

## Dharmakîrti on Thought (*Kalpanâ*), Language, and Reality

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to explain the Dharmakîrti's view on the relation between thought, language and reality – which is related to the Buddhist theory of meaning (*Apohavâda*). Diñnâga, the pre- Dharmakîrti Buddhist scholar, maintains nominalism which asserts that universal is not real, it has no reality, only the unique particular (*svalakṣaṇa*) is ultimately real (*paramârthasat*). According to him, word as a linguistic sign cannot refer to the reality; it refers only to the method of exclusion or the negation of others (*anyâpoha*). Dharmakîrti admits the above doctrine of *apoha* and he pays the great attention to the Buddhist epistemology, logic and ontology to develop this theory very systematically. Here, I have tried to present a new exposition of Dharmakîrti's view on the following questions: Is there any relation between thought and language? If yes, then how can thought (*kalpanâ*) be related to the language? And, does language refer to the reality?

**Keywords:** Nominalism, *Apoha*, *anyâpoha*, universal, unique particular (*svalakṣaṇa*), thought (*kalpanâ*), language and reality.

The Buddhist theory of meaning (*Apohavâda*), as established by the Great Buddhist scholar Diñnâga and his successor Dharmakîrti, is related to the relation between thought, language and reality. It is necessary to mention here that the Buddhist doctrine of *apoha* is basically considered as a theory of knowledge as well as theory of cognition.<sup>1</sup> According to Dharmakîrti, the unique particular (*svalakṣaṇa*) is the object of perception and the ultimately real thing, but the universal is the object of inference which is nothing but mental construction or thought-image (*kalpanâ*).<sup>2</sup> Perception grasps *svalakṣaṇa* (the point- instant real thing) directly, while inference takes it indirectly through *sâmânyalakṣaṇa*.<sup>3</sup> The valid knowledge (*avisamvâdijñâna*) is obviously free from contradiction and verbal expression, but qualified by the causal efficiency.<sup>4</sup> Perceptual knowledge is valid because it grasps the *svalakṣaṇa* (The unique particular, the object of perception) while verbal knowledge cannot grasp the object of reality, it grasps only *sâmânyalakṣaṇa* through inference. So, verbal knowledge is not separate means of knowledge other than inference.<sup>5</sup> Though a concept, being expressed by the word as we believe in general, can be understood as the meaning of the word, but words

along with the concept, according to Dharmakîrti, does not convey any positive meaning for the external reality. Because, words have no direct relation to the point-instant real thing, they thus denote only conceptual constructions (*vikalpa*).<sup>6</sup> When we believe that there is a relation between words and the reality, actually it is made by illusion which exists in the conceptual realm due to our desire.

Dharmakîrti's *apoha* thesis deals with the following questions:

- i) What is thought or concept (*kalpanâ*)?
- ii) Does language express thought?
- iii) If yes, how can it be possible? And
- iv) Is there any ability by which language can grasp the reality?

In fact, Dharmakîrti's philosophical programme is to show that how conceptual knowledge is possible in the absence of universals. By introducing the role of mental representation, the concept of causal efficiency and resemblance theory Dharmakîrti opens the door to emphasize the various aspects of *apoha* theory. According to him, the so-called primary qualities e.g. time, duration, space and extension, the notion of existence or non-existence, reality, generalization, causality,<sup>7</sup> etc. all are nothing but subjective constructions of the understanding. He sometimes uses the term *asâdṛśa* (dissimilarity) to identify the *svalakṣaṇa* which is the unique and absolutely dissimilar from all others. There is a relation between thought (*kalpanâ*) and language, it is well known to all that language serves more perspectives than our communicative purpose. Through language we identify the particular object and acquire the capacity to mark certain experiences with certain words. Without linguistic sign (words) thought (*kalpanâ*) cannot express anything. In fact, concepts and language mutually depend on each other, even the concept of virtual reality depends on words, at the same time, and the word depends on the concept to acquire its meaning. Language can be understood clearly through the definition of thought (*kalpanâ*), and thought identifies the object by association of word and meaning.

What is *kalpanâ*? In Sanskrit grammar the word "*kalpanâ*" is derived from the grammatical or etymological explanation of (*kṛp+lyut*) which means 'concept loaded imagination'.<sup>8</sup> In Indian classical philosophy the Sanskrit word "*kalpanâ*" is similar to the one that is the meaning of the term "*vikalpa*" –the two words, according to the Buddhist, are synonymous. The term

