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EPISTEMOLOGY: CONCEPTION AND PERCEPTION

Epistemology in Buddhism

BUDDHIST EPISTEMOLOGY is the systematic investigation of the nature of knowledge: its scope, base, and reliability. It looks at the *scope* in terms of how far knowledge can go toward understanding reality, the *base* minds from which knowledge can grow, and whether knowledge can serve as a *reliable* source for an individual to completely understand reality.

Buddhist epistemology was first taught systematically and explicitly by the Indian scholar Dignaga (ca. 450 A.D.), and then by his commentator Dharmakirti (ca. 625 A.D.) in the *Commentary on Valid Perception (Pramanavarttika)*. As I have mentioned, although Nagarjuna and his disciple Aryadeva wrote texts on epistemology much earlier, this was not done in any structured or extensive way; thus Dignaga and Dharmakirti are considered the founders of Buddhist epistemology and logic.

Epistemology in Buddhism is not merely the study of knowledge for its own sake, but is aimed at bringing the seeker an understanding of how sentient beings can overcome their problems and eventually experience liberation—the cessation of suffering and its root causes. Dignaga and Dharmakirti's explanations of epistemology are not just empirical data, such as one would find in science—although of course much within their explanations concurs with Western science. The difference between them is the motivation. In the case of Buddhist epistemology, this knowledge is acquired solely to develop the understanding that counteracts and eliminates our fundamental confusion.

Conception

Buddhist thought recognizes two basic kinds of mental experience: the experience in which the mind accesses its object directly, and the experience in which the mind relies on another mind to access its object.

These two states roughly correspond to *perception* and *conception*, terms most speakers of English would understand, although not always precisely, and certainly not in the context of the Buddhist analysis. If you feel that a concept is a thought and a perception is more direct, more correct, then you are getting there, but even so, as we will see, there's a great deal more to it than that.

Dharmakirti defines *conceptual cognition* as “that consciousness that apprehends the object indicated by words in relation to the actual thing.” Here we see a close connection drawn between thought on one hand and language and concepts on the other. In the definition, “words” refers to both language and concepts. In Tibetan the term for “word” is *dadun*, literally the “object of concept.” That is not to say that a concept is the same as a word. An intermediary mind helps the mind as a whole access its object, and that can take the form of an image or an idea, as well as an actual word or label.

For example, think about a particular table, perhaps the one in your living room. When you think about the table, the image of the table will probably arise in your mind. That image can never be more than a representation of the table. A thought about the table is not the actual table. Between your consciousness and the actual table you are thinking about is the intermediary image of the table you have evoked.

However, the concept of table is more than just the intermediary process that occurs between the mind and the actual object; it also encompasses what we *mean* when we say “table.” Our subjective representation of a table is not

directly connected to reality because it is constructed by language and concepts. Thus, a conceptual mind is fiction rather than reality—it is made up by our minds. The concept is a subjective representation of an object that relates the object to other objects in the same class and is understood by society to be a whole. It is not the direct expression of the object.

Let's break it down a bit. We all relate to the concept of *table*. It represents an object with properties shared with all kinds of things—wooden tables, iron tables, simple tables, ornate tables, coffee tables, dining room tables—that have specific parts—legs, top, and so on—and function as table. This is a mental concept. The concept does not arise from the side of the table itself, but is part of our linguistic construction of *table*.

In reality there is no actual table that shares all the properties of every other table. We assume a common “table-ness,” but that essence is fiction. The representation of the table in the conceptual mind is separate from the real table, and furthermore this fictional entity, table, that we hold is superimposed over any “real” individual table we are investigating. Our experience of a table is predominantly a projection, an abstract generality.

That does not mean the table does not exist. The object we call “table” sitting in front of us at this moment does exist, but the “table” of our conceptual mind only exists as a generality, because it is a mere conceptual construct.

CONCEPTUAL THOUGHTS ENGAGE THROUGH ELIMINATION

In the common division of existent things, Buddhist philosophers distinguish two categories: impermanent and permanent (which are categorized from the side of the object) or affirmation and negation (which are categorized from the side of the subject—the mind apprehending the object).

Although the former division is more widely discussed, in some ways the latter is more important because, from a Buddhist perspective, we can never know an object without the involvement of mind, and thus without some degree of subjectivity. Therefore, this twofold division contains objects that can be known by affirmation and those that can be known by negation. I would like to look at these now.

The conceptual mind does not apprehend its object through a positive recognition but by eliminating all other objects that are not that particular object. Therefore, in Buddhist epistemology the conceptual consciousness is construed as negative in nature, as it arises from a process of elimination.

For example, if I say “apple” to you, the image of an apple will come into your mind. According to Buddhist thought, it arises through the systematic negation of all things that are *non-apple*. If I qualify my concept by saying “green apple,” your mind will refine the generic image, and my saying “That large green apple you have just eaten” will further refine it. Still, there is no direct perception of that just-eaten apple. The concept remains an elimination of all the stored memories of what is *not* that apple and a generic construct of what *is* that apple.

This process occurs through the use of a linguistic sign—a word or label. This is more than just seeing an apple and sticking on the mental label, “apple.” The process is much more subtle than that. It is virtually impossible for ordinary people such as ourselves to have a direct perception of an object, unadorned by

conceptual process. Even if we have no conscious discursive thought about the object, we engage in this mental process of object classification.

