

THE BUDDHIST THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE: SOME REFLECTIONS

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From the very beginning Buddhism has followed the critical and anti-dogmatic tendency and rejects the traditional authority of Vedas. In the *Kālāma-Sutta* Buddha rejected ten grounds that were commonly accepted by his contemporaries for determining the truth.¹ Among the ten grounds rejected, some of them are revelation, sacred scriptures, tradition, authority of venerated teachers, and speculative reason. In fact, Buddhism relies upon individual experience and rationalism in matters of religion and philosophy, unrestricted by any code of set-beliefs. The Buddha himself calls his teachings as ‘*dhamma-anitiha*’,² which means that which is based on self-confirmation and not on traditional authority. In an occasion, while delivering his message to Monks: he advised to his followers thus: “Do not O Bhikṣus! accept my words out of mere respect for me, but accept them what they are worth for, after properly scrutinizing them, just as a piece of gold is accepted by an expert after burning it in fire, cutting it and testing it on a touchstone”.³ This tendency of reasoning and argumentation is found throughout in the development of Buddhist epistemology. Th.Stcherbatsky rightly remarks that, “later Buddhism continued this critical spirit with the result that the ontology and psychology of the preceding period were entirely superseded by a system of logic and epistemology. It abandoned the dogmatical method of mere assertions and turned its face to an investigation of the sources and limits of cognition”.⁴

Buddha himself was not much concerned with the questions of what is knowledge, what makes a piece of knowledge valid, etc. His main thrust was on the knowledge that would enable the individual to get rid of this world of suffering. Like all other schools of Indian Philosophy, Buddhism at a later point in time gave much emphasis on epistemological discussions to provide a solid foundation for their philosophical

¹ *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, Ed. R. Morris and E. Hardy, Vol.1, p.189, PTS. London, 1885-1900. P.189. Tr. F. L. Woodward and E. M. Hare, *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, 5 Vols., PTS. London, 1932-36.

² *Suttanipāta*, 1053, Ed. D. Anderson and H. Smith, PTS. London, 1948. Tr. V.Fausboll, SBE., Vol. 10, Part 2, Oxford, 1881.

³ Śāntarakṣita’s *Tattvasamgraha*. Kārika.3587.

⁴ Th.Stcherbatsky’s *Buddhist Logic*, Vol.1, p.75, Dover Publication, New York, 1962.

theories. Dignāga the father of the Buddhist logic, begins his treatise, *Pramāṇasamuccaya* with the verse offering salutations to Buddha “who is recognized to be the personification of the means of valid cognition (*pramāṇabhūta*)”⁵. Dharmakīrti also devoted almost all his works for the exposition of the theory of *pramāṇa*.

The theory of knowledge is an attempt to answer the basic question, “how do we know?” In asking how a person knows something we are typically asking for his grounds for believing it. We want to know what justifies him in holding his belief. Thus, epistemology has traditionally focused on epistemic justification more than on knowledge. Knowledge in general defined as a cognitive episode, which reveals or grasps a cognizable object as it is. This kind of episodic view of knowledge is found in all Indian *pramāṇa* theories. However if we take knowledge in its widest sense to mean any way of cognizing objects, then valid knowledge is a special form of cognition. All cognitions are not valid knowledge. Hence, in order to understand the nature of the method of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*), we have to consider first the nature and different forms of cognition as such.

Cognition, in general, means awareness of objects. It includes all cognitions that have a more or less determinate objective reference. With regard to the nature of cognition, there are diverse opinions among different schools of Indian Philosophy. Some are having the opinion that cognition is self-luminous (*svaprakāśa*), while the other holds the view that it can be revealed only by some other means of cognition. Self-luminosity of cognition means that a piece of cognition is cognized by itself. It does not require any other cognition for its own illumination.⁶ It illumines itself and its object simultaneously. When a man has the cognition of something blue (*nīla*) he has at the same time the awareness of the cognition of something blue (*nīla-dhī*). This awareness is caused by cognition itself.

The Buddhists, whether they are Vaibhāṣikas, the Sautrāntikas, or the Yogācarins, all are unanimous on this point that cognition is self-luminous (*svaprakāśa*). In the early work like the *Milinda-pañho*, explaining *prajñā* to the King,

⁵ Dignāga’s *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, I, Kārika.1.

