Illuminating the Mind
Exploring Buddhism and Science with the Dalai Lama

Lesson Five Reading

1) A selection from *Buddhist Psychology: The Foundation of Buddhist Thought, Volume 3* by Geshe Tashi Tsering (Wisdom Publications, 2006)

happen simultaneously: the object is reflected in the consciousness—the objective aspect—and the consciousness is aware that the process is happening—the subjective aspect.

Almost all of the schools besides Vaibhashika—Sautrantika, Chittamatra, and Svatantrika Madhyamaka—assert that subjective aspect is a valid mind and that it is synonymous with self-awareness or self-cognition. They consider its presence absolutely necessary to trigger future recollections of the object. Dharmakirti says that cognition is self-luminous, which means that at the same time that the eye perceives blue, it is aware—self-aware—that it is perceiving blue. The meaning of self-luminosity is similar to that of the English term apperception, which means the mind’s awareness of itself. These three schools assert that the mechanism by which we hold an object from one moment to the next is self-cognition.

The subjective aspect of a mind cannot be a different entity from the mind itself. If it were, for example, one mind looking at a separate mind, we would find ourselves in an infinite regression—for a mind apprehending an object, there would need to be a second mind aware of that mind, but that second mind would require a third mind that was aware of that one, and a fourth, and so on, ad infinitum. The subjective aspect is the same mind but a different aspect. The subjective aspect of an eye consciousness is the eye consciousness. It is the mechanism within the eye consciousness that allows the mind to later recall it.

Comparing Perceptual and Conceptual Minds

At this stage it is worth reviewing the two main divisions of consciousness, perception and conception, and expanding upon them. The chart below details this.
A perception apprehends an object without any labels or stories. It is not mistaken, unless there is some short-term physical problem, such as when we squeeze our eyes shut and see two moons. In contrast, as we have seen, conceptual minds are always mistaken with regard to their object.

It is not the role of the perception to identify the object; it apprehends only raw data. The conceptual mind then immediately adds the content and discrimination one object from another: eliminating what it is not, and identifying what it is, labeling it, and categorizing it. This process can also quickly arrive at a judgment about the object: good or bad, beautiful or ugly, friend or enemy, and so on.

Basically, all phenomena are either impermanent or permanent—there is no other alternative. Impermanent things depend on causes and conditions to come into existence and make up most of the things of our world. Permanent things do not function, nor do they depend on causes and conditions. Permanent things include states such as emptiness or concepts such as time. They do exist, but are unchanging, which is not to say they are eternal—they are not—but while they exist, they are not subject to cause and effect.

Impermanent things are also called positive or established, referring

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<td>engages in its object negatively, by elimination</td>
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to the way the mind apprehends them, whereas permanent things can be called negative or eliminative.

Perceptions apprehend impermanent things positively. The eye sees a book—an impermanent thing—or the ear hears a sound. Conceptions apprehend permanent things. We can see how time and maybe emptiness may be permanent, since they are somewhat abstract to us right now. But what about the mind that apprehends a beautiful sunset? Surely a sunset is an impermanent thing? The actual sunset is, but not so the image of the sunset that the conceptual mind apprehends. That image is permanent, because it cannot perform a function and does not change moment to moment while it exists.

The sense consciousnesses operate without interpreting their apprehended object. When the eye sees something, there is no elimination process. According to some Buddhist schools, between the object and the consciousness is the aspect, which has a direct one-to-one relationship with the object and hence is nonmistaken. The sense consciousness sees the object directly and positively. The conceptual consciousness in contrast apprehends its object indirectly, through mediation, and negatively, through elimination.

A mental event is passive or active depending on whether a process is involved. The perceptual mind involves no process and therefore engages passively with its object. The conceptual mind, on the other hand, always operates through an intermediary and therefore engages actively with its object. A conceptual construct arises between the object and the mind—whether this be the label, the feeling of attraction or aversion, or any of the other sorts of elaboration that go on—the internal dialogue of comparison, judgment, and identification.

The perceptual mind only collects the raw sense data; the conceptual mind does everything else. The perceptual mind is like the latent image on the film in a camera—light rays hitting sensitized film. The
conceptual mind develops and prints the film (and complains because it is out of focus!).

