnesses (*javana*). In an ordinary case, that is, in the sensual-desire-sphere (*kāma-āvacāna*) these consciousnesses are rooted in either profitable or unprofitable causes.⁹ Distinct from the preceding types of consciousnesses these impulsion consciousnesses are not resultant from karma, in stead, they have the ability to produce karma. This is the stage where the temperaments or proclivities of the individual play a more dominant role than the nature of the object. Therefore, even if the object been perceived is undesirable one could still give rise to the pleasant impulsion consciousnesses, and vice versa. This is more so when one's mind is equipped with the power of virtue (*sīla*) and concentration (*samādhi*).

k6. Next to the impulsion consciousnesses there arises the consciousness of registration (*tadārammaṇa*), which is a karmic resultant type of consciousness. After the registration consciousness, which lasts for two thought-moments, the life continuum consciousness resumes, if there is no further contact with the object, or disrupted again, if the object is still in focus, or if there is a new object being noticed. The role of the perceived object varies at different stages of

⁹ The profitable *javana* consciousnesses are rooted in non-greed, non-hatred, and non-ignorance, and they are 8 in number (Vism. 14. 83). The unprofitable *javana* consciousnesses are rooted in greed, hatred, and ignorance, and they are 12 in number (Vism. 14. 90-92).

the perceptual process illustrated above. From the moment of contacting with the object being perceived to the moment of the determination of the object, that is, stage k1-k6, the process of perception is a *close* process, because it is predetermined as it were by the nature of the object. During this process whether the type of consciousness to arise is profitable or unprofitable is contingent upon the nature of object perceived. The way in which the consciousness investigates the object is also shaped by the nature of the object, for whether the investigating consciousness is profitable or unprofitable is also determined by the nature of the object. Thus the *Visuddhimagga* states that during the process of the perception before the rise of the impulsion consciousness the guarding of sense faculties from their sense objects is irrelevant.

Herein, there is neither restraint nor non-restraint (of the sense faculties) on the occasion of the life-continuum, or on any of the occasions beginning with advertizing. (*Vism* 1. 57).

When the process of perception reaches the point of the arising of the impulsion consciousnesses the process is *open* since the way in which the object is perceived can be shaped by temperaments and proclivities of the individual. Therefore, it is meaningful to guard one's sense faculties at this stage as the *Visuddhimagga* states:

But there is non-restraint if unvirtuousness or forgetfulness or unknowing or impatience or idleness arises at the moment of impulsion. (*Vism* 1.57) To conclude the section, the desirability or undesirability of the external objects is not entirely contingent upon the intentionality of the individual. In other words one's sensory experience of the object depends largely on the nature of the object we perceive. In a normal situation, everybody should have the similar sensory experience, for example, on the corpse in terms of its repulsiveness.¹⁰ This process of attributing the repulsiveness to the intrinsic nature of the object echoes Peter Burger's

¹⁰ The exception may be for those for whom corpse is a desirable thing. In this case, the *Sammohavinodanī*, would contend that the person is suffered from a perverted perception (*saññāvipallāsa*).

theory of social construction of reality. According to Peter Berger's *Sacred Canopy* (1967) and his earlier work with Charles Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), knowledge develops dialectically in three stages: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. If we apply this theory to the case of corpse in terms of karmic perception, the process of externalization takes place when the repulsiveness has been first felt and then expressed by the “average men” through sign, symbol, and language. Through social construction, this repulsive sensation is objectivated and transforms itself into intrinsic nature of the object. When the individual perceives the corpse he or she will inevitably give rise to the repulsive consciousness; this can be said to be the process of internalization. While admitting that the sensory experience is shaped by the nature of the object, Buddhaghosa, however, held that the attitude that the individual has toward the sensory experience is contingent upon the temperaments and proclivities of the individual. It is not without surprise to discover Buddhaghosa's view on the formation of the nature of the material world is likened to some social construction theory. Nonetheless, he did not carry such theory as far as the modern sociologists do. For him the process of perception is by and large karma-oriented, and karma essentially accentuates individuality over sociality. The fact that the profitable-unprofitable nature of the material object gives rise to the corresponding consciousness seems to provide with an occasion for the individual to receive the karmic fruit. My hypothesis of how the karmic law works out in this particular way is as follows. One who committed unprofitable deeds in the past should receive unprofitable karmic retribution by way of giving rise to the unprofitable sense consciousness, which is associated with unpleasant feeling, and thus one suffers from the feeling. In order for the unprofitable sense consciousness to arise, one would inevitably confront with unpleasant

object. For all these to be possible the natures of the objects perceived have to have the power to determine what kind of consciousness has to arise.

