

## The role of language in Buddhist epistemology

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the role of language and the concept of *pramāṇa* (valid means of knowledge) within Buddhist epistemology. The central theme of Indian philosophy, including Buddhism, is the investigation of *pramāṇas* as instruments for attaining accurate knowledge (*pramāṇa*). While various Indian schools accept up to six *pramāṇas*, Buddhist logico-epistemology, notably the Dignāga and Dharmakīrti schools, exclusively recognize two: Pratyakṣa (Perception) and Anumāna (Inference). They view others like comparison and testimony as subsumed under inference. Furthermore, the Buddhist tradition accepts scriptural authority only if it is consistent with perception and inference, aligning with the Buddha's injunction against accepting anything based on mere tradition. Pratyakṣa (Perception) is defined as direct, immediate, and non-conceptual experience of reality. It is considered valid because it apprehends the uniqueness (*svalakṣaṇa*) of an object, unassociated with language or conceptual construction (*kalpana*). Anumāna (Inference) is the secondary means of knowledge, relying on reasoning and logical analysis. It is based on *vyāpti* (invariable concomitance) between a *hetu* (reason) and a *sādhya* (inferable property). Inference is categorized into *Svārthānumānam* (for oneself) and *Parārthānumānam* (for others, often stated in syllogistic form). Different Buddhist schools like Sautrāntika, Yogācāra, and Madhyamaka offer varied theories on the nature and limitation of perception and inference, particularly concerning the role of consciousness, momentariness, and emptiness (*śūnyatā*). The paper concludes that Buddhist epistemologists utilize these tools to accurately "measure reality" and advance the path to liberation.

**Keywords:** *pramāṇam*, Pratyakṣam, Anumānam, Śabdām, *Svārthānumānam*, *Parārthānumānam*.

### Introduction

Buddhist philosophy is the ancient Indian philosophical system that developed within the religio-philosophical tradition of Buddhism. The most fundamental concept in all of Indian epistemology, both for Buddhists and non-Buddhists, is the concept of *pramāṇa*. Epistemology as a field of philosophical study is, for Indian philosophers, primarily an investigation into and elucidation of the nature of *pramāṇas*.

Pramana literally means "proof" and "means of knowledge". Many ancient and medieval Indian texts identify six pramanas as correct means of accurate knowledge and attaining to the truth. The claim that a *pramāṇa* is an instrument used for the attainment of knowledge is tied to the Indian tradition's broad predilection for a causal theory of cognition (and knowledge). Linguistically, the term for an instance of knowledge, *pramāṇa*, consists of the root *mā*, meaning "to measure," and the prefix *pra-*, which expresses a kind of superiority or excellence. In this way, a *pramāṇa* can be

seen as a “measurement par excellence,” and thus a *pramāṇa* is the means or instrument for making such a measurement. There is yet another, and slightly different, way of construing what is meant by a *pramāṇa*. In its most literal sense it is an instrument by which one achieves *pramā*, or an episode of knowledge.

### **Discussion**

The various schools of Indian philosophies vary on how many of these six *pramanas* are epistemically reliable and valid means to knowledge.

चार्वाकास्तावदेकं द्वितयमपि पुनर्बाद्वैशेषिकौ द्वौ ।  
भासर्वज्ञश्च साङ्ख्यश्चित्यमुदयनाद्याश्चतुष्कं वदन्ति ॥  
प्राहुः प्राभाकराद्याः पञ्चकमपि वर्यं तेषि वेदान्तविज्ञाः ।  
पौराणिकास्त्वष्टकमभिदधिरे सम्भवैतिह्ययोगात् ॥

Different philosophical schools uphold different sets of *pramāṇas* as legitimate. All Indian schools of thought accept perception (*pratyakṣa*) as a source of knowledge. And, except for the Cārvāka School of materialism, all Indian philosophical systems accept inferential reasoning (*anumāna*) as a source of knowledge as well.

