Pramāṇa, Tantra, & The Middle Way

Karmê Chöling
Summer 2005

Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso Rinpoche

Translated by

Ari Goldfield

Additional Teachings by

Dorje Loppön Lodrö Dorje
Elizabeth Callahan
Scott Wellenbach
John Rockwell
Andy Karr

Edited by the

Vajravairochana Translation Committee

Introduction to Pramāṇa

Scott Wellenbach

The Presentation of the Classifications of Mind, called *The Essence of the Ocean of Texts on Reasoning*

Forever embracing all beings undeceivingly with great loving kindness,
Nor obscured with respect to all knowable objects, you teach the [mode of] appearance and the actual [nature] of profound and vast phenomena.
Through the brilliance of the thousandfold light of knowledge, loving kindness and power, you dispel the ignorance of beings.
To you, the Sugata, the unsurpassable refuge, I prostrate in all my lifetimes with deep respect.

In terms of the definitive meaning, you are primordially enlightened, yet in order to demonstrate the way of becoming enlightened again
You manifest unceasingly in a youthful physical form, even though in terms of your true nature, you are beyond form.
On the level of equality there is nothing to dispel, yet you have the ability to dispel the torments of afflictions,
Supreme extraordinary deity Mañjugosha, take care of me throughout all my lifetimes!

In nature, you are primordially inseparable from the dharmakāya of all the Victorious Ones,
Yet your way of appearing is the unimpeded, continual arising of manifold, ever-pervading arrays of form bodies.
You are always endowed with the enlightened activity of loving kindness for the unprotected sentient beings of saṃsāra,
To you, all-pervading lord, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, until enlightenment, I prostrate with deep respect.

In order to present to the Mighty Lord of the world, the supreme, victorious Karmapa,
The pleasing offering of exposition, debate, and composition
And so that newcomers may quickly develop their intelligence
I have here summarized the *Essence of the Ocean of Texts on Reasoning.*

The explanation of *The Presentation of the Classifications of Mind, the Essence of the Oceans of Texts on Reasoning* has three parts:

(1) The definitions of mind
(2) The divisions of mind
(3) The concluding summary which states the purpose in the form of reasonings

1. The definitions of mind

There are definitions [of mind], because the definition of **mind** is "that which is clear and aware," the definition of **consciousness** is "that which is aware of objects," and the definition of **awareness** is "that which experiences an object of comprehension." This is so, because it is stated in such [texts] as the *Commentary on Valid Cognition:*

> Consciousness is the phenomenon that apprehends an object.

In this context, in *The Presentations of the Classifications of Mind* there are many ways to posit definitions as well as negations and positions. These are to be known from *The Surging Waves on the Ocean of Texts on Reasoning, a Critical Analysis of Mind* and *The Surging Waves on the Ocean of Texts on Reasoning, a Critical Analysis of Reasons.*

* * * * *

During this class, we will be studying a text composed by Khenpo Rinpoche that is entitled the *Lorik*. We will be looking at the root *Lorik* text and drawing on commentaries given at Nītārtha Institute, by two of Khenpo Rinpoche's students, Dzogchen Pönlop Rinpoche and Āchārya Sherab Gyaltsen, which are available in transcript form. *Lorik* is here translated as "Classifications of Mind," though we will touch on some alternative translations of that title. It is part of the general study of what is known as *pramāṇa* in Sanskrit. The word *pramāṇa,* which is translated as *tsema* (Tib. tshad ma) in Tibetan, has two parts; the first is the prefix *pra* which means "best" or "highest" in Sanskrit. We are familiar with that from the word prajñā. *Māṇa* comes from the root *ma*, which means "measure" or to "know"; interestingly, one of its more unusual meanings is to "ascertain." So pramāṇa is the best knowledge, the best measure, the highest ascertainment.

We translate tsema, or pramāṇa as "valid cognition." One might also say something like "correct thought." But what we're really talking about here is *knowledge*, in the strong sense of the word. This is particularly so from the Indian tradition. What do we know, what are we certain of? As we try to make sense of our lives in this very elusive, ever shifting, ever changing world, what can we actually rely on? That's what pramāṇa is trying to get to.

