

The Seven Types of Awareness

(sources: *Mind in Tibetan Buddhism* by Lati Rinpoche and Elizabeth Napper, *Mind and Its Functions* by Geshe Rabten, Chapter Four of *The Gelug/Kagyü Tradition of Mahamudra*)

A. DEFINITION

A definition of awareness (ལྷོ་/ blo) is: (mere) clarity and knowing.

* “Clarity/clear” (གསལ་/ gsal)

- One meaning: “clarity refers to the non-material, space-like nature of consciousness, i.e. its being completely devoid of color, shape, form, or material dimension.” *Geshe Rabten*
- Another meaning: “giving rise to” – the mind always gives rise to something (its object), and is clear about it, i.e. makes it clear. *Alex Berzin*
- Mind is like a mirror in that it takes on an aspect/reflection of its object.

* “Knowing/knower” (རྟོག་པ་/ rig pa)

- Mind always has an object.
- Mind knows/experiences/is aware of/engages with its object.
- But that does not mean it is always fully conscious, nor that it understands its object.

* “Mere”

- Mind is merely a cognitive event: giving rise to an object and experiencing it.
- “Mere” can exclude the need for attentiveness, understanding, evaluation, etc.
- It also excludes (1) the mind being like a machine that sees, thinks, etc., and (2) a solid “I” that uses the mind to see, think, etc.

“Mind in Buddhism refers to experience, namely the mere arising and cognitive engaging with the contents of experience. The continuity of experience is known as the mind-stream, or ‘mental-continuum.’

“It is always individual, with each moment of experience following from previous moments of experience according to the karmic laws of behavioral cause and effect.” *Alex Berzin*

B. SYNONYMS

- Awareness/mind (blo)
- Consciousness (ཤེས་པ་/shes pa)
- Knower/cognizer (rig pa)

C. SENSE CONSCIOUSNESSES AND MENTAL CONSCIOUSNESSES

This is one way of dividing awarenesses/consciousnesses. Every instance of awareness is necessarily either a sense or a mental consciousness, and nothing is both, i.e. they are mutually exclusive. The difference between them is in terms of the

sense power they depend on as their uncommon empowering condition: a sense consciousness depends on a physical sense power, and a mental consciousness depends on the mental sense power: whichever of the six consciousnesses is the immediately preceding moment of mind (see Chart 1 below).

D. PERCEPTIONS AND CONCEPTIONS

1. A **perception** (literally, a non-conceptual mind) engages with its object directly, rather than through the medium of a mental image, as is the case with a conception. Its object is always an impermanent phenomenon (according to Sautrantika).

There are six types of perception, related to the six senses: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. Thus a perception can be either a sense or a mental consciousness. They arise in dependence on three conditions, as shown in the following chart.

Chart 1: The three conditions for a perception

Type of perception	Uncommon empowering condition	Object condition	Immediately preceding condition
Eye	Eye sense power	Visual object (colors and shapes)	The previous moment of consciousness
Ear	Ear sense power	Sound	The previous moment of consciousness
Nose	Nose sense power	Smell	The previous moment of consciousness
Tongue	Tongue sense power	Taste	The previous moment of consciousness
Body	Body sense power	Tangible object	The previous moment of consciousness
Mental	Mental sense power (the previous moment of consciousness)	Various	The previous moment of consciousness

2. A **conception**/thought is a state of mind that does not experience its object directly. Instead it experiences its object via a meaning-generality (a mental image of the object), which is the appearing object of a conception. The conceptual mind is not able to distinguish between the actual/engaged object one is thinking about (e.g. one’s mother), and the mental image of the object. Therefore, conceptions are always *mistaken* (འཇུག་/ 'khrul {pronounced *trul*}), because they are always mistaken with regard to their appearing object (the object that appears to the mind). If they are also mistaken with regard to their engaged object (the actual object the mind is dealing with), they are also *wrong* (ལོག་/log); if they are not mistaken with regard to their engaged object, they are *correct*. (See Chart 2 below)

Conceptions are also known as “determinative knowers,” meaning that they think, e.g. “This is a table; that is a cat;” etc.