⁶ Śāntarakṣita’s *Tattvasamgraha* Kārika.2011.

Nāgasena says that self-luminosity is also a character of *prajña*.⁷ The Buddhists are so certain about the self-luminosity of cognition that they assert that if cognition does not cognize itself, the cognition of the object is not possible.⁸ While explaining the Buddhist view, Kumāriḷa Bhāṭṭa in his *Ślokavārtika*, endorses the same view that according to the Buddhist so long as the illumination in the form of cognition (*jñanākhyā prakāśa*) is not comprehended, even the object will not be apprehended, because its apprehension depends upon the cognition, just as the illumination of a jar depends upon the illumination of the lamp.⁹ Further Kumāriḷa asserts that even if the objects have been produced, their apprehension, some-times does not occur either due to the absence of luminosity or due to the presence of some impediment; while in the case of cognition, there is no impediment at the time of its origination, nor it is of a non-luminous nature, on the account of which it may not be apprehended.¹⁰ It is further added that cognition is always produced before the apprehension of the object and its consciousness (*saṃvedanam*) must also occur at the same time i.e., at the time of its origination. This is because if it is not cognized at the same time, it cannot be cognized afterwards.¹¹ Thus, it is evident that for the Buddhists, cognition is of self-luminous nature.

The Buddhists are against the theory of ‘non-self-luminosity’ (*paraprakāśatva*) of cognition maintained by the realists like Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas and the Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsakas. According to the Buddhists, a cognition does not require another cognition, because if it is held that the cognition of previous cognition depends upon the latter one and that on another there would occur *regressus ad infinitum*.¹² According to the Buddhists when a person, after apprehending an object, say jar, recollects it afterwards, there arises in his mind the recollection of the jar as well as the cognition of the jar. This two-formed recollection of a cognition (*dvi-*

⁷ *Milinda-pañho*, 2, 23, Ed. V. Trenkner, London, 1928.

⁸ Śāntarakṣita’s *Tattvasaṃgraha*, *Kārika*.2073.

⁹ *Ślokavārtika*, *Sūnya*, *Kārika*, 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 23, 24.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 25.

¹² *ibid* 27.

rūpa-smṛtiḥ) shows that at the time of the apprehension of the jar, the person had cognized its cognition too, which proves the self-luminous nature of cognition.

As already indicated cognition so to say *jñāna* in Indian tradition is used in a wide sense to include all sorts of cognitions both valid and invalid. However knowledge, in its strict sense, means a true belief that carries with it an assurance of its truth. Thus knowledge is always true. It is a tautology to speak of 'valid knowledge' and a contradiction to speak of 'invalid knowledge'. The latter is no knowledge at all, since it does not stand for any belief which is true and which gives us an assurance of its truth. Valid cognition so to say knowledge is generally referred as *pramā*. An effort has been made in the following pages to explicate the concepts, *pramā* and *pramāṇa* in Buddhist tradition.

Valid Knowledge (*Pramā*) and the Method of Knowledge (*Pramāṇa*):

It has been generally admitted by all schools of Indian philosophy that *pramāṇa* is that which gives *pramā* and that *pramā* is knowledge. *Pramā* is that which is true. But what makes knowledge true? The reply for this is that knowledge is true when it is not contradicted by its object. That means the knowledge is true when it reveals its object with that nature and attribute which abide in it despite all changes of time, place and other conditions. What is once true of an object is always true of it, no matter what its position in space and time may be. More definitely speaking, to know a thing truly is to know it as characterized by what is a characteristic of it. Thus there must be a complete harmony between the content of cognition and the object. But there is much difference of opinion among them as to the nature of the truth, which each of them claims for its *pramāṇa*. The Buddhists generally take the truth of knowledge consists in its capacity to produce successful activity. *Pramā* or true knowledge (*saṃyagjñāna*) is harmonious in the sense that there is no conflict between the cognition of an object and the practical activity obtained by it. In fact, all knowledge is meant for some action. It is the ground of all rational practice and intelligent activity. It is on the basis of knowledge of some kind that all living beings deal with other objects of the surrounding world. We behave differently in relation to different objects because we know them to be different. Thus *pramāṇa* or the method of knowledge fulfils its function when it shows an object such a way as to enable us to act successfully in relation to it. In other words,

it can be said that *pramā* is practically useful knowledge, and *pramāṇa* is the instrument or source of such knowledge.