Three Types of Suffering

To try to put this into context for us who have been practicing and studying Buddhism, I want to present this idea of pramāṇa from a somewhat unusual point of view and talk about material that I know is familiar to all of us, which is the first noble truth. I present it this way because I think this idea of valid cognition goes back to the Buddha's original teaching. As we know, the first noble truth is suffering, or in Sanskrit, *duḥkha.*

Traditionally, in the Tibetan tradition we speak of three types of suffering. The first is the suffering of suffering or the pain of pain. This is when you break a leg, when you hurt yourself. It hurts until it stops. It is what we normally try to avoid. On one occasion, though, Pönlop Rinpoche presented it a bit differently, as the suffering that we bring upon ourselves when we avoid the painful situation. So, for instance, we are in an terrible fight with our wife or our husband. Kleshas are running rampant. We cannot bear it. We storm out of the house,

get in our car, drive to the local bar, get drunk, say awful things, get in a fight, and get socked in the nose. That is the pain of pain. In addition to the original pain, it is the pain that we bring upon ourselves by not sticking with, not sitting in the middle of, a difficult, uncomfortable situation. So, we can work with both of these meanings.

The second type of suffering is the pain of change. If pain of pain is what we do not want, pain of change is when we actually get what we want, or what we think we want, and then it passes—that sense of impermanence.

Then finally, the third type of pain, which is the pertinent one to today's discussion, is all-pervasive suffering. All-pervasive suffering is said to be present in every moment of saṃsāric existence. Here the etymology of the word duḥkha is very helpful. *Duḥ* means "bad," and *kha* means a "fit." Historically it is said to come from the fit of the axle of a chariot into the hub of its wheel. So a duḥkha is a "bad fit." It's not snug, it's not firm. What we long for is a sukha, a good fit, or from a vajrayāna point of view a mahāsukha, a great good fit. We are haunted by this notion. This is what we long for. One could say that the entire Buddha path, our entire enterprise as meditators is the journey from a duḥkha to a sukha.

Now obviously, there is a sexual image here. And beyond that sexual image, I think that in contemporary Western culture, the notion of a "good fit" conjures up a kind of romantic image. What the Buddha was talking about is that nagging feeling that our life isn't quite right. The third type of duḥkha, the all-pervasive suffering, is that haunting sense of not quite fitting in, which we always had, for instance, as we were growing up. Things weren't quite right. What we want, what we are haunted by, what we long for, is something that will make our lives make sense: finally our life will come together and be right. I think that for most of us, growing up in the twentieth century, what fulfills this function, or seems to, is the fantasy of romantic love. When Mister or Miss Right enters our life and we fall in love and they accept us in this way, then finally things will be all right. It is not always romantic love of course, it could be that good job or the salary or the family or whatever. But it is that sense of sukha, good fit that we want.

Classifications of Pramāṇa

Other traditions and cultures have had different answers to this question of what constitutes a sukha, a good fit. In terms of the presentation in this class, pramāṇa is said to be that good fit, that highest knowledge or best ascertainment—what we can really count on. What constitutes pramāṇa or valid cognition has been subject to a variety of interpretations in various cultures and various philosophies. This is not just a Buddhist idea; it is a pan-Indian notion. Once when we were translating with Lama Chönam, who works with Jules Levinson and the Light of Berotsana Translation Committee, he said that from a vajrayāna perspective there are often three criteria as to whether something fulfills the function of pramāṇa. In other words, can you count on it, can you rely on it, is it true? These three are: (1) Does it accord with what Buddha said? (2) Does it accord with what your teacher told you? (3) Does it make intuitive sense to you? I think that is probably a tradition found only in Tibetan vajrayāna.

In the Indian tradition generally the most comprehensive formulation that I have seen is that there are six types of pramāṇa, six types of valid cognition. More narrowly, generally in

Buddhism there are said to be three. The first is direct experience, what we directly perceive. The second is inference, logical mind, what we can figure out. The third is what one might call "reliable authority."

To go through these briefly, the first is direct perception, direct experience. Sense perception is the most familiar example of this, but the *Lorik* presents other subtle and more important aspects of direct experience. For example, when Khenpo Rinpoche was leaving the shrine room this morning he mentioned self-awareness, which turns out to be the key and most prime example of direct perception. But to start on a more ordinary level, it is easier for us to see direct experience as sense perception. What we see, the color and shape. What we hear, the sound. What we taste, what we smell, what we touch, the feelings that impinge on our body. This is direct experience prior to concept—the redness of red, the chirping of a bird. It is direct experience before we label it, and certainly before we say things like "I like," "I don't like," or any other evaluation of the experience. Thus direct experience is one source of pramāṇa.

