The Bonpo Abhidharma Theory of Perception (Saṃjñā)

KUMAGAI Seiji

Introduction

Bon, an indigenous religion in Tibet and the Himalayas, originally seems to have centred on funeral rituals and divination. Since the seventh century, Bon seems to have absorbed Buddhist doctrines. In the West, Karmay (1988) proved that Bon, especially its esoteric doctrine rDzogs-chen, has similarities with Buddhist rNying-ma doctrines. Recently, its Sūrayāna aspects as well as its doxography have been studied. Remarkably, Martin (2000) proved that the Abhidharma theory exists within the Bon religion. What is the structure of the Bonpo Abhidharma theory and what are its characteristics?

The SPDP is regarded as the most fundamental Abhidharma text in Bon. The Bon tradition insists the SPDP was composed in ancient times by the founder of Bon, gShen-rab mi-bo (16016 BC–7816 BC), and later rediscovered in 1017 by gShen-chen Klu-dga' (996–1035). It is thought that the SPDP, composed of 17 chapters, was originally written in the Zhang zhung language (hereafter ZZ) and later translated into Tibetan. Its commentaries such as the NZPD and the PGGM and certain sections of the Abhidharma in doxographical texts such as the BGSB are considered helpful to understand the detailed meanings of the SPDP’s complicated verses.

The present author (Kumagai 2016) has already proven that Vasubandhu’s PS has a striking similarity to the Bonpo theory of “five aggregates” (pañcaskandha, phung po lnga). This paper further analyses the Bonpo theory of “perception” (saṃjñā, ‘du shes) among the five aggregates in greater detail.
1. The Bonpo Theory of “Perception”

1.1. The Three Types of Perception as Seen in the SPDP

The SPDP divides the term “perception” into three types: “small perception” (ZZ. de rmhe tha tse, Tib. rgya chung ’du shes, Skt. *parītta-saṃjñā), “great perception” (ZZ. de rmhe ca ce, Tib. rgya che’i ’du shes, Skt. *mahadgata-saṃjñā) and “boundless perception” (ZZ. de rmhe dzad min, Tib. dpag med ’du shes, Skt. *apramāna-saṃjñā). These three categories are further divided into five subcategories, respectively.

“Small perception” corresponds with perception in the “desire realms” (kāmadhātu, ’dod kham), namely the five classes of sentient beings: (1) beings in hell, (2) hungry spirits, (3) animals, (4) human beings, and (5) gods (in the desire realms).

“Great perception” corresponds with perception in the “form realms” (rūpadhātu, gzugs kham): (1) the first meditative concentration, (2) the second meditative concentration, (3) the third meditative concentration, (4) the fourth meditative concentration (*the realms of the three gods other than the five pure gods in the state of the fourth meditative concentration), and (5) those who were not born by the four manners of birth but were born from undefiledness (*the realms of the five pure gods).

“Boundless perception” corresponds with perception in the “formless realms” (ārūpyadhātu, gzugs med kham) as well as with the “omniscient one”; (1) field of infinite space, (2) field of infinite consciousness, (3) field of nothingness, (4) field of neither perception nor nonperception, and (5) the omniscient one.

The SPDP thus correlates the “three types of perception” with the “three realms” and the “omniscient one.” The correlation between the “three types of perception” and the “three realms” is also found in Buddhist scriptures, which will be discussed later. On the other hand, Bon is different from Buddhism in that the “omniscient one” is included in “boundless perception.” It also seems to be a peculiar aspect of Bon that the tradition subdivides the fourth meditative concentration into two subcategories and postulates “five types of great perception” in total.

1.2. Three Types of Perception as Seen in the NZPD

The NZPD takes the same position as the SPDP in that it correlates the “three types of
perception” with the “three realms.” The NZPD further develops the theory by providing a definition for each of the three types of perception. On the other hand, the NZPD is different from the SPDP in that it includes the perception of the “bodhisattva” (*sams dpal) and “emanation body of buddha” (*sprul sku) and “[the perception that is produced from] hearing” (*thos) in the “boundless perception.”

