

Lorig- Mind and Awareness

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As always regenerate the highest motivation for the highest good, that is, to attain the state of a Buddha for the sake of all sentient beings who have all been our mothers.

In Tibetan lo means mind, rigpa means awareness, and shepa means consciousness. They are synonyms. The words are different but they boil down to the same point. What is lo/mind? Mind or awareness is a phenomenon to which an object appears and which takes cogniscence of the object. It understands the object.

Lo.rig has a few divisions; for example, valid and nonvalid cognition, and secondly conceptual and non-conceptual mind. There could be many more. Let's deal with the first one.

Valid and non-valid cognition

What is valid cognition? There are at least three interpretations. There could be valid cognition from the point of view of the highest school of Buddhist thought, Prasangika Madyamika, and from the point of view of the three subsequent lower schools and Vaibashika, the lowest school.

According to Prasangika Madhyamika, the highest school of thought, valid cognition is a non-deceiving/non-misleading mind which does not need to be fresh or new to be called valid. Why? An analogy explains it. In the world an honest person is one who does not deceive, not just for the first time, but all the time. According to Vaibashika, valid cognition doesn't have to be a consciousness. A non conscious phenomenon could also be valid. For example, an eyeball, which is a clear organ is said to be valid at the time when a visual consciousness arises. An eyeball is not consciousness but matter. Yet according to this school non consciousness is also called valid. Why do the proponents of this school take an eyeball, for example, a non-conscious phenomenon, as valid cognition?

They say; if consciousness alone was a valid cognition, since it is unimpeded by form and matter, and can pass through things, a person should be able to see clearly what is behind a wall or hill. But we don't see through such solid objects. Therefore, they say, consciousness alone is not a valid cognition.

Most schools contend that whenever a consciousness, sensory or mental, cognizes its object, at the same time, a likeness of the object is also understood. However Vaibashika, the lowest school, says consciousness can't take a valid cognizance of the object via experience of likeness of the object. They say it needs to empirically, palpably, gauge the object.

Other schools believe a mind that attends to the object is able to cognize many aspects or likenesses of it. For example, in a dark room if we all flash a torch on to a flower all the torches illuminate the numerous features of the flower and as many as ten consciousnesses are able to take cognizance of these.

Vaibashikas say, it is not possible for consciousness to have as many awarenesses as there are features of the object. They don't believe in an omniscient consciousness. All other schools believe Buddha's omniscient consciousness could simultaneously know everything that exists, could take direct cognizance of all that exists at the same time. The lowest school denies this, saying it is impossible. They believe an omniscient consciousness can take serial cognizance of the features of an object one by one, but not absorb everything all at once.

As consciousness experiences the likeness of an object, because a likeness is dissimilar to matter, and does not block awareness of the object, and you only have a generic image, (that is, non matter) when you have the likeness of a vase, for example, at the same time you can have a likeness of something else. You could have the experience of a likeness of many things. That is why omniscient consciousness is possible. Omniscient consciousness has direct experience of objects through experience of the likenesses of all things.

Vaibashikas say consciousness is dependant on the sense base/faculty, e.g. visual sense consciousness relies on the visual sense faculty, the clear eyeball. They say it is the eyeball that cognizes the object and that generates the resultant visual consciousness. Therefore the sense organ/base needs to have direct palpable unclothed appearance of the object. The point, the Vaibashika viewpoint, is that sense bases must have direct experience.

The Vaibashikas don't believe in the wisdom consciousness of a Buddha that directly experiences the likenesses of all phenomena. However they believe in an all-knowing consciousness, an all-knowing wisdom mind, the wisdom mind that knows all. Because of that they do not believe in the second of the two obstructions, obstructions to direct knowledge. Lets not be distracted by side issues and get back to valid cognition.

Valid cognition/pramana, is here being presented in the main from the second school's point of view, from the sutra system, which says valid cognition is an awareness that is new and incontrovertible. It has the three things; new, incontrovertible/ non-deceiving, and awareness. There are reasons why there are three terms. They say it is an awareness in that it understands an object. It is incontrovertible because it is unmistakable. They insist on new because it perceives afresh and to rule out subsequent moments of cognition.

