

# What Does It Mean to Understand Something?

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Alexander Berzin, March 2012

[As background, see: [Seven Ways to Cognize Objects - Session One: Philosophical Background and Bare Perception](#) {1}. See also: [Introductory Survey of Objects of Cognition: Gelug Presentation](#) {2}.]

## Introduction

Understanding is crucial not only in Dharma study and practice, but also in daily life. We need to understand not only various points in the Dharma, for instance voidness, but also other people, their problems, what they say, what they mean by what they say, and so on. We need to understand ourselves and our own problems. But what does it mean to understand something, as opposed to knowing it or simply apprehending it accurately and decisively? Our words for such things have several meanings and are not precise. "I know French" and "I understand French" mean about the same. But "I apprehended what you said," "I know what you said," "I understand what you said" - these are different. On the other hand, "I know what I read," "I understand what I read" can have slightly different meanings, depending on what the speaker means by these statements.

In Tibetan, we differentiate:

- *sems* - mental activity, mere clarity and awareness (*gsal-rig-tsam*). This means to give rise (*shar-ba*) to a mental object (a mental hologram, a "mental aspect" of something - *rnam-pa*) and to have a mental engagement (' *jug-pa*) with it, with no separate "me" or mind doing it or observing it or controlling it.
- *shes-pa* - to cognize an object, *rig-pa* - to be aware of an object, and ' *dzin-pa* - to take an object. These are all synonyms. They each mean actively to hold a validly knowable object in a cognitive manner continually, whenever and for as long as the validly knowable object serves as one's object of cognition. There are many ways to cognize an object. Some are valid, meaning nonfraudulent (*mi-bslu-ba*), and some are not.
- *rtogs-pa* - to apprehend something. This means to cognize a validly knowable object both accurately and decisively.
- *go-ba* - to understand something. This term is not clearly defined in Tibetan.

"Apprehend" and "understand" are not synonymous. If we understand something, we also apprehend it. But if we apprehend it, we don't necessarily understand it. To discover the difference between apprehend and understand, let's first explore "apprehend."

## Apprehension

To apprehend something means to cognize it both accurately (*yang-dag-pa*) and decisively (*nges-pa*). There are four possibilities concerning a cognition being accurate and decisive:

- accurate and decisive - the person said "yes" and you heard "yes" and are sure about it;
- inaccurate and decisive - the person said "yes" and you heard "no" and are sure about it;
- accurate and indecisive - the person said "yes" and you heard "yes," but you are not sure;
- inaccurate and indecisive - the person said "yes," you heard "no," but you are not sure.

Even if we apprehend correctly and decisively, however, we might still not really understand what the person meant by saying "yes."

## Explicit and Implicit Apprehension

Apprehension can be either explicit (*dnagos-su rtogs-pa*) or implicit (*shugs-la rtogs-pa*). The difference is whether or not a mental hologram of the involved object ('*jug-yul*) arises. For example, when we explicitly apprehend the sound of footsteps on the stairs, we implicitly apprehend the presence of someone there. A mental hologram of the person on the stairs doesn't arise in the cognition, but we know someone is there both accurately and decisively.

[See: [Apprehension of Validly Knowable Phenomena](#) {3}.]

## Accuracy and Decisiveness

What do "accurate" and "decisive" actually mean in the definition of apprehension, for instance apprehending with audio cognition the sound of our baby crying?

"Accurate" means that it fulfills the three criteria of Dharmakirti for a cognition being valid:

- It accords with a convention: babies cry.
- It is not contradicted by a mind that validly cognizes conventional truth: others can hear the sound too.
- It is not contradicted by a mind that validly cognizes deepest truth: aryas do not perceive the sound of a baby crying as arising independently of causes and conditions and independently of what the mental label "crying" refers to.

Just because we accurately hear the sound of the baby crying, however, doesn't necessarily mean that we understand what that means. The dog can also accurately hear the sound of the baby crying.

"Decisive" means to distinguish ('*du-shes*) a characteristic feature (*mtshan-nyid*) of the appearing object (*snang-yul*) in a cognition and, with discriminating awareness (*shes-rab*), to have no indecisive wavering (*the-tshoms*) about it so that later no doubts about it arise. This means, when explicitly apprehending the object, such as when hearing the sound of the baby crying and distinguishing the defining characteristic of the sound as the characteristic feature of crying, we implicitly apprehend what are known as "object exclusions" (*don rang-mtshan-gyi gzhan-sel*). These exclude everything other than this specific item. For

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example, "not the sound of the baby sleeping" is the exclusion of the characteristic feature of the sound of the baby sleeping. Other object exclusions include "not anything other than (*ma-yin-pa-las log-pa*) the sound of a baby crying," "not anything other than the sound of *my* baby crying," and so on.