The negation process of conception has parallels in the way Buddhist practice is pursued. For example, this page is impermanent, but our minds presently perceive it as permanent, at least on a moment-by-moment basis. We need to eliminate the misconception that it is permanent to perceive it accurately. In this case, the concept of permanence is the object of negation. That is similar to the way the conceptual mind operates, though in this case we need to consciously intend the negation. Without negating its permanence we will never see its impermanence—either as a concept or, at a very advanced stage of meditation, as a direct perception.

We are categorizing things all the time. We classify objects as beautiful, ugly, tall, short, and so on. Moreover, our categories depend on our cultural context—so in one culture “beautiful” might be equated with tall, slim, blond, and blue-eyed, while in another it might be fat and bald!

We are also constantly making value judgments—good or bad, fair or unfair, right or wrong. Observing our personal instinctive dialogue of judgment is a very interesting exercise because value judgments as categories are particularly removed from the object at hand and say more about the perceiver than they do about the object. By looking at them, we can learn a lot about our minds. According to Buddhist epistemology, we arrive at our judgments—which are concepts—by elimination. On the basis of all of our accumulated conditioning, we decide that something is good by eliminating all that is not good.

CONCEPTUAL THOUGHTS ARE ALWAYS MISTAKEN

The conceptual mind apprehends its object through negation, therefore it is considered a mistaken mind. Although it is a construct based on a linguistic, generalizing process that has little to do with the actual object before us, this is not the way we see it. According to our view, the object of our conceptual consciousness is real and accurate. This is a mistake.

As long as the dichotomy persists between *apple* and *non-apple*, or whatever our conceptual mind is apprehending through this elimination process, there is no way to overcome this fundamental mistake. Thus conceptual consciousness can never reflect reality as accurately as a perceptual consciousness.

A conceptual thought is merely a fiction projected onto an object or event and depends on socially shared assumptions. A table does not think of itself as a table—it does not think that it is wooden and comes from Ikea, or that its function is to hold a computer. These are all assumptions we attach to the object. In fact, the term *table* is a conventionality that exists in the English-speaking world. It has no reality based in the actual object. The assumptions we layer on objects arise from the social process of language acquisition and the habit of labeling our sense stimuli in certain ways over and over again. We want to buy a table, we plan the purchase in our minds, and we feel the table we want to buy is a real table, while in fact “tableness” is a fiction created by the conceptual mind and nowhere to be found.

Our experience of objects as real and our acceptance of the terms commonly used for such objects as natural are the two key factors for the formation of the conceptual mind. Superimposed on the real table is this combination of memory and socially constructed generalization that ignores the fact that one object labeled *table* is entirely separate and different from another object labeled *table*. In reality all physical objects are unique, individual things. In the realm of reality, this concept of *table* does not exist within all things we call tables; we superimpose it upon the object.

CONCEPTUAL THOUGHTS PROVIDE COGNITIVE CONTENT

Mistaken though they are, conceptual consciousnesses are vital to our lives and well-being. They provide the elaboration necessary for us to make sense of the raw data of the direct sensory consciousnesses. Only a conceptual mind can categorize objects; only a conceptual mind can analyze and discriminate; only a conceptual mind can plan—in short, only a conceptual mind can “think.” Because of that, conceptual thoughts are very useful.

On one level they are always mistaken, misrepresenting the real world. On another level they are vital for sentient existence. They help us to apprehend things and events not apparent to our sensory consciousnesses, either because of their subtle nature, because of their temporal location—meaning they happened in the past or are still to happen—or because of their physical location—meaning they occur too far from our sense consciousnesses for us to apprehend them. In such circumstances the conceptual mind is the only way we can connect with those things and events.

As discussed above, we must strive to realize objects such as subtle impermanence and selflessness if we are ever to experience the complete cessation of suffering and its origin. Dignaga and Dharmakirti assert that such knowledge can only arise through conceptions. At our stage of development we cannot directly perceive subtle impermanence, thus the conceptual mind is the only tool we have to connect us to this truth in any way. Therefore, it is important to keep conceptuality in perspective. While we must understand that concepts always contain an element of error and do not reflect reality accurately, thinking is nonetheless crucial to our spiritual development.

IMPLICATIVE AND NONIMPLICATIVE NEGATION

If you asked a Gelug master about nonimplicative negation, he or she might just say that it is the most important thing you can ever know. It is such a strange term, and yet it is so important! Without understanding nonimplicative negation, it is impossible to understand ultimate reality.

The difference between the two types of negation lies in whether the negation causes something else to be implied in its place. Hence we have the terms *implicative* and *nonimplicative*. If you go to university where there are two choices, full-time or part-time study, and you tell a friend that you are not studying full-time, this is a negative statement. However, through this negation you imply a positive statement—that you *are* studying part-time. Thus your statement is an implicative negation. If I tell you there is no honey in the kitchen, that too is a negative statement, but it does *not* imply anything positive, such as the fact that there *is* sugar, or coffee. This is a nonimplicative negation.

Gendun Drub defines nonimplicative negation as:

...That which is realized through an explicit elimination of an object of negation and does not suggest some other positive phenomenon in place of its object of negation.²³

In other words, a nonimplicative negation eliminates whatever needs to be eliminated without implying that anything exists in its place. To state that I don't play football does not imply that I do play tennis.

