

Between Immediacy and Articulation: Rethinking Non-Conceptuality in Dignāga Epistemology

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Received : 15 April - 2026

Accepted : 06 May - 2026

Published online : 08 May - 2026

Abstract

This research paper critically re-examines non-conceptual cognition (*nirvikalpaka-pratyakṣa*) in Dignāga's epistemology, focusing on the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual knowledge within *pramāṇavyavasthā*. Dignāga explains that "*pratyakṣam kalpanāpoḍham*" refers to perception devoid of conceptual constructs (*kalpanā*) that perceives the *svalakṣaṇa*. In contrast, inference (*anumāna*) depends on conceptual determination (*vikalpa*) and exclusion (*apoha*). The binary of two separate realms creates an epistemic hierarchy that views non-conceptual awareness as more immediate and ultimately more reliable. This paper argues that although the hierarchy between non-conceptual and conceptual knowledge is epistemologically justified, it may obscure Buddhism's ethical and liberation aims, which focus on *duḥkha*, *pratītyasamutpāda*, and *nirvāṇa*. The discussion emphasizes two main points: First, it presents a relational view of cognition that combines epistemic analysis with ethical intent, linking Dignāga's ideas to the broader Buddhist goal of *nirvāṇa*. Second, it proposes a phenomenological framework that links immediacy to articulation, fostering a relational understanding of cognition that avoids rigid dualism and highlights Buddhism's ethical and emancipatory aims.

Keywords: Buddhist Epistemology, Cognition, Epistemic Hierarchy, Non-conceptual, Phenomenology.

1. Introduction

The debate on the distinction between the non-conceptual and the conceptual tends to be polarized along the lines explored in this paper. Dreyfus (1997) states that Dharmakīrti's epistemological devices of *svalakṣaṇa* and *sāmānyalakṣaṇa* are still bound up in their soteriological application; it is not enough for valid cognition to be valid from a descriptive standpoint, but it must justify it by its ability to lead the practitioner to liberation. Dunne (2004) builds on this reading and demonstrates the ways in which Dharmakīrti's theory of yogic perception (*yogipratyakṣa*) blurs the distinction between the ordinary, non-conceptual sense-perception and the meditative realization, suggesting that the two truths framework does not conflict with but enhances the liberative aims. In contrast, Arnold suggests that the more technical apparatus of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti may not align with early Buddhist concerns with ethics, because of their foundationalist epistemology of momentary particulars, which is less accommodating of the pragmatic emphasis of dependent origination (2005). Coseru (2012) suggests a middle way between the explicit and implicit approaches to the non-conceptual/conceptual distinction by interpreting it as a description of intentional experience rather than a metaphysical contrast. In the meantime, there are two studies that take a more restricted interest in the semantics of *apoha*, both of which, to a greater or less extent, sidestep soteriological matters, examining the theory's coherence as a nominalist theory of meaning:



Siderits (1991) and Hayes (1988). This scholarship, while recognizing that the tension between epistemic systematization and liberative purpose is a well-known fault line in the Buddhist tradition, has yet to be resolved by sustained engagement with Anālayo (2020) early Buddhist critique of hierarchical cognitive schemas, the gap this study fills.

The non-conceptual can be understood as the pre-reflective world of consciousness, where consciousness is not conceptually determined. It is usually referred to as instant, non-dual, and devoid of linguistic mediation. In Vasubandhu's *Yogācāra* system, consciousness is the ultimate reality, expressed in various modes, such as *viññāna*, *manas*, and *ālaya-viññāna*. The latter is the warehouse of the karmic impressions that create the seeming duality of the subject and the object. Vasubandhu's well-known statement "*viññaptimātram evaitad asadarthāvabhāsanāt*," meaning that what appears as external objects is only a manifestation of consciousness, lacking real external referents (Viṃśatikā, v. 1 trans. Anacker, 1984). The level of consciousness before the construction of concepts is, in this sense, the non-conceptual. It does not merely imply a lack of concepts but rather a basic, precursory state of consciousness prior to conceptual activity.

