Is the immediacy of our knowledge an epistemological ideal or merely a psychological reassurance that our senses don’t misguide us? If we disregard immediacy in favour of other means to determine all of our knowledge including sensation, how can we discern sensation from knowledge? Conversely, if we regard immediacy as a physiological event (sense stimulation), how can we prove that it’s part of the cognitive process? Immediacy-related problems arise in any epistemological discourse – Western or Eastern, ancient or modern. What is immediacy according to Buddhist epistemological tradition (pramanavada) represented by Dignaga (480-540) and Dharmakirti (600-660)?

In their disputes with Brahmanical thinkers the Buddhists tried to exclude any kind of mental construction (kalpana) from the realm of the immediately given. But, deprived as it is of mental construction, immediate perception becomes automatically incapable of providing any cognitive information about its object. That is why Buddhist thinkers had to prove that immediate perception (pratyaksha), in spite of its non-conceptual character, is still a genuine instrument of knowledge (pramana). How did they manage to reconcile the ‘blindness’ of pure sensation with its being part of the cognitive activity?

Units of becoming

The main goal of knowledge from the Buddhist point of view is to know things the way they are (anatman) – or to know reality as such (atmata). What then constitutes reality? For the Buddhist the essence of reality is impermanent (anitya); to exist means to change, because nothing has any endurable essence (anatman). Existence is being reduced to a stream of discrete momentary dharmas.

The term dharmas (in plural form) has no equivalent in Western thought; it has been interpreted in many ways: ‘phenomena’, ‘point-instances’, ‘units of becoming’, ‘properties’, ‘tropes’ etc. To know reality as it is means to know it as a series of dharmas. For the Buddhist this kind of knowledge is obtained in meditation and has a totally immediate character. In this way immediacy is obviously related to the religious soteriological perspective of the Buddhist tradition, but it is the immediacy of the common cognitive experience that was a subject of epistemological discourse and controversy among philosophers of different Indian schools and traditions – Buddhist as well as Brahmanical.

Particulars and universals as subject-matter of pratyaksha and anumana

According to Dignaga’s major epistemological work Pramanasamuccaya (‘A Collection of Instruments of Knowledge’, henceforth, PS), only two instruments of valid knowledge (pramana) exist: pratyaksha, or perception, and anumana, or inference, and each of them has its own subject matter. Pratyaksha deals with what Dignaga calls svālakshanas, literally, that which characterises itself, a particular characteristic or pure particular – something absolutely unique, singular and, most important, momentary (kṣanika). As svālakshanas are ultimately real (pāramarthaḥ) and inexpressible, to experience them means to experience reality as it is. The object of the other pramana, inference (anumana), is constituted by conceptualisations, verbalisations, reflections and other products of mental construction (kalpāna or vikalpa) that Dignaga calls samanyalakshanas – a general characteristic applicable to many objects or distributed over many instances. Samanyalakshanas, generally translated as ‘universal’, are endurable and not subject to change – for this reason they are regarded by Buddhists as only relatively real (samarthā). The term svālakshana does not easily lend itself to interpretation. Its understanding is still a highly controversial matter among scholars. The problem is that its ontological status is quite ambiguous in our authors’ writings. The reason for this ambiguity was formulated by George Dreyfus: ‘Dignaga and Dharmakirti are ontologists only inasmuch as their epistemology requires them to be. They even seem to feel free to alternate between several conflicting metaphysical standpoints. For example, in most of their works, Dignaga and Dharmakirti adopt a so-called Sautrantik standpoint, presupposing the existence of external objects. In other parts of their work, however, they shift their ontological frameworks and move to a Yogacara rejection of external objects... Commonsensical levels are introduced for the sake of convenience and withdrawn to be replaced by higher but more counterintuitive schemes’ (Dreyfus 1997: 49). A choice of ontological positions is equally applicable to svālakshana: it may be either mind-independent or mind-dependent. As far as immediacy is a kind of inner experience of mental actuality, it will be natural to accept that svālakshana, at least in some of our authors’ texts, is regarded as a sort of sense data.

Is pratyaksha a cognitive event?

To Dignaga, a pratyaksha (etymologically, ‘before eyes’) is above all an immediate experience, and its immediacy proves its veracity and certainty. This immediacy is so important that he defines pratyaksha through the exclusion of mediacy in the form of mental constructions. Thus he calls it kalpāna-apodhāna, ‘free from mental constructions’ (PS 35). In this
They might propose an answer conversation is cognitive but not immediate? So what makes an instance of momentary point-instances is no subject of knowledge apart from Buddhists, both of them reject the answer to this question is not simple. Being Buddhists, both of them reject the existence of Atman or Self in a role of a permanent cogniser. For them there is no subject of knowledge apart from the knowledge itself, which is a flow of momentary point-instances (dharmas). So what makes an instance of pratyaksha a piece of knowledge if sense-object contact is not cognitive and conceptualisation is cognitive but not immediate? They might propose an answer connected to their concept of svasamvedana as a variety of pratyaksha. Literally, svasamvedana is a self-awareness, not the awareness of the Self as Atman, but the awareness of the cognitive event itself, or self-reflexive awareness. Dignaga distinguishes between mental perception of the object, such as colour and other sense qualities, and self-awareness of desire, anger, pleasure, pain, etc., which for him constitute mental events not dependent on any sense organ. Svasamvedana is a sort of intuitive experience (anubhava) that accompanies all kinds of mental activity, being itself free of any conceptualisation. It is sometimes rendered by the term ‘apperception’, introduced by Leibniz in the sense of the reflexive awareness of our personal cognitive experience as desirable or not. But that does not mean either that cognition is cognised by a separate cognitive act (otherwise, there would follow an infinite regression) or that svasamvedana, being a sort of introspection, has other mental states as its objects.

Is pratyaksha a true or an instrumental cognition? When Dignaga defines pratyaksha as exempt from mental construction, does he mean that the pramana of pratyaksha is a true cognition? The confirmation that pramana is not tightly associated with truth lies in the veridical status of anumana (inference). Being a mental operation dealing with mentally constructed objects, it could not grasp the true nature of the object and for this reason is regarded as abhranta – erring or subject to errors. Nevertheless, it is still a pramaṇa. Why? Because, according to Dharmakīrti, it may reveal something previously unknown and may lead to a successful action. It is pramana because it is not a confirmation of perception. But how does he explain our experiencing immediacy with perception? Regarding Reality: Dharmakīrti’s Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations. New York: SUNY Press.

For further reading
- Victoria Lyons is a research professor at the Institute of Philosophy, Russian Academy of Sciences. vlyons@yandex.ru