

RAS Institute of Philosophy  
Tibetan Culture and Information Center in Moscow

## First International Conference “Buddhism and Phenomenology”

November 7–8, 2016  
RAS Institute of Philosophy, Moscow

Supported by:

➤ Save Tibet Foundation



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### **Subjectivity, Intentionality, and Reflexivity: Core Features of Consciousness in Buddhist Thought**

Buddhist scholar, principal English translator to His Holiness the [Dalai Lama](#) since 1985. Director of the Institute of Tibetan Classics. He has translated and edited more than ten books by the Dalai Lama including [The World of Tibetan Buddhism](#) ([Wisdom Publications](#), 1993), *A Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus* (Wisdom Publications, 1996), and the [New York Times](#) bestseller [Ethics for the New Millennium](#) (Riverhead, 1999). He received traditional Buddhist education (Geshe degree is corresponding to PhD) as well as Western education (bachelor's degree in Western philosophy and PhD in religious studies - both obtained in Cambridge, UK). He is a visiting researcher at the Stanford Institute for Neuro-Innovation and Translational Neuroscience, Stanford University, USA.

*Subjectivity, Intentionality, and  
Reflexivity:*

Core Features of Consciousness  
in Buddhist Thought

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# OUTLINE

1. Consciousness in Buddhism: The Context
2. Defining mind or consciousness
3. Three core features of consciousness
4. Challenges for naturalization project

## Being clear about key terms

**Consciousness:** “conscious experience,” “conscious of” (transitive), “he is conscious” (intransitive)

**Awareness:** “aware of” (transitive) “aware” (intransitive)

**Self-consciousness, self-awareness:** (reflexive)

**Mind:** “mental events,” “the mental” (objective)

## Being clear about key terms

On a generic level, when the terms are used as contrasts to something that is non-sentient

Consciousness = Awareness = Mind (the mental)

“... the word *consciousness* here refers to mental states understood as phenomenologically observable entities or, better, processes apprehending objects that thereby are revealed to them.” (Dreyfus, 1997)

# 1. The Context

“What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday,  
And our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow;  
Our life is the creation of our mind.” (*Dharmapada*)

“A disciplined mind is excellent indeed;  
A disciplined mind leads to happiness.” (*Uddanavarga*)

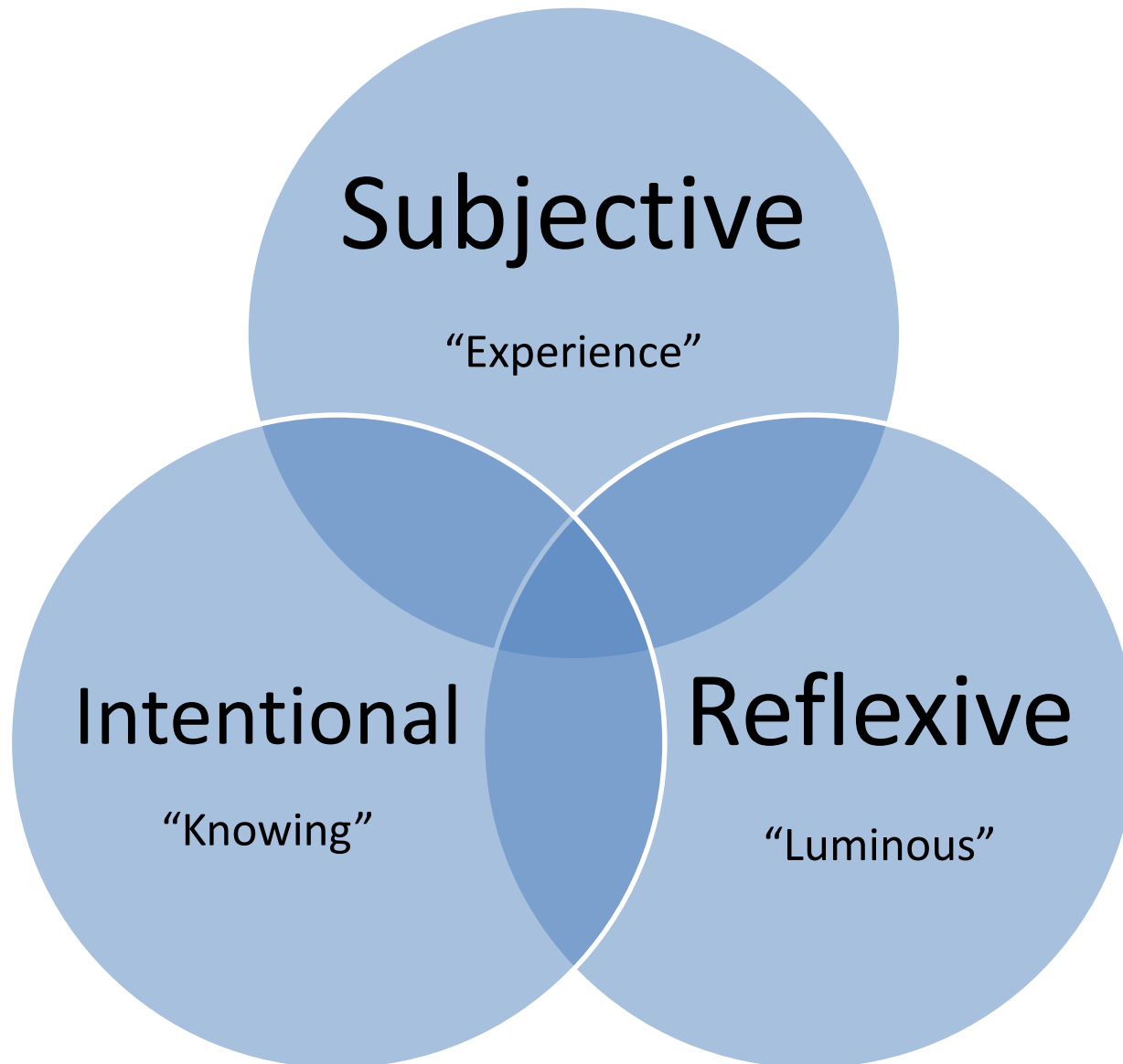
“The mind is dynamic and is deceptive;  
It ventures far and is hard to bring back.  
So like an archer who shapes his bow with heat,  
Discipline your mind with a firm resolve.” (*Uddanavarga*)