This may sound a little silly to you, but nonimplicative negations become crucial when we seek to understand emptiness or selflessness. We are all trying to understand emptiness (at least I hope we are!). But what are things are empty

of? When we realize that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence, do we simultaneously realize that they possess other qualities? The insight into emptiness brings no such implication. There is nothing beyond, not even something called “emptiness.” It is the same with selflessness. The very word directs us to the absence of a self, but it does not imply that something else exists.

Meditating on emptiness is a long and profound process. The object we are trying to negate is quite crude early on, but slowly it becomes more and more subtle. If, at the end of our analysis, we are left with anything positive at all, the analysis has gone wrong. Our negation should be nonimplicative. When our mind realizes an object’s ultimate nature, its absence of inherent existence, what it realizes is just a mere absence of inherent existence and absolutely nothing else. If, when inherent existence is negated, anything remains—even something profound, like a realization of dependent arising—that mind does not have a true understanding of emptiness.

HOW THE MIND GENERALIZES

Conceptual consciousnesses are mistaken in that the mind takes something generic and assumes it is specific. Superimposed upon the perception of a book, for instance, is almost always the concept of *book*, which helps us interpret the object but denies us direct access to it. There are four types of generalizations the mind makes about objects:

1. collective generality
2. categorical generality
3. meaning generality
4. sound generality

Getting a clear picture of these four points can really help us see the process by which we superimpose and the mistakes this process can bring. The effect of these mental mistakes is huge. In fact, the ways we react socially and individually to our world are dominated by these first three generalities.

A *collective generality* is really another name for the *density of whole*, a topic that comes up in the next chapter. In this context, however, we are focusing on the way the mind elaborates on the original sense data. *Collective generality* refers to the assumptions we make about the completeness of an object. For example, when we watch the news on television, we only see the top part of the anchorperson's body, but we assume the existence of his or her waist and legs. This is a conception rather than a perception. Our experience tells us that a person has all these parts, so if we see one part, we assume the others will follow. This is something we rarely question, and in most cases experience does not contradict it. However, this mistaken mind can harm us—even on a mundane level. Once, I was helping to renovate Jamyang Buddhist Centre after the building was first purchased, and I stepped on some old linoleum in a deserted upper-story room. I had assumed there was solid floor beneath, but in fact the floorboards were rotten—a collective generality that could have seriously injured me.

A categorical generality is a generalization the mind makes based on the category an object fits into. This can be a useful conceptual shorthand, but it can also be very harmful, as when we judge an entire race of people based on a stereotype.

No two objects are identical. Even if they are the same shape, color, and so on, they are two different entities. If you have two glasses in front of you, they may *look* identical, but of course they are different glasses; they are composed of different atoms. However, it would be impossible for the mind to keep up if it had to newly label every object in the universe every time it encountered one, and so we categorize. I have used *glass* as an example, and I know that you have no trouble imagining one. If I ask a friend to buy me a carton of soymilk at the shop, I know she won't come back with dog food. Placing objects into manageable categories is an essential role of the conceptual consciousness.

The worrying side to this mental process is that by categorizing, we may deny the unique integrity of the object. We may pigeonhole, reduce to stereotypes, or at worst, judge a person based on our generalized assumption about a group. The prejudice—racial, sexual, or whatever—that is the cause of so much of the world's suffering is probably the most dangerous manifestation of this. People under the influence of prejudice need no deep philosophical understanding in order to hate. If people with a particular bias—against a race, religion, sex, or skin color—see someone in that category, they react based on the categorical generality they are making. It colors and distorts their perception.

A *meaning generality* is another term for the generic image the mind creates. We have already covered the way the conceptual mind functions through image and language. Here the focus is the mental image that arises in place of the perception. As we have seen, the conceptual mind creates the image through negation, systematically eliminating everything that is not its object. So if I ask you to imagine an apple, the image that arises in your mind is everything that is not non-apple. No matter how specific that image might seem, it is not the actual object—it is the meaning generality. Say we both met His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala in 1995 and I remind you that he shook your hand—a singular and powerful experience you are not liable to forget. That image may be strong and vivid in your mind, but it is still a meaning generality, a counterfeit of

the actual event. In fact, we don't even remember real events at all for the most part; we recall our previous meaning generalities.

Sound generality is much the same, but based on sound. Think of your favorite song. In your mind you may hear it playing, although in reality of course it is not. This is the conceptual mind producing a sound generality based on memories of listening to the sound. Again, for the most part this process is harmless, but because the mind is not apprehending the object exactly in accordance with reality, a fundamental mistake exists that can cause problems.

These generalities operate continually in our minds. They shape our opinions and color our entire world, and yet we are rarely aware of them as such. Although this topic is complex, we should seek to understand it, for the misunderstanding that skews our view of the world, no matter how subtle, causes mistakes that can lead to suffering.

Perception

As beings of the physical world, we are fortunate to not only possess the ability to make sense of our external environment, but also to possess the five sense faculties by which we can gather accurate information about it. According to Buddhist epistemology, although perception is not solely the realm of the sense consciousnesses—on certain occasions the mental consciousness can directly perceive sense data—nevertheless our sense perceptions are the main tools by which we gain impressions of the external world.

Perception can be defined as “a mental event that can apprehend its object positively, engaging the object as it is.” This refers mainly to our five sense consciousnesses. I walk down a street and see a person on the other side, hear the traffic, smell the flowers in the park, and feel the cool breeze. I am also eating an ice cream cone. These mental events—seeing, hearing, tasting, and so on—engage the object—the person, the noise, and so on—directly and positively. At this level there is no elimination or indirect apprehension.

