Out of Sight Into Mind: The History and Philosophy of Yogic Perception

Forman, Jed

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In 1965, Joseph Kosuth staged a conceptual art piece entitled "One and Three Chairs," in which a plain wooden chair is flanked by a photo of itself and a copy of the dictionary definition of "chair." The piece prompts reflections on which of these three chairs is real. Is it the image of the chair, the concept of the chair grounded in language, or the actual chair? Is 'that' chair more real because I can sit in it and therefore it fulfills a function? (Well, actually, I can't sit in 'that' chair because it is an art museum, and that sort of thing tends not to be permitted). The first time I encountered one of Kosuth's chair pieces, I was in Paris, coming down off a week-long Tibetan studies conference during which I had listened to many philosophically inclined Tibetologists pose questions about chairs and tables. These quintessential examples are commonly used to explore the tensions expressed by Buddhist thinkers between how we perceive things, how we conceive of them, and how we can penetrate the façade to have a more accurate view of our realities. These pressing concerns in Buddhist philosophy are often articulated in terms of the connection between the universal and the particular. In Kosuth's piece, the dictionary definition reflects the linguistically substantiated concept of chair (the universal), and the wooden object embodies the

particular chair, but the photograph of the chair introduces a third dimension to the problem, the image or representation of the chair. How do Kosuth's three chairs relate to one another? I found myself returning to this question repeatedly as I read Jed Forman's new book on yogic perception (*yogi-pratyakṣa*). For example, in describing the pragmatism of Indian Buddhism philosopher Dharmakīrti's perspective, Forman writes: "Conceptual thinking simply seems to work. Although universals are mental concoctions that do not inhere in the world, thinking with them is effective. The idea of a chair is good enough to help me to find something to sit in" (79). Cognition is useful in Dharmakīrti's view because it has the capacity to be both informative (*avi/saṃvāda*) and effective at achieving desired ends (*arthakriyā*) (49).

From a Buddhist perspective, which chair(/s), if any, does the liberated yogin see? Are these accomplished meditators able to see both every instance of a chair in any time and place as well as the chair's tenuous metaphysical status? Is it possible to even describe this way of looking at the world? These are the types of questions that concern Forman in his ambitious study of yogic perception across over a thousand years of philosophical inquiry between India and Tibet. He coins the term "omniphemenology" to describe the possibilities presented by Buddhist thinkers for a more enlightened view of things. As to whether such a yogin would see all the chairs that have ever been or none at all, Forman reveals a rich and diverse range of views expressed by Indian and Tibetan thinkers from about the fifth to the sixteenth centuries.

The book is divided into three parts comprising two chapters each: "Hindu Traditions and Epistemology," "Indian Buddhism and Phenomenology," and "Tibetan Buddhism and Language." In Chapter

One, "Extramission, Remote Seeing, and Intuitions," Forman argues that understandings of yogic perception evolved from a visual paradigm to a kind of mental introspection. He introduces the early Indian notion of *prāpyakārin* ("acting having reached [the object]") according to which the senses reach out to their objects, citing relevant instances from key texts such as the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, the *Śiva Puraṇa,* and the *Yogasūtras* of Patañjali. He highlights Vyāsa's 5th/6th century commentary on verses 3.25 of Patañjali's text, which reads: "It is said that this mental activity is luminous (*jyotis*). The mind's light belongs to this activity; when it is cast toward a subtle (*sūkṣma*), occluded (*vyavahita*), or distant (*viprakṛṣṭa*) object, the yogi discovers that object" (18 & fn20). The verse serves as a touchstone for exploring the nature of omniscience, and as Forman shows, it is cited in the work of Buddhist authors. Prajñākaragupta (ca.750-810), a commentator on Dharmakīrti's work, for example, cites the verse to laud "those 'great' (*mahat*) remote seers—not content just with clairvoya nt acrobatics" who "first develop insight into reality, practical omniscience, before developing literal knowledge of all things"(28). Forman builds upon these themes of the extent of yogic perception and the ranking of its contents in the next chapter.

Chapter Two, "The Epistemology of Authority and Testimony," explores arguments against yogic perception, such as those posed by the Mīmāṃsā together with responses from Vaiśeṣika, Nyāya, Jain, and, of course, Buddhist thinkers. Here, Forman interrogates the connection between 'testimony' and 'perception' through the writings of thinkers such as Dharmakīrti, Śāntarakṣita, Kamalaśīla, Jñānaśrīmitra, Veṅkaṭanātha, and Candrakīrti. Śāntarakṣita, for example, asserts that "scriptural meaning is underdetermined" and therefore yogins are necessary to make sense of it (56). Further clarifying Śāntarakṣita's position, Forman writes:

"Insofar as we have effective religious practices—mudras, mandalas, and mantras—there must have been someone with supersensible abilities who first had insight into their efficacy" (57). Veṅkaṭanātha, a defender of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, introduces the possibility that text doesn't just document yogic perception but also produces it (59-60). The relationship between text, exegesis, and yogic experience is central to these discussions, but the word 'experience' seems to appear very little in the first part of Forman's book. I suspect that this absence is intended to support the author's concerns with parsing experience to address the "epistemic *disconnect* between perception and conception" he regards as common to Buddhist traditions (76). He pursues this 'disconnect' in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter Three, "Pragmatism and Coherentism," initiates the second part of the book. Forman begins the chapter by laying out Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's approaches to the aforementioned "epistemic *disconnect*" and proceeds to explore how appearances relate to "direct insight" in the works of Vasubandhu and Asaṅga. Grasping these two different strains of Indian Buddhist philosophy will be vital for the reader in making sense of Forman's arguments on the Tibetan tradition in the book's final sections. Both Dignāga and Dharmakīrti hold that whereas we 'perceive' particulars, we 'conceive' universals (re-enter the chairs and tables). What does the yogin perceive? What do they see? In the *Abhidharmakośa*, Vasubandhu asserts that progress on the Path of Seeing (*darśana-mārga*) involves directly realizing the Four Noble Truths (83). Forman also describes Asaṅga's three stages of coming to see objects as mind, challenging the very notion of 'mind,' and overcoming the dichotomy between subject and object (84). Apparently, the third stage involves eliminating appearances altogether. In this vein, Asaṅga

explains: "*In nonconceptual wisdom, none of those objects appear at all. So, take to heart that there are no objects. And since there are no objects, there is no consciousness*" (85 & fn 35). As Forman points out, the question of whether appearances actually disappear is a subject of much controversy; it certainly percolates beneath the Tibetan scholastic landscape.

Forman defines omniscience as "a nonperspectival way of being in the world" (111-12) and proposes that yogic perception of this kind has the potential to solve phenomenology's undue fixation on the first-person perspective and dualistic thinking. Forman's "Omniphenomenology" is the title and topic of Chapter Four, in which the language of 'experience' begins to manifest. For example, Forman remarks that "Buddhists insist that unlike normal sense perception—which, indeed, does not reach the level of awareness—yogic perception is an experiential state" (133). Moreover, he suggests that "within yogic perception, which perceives reality at its most fundamental, experience and the world are coextensive"(132). In this understanding, Buddhists see the distinction of self and world and subject and object as "conceptual," obscuring our "fundamental nondual experience" (131-2). I concur with Forman's proposal that understanding yogic perception better has the potential to subvert entrenched biases within phenomenology. I appreciate his exploration of the anti-racist implications of this work through his dialogue with Calvin Warren's *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* at the end of the chapter.

The final third of the book turns to Tibet to focus specifically upon how Buddhist authors from the Gelug and Sakya traditions built upon and modified the work of their Indian predecessors. We may find

some answers to the problems of Kosuth's third chair in this account of competing Tibetan views on 'appearances.' Overall, Forman frames the discussion in terms of two connections: how Gelug scholars responded to Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti in what he calls "quasirepresentationalist realism," and how Sakyapas incorporated Asaṅga's position in a form of "antirepresentationism." Forman describes the attitude toward appearances in the first view as a blindfold in need of removal as opposed to the second view, in which they are more like an inaccurate prescription for glasses that can be corrected (142-3). In both cases, the relationship to the views of Chapa Chökyi Senge (1109-1169), the abbot of the vibrant scholastic community of Sangpu Neutok, is significant.

In Chapter Five, "Gelug Representationalism," Forman shows how Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa (1357-1419), the founder of the Gelug tradition, made sense of appearances in ways that both agree with and differ from Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti's legacies. Forman plants the seeds for this conversation on appearances between Tsongkhapa and Candrakīrti in Chapter Two, where he highlights Candrakīrti's stipulation that all cognitions correspond to external objects using three examples to illustrate this point: meditation on the environment as a world filled with bones, the phenomenon of floaters experienced by the person suffering from an eye disease, and the hell being's vision of water as pus a blood. In Chapter Five, Forman returns to these examples to illustrate how Tsongkhapa prioritized making distinctions between appearances that are "authentic representations" and those that are not (151). He summarizes Tsongkhapa's view as follows: "although both yogic appearances and the appearance of falling hairs are alike in their being clear, they are distinct on the question of representation" (153). In other words, it is not enough for a yogic appearance to be conducive toward enlightenment; it

must also correspond to an object in the world, one that can be supported by inference. Forman shows how Tsongkhapa's views accord in this way with those of Chapa, who parsed "distortions" from appearances with "epistemic value" and gave reason an essential role in awakening (143-7). Forman argues that Tsongkhapa's concern with evaluating the authenticity of representations surpasses his pragmatism and that this theory holds true for Tsongkhapa's interpretations of tantric practice as well.