Dignāga systematizes this distinction within an epistemological framework. He distinguishes two means of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*): perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*). Perception is characterized as "*pratyakṣam kalpanāpoḍham*" (perception is not conceptually constructed) (Pramāṇasamuccaya, I.3) (Hayes, 1988). It has as its object the unique particular (*svalakṣaṇa*), which is momentary (*kṣaṇika*), self-cognizing (*svasaṃvedya*), and inexpressible (*anirdeśya*). In contrast, conceptual cognition operates through generalities (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*), which arise from mental activities such as *vikalpa* (conceptualisation). The role of language in this field is exclusion (*apoha*), in which words do not mean directly, but mean by exclusion: "*anyāpohaḥ śabdārthaḥ*" (the meaning of a word is the exclusion of others). This difference results in a definite epistemological rift: the non-conceptual grasps reality immediately, whereas the conceptual creates a mediated, conventional world. Nevertheless, the division raises fundamental questions about the relations among immediacy and mediation, perception and language, and, finally, cognition and liberation.

What emerges from an examination of the works of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti is that they developed their epistemological framework within Nāgārjuna's conception of the two truths: ultimate truth (*paramārthika*) and conventional truth (*saṃvṛti*). Both philosophers believe that consciousness exists at two levels: non-conceptual and conceptual. This difference is the main point in their philosophical systems, but it also creates a tension that is difficult to resolve. The prereflective mode of consciousness, in which consciousness is expressed without subject-object division, is non-conceptual. Conceptual knowledge, however, is discursive cognition that refers to language, inferences, and mental construction. This is not a mere descriptive distinction; it is a hierarchy. It is believed that non-conceptual cognition has greater epistemological value and is closer to reality than conceptual cognition, whereas the latter is derivative and conventionally valid. Bhikkhu Anālayo shows that early Buddhist teaching does not aim to build an abstract hierarchy of cognition, but rather to identify and eliminate the conditions of suffering through dependent origination (Anālayo, 2020).

Therefore, this type of hierarchical structure is not suitable, according to the teachings of Buddha. Early Buddhism does not classify cognition; instead, it aims to modify it. Thus, the teaching of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) implies that knowledge is empty of suffering. The Buddha is saying that when you see dependent origination, you see the Dharma (Bodhi, 2000). This means that cognition has meaning when it brings about emancipation from oppression.

Taken together, this body of scholarship reveals a persistent gap. The conceptual/non-conceptual distinction has been further developed in epistemological studies of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti with impressive philosophical sophistication, but, with the exception of Anālayo (2020), it is rarely examined in light of the early Buddhist emphasis on the role of cognition in the elimination of suffering. Phenomenological reconstructions, on the other hand, shed light on the constitution of non-conceptual awareness and rarely ask what is lost if an epistemic hierarchy replaces a liberating purpose. These strands have not been discussed in an ongoing study. This paper attempts to fill that void by asking whether the distinction can be reread in a relational (as opposed to hierarchical) way without sacrificing either tradition's fundamental commitments.

This study explores whether the conceptual/non-conceptual distinction proposed by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti is consistent with their soteriological emphasis or whether it redefines Buddhist philosophy as epistemological and metaphysical. The paper argues that despite their philosophical advancements, their differences tend to overshadow Buddha's core concern which is his ethical and liberative goals by emphasizing epistemic purity over existential transformation.

2. Literature Review

The scholarship on Dignāga and Dharmakīrti is a multi-disciplinary and overlapping body of literature in classical Buddhist epistemology, phenomenology, and contemporary philosophy of mind. However, despite its philological richness, this literature makes a number of assumptions, one of which is that the conceptual/non-conceptual distinction is categorical rather than relational. I believe that this assumption is not merely a matter of interpretation but a methodological artefact of the field itself and should be subject to serious critical consideration, not passively inherited.

The classical philological tradition provides the evidential basis for the field but also has the potential to naturalize it, the dichotomy that is the subject of this paper. While the conceptual/non-conceptual distinction is central to Dignāga's theory of signs and the *apoha* doctrine, Hayes' analysis remains largely confined to the logical-semantic system on which it is based, without considering whether this dichotomy is a phenomenological reality or a convenience created for polemical aims against Nyāya realism. Hattori's meticulous text-criticism of the *kalpanāpoḍham* in *Pratyakṣapariccheda* (1968) is valuable not because it goes further than necessary to avoid over-literal readings of "non-conceptual," but because it does not go far enough to ask what is philosophically at stake in preserving the distinction at all, a question this paper makes central rather than peripheral.