The proper function of *pramāṇa* is to give a true knowledge of objects. But that gives a true cognition of the object which determines the cognition in question to have the same form and structure, in which the object exists, so as to give it the character of objectness (*viśayatā*). However, the sense organs which are generally supposed to be the organs of knowledge (*jñānakaraṇa*) do not determine cognition of blue our cognitions to have the same content with the objects cognized by them. The colour is not certainly due to the action of the eyes, for the same eyes are operative even in the cognition of colours other than the blue. It is the blue content of the object that determines our cognition to be a cognition of blue colour. The content of the object being impressed on our cognition gives the same content to it, and thereby reveals the object itself as having that content. Therefore, the objective datum (*arthākāra*) is the *pramāṇa* or the source of our knowledge of the object, inasmuch as it is the given datum that determines the object as well as our knowledge of it one way or the other. The content of the object is thus both the ground and the product of knowledge, the means and the end of the process of knowledge. It should not be supposed that there is a contradiction in the same thing being the content of both the object and its knowledge. For here the object is only the object of knowledge and the knowledge is a determination of the object itself. When a tree is known as *śimśapā*, the nature of the *śimśapā* is the content of both the tree and our knowledge of it. It is the object of our knowledge as well as the ground of a discriminative cognition of the object in question. Hence the content of an object (*arthākāra*) is *pramāṇa* in so far as it establishes an identity between the object and our knowledge of it.

According to the Yogācāras school of Buddhism consciousness (*vijñāna*) as the principle of self-manifestation is the source of all knowledge (*pramāṇa*). Having no determination in itself, consciousness comes to have certain determinate contents in order to manifest itself and thereby gives us knowledge of a world of objects. A *pramāṇa* is that which manifests objects, but manifestation as a conscious process can belong only to that which is intelligent and conscious. The sense organs being unintelligent and unconscious cannot have the power of conscious manifestation. Hence the intellect itself is to be recognized as *pramāṇa* by virtue of its intelligent

nature and capacity of manifestation. It has neither any permanent subject as its locus nor any objects that are external to and independent of it. It is the intellect that accounts for both the subjective and objective aspects of experience. With its beginningless tendencies consciousness is manifested in two series, namely, the objective, consisting of percepts or object-ideas, and the subjective, consisting of perceptions or subject-ideas. We need not posit the real existence of objects outside of consciousness. Consciousness may be regarded as manifesting both itself and the so-called objects from within itself. The series of external objects, though not ultimately real, is yet set up by consciousness for the sake of practical activity through the influence of beginningless desires and impressions (*vāsāna*) that are inherent in every finite mind. The diversified contents of experience arise out of the continuous operation of desire, and their bifurcation into the subject-object series is the result of the will to live and act. As there are ultimately no objects or perceptible other than the intellect, the intellect itself is to be recognized as manifesting itself and is its own perceptible, luminous with its own light, like light. The intellect or consciousness, therefore, is both *pramā* and *pramāṇa*, the ground of knowledge and the attained knowledge, since it is the cause of manifestation and the object manifested in knowledge.

Dharmakīrti defines *pramāṇa* as valid cognition which is non-contradictory and non-discrepant in character.¹³ This definition explains the features of *pramāṇa* as 1) it is knowledge and 2) it is non-contradictory or non-discrepant in character. Though the first feature seems to be a mere tautology like “X is X”, it is actually is not so. It is offered to indicate that according to the Buddhists anything other than knowledge, such as sense-organs or the sense object contact cannot be regarded as means of valid cognition or *pramāṇa*. In fact, Dharmakīrti believed that the means of valid cognition is the most efficient cause (*sādhakatamam*) of knowledge. A moment of knowledge arises out of several causes belonging to the immediately preceding moment for e.g., sense-organs, knowledge, etc. But none of them is regarded as more efficient than the other for all of them equally contribute to the production of

¹³*pramāṇam avisamvādiñānam*, Dharmakīrti’s *Pramāṇavārttika*, verse 3.cf., *avisamvādakam jñānam samyagiñānam*, Dharmottara’s *Nyāyabindutikā*, 17.1.

