



# Dhargyey Buddhist Centre

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Geshe-la's question: What is the difference between mistaken awareness and distorted awareness?

A: mistaken is seeing a white snow mountain as blue; is distorted awareness an awareness distorted by ignorance?

Geshe-la: distorted awareness is a mistaken awareness. There is the logic of entailment. It prevails that distorted awareness is mistaken. You look at an object but it is coloured by your perception: you look at a thing and although it is existent you consider it as non-existent – and vice versa: that is very close to the meaning of distortion. What is mistaken awareness?

When you look at something but you are not aware of it is not an example of mistaken because when you are listening to music, and at the same time you see an object, it appears to the visual consciousness; that visual consciousness is not mistaken with regard to the object appearing. The object seen is the object there but it has not been ascertained as to what it is. This is not an example of mistaken awareness.

In this connection what we need to remember are two important concepts: mode of apprehension and mode of appearance. If one is not clear about the apprehension it will turn towards distorted, if it is not clear in the mode of appearance it will turn to mistaken awareness.

Imagine you are in a crowd but you are only talking to one person. Your attention is mainly on the person with whom you are talking but at the same time you see the crowd. Many faces appear to your visual consciousness but it does not apprehend them. The person you speak to appears and is apprehended. However somehow if you thought to yourself, 'the person I am talking to is not a human and does not appear to me as a human' then your awareness is both distorted and mistaken. Whereas you decide that the person you are talking to is indeed non-fraudulently and verifiably a human and appears as a human then such is a non-distorted, unmistakable awareness.

Distorted awareness occurs when an object does not exist the way it is apprehended. A mistaken awareness happens when the object does not exist the way it appears. The critical distinction is the mode of appearance and the mode of mental grasping or apprehension.

According to the highest school, Prasangika Madyamika, all consciousnesses (mental and sense, conceptual and non-conceptual minds) of ordinary beings are mistaken. For the Sutra school all concepts (conceptual minds) are mistaken but not non-conceptual minds.

Tonight I will introduce a new area of mind and awareness. Generally speaking direct awareness/ perception is not mistaken but there is a new thing: seeming direct perception. It looks like it is real or direct but it is not real/direct. We are in the Sutra school. According to this school empirical, direct awarenesses are non-mistaken and all conceptual awarenesses are mistaken.

The definition of seeming direct perception: an awareness which is mistaken with regard to its appearing object.

There are 7 kinds of seeming direct perceptions. Six of them are conceptual seeming direct awareness, and one is non-conceptual seeming direct awareness. It means false or apparent. It is like a charlatan who behaves like an honest character and reliable, but he is not. In the same way, all these seeming direct awarenesses are empty of being direct.

1. Mistaken concept
2. Conventional or relative concept

3. Inferential concept
4. Concept arising from inference
5. Concept of memory, concepts pertaining to memory
6. Concepts of aspiration – past and future (concepts pertaining to past events or future events, something that you would like to acquire).
7. Non-conceptual seeming direct awareness

Examples:

1. Mistaken concept: The concept/idea in your mind grasping at/apprehending permanence of sound, holding that sound is permanent.
2. Conventional or relative concept is an inferential awareness/cognition that understands impermanence of sound. The name of this one is concepts of the conventional. Is it a conventional truth from this school's point of view? It is not. According to this school conventional truth (non-ultimate truth) is necessarily permanent by nature. All permanent things are conventional truth. Why is this seeming direct awareness called conventional? Because the conventional nature of things is to be understood via or through concepts. But that the concept itself is impermanent is the ultimate truth.
3. An example of the inferential concept is called awareness or mind grasping/ apprehending logical signs (reason or proof). Mind apprehending sign (logical sign/ the proof).
4. An example of concept arising from inference is an awareness that understands the thesis (when you present a reasoning, you have a topic, predicate of the thesis, sign or proof and then you establish a conclusion) or the established point.
5. An example of the concept of memory is the current awareness recollecting events in the past; concepts pertaining to past events, things remembered.
6. An example of aspirational concepts are things that one might aspire to in the future.
7. The example of a non-conceptual seeming direct awareness is an eye consciousness to which the white snow-mountains appear as blue.

Why are these called seeming direct awarenesses or perceptions? They are called so from the point of view of their being mistaken awarenesses. As you can see the first six were conceptual. Why are conceptual minds mistaken? They could be right with regard to what you understand and yet be mistaken. Let us use ones concept of apprehending gold as an example. Imagine gold. Our idea/concept of holding on to 'precious gold' is mistaken. If you think to yourself about gold and let it appear as an idea then look at the experience of how your mind holds the idea of gold, how gold appears to it and how the mind grasps it.

This needs three properties/features/criteria/factors. The appearing aspect or factor of gold as an idea is a pure figment of your imagination – just imagination, only a label. It is never concrete, real gold, tangible or a specifically characterised substance like the real thing that you can touch and feel. The gold that appears in the mind is pure idea, a concept designated/labelled phenomenon and therefore it is permanent.

Secondly, although the object of appearance is never tangible gold and it is not specifically characterised gold, gold as such does appear to be the mind's appearing object. Gold seems to be its appearing object although it is not real, what appears to the mind is gold. Where does this gold apprehending concept arise from? It arises as a result of the predisposition of a perception of gold by the visual consciousness in the past which is left on the mind. The mind has previously seen gold and this left the predisposition/potency on the mind. When we analyse this for the gold apprehending concept the aspect of appearance to it looks like gold. The aspect of looking like gold, appearing like gold, is not actually gold is it? Such an aspect of gold appearance or likeness is a meaning-generic image or sound-generic image (meaning-generic image meaning object here).