B. Yogic Perception

This is the type of perception cultivated by arduous and meticulous process of meditation in which the object to be observed intensively with a concentrated mind will go through a complex manipulation. To begin with, the objective of this mode of perception is far from “seeing things as they are” in both phenomenological and Buddhist sense. Rather, it is to see things in some idiosyncratic way. For example, it is possible for a yogin who is skillful in the mediation on foulness (*asubha bhāvana*) to perceive even a beautiful woman as a “group of bones”. (Vism 1.55) This seems to be a perfect case to show the predominance of the mind over the perceived object in determining the way of perception. However, the perception of foulness (*asubhasaññā*) in this case is not simply an imagination generated at the practitioner’s own intention, rather, it is an image, though mental, arises upon seeing the bones in the form of teeth of the woman.¹¹ (Vism 1. 55)

Thus the relation between the nature of the object and the manner of the yogic perception is complex. On the one hand the nature of the object does not entail the way of the yogin’s perception of the object, on the other, the yogin’s perception (*saññā*) is cultivated precisely from the vary nature of the object. This paradox can be explained by way of analyzing the process of perception of the foulness meditation.

y1. The process of the preliminary perception, that is, perceiving the ten decaying state with eye faculty, is similar to the process of karmic perception mentioned above.

¹¹ “[T]he elder looked up and finding in the bones of her teeth the perception of foulness (ugliness), he reached Arahantship. Hence it was said: ‘He saw the bones that were her teeth, and kept in mind his first perception.’”

Such process is known as five-door series (*pañcadvara-vīthi*) because it involves the five-sense consciousnesses. At this stage the object is perceived intensively with concentrated mind, but more importantly, the attention is deliberately paid to the nature of the object. Each object of the ten decaying state of the corpse possesses its own distinct nature.¹² The nature of the object is to be developed into a kind of filtered mental image call “counterpart sign” (*paṭibhāga nimitta*),¹³ which is the real object of the yogic perception for cultivating absorption concentration (*appanāsamādhi*).

y2. When this counterpart sign arise as the meditation object, the mind-consciousness element arises to advert the mind to the mind door. Since the counterpart sign is a mental image there does not arise the sense-consciousness, and as a result the following three types of consciousnesses, namely the receiving, investigating, and determining consciousnesses would not arise.

y3. Immediately following the adverting consciousness, the impulsion consciousnesses arise in a series of four or five thought moments. (Vism. 4. 74) Through the repetition of this process the concept of repulsiveness in the form of counterpart sign, an mental image, would develop into an idiosyncratic *saññā* as a part of mental concomitants.

¹² “It has an individual essence, its own state of being bloated, which is not common to anything else, since it was said that he defines it ‘by the fact of its having attained that particular individual essence.’ The meaning is that it should be defined according to individual essence (*sabhāva*), according to its own nature (*sarasa*), as ‘the inflated, the bloated’.” (Vism 6. 33) These ten objects of the foulness meditation are dhammas that processes essence (*saha bhāvena*), which is the phenomenon’s own nature (*sako bhāva*) or existing nature (*samāno bhāva*). (Vism 14. 7 n. 3)

¹³ The counterpart sign developed out of the foul object is a concept of repulsiveness in a form of mental image. It is “born only of perception (*saññā*),” and devoid of the three characteristics (*tilakkhana*), namely impermanence, suffering, and selfless. (Vism 4.31) This fact that the counterpart sign lacks of the three characteristics is a significantly related to the topic of the *yathābhūtañānadassana*, which will be dealt with in the next section.

Thus is explained how the repulsive perception (*paṭikkūla saññā*) is obtained based on the nature of repulsive objects. Next I will try to conjecture how the yogic perception works when the yogin perceives an object such as the attractive teeth of the woman in our example.

y4. When the yogin perceives the attractive teeth of the woman, a series of consciousnesses arise in the way explained from k1 through k4. When the process reaches k5, that is, there arise the impulsion consciousnesses, which in this case is an absorption consciousness (*jhāna citta*) accompanied with repulsive perception. In the following moment of the perceiving act, the yogin does not perceive the teeth anymore, rather, he perceives the group of bones, which is really the mental image created by the *paṭikkūla saññā*.