Of course, things do not remain so simple for more than an instant. Immediately the mind begins to label things, and feelings and stories arise. The person is a friend, the traffic is loud, the breeze is cold, and so forth. This is the conceptual mind’s process of enhancing the initial perceptions, but they are not in themselves perceptions.

Intuitively, when we see an object, hear a sound, or ascertain something with any of our other sense faculties, we assume that it exists exactly as we perceive it. But all Buddhist schools assert a discrepancy between the world as it actually exists and the world as we perceive it. There is even a school that denies the existence of the objects of the external world entirely.

ASPECT

When we apprehend an object through direct perception, we assume we are ascertaining the actual object. We see a house and we think there is nothing between the actual house and our perception of it. But this is not so.

Among the schools of Buddhist thought, there is actually no clear agreement on what we actually see. In order to get an idea of the complexity of this issue, we need to examine the assertions of each of the four philosophical schools. For our purposes, we will limit our analysis to the first three schools, excluding the highest school, the Madhyamaka, as it really complicates the picture.

According to the Vaibhashika school, the least subtle of the four schools, our consciousness has direct and unmediated access to the object. However, the Vaibhashika also assert that we are unable to perceive an entire object with a single consciousness. If you think about it, this makes sense. We see an apple and think we are seeing the entire apple. In fact our eye consciousness has only taken in the color and shape of the part of the apple we can see, not its back or bottom, or the smell and taste that make up the complete object.

But apart from that, say the Vaibhashika scholars, a real apple exists, and that is exactly what our eye sees. For that reason we call the Vaibhashika a *realistic* school. This is not because they have an exclusive claim on the truth, but because they proclaim that things are real in the sense of having an intrinsic essence.

This assertion is strongly refuted by the other schools. First, say the others, this assumes a chronological impossibility, for according to the Vaibhashika, the existence of the apple and the apprehension of the apple would have to happen at the same time. This would eliminate the possibility of cause and effect, which by definition is sequential. If the apple and the apprehension of the apple were simultaneous, then the object could not be the cause for the mind that

apprehends it, which, according to the other schools, is absurd.

The Sautrantika and Chittamatra schools introduce the concept of *aspect* (Tib. *nampa*) in their discussions of how objects are perceived. The aspect is the reflection of the object that becomes the direct perception. It is an intermediary between the object and the mind, and as such behaves in the same way as a conceptual consciousness. We see blue, but what is it that differentiates blue from yellow before the conceptual consciousness labels it? These schools say it is aspect. The aspect of blue is both caused by the “real” blue color of the object and its representation in the visual consciousness.

It is obvious that an object cannot physically be present within a consciousness. However, according to these schools, the object can cause an impact—a mark or a reflection—on the consciousness. This is like leaning on a freshly-painted wall. Your arm is not left on the wet paint, but the mark of your arm is. According to these schools, this is a necessary part of the process of perception—without it, there is no base for discrimination.

The difference in assertion between the Sautrantika and Chittamatra schools does not revolve around whether the sense consciousness needs an intermediary, but around the status of the external object. The Sautrantika school assumes the external object exists, and the Chittamatra school refutes this. According to the Chittamatra, the aspects of color or taste that arise within our consciousness do not come about as a result of an impression from a real external object, but rather are produced by our own latent internal tendencies, or imprints. There is no experience of an external object without taking into account the mind that experiences it. Object and subject are one entity in that the table and the mind experiencing *table* arise at the same time from the same source.

Although having very different ideas about the subject/object relationship, both schools assert that a perception cannot arise independently of the object it perceives. Therefore perceptual aspects have a direct one-to-one correspondence with the objects they represent. A perceptual consciousness will arise only if there is an actual object, and therefore it can be said to hold the object itself. And so an eye sense consciousness apprehending a blue color is said to hold the

actual blue even though it is only aware of the *aspect* of blue rather than the blue itself.

Furthermore, an aspect is not something separate from consciousness. It is both a representation of the object in a consciousness as well as the actual consciousness that sees the object. Because of this double nature, it is said that the aspect has the *appearance* of the external object but the *nature* of consciousness.

The concept of aspect is also of great importance for these schools in that it opens the inquiry into self-cognition (Tib. *rangrig*),²⁴ or how the mind can apprehend itself. In relation to self-cognition, scholars such as Dharmakīrti and Dignāga speak of two types of aspect, objective and subjective.

Objective aspect focuses on the object—the color blue, for instance—whereas the subjective aspect focuses on the eye consciousness itself as it apprehends blue. In any perception, two things 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 Vaibhāṣika—Sautrāntika, 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. Dharmakīrti 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.

<i>perception</i>	<i>conception</i>
engages in its object positively, by affirmation	engages in its object negatively, by elimination
engages in its object as it is (without exaggerating)	does not engage in the object as it is
engages in a real object	does not engage in a real object
is generally very accurate	is always mistaken
does not provide any integrative content	provides integrative content

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 discriminates 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 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.²⁵ 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.”²⁶

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 *pra* in *pramana* definitely means *new* and therefore if a cognition does not reveal new information, it is not a valid cognition.²⁷ 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.”²⁸

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.

INFERENCEAL 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 Dharmakirti 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 we 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.