In the final chapter, "Sakya Antirepresentationalism," Forman represents a range of Sakyapa views on appearances, including the voices of Sönam Tsemo (1142-1182), Sakya Paṇḍita (1182-1251), Gorampa (1429-1489), and Śākya Chokden (1428-1507), emphasizing their contrast with the Gelugpas. Overall, he highlights the "complicated relationship between inference and direct realization" as well as the idea that yogi perception moves beyond appearances (173). Sönam Tsemo, one of Chapa's own students, appears to be in conflict with his teacher in eliminating epistemic objects from yogic perception. They also construe what it means to be "free from elaborations" in different ways. Forman asserts a parallel between the view of Sönam Tsemo (as well as of some of his successors) and that of Asaṅga, a connection some Sakyapas (both past and present) might take issue with. As for the great polymath Sakya Paṇḍita, Forman nuances his yogic perception to include one with appearances (and capable of seeing other worlds) and one without appearances (176). This intriguing distinction, one Forman shows to be not common to the Gelugpas, merits further research, together with the compelling remarks on "clear appearances." For example, Forman observes that while Dharmakīrti admits such appearances into his view of yogic perception, Sakya Paṇḍita "denies that yogic perception represents the real via an appearance" (178). Forman contrasts the

instrumental value of appearances for the Gelugpa with the Sakyapa view, which he summarizes as follows: "The ultimate truth realized in yogic perception does not appear at all, not even in yogic perceptions, which grasps it (somehow) without appearances—not even qua the absence of appearances" (193). My own evolving understanding of the Sakyapa position has been trained on a gap between appearances, a space between thoughts, in which powerful transformations might occur. I would be curious to know the author's response to that possibility. Forman successfully identifies several key issues in the Sakya view of appearances. A groundbreaking study, Forman's *Out of Sight Into Mind* also attests to the fact that more work remains to be done.

Tsongkhapa's student, Kedrub Gelek Pelzang (1385-1438) serves as a foil for working through the differences in Sakya and Gelug approaches, particularly in thinking through how inference and yogic perception relate. Forman accentuates the power of inference in both Tsongkhapa and Kedrub's thinking, a power to deduce aspects of the true state of things complemented by yogic perception's more direct access to them (187). The author remarks upon how Tsongkhapa strives "to maintain representational realism but also preserve the Buddhist soteriological project, which problematizes representations" (166). I have found such tensions to be especially potent in tantric polemical encounters of the Gelug and Sakya traditions. For example, in a debate with a Sakyapa tantric master on the topic of body mandala, Tsongkhapa's student Kedrub challenged tantric visualizations as mere mental constructions and therefore lacking in efficacy unless they had some basis in reality. In the context of that argument, Kedrub elevates practice with an actual versus an imagined tantric consort on the reasoning that without actual bodily sites to be transformed, the transformation of

body into mandala will not be efficacious. Similarly, at another point in that same debate, Kedrub asserts that when imagining deities arrayed on different parts of the body, it is only necessary to position them on actual body parts, i.e. the two actual eyes rather than the six imagined ones of a many-faced deity.[1] Such arguments might be fruitfully incorporated into Forman's calculation of what counts as an 'authentic representation' in a soteriological context in which representations (and of course, bodies) hold such a charged status.

As a work of comparative philosophy, Forman's book contributes meaningfully to the larger project of taking Buddhist philosophy seriously *as* philosophy. Forman produces conversation between the Buddhist authors at the center of his study and a wide range of Western philosophers, including Hegel, Heidegger, Russell, and Wittgenstein, to name just a few. There are moments, however, in which I would have appreciated a bit less engagement with Heidegger, for example, and a little more with a broader range of Tibetan interlocutors. In particular, creating a parallel between Asaṅga's view on appearances and that of the Sakyapas calls for reflection upon who else in the trajectory of Tibetan scholasticism may have issued a similar claim. Historically, how has proposing such a parallel been an act fueled by concerns that exceed the purely philosophical, concerns with distinguishing traditions, securing patronage, and so forth? My engagement with Sakya experts suggests, for example, that while they acknowledge some correlation with the Cittamātrin view, for the latter, consciousness is real, whereas for the Sakyapa, it is instead natureless, interdependent, and free from expression. In fifteenth-century tantric polemics, for example, Sakyapas

1 See Dachille, Rae Erin. 2022. Searching for the Body: *A Contemporary Perspective on Tibetan Buddhist Tantra*. Columbia University Press, 59-60

often pushed back against any conflation of their perspective with that of the Yogācārin, Vijñaptimātrin, or Cittamātrin.[2] Forman's treatment of Gorampa and Śākya Chokden might be enriched through further conversation with some of these polemical exchanges.

As a whole, Forman's *Out of Sight Into Mind* invites readers to probe the limits of perception and imagination in India and Tibet. The author makes bold connections and provides valuable philosophical context for exploring these limits both within and beyond the Buddhist world.

2 For one example, see Dachille, Rae. '"Empty Like the Sky': Polysemy and the Problem of 'Mere Clear Awareness' at the Intersection of Sūtra and Tantra in Fifteenth-century Tibet." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, 58 (April 2021): 208-236.