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THE BUDDHIST ANALYSIS OF COGNITIVE PROCESS

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BUDDHIST THEORY OF COGNITION

The process of cognition that has its genesis due to one of the five senses or the sensory contacts is called Sense-Door Cognition or Sensory Cognition (Pañca Dvāra Vīthi) in the Abhidhamma tradition. Further, the Process of Cognition through Mind Door is called Manodvāra Vīthi, wherein an idea, concept or imagination enters the mind without its direct dependence on any of the five senses.

According to the Buddhists mere abstraction, whether acquired in the form of a sensory apprehension (viññāna); or by the mind in the form a mental apprehension (manoviññāna) would not explain the complete process of cognition without the active role of Javana or the *mental act of apperception* which is purely a subjective act of understanding that makes a meaningful interpretation of an idea in

the form of a judgement by way of apperception. This may be underlined that no apprehension of a phenomenon would be meaningful unless it is apperceived and interpreted. So all our experiences shall remain empty unless it is replenished with meaning. This is the job which the Javana undertakes. It as a matter of fact acts like a TV Editor who not only selects the episodes but also edits and allows the continuity of the episode for the recordings in the mind called Tadālabana, which is why an object is remembered, identified, and recognised. It also accounts for the variation in the clarity of cognition and memory. Thus is the Course of Cognition has been presented by the Buddhists.

This may be iterated that the agreeability, disagreeability and neutrality of a feeling is primarily subjective and mind dependent. A feeling has its genesis in the judgemental understanding due to the mental act of Javana. Hence, an object in itself is not to be reckoned as pleasant or unpleasant. It has to be understood in terms of its understanding due to our mental judgements., which is why one particular object does not evoke the similar emotive response; or objectively viewed as pleasant or unpleasant in equal degrees for all.

The graphic description of cognition as discussed by the Buddhists is as follows:

Whence an object comes within the purview of one of our five senses: the passive state of mind or the subliminal consciousness (bhavaṅga) is stimulated or vibrated (bhavaṅga-calana) which in turn dissolves the sublimity (bhavaṅga-upaccheda) of consciousness; and thence the mind turns towards (āvajjati) the object through one of the five sense-doors; and the act is called pañcadvārāvajjana. Thus begin the conscious sensory activities of the mind through a sense-door by way of seeing (dassana); hearing (savana); smelling (ghāyana); tasting (sāyana); touching (phusana) through an appropriate sense-door (or doors) having the according to its respective sensitivity or sense-field (āyatana) to effect an appropriate sensory apprehension called the viññāna. The act of seeing effects visual apprehension (*cakkhu-viññāna*) due to the