According to the highest school, Prasangika Madyamika, there is an awareness called subsequent cognition which is valid cognition. To explain the validity of subsequent cognition the highest school gives the example of an honest person. Such a person they say cannot be called honest if they are honest only once, but must be honest always, or subsequently, to be called an honest person. But according to this second school valid cognition can only be fresh. Therefore they say, all subsequent cognitions, (which aren't fresh), cannot be called valid cognition. Then they say it has to be incontrovertible which is used to rule out presumptions. Some presumptions can in fact be valid. Although there is no evidence that's presumed, they can still be correct; but that is ruled out by the second school.

Awareness is used to rule out the Vaibashika position that eyeballs and other sense organ/ bases, which are matter, could be classed as consciousness. If they were they could understand visual objects.

Direct valid cognition and inferential valid cognition

What is a direct valid cognition/cogniser? Such cognition is an awareness that is free of concepts, non-conceptual, and understands/knows its object incontrovertibly and anew. It understands its object clearly and is not connected to concept. Direct cognition understands a phenomenon directly/ empirically without going through the medium of a generic image.

What is a concept?

A concept is an awareness which clings to/ cognizes an object by mixing sound generic image and meaning/object generic image. To elaborate on that, take an impermanent functional thing. When you think of it you can't grasp it. It can only be understood via knowing its definition, which is a phenomenon which is able to function. That is the definition of an impermanent thing. You know an impermanent thing by forming a concept of it based on that definition. Let's take an example of a person who doesn't know a particular impermanent thing but who still gets a meaning generic image and a sound generic image of it. He/she gets the two images, but not a blend of the two. If they do get a mixture of the two, meaning generic image and sound generic image, they would have understood the thing.

Another example is the pillar and the vase which are examples of functional entities/things. Someone who understands it knows a pillar is a phenomenon that is able to perform a function, but he/she is not able to understand it is a functional entity. If you tell him/her it is, because it can perform a function, then he/she understands the pillar as a functional entity. Subsequently when they then see a vase, they'll also understand the functional entity of the vase. They don't have to be told because they have the knowledge about the functional nature of the pillar. Consider how this has happened. When someone understands that the functionality of the pillar is the reason why it is called a functional entity, then pillar is understood. At that time he/she has got two generic images, a sound generic image, a label, and a meaning generic image, a definition, and he/she understands how the term functional entity is applied. He/she has a fusion of the two images. Now he/she understands pillar through two generic images, and so applies this understanding to all instances of functional entities/impermanent things.

To elaborate; take a person called Tashi. Before we know his name, we have an appearance of him and that is called the meaning/object generic image of him. Then someone may ask, "Do you know the name of that man?" "Can you put a name to that face?" We don't know his name so we can't put a name to the face. However someone who does know his name points to him and tells us, "That is Tashi." So then we can attach the linguistic term, Tashi, a sound generic image, to the face, a mental/object generic image.

The appearing object of a conceptual mind is quite different from appearing objects of other awarenesses.

All this has come up because I was talking about direct valid/prime cognition which I said is free of concept and understands its object anew and incontrovertibly. Any awareness that directly engages with its object and does away with generic images is called direct prime or valid cognition. On top of that, according to the sutra school, direct prime cognition mustn't be a mistaken consciousness.

There is a distinction between mistaken and distorted consciousness.

For example when you watch television and see images of war in a distant place, what appears are the images of war and not war itself. So it is a mistaken appearance of war. When you see people fighting in a distant country, if you believe the images you see are real and are happening under your nose that is a mistaken consciousness.

However it isn't distorted because the image does come from an actual event happening somewhere. These two can happen in a single instant of consciousness. If you close your eyes and think of a vase in your home you have a mental image of it which appears to be the vase, but actually isn't the vase itself, so it is a mistaken consciousness. It isn't however distorted because what it believes to be a vase is actually and truly a vase. The mental image makes you understand the vase in your home to be a vase, and not for example, a spoon. So it is a consciousness coming from a fact and therefore not distorted.

There can be a range of mistaken awarenesses and a range of distorted awarenesses. Mistaken awarenesses come from obstructions to omniscient knowledge. The entire range of distorted awareness comes from obstructions to liberation/delusive obstructions. There are two obstructions; obstructions to nirvana/liberation and obstructions to Buddhahood. All distorted awarenesses come from coarse delusions and prevent attainment of nirvana and all mistaken awarenesses come from subtle delusions and are obstructions to Buddhahood.