### 1.3. Three Types of Perception as Seen in the PGGM

The PGGM, using more detailed explanations, took fundamentally the same position as the SPDP in correlating the “three types of perception” with the “three realms.” On the other hand, the PGGM is different from the SPDP and the NZPD in that it includes the perception of “those who have engagements through belief” (*mos spyod la gnas pa) in the “boundless perception.”

### 1.4. Three Types of Perception as Seen in the BGSB

The BGSB defines “perception” as “that which grasps the characteristic of an object.” This definition seems to be common in Buddhism as well. The BGSB also divides “perception” into three categories, similar to the SPDP.

### 1.5. Summary

As examined above, Bon postulated three types of perception: “small perception,” “great perception,” and “boundless perception,” and correlated them with three realms: the “desire realm,” “form realm,” and “formless realm.” The Bon tradition includes all four types of meditation of the formless realm in “boundless perception.” Bon also includes the perception of the “omniscient one” in “boundless perception.” As the difference inside the Bon tradition, the SPDP’s commentaries differently added the following perceptions in the “boundless perception” category: “perception of the bodhisattva” and “perception of the emanation body of buddha,” “perception that is produced from hearing,” and “perception of those who have engagements through belief.”

### 2. Influence of Buddhist Thought on the Bonpo Theory of “Perception”

The previous section analysed the Bonpo theory of “perception.” How, then, is it related to Buddhist theory? In Buddhism, there are (1) the tradition of three types of perception (*Apidamo pinlei zu lun* 阿毘達磨品類足論, *Da banniepan jing* 阿毘達磨品類足論, *PS*, *PSV*, and so on), (2) the tradition of four types of perception (*Shuo chu jing* 說處經, *SP*, *PSV*, and so on), (3) the third meditative concentration, (4) the fourth meditative concentration, and (5) the omniscient one. The correlation between the “three types of perception” and the “three realms” was further developed in correlating the “three types of perception” with the “three realms.”
Apidamo ji yimen zu lun 阿毘達磨集異門足論, and so on), and (3) the tradition of combining two types and four types of perception (Jueding zang lun 決定藏論, AS, and so on). This section focuses on the first tradition and compares it with the Bonpo theory.

(a) The Apidamo pinlei zu lun postulates the three types of perception but there is no reference to the correspondence between the three types of perception and the three realms. 29)

(b) The Da banniepan jing correlates the three types of perception with the three realms. 30) This point corresponds with Bon. On the other hand, the Da banniepan jing does not correlate the omniscient one with “boundless perception.”

(c) The Ru Apidamo lun 入阿毘達磨論 also postulates three types of perception. The treatise insists on two traditions for “boundless perception”: (1) that which includes only the field of infinite space and so on (likely the field of infinite space and the field of infinite consciousness) and (2) that which includes all of the four fields. 31) The former corresponds with the PSV and the latter corresponds with the Da banniepan jing.

(d) The PS corresponds with the SPDP in that they both postulate the three types of perception. 32) However, the PS does not refer to the relationships between the three types of perception and the three realms.

(e) The PSV, the commentary to the PS, also postulates three types of perception but correlates “boundless perception” only with the field of infinite space and the field of infinite consciousness among the four fields. 33) This idea could be influenced by Yogācāra treatises such as the AS 34) but is different from the position of the Da banniepan jing, which includes all of the four fields in the formless realm.

Conclusion

This paper examined the Bonpo Abhidharma theory of “perception” and compared it to the Buddhist Abhidharma theory. The SPDP and its commentaries include all of the four fields of the formless realm in “boundless perception.” The PS postulates three types of perception but does not refer to their correlation. While the PSV includes only the field of infinite space and the field of infinite consciousness in “boundless perception,” the Da banniepan jing includes all of the four fields of the formless realm. There are two potential explanations in this regard:

1. It is possible that the Bon tradition originally developed the theory of the three
types of perception set forth in the PS and correlated them with the three realms.