MOVING TOWARD KNOWLEDGE

The Sevenfold Division

PART OF EPISTEMOLOGY is the knowledge of conceptions and perceptions, and of mistaken and valid minds, as we saw in the previous chapter. Another part is understanding the actual way we move from mistaken to correct minds and from conceptual to perceptual consciousnesses. In its examination of the validity of knowledge and the way we acquire it, the Gelug tradition commonly lists seven types of mind:

1. wrong consciousnesses
2. doubting consciousnesses
3. non-ascertaining consciousnesses
4. correctly assuming consciousnesses
5. subsequent cognizers
6. valid inferential cognizers
7. valid direct perceivers

WRONG CONSCIOUSNESSES

Wrong consciousnesses, whether conceptual or perceptual, are erroneous with regard to the main object. Although a direct sense perception can be a wrong consciousness, the error will generally be very superficial. The traditional illustration is seeing everything as yellow because of jaundice—although wearing sunglasses might be a more modern twist on this example. In contrast, wrong consciousnesses at the conceptual level, such as belief in a permanent self, can be quite deep.

Buddhist epistemology lists six sources of deception:

1. the object
2. the basis of perception
3. the situation
4. the immediate condition
5. karmic imprints
6. repeated familiarization

I'll deal with the first source of deception last. The second, the *basis of perception*, is deceptive when we mistakenly focus on an inappropriate object. Many minds and mental factors make up a mental event, and usually the mind moves to the most important but not always. Something can skew our appreciation of the object. For example, a loud sound can blind us to an oncoming car as we step off the curb.

The *situation* can also deceive us. For example, we may view a large male figure on a dark street as intrinsically threatening when no actual threat is present.

The *immediate condition* refers to the immediately preceding moments of mind that distort our appreciation of an event. An example is when intense anger leaves a residue that colors the following situation, causing us to see something

we would ordinarily experience as pleasant or neutral as negative.

Karmic imprints trick us all the time. In fact, the propensities left on our mindstream from past actions have almost constantly programmed us to mistake things. The most important mistake relates to the suffering of change, where we cling to objects as intrinsically desirable only to set ourselves up for future suffering when they inevitably “fail” us. The fault lies not in the object, but in our perception of it.

Similarly, *repeated familiarization* distorts the picture, dulling perception and making mistaken attitudes seem normal and correct. We see this with political rhetoric, advertising campaigns, and dysfunctional families when violence and selfishness are portrayed as desirable. It is also true of our habitual projection of self-existence onto objects.

These points are interesting to explore and, I think, reasonably easy to understand. But let us return now to the first source of deception on our list, the object. As I mentioned earlier, the object itself can also deceive us. The other sources of deception can be seen as subjective—they are all mistakes the mind makes. How is it that the object can be at fault?

In fact, the fault does not come from the side of the object, but rather from the inability of the mind to take in certain aspects of the object. These aspects are known in Buddhist epistemology as the *four densities*:

1. the density of continuity
2. the density of function
3. the density of object
4. the density of whole

Density is the word that English-language scholars use, but I prefer the Tibetan term, *nyurwa* or “quick”—as in, the object or event is too “quick” for the mind to apprehend.

The *density of continuity* refers to the mistake we make when we see a sequence of events in relation to an object and mistakenly impute them as simultaneous or continuous. The confusion arises because there the space of time between the first event and the second is so small. The traditional example of this is of an arrow that is shot through a thick sheaf of paper. To the naked eye, it seems that the arrow has instantaneously created a hole through all the paper, but in fact it has gone through each sheet separately, one at a time.

We see another everyday example of this when we watch a film. Each second of a film is made of twenty-four separate frames, and each frame is a still picture. Because the frames are run through a projector very quickly, however, the movement in the picture seems to be continuous rather than composed of discrete stills.

The *density of function* looks at a set rather than a sequence as in the first density, but other than that it is quite similar. For example, walking up stairs seems like one single action to us, but, if we think about it, we can see that it involves a complicated set of motions.

The *density of object* refers to the way we see an object as a whole rather than as a collection of parts. A black-and-white photograph in a newspaper might look like one image of continuous tones, but if we examine it closely we will see it is nothing more than a collection of dots. Our mind makes connections that aren't actually present in the object itself.

The *density of whole* refers to objects that look uniform throughout although they are not. I see the front of something and presume the back and sides are identical. I bite into a delicious-looking apple only to find the inside is rotten. We are always making assumptions about wholes based on knowing only parts.

Recognizing that objects trick us all the time helps disengage us from appearances and look for deeper realities. Some people encountering television for the first time think that the characters and situations in soap operas are real.

Of course we aren't like that (at least I hope not!), but we might well get so wrapped up in a good film that we forget we are watching actors in fictional situations. And rarely are we conscious that the images we are watching on the screen are a series of still images.

This does not mean that objects and situations are utter illusions or that they do not function. They do function. A newspaper photograph functions as such, and merely because we fail to see that it is composed of many dots does not mean there is no photo. There is, however, an element of illusion at work that relies on our mind to fill in the spaces.

The lesson here is that we should not grasp onto things unreflectively, or take the labels our mind gives them as fixed. The capacity to create a little distance in this way can help us break the patterns that cause us so much unhappiness. This gap is essential for understanding reality and for reducing emotional distress.

Lama Yeshe offers a simple yet effective meditation.