A second pattern of scholarship, evident in the shift of *pramana* theory further away from soteriology, is the tendency to treat *pramana* as a purely logical instrument. A second pattern of scholarship to be noted in the shift of *pramana* theory further from the soteriological concerns is to consider *pramana* a purely logical instrument. While Dreyfus (1997) refers to a genuine and important move toward valid cognition as an end in itself, his account seems to map out the move more than it questions its price: i.e., it is a question of whether the growing technicality of *pramāṇavāda* signals philosophical maturity or a deviation from the Buddha's therapeutic goals. This is compounded by Kellner (2011) own argument, which is a fine piece of logic but also an example of the kind of foundationalist maneuver that early Buddhist philosophy set out to prevent: the theoretical elevation of self-awareness and its consequent metaphysical stability that had to be destabilized by origination. G. Dreyfus and Thompson (2007) suggest a phenomenological corrective, but a descriptive

one at best: a catalogue of agreements between the Buddhist and phenomenological accounts of mind, without confronting the normative question of what is lost in the process where epistemology takes precedence over liberation as the field's organizing principle.

The most serious and genuine attempt to overturn the categorical distinction in the literature comes from Coseru (2012), a phenomenological reconstruction that will be the main ally of the present paper, albeit with some reservations. Coseru (2012, 2016) faces the challenge that his perceptual awareness, with its pre-reflective intentional structure, is too stubborn to be inert or unstructured, and that his reconstruction relies too heavily on Husserlian intentional-structure language to cast light on the Abhidharma, rather than reconstructing it in a Husserlian way. Tzohar's reinterpretation of conceptual activity as *upāya* is important, since it invests conceptual activity with ontological primacy, rather than deriving it from other cognitive processes, but it is not fully compatible with the *apoha* theory of Dignāga, particularly when he reads the former in terms of Dignāga's own theory of the inferior status of conceptual cognition with respect to *svalakṣaṇa*-grasping perception. In line with Coseru, Siderits (2020) is not necessarily optimistic, since she is more reserved in suggesting that a sharp distinction is unsustainable, and she also doubts the idea of a later concern with "active perception" as it relates to the classical idea of perception. Ganeri (2012) complicates the situation with a useful discussion of the notion of active perception, but, like Coseru, risks reading later cognitive-scientific concerns back into a classical vocabulary that may not have shared those concerns.

This extensive phenomenological literature offers conceptual tools to dissolve the binary between immediate and mediated experience. It includes works by Husserl (1991) on retention and protention, Merleau-Ponty (2013) on embodied, action-oriented perception, Zahavi (2005, 2014) on pre-reflective self-awareness, McDowell (1996) on how experience is normatively structured, and Gallagher (2005) on embodiment and affect. However, while valuable, this literature is primarily developed toward a focus that does not align with Buddhist soteriology. Using it as a basis for Dignāga and Dharmakīrti risks oversimplifying, as it may equate claims that sound similar but lack the specific stakes of liberation through non-conceptuality in the Buddhist tradition, which has no direct phenomenological equivalent.

In this context, early Buddhist criticism becomes essential rather than merely an add-on. If taken seriously, the Nikāyas are not epistemological classifications but are directed towards the termination of suffering through dependent origination, as Anālayo (2020) argues. This critique is further developed by Sharf (2018), who argues that non-conceptuality is not metaphysically opposed to a conceptual approach but rather stands in pragmatic and transformative opposition to it. In doing so, he directly challenges Kellner (2011) foundationalist interpretation of *svasaṃvedana* and indirectly raises the question of whether the systematic epistemology developed by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti represents a faithful continuation of, or a departure from, early Buddhist concerns. Perhaps the most pointed critique is offered by Garfield (1995), who argues that the primary aim of Buddhist philosophy is to dismantle conceptual barriers rather than construct them. This perspective suggests that the scholastic apparatus of the *pramāṇa* tradition risks overlooking, or even losing sight of, that fundamental objective.

This collection of scholarship critically examines itself and does not "resolve" the tension between epistemic systematization and a liberative purpose. Instead, it reproduces this tension at a more sophisticated level. Classical philology offers rigor but lacks critical awareness of its subject, while the phenomenological approach introduces critical insight but often relies on external frameworks whose relevance to Buddhist material has yet to be

critically assessed. Early Buddhist counter-traditions are highly diagnostic but have not engaged in sustained dialogue with the conceptual structures they implicitly challenge. This three-way impasse between conceptual, non-conceptual, and Buddhist soteriological perspectives this paper aims to address by proposing a new model of cognition. It suggests that the conceptual/non-conceptual distinction is not oppositional but functionally interconnected, thereby restoring epistemology's proper relationship to Buddhist soteriological goals.