## 2. Defining mind or consciousness

“The mind has no form, it is not demonstrable, it has no solidity, and it is cannot be perceived [by the senses], and is like an illusion.” (*Sutra*)

- Formless
- Not demonstrable in an objective way
- Devoid of resistance
- Not object of the senses

## 2. Defining mind or consciousness





# 3. Core Features of Consciousness

## 1. Subjectivity

There is a phenomenal or experiential dimension to mental events, namely their first person character. A key feature of mental events is the way in they are experienced by the subject, whether it is a simple sensation of pain, or seeing a blue color, even to have an abstract thought. There is something irreducible about the first-person dimension, what some philosophers characterize as “qualia” or “what it feels like” about our experience of mental states.

“What does it feel like to be a Bat?” (Nagel, 1974)

### 3. Core Features of Consciousness

## 2. Intentionality (object-directedness)

“Apprehension of an object is the defining characteristic of consciousness.” (Dharmakīrti, c 600-660 CE)

“Every mental phenomena is characterized by what the scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (and also mental) in-existence of an object, and what we would call, although not entirely in unambiguous terms, the reference to a content, a direction upon an object (by which we are not to understand a reality in this case), or an immanent objectivity.” (Brentano, 1960)

## 3. Core Features of Consciousness

### 3. Reflexivity?

- Strong thesis: “The nature of consciousness is reflexive awareness, and that which is not reflexively aware is insentient.” (Śāntarakṣita) This reflexive awareness does not have an agent-action-object structure and is “intransitive” – i.e. it has no object.
- Moderate thesis: Unlike matter, mind has the capacity to reflect upon itself, in the sense of double intentionality. On this view, reflexivity is not a necessary feature of every experience of consciousness, but a general capacity of consciousness that comes into view when one instance of cognition takes another instance as its object.

# Arguments for Strong Reflexivity Thesis

DIGNĀGA (fifth-sixth century):

1. If you compare the structure of the *recollection* of seeing blue with the actual *experience* itself, the former has double aspects – of the object perceived as well as of the experiencing of that object. All subsequent recollections, remembering of remembering, each will thus acquire one additional aspect, as if viewed through layers of filters, until the chain ends. Therefore, cognitions possess an *objective aspect* as well as a *subjective* aspect. Otherwise, cognition of an object and cognition of its cognition would be indistinguishable.

# Arguments for Strong Reflexivity Thesis

## DIGNĀGA'S ARGUMENTS FOR DUAL-ASPECT CHARACTER:

2. The fact that, in our recollection of past experiences, we are able to distinguish between different perceptions – of seeing a form as opposed to hearing a sound, and so on – indicates that our experiences have dual dimensions, an objective one and a subjective aspect. Not only are we able to remember the specific object experienced we also remember the specific modality of that experience.