Buddhist logico-epistemology is a term used in Western scholarship to describe Buddhist systems of *pramāṇa* (epistemic tool, valid cognition) and *hetu-vidya* (reasoning, logic). *Pramāṇa* is often translated as "valid cognition" or "instrument of knowledge" and refers to epistemic ways of knowing. Decisive in distinguishing Buddhist *pramana* from what is generally understood as Orthodox Hindu philosophy is the issue of epistemological justification. All schools of Indian logic recognize various sets of 'valid justifications for knowledge' or *pramana*. Buddhist logico-epistemology was influenced by the Nyāya School's methodology, but where the Nyāya recognised a set of four *pramanas* -perception, inference, comparison and testimony; the Buddhists (i.e. the school of Dignaga) only recognized two: perception and inference. For Dignaga, comparison and testimony are just special forms of inference. Most Indic *pramanavada* accept 'perception' (Sanskrit: *pratyakṣa*) and 'inference' (Sanskrit: *anumāna*), but for some schools of orthodox Hinduism the 'received textual tradition' (Sanskrit: *āgamāḥ*) is an epistemological category equal to perception and inference. The Buddhist logical tradition of Dignaga and Dharmakirti accept scriptural tradition only if it accords with *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna*. This view is thus in line with the Buddha's injunction in the Kalama Sutta not to accept anything on mere tradition or scripture.

In Buddhist philosophy, the two principal valid means of knowledge (*pramanas*) are *Pratyaksha* (perception) and *Anumana* (inference). Three of these are almost universally accepted: perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), and "word" (*śabda*). The other three *pramanas* are more contentious: comparison and analogy (*upamāna*); postulation or derivation from circumstances (*arthāpatti*); and non-perception, or proof from absence (*anupalabdhi*). Each of these are further categorized in terms of conditional-ity, completeness, confidence, and possibility of error.

Perception (pratyakṣa) is a fundamental concept in Buddhist epistemology, referring to the direct, immediate experience of reality, unmediated by language or concepts. In Buddhism, perception is considered a primary means of knowing (pramāṇa), providing a direct and unfiltered experience of reality. In perception is direct sensory experience of an object. It is the immediate and unmediated apprehension of something by the senses. Perception is able to give us a concrete and distinct knowledge about an object and in this sense; it is slightly different from Inference, in which the knowledge is getting always indirectly.

Three types of Perception— 1. Sensory Perception, 2. Mental Perception, 3. Yogic perception. Perception can be internal or external. In external perception, usually our external organs perceive the objects and hand over the information to the mind. Then Mind communicates this with the Atman. The functioning of Atman – mind – sense organs trio is different for each philosophy systems. Apart from external perception, there is ‘internal perception’. We comprehend the pleasure, pain, desire etc. through the internal perception. Here Atman gets knowledge about the mood of mind directly from the Mind. So it is very quick and determinate in nature.

There are commonly two classifications about perception regarding certain philosophical sects, including Advaita Vedanta. They approve two stages in apprehending an object. They are indeterminate perception (Nirvikalpaka) and Determinate perception (Savikalpaka). As per this every determinate perception is preceded by a indeterminate perception. In indeterminate perception perceiver does not identify the kind and quality of the object. Perceiver only gets a vague idea of something that is to determined and known next. But in determinate (savikalpaka) perception perceiver get the full details about the object including the object’s generic and specific attributes.

Pratyaksha (Perception) according to them is a non-erroneous presentation devoid of all determination or conceptual construction. It is the immediate apprehension of an object in its uniqueness unassociated with names and other determination (kalpana). Indeterminate perception alone is perception. It is valid because it apprehends the uniqueness or individuality of an object, devoid of all qualifications. In determinate perception there is similarity between the form of cognition and the form of its object.

A real object is characterized by its capacity to produce fruitful activity (arthakriyasamarthya). That, which is different from it, is the general character of an object (samanayalakshana). It is its common character. It is apprehended by inference.