3. Methods

This paper adopts a qualitative methodological philosophy, grounded in three complementary approaches: first, the textual-hermeneutical approach; second, comparative philosophy; and third, the phenomenological approach to reconstruction. The approaches selected are based on the fact that the research issue, namely, whether the conceptual/non-conceptual distinction in Buddhist epistemology helps or hinders the soteriological goals of Buddhism, is ultimately interpretive. It involves engagement with primary Sanskrit sources, critical engagement with secondary scholarship, and a normative framework suitable to the ethical aspects of the enquiry.

3.1. Textual-Hermeneutical Analysis

The main sources referred to are Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccaya* (as quoted by Hattori in his Sanskrit fragments and the 1968 Tibetan edition) and Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika* (Dunne's translation and the 1938 Patna edition with Manorathanandin's commentary). Vasubandhu's *Viṃśatikā* and *Triṃśikā* (Anacker, 1984), *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* (Pruden, 1988-1990), and the appropriate passages from the *Nikāyas* (Bodhi, 2000; Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995) are also primary sources. The hermeneutical strategy is a close reading that focuses on the key Sanskrit terms *kalpanāpoḍham*, *svalakṣaṇa*, *apoha*, *arthakriyā*, and *pratītyasamutpāda*, rather than on terms drawn solely from received translations. If secondary scholars differ, their differences are explained and/or discussed on a textual basis.

3.2. Comparative Philosophy

This paper places Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's epistemologies in dialogue with (a) early Buddhist soteriology as seen in the *Nikāyas* and scholarship on dependent origination and (b) Western phenomenology, specifically, that of Gallagher (2005); Husserl (1991); McDowell (1996); Merleau-Ponty (2013); Zahavi (2005, 2014). The comparative method is non-reductive, neither attempting to "modernize" Buddhist concepts nor trying to "westernize" Western concepts; it simply aims to bring features of each tradition into the light through cross-traditional resonances and dissonances, as heuristic devices. The comparative lens is used with the awareness that both traditions ask themselves questions of the structure and normative implications of lived experience, and that this common question is a valid one for dialogue.

3.3. Phenomenological Reconstruction

This paper is based on the works of Coseru (2012), Dreyfus and Thompson (2007), and Zahavi (2005), and uses phenomenological reconstruction to re-read classical Buddhist epistemological claims and understand them within the frameworks of lived experience. It includes an exploration of concepts that impinge on the conceptual/non-conceptual distinction, such as temporality, embodiment, intersubjectivity, and normativity. The goal is not to supplant classical analysis but to enhance it with a framework that accommodates the

ethical and transformative aspects of cognition, which are often bracketed in the classical *pramāṇa* literature.

3.4. Scope and Limitations

This paper focuses on the Dignāga-Dharmakīrti tradition and does not attempt a comprehensive analysis of all Buddhist epistemological traditions. Although the Madhyamaka and Chan/Zen traditions are discussed as alternative approaches to non-conceptuality, they are not examined in detail. Likewise, the engagement with Western phenomenology is intentionally selective rather than exhaustive, emphasizing those philosophers whose work is most directly relevant to clarifying the Buddhist issues under consideration. Accordingly, the conclusions presented here should be understood as provisional contributions to comparative philosophical dialogue rather than definitive resolutions.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Tensions Within the Conceptual–Non-Conceptual Divide

The analysis suggests that Dignāga and Dharmakīrti distinguish between two forms of cognition and, at times, appear to organize them hierarchically. This hierarchy is commonly understood in relation to the doctrine of the two truths, whereby non-conceptual cognition is associated with ultimate reality and conceptual cognition with conventional reality. Nevertheless, this framework gives rise to several significant philosophical tensions. First, the connection between these two domains is unclear. When non-conceptual awareness is utterly insensitive to conceptuality, it is difficult to make sense of how it can be known, described, or communicated. If conceptual cognition results from or relies on non-conceptual perception, then the two cannot be entirely independent, implying a more intricate connection between them.

Second, the Buddha did not undermine the role of language in making sense of what is real. For him, it was adaptable and practical. His teachings were adapted for different audiences and their capabilities, as shown in the *Dīgha Nikāya*. This implies that language is not merely a medium of distortion, but also one in which understanding is inherently required. Thus, conceptuality cannot be regarded as completely misleading. Third, identifying non-conceptual awareness with liberation raises philosophical issues, such as whether Nirvana is merely a particular form of cognition or a transformation in an existential sense. The famous quote, “*nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ*” (Nirvana is the utmost bliss), refers to the level beyond the cognitive states. Therefore, liberation is not the absence of conceptual thought.

