Understanding Philosophy of Logics and Epistemology in Theravada Perspective

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1. Introduction

In Indian tradition of epistemology, the analysis of knowledge has been the main feature of many famous systems of thought like Nyaya, Vaisesika, Samkhya, Yoga, Purva-Mimamsa, Jain, Buddhism and Vedanta. Different kinds of means of knowledge (pramanas) which have been discussed by these traditions are: (i) direct knowledge or perception (pratyaksa), (ii) inference (anumana), (iii) knowledge by similarity (upamana), (iv) verbal testimony (sahda), including scriptural testimony (sastra or agama), (v) presumption (arthapatti), (vi) implication (sambhava), (vii) non-existence (abhava), and (viii) tradition (aitihya). The number of these means of knowledge accepted by each tradition, however, is different. The signs of epistemology are traceable as early as some of the hymns of the Rgveda. Many of philosophical schools then introduced and develop own analysis of epistemology.

Buddhist tradition of logic and epistemology started with Dinnaga approximately one thousand years after the mahaparinirvana of the Sakyamuni Buddha. Though the topics of this tradition were traced back to the earliest teachings of the Buddha in Nikaya literature and some philosophical works of many famous Buddhist thinkers like Nagarjuna, Asanga, Vasubandhu, it was Dinnaga who officially founded this logico-epistemological system. We must recognize that the contribution of Buddhism to profound system of logic and epistemology of Indian philosophy began with Dinnaga. Dinnaga was the first Buddhist thinker who set up and systematized the Buddhist theory of knowledge which has been definitely the foundation of later Buddhist development of epistemology carried our by Dharmakirti, Dharmottara, Santaraksita, Kamalasila, Jnanasrimitra and Ratnakirti. It is true that Dinnaga keeps an important position in both Buddhist and Indian history of epistemology. He is said to have inaugurated new era in the history of logic and epistemology insofar. By treating the theory of the means of knowledge as a subject by itself, he departed from the usual observation of the previous Hindu schools which used to deal with both the means of knowledge and the objects of knowledge together. It is necessary that there should be many attempts on the study of Dinnaga’s philosophy so that his role in Buddhist logico-epistemological system is certified. This study is one of them.

This article deals with various signs of epistemology in Theravada as well as other Buddhist schools in India. Though the fundamental doctrines of early Buddhism rest on the path of liberation, we can find out
the classifications and the way of acquiring knowledge in Pali suttas. Two pioneering works on Theravada’s epistemology are Jayatilleke’s *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* and Khemananda’s *Logic and Epistemology in Theravada*. Epistemology is then discussed in detail by many authors of Vaibhasika, Sautrantika, Madhyamika and Yogacara. In this chapter epistemology of Vaibhasika and Sautrantika is discussed on the base of main doctrines of these schools. The discussions of Madhyamika’s epistemology are based on Nagarjuna’s works like *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, *Vigrahavyavartaniand* and *Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra* while Yogacara’s epistemology is discussed through *Dasabhumika-sutra*, *Lankavatata-sutra* and other works of Maitreya-natha, Asanga, Vasubandhu, and Dharmapala.

2. **Epistemology of Theravada Buddhism**

   The system of teachings in Early Buddhism is not just a way of mindful living, but also an approach to satisfy various requirements of human daily life like philosophy, psychology, psychotherapy, and so on. One of the main concerns of this system is the introduction as well as the method to acquire emancipating knowledge. The discussion of epistemological questions occurs in so far because the purpose of Buddhist practitioners is how to attain the ultimate freedom. Though the Buddha himself is not interested much in the philosophical problems about the nature and the scope of the theory of knowledge in the form of academic study and logical analysis, his teachings of the noble path are characterized by the introduction of different levels of knowledge pursued by various living beings.