Usually, in our everyday lives, perceptual and conceptual minds work together. Directly perceiving a red traffic light and not going any further in the process is dangerous. We need the conceptual mind to label *traffic light* and *red* and enter into an internal dialogue that causes our foot to hit the brake. As we have discussed, however, the conceptual mind adds more information than is necessary, exaggerating and even getting it plain wrong. In reality, our partner is not the most wonderful person in the world (or the least), and this new flat screen TV will not be the key to never-ending pleasure.

Normally we experience the world around us without questioning it. Sights appear, sounds happen—they all become part of our experience, filtered, sorted, judged, and either filed or discarded. Unconscious of the mechanics of our mental life, we mindlessly develop attractions and aversions, we remember and forget, under the sway of mental addictions and habits. If we are ever to gain any control over this circus within our heads, we need to understand conception’s power, and the way consciousness creates the world we encounter. We need to liberate ourselves from servitude to the negative conceptions that now dominate us.

**Valid Cognition**

**Pramana**

When direct perception is not mistaken with regards to its object, it is called *valid cognition*. In Sanskrit the term is *pramana* (pra MAH na; Tib. *tsema*), a term used in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist epistemology. Non-Buddhist schools generally use this term to refer to two things: an instrument for gaining knowledge of an object and the knowledge itself.
For Buddhist schools, pramana refers to knowledge itself. It is a nondeceptive cognition. Dharmakirti and Dignaga assert that a consciousness is only valid and correct if it is nondeceptive, and if that is so, then that consciousness is pramana.

In his *Drop of Reasoning (Nyayabindu)* Dharmakirti further states that valid cognition is a prerequisite for the fulfillment of all human purposes. All roads to enlightenment must cross the threshold of valid cognition, says Dharmakirti. There is no use looking for fulfillment and happiness in anything if it stems from a mistaken mind, because sooner or later suffering will result. Without pramana, we might seek chocolate ice cream but end up with chilis. Of course Dharmakirti is referring to much deeper levels of mistaken cognition than this, things like seeing others without the lens of self-interest and seeing phenomena without the distortion of self-existence.

On a common-sense level, we can all see the truth in this. Misfortunes sometimes seem to come “out of the blue,” but generally, when we suffer, we can identify mistakes we have made somewhere along the way. We make physical mistakes, such as not watching where we are stepping, or verbal mistakes, such as speaking without considering another’s feelings—but the mistakes that matter most are made with the mind. The much-quoted Buddhist teaching is that the root of all our problems is ignorance, and that ignorance is the fundamental mistaken mind. It is not a mind of spaced-out nothingness, or a mind that simply does not know, but an active mind of mis-knowing. Therefore, it is vital that we understand and develop valid minds while eliminating those that are mistaken.

A valid mind correctly differentiates between existent and nonexistent objects. It can see that the horns of a rabbit are nonexistent and that the table in front of us does in fact exist.
The Etymology of Pramana

This Sanskrit term *pramana* is a precise technical term. Though I have not studied Sanskrit formally, I will try briefly to explain the term. Sanskrit words can be divided into base terms and either suffixes or prefixes. Grammatically, the word *pramana* can be split into the words *prama*, the base term meaning “knowledge-event,” and *ana*, the suffix, which in this case is the active agent meaning “to bring about.” Although *pramana* is generally translated into English as *valid cognition*, the term encompasses a broader meaning. The Western concept *knowledge* implies something enduring. In Buddhism, in contrast, knowledge is not static but momentary, and this is reflected in the use of the active term *ana*.

In the monasteries, as a learning tool, we divide the word slightly differently, into the syllables *pra* and *mana*. *Pra* has many different meanings depending on the context: among them “excellent,” “perfection,” “first,” and “newly.” *Mana* means to measure, cognize, recognize, or apprehend. So *pramana* literally means to cognize perfectly, excellently, or newly. Different schools interpret this differently. Prasangika Madhyamaka scholars, for instance, read the *pra* to mean “main” or “prime.” For when it is taken to mean “first” or “newly,” then only the first moment of a mind can be valid, which is limiting. We will come back to this point below.

