

## Introduction: Towards the understanding of the role of cognition in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism

**Vladimir Korobov**

*Vilnius University*

A fundamental teaching of Buddhism describes the life of sentient beings as a state of suffering cyclically recurring from one incarnation to another. It is asserted that a root of the suffering is the essential misunderstanding of the way oneself and phenomena exist, or more exactly, the essential misunderstanding of the way the identity of oneself and phenomena is established. 'Evil and suffering, that is, are the unintended yet inevitable consequences of our tendencies to reify relationships and processes into unchanging things, to abstract characteristics and qualities in terms of fixed essences or natures, and, most egregiously, to identify ourselves as singular, substantive selves in contrast to and standing apart from our surrounding, sustaining environments. Identity is thus not only a construct based upon an ignorant and untenable dichotomy between self and not-self, but also, almost inevitably, leads to attachment to "us" and "ours" and aggression toward "them" and "theirs", the very processes that lead, in the extreme, to the horrible inhumanity we are attempting to understand' (Waldron 2003, 147).

As a result, we compose the world in a wrong way and live within the misconception that things exist concretely and continuously from their own side. This essential misconception entails imbalance and distortion between the observer and observable things that, in turns, entails afflicted states of consciousness and non-virtuous actions bringing harm to ourselves and others.

After we are introduced to things, we obtain our identity, and after things are introduced to us, they obtain their identity. The next step after we all have been mutually identified is to protect our own identity even to the prejudice of the identity of the other. The Red Queen in Carroll's story introduces Alice to the leg of mutton and then introduces the leg of mutton to Alice. Of course, Alice wants to cut a slice of the mutton, but Red Queen says, very decidedly: 'it isn't etiquette to cut anyone

you've been introduced to'. Unfortunately this etiquette doesn't conform to our human condition; identified entities slice other identified entities into chunks in many ways. Identity requires permanently increasing support and protection from being destroyed, meaning it is necessary to protect one's own identity to the prejudice of the identity of others.

To correct this state of things, it is necessary to achieve the equal way of observing reality from all possible points. Knowable reality must become a subject of revision (critique).

This essential critique of reality requires the existence of a specific attitude towards cognition and a highly elaborated epistemological background. In Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, this background is established by Madhyamaka–Yogācāra epistemology presented in various works by Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga, Dharmakīrti, Dignāga, Vasubandhu, Chandrakīrti, and many other Indian and Tibetan commentators.

*Pramāṇa* or valid cognition is of great importance for Mahāyāna soteriology for several reasons. First, 'a valid cognition must be directed toward its object in accordance with the nature of the object. It is the agreement between the cognition's intentionality and the nature of the object that constitutes the truth necessary to the validity of the cognition' (Dreyfus 1997, 290). Thereby, in this case, intentional structures prepared to perceive reality as it is (*yathābhūta*) are arranged on the grounds of valid cognition. These intentional structures serve as a basis for determining the identity of 'I' and external things and respectively form preconditions for cutting off ignorance (*avidyā*) as a main root of suffering. Second, 'the content revealed by a cognition must be new. A mental episode that just repeats previously known information can be useful. It also can be true, but it is not valid in the technical sense of the word, for it does not bring anything new to the cognitive process' (ibid.). The novelty of each moment of perception corresponds to the main characteristic of the flow of dharmas and thereby describes the process of cognition being in accordance with the cognisable object (i.e. with the flow of unconjugated, *svalakṣaṇa* dharmas). Soteriologically these two aspects of valid cognition—proper intentional structure and novelty—mean the removal of suffering and roots of suffering.

The theories of cognition are developed in various tenets of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism with varying levels of subtlety. The articles presented here discuss different aspects of theories of cognition in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Six scholars from various countries collaborated here to produce a volume containing an in-depth study of Buddhist epistemology.

Each author of this volume combines historical and philological scholarship with philosophical acumen and linguistic insight. Each of them uses original textual (Tibetan or Sanskrit) material to resolve logical issues and philosophical questions.

Richard Payne opens our volume with an explanation of the epistemological role of the authority of the Buddha. ‘The historical integrity of Buddhism as a religious institution depends on the idea of lineage, that is on the authority of the Buddha Śākyamuni as the Awakened One, and the transfer of that authority to subsequent members of the Buddhist *saṃgha*. While having broader ramifications, to the extent, however, that the awakening of the Buddha has been understood (at least metaphorically) as the waking up from the sleep of ignorance (*avidyā*), the authority of the Buddha is itself an epistemological matter.’ Analysing different means of valid knowledge in Buddhism, Payne asserts that whereas Buddhist epistemologists ‘accepted two means of valid knowledge—perception and inference—eliminating testimony’, in the case of the authority of the Buddha they ‘did not eliminate testimony as a reliable means of knowledge, only that it was reducible to other means’. Comparing the role of testimony in Western and Buddhist epistemological traditions, Payne comes to the conclusion that the focus in ‘Western epistemological considerations of testimony is on the qualities or status of the speaker, broadly construed to include author, document, record, and so on. In contrast to this, in classic Indian discussions of *śabdapramāṇa*, the emphasis is placed much more on what is heard. The power that speech per se has is located in what might be called the “speech-event”, rather than in the speech-act’.