2. It is also possible that the Bon tradition incorporated the theory of the Da banniepan jing, which correlates the three types of perception with the three realms.

Based on the research discussed above, we can also see that there are two peculiar characteristics of the Bon tradition:

1. The Bon tradition divides “great perception” into five categories based on (a) the first meditative concentration, (b) the second meditative concentration, (c) the third meditative concentration, (d) realms of the three gods other than the five pure gods in the state of the fourth meditative concentration, and (e) realms of the five pure gods.

2. The Bon tradition, unlike Buddhism, includes the perception of the omniscient one in “boundless perception.” There are also different traditions within the Bon tradition. For example, the commentaries to the SPDP add the following perceptions to “boundless perception”: “perception of the bodhisattva,” “perception of the emanation body of buddha,” “perception that is produced from hearing,” and “perception of those who have engagements through belief.”

Notes


2) The SPDP’s Zhang Zhung title is Ti ka rgya se lig min rkya.

3) SPDP (49.2–3): ZZ. de rmhe tha tse rko pung ni //; Tib. rgya chung ’du shes Inga bstan pa //.

4) SPDP (49.3): sduug bsgal kun ye rgya chung dang //. Cf. PGGM (538.4–5): sduug bsgal kun gyis g-yeng ba’i dmyal ba’i ’du shes rgya chung sogs dang //.

5) SPDP (49.3): sgrib pa gnyis ldan rgya chung dang //. Cf. PGGM (538.5–6): phyi nang gi sgrib pa gnyis ldan yi dwags kyi ’du shes dang //.

6) SPDP (49.3–4): mi shes rmugs pa’i rgya chung dang //. Cf. PGGM (538.6): mi shes rmugs pa byol song gi dang //.

7) SPDP (49.4): thayad mkhas la rgya chung dang //. Cf. PGGM (538.6–7): thayad la mkhas shing don la rmons pa mi dang //

8) SPDP (49.4): longs spyod yengs pa rgya chung Inga’o //. Cf. PGGM (538.7): longs spyod kyi g-yeng ba ’dod lha’i ’du shes rgya chung ba.

9) SPDP (49.4–5): ZZ. de rmhe ca ce rko pung ni //; Tib. rgya che’i ’du shes Inga bstan pa //.