Finally, basing ontology on epistemology completely generates additional challenges. The point of *svalakṣaṇa*, as proposed by Dignāga, is that they are ultimately real, and this hinges on the immediacy of perception. However, when one cannot express it, then the explanation or defense of this fact in the context of philosophical dialogue becomes dysfunctional, as the latter cannot but be based on the language of concepts. As the definition of reality as *arthakriyāsamarthaṃ* sat suggests, causal efficacy requires judgment, contrasting, and comparing, activities that are conceptual in nature. Even the concept of unique particular (*svalakṣaṇa*) is therefore based on conceptual activities, although it is supposed to be above them (Hayes, 1988). Collectively, these problems imply that the relationship between conceptual and non-conceptual cognition is more complicated than dividing it or placing it in a hierarchy of cognition would suggest.

4.2. Textual Reinterpretation: Rethinking Non-conceptuality

Dignāga's distinction between conceptual (*vikalpa*) and non-conceptual (*nirvikalpa*) cognition is more nuanced than a straightforward dichotomy. Most interpretations characterize non-conceptual cognition as providing immediate and unmediated access to reality. However, there are compelling reasons to suggest that Dignāga's account is more internally layered and marked by significant philosophical tensions than these interpretations generally acknowledge.

Dignāga defines perception as *pratyakṣam kalpanāpoḍham*, free from conceptual construction (Pramāṇasamuccaya I.3). This is usually understood to imply that perception does not contain any conceptualization (Hattori, 1968). However, the word *kalpanāpoḍham* should be read attentively. In this case, *kalpanā* does not imply any structuring; it is more narrowly defined by discursive construction, particularly language-based and generational discursive construction. This is explained by Dharmakīrti, who defines conceptual construction as *abhilāpasamsarga-yogyatā*, that is, that which can be related to verbal expression (Dharmakīrti, 2016). Thus, perception is excluded, not the structure itself, but language and the discursive overlay. Such an opinion is justified by Coseru (2012), who states that perception cannot be unstructured. Rather, it possesses a pre-reflective disposition towards its object. Thus, non-conceptual awareness is not entirely immediate or raw. It can be characterized more as pre-propositional before explicit judgment and still having minimal structure.

The concept of *svalakṣaṇa* carries an additional burden. Dignāga characterises the object of perception as *anirdeśya* (inexpressible) and *avyapadeśya* (non-denotable). Nevertheless, this brings a conflict. When one cannot describe something, referring to it as something that cannot be described is a linguistic process itself. The assertion that particulars cannot be ineffable remains in language, as Siderits (2020) notes. This demonstrates that conceptual mediation is unavoidable.

The same issue surfaces in Dignāga's definition of reality as *arthakriyāsamarthaṃ sat*, which means that it is real and causally effective. Causal efficacy requires judgment, contrast, and comparison, conceptual activities. The *apoha* (exclusion) theory also undermines the idea of sharp boundaries. Dignāga defines meaning as *anyāpohaḥ śabdārthaḥ*, a word that means what it excludes (Hayes, 1988). This is a denial of real universals, which does not rule out the functioning of language. Conceptual cognition is not a simple falsehood; it operates in daily practice (*vyavahāra*). Dharmakīrti gives it another meaning: *arthābhāsamātra*, or the mere appearance of an object, yet one still needed in practical life (Dharmakīrti, 2016).

The Yogācāra, as presented by Vasubandhu, offers an effective perspective. He writes in the *Triṃśikā* (v. 20): *vijñaptimātram evaitad asad-arthāvabhāsanāt*. This does not disapprove of conceptual cognition; rather, it presents both conceptual and non-conceptual modes of consciousness as one continuum (Vasubandhu in Anacker (1984)). The Abhidharma distinction between *paramārthasat* and *saṃvṛtisat* makes a similar point. The conventional reality disintegrates under analysis in *Abhidharmakośa*; yet it remains necessary (*vyavahāra*) in practice (Vasubandhu, 1988). Taken together, these sources show that the conceptual and non-conceptual cannot be viewed as entirely distinct. Non-conceptual awareness does not consist purely, and conceptual cognition is not merely an error. The difference can be further interpreted as a relational difference in a single continuous field of cognition.