3. **The Buddha and three tendencies of Indian epistemology**

   Buddhism emerged in India during a period when numerous contradictory theories about the nature of men, universe and knowledge were advocated by different religious and philosophical schools. Therefore in order to face and pass such challenges the Buddha had to present his epistemological views on some necessary matters in response to the contemporary thinkers in their conversations. The Buddha’s attitude towards the epistemological explanations of the other religious and philosophical systems is mentioned in many Pali Discourses.\(^1\) K.N. Jayatilleke cited a passage in the Sangarava-Sutta to present that the Buddha classifies his predecessors and contemporaries in respect of their ways of knowing into three classes, namely, the traditionalist, the rationalists, and the experientialists. The Buddha also identifies himself with the members of the third group.\(^1\) The traditionalists who upheld the sacred authority of the Vedas claim that their knowledge is derived from the scriptural tradition. The Brahmins belong to this class. The rationalists believe that their knowledge is derived from reason and speculation, not sensory perception. This class includes the metaphysicians of Early Upanisads, the Sceptics, the Materialists and most of the Ajivakas.

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\(^1\) Some of them are the Brahmajala-Sutta (D. 1), the Vimamsaka, Upali-Sutta, Apannaka-Sutta (M.I) the Sandaka, Sangavara-Sutta, Canki -Sutta (M.II), the Kalama-Sutta (A.I), the Culavivuhya- Sutta, Mahaviyuha-Sutta, Atthakavagga (Suttanipata)...

\(^1\) K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist theory of Knowledge*, pp. 171-172.
The Experientialists accept the direct personal knowledge and experience, including extrasensory perception. Many thinkers of the middle and late Upanisads, some of the Ajivakas and Jains are in this class.

The traditionalists’ appreciation on the authority of the Vedas is not accepted by the Buddha. This attitude of the Buddha is presented in the Kalama-Sutta where six forms of dependence on authority are mentioned in the following passage:

“Do not, Kalama, arrive at conclusions owing to hearsay, owing to tradition, owing to rumor, owing to distinction in canonical works, on account of speculation, on account of methodical reasoning, owing to a study of appearance, after nor by thinking ‘the ascetic is our revered teacher.’ But when, Kalama, you yourselves know: ‘these properties are unhealthy, these properties are shameful, these properties are reproached by the wise, these properties when fulfilled and undertaken lead to harm and distress,’ then you must reject them.”

Beside authority, the reason is not considered as the proper means of supreme knowledge. The rationalists use reason to formulate philosophical theses, defend them, and also attack the contradicted theses of the others. The Buddha considers the product of such rational speculation as strong dogmas. These dogmas are criticized by the Buddha in the Brahmajala-Sutta (D.I) and the Atthakavagga (Suttanipata). The Buddha did not believe that one could arrive at truth by means of such a method, but it merely leads to conflicts and debate which produces unwholesome emotions influencing a person’s moral progress. The Kalama-Sutta does aim to denote the uselessness of the grounds mentioned from the point of view of a person searching for the truth, but it maintains that there are moral and spiritual truths that one could realize by oneself without depending on external authorities and pure rational speculation. The moral and spiritual life is known to consist in the cultivation of non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion. The Buddha did not reject the Vedic teaching out-right, but considered it as unsatisfactory teaching about the noble life because it was based on tradition.

4. **Conventional knowledge in Theravada**

It is not easy to state the theory of knowledge of Theravada in systemized perspective. In Theravada knowledge can be classified as conventional and noble (Aryan). The knowledge of the worldly phenomena is mundane and it is described by such terms as ‘jnana’ (knowledge), ‘vijnana’ (knowing), ‘citta’ or ‘mana’ (mind). The three terms ‘vijnana’, ‘citta’ and ‘mana’ are actually different aspects of the same element.

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3 *EB*, Vol VI. Fascicle 1, p. 87.
Vijnana is capable of knowing six kinds of objects through six equivalent sense organs. The process of acquiring knowledge is described by the Buddha in the following passage:

“Depending upon the visual organ and the visible objects, O monks, arises visible consciousness; the meeting together of these three is contact; conditioned by contact arises feeling. What one feels, one perceives; what one perceives, one reflects about; what one reflects about, one is observed with. What one is observed with, due to that, concepts characterized by such obsessed perception assail him in regard to visible objects cognizable by the visual organ, belonging to the past, the future, and the present.”