Nondeceptiveness

For a consciousness to be nondeceptive, the outcome must be consistent with the intention, meaning the object we are seeking must be determined correctly. Suppose we are looking for our friend John in a crowd. He is tall, bald, and wears glasses, and we think we see him in the distance. The consciousness has apprehended its object. When
we move to the other side of the room, we see that the shape we took to be John is in fact another man. However, directly behind him is John. We sought John and found him, so there is agreement between the goal and the outcome—the practical effect is nondeceptive—but there has been a deception of the intention in that our actual object differed from the object we cognized.

A valid cognition can be either a direct perception or an inference. Inferential valid cognitions are discussed below. For either kind of consciousness to be a valid cognition, it needs to be nondeceptive in two ways: in terms of its practical effect (you want A and you get A) and in terms its capacity to capture the object accurately.

This means that cognition is more than just getting things right—it is getting things right intentionally. The eye consciousness looks at the table and mind apprehends it, and there is no incongruity between the intention and the practical effect. However, there is no valid cognition between the eye consciousness seeing Dave and the mind mistaking him for John, since the intention and the practical outcome are not in accord.

**Novelty**

If, as I mentioned above, one takes the first syllable of pramana to mean *new*, then a valid cognition must know its object newly. In fact Dharmakirti states that: “With respect to this, valid cognition is only that which first sees an uncommon object.”

This element of novelty is quite important. Although a mental event that repeats previous information can be beneficial and may reveal correct information, because it is a repetition of a previous consciousness and therefore gives no new information, technically it cannot be a valid cognition. If it adds nothing new to the cognitive process, it is, in terms of cognition, irrelevant.
For example, according to most Buddhist epistemology, memory is not a valid consciousness, because it is a mere conceptual repetition of previous knowledge. There is no direct exposure to an object or event to ensure its validity, and so no matter how clearly and correctly we remember something, it no longer exists except as a mental fabrication. A nondeceptive mind must apprehend the object freshly. Thus memory can never be nondeceptive.

Gendun Drub wrote many commentaries on Dharmakirti, and he is one who claims that the prāṇ in pramāṇa definitely means new and therefore if a cognition does not reveal new information, it is not a valid cognition. This view is widely held, but it can lead to complications. Khedrup Je, one of Lama Tsongkhapa’s two main disciples, disagreed with the widely held view, arguing that novelty was not in fact a prerequisite for validity. He defined valid cognition instead as “the cognition that is nondeceptive with respect to the object that it [the cognition] realizes by its own power.”

So what does by its own power mean? It means without the help of another consciousness. Some masters assert that this implies a new apprehension, because a second moment of apprehending an object depends on the first moment. This does not refer to the general way that any moment of consciousness always depends on the preceding one, but to the specific way in which subsequent cognitions of the same object become dulled, losing the power of that initial moment. Here, we are not speaking of the conceptual minds that come into being immediately after any perception, but the raw direct perception itself, in its second or subsequent moments.

Other masters say the second moment of perception is still valid, but differentiate it from the subsequent moments of mental apprehension, the conceptions about the object. For them the idea of “newly” excludes only conceptions and not subsequent perceptions. If your definition of valid cognition is a mind that apprehends an object “by its own
power,” then second moments and so on can therefore still be novel if that apprehension is free of other minds—free, specifically, of conceptual superimposition.

**Inferential Valid Cognitions**

Within Tibetan Buddhism, it is generally agreed that there are only two sources of valid cognitions: perception and inference. Other philosophies also cite testimony, such as the words of a realized master, as a source of valid cognitions, or analogies that point to the truth, but these are disclaimed by most Buddhist scholars, including Dhammakirti and Dignaga.

As we’ve already seen, perceptual valid cognitions are simply our sense consciousnesses perceiving an object directly and correctly. To understand how an inference can be correct takes further consideration. Inference is a concept, and by definition concepts are mistaken minds, so is there a contradiction? We need to look carefully at the difference in meaning—within Buddhist philosophy, at any rate—between valid and mistaken. Some minds can be both.

Besides the usual twofold division of existent things into impermanent and permanent, there is also a division of phenomena into obvious, hidden, and very hidden things. **Obvious** things are things that we ordinary people can recognize without depending on inference, such as the everyday objects available to our five senses. However, our sense perceptions cannot apprehend **hidden** objects. To cognize such objects, we need inference.

The usual and very clear example of this is inferring fire from smoke. This is the example that eight-year-old monks love debating! When visible to our eye consciousness, fire is an obvious object. But it can also be hidden when, for example, there is a forest fire in the distance. All we see is smoke, but based on this appearance we can infer the
existence of fire. This mind is valid because the mind accords with the object, although there is no direct perception.