#### **Perception Theories in Buddhism.**

The Sautrāntika school of Buddhism has a unique perspective on perception, emphasizing direct experience and inference as the primary means of knowing.

1. Direct perception: Sautrāntikas believe that perception is immediate and unmediated by concepts or mental constructions.

2. Representationalism: They propose that perception involves a representational relationship between the object and the mind, rather than direct access to reality.
3. Momentariness: Sautrāntikas subscribe to a doctrine of "extreme momentariness," where only the present moment exists, and all phenomena are transient.
4. Inference: Inference is considered a valid means of knowing, allowing us to deduce things not directly perceived

Sautrāntika ideas influenced later Yogācāra thought, particularly regarding the nature of consciousness and reality. Sautrāntikas reject the Vaibhāṣika view of independent, objective dharmas, instead emphasizing the role of perception and inference.

Yogācāra, a prominent school of Mahayana Buddhism, offers a unique perspective on perception, emphasizing the role of consciousness in shaping our understanding of reality.

1. Consciousness: Only (Vijñapti-mātra): Yogācāra posits that all phenomena are creations of the mind, and external objects are merely reflections of consciousness.
2. Three Natures (Trisvabhāva): Reality is understood through three aspects— Imagined Nature (Parikalpita), Dependent Nature (Paratantra), and Perfected Nature (Pariniṣpanna).
3. Eight Consciousnesses: Yogācāra introduces two additional consciousnesses beyond the standard six— Manas (defiled mentation) and Ālaya-vijñāna (storehouse consciousness).

Madhyamaka, a prominent Mahayana Buddhist school, offers a unique perspective on perception, emphasizing the emptiness (śūnyatā) of all phenomena.

1. Emptiness (Śūnyatā): All phenomena, including perceptions, is empty of inherent existence.
2. Two Truths: Madhyamaka distinguishes between conventional truth (samvṛti-satya) and ultimate truth (paramārtha-satya).
3. Dependent Origination: Phenomena arise dependently, lacking inherent existence.

Inference (anumāna) is a crucial concept in Buddhist epistemology, referring to the process of deriving knowledge or understanding through reasoning and logical analysis. In Buddhism, inference is considered a secondary means of knowing (pramāṇa), complementing direct perception (pratyakṣa). Anumāna or Inference is based on the invariable concomitance of two things, like fire and smoke. This invariable concomitance between two things is known as 'vyapti'. It is not just the presence of an object when its 'mark' is present, but also the non-present of an object when the 'mark' is absent; i.e. concomitance between two things at all time. If the first criterion is met then the second criterion must be present there. Also when the first criterion is absent, the second criterion must not present there. There should not be any contradiction to the above mentioned relations, from the

other factors. This kind unbreakable relation, called ‘vyapti’, must exist for a fault proof ‘anumana’ to work. Inference involves using reasoning and evidence to arrive at a conclusion about something not directly perceived. It's a cognitive process that helps fill gaps in knowledge, understand complex phenomena, and make informed decisions.

Inference is of two kinds; a) Svarthanumana- Inference for oneself, used to understand a phenomenon or concept. b) Pararthanumana- Inference for others, used to explain or convince others about a particular point. The former is the knowledge of an inferable property (sadhya) from the knowledge of a mark of inference (linga) which abides in the minor term or the subject of inference (paksha) or in cases which are homologous (sapaksha) or which does not abide in cases which are heterologous (vipaksha). The example or illustration used to support the inference (Drṣṭānta).

Hetu possesses three characteristics:

- reason which is identical in essence with the probandum;
- a reason which is an effect of the probandum and
- a reason which is not perceived in negative instance.

This is a tree because it is a simshapa tree. This inference is based on uniformity in essence (tadatmya) which is uniformity of co-existence. There is fire here because there is smoke here. This inference is based on uniformity of causation (tadutpatti), which is a uniformity of succession. Smoke is the effect of fire. This cause is inferred from its effect.

