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निदर्शनम्

The Example: Illustration in Proof

डॉ. मन्था-श्रीनिवासुः · Dr. Mantha Srinivasu · 14 Nov 2026 · AŚ 15.1.47–48; Su. Utt. 65.36

Abstract

Nidarśana is the illustrative example: the case from common experience that makes a claim plain. Kauṭilya defines it as "an illustration joined with an example", and his example is memorable: a king who goes to war with a stronger one "enters, as it were, a foot-fight with an elephant." Suśruta defines it as "the explicit statement of an illustration": "as fire, joined with wind, grows in dry brush, so does a wound vitiated by vāta, pitta and kapha." Cakrapāṇi defines it as "an illustration within the shared understanding of the unlearned and the learned", and cites Caraka's verse on medicine: unknown, it is like poison, a weapon, fire or a thunderbolt; known, it is like nectar. Cakrapāṇi's definition reproduces the Nyāyasūtra's definition of *dṛṣṭānta* — "the matter on which the understanding of ordinary people and of examiners agrees" — and Caraka gives the same definition in his rules of debate. This article shows that the three examples display three functions of illustration: to make a danger vivid, to make a process intelligible, and to make a value memorable; it distinguishes nidarśana from *upamāna* and from the Nyāya *udāharaṇa*, and answers three objections: that an example proves nothing, that it is mere analogy, and that what is common to the unlearned is beneath a śāstra. It concludes that nidarśana is the common ground on which a śāstra meets every reader, and that its modern forms are the worked example, the case illustration and the explanatory analogy.

Keywords: nidarśana; dṛṣṭānta; udāharaṇa; tantrayukti; example; illustration; common ground; worked example; explanatory analogy; pedagogy; Nyāyasūtra; Arthaśāstra; Suśruta; Caraka

1. प्रवेशः · Place in the lists

Nidarśana is twenty-first in Kauṭilya's list, twenty-eighth in Suśruta's and thirtieth in Caraka's, in each case next to *nirvacana* (TY-21). Cakrapāṇi defines the two by contrast: nidarśana is for everyone, nirvacana for the learned only. The word, from *ni-* + √*dṛś* (causative), "to cause to see", means a showing: an example that lets the reader see what is meant.

2. लक्षणानि · The definitions

> दृष्टान्तो दृष्टान्तयुक्तो निदर्शनम्
>
> विगृहीतो हि ज्यायसा हस्तिना पादयुद्धमिवाभ्युपैतीति
>
> "An illustration joined with an example is nidarśana." — Example: "For one who is at war with a stronger king enters, as it were, a foot-fight with an elephant."

Kauṭilya, *Arthaśāstra* 15.1.47–48

> दृष्टान्तव्यक्तिर्निदर्शनम्। यथा अग्निर्वायुना सहितः कक्षे वृद्धिं गच्छति तथा वातपित्तकफदुष्टो व्रण इति ॥
>
> "The explicit statement of an illustration is nidarśana. For example: as fire, joined with wind, grows in dry brush, so does a wound vitiated by vāta, pitta and kapha."
>
> Suśruta, *Uttaratantra* 65.36

> निदर्शनं नाम- मूर्खविदुषां बुद्धिसाम्यविषयो दृष्टान्तः; यथा- "विज्ञाताममृतं यथा" (सू.अ.१) इत्यादि।
>
> "Nidarśana is an illustration within the shared understanding of the unlearned and the learned. For example: 'known, it is like nectar' (Sūtrasthāna 1), and so on."
>
> Cakrapāṇidatta, *Āyurvedadīpikā* on Caraka, *Siddhisthāna* 12.41–44

The verse Cakrapāṇi cites reads in full:

> यथा विषं यथा शस्त्रं यथाग्निरशनिर्यथा । तथौषधमविज्ञातं विज्ञाताममृतं यथा ॥
>
> "As poison, as a weapon, as fire, as a thunderbolt — so is a medicine not understood; understood, it is like nectar."
>
> Caraka, *Sūtrasthāna* 1.124

3. लक्षणपरीक्षा · Testing the definitions

3.1 The shared understanding

Cakrapāṇi's definition — "within the shared understanding of the unlearned and the learned" (*mūrkha-viduṣāṃ buddhi-sāmya-viṣayaḥ*) — reproduces the Nyāyasūtra's definition of the example:

> लौकिकपरीक्षकाणां यस्मिन्नर्थे बुद्धिसाम्यं स दृष्टानतः
>
> "The matter on which the understanding of ordinary people and of examiners agrees is the example (*dṛṣṭānta*)."
>
> *Nyāyasūtra of Gautama* 1.1.25

> लोकसामान्यमनतीता लौकिका नैसर्गिकं वैनयिकं बुद्ध्यतिशयमप्राप्ताः। तद्विपरीताः परीक्षकाः। तर्केण प्रमाणैरर्थं परीक्षितुमर्हन्तीति। यथा यमर्थं लौकिका बुध्यन्ते तथा परीक्षका अपि, सो ऽर्थो दृष्टान्तः।
>
> "Ordinary people are those who do not go beyond the common, who have not attained a natural or acquired excellence of understanding; examiners are the opposite, able to examine a matter by reasoning and the means of knowledge. The matter which examiners understand in the same

> way as ordinary people do — that is the example."
>
> *Nyāyasūtra of Gautama* 1.1.25 (vatsyayana)

Caraka gives the same definition in his rules of debate, with examples of his own:

> अथ दृष्टान्तः---दृष्टान्तो नाम यत्र मूर्खविदुषां बुद्धिसाम्यं, यो वर्ण्यं *वर्णयति । यथा---अग्निरुष्णाः, द्रवमुदकं, स्थिरा पृथिवी, आदित्यः प्रकाशक इति; यथा *आदित्यः प्रकाशकस्तथा *सांख्यज्ञानं प्रकाशकमिति ॥
>
> "Now the example. The example is that in which the understanding of the unlearned and the learned is the same, which describes what is to be described. For example: fire is hot, water liquid, earth stable, the sun illuminating; as the sun illuminates, so the knowledge of Sāṃkhya illuminates."
>
> Caraka, *Vimānasthāna* 8.34

The agreement of the lay and the expert is the defining feature. An example works because no one disputes it: everyone knows that fire spreads faster in wind, that a foot-soldier cannot fight an elephant, that nectar heals and poison kills. On that undisputed ground the śāstra builds its claim.

3.2 Three functions

Authority	Illustration	Claim illustrated	Function
Kauṭilya	A foot-fight with an elephant	War with a stronger king is ruinous	To make a **danger vivid**
Suśruta	Fire, joined with wind, in dry brush	A wound with vitiated doṣas spreads rapidly	To make a **process intelligible**
Caraka	Poison, weapon, fire, thunderbolt; nectar	Medicine misunderstood harms, understood heals	To make a **value memorable**

Suśruta's illustration is the richest. It is not a static likeness but a model of a process: fuel (the wound), heat (pitta), wind (vāta) — and implicitly, the dampening or smothering that kapha might bring. It explains both why the vitiated wound spreads and why it must be treated at once. Kauṭilya's is a deterrent: the image of a man on foot facing an elephant says, more quickly than any argument, "do not do this". Caraka's is a contrast that teaches the purpose of the whole science: knowledge turns a poison into nectar.

3.3 Nidarśana and udāharaṇa

In the Nyāya five-membered argument, the third member is the *udāharaṇa*: "an example which, through likeness to what is to be proved, has its property" (1.1.36). It must exhibit the pervasion between reason and property — wherever there is production, there is impermanence, as in a pot. Vātsyāyana remarks that the power of the reason and the example in this sense is "supremely subtle,

hard to grasp, knowable only by the learned". The tantrayukti nidarśana is broader and humbler: it need not exhibit a strict pervasion, only a shared and undisputed case that makes the claim plain. Every udāharaṇa is a nidarśana, but not every nidarśana is an udāharaṇa.