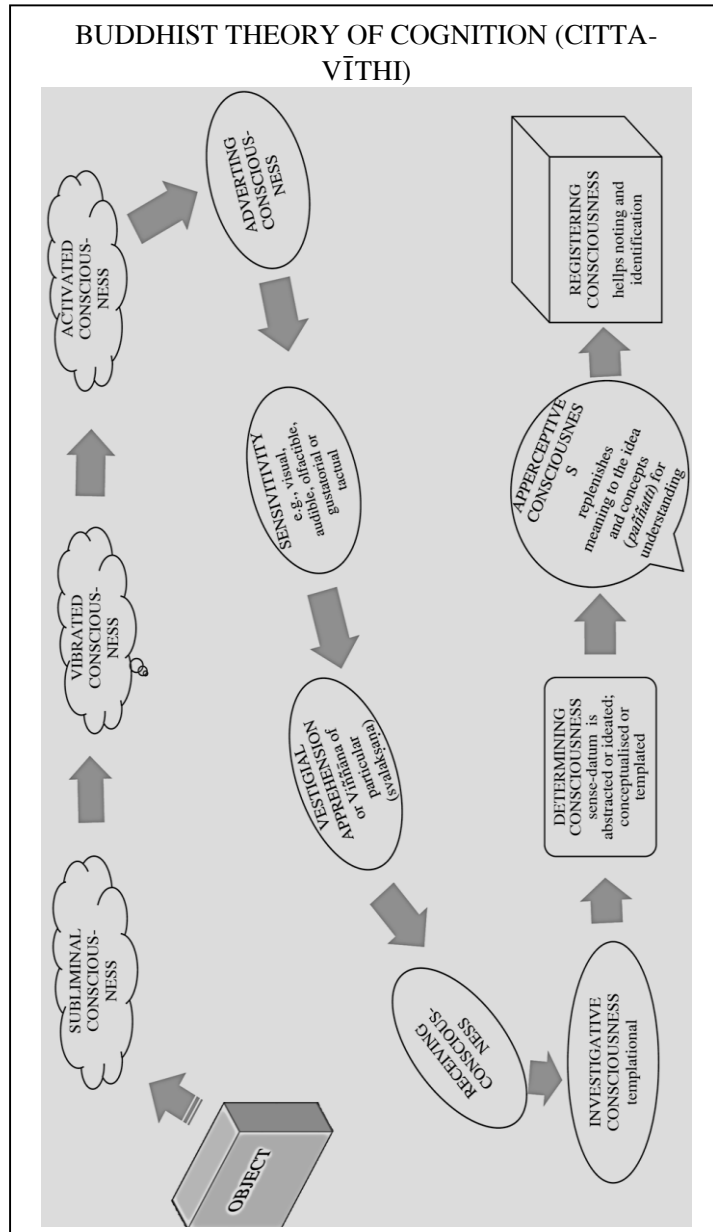
contact with the object having form and colour, i.e., visual (rūpa);* the act of hearing effects audible apprehension (śrota-viññāna), i.e., audio due to the contact with an object having sound; the act of smelling effects the olfactory apprehension (ghāna-viññāna) due to the contact with an object having smell, i.e., olfactible, the act of touching effects gustatory apprehension (rasa-viññāna) due to the contact with an object having flavour; and the act of touching effects the tactile apprehension (kāya-viññāna)) due to the contact with a tactual object.

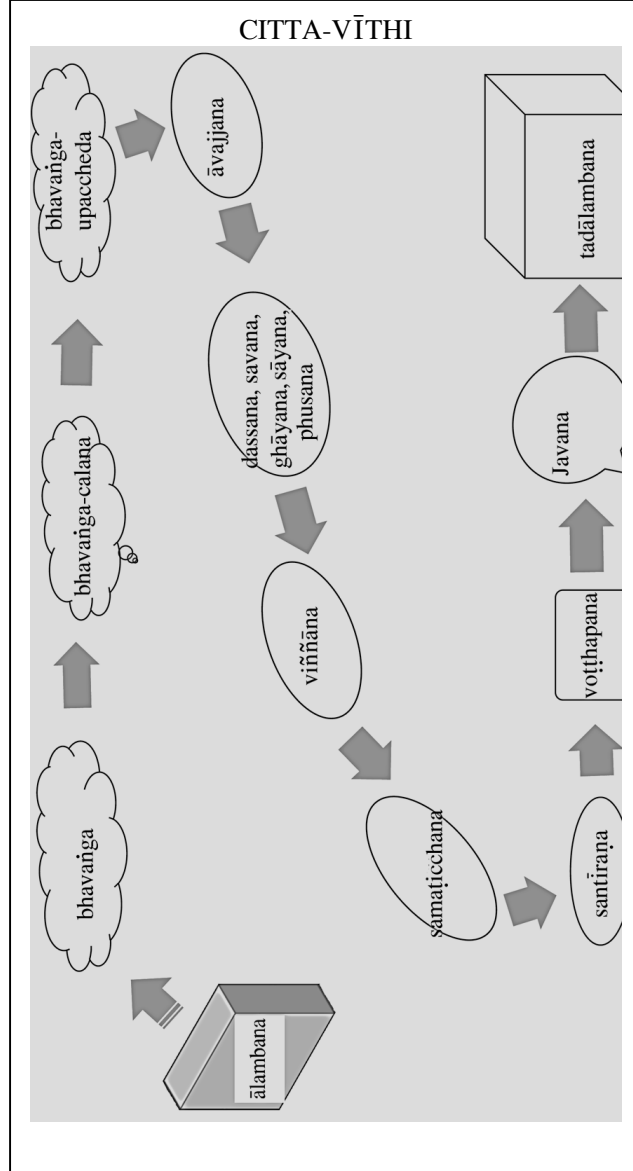
The Buddhists reckon that the sense organs like eye, ear, nose, tongue and body are just the forms of matter attributed with sensitivity to receive sense datum and are thus classified under the Pasāda rūpa or five kind of sensitive matter which respond to the sense datum and allows them to enter the mind rather mechanically by opening up the doors for the vestigial apprehension (viññāna) of the of the sense impressions. Hence, the Buddhist reckon that the role of the five sense organs is rather mechanical and restricted to the mere formation of the rudimentary or vestigial image. It is for this reason they call the five sense organs as five-fold doors (pañca-dvāra).