This aspect of appearance of the imagined object (looking like the real object) is a critical and key concept in relation to which the sutra school presents ultimate truth and conventional truth. Therefore from the sutra school point of view the likeness of gold – the aspect of appearance of gold - is a conventional truth. It is a generic image and therefore conventional truth. Why is it conventional truth? It is a truth-veiling factor. This aspect of appearance or the likeness of the object is a veil that prevents you from seeing the real tangible gold, and real tangible objects, according to this school, are ultimate truth. Concepts/generic images that hold the likeness of things are not real and are therefore conventional truth.

Here I have to explain the three ways of defining conventional truth (kundzob) or truth for the concealer.

1. Dependent on other factors.
2. Veiling.
3. Labels/language terms used by the world (names given to things according to societal agreement).

According to the first or lowest school conventional truth is explained in terms of the point 1 above. From the sutra school point of view it is explained in terms of point 2 above (veiling). What does it veil? It veils specifically characterised, tangible phenomena (rangzin), self-defining characteristics, and therefore used to define impermanent things. From the highest school point of view what does it veil? It veils dharmata which means suchness or emptiness.

In the Sutra school the likeness of the imagined object in the mind needs to be explained in terms of its veiling factor. From the school's point of view, impermanent things (rangzin) like table etc. are called things that have self-defining properties. J. Hopkins (American translator) calls them specifically characterised. Why are they called this? Impermanent things have many properties that define them, i.e. in terms of colour, shape, energy, the way it produces an effect etc. The opposite of this is called generally characterised, universally characterised or universals. These do not have many properties by which they can be characterised, their characteristics are common not individual. The likeness of the imagined object is exaggerated or purely a construct. The likeness of an imagined object to be that object is purely a figment of imagination. What does it do? It puts a veil before the mind preventing it from seeing its specific characteristics. It veils the mind from the specifically characterised/ real thing. Such an aspect of appearance or such a likeness of gold appears to be gold therefore that concept is mistaken.

Later on, the mind to which the likeness of gold appeared, begins to entertain a thought of white gold, or another time black gold. Although white and black gold, if they ever existed, would be different, for the mind entertaining the thought, they are both gold. Yellow, black or white gold are all gold. They are all different aspects but they share the common thing, gold. To the mind these different types of gold appear, and although white gold is white, black gold is black, yellow gold is yellow, for that conceptual mind they look the same and therefore it is mistaken. If the conceptual mind to which the likeness of gold appeared were non-mistaken then the different types of gold would be distinct and they would exist in the way the black gold appeared and so on. Secondly, it would follow that the conceptual mind is also not mistaken.

This appearance aspect (nangcha ...directly translated from Tibetan) would be the explanation of sound and meaning generic images without splitting them as separate. Sound-generic image means although you may not have seen a wild thing I describe, but if I describe it, although it does not exist and you have not seen it, you construct something in your mind of it this is sound-generic image. Meaning-generic image is reflecting/recollecting something in your home, for example, that one has, as it exists.

For example, a human called Tashi. That person was not born Tashi but came nameless. He was not born labelled Tashi, the name was given to him/her subsequently. Although the name is given to a real person when you carefully investigate, the name Tashi is given to the likeness of Tashi. How do you know that? After a few years when you see the person, what you see is the person's body and the face, and you recognise that aspect as 'Tashi'. The name Tashi therefore was given to the likeness or aspect of appearance of the person when the name Tashi was given for the first time. If the name Tashi was given to the body of the person, since the body is an impermanent phenomenon which undergoes momentary change/destruction, the label Tashi would also change and be destroyed many times. The label would be gone. But when you Tashi's body you say 'there is Tashi.' Why does the person retain the name Tashi. The likeness/appearance of Tashi is permanent and never changes and therefore the name stays. The first time the name Tashi is given is called naming or label time. Many years down the track when you see the person and you say 'there is Tashi' this is called nominal/linguistic term time, designation time. From the Sutra school point of view this is the basis of delineating what is ultimate and conventional truth, what is specifically or generally characterised, what is many and so on. It becomes the basis of many delineations or dichotomies. It is quite important.

This is a critical concept and the highest school of thought negates the position of logicians of the second highest school of thought which believes that the tripartheid/ the three modes of logical consequence exist from their own side. The highest school of thought says nothing in the universe and therefore also the three signs of logic do not exist truly. To understand how the highest school repudiates this strong position of logic we need good understanding of the aspect of appearance/ likeness of things. The Mind Only school says that form (objects) does not exist characteristically or truly as an object of conception by the concept apprehending it. Form does not exist truly or inherently as the basis of conceptual clinging/belief by the concept that apprehends the form. This is a mouthful and very difficult. If you do not understand the crux of this matter, leading to forming ideas, and yet we raise our eyebrows when we see Buddha's image and so on, then one's claim as a Buddhist is only good-natured claim/wishful thinking. We believe that Buddhism is quite unique and we need to show how it is unique in terms of thought formulation in the different schools and how these have implications for how one responds to things. This is the big point of difference that makes Buddhism unique.