This type of yogic perception does not aim at seeing things as they are, rather, it is antidotal to the unprofitable temperaments of the individual. It enables the yogin to perceive the external objects in a way quite the opposite to the social constructed natures of the objects. However, such opposite perception this does not mean that the way in which the object presents itself to the yogin and to ordinary people is different, because they have different structured consciousness. Rather, this difference between the two is that the yogin and the ordinary people perceive different things; for the former it is the image his meditative consciousness (*jhana citta*) creates, and for the latter it is the sense object.

C. Insight Perception

Distinct from the first mode of perception, which perceives things as they present themselves (karmically), and from the second, which perceives things through idiosyncratic screen-filter developed by meditation, the insight perception aims at seeing things as they really are. Question immediately follows as to what this “really are” refers to. The Pali term for the phrase “as they really are” is *yathābhūtam*, which means, literally, as the way in which it has

come into existence (*yathā bhūtaṃ tathā atthi*). The word *yathā* is crucial, it does not mean a mere resemblance as the words “*iva*” (like) and “*eva*” (that very thing, precisely that) do. It connotes the sense of proper, correct, the way ought to be, etc. Therefore, *yathābhūtañānadassana* means not only to see and know what is really there, but also to see and know correctly. This understanding of the term is implied in the *Visuddhimagga*, which reads, “When he brings to mind as impermanent (unsatisfactory, selfless) he correctly knows and sees the sign (*nimittaṃ yathābhūtaṃjānāti passati*). Hence ‘right seeing’ is said. Thus, by inference from that, all formations are clearly seen as impermanent.”¹⁴ It can therefore be stated that the insight perception is to perceive things as being subject to impermanence, unsatisfactory, and selfless.

Like yogic perception, the insight perception is not simply a matter of intention, though the rhetoric “to see things as being impermanent, etc., seems to suggest so. One is not able to perceive things being impermanent, etc., just because he intellectually realizes so. Intention alone does not enable one to see impermanence in one’s perceptual objects.

Before one can actually perceive impermanence, one has to be able to discern several other things, which are classified as aggregates, bases, elements, faculties, dependent origination, etc., the understanding of which is the soil of this *prajñā* into impermanence, etc. Thus,

¹⁴ The same formula apply to unsatisfactory and selfless. Note the substitute of *dhammā* for *saṃkhārā* when refers to selfless. “Aniccato manasikaronto nimittaṃ yathābhūtaṃ jānāti passati, tena vuccati sammādasanaṃ. Evaṃ tadanvayena sabbe saṅkhārā aniccato sudiṃhā honti. Ettha kaṅkhā pahīyati. Dukkhatto manasikaronto pavattaṃ yathābhūtaṃ jānāti passati...pe... anattato manasikaronto nimittaṃ pavattaṃ yathābhūtaṃ jānāti passati, tena vuccati sammādasanaṃ. Evaṃ tadanvayena sabbe dhammā anattato sudiṃhā honti. Ettha kaṅkhā pahīyati.” (Vism 19. 27) The nuance of this substitute is that while all dhammā (phenomena) are selfless (*anatta*), not all dhammā are impermanent and unsatisfactory, only compounded phenomena (saṅkhārā) are. This is to avoid the inclusion of dhammas such as nibbāna into the category of impermanent and unsatisfactory. Thus, the cardinal doctrine pertaining to the three characteristics is that “*sabbe saṃkhārā aniccā, sabbe saṃkhārā dukkhā, sabbe dhammā anattā.*”

Buddhaghosa put forth three stages of understandings, namely the full-understanding as the known (*ñātapariññā*), as investigation (*tīraṇapariññā*), and as abandoning (*pahānapariññā*):

Herein, the understanding that occurs by observing the specific characteristics of such and such states thus, “Materiality has the characteristic of being molested; feeling has the characteristic of being felt.” The understanding consisting in insight with the general characteristics as its object that occurs in attributing a general characteristic to those same states in the way beginning, “Materiality is impermanent, feeling is impermanent”. The understanding consisting in insight with the characteristics as its object that occurs as the abandoning of the perception of permanence, etc. (Vism 20. 3)