knowledge. The most efficient among them, for Dharmakīrti is that which ultimately differentiates one knowledge from another.¹⁴ For instance, knowledge of a cow is said to be distinguished from knowledge of the horse on the basis of the object concerned. But for Dharmakīrti the object cannot be the most efficient cause of knowledge, since when two persons ‘X’ and ‘Y’ are looking at the object at the same time, the object is common to both and so we cannot distinguish X’s knowledge of the object from that of ‘Y’. What ultimately distinguishes one’s knowledge from that of the other, is the objective image (*viṣayākāra*) projected on the knowledge by the external object.¹⁵ Thus the means of valid cognition is the resultant cognition itself. To be specific, *pramāṇa* is that aspect of the cognition which consists in its possessing an objective image or resemblance with the object.

Dharmakīrti tries to specify the nature of that cognition which is regarded as *pramāṇa* by saying that *pramāṇa* is non-contradictory or non-discrepant cognition. This non-contradictory or non-discrepant feature consists in the fulfillment of human end or purpose.¹⁶ That is, attaining or obtaining the object which has been the subject of our volition, defines the non-discrepant character of cognition.¹⁷ The term *avisamvādi* means “that which is free from *visamvāda*”. *Visamvāda* means false assertion or that which is disappointing. Accordingly, *avisamvādi* means non-contradictory or non-discrepant or simply true. That is, that cognition which is consistent with our volition is regarded as *pramāṇa*. In our day to day activities, the individual who informs us about an object and following whose instructions we are able to attain the object, is regarded as *avisamvādaka*, i.e., a dependable guide. In a similar way, being guided by *pramāṇa* we are able to attain our intended object.¹⁸ As

¹⁴ *Sarveṣam upayoge’pi kārakāṇām kriyām prati, yadantyaṁ bhedakam tasyās tat sādhatatamam matam, Dharmakīrti’s Pramāṇavārttikam, II.311.*

¹⁵ *Viṣayākārabhedāc ca dhiyo ‘dhigamabhedataḥ, Dharmakīrti’s Pramāṇavārttikam, I.6.*

¹⁶ *Arthakriyāsthitiḥ avisamvādanam, Dharmakīrti’s Pramāṇavārttika, I.3.*

¹⁷ *Avisamvādakam pravṛtṭiviṣayavastuprāpakam samgñānam iti. Dharmottara Pradīpa, 17.13.*

¹⁸ *Yathopadarśitārthasya kriyāyāḥ sthitiḥ pramāṇayogyatā = avisamvādanam, Pramāṇavārttikavṛtti, 6. 15-16.*

such *pramāṇa* is described as *avisamvādaka*.¹⁹ Valid cognition is non-discrepant in the sense that it does not mislead the knower. The object which is indicated by *pramāṇa* as belonging to a particular place in a particular time can be obtained by the agent in that particular place, leading to successful activity.²⁰ The property *avisamvādaka* is added to eliminate illusory cognitions like that of rope-snake or of silver-shell, etc. Thus this *avisamvādaka* feature points to the indubitable nature of valid cognition. Knowledge is also regarded as *prāpaka* in the sense that it can induce us to activities leading to the attainment of the object.²¹ When knowledge or cognition arises regarding a particular object, we have an inclination or volition (*pravṛtti*) for that object. By directing, leading our volition towards that object, we are able to attain it. Thus knowledge helps us to attain an object by directing our volition towards it and it is in this sense that knowledge becomes the *prapaka*.²²

Apart from *avisamvādakatva* Dharmakīrti added another condition namely *anadhigatatva* to the definition of *pramāṇa*. He defines, “*pramāṇa* or valid cognition is what reveals an object previously unknown”.²³ The Buddhists have highlighted this notion of novelty in their analysis of valid cognition. Dignāga in his *Pramāṇa-samuccayavṛtti* argues that “recollection, desire, aversion, etc. are not independent valid cognitions with respect to a previously cognized thing”. That is, these cognitions are not valid since they apply to previously apprehended objects. Implicit in Dignāga’s argument lies the assumption that a cognition must apprehend a new object in order to qualify as valid cognition. A cognition has to apprehend an object not yet apprehended if it is to be regarded as valid which is possible only in presentational cognitions. In order to exclude representational cognitions such as