The theme of the means of valid cognition is continued through the article written by Marie Louise Friquegnon. Analysing Śāntarakṣita’s views on perception presented in *The Ornament of the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakālamkāra*) and its auto commentary *Madhyamakālamkāravṛtti*, as well as the position on appearances and emptiness presented by the 11<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan philosopher Rongzom Chokyi Zangpo, Friquegnon points out the hermeneutical difference between ‘some Madhyamaka philosophers who downgraded experiences and elevated the absolute’ and Śāntarakṣita’s and Rongzompa positions on the essential identity of appearance and emptiness. This identity establishes appearance as divine, or in other words, it establishes the identity of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. ‘Establishing appearances into the divine requires a perspectival shift. This shift is different than that involved in Wittgenstein’s switch from seeing a drawing as a duck to seeing it as a rabbit. In that case there is a subject that is seeing the object differently. What would it be like to achieve a total perspectival shift that dissolved the distinction between subject and object, that did not involve grasping at the object, and that was perfectly selfless?’

The theme of perception is continued in the article written by Bruce J. Stewart. The article is based on his own new translations from Sa skya Paṇḍita’s (1182–1251) *Tshad ma rigs gter* and is focused on ‘the defining characteristic and variegation of direct perception’ as a mean of valid cognition (*tshad ma, pramāṇa*). The article gives a wide and elaborative observation of Sa skya Paṇḍita’s epistemology concerning

direct perception. On the basis of Sa skya Paṇḍita and Go-rams pa's works, Stewart analyses variegations of direct perception in various tenet systems of Buddhist philosophy.

Perception from the corner of actuality and potentiality is analysed in the article by Viktoria Lysenko. She examines the concept of immediate perception (*nirvikalpaka pratyakṣa*) in various works written by Dignāga and finds an inconsistency in the understanding of an immediate perception being the 'direct access of a non-propositional perception either to an external object or to its mental representation' on the one hand and the immediate perception being 'an entirely interior process that proceeds, without the help of any external object' on the other hand. Viktoria Lysenko proposes 'to understand these two approaches in terms of *upāya kauśalya*—skilful means'.

Perception from the corner of Madhyamaka epistemology is analysed in the article by Sonam Thakchoe. First he introduces us to a brief summary of Prāsaṅgika theory of perception and then presents Candrakīrti's alternative theory of perception, 'a radical departure from the Pramāṇika's account. It is almost a complete reverse of the latter'. According to Sonam Thakchoe, the radicalism of Candrakīrti's epistemology lies particularly in the description of reliable epistemic sources. 'Candrakīrti advances his arguments by insisting that perceptions effectively function as reliable epistemic resources strictly on the grounds that they are unreal and lack any intrinsic nature, for only such an exclusive ontological reason warrants the perceptual faculties to become reliable epistemic resources'.

Our volume concludes with Vladimir Korobov's attempt to describe the epistemic functions of *bodhicitta*. The article is based on the second chapter of the *Guhyasamājantra* and Kamalaśīla's work *Bodhicitta-Bhāvanā*, a commentary on verses proclaimed by Tathagāgata Vairocana in the second chapter of the *Guhyasamājantra*. The article explores the understanding of *bodhicitta* as a kind of cognitive strategy and/or a specific instrument of cognition in Tantric Buddhism that is situated and functions beyond reach of *vijñāna*. The author presents the Tantric way of cognition as a process of imitating (or representing) ultimate reality within *saṃsāra*. *Bodhicitta* in this case may be understood as a practical strategy of cognition based on mimesis or imitation (with an element of passion for imitation) of ultimate reality (*dharmatā, śūnyatā, yathābhūta, tathatā*) by different means within the *saṃsāra*.

To sum up, this volume presents different aspects of theories of cognition in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. The authors present their own understanding of difficult points of epistemology, and these attempts obviously inspire new ideas not only in the study of Buddhist epistemology but in the field of Western philosophy as well.

## References

- Dreyfus, Georges B.J. 1997. *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakīrti's Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Waldron, William S. 2003. 'Common Ground, Common Cause: Buddhism and Science on the Afflictions of Self-Identity', in *Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground*, ed. B. Alan Wallace, New York: Columbia University Press, 145–91.

Vladimir KOROBOV, Ph.D. (vladimir.korobov@oc.vu.lt), lecturer of Tibetan and Buddhist studies, Centre of Oriental Studies, Vilnius University

✉: Universiteto 5, LT-01513 Vilnius, Lithuania