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Perception in Mahayana Buddhism: A study of Contemporary Perspective

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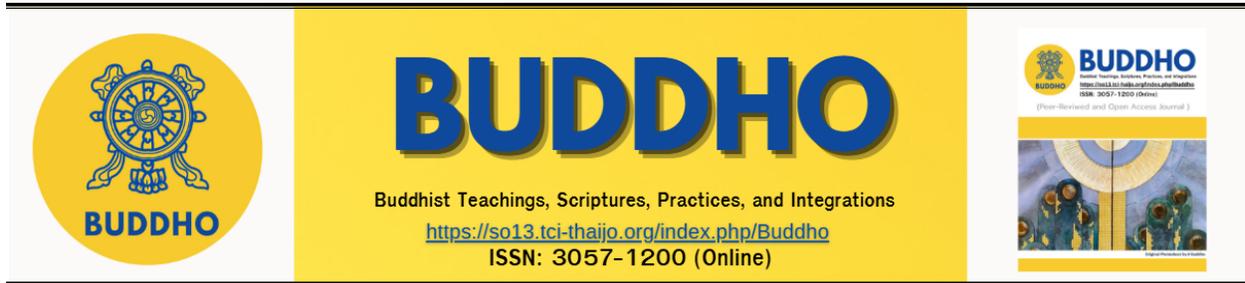
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Perception in Mahayana Buddhism: A study of Contemporary Perspective

Achini Chandima*

Abstract

This study investigates the concept of perception in Buddhism from a contemporary analytical perspective, emphasizing its philosophical foundations, psychological dimensions, and practical applications. The significance of this research lies in its attempt to bridge classical Buddhist epistemology with modern intellectual discourse, particularly in psychology and cognitive science. By examining primary sources from early Buddhist texts alongside contemporary scholarly interpretations, the study clarifies how perception (*saññā*) functions within the Buddhist framework of cognition and experiential reality.

The findings reveal that perception in Buddhism is not merely a passive sensory process but an active, conditioned construction shaped by mental formations, memory, and conceptual proliferation. Within Buddhist epistemology, perception operates in dynamic interdependence with consciousness and feeling, contributing to the formation of self-identity and experiential suffering. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that mindfulness practices serve as practical methods for refining perception, enabling practitioners to observe cognitive processes with greater clarity and reduce distorted interpretations of reality. The body of knowledge gained from this study contributes to interdisciplinary dialogue by showing conceptual parallels between Buddhist theories of perception and contemporary models in cognitive science, particularly regarding constructive perception, attentional processes, and neuroplasticity. This research therefore offers a framework for integrating Buddhist philosophical insights into modern psychological and neuroscientific discussions, while also reaffirming the practical relevance of Buddhist perception theory in promoting mental well-being and self-awareness in contemporary society.

Keywords: Perception, Buddhism, Epistemology, Mindfulness, Cognitive Science

Introduction

Perception plays a crucial role in Buddhist philosophy, shaping the way individuals understand and interact with reality. Rooted in the Abhidharma traditions and the teachings of major Buddhist schools, perception is analyzed as a process that influences cognition, emotions, and behavior. This study aims to bridge classical Buddhist theories of perception with contemporary discussions in cognitive science and psychology. Buddhism presents a nuanced understanding of perception, emphasizing its role in shaping subjective reality and conditioning human experience. According to Buddhist epistemology, perception is not merely a passive reception of sensory stimuli but an active cognitive process influenced by mental formations (samskaras), past experiences (vasanas), and karmic imprints. Classical Buddhist texts, particularly from the Yogācāra and Madhyamaka schools, discuss perception as a construct shaped by both internal and external factors (Garfield, 1995). Perception in Mahayana Buddhism is deeply rooted in the doctrines of subjectivity and interdependent origination. It is shaped by mental formations (samskaras) and past experiences (vasanas), which influence how individuals interpret reality. This paper explores the contemporary understanding of perception in Mahayana Buddhism, focusing on the perspectives of the Yogācāra and Madhyamaka schools, and their implications in modern philosophical and psychological discourse.