4.3. Epistemology, Metaphysics, and the Displacement of Buddhist Concerns

The evolution of Buddhist epistemology, as represented by Vasubandhu, Dignāga, and Dharmakīrti, marks a significant shift in Buddhist thought. Their work is characterised by careful analysis, logical clarity, and intensive attention to valid cognition (*pramāṇa*), errors, and justifications. This renders Buddhist philosophy more systematic and precise. Simultaneously, it causes tension in the body. Attention begins to shift to the practical issue of suffering and questions about how knowledge is justified. The risk is not only methodological but also philosophical, in that epistemology can come to dominate the Buddha's initial concern with emancipation.

The teaching of early Buddhism is different. Buddha declined to provide *avyākṛta* responses, e.g., to the question of whether the world is immortal or whether the self is the end. According to hints in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, these questions are not linked to the goal (Ñānamoli & Bodhi, 1995). This implies that knowledge is always connected to practice and ethical change. Later *pramāṇa* traditions, such as those of Dignāga, are more concerned with the circumstances under which cognition is valid and sometimes make no reference to liberation.

This change is more evident in the topic of *svasaṃvedana* (self-awareness). Birgit Kellner argues that the concept of self-awareness was introduced to prevent an infinite regress in theories of cognition (Kellner, 2011). This is a powerful and good step, as it prevents endless justification. Nevertheless, it is also characterised by a shift in focus. The goal is to achieve logical coherence in a theory without focusing on suffering. Thus, the justification of cognition is directed by its inner character rather than its transformative capacity.

The same worry is evident in phenomenology. Dan Zahavi believes that self-awareness does not follow experience but is already inherent in lived experience (Zahavi, 2005). Self-awareness would be greatly lost if pursued as a theoretical solution. What is initially a property of experience existing in a system as an abstract concept signals a more widespread change, the passage between experience and theory.

Georges Dreyfus makes a similar point. According to him, Buddhist philosophy undergoes a transition from a liberational to an academic enquiry (Dreyfus, 1997). Jay Garfield reminds us that Buddhist thinking is not designed to establish definite theories about reality, but to question our tendency to cling to such constructions (Garfield, 1995). Therefore, the primary question is not whether epistemology should be applied in Buddhism, but rather how it should be applied. As long as it aids in clarification and points the way towards liberation, it will be meaningful. However, when it becomes preoccupied with answering internal questions, such as the problem of logical regress, it risks losing its reason. The difficulty is reconnecting epistemology with life experience and ethical practice.

4.4. Temporality, Embodiment, and the Structure of Experience

The phenomenological approach redefines the conceptual/non-conceptual dichotomy by returning to the form of lived experience as such. Experience is not presented as a single or isolated phenomenon. It is set in a temporal field where the immediately past and the future, which is awaited, are ever-present. According to Edmund Husserl, this is the interaction of retention and protention, through which perceptions are constantly formed by temporal horizons (Husserl, 1991). Consequently, even the most immediate consciousness is already in a broader area of meaning. It is instantaneous, yet not disorganized.

The phenomenology of embodiment supports this sense of time. Merleau-Ponty contends that perception cannot be seen as a passive experience of sensory information but as an action, a bodily experience of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). Meaning is not added to

experience once it has happened. It is already in the body's orientation, response, and action. The body reveals the world in a pre-reflective yet significant manner; what is usually taken to be non-conceptual awareness cannot be construed as non-structural. It is scarcely structured via bodily habits and pragmatic orientations. Combined, both temporality and embodiment demonstrate that experience has intrinsic organization in its entirety.

4.5. Language, Communicability, and Intersubjectivity

Phenomenology also shows that experiences are intersubjective. It does not exist in its own inner world but in a shared world. Zahavi (2014) stresses that subjectivity is relational in nature and open to others. This directly applies to the role of conceptualization. To share, interpret, and enact experiences within a community, they must be communicable. Hence, language and conceptual articulation are constitutive. They are not by-products or ferments of false consciousness, but prerequisites for the possibility of mutual understanding. The highest understanding cannot but assume a conceptual form, in order that it may guide to action or be conveyed. Conceptual cognition, in this case, is a part of the ethical and practical aspects of experience. Phenomenology asserts that experience is more than its conceptualization. There is never enough meaning that can be exhaustively represented in language. However, this surplus does not make language unnecessary. Instead, it establishes its boundaries. Language is not exhaustive of experience but makes it available. This view does not reduce experience to conceptual schemes nor does it dismiss conceptuality as necessarily false.