¹⁹ *yathā loke satyavādiśabdappravṛttinimittasyopadarśitārthaprāpaṇasya puruṣe sambhavāt samvādakaśabdaḥ pravarttate, tathā jñāne’pi tatsambhavād iti,samvāda[ka] śabdaḥ pra [bdapra] vṛttinimittam tu sarvatra samānam iti, Dharmottara Pradīpaḥ, 17.17-23.*

²⁰ *tato ’rthakriyāsamarthavastupradarśakam samyagjñānam, Dharmottara’s Nyāyabindutīkā, 17.3-18.2.*

²¹ *na jñānam janayad artham prāpyati, api tvarthe puruṣam pravarttayati prāpayatartham, pravarttakatvam api pravṛtṭiṣayapradarśakatvam eva, Dharmottara’s Nyāyabindutīkā, 17.3-18.2.*

²² *pradarśite cārthe pravartkatvam eva prāpakatvam, nānyat, Dharmottara’s Nyāyabindutīkā, 17.3.*

²³ Dharmakīrti’s *Pramāṇavārttikam*. I.8, and Dharmottara’s *Nyāyabindutīkā*, 19.2-3.

memory cognitions from the domain of valid cognitions Dharmakīrti emphasized novelty as a condition for valid cognition. A valid cognition is such that it has not yet been realized by the apprehender. A recollective cognition apprehends an already apprehended object and hence it is not a valid cognition. Further a recollective cognition does not bring any new information in the cognitive process. Thus memory and recognition are not regarded as *pramāṇa* in the Buddhist epistemology. In the case of memory the object is that which had been apprehended earlier. Only that which had been known by him can be remembered later in appropriate circumstances. This means that memory is always knowledge of the known; it does not present the object as something new and hence cannot be regarded as *pramāṇa*. According to the Buddhists, existence of an object consists in its causal efficiency. To know an object is to have knowledge of its causal efficiency. So when an object had already been apprehended the knower has the apprehension of its causal efficiency. Hence he does not feel any necessity to know the object again as something new.²⁴ Knowledge does not have any meaning unless it expresses something new, gives us some new information. Through knowledge the knower comes to know an object and being guided by such information becomes desirous to get the object and performs action to get it. So for the attainment of the object the first cognition of the object is essential. Once the object is attained the agent does not feel any necessity to apprehend the same object again through any other cognition.²⁵

Due to the same reason recognition or *pratyabhijñā* is not regarded as *pramāṇa*. Recognition arises in such cases as “This is the man whom I met earlier”, where the object cognized has been identified with an object experienced earlier. Though in respect of the present object, there is no difference between knowledge and recognition as both are apprehending an object present, however, regarding the resultant cognition there is a difference between the two. Recognition, unlike perception, is concerned not merely presenting something but also takes into account

²⁴ *Smaraṇam ca pūrvagr̥hītārtha vikalparūpatvān nādhikagrāhi, gr̥hīte ca prāktanam eva pramāṇam, idānīm tu smaraṇam apravartakam*, Dharmakīrti’s *Pramāṇavārttikam*, 7.12-140.

²⁵ *Yenaiva hi jñānena prathamam adhigato’rthaḥ tenaiva pravartitaḥ puruṣaḥ, prāpitaś cārthaḥ, tatraiva cārthe kim anyena jñānena adhikam kāryam*, Dharmottara’s *Nyāyabindutikā*, 19.3-4.

what had earlier been experienced. That is, there is an element of memory involved in it. As such, recognition is not *pramāṇa*, while perception is so.²⁶ Therefore, it follows that both Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, emphasized novelty as the condition for validity of cognition.