You check, you watch, your own mind. If someone's giving you a hard time and your ego starts to hurt, instead of reacting, just take a look at what's going on. Think of how sound is simply coming out of that person's mouth, entering your ear, and causing you pain in the heart. If you think about it in the right way, it will make you laugh; you will see how ridiculous it is to get upset by something so insubstantial. Then your problem will disappear—poof! Just like that.²⁹

Wrong consciousnesses are minds that process the information about their objects incorrectly. This might seem a pedantic point but it is important to realize that there is a difference in Buddhist epistemology between a wrong consciousness, such as we have been discussing, and a mistaken consciousness. The Tibetan term for wrong consciousness, *lokshe*, means “reversed consciousness,” implying a complete inaccuracy, such as seeing a flower and

thinking it's a horse. *Mistaken consciousness* (Tib. *trulshe*) is much more subtle, referring, as we saw above, to the conceptual mind's inability to perceive an object directly. As I have said, the conceptual mind is always mistaken in this way, whether or not it is wrong.

DOUBTING CONSCIOUSNESSES

The second of the sevenfold division is *doubting consciousnesses*. This is a consciousness that is uncertain, wavering between one conclusion and its opposite. Everyday we are asked to make numerous choices, from products in the supermarket to decisions at work. If you are like me, most of those choices will be colored by indecision.

In Buddhist teachings, great doubt often arises in relation to the question of the inherent existence of things. We can listen to a teaching on emptiness and initially feel it is some esoteric concept that has nothing to do with our lives. That is doubt not tending toward the fact. If we hear more about it and start to feel that there is some possibility that things do not exist inherently, as the teachings are saying, that is doubt tending toward the fact. This is a powerful initial step in weakening the force of wrong view. It is the beginning of the process of moving toward correct understanding.

Even the suspicion that things and events may not be permanent is a thought diametrically opposed to our normal patterns and is in fact a very profound mind. As Aryadeva says in his *Four Hundred Verses (Chatushataka)*: “Even through merely having doubts, cyclic existence is torn to shreds.”

In the sequence that leads us from wrong consciousness to direct perception, doubt is one of the first types of mind we want to eliminate. However, early on, healthy doubts that tend toward the fact are in fact positive minds. For instance, to doubt that this is the only life we have and wonder if there is a next life might lead us to think about it, research it, and from the understanding we gain, produce a positive result.

The danger of doubt is the unsteady mind that does not examine closely and stays stuck in a wavering state, under the sway of whatever view was encountered most recently. If, while doubting the existence of future lives and

not having examined the issue carefully, we attend a lecture by a charismatic speaker who asserts there is no life after death, we may get caught up in the presentation and immediately grant it credibility. In order to progress on the path, we need to move beyond this chronic indecision.

NON-ASCERTAINING CONSCIOUSNESSES

Every day millions of sensory experiences appear to our consciousness. Say you walk from your home to a nearby park. When you return, you might be able to tell your partner about the noisy dog, the new display in the shop window, or the leaves turning brown in the autumn chill—but in fact you do not ascertain the vast majority of sensory input.

If we could analyze our minds over a twenty-four-hour period, most of what we experience would fall into this category. Of course we pay attention when we walk down a street—our survival depends on it—but the mind cannot possibly take in everything. The mind must filter input to make sense of the world, otherwise it would be like receiving every radio station in the world at once. The majority of our mental events are consciousnesses to which the object appears but is not ascertained, meaning the object has been apprehended by the consciousness without enough force to register.

Similarly, we may attend to an object, but it fails to register deeply. There is no certainty about the object. We attend a talk on Buddhism, but two days later cannot recall what was discussed because the teaching did not penetrate our minds sufficiently. That is another example of the mind that apprehends the object without ascertaining it.

CORRECTLY ASSUMING CONSCIOUSNESSES

The fourth consciousness is the last of what is called the *noncognizing consciousnesses*, in that they are conceptions and not perceptions and so do not actually “cognize” or know their objects. Correctly assuming consciousness is a consciousness that conceives the object in accordance with reality, but in a fallible manner.

While the vast majority of our consciousnesses fall into the category of non-ascertaining consciousnesses, the majority of the minds that *do* ascertain the object are correctly assuming consciousnesses. We ascertain the object but only through assumption. This mind can be positive, negative, or neutral, and it is a necessary step in developing the actual mind of direct perception.

A correctly assuming mind draws its conclusion based either on no reason at all or on a faulty reason. We have heard it, it seems right, and so we accept it without our own reasoning or experience playing a part. Even if we do investigate it in some way, we don’t take this far enough. Investigation ceases before there is a full, clear understanding and whatever we are investigating becomes incontrovertible; it assumes without fully knowing. *Correctly assuming* means just that—the mind is correct about its object but it is only an assumption, without the weight of detailed analysis or realization. Very often cultural assumptions are taken as truths without investigation. I know many Tibetans who are very simple, devoted people who recite mantras every day and have unwavering faith in the law of cause and effect, but possess no understanding at all of subjects such as the four noble truths.

Because this consciousness assumes rather than knows, it has no real power to actually recognize the object. We learn about impermanence and assume that things are impermanent, which is good to a point, but the whole thing can become quite dangerous if we become content with our limited analysis and never go deeper, especially if our assumption is accompanied by a good deal of intellectual egoism. Generally in Tibetan Buddhism we talk of three wisdoms:

the wisdom of hearing, contemplating, and meditating. Correctly assuming consciousness belongs to the first and is only really useful if it leads to the second, which takes whatever it has understood to the next level and eventually leads to single-pointed meditation upon the subject.