4.6. Reflection, Transformation, and Normativity

The normative aspect of cognition is also predetermined by phenomenology. Experience is not only receptive but also evaluative. We experience the world as significant, pertinent, and practical. John McDowell claims that experience is already sensitive to reasons and is therefore organized by types of judgment (McDowell, 1994). Cognition, even at a simple level, entails discrimination and orientation. This implies that conceptual aspects do not form external imposition but are already involved in the understanding of experience.

This is particularly crucial in the aspect of transformation. Experience is not given, but can be reconfigured. Shaun Gallagher points out that experience has embodied and affective aspects that determine how the world appears (Gallagher, 2005). Transformation, then, entails changes at various levels of perception, attention, interpretation, and action. It cannot be narrowed down to a particular state of cognition. In this process, reflection clarifies rather than distorts. Pre-reflective forms of awareness are brought into the limelight through reflection, as Zahavi (2005) points out. It is therefore from non-conceptual experience that conceptual cognition arises and is anchored in that same experience. They are not in opposition but in continuation.

In this light, transformation is never to be traced with non-conceptual awareness alone. It demands the restructuring of the whole field of experience. Conceptual and non-conceptual processes both help with this transformation. Notably, their relationships are not hierarchical but functional, with each having the capacity to engage in various facets of cognition and practice. Phenomenology demonstrates that experience is never atemporal, disembodied, or non-intersubjective. These characteristics complicate maintaining a strict distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual cognition. Meanwhile, they maintain a significant distinction between immediacy and articulation without reducing them to an opposition.

A relational account of cognition is more plausible. Conceptual cognition forms, stabilizes, and expresses the ground of experience provided by non-conceptual awareness. Their association is dynamic and mutual. This perspective not only clarifies the architecture

of cognition but also connects epistemology to its transformative purposes. Cognition does not simply constitute an issue of justification; it is an affair of a process wherein experience itself is reformulated.

4.7. Contemporary Engagement: Toward a Relational Model

In the modern literature on Buddhist philosophy and phenomenology, a new departure is seen when the hierarchy of the conceptual/non-conceptual distinction is challenged. While non-conceptual awareness is privileged in epistemology and the ontological view is closer to reality in the case of Vasubandhu and Dignāga, current Buddhist phenomenology argues that privileging non-conceptual awareness obscures the structural interdependency of immediacy and articulation in lived experience. In contrast to the non-conceptual as an undisturbed and autonomous field, more contemporary approaches reveal it as an ever-present sphere of apprehending, materializing, and verbalizing.

This aspect is especially significant for Coseru's phenomenological reconstruction of Buddhist epistemology. He challenges the view of perception (*pratyakṣa*) as non-conceptual and content-given. Instead, he asserts that perceptual awareness is nearly non-intentional (Coseru, 2012), and that perception cannot be without structure (Coseru, 2012), a structure that is a pre-reflective orientation to its object (Coseru, 2012). This insight challenges the notion that non-conceptual cognition can occur without conceptual mediation.

Roy Tzohar continues this critique by rethinking the part of language in Yogācāra philosophy. He offers a different opinion: language use is not a distortive activity but *upāya*, or skillful action. As he explains, conceptual cognition is not a distortive activity, but rather an (*upāya*) action, a skilful action: *'language use can be considered a type of skilled action rather than a distortion of reality'* (Tzohar, 2020). This position reaffirms conceptual cognition as primary, not secondary.

As Buddhist philosophers of the mind place their theory of the mind within the framework of the phenomenological controversies they are engaging with, they emphasize that cognition involves the interaction of immediate experience and conceptual articulation, with the dynamic interplay between cognitive processes and lived experience (Dreyfus & Thompson, 2007). The interdependence of pre-reflective and reflective self-awareness is further confirmed in Dan Zahavi (2005) account: reflection is not a process that brings about self-awareness but one that makes pre-reflective self-awareness explicit. This means that non-conceptual consciousness is not a purely sovereign or pristine sphere, but only one that can be made intelligible when connected to the sphere of conceptual expression.

Siderits (2020) distinguishes between conceptual and non-conceptual cognition, which is not easily practiced, and Ganeri (2012) emphasizes perception as an active process in the world rather than a passive one. Evan Thompson's inactivists approach also supports the relational vision in his writing when he says, *"cognitive systems enact a world as a domain of distinctions"* (Varela et al., 2016).