4. पूर्वपक्षः खण्डनं मण्डनं च · Objections and replies

4.1 Does an example prove anything?

> ननु दृष्टान्तः न साधकः। "अग्निः वायुना कक्षे वर्धते" इति सत्यं, किन्तु तेन "व्रणः दोषैः वर्धते" इति न सिध्यति — व्रणः न अग्निः। बौद्धाः अपि "न पृथग्दृष्टान्तो नाम साधनावयवः" इति वदन्ति। अतः निदर्शनं निष्प्रयोजनम् इति चेत्, न। निदर्शनं न स्वतन्त्रं प्रमाणं, किन्तु प्रमाणस्य बुद्धौ आरोहणस्य उपायः। व्रणवृद्धेः हेतुः अन्यत्र — दोषशास्त्रे — स्थापितः; निदर्शनं तं हेतुं सर्वेषां बुद्धौ स्पष्टं करोति। धर्मकीर्तिः अपि दृष्टान्तं हेतौ अन्तर्भावयति, न तु निराकरोति — "हेत्वन्तर्भूत एव दृष्टान्तः"। वात्स्यायनः च "दृष्टान्तविरोधेन हि प्रतिपक्षाः प्रतिषेद्धव्याः, दृष्टान्तसमाधिना च स्वपक्षाः स्थापनीयाः" इति वदति। अतः दृष्टान्तः साधनस्य अङ्गम् — अवयवः वा न वा, उपायः तु अवश्यम्।
>
> **Objection:** an example does not prove. "Fire grows in brush with wind" is true, but it does not follow that "a wound grows with the doṣas" — a wound is not fire. The Buddhists too say "there is no separate member of proof called the example". So nidarśana serves no purpose. **Reply:** No. Nidarśana is not an independent means of knowledge but a means by which proof enters the mind. The cause of the wound's spread is established elsewhere, in the doctrine of the doṣas; the illustration makes that cause plain to everyone. Dharmakīrti too includes the example within the reason; he does not reject it — "the example is included within the reason". And Vātsyāyana says, "by contradiction with the example opposing views are to be refuted, and by agreement with the example one's own views are to be established". The example is a part of proof — whether or not a separate member, certainly a means.
>
> Śaṅkā–samādhāna composed for this article.

4.2 Is nidarśana not just upamāna?

ननु “यथा अग्निः तथा व्रणः”, “हस्तिना पादयुद्धम् इव” इति सादृश्यम् एव। उपमानम् अपि सादृश्येन साधनम्। अतः निदर्शनम् उपमानात् न भिद्यते इति चेत्, न। उपमानं “दृष्टेनादृष्टस्य साधनम्” — अज्ञातस्य ज्ञापनम्, आचरणस्य नियमनं वा: पितृवत् अनुग्रहः इति राज्ञः अज्ञातः धर्मः प्रकाश्यते। निदर्शनं तु “दृष्टान्तव्यक्तिः” — यः अर्थः पूर्वम् एव उक्तः, तस्य स्पष्टीकरणम्। व्रणस्य वृद्धिः दोषशास्त्रेण ज्ञाता; अग्निदृष्टान्तः तां सर्वेषां दृष्टिगोचरां करोति। उपमाने साध्यम् अज्ञातं, निदर्शने उक्तम्। किञ्च निदर्शनस्य विषयः बुद्धिसाम्यम् — लौकिकपरीक्षकयोः अविवादः; उपमाने तु प्रसिद्धसाधर्म्यं पर्याप्तं, न सर्वजनसम्मतिः।

Objection: “as fire, so the wound”, “as it were a foot-fight with an elephant” — this is likeness. Upamāna too establishes by likeness. So nidarśana does not differ from upamāna. **Reply:** No. Upamāna is “establishing the unseen by the seen” — making known what was unknown, or regulating conduct: “favour like a father” reveals an unknown duty of the king. Nidarśana is “the explicit statement of an illustration” — the clarification of a matter already stated. The spread of the wound is known from the doctrine of the doṣas; the illustration of fire brings it within everyone’s sight. In upamāna the thing to be established is unknown; in nidarśana it has been stated. Moreover, nidarśana requires shared understanding — no dispute between the lay and the expert; for upamāna, likeness to the well known suffices, without the agreement of all.

Śaṅkā–samādhāna composed for this article.

4.3 Is what the unlearned understand not beneath a śāstra?

ननु शास्त्रं विदुषाम् अर्थे। मूर्खबुद्धिसाम्यविषयः दृष्टान्तः शास्त्रस्य गौरवं हीनं करोति इति चेत्, न। चरकः एव शास्त्रगुणेषु “त्रिविधशिष्यबुद्धिहितम्” इति गणयति — मन्दमध्यमतीक्ष्णबुद्धीनां त्रयाणाम् अपि हितं शास्त्रम् उत्तमम्। निदर्शनं मन्दबुद्धेः द्वारम्, निर्वचनं तीक्ष्णबुद्धेः। किञ्च वैद्यस्य रोगी लौकिकः — तस्य बोधनं विना चिकित्सायां सहयोगः न। राजशास्त्रे अपि मन्त्रिणः प्रजाः च लौकिकाः। अतः यत्र विद्वान् लौकिकः च समं बुध्येते, तत्र एव शास्त्रस्य लोके प्रतिष्ठा। निदर्शनं शास्त्रस्य हीनता न, किन्तु तस्य लोकसेतुः।