The second source of pramāṇa is inference. Direct perception, as important as it is, for human beings this side of enlightenment is a little bit limited—we need more help. For instance, if smoke comes billowing through the open door of this shrine room, first we have a direct sensory experience of gray billowing matter, and even before we smell it we identify it through sight and say to ourselves "smoke." And then we would say, "Oh, there must be a fire out there." This is because we know the relationship, the certain relationship, between smoke and fire. Where there's smoke, there's fire, as we say in English. That is a logical inference. We do not see the fire directly, we do not smell it, we do not taste it, and we do not feel its heat, yet. But we can logically deduce its existence. We need that sort of tool to manage our lives. So that is inference.

The third pramāṇa is reliable authority. This pramāṇa concerns valid cognitions that we cannot know directly this side of enlightenment; nor can we prove them logically. There are things that we need to trust. In vajrayāna communities in the West the pramāṇa of reliable authority usually begins with the two words "Rinpoche said" [laughter]. But more generally, of course, it's the scriptural authority of Lord Buddha, what he said. For instance the law of karma: it is said that if one is generous then one will reap what one sows, one will have a rich existence. But when we look at this idea from the perspective of our own experience, does it seem to be true? For some people who are generous, generosity does seem to come back to them, but others seem to get nothing back and they end up in poverty. On the other hand, some people who are downright niggardly may win the lottery. The Buddha says that it is not necessarily in this life that karma plays itself out; it could be in a future life. But we cannot ascertain this from our own experience and it is very difficult to prove it logically. So this is something that one needs to at least provisionally take on trust. We can trust this type of teaching: since other things the Buddha said seem to be true, either to our direct experience or to what we can logically deduce, we can rely on other of his instructions, even those that we cannot immediately verify. We are asked to try this out and see how it affects our lives when we take it to be so. For example how does it affect our life if we actually put generosity into practice?

History of the Pramāṇa Tradition

The above is a brief account the three traditional types of pramāṇa or valid cognition. Now we will step back and take a look at the history of this pramāṇa tradition. Shākyamuni Buddha, at least in the sūtras available to us today, did not fully address the issue of pramāṇa or valid cognition in any one sūtra. There is no such thing as the *Pramāṇa Sūtra*. Rather, he spoke of valid cognition throughout in various places scattered throughout the sūtras. He spoke about what direct experience might be, he spoke about what logical inference is and the use of logical inference, and he spoke of the proper use of scriptural authority. But not in one place at one time.

The Buddha is said to have lived in roughly 500 BC. Let's fast forward now a millennium. A man very important to this tradition is born in India by the name of Dignāga, whose dates are 480-540 AD. Dignāga surveys the Buddhist literature available to him and organizes the references to valid cognition of all different sorts into a coherent system. He writes a book entitled in Sanskrit the *Pramāṇa-samuchchaya*, or in English *The Compendium of Valid Cognition*. It is a monumental work, of great importance, but tremendously difficult to understand. Portions of it have been translated into English so it is starting to become available—it is very, very hard, very cryptic. Dignāga's spiritual grandson comes along about a century later, 600-660 AD. His name is Dharmakīrti. This spiritual grandson, who is the disciple of Īshvarasena, Dignāga's foremost student, builds on Dignāga's work. Dharmakīrti writes seven seminal treatises on pramāṇa, the most important of which is entitled the *Pramāṇa-vārttika* in Sanskrit, or *Commentary on Valid Cognition*. The pramāṇa tradition, at least the Tibetan understanding of it, harkens back essentially to these two gentlemen, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, particularly Dharmakīrti, and especially to the *Pramāṇa-vārttika*. You will see in the *Lorik*, as we go through these teachings in these coming weeks, that for each important point that he makes about valid cognition, Khenpo Rinpoche quotes from the *Pramāṇa-samuchchaya* and/or the *Pramāṇa-vārttika*. He gives a short verse from these root texts bringing out the point that he is making.

Mention was made above that in general Buddhism speaks of three types of valid cognition: direct experience, inference, and reliable authority. Importantly, Dharmakīrti emphasized the first two of those. He was part of the mahāyāna expansion of Buddhism, in which it grew from being a narrow group of religious followers to a world tradition. In this search for pramāṇa, in the sense of knowledge, what one could rely on, it was critical that the inquiry begin with a basis on which all human beings could agree. In that vein, the third type of valid cognition, reliable authority, won't hold up. Buddhists cite what Buddha said, Hindus refer to the Vedas, and so forth—there is no common ground. But Dharmakīrti felt that we ought to be able to agree on what we directly experience as human beings, and what we can logically figure out.