It is the same with things like subtle impermanence or even our birthdays. We have no direct perception of the day we were born, not even a memory of it. We must rely on our parents’ honesty and birth certificates. Despite all that, we still seem convinced enough to celebrate! Many of the really important ideas in Buddhism are hidden phenomena—emptiness, enlightenment, reincarnation, and so on. To understand and to finally realize such things definitely depends on inference.

The third category, *very hidden objects*, takes this all one step further. We can be certain that we are the product of our mother and father, but have no idea why we have a certain personality or why were born in a particular place. Buddhism says these things are due to karma, and at its most subtle level karma is a very hidden object. Very hidden objects can only be seen directly by a buddha and are thus penetrated by neither inference nor the direct perception of non-enlightened beings.

Through inference we can understand that we were born on such and such a date, which is a valid inference, but because it is a conceptual mind and not a perceptual mind it is still mistaken in that it does not apprehend its object directly. A conceptual mind is always a mistaken mind, even if it is nondeceptive. Seeing smoke and inferring fire is correct, or valid, but the mind that infers fire is also mistaken because it is conceptual and does not therefore directly apprehend its object.

Perceptions cannot apprehend concepts. My eye consciousness can apprehend the table in front of me but not the table’s emptiness. For this reason, the conceptual mind of inference is a vital part of spiritual development, where we naturally move from a shallow, intellectual understanding of the concept of something like emptiness to a deeper
one, and then to a valid inferential cognition. Without this, we could never go on to realize emptiness directly, and enlightenment would be impossible.

The belief that because conceptual minds are mistaken they are therefore never valid is erroneous, for it leads to the verdict that realizing emptiness or enlightenment is impossible. Only through conceptual minds can we attain such states. In order to avoid the dangers of acceptance based on mere dogma, we must understand epistemology well and employ valid reasoning. To do that, we must examine perception—the phenomenon that bridges the conceptual mind and the external object.

Many masters make this fundamental point: if we trace all valid cognitions back to their origins, we arrive at perception. Eventually any valid cognition—perception or inference—must be validated by perception. Seeing smoke in the distance and apprehending that there is fire is mistaken in regards to its appearing object—we have no direct proof of fire—but valid because there is fire. But this inferential understanding is only possible through the valid perception of smoke. And we are only able to ascertain and accept this link between smoke and fire because we have previously perceived this causal relationship.

Perception and conception continually work hand in hand to bring us a complete picture of the world.
Buddhist Epistemology