It may be argued that if *pramāṇa* is defined as apprehension of something that had not been experienced, not only memory and recognition but also some cases of valid cognition will have to be eliminated from the scope of *pramāṇa*. For instance, it will not be appropriate to the case of continuous perception where the same object is perceived for a longer period. In such cases though there are different perceptions occurring at consecutive moments, there is no difference in the object perceived. It remains one and the same. The perception of the second moment being apprehension of the object perceived in the first moment, this perception cannot be regarded as valid according to the second definition of *pramāṇa*. But continuous perception is regarded as valid even by the Buddhists. Thus by excluding memory and recognition from the scope of *pramāṇa*, the Buddhists are at the same time excluding a valid case and thereby making the definition of *pramāṇa* overly restrictive. In reply the Buddhists will say that since the object is momentary the object of perception of each moment will be different. The cognition of an object, for instance a table, which occurred in the first moment, was destroyed along with the object in the second moment. In the second moment a completely different, causally effective table occurred and that had been cognized in the second moment, and so on. In this way, the cognition and its object being different in each moment, we cannot regard the cognition of the later moments to be apprehension of what had been earlier apprehended. In other words, according to the theory of momentariness what appears to be a continuous perception is in fact a series of moments of perceptions which take in a new object with each ensuing moment. Hence, there is no difficulty in accepting the validity of continuous perception.

²⁶ *Pratyabhijñātmakam yadviśeṣadr̥ṣṭajñānam tatpramāṇam na bhavatītyarthaḥ, yadyapi jñānapratyabhijñānayoḥ vastutaḥ bhedo nāsti tathāpi pramāṇaphalayoḥ bhedakalpanajñānam pratyabhijñeyārtham vijātīyam, gr̥hītagrahaṇam pratyabhijñānam, Dharmakīrti's Pramāṇavārttikavṛtti, 10.*

Thus we find that the Buddhists are accepting two different criteria of valid cognition namely pragmatic, presented in terms of non-contradiction with experience or existence of the fulfillment of human purpose, and the other purely epistemological, presented in terms of grasping something new. So *pramāṇa* is non-contradictory knowledge which reveals an object as new and not apprehended earlier.

An altogether different approach in this regard can be found in Dharmottara. Dharmottara in his commentary on *Nyāyabindu*, while speaking on *samyagiñāna* observes that “A valid cognition is a cognition which does not belie. For among the people, the person who makes one obtain a previously indicated object is called ‘one who does not belie’. In the similar manner, a cognition too is said to be non-belying in as much as it enables one obtain the object indicated by the cognition itself. And to enable one obtain, means to induce one to action towards the indicated object, nothing else. For the cognition does not make one obtain the object in the sense of producing it, but rather enables one to obtain the object by inducing one to act towards the object. To induce to action in its turn means only to indicate the object of action. For the cognition cannot induce a person to act by force. And precisely for this reason only the apprehension of the object is the result of knowledge (*pramāṇaphala*). For when the object is apprehended, the person is induced to act and the object is made to be obtained. And when this is the case, the activity of knowledge is completed with the apprehension of the object, and precisely for this, knowledge has an unapprehended object as its subject (*viṣaya*). Since, by whatever cognition the object is apprehended for the first time, by that very cognition the person is induced to act and the object is made to be attained. And in this respect, what else can be done by another cognition? Hence, in as much as the object is already apprehended, the second cognition cannot be a *pramāṇa*”.²⁷ A cognition, which does not belie is a cognition which can make the cognizer obtain the apprehended object by indicating the object as an object of voluntary action to him. This is the reason why the result of *pramāṇa* is the apprehension of the object and not its actual attainment. Consequently, the subsequent cognition of the same object

²⁷ Dharmottara’s *Nyāyabindutīkā*, 17.1-19.4, translated by E.France in “The Disjunction in *Pramāṇavārttika Pramāṇasiddhi*, Chapter, verse 5c.

cannot be a *pramāṇa* as the capacity to attain the object has already been produced by the former cognition and cannot be reproduced by the later cognition again. Thus Dharmottara is making a sort of equation among the concepts such as valid cognition, non-belying cognition, indicator of the object of volition, inducer of action towards the indicated object, enabling to attain the indicated object.

This shows that for the Buddhists, these two features, the pragmatic and the epistemological ones are not completely distinct; rather they are linked with each other. If any cognition is non-contradictory in character it can reveal an unknown object. This is because of the non-discrepant nature; knowledge can lead the knower or the agent towards the object and enable him, to get it. On the other hand, unless the object is something new the agent does not feel any urge to make any attempt to get it. That is, the unknown aspect of the object leads the agent to perform voluntary action which, if successful, makes the knowledge of that object *pramāṇa*. In the case of erroneous cognition like that of silver and shell, the agent feels an urge to get silver but as his action is not successful he cannot be said to know the silver.