Chart 2: Engaged objects and appearing objects

Mind	Engaged object (འདུག་ཡུལ་)	Appearing object (སྐྱར་ཡུལ་)
An eye consciousness perceiving blue	blue	blue
A conceptual consciousness thinking about blue	blue	A meaning-generality (mental image) of blue

The engaged object of a conception can be any phenomenon, impermanent or permanent. But the appearing object (a meaning-generality) is always permanent. Conceptions are exclusively mental consciousnesses, never sense consciousnesses.

A meaning-generality can come about in one of two ways:

- Experiential: this arises after having a direct cognition of an object, e.g. seeing the ocean. This is a “meaning-generality.”
- Nominal: this arises due to hearing a description of an object you’ve never seen, e.g. someone who’s never seen the ocean but hears about it. This is called a “sound-generality.”
- A third possibility is a conception of an object based on both direct experience and verbal description—e.g. seeing the ocean for the first time after hearing descriptions of it. In this case, the conception knows the object by means of both meaning and sound generalities, as if mixed together.

Both perceptions and conceptions can be either correct or wrong. For example:

Perception

- Correct: Seeing green as green; seeing a tree as a tree.
- Wrong: seeing green as red; seeing a reflection in a mirror as a real object.

Conception

- Correct: thinking that the earth is spherical; thinking that one’s body is impermanent.
- Wrong: thinking that the earth is flat; thinking that one’s body is permanent.

E. PRIME COGNIZERS (ཚད་མ་/tshad ma) AND NON-PRIME COGNIZERS

The definition of a **prime cognizer** (a.k.a. valid cognizer or reliable cognizer) is: a knower that is new and incontrovertible.

“**New**” means it is the first moment of realizing an object.

“**Incontrovertible**” (མི་སྦྱོར་ / mi slu wa) means that it is infallible, and is able to induce ascertainment of & eliminate misconceptions about its object. In other words, it realizes its object in a correct way, so that it can lead to certainty about the object, and can eliminate misconceptions about the object.

An example of a prime cognizer is the first moment of seeing a red rose, in which the red rose is seen correctly, and afterwards you are 100% certain that you saw a *red* rose, and not a *white* rose, not a daisy, etc. Another example is the first moment of an inferential cognizer realizing sound to be impermanent, based on a correct sign.

A **non-prime cognizer** is an awareness that is *not* new and incontrovertible. It is missing one or both of those qualifications.

F. THE SEVEN TYPES OF AWARENESS – these are:

1. direct perceivers
2. inferential cognizers
3. subsequent cognizers
4. correctly assuming consciousnesses (correct assumption)
5. awarenesses to which an object appears but is not ascertained (inattentive perception)
6. doubting consciousness
7. wrong consciousnesses

1. DIRECT PERCEIVERS (མངོན་སུམ་/ mngon sum)

A definition of a direct perceiver is: a non-mistaken knower that is free from conceptuality.

- “Non-mistaken” means it is not mistaken with regard to its appearing object. (Note: if a perception is mistaken to its appearing object, it is also necessarily mistaken to its engaged object, and therefore is a wrong consciousness.)
- “Free from conceptuality” means it is free from being a determinative knower that apprehends sound and meaning generalities as suitable to be mixed. In simple terms: it is a consciousness that is not a conception.

There are four types of direct perceivers:

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

1) SENSE DIRECT PERCEIVERS

Definition: a non-mistaken non-conceptual knower that is produced from its own uncommon empowering condition, a physical sense power.

It has five divisions: those apprehending forms, sounds, odors, tastes, and tangible objects.

2) MENTAL DIRECT PERCEIVERS

Definition: a non-mistaken non-conceptual knower that arises from its own uncommon empowering condition, a mental sense power.

(The mental sense power is whichever of the six consciousnesses has immediately preceded it.)

There are two types of mental direct perceivers:

- (1) a brief moment of a mental direct perceiver apprehending a form (e.g. a visual object, sound, etc.) that arises at end of a continuum of a sense direct perceiver apprehending that form. In the next moment, there will be a conception thinking about that form.
- (2) The five types of clairvoyances/superknowledges, e.g. seeing others' minds, remembering the past lives of oneself and others, etc.