Over the centuries, Tibetan scholarship on the Indian Buddhist classics has been greatly facilitated by the creation of literary genres that extract and organize materials on particular topics in the Indian Buddhist texts. The previous discussion of mental factors, for example, reflected the “mind and mental factors” literature (Tib., *sems dang sems byung*), which extracts and organizes materials from an array of Abhidharma texts. In their examination of “mind and its object,” our authors’ efforts are similarly informed by another such genre known as “mind and cognition” (Tib., *blo rig*). Drawing on the main themes of that genre, our authors now have the opportunity to explore in greater detail some issues we have already encountered. To do so, our authors focus on Indian Buddhist epistemological texts, especially those of Dharmakīrti and his followers. Yet the way that material is structured and interpreted reflects nuances and innovations articulated by Tibetan scholars themselves. Here, we encounter especially the influence of the renowned scholar Chapa Chökyi Sengé (1109–69), whose work on numerous issues figures prominently in this discussion. Our authors note that Chapa’s opinions were at points controversial, and his views received especially trenchant criticism from Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltsen (1182–1251) and his followers. Our authors remark on these differences at crucial points, and as with other topics treated in this volume, they aim to present a range of theories. Nevertheless, Chapa’s approach has advantages for unpacking central aspects of the Buddhist epistemological tradition, and our authors thus organize this part around key concerns for Chapa. In the first half, they examine the varieties of objects, along with related issues such as the role of images in cognition and the nature of conceptuality. In the second half of this part, our authors then turn to a sevenfold typology of cognition. To set the stage for the appreciation of these topics, I will now examine some of their key features.
Although earlier precedents can be cited, the Indian Buddhist epistemological tradition (Skt., *pramāṇa*) is generally traced back to Dignāga and Dharmakīrti in the sixth and seventh centuries. Through the works of various commentators, critics, and interpreters, Dharmakīrti becomes particularly influential for later Indian Buddhism and its transmission to Tibet. To understand the Dharmakīrtian account, it is helpful to begin with the relatively straightforward example of an ordinary person’s visual sense perception. Dharmakīrti and his followers hold that sense perception is a causal process, and several conditions are required for visual perception to occur: some material, visible stuff must be present; other external conditions such as adequate light must be involved; various mental factors including a basic level of attention (*manasikāra*) must be active; contact (*sparśa*) between the object and the sense faculty must occur; and so on. When all the requisite preconditions are in place, an *image* (*ākāra*) or phenomenological form of the object is generated in visual consciousness. Dharmakīrti indicates that this image is not just a mirror image of the object, since it varies across individuals, owing to such factors as the acuity of their sensory faculties and their currently active interests and affective states. Simultaneous with this *object image* (*grāhyākāra*), a *subject image* (*grāhakākāra*) must also arise. This subject image accounts for the phenomenal sense of consciousness or knowing that accompanies the experience, and it also is part of the subject-object structure—the sense of “in here / out there.” These images of the subject and of the object arise simultaneously in the moment of visual perception, and for a tiny fraction of a second, those images are presented without any categorization or conceptualization. Here, we should add that this involves a particular meaning of “conceptualization” that we will discuss further below. Importantly, our authors note that earlier models in the Abhidharma do not accept the notion that perception is mediated by images or phenomenal forms in this way, but for the epistemological tradition established by Dignāga and
Dharmakīrti, an object image and a subject image are necessarily present in any moment of ordinary consciousness.

Some crucial features of this model may already be evident. First, in the most straightforward account of Dharmakīrti’s model, what is directly presented in a moment of sense consciousness is not the visible thing itself. Instead, it is an image or phenomenal form presented in consciousness. When I see an object that I identify as “blue,” for example, the blue color that I am directly experiencing is not a thing outside my mind; it is an image within consciousness. Second, my identification of that object as “blue” does not occur in the moment of perception itself; that conceptualization occurs as a perceptual judgment or subsequent cognition (Tib., bcad shes) that conceptualizes the image after the initial perception. The perceptual image and the consciousness in which it occurs are thus completely nonconceptual. A third key feature here is that perceptions do not occur in a vacuum; they are filtered and defined by the interests, goals, and dispositions active in the mind. For Dharmakīrti and his followers, a perception can count as a “valid cognition” only if it can produce a subsequent cognition that provides epistemically reliable information about the object in a way relevant to my goals. Thus, even though my perception is an image in consciousness, my perception must enable me to act on the cause of that image—a causally efficacious object—that is relevant to my goals. In a sense, what I directly see is just an image in my mind, but no organism is just interested in mental images; we wish to encounter opportunities and avoid dangers. If the image caused by the object cannot lead me to act on causally relevant stuff (and not just images in my mind) in ways that enable me to achieve those goals, then perception would be pointless, at least on the Dharmakīrtian account.

One important feature of the Dharmakīrtian system is that it posits a distinction between the image presented in sense consciousness and the object that caused the image. In other words, this model involves a kind of gap between the phenomenal image and its cause (an approach that, in Western philosophy, would be akin to a sense-data theory). The image might be something such as the presentation of a red object in awareness.
with a particular shape that we conceptualize as an “apple,” and the cause would be the actual material stuff that we wish to eat. Some interpreters of Dharmakīrti such as Chapa attempt to close this gap, even to the point that, by reinterpreting Dharmakīrti’s notion of the object image in particular ways, the image’s role as a mediator—a bridge between the material stuff and immaterial consciousness—is reduced or eliminated. As a result, for these interpreters, sense consciousness ends up engaging more-or-less directly with objects (akin to versions of “direct realism” in Western philosophy). Other interpreters, such as Sakya Paṇḍita, seek to preserve this gap in their interpretations of Dharmakīrti’s model of perception. There is thus a spectrum of interpretations, some that seek to close the gap between the object and the object image and some that seek to preserve it. An exploration of this spectrum’s full range would be complex indeed, and in the interest of simplicity, our authors decide to favor Chapa’s end of the spectrum, where the gap between the object and the object image in consciousness is reduced or eliminated. However, as Georges Dreyfus has noted, Dharmakīrti’s earliest Indian interpreters tend to assume a stronger version of this gap, and thus in historical terms, the typology of objects discussed by our authors arose in response to interpreters who assumed a clear gap between object and object image. Let us now examine the typology of objects our authors present, with an eye to clarifying how it seeks to reduce that gap.