The above process can be applied to the other sense organs like nose, ear, tongue, body, and so on. The principle of this process is the ‘dependence’ (paticcasamuppada) because it is in dependence on the sense organ and the object that the process of perception begins. The coming together of the sense organ object of sense, and the consciousness conditioned by them is called contact (phasa). Contact is the cause of feeling (vedana), which can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Feeling is a common aspect of human psychology and an element which influences the sensual perception or the direct knowledge of a person. The statement that “What one feels, one perceives; what one perceives, one reflects about” is a way of stating that our perception (sanna) is determined by our emotions. Sanna is a cognitive response of the unenlightened individual or a way leading to bondage and suffering. It is therefore should be transcend. The next step in the process of experience is reflection (vitakka), which can help people to evaluate the consequences of perception, whether it leads to suffering or happiness. Ven. H. Khemananda has given the following conclusion on Theravada conclusion of the origin of knowledge by means of sensual organs:

1. The objects belonging to the five organs will also enter the mind-organ.

2. The objects only ‘fall in’ to the five organs which do not cognize objects.

3. The knowledge on mind-organ derived from the five organs is called ‘belonging to mixed mind-organ.’ This is the knowledge belonging to the five faculties.

4. What is seen, heard, felt is ‘belonging to mind-organ’ and what is known is regarded as belonging to pure mind-organ.

5. The pure mind-organ is twofold: associated with the five organs and occurring independently.

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1 Organ are merely doors for the object and the function of knowing is performed through mind (manas). The relation of mind, organs and objects is illustrated in the following simile: suppose there is a city covered by a wall with six entrances. The master of the city stays as the middle of the city and the messengers entering from all six entrances would come to him in order to get business attended. In the like manner, six entrances are compared sense organs, objects are compared to the messengers and the master is compared to mind. H. Khemananda, Logic and Epistemology in Theravada, p. 28.


1 H. Khemananda, op. cit., p. 32.
6. The cognitive process of a form perceived initially through the visual faculty may recur in the mind. This is comparable to the echo of a belt.

7. There is more than one way for the independent origination of knowledge in mind. They do not necessarily produce perception, for the objects are forms belonging either to past or to present but not concepts. Nevertheless, one’s knowledge of the nature of those forms has concepts as its object.

It is noted that the mind-organ receives its objects through various means like objects received earlier by the five faculties, receiving similar objects, hearing others’ words, hearing something similar to what was heard earlier, faith, inclination, reflection on reasons, conviction based on reflection on theories, and so on.

Thought-process or the process of thought that takes place in the act of understanding an object is analyzed in Theravada. Those pertaining to the five organs are classified as (1) very big, (2) big, (3) small, and (4) very small, while those belonging to mind-organ has been classified as (1) illuminated and (2) unilluminated. It is said that the maximum duration of a form or matter is seventeen thought-moments which becomes fifty one when multiplied by the three briefer instances of each moment, namely nascence, existence and disintegration. This means that it is necessary to spend all the seventeen moments in order to know matter fully which is the comprehensive perception of what is seen. The minimum is one thought moment. The duration of the knowledge of the objects of the mind-organ, however, is shorter. It lasts thirteen or eleven moments maximum or, in some cases, one moment minimum.¹

5. Noble knowledge in Theravada

The second kind of knowledge in Theravada is noble knowledge (Aryanjnana) or super knowledge. Those who attain this knowledge are called the arya (noble ones). This knowledge is the wisdom of those who are attaining the aryahood and those who have attained the aryahood. The Pali Nikayas mention the super-cognitive ability of some recluses and Brahmins who can remember their previous existences.² The super-cognitive ability of these recluses and Brahmins is called abhinna, a special way of knowing of the Yogi practitioners. The prefix abhi in abhinna means ‘superiority’, ‘speciality’, ‘extra-ordinary’ or ‘greatness’. Therefore the term abhinna can be rendered into English as cognition. The Pali Nikayas enumerate the following six forms of abhinna: i. Iddhividha, ii. Dibbasota, iii. Cetopariyanana, iv. Pubbenivasanussati, v. Dibbacakkhu, and vi. Asavakkhayandna. Iddhividha is an extraordinary ability to perform certain acts like walking on water, levitation, etc...Dibbasota is the ability of super audition beyond the range of one’s normal power of audition. Cetopariyanana enables a person to examine directly and comprehend one’s own mind the mental traits in another’s mind. By this ability one can know thought