Now let's fast forward again another millennium. We are now in Tibet, the dharma has been brought to Tibet for a number of centuries, the Karma Kagyü lineage is flourishing, and the seventh Karmapa, Chödrak Gyatso writes a key work for our lineage on pramāṇa. It is entitled *Ocean of Texts on Reasoning* or, in Tibetan, *Rikshung Gyatso*. In essence, he situation was that even with the tremendous work of Dignāga and the further work of Dharmakīrti and even though these pramāṇa texts were well translated into Tibetan, they were still very, very hard to understand, as we have all experienced in our efforts to learn the dharma in English. Translated dharma is difficult. By this time there were starting to be written indigenous

Tibetan commentaries on pramāṇa to try to make more sense out of this tradition for the Tibetans studying the valid-cognition teachings. I think all the major traditions have their own commentaries authored around this time or even earlier. For the Kagyü the request was put forth to the seventh Karmapa that he also write a commentary.

The way that Pawo Tsuglak Trengwa, the great historian of the Kagyü lineage, recounts the story is that Chödrak Gyatso, without any text available to him, would simply enter some sort of state of samādhi and recite a verse of Dharmakīrti or Dignāga and then comment on it from memory, while the scribe would write it down. It is also said that at some point Chödrak Gyatso would say things like "When I was Dharmakīrti, I remember . . . ," which perhaps accounts for how he was able to do this. And interestingly enough, his first name, "Chödrak" in Tibetan, in Sanskrit would be "Dharmakīrti"—a most auspicious coincidence.

So, Chödrak Gyatso writes this mammoth work, roughly 800 or 900 pages long. It is very helpful but still difficult and long. But at least it is in indigenous Tibetan and it is presenting the Kagyü view; in particular it is presenting the link between the pramāṇa tradition and mahāmudrā and the practice tradition of the Kagyü lineage. It lays out why studying pramāṇa, why studying texts like the *Lorik*, is important to practitioners. And it makes the key link, as Khenpo Rinpoche was saying just before he left, between what is called rangrik, self-awareness, and the insight of mahāmudrā and dzokchen. We will be studying this self awareness, this rangrik, in the *Lorik* during this first week.

Let's fast forward again. Chödrak Gyatso lived in roughly the fifteenth century. It's now about twenty-five years ago in the late 1970s, I think. His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa has founded the Rumtek Shedra. Thrangu Rinpoche is put in charge of the shedra but Khenpo Rinpoche is one of the primary teachers there. Some of the leading students in the shedra are the Dzogchen Pönlop Rinpoche, Sanggye Nyenpa Rinpoche, and a number of the āchāryas who are now starting to teach in the West, such as Āchārya Tenpa Gyaltsen and Āchārya Sherab Gyaltsen, whose lectures form one of the commentaries on the *Lorik* that are available through Nītārtha. They are all studying under Thrangu Rinpoche and Khenpo Rinpoche and the four princes at the shedra at Rumtek. They are studying pramāṇa: they're studying the translations of the *Pramāṇa-vārttika* and the *Pramāṇa-samuchchaya* as well as Chödrak Gyatso's seminal work, *Ocean of Texts on Reasoning*, and still it's really hard, really tough sledding. Essentially they ask Khenpo Rinpoche for the Cliff's Notes [laughter], if he will give them the key points, you might say. There is a long tradition of this; it is not that this is only a modern idea. Traditionally there are synopses of these pramāṇa topics that the lineages provide for students trying to fathom this material. So Khenpo Rinpoche accedes to their request and in this case the scribes were Pönlop Rinpoche and Sanggye Nyenpa Rinpoche, who recorded one of the texts that Khenpo Rinpoche wrote. The way Pönlop Rinpoche tells the story is that the situation was a very similar to how the lineage recounts the way Chödrak Gyatso wrote his texts. That is, Khenpo Rinpoche and Pönlop Rinpoche would be alone and Khenpo Rinpoche, from memory, not from pouring over pechas, but from memory would quote from Dharmakīrti or Dignāga and then comment on what they had said. I am particularly talking about the *Lorik* now, but this goes for all the texts.