**Types of Objects**

Based on Dharmakīrti’s account and fully elaborated by later Indian and Tibetan interpreters, the typology of objects presented by our authors is fourfold: (1) appearing object, (2) observed object, (3) conceived object, and (4) engaged object. The interpretation of these categories varies, and not all Buddhist epistemologists used this typology or accepted it. Dharmakīrti and his earliest interpreters do not explicitly use this typology, and they lack the technical term _appearing object_; however, they do refer to the object image as an “appearance” (Skt., _pratibhāsa_) in awareness. This
stands in contrast to the observed object (grāhya)—the thing that causes an appearance or object image to arise in a moment of perception. Thus, if Dharmakīrti’s earliest Indian interpreters were to use this fourfold model, they would say that the first two types of objects—the appearing object and the observed object—should be distinct. But following Chapa, our authors collapse the gap between object and object image, and the appearing object and the observed object are thus synonymous. In lieu of being interpreted as what causes an object image in a perception, the observed object is precisely what is directly apprehended by a sense consciousness, and that object is also the appearing object in that it is cognized by that consciousness by way of appearing to it.

So far, we have been discussing the typology of objects in relation to perception, which is necessarily nonconceptual for the Buddhist epistemologists. To understand the third type of object—the conceived object—we must examine conceptual cognition. In brief, conceptual cognitions involve mental objects such as the conceptual image of a pot presented in the thought “This is a pot.” This conceptualized “pot” is both the appearing object and observed object of that conceptual cognition, since it is what that cognition directly apprehends. That conceptual pot, however, is presented as referring to—or simply being the same as—some real pot in the world. As such, that real pot is the “conceived object” of that conceptual cognition. In other words, it is what that conceptual cognition is guiding us to. In part this means that the thought of a unicorn does not truly have a conceived object, since there is no real thing to which it can refer in this way.

The fourth type of object, the engaged object, is what a cognition is prompting us to act upon, whether through physical actions or additional mental activity. A conceptual cognition prompts us to engage in this way precisely by presenting its mental objects as the conceived object—as some real thing in the world. A perceptual cognition, being nonconceptual, has no conceived object; instead, it directly presents its content—the observed object—as something for us to act upon, and in comparison to a conceptual cognition, a perceptual cognition has a kind of vividness that is especially
relevant to prompting actions on its engaged object. From a strictly epistemological standpoint, this category of the engaged object may seem redundant, since it is not directly connected to questions of truth or justification, but Buddhist thinkers are interested in more than just the conditions that make a cognition epistemically reliable. Their theories are also informed by a keen interest in the mechanisms involved in our behaviors and the role that cognitions play in prompting—or changing—those behaviors.

**On Concept Formation through “Exclusion”**

Already in part 1, our authors pointed out that conceptual cognition is deceptive. On the one hand, we ordinary beings must rely on concepts—as expressed in language and thought—to make our way in the world, yet our thoughts and statements about the world, while useful for engaged action, invariably mislead us. In the introduction to part 1, I noted the two ways in which conceptual cognitions are mistaken. First, they present their content—such as the concept “fire”—as identical to some real fire in the world, but unlike an actual fire, the thought of fire cannot truly burn anything. Second, the concept or thought of fire involves a universal (Skt., sāmānyalakṣṇa), which amounts to an essence or “fire-ness” that characterizes every fire. Yet Buddhist epistemologists maintain that this notion of “fire-ness” is simply a mental construct; in fact, there is no such universal, no entity that is exactly the same in any two things that we call “fire.” Every thing that we call “fire” is actually unique in every way, not at all the same, even if by using that concept or expression we somehow are able to successfully achieve our goal of becoming warm and do not confuse those entities with stuff that will make us cold.