[See: [Fine Analysis of Objects of Cognition: Gelug Presentation](#) {4}.]

Being a decisive apprehension means that it is not a nondetermining cognition (*snang-la ma-nges-pa*), which would be when we're not sure that we heard something or we're not sure that what we heard was the sound of the baby crying or the sound of *my* baby crying. It is also not indecisive wavering: "Maybe I heard it or maybe I didn't." But even if we decisively hear the sound of our baby crying, it still doesn't necessarily mean that we understand what it means.

## Straightforward Cognition and Inferential Cognition

Apprehension occurs either with valid straightforward cognition (*mngon-sum tshad-ma*) or with valid inferential cognition (*rjes-dpag tshad-ma*). "Valid" (*tshad-ma*) means nonfraudulent. Sautrantika adds fresh (*gsar*) to the definition of valid, but Prasangika asserts that all moments of cognition are fresh.

"Straightforward," according to Gelug Prasangika, means it does not rely directly on a line of reasoning. Straightforward cognition can be either conceptual (*rtog-bcas*) or nonconceptual (*rtog-med*). Conceptual means it cognizes its object through the medium of a category (*spyi*) as its appearing object.

- In the Sautrantika system, the same term (*mngon-sum tshad-ma*) is defined as "bare cognition," which means cognition that is not through the medium of a category. In this tenet system, then, bare cognition is always nonconceptual.

Inferential cognition is always conceptual and relies on a line of reasoning (*rtags*). It can be:

- inference based on the power of the way things actually are (*dngos-stobs rjes-dpag*). This is referring to deductive logic based on the nature of things. For instance, based on the fact that "where there is smoke, there is fire," we deduce the presence of fire when we see a specific instance of smoke.
- inference based on renown (*grags-pa'i rjes-dpag*). For instance, we hear a sound and, based on the reason that it is well-known by convention to be the sound of a word, we infer that it is the sound of a specific word and we infer the specific meaning assigned also by convention to that word.
- inference based on confidence (*yid-ches rjes-dpag*) - because the source of information is reliable, we infer that what he or she says or writes is true. For instance, we infer the accuracy of the date and time of our birth based on confidence that our mother is a valid source of information for this fact.

## Apprehension in Conceptual Cognition

The example of apprehending the sound of our baby crying is an example of apprehension in the category of nonconceptual straightforward cognition. We shall discuss how this works below. But first, how does apprehension work in a conceptual cognition, for instance

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inference based on renown, like when hearing or reading the word "voidness"?

Conceptual means cognizing through the medium of a category, either an audio category (*sgra-spyi*) or a meaning category (*don-spyi*). It occurs in steps:

1. First we apprehend nonconceptually the sound "voidness" that we hear. We heard the sound correctly and we are absolutely certain that we heard that sound and not any other sound.
2. Through the audio category of "voidness," we cognize this sound as being the sound of the word "voidness." Through this audio category, no matter how this sound is pronounced, at whatever volume and in whatever voice, we cognize all of them as being the sound of the word "voidness." When we conceptually apprehend this sound as being the sound of the word "voidness," we also cognize this accurately and decisively. It is not the sound of any other word. We are absolutely certain that it was the sound of nothing other than the word "voidness." If we thought we heard a different word or we were not certain what word we heard, then we have not apprehended the word.
3. Through the meaning category of "voidness," we cognize the word "voidness" as having the meaning "the total absence of an impossible way of existing." No matter whether we hear the word "emptiness," "voidness," "shunyata," "tongpa-nyi," "Leerheit" or "vacuite," we cognize them all as having the same meaning.

We can apply the same three criteria for the validity of this meaning as we did for the sound of crying.

- It accords with the convention that a group of people have assigned this sound to be the sound of the word "voidness" and for this word to have this definition,
- It is not contradicted by what the classical texts and what qualified teachers explain,
- It is not contradicted by aryas who cognize that words do not have meanings established inherently in them, independently of mental labeling.

If we applied an incorrect meaning to the word "voidness," or are unsure what it means, then we have not apprehended the meaning of the word "voidness." However, just because we apprehend correctly and decisively the sound that we hear as being the sound of the word "voidness" and just because we apprehend correctly and decisively the meaning of the word "voidness" as being "the total absence of impossible ways of existing," that still doesn't mean that we necessarily understand voidness. Or consider the example of reading a complex sentence in a Tsongkhapa text on voidness: we could apprehend each word and the meaning of each word correctly and decisively, but not understand the sentence at all. We could even apprehend different levels of the meaning of the word "voidness" as meaning this for Chittamatra, that for Svatantrika, and that for Prasangika, and still not really understand voidness.