The significance of studying perception in Buddhism extends beyond philosophy into practical applications in psychology, mindfulness, and cognitive science. Mindfulness practices rooted in Buddhist traditions have been incorporated into contemporary therapeutic interventions, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Furthermore, recent neuroscientific research suggests that meditation and mindfulness practices alter brain activity, enhancing cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation (Davidson & Goleman, 2017). This interdisciplinary approach underscores the relevance of Buddhist perception theories in modern scientific discourse. The Madhyamaka school, on the other hand, emphasizes the emptiness (śūnyatā) of perceived phenomena, arguing that perception is dependent on conceptual constructs rather than objective reality (Garfield, 1995). Buddhist theories of perception provide a valuable framework for understanding cognition, mindfulness, and mental conditioning. Contemporary research supports the relevance of these theories in psychology and neuroscience, demonstrating their applicability beyond traditional Buddhist contexts. Future studies can further explore the intersection of Buddhist epistemology and scientific inquiry, offering deeper insights into human perception.

Perception in Classical Buddhist Thought

Buddhism posits that perception is inherently subjective and conditioned by mental formations (samskaras) and past experiences (vasanas). According to the Yogācāra school, perception is mediated by the eight consciousnesses, including the alaya-vijñāna (storehouse consciousness), which retains karmic imprints. The Madhyamaka school, on the other hand,

emphasizes the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of perceived phenomena, arguing that perception is dependent on conceptual constructs rather than objective reality (Garfield, 1995). 1. The Yogācāra Perspective on Perception The Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, often referred to as the "Mind-Only" (*Cittamātra*) school, presents a unique and deeply idealistic view of perception. According to Yogācāra, all experiences are the result of consciousness (*vijñāna*) and are ultimately mental constructs (Williams, 2009). This perspective challenges the notion of an external, independent reality by positing that what is perceived is a manifestation of stored karmic imprints in the eighth consciousness, or *ālaya-vijñāna* (Lusthaus, 2002). Yogācāra argues that perception arises through the interaction of three natures (*trisvabhāva*): the imagined nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*), which consists of conceptual projections; the dependent nature (*paratantra-svabhāva*), which accounts for the causal conditions behind experiences; and the perfected nature (*pariṇiṣpanna-svabhāva*), which is the realization of the non-dual nature of reality (Garfield, 2015). Through deep meditative insight, practitioners can transcend conceptual dualism and recognize the illusory nature of their perceptions.

Critically, while the Yogācāra school provides a compelling explanation of perception as a cognitive construction, its idealism raises epistemological concerns. If all experiences are merely mental, how does one account for intersubjective agreement on empirical reality? Moreover, its reliance on the *ālaya-vijñāna* as a repository of karmic seeds introduces a quasi-metaphysical element that some critics argue veers close to substantialism, which Buddhism traditionally seeks to avoid (Kapstein, 2001). 2. The Madhyamaka View on Perception and Emptiness In contrast, the Madhyamaka school, founded by Nāgārjuna, offers a radical deconstruction of perception through the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Madhyamaka asserts that all phenomena, including perception, lack inherent existence (*svabhāva*) and arise only in dependence on causes and conditions (Garfield, 1995). This perspective rejects both external realism and subjective idealism, arguing instead for a middle way that transcends extremes of existence and non-existence (Siderits, 2007). From a Madhyamaka viewpoint, perception is neither an internal projection nor a representation of an independent reality; rather, it is a dependent-arising phenomenon with no intrinsic essence. As Candrakīrti (c. 7th century) elaborates, perception arises in dependence on the six senses, mental factors, and conditions, but none of these factors possess inherent existence (Thakchoe, 2016). This insight leads to the realization that all perceived phenomena are empty, including the perceiver, thereby dismantling any basis for ontological attachment or fixation. A critical analysis of Madhyamaka's stance on perception highlights its strength in avoiding the pitfalls of both realism and idealism. However, its radical emptiness doctrine has been critiqued for potentially undermining the very possibility of knowledge. If perception lacks any inherent grounding, how can one assert epistemic validity or distinguish between illusion and conventional truth? Madhyamaka scholars respond to this by distinguishing between conventional and ultimate truth, asserting that conventional truths function pragmatically even if they lack intrinsic existence (Garfield, 2015).