Inference for the sake of other (parathanumana) resembles inference for one's own sake (svarthanumana) in all essential characteristics; but it differs from it in the fact that it is formally stated in the form of a syllogism.

Inference for the sake of other is of two kinds a) positive or homogeneous (sadharmyat) and b) negative or heterogeneous (vaidharmyat) For instance, sound is non-eternal because it is a product, all products are non-eternal as a pot (positive) Sound is non-eternal, because it is a product, no non-eternal (eternal things) is a product as ether (negative). The Buddhists accepted three members of syllogism. They are: conclusion, the minor premise and the universal major premise with an example. Inference is based on vyapti or inseparable connection between the probans and the probandum.

The Triad (Pramata, Pramana, Prameya): *Pramana* is one part of a three-part process for acquiring knowledge, alongside the *pramata* (the subject or knower) and the *prameya* (the object or knowable).

Buddhist theories of inference (anumāna) vary across schools, but share common goals: understanding reality and guiding spiritual practice.

Dignāga's theories- Inference relies on a reason (hetu) and example (drṣṭānta), establishing a relationship between the subject (paks) and the inferred property (sādhya).

Dharmakīrti's Expansion- Emphasized the role of inference in understanding reality, introducing concepts like "exclusion" (apoha) for conceptual understanding.

Madhyamaka Perspective- Inference is conventional, used to understand emptiness (śūnyatā), but ultimately, all phenomena, including inference, lack inherent existence.

Buddhist logico-epistemology is a term used in Western scholarship for pramāṇa-vāda (doctrine of proof) and Hetu-vidya (science of causes). Pramāṇa-vāda is an epistemological study of the nature of knowledge; Hetu-vidya is a system of logic

Buddhism holds that two pramanas (perception, inference) are valid means. The various schools of Indian philosophy have debated whether one of the six forms of pramaṇa can be derived from another and the relative uniqueness of each. For example, Buddhism considers Buddha and other "valid persons", "valid scriptures" and "valid minds" as indisputable, but that such testimony is a form of perception and inference pramanas.

Pramāṇa forms one part of a trio of concepts, which describe the ancient Indian view on how knowledge is gained. The other two concepts are pramāṭr, (प्रमातृ, the subject, the knower) and prameya (प्रमेय, the object, the knowable). They each influence the knowledge, by their own characteristic and the process of knowing.

### Conclusion

The concept of a pramāṇa, in the Indian tradition of philosophy, represents a source of knowledge or an instrument for attaining knowledge or an instrument by which one accurately measures reality. Buddhist epistemologists in India consent to this broad way of approaching the study of knowledge. Just like other Indian philosophers, they accept the idea that theoretical investigations of knowledge should be focused on exploring the concept of a pramāṇa. The traditional Indian account, described earlier, treats a pramāṇa as the instrument that brings about an episode of knowledge, where the episode of knowledge consists in a cognition that is the result of a causal process brought about by the pramāṇa. Perception is a fundamental concept in Buddhist epistemology, providing a direct and unfiltered experience of reality. Understanding perception is crucial for Buddhist practice, allowing practitioners to develop wisdom and insight into reality. By recognizing the characteristics and limitations of perception, practitioners can cultivate a deeper understanding of reality and progress on the path to liberation. Anumāna, or inference, is a crucial concept in Buddhist epistemology, enabling practitioners to derive knowledge and understanding through reasoning and logical analysis. By understanding the components and limitations of inference, practitioners can effectively use this tool to deepen their understanding of reality and progress on the path to liberation. In Buddhist philosophy, anumāna is considered a secondary means of knowing (pramāṇa), building upon direct perception (pratyakṣa). There are two types of anumāna. Svārthānumāna Buddhism based related texts -

Inference for oneself, where we use reasoning to understand something.  
Parārthānumāna - Inference for others, where we use reasoning to explain or convince others.

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