“*vikalpa*” is derived from the composition (*vi+kalpa=vikalpa*) which means mere verbal knowledge, imagination, thought image, etc. When the realist uses the term “*nir-vikalpa*”, it means the perception without imagination or verbal knowledge, and the word “*sva-vikalpa*” means the perception with imagination or verbal knowledge. Prof. B. K. Matilal, by using few words, suggests the meanings of the said two terms as “conception-free” for the meaning of the term “*nir-vikalpa*” and “conception-loaded” for the meaning of the term “*sva-vikalpa*”.<sup>9</sup> In Indian philosophical systems, the term “*vikalpa*” can be used as theoretical constructs and hypothetical alternatives. In the Nyāya system it is used to express any kind of thought constructions, may be they become true constructions or structures. When the Realists use the two types of perception i.e. *nirvikalpaka pratyaksa* and *sva-vikalpaka pratyaksa*, they want to say for the first, the perception without name, class, structure, etc. and for the second, the perception with name, class, configuration etc. But the Buddhist, the idealist school in Indian context, takes the term “*vikalpa*” as an obsessional tendency for conceptual images, which is nothing but mental construction. *Vikalpa* as conceptual image is originated from beginningless desire or ignorance (*anādi-avidyā*). It is, as Prof. B. K. Matilal puts, philosophically uncountable.<sup>10</sup> In the Buddhist philosophy the concept *vikalpa* is very pervasive; it is considered as a conceptual application in verbal expression.

Diñnāga in *Pramāṇasamuccaya* mentions the word “*kalpanā*” to indicate name, genus, quality, function which are nothing but mental constructions or arrangement (*yojanā*) or conceptual presentation (*nāma-jāti-guṇa-kriyā-dravya-kalpanā*). *Kalpanā* is thus associated with our judgment in which the subject represents something that is merely productive imagination (*vikalpa*). For example, “this is Dittha” is *nāma-kalpanā*, “this is a patch of blue colour” is *guṇa-kalpanā*, “this is cow” is *jāti-kalpanā*, -these are the different kinds of judgments which are mere mental constructions associated with language. According to Dharmakīrti, the sense of colour, name, quality, class, universal etc. are nothing but mere constructions of productive imagination (*kalpanā*).<sup>11</sup>

In *Nyāyabindu* Dharmakīrti defines perception as free from conceptual construction or *kalpanā* (*tatra kalpanāpoḍhambhrāntamptyakṣam, Nyāyabindu, 4*), it means perceptual knowledge is always free from *kalpanā* which is nothing but name, class, configuration, verbal expression etc. What is the nature of *kalpanā*? Dharmakīrti’s answer is that whatever is expressed by words and associated with the categories of language or conceptual thought is called as conceptual construction (*kalpanā*). *Kalpanā* is defined in *Nyāyabindu* as conceptual

cognition whose content is capable of a relation with a significant word or linguistic expression (*abhilâpasamsargayogyapratibhâsapratîtiḥ kalpanâ*, -*Nyâyabindu*, Chapter-1, 5). Dharmakîrti uses the term “*kalpanâ*” as a conceptual cognition (the *pratibhâsa*) which is associated with verbal expression. This kind of association is occurred when the content of conceptual cognition and the verbal expression are cognized as they are not separable (*abhilâpena samsarga ekasmin jñâne 'bhidheyâkâra yâ' bhidhânâkâreṇa saha grahyâkâratayâ úlanam. Nyâya bindu Tikâ*, p. 10).<sup>12</sup> He puts the term “competent” (*yogyâ*) to include even the conceptual cognition of new born baby who has no idea how to use language but whose cognition yet has possible capacity to be reached with articulate words. The conceptual cognition (*pratibhâsapratîti*) which makes the knowledge as fit to be verbalized and which is associated with language, but mere representation (*pratibhâsa*), not real, is called *kalpanâ*.<sup>13</sup>

Dharmakîrti uses the term “*abhilâpasamsarga*” in the definition of thought to indicate the relation between word and its referent (meaning of word). Here the term “*abhilâpa*” means the word with which object of knowledge or concept is associated. The term “*samsarga*” means an association between the word and the object (which is expressed by the word). The word “*yogyâ*” in the definition of thought has special significance which is equal to the word “fit”, it means the thought which is not at present verbally expressed but possibly fit to be verbalized. The concept of a thing is not actual or real thing as it is, but it is as thought as mental representation which is not real but verbally expressible. Dharmottara defines *abhilâpa* as a word or linguistic sign which denotes an object or a significant word. A chain of cognition is manifested to consciousness as associated with words.<sup>14</sup>