Both of these two arguments, using memory, aim to demonstrate the dual-aspect character of consciousness.

# Arguments for Strong Reflexivity Thesis

## DIGNĀGA'S Memory Argument for Reflexive Awareness

Memory requires prior experience. When one remembers one recalls both the object perceived as well as the experience of perceiving that object. To have such a recollection of the subject side of the experience, that of *perceiving* the object, there is no need for an additional second-order or subsequent cognition to be present. This indicates that the original experience itself has a reflexive dimension of self-awareness.

SUBJECT: *The perception of blue*

THESIS: *It has a prior experience*

REASON: *Because there exists its subsequent recollection.*

# Arguments for Strong Reflexivity Thesis

**DHARMAKĪRTI** (c 600-660 CE): *Argument from sensations*

“Suffering and happiness are not external to consciousness, but integral to our awareness of external objects. For example, we do not get burned and afterward feel pain. Rather, our perceptions are colored from the very start by our sensations. Our perceptions arise with a certain tone feeling, be it pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Thus, suffering and happiness are feelings experienced through the same mental states that apprehend external objects. They are not experienced separately from the objects we see, although they are different from them. How is it a single mental state able to apprehend an external object and experience a sensation?”

Answer: Dual nature of mental states.

(As rephrased in Dreyfus, 1997)

# Arguments for Strong Reflexivity Thesis

## DHARMAKĪRTI's Other Arguments

- Because cognitions are reflexive, they possess their intentional dimension – the capacity to apprehend their objects. They are able to *illuminate* objects because they are *luminous* themselves. Just as light, by virtue of being luminous, illuminates other objects.
- It's reflexive self-awareness that allows one to recall the hearing of a long word composed of numerous syllables. Our auditory cognition perceive what is directly presented to it, in a sequence of series, and it's reflexive awareness that help bind them together, giving rise to a unified coherent cognitive experience. It's what allows one to apprehend things in terms of "I perceive this and that."
- It's the mind's ability to be aware of itself that "allows us to act as subjects in a world of objects."



# Key Points of Reflexivity Thesis

- Because consciousness is self-presencing ('self-luminous'), inherently reflexive, it can apprehend an object by assuming its form. So, from one side, consciousness has an externally oriented aspect, a form mental states assumes when apprehending an object. Consciousness also has a subject aspect that allows us have an internal knowledge of our own mental states.
- This reflexive self-awareness, or apperception, is not a separate form of cognition; it's an essential feature of our mental states.
- So consciousness is aware of itself in a non-dual (intransitive) manner. There is no subject-object character to this reflexive awareness of our own mental states.
- It's this reflexive feature of consciousness that allows us to have a sense of coherence and unity in our cognitive experience, as well as provide the basis for our sense of being the subject of our experiences of the world.

## 4. Challenges for naturalization project

(Attributes of) the intentional (object-directed) dimension of consciousness might lend more readily to natural explanation:

- Conceptually speaking, there is a subject-object structure as well as content to the experience
- There is a relationship, causal or otherwise, to its object (whether external or internal)
- Functionally defined elements of the cognition – attention, intention, recognition, determination, etc. – and their mechanisms may lend to natural explanations
- The challenge is to conceive what might constitute a successful natural explanation

## 4. Challenges for naturalization project

- Would discovery of neural correlates suffice? How far or basic, say in a perceptual process for example, such correlations need to go?
  1. Bare sensing of an object (conscious but no reflective awareness)
  2. Determination (categorization and proto-conceptual)
  3. Full-blown cognition (“This is a flower” often accompanied by reflective self-awareness “I see a flower.”)
  4. Subsequent recollection of that flower
- Even with discovery of NCC, say of the object-related aspect of conscious experience, wouldn’t there still remain the “explanatory gap”?

## 4. Challenges for naturalization project

- If we take strong reflexivity thesis and its postulation of pre-reflective self-awareness as a constitute feature of consciousness seriously, does this rule out any possibility of a third-person objective “naturalized” explanation of consciousness?
- Even if we take the moderate version of reflexivity thesis, challenge still remains of explaining mind’s capacity for self-cognition as well as the subjective experiential dimensions of consciousness. What would such explanations even look like?
- Are we then to admit that the phenomenal dimension of consciousness is beyond any naturalized scientific explanation?