Pönlop Rinpoche says that Khenpo Rinpoche was working from some sort of meditative state and that it reminded him very much of the lineage stories of how Chödrak Gyatso had worked with his scribe in writing the *Ocean of Texts on Reasoning* some five centuries before.

Khenpo Rinpoche writes five texts in this fashion. That's about twenty-five years ago now, or thirty. The first one is the *Lorik*, which is translated here as Classifications of Mind. Actually the title lends itself to a variety of interpretations. It all depends on what that word *rik* in *Lorik* means. *Lo* means "mind," but sometimes *rik* has been interpreted as you see in our title—as "classifications"; sometimes it has been interpreted as "science," in which case the title would be "science of mind," which certainly makes sense; and sometimes as "awareness" (*rik* as in *rikpa*), in which case the title would be "mind and awareness," another traditional understanding. In any case, this is the first text of the five texts that Khenpo Rinpoche composes. *Lorik* is what we would call in the West something like an epistemology or a cognitive psychology. It is talking about how the mind works, how it knows things. It is talking about the subjective side of experience

Khenpo Rinpoche also writes what is called a *Tarik*, or in English, *Classifications of Reasons*. This is a book on logic. If you see smoke and infer fire, why does that work? What are the criteria there, very specifically, what are the necessary criteria for valid deduction? He also writes a Düdra, which translates as "Collected Topics." Its short title in English is *The Miraculous Key*. Both of these texts have been translated by Ari. The *Tarik* is available through Nītārtha Institute; *The Miraculous Key* was published in the journal "Profound Path of Peace" out of Gampo Abbey.

Khenpo Rinpoche also writes two commentarial works. One is called the *Lorik Thachö*, which brings out the difficult points of *Lorik* and discusses in detail some of the critical and controversial issues. I think it is translated as *A Critical Analysis of Mind*. This text has been translated by Karl Brunnhölzl, who is also the translator of our *Lorik* text, along with Chryssoula Zerbini.

The last of these five text by Khenpo Rinpoche is the *Tarik Thachö*, or in English, *A Critical Analysis of Reasons*, where he brings out or he discusses the key points of the Tarik, his text on logic.

In Western-style categorization, if the *Lorik* is the something like epistemology or cognitive psychology and the Tarik a text on logic, the düdra, *The Miraculous Key*, is more like a phenomenology; it considers the objects that mind knows, the phenomena of our world.

Lorik: The Homage

The above was by way of an introduction to the history of the pramāṇa tradition in general. Now we will turn to the *Lorik* text itself. I would like to make a few remarks about its structure and touch into the very beginning of the text, and then we will be getting into the meat of the material starting tomorrow. Today we are trying to simply provide an overall orientation.

Those of us who have come from previous Nītārtha or Pullahari programs or whatever need to realize that there are many editions of this translation, so the page numbers will vary. We will use as our standard the edition that we have provided at registration.

The text begins with an homage on page six and then we get very quickly, on page seven, to the first really substantial section of the *Lorik* which is on valid cognition itself. This section discusses what valid cognition is, what it is not, what are the four types of direct valid cognition, what is indirect valid cognition, what seems to be direct valid cognition but is not—issues like that. That is the first section and that goes up, in this edition, through page sixteen. This is the most important section of the *Lorik*, on pramāṇa itself. We will be spending the bulk of our time together looking at this section.

The second section, which starts on page seventeen, deals with what are called the "modes of engagement of mind." This section is largely about how conceptual mind works (not entirely, but it mostly focuses on conceptual mind). It discusses what is happening when we try to communicate and it discusses how mind is functioning when it is conceptualizing versus when it is having direct experience. What are these modes of mind like? What is mind like when it sees contradiction, or when it sees connection? These are important conceptual frameworks.

One of the most important points of this second section is how helpful and important conceptual mind is to us mere mortals. In the first section, under valid cognition, it is definitely said that one type of valid cognition is conceptual—that is inferential valid cognition, logical deduction. Nevertheless, the whole emphasis is on direct, nonconceptual mind, and conceptual mind seems to be sort of a poor second cousin. I am not sure that view is necessarily wrong, but nevertheless, this side of enlightenment, being able to figure things out is crucial. That is what this second section is largely about: the modes of engagement of mind, conceptual mind in particular.

The third section, which begins on page twenty-six, discusses mind and mental events. It distinguishes primary mind, sometimes translated as "main mind," from the mental events that accompany it. "Mental events" refers, for example, to faith or anger or doubt or sleep—all sorts of things.