The Buddhists further state as to whence the sensory apprehension is collected or received by the mental act of Sampaticchana as an acquired image (called uggaha-nimitta) it is put to investigation. The investigative act of consciousness is called ‘Santīraṇa’† which Santīraṇa’ is a compound of san (‘appropriately’) and tīraṇa (‘measured’) and is thus etymologically interpreted as an act of ‘comparison and deliberative analysis.’ Upon investigation the acquired image is reduced and abstracted and thence called ‘after image’ (paṭibhāga nimitta). This act is known as “Voṭṭhapana”,

* Rūpa, here refers to an object which has form and colour; and not a referent commonly used in the context of designating matter, materiality or material qualities of all kinds. See Compendium of Philosophy ch.6 for details.

† tīraṇa





because, herein, the physicality is ‘cut off’ as the very etymological interpretation of the term “Voṭṭhapana” would suggest. It is this stage wherein the object severs the physical world or particularity

and enters the domain of ideas or mind as being reduced to an essence. Hence the Voṭṭhapana stage is also called as the ‘gateway to the mind-door’ (‘Manodvāra Vīthi’) which filters the physicality effecting ideational reduction; and the entire process of cognition thence becomes fully mind dependent with the severance from the existential linkage. Hence the process of cognition operating from the Voṭṭhapana level is called the ‘Manodvāra Vīthi’ or the ‘Cognition by way of the Mind-Door’. The objects like pure idea, concept or imagination, which do not have the genesis through one of the five-sense-doors are processed for cognition directly from this stage onwards; yet all sensory objects must first enter through the five senses to pass through the process of cognition through the

Mind door (Mano-Dvāra Vīthi). The ideas that enter through the mind door is then apperceived by the cognitive act of Javana, which partakes in the subjective act of consciousness that involves interpretation and conceptualisation

Buddhist theory of cognition shows that mental templates intuit sense datum by the stage of Voṭṭhapana, which thence become meaningful upon the apperceptive act of consciousness called ‘Javana’.

As happiness is a mental phenomenon, it is to be grasped and understood by mind. So, the Buddhist theories on mind are primarily embedded in their subtle studies by way of the explanation of the process of mental graspings due to the five-fold sensory awareness (Pañca-Dvāra-Vīthi) and the subsequent passive mental activities upto the stage of Voṭṭhapana or the determining act by way of abstraction wherein the objective sense datum is for mental registration that accounts for identification, recognition, and memory. reduced to a subjective content. Thence begins the subjective apperceptive act called Javana, which makes out the sense

of the abstracted essence for a meaningful interpretation thence processed.

The process of cognition is as follows:

When an object comes in the range of one of our five senses: the passive state of mind is disrupted (bhavaṅga-calana); which is then broken (bhavaṅga-upaccheda); which causes alertness at one of the five sense-doors (pañcadvāra-āvajjana); which results in a sensory awareness or viññāna due to the contact of the sense organ and the object, e.g., the visual awareness or *cakkhu*-viññāna; audible awareness or *sota*-viññāna; olfactory awareness or *ghāna*-viññāna; gustatorial awareness or *jivhā*-viññāna; tactual awareness or *kāya*-viññāna.