10) SPDP (49.5): dga’ bas (sic read ba) bskyped pa’i ’du shes dang //. Cf. PGGM (538.12–13): dga’ ba bskyped pa bsam gtan dang po’i ’du shes sa sogs rgya che ba.
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11) SPDP (49.5–6): bde ba (sic read ba) bskyed pa'i 'du shes dang //. Cf. PGGM (538.13–14): bde ba bskyed pa bsaṃ gtan gnyis pa.
12) SPDP (49.6): ting 'dzin skye ba'i 'du shes dang //. Cf. PGGM (538.14): ting 'dzin bskyed pa'i bsaṃ gtan gsum pa.
13) SPDP (49.6–7): bden pa (sic read pa) bskyed pa'i 'du shes dang //. Cf. PGGM (538.14–15): bden pa bsaṃ gtan bzhi pa.
14) SPDP (49.7): skye med sprul pa'i 'du shes lnga'o //. Cf. PGGM (538.15–16): skye gnas kyi srid pa las skye ba med cing zag med las skye zhing sprul pa'i gtsang ma'i lha.
15) SPDP (49.7–8): ZZ. de rmhe dzad min rko pung ni //; Tib. dpag med 'du shes lnga bstan pa //.
16) SPDP (49.8): tha snyad mi mkhas tshad dpag med //. Cf. PGGM (558.19–20): gzugs sogs kyi tha snyad la mi mkhas pa nam mkha' mtha' yas kyi 'du shes la soqs dpag tu med pa.
17) SPDP (49.8–9): med las (sic read la) snyoms 'jug tshad dpag med //. Cf. PGGM (538.20–21): yul can rnam shes mtha' med la snyoms par 'jug pa rnam shes mtha' yas.
18) SPDP (49.9): 'du shes med min tshad dpag med //. Cf. PGGM (538.21–22): 'du shes phra ba med min la rye ba'i ci yang med pa.
19) SPDP (49.9): rtse la snyoms 'jug tshad dpag med //. Cf. PGGM (538.22–23): srid rtse la snyoms par 'jug pa'i yod min med min gyi skye mched.
20) SPDP (49.9–10): thams cad mkhyen gsal dpag med lnga'o //. Cf. PGGM (538.23–24): bon thams cad la mkhyen pa la soqs gsal snang can dang ldan pa mos sphyod la gnas pa.
21) NZPD (273.8): rga'yu chung rga'ya che tshad dpag med gsum kham gsum du rim pa bzhin yod de //.
22) Regarding the definition of small perception, see NZPD (273.15–17): dang po mi shes rmongs pa'i blo gang zhig yul la tha snyad du 'dogs pa'i du ma 'dus pa gsungs pa'am / mi gsal ba'i blos yul la mtshan mar 'dzin pa 'dus pa'o //; regarding the definition of great perception, see NZPD (273.20–22): dang po la shes shing gsal ba gang zhig / yul la la tha snyad 'dogs pa du ma 'dus pa zhes gsungs pa'am / gsal pa'i blo yul la mtshan mar 'dzhin pa 'dus pa'o //; regarding the definition of boundless perception, see NZPD (273.24–274.2): dang po ni stong nyid dang snyoms 'jug gi blo gang zhig gis yul la mtshan mar 'dzin pa du ma 'dus pa gsungs pa'am / tshad med pa'i blos yul la mtshan mar 'dzin pa 'dus pa'o.
23) NZPD (274.2–5): gnyis pa ni / gzugs med bzhin dang thams cad mkhen gsal ni / kha cig sems dpa' / kha cig sprul sku la 'dod de / on kyang thos bsaṃ kyi thos 'dod la bshad la / de'i re re la yang yid la bren pa las med do //.
24) Small perception: PGGM (538.4–9); great perception: PGGM (538.9–16); boundless perception: PGGM (558.16–24).
25) PGGM (538.23–24): bon thams cad la mkhyen pa la soqs gsal snang can dang ldan pa mos sphyod la gnas pa.
26) BGSB (40.7): gsum pa 'du shes kyi phung po'i mtshan nyid mtshan mar 'dzin pa.
28) BGSB (40.11): dbye na rgya che chung gnyis tshad med pa'i 'du shes gsum.
29) T. vol. 26, no. 1542, 693a11–12: 想云何，謂取像性。此有三種，謂小想大想無量想。
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30) T. vol. 12, no. 375, 832a21–28: 是想三種，一者小，二者大，三者無辺。小因縁故，生於小想。大因縁故，生於大想。無量縁故，生無量想。復有小想，謂未入定。復有大想，謂已入定。復有無量想，謂十一切入。復有小想，所謂欲界一切想等。復有大想，所謂色界一切想等。復有無量想，謂無色界一切想等。三想滅故受則自滅，想受滅故名為解脫。I am grateful to Dr. Satō Naomi (Kyoto University) for helpful information regarding to the concept of “perception” as seen in the Da banniepan jing.

31) T. vol. 28, no. 1554, 981c20–26: 想句義者，謂能仮合相名義解。即於青黃長短等色，螺鼓等声，沈麝等香，鹹苦等味，堅軟等触。男女等法名義中仮合面解。為尋伺因故名為想。此隨識別有六如受。小大無量差別有三。謂緣少境故名小想。緣妙高等諸大法境故名大想。隨空無辮處等名無量想。或隨三界立此三名。See AS, chap. 7 (15.21–28). I am grateful to Dr. Kanō Kazuo (Koyasan University) for helpful information regarding to the concept of “perception” as seen in the AS.

Abbreviations


The Bonpo Abhidharma Theory of Perception (Saṃjñā) (KUMAGAI)


Bibliography

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(Uehiro Associate Professor, Kyoto University)