SUBSEQUENT COGNIZERS

The last three of the sevenfold division are cognizers, minds that actually get at the object. A *subsequent cognizer*, as the name implies, is a cognition of something that has been apprehended previously. It is subsequent to an initial and fresh valid cognition—either a perception or an inference. It is not the first moment of that mind. My eye consciousness sees a pen. The first moment is a valid perception, the second moment is a subsequent cognizer. Subsequent cognizers can be either perceptual or conceptual.

This distinction between *first* and *subsequent* is a point of debate among Buddhist scholars—some saying subsequent minds are valid, some saying they are not—but on a practical level, the difference is not so important.

INFERENTIAL COGNIZERS

Although an inferential cognizer is a conception rather than a perception, it incontrovertibly realizes its object of cognition and, as such, is as reliable a form of knowledge as a direct perceiver. However, while a direct perceiver contacts its object directly and nonmistakenly, an inferential cognizer makes contact via inference with things that are not available to perception. Many points, such as subtle impermanence or selflessness, are at present obscured from our immediate experience and can only be comprehended through a conceptual cognition.

As we progress on the spiritual path, our capacity for logic develops and our understanding of hidden phenomena becomes deeper. Things that once were hidden to us and only accepted through the power of belief become objects of knowledge. Perhaps you have already had times when some level of understanding about a subject has come about, not through logical deduction alone but because some deeper comprehension has been triggered through a far subtler mechanism. You could call this intuition, but it could also be karmic imprints ripening due to meeting the right conditions. Buddhists call this a realization. You might have a good intellectual understanding of impermanence as a result of years of study, but all this knowledge can and should be solidified until it becomes incontrovertible. The mind that brings this about is an inferential cognizer.

VALID DIRECT PERCEIVERS

Valid direct perceivers, the last of the sevenfold classification, are consciousnesses that apprehend the object directly and in a nonmistaken way. *Nonmistaken* means that no false element appears to the consciousness. The apprehension of the pen by the eye consciousness is without fault. What appears is the real pen. This obviously is a simpler concept of perception than the one we examined earlier, in which the *aspect* acts as a veil between mind and object.

The definition *nonmistaken* also eliminates mistaken minds that are not conceptual but also not direct perceivers. Sometimes certain sensory consciousnesses see or hear things completely incorrectly due to temporary distortions. While you are on a train that begins to pull away from the station, you may feel that the train is still while the people on the platform are moving. This is obviously mistaken. Although the perception of the moving people is a direct perceiver, it is not a *valid* direct perceiver because it is not nonmistaken.

In Buddhist epistemology there are four types of valid direct perceivers:

1. sense direct perceivers
2. mental direct perceivers
3. self-knowing direct perceivers
4. yogic direct perceivers

Sense direct perceivers operate with our five sense consciousnesses. *Mental direct perceivers*, on the other hand, are direct perceivers that are not part of the sensory consciousnesses. *Self-knowing direct perceivers* are also known as self-cognizers, the aspect of the mind that is self-aware and the source of memory. These minds are accepted as existent by all schools except Prasangka Madhyamaka, the highest subschool. It is worthwhile to look briefly at mental direct perceivers, which are said to be of two types: (1) those that occur at the end of a sensory direct perception and (2) clairvoyance.

Between the sense consciousness perceiving an object and the conceptual consciousness that superimposes conceptual thought upon the object, a brief moment of mental direct perception occurs. This consciousness is so brief that we ordinary people cannot recognize it. That moment is a mental direct perceiver at the end of a sensory perception.

The second type of mental direct perceiver is clairvoyance. There are different types of clairvoyance, such as the clairvoyance that directly sees other beings' minds, or the clairvoyance that sees their past lives. This kind of direct perceiver is developed as a by-product of the profound meditation of calm abiding.

Whereas clairvoyance is almost a side-effect of meditation, the development of yogic direct perceivers is a major goal of meditative training. Although we have the capacity to effortlessly and directly perceive such things as forms and sounds with our eye or ear consciousnesses, we do not have that ability with regard to profound phenomena like subtle impermanence or selflessness.

Through meditation and logical reasoning we start to understand subjects on an increasingly deeper level, moving from doubt to assertion to absolute conviction. However, at the beginning all of this occurs only within the conceptual process. In relation to impermanence, for instance, we get a stronger and stronger feeling for the momentary changes that occur in all things. The Gelug school says that a yogic direct perceiver realizing impermanence or selflessness directly—a perception—can only be achieved through the valid inferential cognizer—a conceptual mind. But through repeated meditation, that conceptual mental image becomes more and more part of our mind until it transcends conceptuality and becomes a direct perception. This is a yogic direct perception—we have realized the object directly, not through our senses, but through our mental consciousness.

Unlike clairvoyance, which is an achievement not exclusive to Buddhist practitioners, yogic direct perceivers occur only in the continuum of superior beings.³⁰ Although it shares some features with our sensory direct perceivers, such as freedom from conceptuality and being nonmistaken, yogic direct perceivers only occur through training. For this training, we need a clear

understanding of the complete process of mental cultivation. The goal of having a yogic direct perceiver that realizes impermanence or selflessness seems impossible without understanding the definite attainable steps that get us there.

We start with conceptual minds, beginning at the wrong consciousness that sees everything as permanent. Through reading and listening, our doubts become awarenesses. For example, we may, after listening to or reading some Buddhist teachings, start to doubt that compounded phenomena are permanent. This doubt settles into a conviction and becomes a correctly assuming consciousness. With deeper reflection over time, it eventually becomes an inferential cognizer.