## Understanding Something Conceptually

When we understand something, such as voidness, we not only apprehend it, we are also additionally able to infer the implications of it. The more implications we have worked out, the greater our understanding. We are able to put voidness together with many other teachings we have received, such as how cognition of voidness rids us of disturbing emotions and karma. We can apply our understanding of voidness for analyzing other topics. This understanding also needs to be accurate and decisive.

When we have a correct understanding of voidness and we then conceptually focus on voidness, although we apprehend voidness correctly and decisively, we don't simultaneously bring to mind all the implications. Nevertheless, our apprehension of voidness is held by the force of the latencies (*sa-bon*) from our previously having worked out, through inference and deductions, the implications.

## Apprehending and Understanding Something Nonconceptually

To explain how we apprehend and understand something nonconceptually, we need to describe progressive stages. Let's use a simple example first:

When we apprehend something nonconceptually, for instance when a dog is in front of a baby and the baby sees colored shapes, which is nonconceptual cognition, then according to Gelugpa, the baby doesn't just see disjointed colored shapes or just disjointed one second pictures. It sees the whole that they constitute, both spatially and temporally. Whole items are called "collection mental syntheses" (*tshogs-spyi*). In other words, when colored shapes appear in its visual sense field, the baby can distinguish the uncommon characteristic features of a cluster of them which, taken together, constitute an individual item. Such distinguishing is called the "distinguishing that takes a characteristic feature concerning an item" (*don-la mtshan-mar 'dzin-pa'i 'du-shes*). These characteristic features that this distinguishing takes are not shared in common with the colored shapes that constitute the background, for instance the wall behind the dog. The individual conventional item that is distinguished is a synthesis of colored shapes, parts such as legs, a head, a tail, etc. and also a synthesis of at least several moments of perception. This is so even when the animal is moving, in which case the baby is seeing different colored shapes.

Also when the baby sees these colored shapes, it distinguishes the uncommon characteristic features of what kind of item it is - in this case, the characteristic features of a dog. In technical terms, it sees a "kind mental synthesis" (*rigs-spyi*).

- More technically, it distinguishes the characteristic features (*mtshan-nyid*, characteristic marks) of a dog and something that has these characteristic features (*mtshon-bya*), namely a dog, and distinguishes the dog as a conventionally existent object. Characteristic features and something having those characteristic features cannot exist independently of each other. Nor can they appear separately from each other.
- Although, conventionally, validly knowable objects have characteristic features, these features cannot be found on the side of the object and they do not have the power to establish the existence in general of the object, or the existence of the phenomenon specifically as this and not that. Existence established by individual characteristic marks (*rang-gi mtshan-nyid-kyis grub-pa*) is an impossible way of establishing the existence of something.

In summary, when the baby sees these colored shapes within a visual sense field, it also sees nonconceptually a dog as an individual whole item. However, the baby doesn't have to know what this thing is in order to see a dog.

More technically, the colored shapes, parts and characteristic features are the basis for labeling "dog" and a dog is what the label "dog" refers to in relation to this basis. Although a basis for

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labeling (*gdags-gzhi*) and what a label refers to (*btags-chos*) do not exist independently of a mental label (*btags*), the baby doesn't know the mental label "dog." It sees what the label "dog" refers to and the basis for that label, but does not know the mental label. So, the baby doesn't have to know that it is called a "dog" or what it is called, in order to see a dog. In other words, the baby doesn't need to mentally label "dog" or say the word "dog" in its mind or even know what the word "dog" means in order to see a dog.

As babies, we had to learn the category "dog" and the name "dog" and its meaning. This was a conceptual process. Now, when we see a dog accurately and decisively, we cognize it conceptually in the next moment, both accurately and decisively, through the meaning category "dog" - although even then, not necessarily thinking the sound of the word "dog" in our heads. In this conceptual cognition, we distinguish an outstanding feature (*bkra-ba*) of the appearing object, namely an outstanding feature of the meaning category "dog," and ascribe to this category the convention that it is the meaning of the word "dog." This is known as the distinguishing that takes a characteristic feature concerning a convention (*tha-snyad-lam-tshan-mar 'dzin-pa'i 'du-shes*).

Conceptually cognizing a dog, then, is like, in our minds, accurately and decisively putting what we see in the box "dogs," as if it truly existed in a box - the category "dog" - independently of its being just what the label "dog" refers to. This compartmentalization occurs through an additional filter that appears in the cognition besides the meaning category "dog," namely the conceptual isolate (*ldog-pa*) "nothing other than a dog." The conceptual isolate is a mental exclusion of all that is other (*blo'i gzhan-sel*) than dog and is a negatingly known phenomenon (*dgag-pa*).