¹ Ibid., pp. 33-35.
² T.W. Rhys, Davids (tr.), Dialogues of the Buddha, p.27.
arising in the mind of others. Pubbenivasanussati is an extension of one’s memory into the past beyond one’s present life experience. It can help a person recall his own previous memory experiences. Dibbacakkhu is a super visual ability. It enables person to see the passing away of other beings and their arising in accordance with their own characteristics.

The last one, Asavakkhayanana (knowledge of the waning of influxes) is a kind of self transforming knowledge or the highest knowledge of any spiritual master. Here influxes are defilement produced in human mind as the result of the contact between sensual organs and their equivalent objects. This knowledge is claimed to be unique to Buddhism because it leads to the elimination of suffering and abiding to the absolute reality. In this situation Asavakkhayanana is synonym for freedom (nibbana). The Tevijja-Vacchagotta-sutta states that the Buddha attained three kinds of higher knowledge called tevijja. These kinds of knowledge are Pubbenivasanussati, Cutupapatana (or Dibbacakkhu) and Asavakkhaya. The first two keep a meaningful role in Buddhism because they reveal the truths of rebirth and kamma. The last refers to a moral transformation in the individual. Some of later interpreters propound this knowledge as omniscience. This view, however, is not proper as the Buddha refuses to recognize knowledge of such an essence or substance as existing in the future.

6. Parinna and Panna

Two other popular terms referring to higher forms of cognition in Buddhism are parinna and panna. Parinna (thorough understanding) is the understanding state possessed by the Buddha and the saints when they eliminate defilements. According to Mahadukkhakkhandha-Sutta it is also a comprehensive understanding of the nature of sense-pleasure (kama), material shapes (rupa) and feeling (vedana) as well as their satisfaction, their harmful or perilous consequence and the possible freedom from bondage to them. Panna is the last stage of the path to spiritual perfection which includes sīla (good conduct) and samadhi (meditation) also. In Dīgha-Nikaya panna is considered as the highest stage of leading saintly life and the main factor leading to the state of eternal bliss (nibbana). The distinction between vinnana and panna is explained in the Mahavedalla-Sutta as follow: “intuitive wisdom is to be developed, discriminative consciousness is for apprehending.” This sutta also states that panna is not a form of knowing completely separated from sense cognition, and panna and vinnana are not absolutely separable cognitive activities. The objects of panna and vinnana are not different. The difference lies only in the nature of the cognitive

1 D. Kalupahana, op. cit., p. 42.
3 D. Kalupahana, op. cit., p.43.
4 Ibid., p. 44.
6 Ibid., pp. 112-113.
7 B. Labh, Panna in Early Buddhism, p. 44.
8 Ibid., p.45.
response. Panna or wisdom is the emancipating knowledge acquired only by the proper cultivation while vinnana or sensual cognition is the knowledge of common people. The difference between panna and jnana is discussed in Theravada. While this distinction was not so clear in Pali suttas, it came to be clarified in the Abhidhamma period. In Pali Abhidamma panna means the subject’s knowing and jnana means object to be know. The Atthasalini also considers jnana as product or result, and panna as the way to gain a product. This fact indicates that panna which being as subject has a broader sense than jnana belonging to object.

7. Conclusion

By discussing various aspects of Dinnaga’s system of epistemology we can realize the position as well as the contribution of Dinnaga to the history of Buddhist philosophy in India. Both of his theory of pramanas (the means of knowledge) and language are highly influential for subsequent Buddhist thinkers. It should be noted that Dinnaga’s logico-epistemological system is not a way for mere discussion, but it serves for the purpose of eliminating of human anxieties relating to the nature of life as well as wrong cognitions that the common people involve in their daily lives.

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7 G.H. Sakaki, Linguistic Approach to Buddhist Thought, p. 92.
8 Ibid.