Objection: a śāstra is for the learned. An example within the understanding of the unlearned lowers the dignity of a śāstra. **Reply:** No. Caraka himself counts among the merits of a śāstra that it “benefits pupils of three kinds of understanding” — the best śāstra serves the dull, the middling and the sharp alike. Nidarśana is the door for the dull, nirvacana for the sharp. Moreover, a physician’s patient is a layman; without making him understand, there is no cooperation in treatment. In polity too, ministers and subjects are laymen. A śāstra is established in the world only where the learned and the lay understand alike. Nidarśana is not the śāstra’s lowering but its bridge to the world.

Śaṅkā–samādhāna composed for this article.

5. सिद्धान्तः · The settled view

> शास्त्रे उक्तस्य अर्थस्य, लौकिकपरीक्षकाणां बुद्धिसाम्यविषयेण दृष्टान्तेन, स्पष्टीकरणं — भयस्य, प्रक्रियायाः, मूल्यस्य वा — यत् प्रमाणस्य बुद्ध्यारोहणे उपायः भवति, तत् निदर्शनम्।
>
> "Nidarśana is the clarification of a matter stated in a śāstra — a danger, a process or a value — by an example on which the understanding of the lay and the expert agrees, serving as the means by which proof enters the mind."
>
> Definition composed for this article.

The definition keeps the Nyāya and Caraka condition (shared understanding), records the three functions seen in the examples, and states the device's relation to proof: it is not proof itself, but the way proof reaches every reader.

6. आधुनिकसंवादः · The modern counterpart

Classical form	Modern counterpart
The shared, undisputed example	The **worked example** in textbooks; the canonical case everyone in a field knows
Kauṭilya: a vivid image of danger	Risk communication through concrete images; cautionary case studies
Suśruta: a process modelled by a familiar one	The **explanatory analogy** in science teaching (the circulatory system as plumbing; an epidemic as a forest fire)
Caraka: poison and nectar	Health communication: the same drug as harmful or healing depending on knowledge (dose, indication)
"Benefits three kinds of pupil"	Differentiated instruction; writing for lay and expert audiences

Suśruta's fire in dry brush anticipates a modern analogy closely: epidemiologists still describe the spread of infection in a susceptible population as fire in dry fuel, accelerated by wind.

7. प्रयोगाः · Uses

7.1 In research

In every paper, provide at least one example that a non-specialist could follow, and check that it is undisputed — an example that the reader may doubt weakens the claim it illustrates. Keep the example's function clear: it illustrates a claim established by evidence elsewhere; it does not replace the evidence.

7.2 In teaching

Teach each principle with a nidarśana for all and a nirvacana for the advanced, following Cakrapāṇi's distinction. Ask students to invent their own examples and to test them on someone outside the subject.

7.3 In daily life

To persuade someone, find the ground on which you already agree — an example they accept — and build from there. Kauṭilya's elephant persuades because no one has to be persuaded that a man on foot loses to an elephant.

8. अभ्यासः · Exercise

1. Collect five nidarśanas from Caraka or Suśruta. Classify each by function: danger, process or value.
2. Take a principle from your field and write two illustrations: one for a lay reader (nidarśana) and one for a specialist (nirvacana in Cakrapāṇi's first sense).
3. Find an example in a published paper that a reader might dispute. Replace it with one on which lay and expert would agree.

9. उपसंहारः · Conclusion

Nidarśana is the illustrative example. Kauṭilya makes a danger vivid with an elephant, Suśruta a process intelligible with fire in brush, Caraka a value memorable with poison and nectar. Its defining condition, shared by the Nyāyasūtra, Caraka and Cakrapāṇi, is the agreement of the lay and the expert. An example does not prove by itself, but it is the means by which proof reaches the mind; it differs from upamāna because it clarifies what is stated rather than revealing what is unknown; and it does not lower a śāstra but connects it to the world. Every good teacher and every good paper uses it.

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Author: ORCID 0000-0002-8834-3782 · Google Scholar

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