The Yogācāra and Madhyamaka views on perception present two distinct but interrelated perspectives within Mahāyāna Buddhism. Yogācāra's emphasis on mind-only perception highlights the constructed nature of experience, while Madhyamaka's doctrine of emptiness challenges even the basis of mental constructs. Both perspectives contribute to Buddhist

epistemology and soteriology, yet each faces philosophical challenges: Yogācāra struggles with the implications of its idealism, whereas Madhyamaka must navigate the tension between emptiness and epistemic coherence. Ultimately, both schools aim toward the same soteriological goal—the liberation from suffering through the realization of non-duality and dependent origination. The study of perception in Mahayana Buddhism, through the lenses of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka, provides valuable insights into the nature of experience and reality. These perspectives challenge conventional notions of objective perception and offer profound philosophical and practical implications. Contemporary research in cognitive science, psychology, and philosophy continues to engage with these Buddhist ideas, demonstrating their enduring relevance in understanding human perception and consciousness.

Contemporary Perspectives on Buddhist Perception

Modern scholars and researchers have explored Buddhist theories of perception through the lenses of cognitive science and psychology. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) introduced the concept of enactive cognition, which posits that perception arises through active engagement with the environment rather than passive reception of sensory data. This perspective aligns with Buddhist mindfulness practices, which emphasize the embodied and participatory nature of perception. Research in neuroscience further supports the notion that perception is influenced by attention and mental conditioning, a principle deeply rooted in Buddhist epistemology (Lutz, Dunne, & Davidson, 2007). Studies on meditation have demonstrated that sustained attention can alter perceptual processing, reinforcing the Buddhist view that cognition and experience are interdependent. Mahayana Buddhist theories of perception hold significant implications for contemporary psychology and cognitive science. The idea that perception is shaped by past experiences and cognitive biases resonates with modern theories of cognitive processing and neuroplasticity (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 2017). From a psychological standpoint, mindfulness-based interventions, derived from Buddhist contemplative practices, have been shown to mitigate cognitive distortions and improve mental well-being. Additionally, the Madhyamaka school's critique of inherent existence presents a philosophical challenge to conventional notions of objective reality. This critique finds parallels in quantum physics, particularly in the observer effect, which underscores the interdependence of perception and reality (Wallace, 2003). Such interdisciplinary dialogues between Buddhism, psychology, and physics continue to enrich contemporary understandings of perception and consciousness.

Applications in Mindfulness and Cognitive Science

The integration of Buddhist perceptual theories into contemporary psychology has led to the development of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs). These interventions, such as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), utilize Buddhist insights on perception to enhance emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Furthermore, neuroscientific research demonstrates that mindfulness practices reshape neural pathways, reinforcing the Buddhist view that perception is malleable and trainable (Davidson & Goleman, 2017). The integration of Buddhist perceptual theories into

contemporary psychology has significantly influenced the development of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs). These interventions, such as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), leverage Buddhist insights on perception to enhance emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). By adopting mindfulness practices, individuals cultivate an increased awareness of their thoughts and emotions, thereby reducing maladaptive cognitive patterns that contribute to psychological distress. Moreover, neuroscientific research provides empirical support for the efficacy of mindfulness in reshaping neural pathways. Studies indicate that consistent mindfulness practice leads to structural and functional changes in the brain, particularly in regions associated with attention, emotion regulation, and self-referential processing (Davidson & Goleman, 2017). These findings align with the Buddhist perspective that perception is not a fixed phenomenon but rather a dynamic process that can be refined through intentional practice. The neuroplasticity associated with mindfulness supports the notion that individuals can train their minds to cultivate more adaptive responses to their experiences. Additionally, cognitive science has furthered the understanding of mindfulness by exploring its effects on attention and perception. Research suggests that mindfulness enhances selective attention, reduces cognitive biases, and improves metacognitive awareness (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008). This evidence underscores the practical applications of Buddhist perceptual theories in contemporary psychological treatments, demonstrating their relevance in fostering mental well-being. As the field of mindfulness research continues to evolve, the intersection of Buddhist philosophy and cognitive science offers valuable insights into human perception and cognition. By incorporating ancient contemplative practices into modern psychological frameworks, MBIs provide individuals with effective tools for managing stress, enhancing emotional resilience, and fostering greater psychological well-being.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the relationship between cognition, mindfulness, and mental conditioning within the framework of Buddhist thought, while also considering their relevance in contemporary psychological and neuroscientific discourse. In alignment with the research objectives, the analysis has demonstrated that Buddhist theories of mind—particularly those concerning perception, awareness, and the cultivation of attention—offer a systematic and sophisticated account of human cognition.