Those are the three main sections: valid cognition, modes of engagement, mind and mental events. Then starting on page 32, there is a very nice concluding section where Khenpo Rinpoche talks about the purpose of studying this material.

With that as an introduction, I thought we might chant in unison the homage as a way of beginning our *Lorik* study. [All chant homage.]

To comment on this homage very briefly: Khenpo Rinpoche pays homage here first to Lord Buddha, then to Mañjushrī using the name Mañjugosha, an alternate name for the bodhisattva of prajñā; then to His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa, who founded the Rumtek Shedra, which was the occasion for writing this text. He then concludes with a traditional promise to compose the work.

Definitions of Mind

Even though our time is nearly up today, I wanted to begin our discussion of the main body of the *Lorik*. It starts with definitions of mind, page seven. The text talks about three words that in this tradition are synonymous. An important point to bear in mind, and this is often

difficult for many of us brought up in the vajrayāna tradition, is that the *Lorik* is written from largely a sautrāntika point of view, whose key points we will be reviewing in this course. Some chittamātra, even some shentong is in play, but this text is largely from the sautrāntika point of view. So, for the purpose of the *Lorik*, these three words are synonymous: "mind," which in Tibetan is *lo* (Tib. blo); "consciousness," which in Tibetan is *shepa* (Tib. shes pa), or sometimes *nam-she* (rnam shes); and "awareness", in Tibetan, *rikpa* (Tib. rig pa). We have all heard about rikpa in the dzokchen context, but that is a little bit different. Here we are saying it is the same thing as mind.

Now we will work with the first definition given in the text. This shows how the *Lorik* studies generally proceed—something is presented and it is defined. We need to listen, explore and penetrate what the definition is pointing to. The definition of *mind* is "that which is clear and aware." Mind has two qualities. The clear aspect of mind is *sal* (Tib. gsal) or *salwa* (Tib. gsal ba) in Tibetan, which I imagine we have all heard before. The clear aspect points to the receptiveness of mind, how it is able to reflect, its openness, and how it is not, at least in the normal sense of the word, a thing. Not using the word technically, but using the word in the common parlance, mind is not a thing. (In the sautrāntika view, it is a "thing," technically defined.) I hope we can discuss this more later but it is sufficient to know that, even in the sautrāntika view, mind is not a thing in the sense of being a material thing; it is not matter. These qualities of mind, which are said to be the nature of mind, are all pointed to by this word *sal* or "clear"—it is the sense that we can't put our finger on what we mean by "mind"; it eludes our grasp. On the other hand, mind is not a blank nothing either. There is always content, there is always intentionality to mind. This is its function and this is presented by the other part of the definition, "aware." Mind is always pointing to something, it is always aware of something. So that is the function of mind. Its nature is that it is clear and its function is that it is aware.

What is mind aware of? This takes us to the second definition, that of consciousness. Remember all three words are synonymous in this tradition. It is aware of objects. *Consciousness* is "that which is aware of objects"—sights, sounds, thoughts, emotions, smells. It is always aware of *that*, whatever is present to the consciousness.

What are these objects? We now go to the third definition, which says that *awareness* is "that which experiences an object of comprehension." In this tradition, objects are said to be "objects of comprehension," which is a technical word but the important point here is that there are two types of comprehension and they correspond to whether the mind in question is conceptual or nonconceptual. These two types of objects of comprehension are what are called "specifically characterized phenomena" and "generally characterized phenomena." There are important ideas that we will be discussing through this course. Some of you may be more familiar with the Tibetan for these, which are *rangtsen* (rang mtshan) and *chitsen* (spyi mtshan). Nonconceptual mind has as its object a specifically characterized phenomenon (rangtsen), meaning a particular (specific) sight, sound, etc., or maybe even mind itself, as we will discuss further. Keeping it simple to begin, the easiest examples of this are the sense perceptions—this color of black, that taste of sweet, and so forth. Conceptual mind has as its object of comprehension a generally characterized phenomenon (chitsen) which largely means a concept, or an abstract image, a generic image. That is what comes to mind when we are thinking—"blackness," "sweetness" in general.

Although these terms—mind, consciousness, and awareness—are said to be synonymous, they emphasize different aspects of cognition and they flesh out what mind is like. It is clear—can't put your finger on it—and aware. What is it aware of? It's aware of objects. What are these objects? They are objects of comprehension and there are two very important categories of these: specific phenomena and concepts.