How do we turn these conceptual minds into a yogic direct perceiver? We need to develop calm abiding and then special insight, first separately and then together. The union of the two is not a yogic direct perceiver itself, but the tool that will help us develop it. Once we have done so, we can increase our realizations not only of impermanence, but also of emptiness and bodhichitta.

Remember that I said that there is no intermediary between a direct perceiver and its object, as opposed to a conceptual mind that is separated from its object by an image. Using the union of calm abiding and special insight—a mind that is simultaneously deep in meditation and possesses a strong understanding of the object—we can move beyond a consciousness reliant on mental images. When we separate our mind from these images, we are left with a direct perception of the very subtle object. Having gone through this process and attained this realization, it will never degenerate; it will remain stable from lifetime to lifetime. This shows the extraordinary power of the mind of yogic direct perception, and should inspire us to persevere to develop it.

Differences in Process Between Wisdom and Method

Examining this sevenfold division helps us see the process we need to undergo in order to attain enlightenment—from wrong consciousness all the way to a direct perception of the way things really are. There is a difference, however, between the wisdom approach and the method approach.

As you know, when we work from the wisdom point of view we address facts, such as emptiness or impermanence. But when we develop the method side of our minds, such as great compassion and bodhichitta, what we engage with is harder to pin down. Many texts explain that our conceptual understanding of emptiness or impermanence can become direct perceptions while we are still unenlightened beings. On the other hand, we cannot have a direct perception of bodhichitta until we attain enlightenment.

The reason for this is the object. Every mind must have an object. The object of a mind developing a realization of emptiness is emptiness itself. The object of the mind developing a realization of bodhichitta is the suffering of all sentient beings and enlightenment. We can manage to directly see the emptiness of, say, our own body—it is difficult but not impossible. But until we have an omniscient mind, it is surely impossible to directly know the entire suffering of every single sentient being.

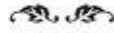
Within the Mahayana tradition, this is considered the point of difference between individual-liberation practitioners and practitioners of the bodhisattva vehicle. When you realize emptiness directly, you can go on to attain liberation from suffering, but if your goal is complete enlightenment or buddhahood, the focus of your meditation is the suffering of all sentient beings. Liberation can be achieved within lifetimes, it is said, but enlightenment takes three countless great eons.

According to our tradition, both perspectives, wisdom and method, need to be developed in tandem. In the first stages, both are conceptual minds, but we develop them in different ways. Then, it is comparatively easily to transform our wisdom into a direct perceiver, but the same is not true of method. Certainly, the objects of bodhichitta and great compassion can be realized before enlightenment, and we can have very powerful experiences in relation to them, but they cannot be realized *directly*. In the context of the sevenfold division, they do not become direct perceivers but only correctly assuming consciousnesses.

In the texts on *lamrim*, or the graduated path to enlightenment, the topics of calm abiding and special insight are taught after bodhichitta. In Tibetan Buddhism, and particularly in the Gelug presentation, we do not develop these later subjects in great detail in the early stages, focusing instead on laying the groundwork of study. However, my feeling is that without calm abiding and special insight we cannot experience direct realizations of anything. The earlier topics within the lamrim will remain intellectual exercises and not penetrate our consciousness in any deep way until we have engaged with them in stable and deep meditation.

The direct perception of emptiness starts at the path of seeing, the third of the five paths of a bodhisattva. This is a very subtle mind, and there is a risk, especially in the advanced stages of meditation, that we will be led into a blissful equanimity from which we will not want to emerge. It is said in some Mahayana sutras that when many individual-liberation practitioners get to a certain point, the wisdom realizing emptiness becomes a meditative absorption that can keep them in blissful stasis for many eons. Our goal is full enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, and if we keep this in mind then we will not get waylaid along the path.

It is difficult to develop this mind while we are still trying to deal with the gross mental afflictions that plague our daily lives. The layers of the mind must be systematically unpeeled to expose evermore subtle layers of affliction. Happiness—of ourselves and others—depends on reaching these deeper levels of mind and developing both wisdom and method in our practice. And in order to bring this about, we must cultivate a deep understanding of the mind and how it functions.



The understanding of the mind that is the subject of the Abhidharma and Pramana texts has been developed over centuries by masters who have been not only great logicians but also great meditators. Their theories have been formulated not in isolation but in the laboratories of their own minds; they actually experienced the mental states they write about.

I feel that so much of this understanding is not only relevant, but vital to our lives today. Our world is in crisis now, a crisis caused largely by an ignorance of the real path to happiness. Look about and see if this isn't so, in your own life, in the lives of the people you know, and in the way the cultures of the world are developing. More and more, the spiritual is being set aside for material pleasure; deep, lasting contentment for the quick buzz. This is due to an ignorance of the role the mind plays in creating happiness and suffering.

In our greed for possessions, we are eating the world we live in. Gandhi said that the world has enough for human need but not for human greed, and it is greed that we see manifesting so strongly in our lives today. Possibly there is no more greed today than in previous times, but with the increase in population and advances in technology, we now have the ability to destroy the delicate infrastructure of this planet. Wisdom has always been needed, but never more so than at this moment.

We have all the tools necessary for a great transformation, of ourselves and of the world we live in. All we need is an enquiring and persevering mind. Mind is complex, but not unknowable. The subjects covered in this book deal with understanding the mind and using that understanding to transform it. As with any tool, whether you use it is entirely up to you.