The findings reveal that mindfulness is not merely a contemplative practice, but a structured method of cognitive training that reshapes patterns of perception and mental conditioning. Buddhist epistemology presents cognition as a dynamic process influenced by intention, habitual tendencies, and ethical orientation. This perspective resonates strongly with modern psychological theories of neuroplasticity, attentional regulation, and cognitive restructuring. Contemporary neuroscience increasingly validates the claim that sustained mindfulness practice can alter neural pathways associated with attention, emotional regulation, and self-referential processing. Importantly, this study highlights the interdisciplinary value of integrating Buddhist philosophical insights with empirical scientific research. By bridging contemplative traditions and modern cognitive science, the research demonstrates the practical

usefulness of Buddhist mental training in areas such as mental health, education, and human development. In conclusion, the study affirms that Buddhist approaches to cognition and mental conditioning remain highly relevant in the modern world. They not only deepen theoretical understanding of human perception but also provide practical methodologies for enhancing cognitive clarity and psychological well-being. Future research may continue to explore the dialogue between Buddhist epistemology and scientific inquiry, contributing to a more holistic and integrative understanding of the human mind.

Recommendation

Given the robust empirical support for mindfulness-based interventions, further interdisciplinary research should explore their long-term effects on cognition and mental health. Future studies could investigate how different Buddhist traditions conceptualize perception and their implications for therapeutic applications. Additionally, integrating mindfulness practices into educational and workplace settings could enhance cognitive resilience and emotional intelligence, fostering a more holistic approach to well-being.

Body of Knowledge

The study of perception in Mahayana Buddhism, through the lenses of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka, provides valuable insights into the nature of experience and reality. The Yogācāra school's emphasis on mind-only perception highlights the constructed nature of experience, while the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness challenges even the basis of mental constructs. Both perspectives contribute to Buddhist epistemology and soteriology, yet each faces philosophical challenges: Yogācāra struggles with the implications of its idealism, whereas Madhyamaka must navigate the tension between emptiness and epistemic coherence.

Ultimately, both schools aim toward the same soteriological goal—the liberation from suffering through the realization of non-duality and dependent origination. Contemporary research in cognitive science, psychology, and philosophy continues to engage with these Buddhist ideas, demonstrating their enduring relevance in understanding human perception and consciousness. The intersection of Buddhist philosophy and cognitive science offers valuable insights into human perception and cognition. By incorporating ancient contemplative practices into modern psychological frameworks, MBIs provide individuals with effective tools for managing stress, enhancing emotional resilience, and fostering greater psychological well-being.

Mahayana Buddhist Perception: Yogācāra & Madhyamaka

1. Yogācāra (Mind-Only School)

- Perception is a mental construct rather than an external reality.
- Emphasizes storehouse consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*) as the basis of perception.
- Categorizes perception through three natures (*trisvabhāva*):
 - Imagined nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*): Conceptual projections.
 - Dependent nature (*paratantra-svabhāva*): Causal conditions behind experiences.
 - Perfected nature (*pariṇiṣpanna-svabhāva*): Realization of non-duality.

- Philosophical challenge: Struggles with epistemological idealism—how to explain shared reality.
- 2. Madhyamaka (Middle Way School)
 - Asserts emptiness (śūnyatā)—all phenomena, including perception, lack inherent existence.
 - Rejects external realism and subjective idealism, advocating dependent origination.
 - Perception arises dependently through causes and conditions.
- 3. Philosophical challenge: Balances emptiness and epistemic coherence—how knowledge is possible if everything is empty.
 - Shared Soteriological Goal
 - Liberation from suffering through realizing: Non-duality (Yogācāra)
 - Dependent origination (Madhyamaka)
- 4. Contemporary Implications & Applications
 - Cognitive Science & Psychology: Perception is shaped by past experiences & cognitive biases (neuroplasticity).
 - Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs): Apply Buddhist insights for stress reduction and emotional resilience.
 - Philosophical & Scientific Intersections: Madhyamaka’s emptiness parallels quantum physics (observer effect). Yogācāra’s mind-only theory aligns with constructivist cognitive models.

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