If conceptual cognitions are always mistaken, how can they reliably guide action? The key to this question lies especially in the problem of accounting for some sameness that enables us to use a single concept or expression such as “fire” for multiple unique things. If, as Buddhist epistemologists maintain, there is in reality no such sameness, how are concepts or expressions such as “fire” still successful in guiding our actions? The
answer to this question is the theory of exclusion (apobha) developed by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti with further elaboration by many generations of commentators.

The full details of exclusion theory are complex, and to set the stage for the in-depth summary provided by our authors, it will be helpful to examine the term exclusion itself. As we have noted, Buddhist epistemologists reject the notion of any real sameness—what in Western philosophical terms would be called a universal—that characterizes every instance of, for example, a fire. Yet even though there is no real sameness, our cognitive systems can construct an unreal sameness. The key here is that our cognitive systems are not simply constructing concepts out of some bad habit, as Dharmakīrti puts it. Instead, these concepts help us avoid what we think will inhibit our flourishing while also helping us obtain what we believe will promote it. In short, we are concerned with desirable outcomes—identifying something as “fire” is tied to my desire to get warm and to engage with an object capable of making me warm. And with that context in place, my cognitive systems construct something that is, in practical terms, the same for all fires, even though there is no sameness in the world.

Although every individual instance of fire is completely unique, our cognitive systems can ignore the variations among those instances and instead focus on the way that each thing we call a “fire” is “excluded” (Skt., apodha, vyāvṛtta) from all things that do not have the expected or desired effects. And this “exclusion of that which does not have the expected goal-oriented, causal capacity” (atadarthakriyāvyāvṛtti) constitutes a sameness. Thus, even though there is no real “fire-ness” that characterizes all fires, in my experience each thing I call “fire” is different from other things that don’t do what I expect a fire to do. A somewhat tongue-in-cheek way of putting this is to say that, in terms of the things that we call a fire, we can say that they are all the same in that they are “not a non-fire.” This statement, however, is not as a simple as it looks, and this process certainly cannot be reduced to a mere logical double-negation, which would be both trivial and pointless. Instead, this notion of exclusion only makes sense when we understand that it falls within a behavioral context, where the
formulation and use of concepts (whether expressed through words or not) is ultimately tied to our goal-oriented behaviors that end in a concrete experience of, for example, feeling warm.

The example of fire that I have chosen is a traditional one, but it also has the advantage of easily invoking an experience. Nearly everyone has had the experience of being cold and then seeking some means to become warm, whether with a “coat,” a “heater,” a “fire,” or the like. And while the vast array of things that we can fit under these categories are varied indeed, it is easy to understand how the point of that categorization is to achieve a goal: the question of the exact sameness of every coat or heater is not a practical concern. Of course, we can—and do—develop higher-order concepts that are less concrete in this way, but the claim of the exclusion theory is that even those higher-order concepts emerge out of a more basic system that serves to guide our embodied actions toward the concrete goals that we seek. For again, the thought of a fire (or some other abstraction) cannot make us warm. The claim here is that what counts is the actual, perceptual experience.

**Seven Types of Cognitions:**
**A Model of Transformation**

Conceptual cognitions involve distortions that do not come into play for perceptual cognitions. This is not to say that perceptions are simply pure, unconstructed encounters with the world. At all levels of analysis, Buddhist epistemologists acknowledge that perception is a highly conditioned process influenced by numerous factors, such as the particularities of our embodiment, the context formed by our expectations, and the acuity (Skt., *pātava*) of our attentional and volitional capacities. Still, perception holds a special place in Buddhist epistemology. As we have seen, at a basic level our conceptual system operates in a way that facilitates our goals, which themselves involve concrete perceptual experiences, such as feeling warm. The mere thought of feeling warm is not enough: we want to actually experience warmth. In this way, perception is said to be vivid.
(spaṣṭa) in ways that thought or conceptuality is not. Importantly, this also means that perception can be harnessed to the project of personal transformation, precisely because its vividness includes a visceral, embodied encounter with whatever is being perceived. To take a key Buddhist example, it is certainly laudable to have a conceptual understanding of the notion of personal selflessness (pudgalanairātmya), such that I intellectually understand that, even if it feels like I have some unchanging, absolute, and autonomous identity that constitutes my “self,” I do not in fact have that kind of self at all. This intellectual understanding of selflessness can be helpful in reforming some of my dysfunctionality, but an actual perceptual experience of selflessness, where I viscerally feel that lack of any such essentialized and unchanging self, will have a much stronger impact on my beliefs and behavior. This insight into the primacy of perception underlies the sevenfold typology of cognition that figures prominently in our authors’ discussion.