The relational model resulting from this contemporary interaction, in which non-conceptual awareness is immediate and a phenomenological basis, and conceptual cognition is an articulation, interpretation, and elaboration of moral sense. One cannot be reduced to the other; one cannot be a substitute for the other. This approach helps solve problems arising in classical Buddhist epistemology and restore its connection to the Buddha's aim, namely, the transformation of experience towards liberation.

4.8. Toward a Relational Understanding of Consciousness

In both modern Buddhist philosophy and phenomenology, the view that conceptual and non-conceptual cognition is best understood as mutually reinforcing rather than hierarchical is strongly supported. Rather than treating non-conceptual awareness as an untainted, unproblematic access to reality and conceptual thinking as secondary and distortive, new scholarship proposes that the facts of conceptual thinking are structurally integrated with the facts of lived experience.

Coseru's phenomenological reconstruction demonstrates that even the notion that perception is determined by *kalpanāpoḍham* (the absence of conceptual construction) cannot be made into a purely unstructured given; it entails a low level of deliberate arrangement. This suggests that non-conceptual awareness offers immediacy, yet not formlessness. It is already enshrined in a broader system encompassing attention, memory, and anticipation.

Despite the development of high non-conceptual awareness, Tzohar (2020) shows that conceptual articulation is still needed when communicating and acting ethically are important. Zahavi (2005, 2014), from a phenomenological point of view, extends this reciprocity by analyzing the nature of pre-reflective self-awareness (the ability of a subject to reflect on itself), which is not created from nothing, but rather an expression of the pre-reflective presence that is already there. Edelglass and Garfield (2009) emphasize that in Buddhist philosophy, language and conceptual thought function as important pedagogical tools but ultimately prove inadequate for realizing awakening, as liberation requires direct experiential insight that transcends conceptual constructions. This criticism, however, does not mean the dispensability of conceptual cognition. Rather, it points to the need for critical and disciplined exercise. This relational knowledge accords with the Buddhist idea of dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*): non-conceptual and conceptual processes cannot be read as ontological layers but rather as dynamically mutually constitutive aspects of the same ontological continuum.

The proposed relational model transcends the dualist hierarchy while maintaining the distinction between immediacy and mediation. Conceptual cognition is a way of articulating, communicating, and giving ethical direction to things, whereas non-conceptual awareness provides the phenomenological ground of experience. Together, they provide a cohesive portrait of consciousness that integrates Buddhist epistemology with its soteriological purpose: the transformation of consciousness towards liberation.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to ask whether the conceptual/non-conceptual distinction developed by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti remains faithful to Buddhism's underlying soteriological commitments, or whether it quietly redefines Buddhist philosophy as an epistemological and metaphysical project in its own right. The analysis suggests that the answer is neither a simple affirmation nor a simple rejection, but a qualified reorientation.

The distinction between non-conceptual perception and conceptual cognition is best understood as epistemological rather than ontological. Dignāga and Dharmakīrti were not proposing two separate strata of reality, one immediate and true, the other mediated and false. Rather, they asked under what conditions cognition can be considered valid, and their answer privileged immediacy without thereby denying the functional necessity of concepts. Read this way, the hierarchy that has troubled much of the secondary literature dissolves into something closer to a division of cognitive labour: non-conceptual awareness supplies the

phenomenological ground of experience, while conceptual articulation supplies the means by which that experience is communicated, evaluated, and ethically directed.

This relational reading resolves the tension identified at the outset of the paper. Where the conceptual/non-conceptual distinction is treated as categorical, it risks precisely the danger early Buddhist scholarship warns against: an epistemic hierarchy pursued for its own sake, detached from the therapeutic aim of reducing suffering. Where it is treated relationally, however, the distinction becomes intelligible as a tool within, rather than a departure from, Buddhism's liberative project. Non-conceptual cognition is not epistemically superior in an abstract sense; it is soteriologically significant because it interrupts habituated conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*) that sustains attachment and ignorance. Conceptual cognition, correspondingly, is not merely derivative or corrupting; it remains indispensable to ethical action and the communal transmission of the Dharma. The distinction between the conceptual and the non-conceptual, then, should be understood not as a wall dividing two orders of cognition, but as a working relation internal to the path towards liberation itself.

6. References

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