But we could also accurately and decisively know it is a dog nonconceptually when we see the dog accurately and decisively. In this case, we explicitly apprehend the colored shapes, parts and so on as the basis for labeling "dog" and we also explicitly apprehend what the label "dog" refers to. These are the mental holograms that appear to the visual cognition. Simultaneously, we implicitly apprehend the mental label "dog." In this case, the mental label and category "dog" are not the appearing objects of our visual cognition. Although we implicitly know that it is a dog, we are not explicitly cognizing it conceptually through the medium of the category and label "dog." We are not cognizing it through the filter of the box "dogs" in which we fit it.

- With nonconceptual explicit apprehension of a dog, we implicitly also apprehend the object exclusion "nothing other than a dog." But unlike the conceptual isolate through which the conceptual cognition of a dog occurs, the object exclusion does not appear in the nonconceptual cognition. Thus, although like a conceptual isolate, an object exclusion is also a negatingly known phenomenon; nevertheless nonconceptual cognition of the dog knows its involved object simply as an affirmation phenomenon (*sgrub-pa*). It cognizes its object in an affirming way, rather than through an exclusion of everything other than it. This is another major difference between a nonconceptual and a conceptual cognition of a dog.

When we have a nonconceptual understanding of a dog, what we have is a nonconceptual apprehension of a dog, accurately and decisively, that implicitly knows that this is a dog and which is held with the force of the latencies of having previously worked out the implications of what a dog is: it can bite, it needs to be walked and so cannot be left alone while we go on vacation, and so on

## Conceptual and Nonconceptual Apprehension and Understanding of Voidness

The way in which both conceptual and nonconceptual apprehension of voidness would also be accompanied by understanding is similar. In the first phase of meditation, the basis for voidness (*stong-gzhi*) appears, for instance the five aggregate factors comprising the present moment of experience and the conventional "me" imputed on them. In the second phase, an absence of these appearances arises, which appears like a blank, like an empty space.

In the case of inferential cognition, that absence arises through the force of the line of reasoning of the refutation of truly established existence and is focused on through the meaning category "voidness." In the case of straightforward cognition of voidness, it arises without direct reliance on a line of reasoning, although in the past we have worked with the lines of reasoning. This straightforward cognition may or may not be through the medium of the meaning category "voidness."

In the case of nonconceptual cognition, among the characteristic features of this blank that arises, the explicit apprehension of voidness distinguishes accurately and decisively not only the characteristic features of an absence of all appearances and an absence of all appearances of truly established existence. It also distinguishes the characteristic features of a total absence of truly established existence itself - there is no such thing.

When we apprehend the voidness of voidness, in the sense of apprehending voidness as dependently arising, we also explicitly apprehend the total absence of truly established existence as merely what the mental label "voidness" refers to. Implicitly, we apprehend the mental label "voidness." Thus we know what this blank that arises is. Understanding accompanies this apprehension when the apprehension is held by the force of our previously having worked out the implications of voidness.

## Intellectual Versus Intuitive Understanding

What does it mean to have just an intellectual understanding versus an intuitive understanding of something? Buddhist epistemology does not differentiate such a division.

According to most Western definitions, intellectual understanding is an understanding of something directly derived through the force of logical reasoning. It may or may not also rely on empirical knowledge from prior personal experience (straightforward cognition).

Intuitive understanding does not rely directly on logical reasoning. Some non-Buddhist spiritual systems explain that intuitive understanding may be mystical and derive from a transcendent source, such as God. In Buddhism, we speak of understanding deriving through inspiration (*byin-rlabs*, "blessings") from the Buddhas or from our spiritual teachers, or deriving from the ripening from our network of positive force ("collection of merit"). We find this most prominently in mahamudra and dzogchen practice in which our teacher helps us, literally, to meet face to face (*ngo-sprod*) the nature of our minds.

Dzogchen also speaks of the "self-arising deep awareness" (*rang-byung ye-shes*) that is primordial (*gnyug-ma*) and arises simultaneously (*lhan-skyes*, innate) in each moment of cognition. This deep awareness is part of the nature of pure awareness (*rig-pa*), the subtlest level of mental activity, devoid of all fleeting stains, such as those of unawareness

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(ignorance). When we access this deepest level, the deep awareness of the two truths is revealed. In Western terms, we would classify this deep awareness as intuitive.