Buddhaghosa then explains that in the full-understanding as the known the penetration of the specific characteristics of states (*paccattalakkhaṇa*) predominates, and that in the fullunderstanding as investigation the penetration of the general characteristics (*sāmaññalakkhaṇa*) predominates. (Vism 20.4) It is clear that in order to cultivate the perception of impermanence, etc., one needs to discern the individual essences (*sabhāvaupalakkhaṇa*) of the objects. This point is also supported by the fact that not all instances of materiality are suitable as perceptual objects for cultivating insight perception.¹⁵ If we admit such progressive cultivation beginning with perceiving the individual essence of the objects, it can be argued that the insight perception as just described is contingent on the natures of the objects. Indeed that insight perception is regarded as seeing things correctly as they are is ultimately grounded on the fact that things are impermanent, et. al. in reality.

¹⁵ 16 Among the twenty-seven instances of materiality, seventeen of them are only suitable of comprehension since they are produced, and they are instances of concrete materiality. The seventeen instances consist of “the four primaries of fourfold origination in this body and dependent color, odor, flavor, and nutritive essence, and the five sensitivities beginning with the eye sensitivity, and the materiality of the physical [heart-] basis, sex, life faculty, and sound of twofold origination.” The rest ten, namely, the bodily and verbal intimation, space element, the impermanence of the materiality, etc., are not suitable. (Vism 18. 13)

What Is Really There?

Having shown the relation between the natures of the perceptual objects the ways of perceiving them, I now turn to the question: What is there that the three modes of perception see? In the modes of karmic perception, one sees the object in terms of its signs (*nimitta*), such as “sign of woman or man, or any sign that is a basis for defilement such as the sign of beauty, etc.”¹⁶ and in terms of its particulars (*anubyañjana*), such as “aspects classed as hand, foot, smile, laughter, talk, etc.”¹⁷ These particularities constitute in and associated with the object are taken as a whole as an object-package is what one sees. In the modes of yogic perception, what the yogin sees is some idiosyncratic image called counterpart sign, which is artificially constructed, nonetheless, contingent upon the natures of the objects. In the mode of insight perception, the seer¹⁸ perceives two sets of phenomena called *sabhābadhammas*.¹⁹ I call the first set the analyzed phenomena and the second the *true* phenomena. The first set of phenomena is those *paramattha-dhammas* that have their own individual characteristics (*sakobhābha*),²⁰ which are traditionally analyzed by classifying them into the five aggregates, the twelve bases, and the eighteen elements. The second set of phenomena is really “what is really there” (*yathābhūtaṃ*),

¹⁶ *nimittaggāh²ti itthipurisanimittam vā subhanimittādikaṃ vā kilesavatthubhūtaṃ* (Vism 1. 55)

¹⁷ *hatthapādasitahasitakathitavilokitādibhedam ākāraṃ* (Vism 1. 55)

¹⁸ This paper focus more on the object of percept than the subject. However, in the insight perception, the idea of subject as a seer is also deconstructed. Thus there is no dichotomy of object-subject, but only the act of perception itself.

¹⁹ Buddhaghosa gives an exposition on *sabhāva* in the *Aṭṭasālinī*, his commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, as well as in other commentaries as follows: In the *Aṭṭasālinī* Buddhaghosa states that the individual essence is the general characteristics of such and such dhammas. The subcommentary to the *Aṭṭasālinī* distinguishes three types of *sabhāva*:

1. The individual essence common to all consisting in impermanence, etc.
2. The individual essence no common to all consisting in, say, hardness as that of earth, or touching as that of contact.
3. The individual essence regarded as general to all that is profitable is the characteristic of being profitable, but it is not common to the unprofitable and indeterminate. (See Vism 8. n.68)

²⁰ In some abhidharma literatures they are regarded as *paramattha dhammas*, because they are phenomena that have real existence as opposed to *paññatti dharmas*, the mere concepts.

namely the states of being impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless, *aniccatā*, *dukkhatā*, and *anattatā* respectively. Ironically, this last set of phenomena, which is supposed to be the “what is really” is really nothing there.

