2 The Psychology of Cognition

The senses are the channels through which we come into contact with the external world. But they are not merely the avenues through which we derive information as to what takes place in the outer world; they are also the avenues through which man's desires and passions may be excited. It is by the control of the sense organs (indriyasamvara) that a person can master his desires. When a person is able to control his sense organs, he will remain unaffected by sensory stimuli and indifferent to them, whether they be pleasant or unpleasant.1

It is also possible that the perception of objects in the external world is influenced by our desires and interests. If our 'perception' of objects is influenced by our desires it would be necessary to train our senses to see these objects as they are rather than project on to them what is really not there. If this is the case, sensory knowledge is shot through with our categories, concepts, constructs of the imagination, etc. The Buddha does not say like the idealist that the external world is a mere creation of the imagination. Rather, while accepting the reality of the sensory process, it is pointed out that to a great degree our perceptions are mixed with the non-sensory conceptual and imaginative components. The Buddha is making two significant points here: first, he is saying that we should not be excited by sensory stimuli and our passions and attachments should be restrained; he is also saying that even our perception of objects and our response to sensory stimuli are shot through with our psychological make-up. There is a clear link between the psychology of motivation and the psychology of perception in the narrow sense, or cognition in the broader sense.

The link between the sensory process and the enjoyment of the pleasures of the senses is presented in a number of contexts:

if there were not this satisfaction that comes from the eye, beings
would not lust after the eye. But in as much as there is satisfaction in the eye, therefore beings lust after it.

If misery, brethren, pertained not to the eye beings would not be repelled by the eye. But in as much as there is misery in the eye, beings are repelled by it.²

Thus it may be said that there are certain types of contexts where the process of sense perception is discussed: contexts where people are admonished not to fall victim to sensual pleasures and those where the causal process of sense perception is described as it is; of the latter type of context, some describe the sensory process using the vocabulary of realism, of the perceptual given, others describe it as a composite and synthetic activity. A look at the nature of sense perception as a synthetic process will invariably take us to non-sensory cognitive factors. Finally, some of the limitations of the normal cognitive functions will take us to the role of extra-sensory perception in the psychology of Buddhism. We shall examine these facets of the psychology of cognition in relation to the material found in the discourses of the Buddha.

The Middle Length Sayings present the emergence of perception in this manner: when the eye that is internal is intact and external visible forms come within its range, and when there is an appropriate act of attention on the part of the mind, there is the emergence of perceptual consciousness.³ Thus visual cognition is a causal process depending on three factors: an unimpaired sense organ, external visible forms and an act of attention. Here the term used for cognition is viññāna.⁴ This process is not only true of the eye (cakkhu) but is similarly seen in the case of the ear (sota) nose (ghāna), tongue (jīvha) body (kāya) and mind (mano). In the psychology of Buddhism, the mind is a further sense-organ, in addition to the other five.

It is also said that the six forms of perception are grounded in the ‘diversity of elements’. The question is asked ‘What brethren, is the diversity of elements?’ To this question it is replied:

The element of eye, of visible object, of eye awareness;
the element of ear, of sound, of ear awareness;
the element of nose, of odour, of nose awareness;
element of tongue, of taste, of tongue awareness;
element of body, of tangibles, of body awareness;