But for more commonly experienced intuitive understanding of something, although we usually are unaware of any reason for why we understand it, in most cases it arises from unconscious reasoning by analogy. It can be based merely on empirical knowledge from present or prior personal experience, in this life or previous lives. Or it could be based on the force of the strong habit of prior inferential cognition, built up either in this life or in previous lives. An example is intuitively being able to operate a new computer program or application without having to read the instructions. But what about an intuitive understanding of impermanence, voidness, compassion, or bodhichitta?

In the Western usage of these two terms - intuitive and intellectual understanding - we need to differentiate the Buddhist epistemological categories of apprehension and understanding. In terms of apprehension:

- a so-called "intellectual understanding" includes an accurate and decisive apprehension of something, for instance what is voidness, compassion or bodhichitta.
- An intuitive understanding of impermanence, voidness, compassion or bodhichitta may or may not apprehend its object. Sometimes it is not very precise in terms of either accuracy or decisiveness, or in terms of both. We may be convinced of the accuracy of our focusing on, for instance, impermanence or voidness, derived through intuition based on personal experience, but this is often just presumption (*yid-dpyod*): we are merely presuming it to be accurate, whereas it is rather vague. We may or may not be able to express our intuitive understanding of something in words, but this can be the case whether or not our intuitive understanding apprehends its object accurately and decisively.

In terms of understanding the implications of impermanence, voidness, compassion or bodhichitta, we may either derive the implications intellectually, which means working them out by logical reasoning and through logically fitting impermanence, voidness and so on together with other facets of the Dharma. Or we may intuitively understand the implications and how it fits with other facets of the Dharma without having to work them out; but this too may or may not be very precise or decisive. We usually experience this as everything just automatically fits together, "everything clicks."

The usual process, however, is that we focus on a specific topic, such as the defining characteristics of mental activity, and then also other topics, such as Buddha-nature and bodhichitta, and then put them all together, most likely using equalizing deep awareness (*mnyam-nyid ye-shes*), and then, without using a formal line of reasoning, we understand how these three fit together. It's hard to say whether this is an intellectual or an intuitive understanding.

## Emotional Understanding

Whether we derive our apprehension and understanding of something, for instance of impermanence, voidness, compassion or bodhichitta, intellectually by relying on lines of reasoning or intuitively by relying on other means, both are nonstatic phenomena (*mi-rtag-pa*). This means that they both have the ability to produce effects (*don-byed nus-pa*) - in this case, transformational effects. His Holiness the Dalai Lama discusses this in terms of the development of compassion, when he explains that compassion based on reason -

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"everyone wants to be happy and no one wants to be unhappy" - is more stable than compassion based merely on emotion. This means that we definitely can develop the constructive emotion of compassion based on reason.

How do we know we have developed a constructive emotion, such as compassion? If the definition of a disturbing emotion (*nyon-mongs*) is a state of mind that, when it arises, makes us lose our peace of mind and self-control, then we can infer the definition of a constructive emotion. It is a state of mind that, when it arises, gives us peace of mind and allows us to have self-control. Whether we develop compassion intellectually or intuitively, the compassion that we develop in both cases positively affects our state of mind.

## Deep Understanding

Whether or not we apply our understanding in our behavior, however, is another matter, and again there is no difference whether our understanding has arisen by directly relying on a line of reasoning or through other means. When it affects our behavior in a positive way, then we have a deep understanding of compassion.

## Links

{1} [http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level5\\_analysis\\_mind\\_reality/cognition\\_theory/level\\_a\\_basics/seven\\_ways\\_cognize\\_objects/transcript\\_1.html](http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level5_analysis_mind_reality/cognition_theory/level_a_basics/seven_ways_cognize_objects/transcript_1.html)

{2} [http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level5\\_analysis\\_mind\\_reality/cognition\\_theory/level\\_a\\_basics/intro\\_survey\\_objects\\_cognition\\_gelug.html](http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level5_analysis_mind_reality/cognition_theory/level_a_basics/intro_survey_objects_cognition_gelug.html)

{3} [http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level5\\_analysis\\_mind\\_reality/cognition\\_theory/level\\_a\\_basics/apprehension.html](http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level5_analysis_mind_reality/cognition_theory/level_a_basics/apprehension.html)

{4} [http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level5\\_analysis\\_mind\\_reality/cognition\\_theory/level\\_b\\_fine\\_analysis/fine\\_analysis\\_objects\\_cognition/fine\\_anal\\_obj\\_gelug.html](http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level5_analysis_mind_reality/cognition_theory/level_b_fine_analysis/fine_analysis_objects_cognition/fine_anal_obj_gelug.html)