Modes of Perception in the *Chengweishi lun*

The modes of perception in the *Chengweishi lun* can be analyzed through the lens of the theory of the “object-conditions”, the *ālambana-pratyāya*, as well as the theory of the transformation of the consciousnesses (*vjñāna-pariṇāma*). In my view, in comparison to the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Chengweishi lun* only allowed two kinds of perception namely the “karmic perception” and “insight perception.”

The Ālambana-pratyāya

According to the *Chengweishi lun* there are two types of perceived object, the direct object (親所緣緣) and remote object (疏所緣緣):

1. The direct object:

It is called a direct object if the essence of the object is not separated from the perceiving subject, and is internally perceived and based upon by the perceiving-aspect (*nimitta bhāga* 見分), etc., of the perceiving consciousness.²¹

2. The remote object:

The remote object is one whose essence is separated from the perceiving consciousness, it serves as a kind of “hyle” for giving rise to [the direct object], which is in turn perceived and based upon internally.²²

²¹ 《成唯識論》卷 7：「若與能緣體不相離。是見分等內所慮託。應知彼是親所緣緣。」(CBETA, T31, no. 1585, p. 40, c16-17)

²² 《成唯識論》卷 7：「若與能緣體雖相離。為質能起內所慮託。應知彼是疎所緣緣。」(CBETA, T31, no. 1585, p. 40, c18-19)

For those ordinary people, that is, those who have not gone through the stage of the base-transformation (*āśraya-parā(pari)vṛtti*), the direct object of perception is the *nimitta-bhāga* of the consciousness itself. In other words the perceiving consciousness actually perceives a mental image produced by the consciousness itself. To be sure, this mental image has its essential base (本質) the more concrete object that exist independent of the respective perceiving consciousness, the remote object, yet that concrete object, such as the sense faculty or the receptacle world (*bhājana-loka* 器世間) is itself a result of the transformation of the *ālaya-vijñāna*, and is itself the direct object of the *ālaya-vijñāna*.²³

However, there is also the question that if the direct object requires as its “hyle” the remote object, which is separated from the *ālaya-vijñāna*. Those who argued that there must be the case otherwise one cannot account for the existence of the corps, which cannot be a transformation of its original *ālaya-vijñāna*, because the *ālaya-vijñāna* is said to leave the body already. This remote object, they explain, is precisely the transformation of the *ālaya-vijñāna* of others. But even if this is the case, this “hyle”, this remote object, does not have any impact on its former *ālaya-vijñāna*.

As a result, even the more concrete object that actually shapes and provide with essential data to the direct object of , for example, the eye consciousness, the nature of that concrete object is the result of the transformation of the karmic *ālaya-vijñāna* of the perceiver. At this level, the nature of the direct object is partly determined by the quality of the eye consciousness with its mental factors, and partly by the karmic quality of the *ālaya-vijñāna*. In other words, the nature of the perceived object, regardless, direct or remote, has no channel through which the

²³ 《成唯識論》卷 2：「阿賴[*]耶識因緣力故自體生時。內變為種及有根身。外變為器。即以所變為自所緣。」(CBETA, T31, no. 1585, p. 10, a17-19)

perceiving mind can be affected. If this is the case, it is hard to establish the transformative power of concentration as is described in the previous section of this article.

At the level of the liberation, that is when is perceiving mind transformed itself to become the 無分別智 and the object of perception is the suchness (*tathatā* or *yathābhūta* 真如), subject-object distinction is simply absent. This is comparable to the “insight perception” described above. But the question is how does one go from “karmic perception” to “insight perception” according to the perception theory of the *viññānavāda*? What exactly is the mechanism of the transformation of the mind? What would be the role of *samādhi* in *viññānavāda*? This paper suggests that the kind of idealistic theory of perception as we see in the *viññānavāda* will create a difficulty for the transformative role of Buddhist meditation as described in the *Visuddhimagga*.

Conclusion

This paper tries to bring our attention to the impact of the material world in the religious life in Buddhism, an aspect often than not overlooked by scholars as well as the practitioners. The importance of this emphasis is twofold: on the one hand it seeks to balance the tilted scholarship in the psychology of Buddhism by providing a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the theory of perception found in the *Visuddhimagga*, on the hand, it seeks to point out a difficulty in the idealistic theory of perception according to the *Chengweishi lun* with respect to the transformative power of meditation.

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