3) SELF-KNOWING DIRECT PERCEIVERS

A self-knower is a cognition/mind that has as its object another mind—not someone else's mind, but one's own. For example, when we see a flower, there is (1) an eye consciousness seeing the flower, and (2) another consciousness that perceives that eye consciousness.

According to the tenets systems that assert self-knowers (Sautrantika, Cittamatra, and Yogacara-Svatantrika-Madhyamika), these minds are necessary to be able to remember later what we experienced earlier. They exist for every awareness, every moment of mind, and are always direct perceivers, never conceptual.

There are three types of self-knowing direct perceivers: those that are prime cognizers, those that are subsequent cognizers, and those to which an object appears but is not ascertained (see *Mind in Tibetan Buddhism*, p. 60-61).

4) YOGIC DIRECT PERCEIVERS

Definition: a non-conceptual non-mistaken exalted knower in the continuum of a Superior which is produced from a meditative stabilization that is a union of calm abiding and special insight and which has become its own uncommon empowering condition.

These exist only in the minds of aryas. The object could be subtle impermanence or selflessness. First one cultivates a conceptual realization of these objects, (i.e. via a mental image), and by continuing to meditate with calm abiding and special insight, one can attain a direct realization. This is a yogic direct perceiver. [Note: a union of calm abiding and special insight is not necessarily a direct perceiver; it can be a conception.]

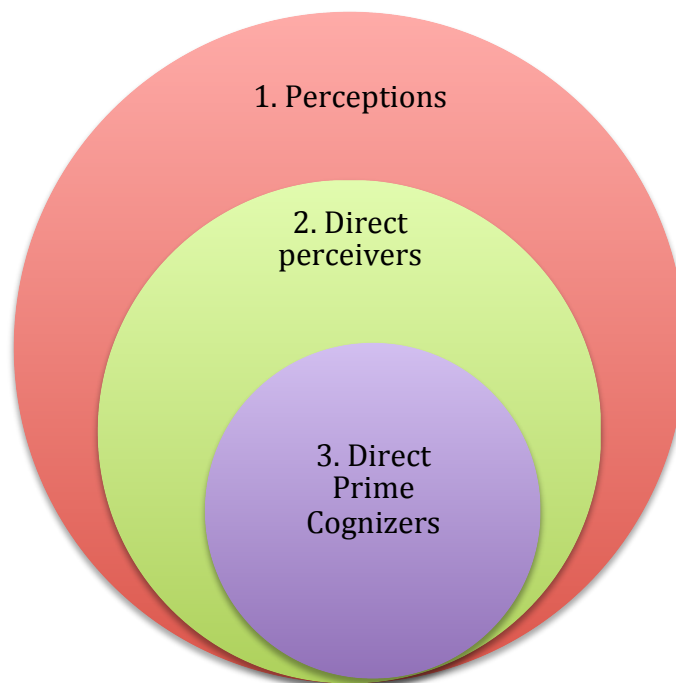
Both self-knowing and yogic direct perceivers are mental direct perceivers. This means that, e.g. a self-knower experiencing an eye consciousness perceiving blue has as its uncommon empowering condition the mental sense power, whereas the uncommon empowering condition of the eye consciousness is the eye sense power.

Direct Perceivers that are Prime/Valid/Reliable Cognizers

The definition of a direct prime cognizer: a new incontrovertible non-mistaken knower that is free from conceptuality.

Some direct perceivers are also prime cognizers, but some are not. For example, the second moment of an eye consciousness correctly seeing blue is not a prime cognizer because it is not “new”; however it does have the quality of being “incontrovertible.” This type of consciousness is called a “subsequent cognizer” and will be explained later.

Chart 3: Perceptions, Direct Perceivers, and Direct Prime Cognizers



- 1) **Perceptions** includes all minds that are non-conceptual and thus know their objects directly, without a mental image. They can be mistaken or non-mistaken, correct or wrong.
- 2) **Direct perceivers** is a sub-category of perceptions; it includes only those perceptions that are non-mistaken.
- 3) **Direct prime cognizers** is a sub-category of direct perceivers; it includes only those direct perceivers that are new and incontrovertible.