When viññāna* is constituted (not reflected as Locke would discuss in his Representaionism) in the consciousness and is marked or noted by mind as received or experienced image (uggaha nimitta) or percept (nimitta) by the mental act of apprehension (sampaṭicchana), it is then put to examination by the act of investigation (santīraṇa). Upon investigation the viññāna is thence abstracted into an ‘after image’ (paṭibhāga nimitta). This act is called the “Voṭṭhapana”, because, herein, the physicality is ‘to be cut off’ and thence the object enters the domain of ideas. Hence the Cognitive Process of Ideas or cognitive processing of ideas begin from this level, which is called the ‘Manodvāra Vīthi’ or the ‘Cognition by way of the Mind-Door’, because mind is reckoned to the sixth sense. Once the image is processed into an abstracted ‘after image’ and determined for classification into concept or paññatti, the subjective act of apperception, i.e., ‘Javana’ processes the datum of consciousness by the subjective interpretation of the acquired subjective content for its understanding and further for identification, recognition and memory. When the object is fully absorbed or understood by the Javana and passed on to the level of Mental Registration called Tadālambana (lit., ‘that-[corresponding]-object’). Should the object

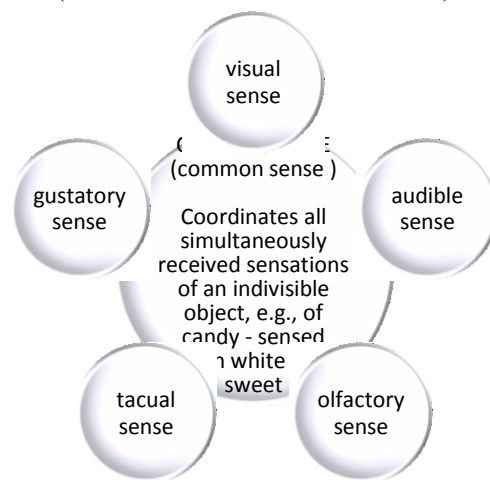
* Sanskrit: Vijñāna.

run for the complete course of Tadāmbana involving two subsequent thought moments, namely for conceptualisation and articulation: the memory of the object would be clear and distinct (Mahanta). However, when the object sinks down to the subliminal consciousness without reaching the Determining stage or Voṭṭhapana stage its cognition is very feeble (ati-pāṇi) it dies before the two thought moments of Registrati (C.B.Varma) (avibhūta). So, we thus note that the process of cognition does not end just with the contact with and response of the sense organ which when comes in contact with the cognitive object, namely visual, audible, olfactory, gustatory and tangible exposures; of the object with a sense organ seeing or quick succession partaking as well as the mind's templates for understanding in the Process of Cognition (Citta-Vīthi). In light of the above they study and analyse consciousness and its cognitive ability as well as the mental factors contributive to and constitutive of the phenomenon of happiness with the activation of the Javana or the apperceptive ability of the mind.

Before we discuss Javana it is however relevant to point out that the Buddhists, too, like many others, subscribe to the view that sensible objects can become the source materials for cognition though not the only source materials unlike the Empiricists like John Locke. The object or ālambana which is akin to Aristotle's postulation of aistheton or 'sensible objects'.

Interestingly, Aristotle's theory of central sense and Kant's Copernican Revolution approximate Buddhist view of mind and its cognitive process.

ARISTOTLE'S AESTHESIS (SENSATION/PERCEPTION)



Like the Buddhists Aristotle also believed in the passive mental act of cognition at the initial stages of cognition which acts in stages, viz., due to its object-directedness character it synthesises the aestheton (sensible objects) supplied through the sense organs, which has the power of receiving into itself the sensible forms without matter as a wax can have impression of the signet ring without metal for further processing.. See De Anima (DA) 424a16-24. This view is close to the Buddhist view of Votthapana.

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