The sevenfold typology again harkens back to Chapa, who is renowned for presenting it. Here again, there are disagreements among Tibetan philosophers about some of these categories, but our authors choose to set aside those disagreements in favor of a presentation that echoes an analysis made by the present Dalai Lama. In this account, the sevenfold typology traces a kind of developmental arc from being caught in the delusion of, for example, a fixed and essentialized self, and gradually moving toward a transformative perceptual experience of selflessness. The first stage involves (1) a distorted cognition, namely, the belief that my identity is immutable, unchanging and autonomous. But then, perhaps under the influence of something I have read or someone I have met, I begin to question this idea. Eventually, a state of (2) doubt arises, and since the issue of my own identity is of considerable importance, I begin to study this question. Through my rational analysis, I reach a point of (3) correct assumption. My analyses have not uprooted my doubt, but I am starting to recognize that my previous belief in a fixed, essentialized self is untenable. Finally, as I engage with this problem more, I am able to have a truly valid moment of (4) inference, where I am fully confident that I have come to the correct
conclusion—namely, that selflessness most accurately describes a key feature of my experience.

These first four types of cognitions are all very much in the conceptual realm, and His Holiness’s way of interpreting them connects to a typical sequence within Buddhist contemplative practice that involves studying (Skt., śruṭi, literally, “hearing”), contemplating (cinta), and meditating (bhāvanā). In a sense, the presence of persistent doubt is what gets us started in the serious study of an issue, and as we mull it over in contemplation, we start to get an idea of where our analysis is headed. Finally, we reach a point of conviction in that analysis, which here would correspond to a well-formed inference. But at this point, we are still in the realm of concepts, and we have not had a visceral, perceptual experience that will truly impact our cognitive schema about the self. As a result, our behavior will not change significantly. Instead, we must begin to meditate or focus on the conclusion to our analysis, and this enables us to have (5) a sustained subsequent cognition, in which the first moment of our inferential insight into selflessness is sustained in thought. We then apply additional meditative techniques to focus one-pointedly on that sustained insight, and this eventually leads to (6) a direct perception of selflessness.

That moment of the direct perception of a transformative insight is visceral in ways that the intellectual understanding cannot be, and it recruits our entire embodied experience—not just our thoughts—to the task of change. Dharmakīrti attempts to explain this point by citing cases that many of us would understand. For example, if I wake up in the middle of the night and hear a thief in my house, the visceral reaction that I feel at the moment is dramatically different from merely thinking about a thief coming that night. The point of Dharmakīrti’s example is not that a thief is actually in my house; instead, Dharmakīrti means that we wake up, perhaps from a dream of thieves, and then we have this visceral experience. In a similar way, the long and intense process of contemplating selflessness, when combined with meditative techniques, can result in a visceral, perceptual experience that truly reorients our beliefs and behaviors. This stands in contrast to (7) an indeterminate perception, which in this context
would be a meditative experience that, while vivid and even dramatic, has no visceral impact on our beliefs or behaviors, precisely because it is not emerging from—or contextualized by—a careful inquiry into a crucial issue such as the question of personal identity.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s insightful way of interpreting the seven-fold typology of cognition sets aside some of its thornier details, including especially the very status of indeterminate perception itself. In a direct and instructive way, it evokes precisely the underlying concern of this model: in what way can our beliefs and experiences be cultivated to reduce suffering and enhance human flourishing?

*John Dunne*

**FURTHER READING IN ENGLISH**


Chapa’s “new epistemology” is discussed at length by Pascale Hugon and Jonathan Stoltz in *The Roar of a Tibetan Lion: Phya pa Chos kyi seng ge’s Theory of Mind in Philosophical and Historical Perspective* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2019).

For Dharmakīrti’s theory of concept formation through *apoha*, or exclusion, see the essays in *Apoha: Buddhist Nominalism and Human Cognition*, edited by Mark Siderits, Tom Tillemans, and Arindam Chakrabarti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). The first essay, “Key Features of Dharmakīrti’s *Apoha* Theory,” offers an accessible overview.