Dharmakîrti uses the term “*kalpanâ*” to define the nature of thought as the experience of a cognition of something which is able to be associated with a significant word. According to him, perception is free from *kalpanâ* (thought construction), substance, quality, action, genus, name etc. are known as *kalpanâ* or thought construction. When we use the following judgments such as “This is a pot”, “This is a cow”, “He is Devadatta”, “This pot is white”, etc. – these are the conceptual constructions of substance, quality, action, name, etc.<sup>15</sup> Not only that, these are the judgments of determinate perception. But in the case of indeterminate perception (the real perception according to the Buddhist epistemology), no individual thing can be expressed by a word or by any verbal judgment.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, *kalpanâ* is a conceptual cognition or consciousness which is associated with

language, and from which perception is distinguished by its nature. Perception is always free from conceptual constructions or mere mental images. Perceptual knowledge is valid in the sense that it is free from conceptual cognition.<sup>17</sup> Only indeterminate perception (*nir-vikalpaka pratyaksa*) is free from conceptual construction, determinate perception (*sva-vikalpaka pratyaksa*) and inference are not free from *kalpanā*. From the psychological point of view thought construction (*kalpanā*) is a mental act which is originated from our unlimited desires and the result of imaginative faculty of the mind. It means thought construction is associated with substances, attributes, actions, names, class, universals, etc. which are expressible by words in language – these are *kalpanā*.<sup>18</sup> *Kalpanā*, according to Dharmakīrti, can be defined in terms of language or in terms of possible linguistic association. It is always involved in verbalization having intention of speaker which serves his communicative purpose (*jāyante kalpanāstatra yatra ābdo niveṣitaḥ*. - *Pramāṇavārttika*, II, 176).<sup>19</sup>

There is a close connection between thought and language. Without language thought cannot be expressed and without thought language has no meaning. Both of them, according to Dharmakīrti, are intimately related to each other, they are very often equated from an epistemological point of view. Word as a linguistic sign signifies universals by a way of thought process, in the same way thought apprehends its object. It means, language indirectly signifies name, class, configuration, universal etc. through conceptual mediation, in the same way concept loaded thought indicates its object through language.<sup>20</sup> Here the way is the process of differentiation or the method of exclusion.

In epistemological explanation of close connection between thought (*kalpanā*) and language Dharmakīrti clearly defines the definition of thought as conceptual cognition or the thought process of consciousness - which apprehends the object through the linguistic sign. Here, thought is an awareness that conceives the thing indirectly by the concept. For example, when we think about a particular cow (*Budhi*), the actual fact is that here thought cannot conceive the cow as it is. Without language thought cannot express it, but through language thought can be expressed as it is constructed in mind as conceptual images and as it is excluded from others. By a linguistic sign thought is associated with its object, but one who is a member of the momentary world of reality cannot directly apprehend a jar as it is in-itself by the conceptual construction. In apprehension the conceptual projection of a jar in the mind is a mere mental construction and it produces conceptual image which is not the jar itself or the jar as it is in-itself. The thought construction of the jar is not real jar; it is nothing but a

representation which we identify by associating it with a linguistic sign.<sup>21</sup>

It is clear from the above discussion that Dharmakîrti's notion of *kalpanâ* is actually defined in terms of language or in terms of linguistic association. It means that it is associated with language. When a person observes a thing, he at first forms a concept about the thing in his mind which is latently verbalizable or it is, at the same time, immediately connected with a word. And, it is well known to all that without linguistic sign (*œabda*) thought (*kalpanâ*) cannot directly express its object or intended thing. The linguistic signs are associated with objects or things by their effective nature. In fact, thought and language mutually depend on each other. The concept of virtual reality depends on language and at the same time language also depends on the concept to acquire its meaning.

There is an important connection between thought constructions and language. It follows the fact - thought (*kalpanâ*) is actually defined in terms of language and language can be effective on the pragmatic ground with thoughts, not without thoughts. In order to understand this relation we have to understand at first the point which has been made by Dharmakîrti in his theory of meaning. Dharmakîrti holds that a word has a meaning in which concept (*kalpanâ*) is associated. Here the term "concept", as he puts it in his theory of meaning, is 'kind' concept which means thought- image (*vikalpa*). In the usage of language a word as a linguistic sign negatively signifies the concept, name, universal, etc. Therefore, the import of word is purely negative. Words thus signify neither external reality nor internal ideas; they refer only to 'the exclusion from others.' By words we can generally express meaning as mental construction having its source in the innate constructive or imaginative tendency of the mind.<sup>22</sup> The following verse represents this view:

*vikalpapratibimbeṣu tanniṣṭheṣu nibadhyate,  
tato 'nyâpohaniṣṭhatvâduktânyâpohakṛcchrutiḥ, vyâtirekiva yajjñâne  
bhâtyarthapratibimbakam, sabdât tadapi nârthatmâ bhrântiḥ sâ vâanodbhavâ.*

-*Pramâṇavârttika*, II, 164-65)<sup>23</sup>

There is no doubt about the assertion of Dharmakîrti, that is, a conceptual cognition is associated with language, it means without language no concept would be expressed. But here the question essentially asks whether thought and language are directly associated with the reality. In a question form, does concept or word directly refer to the reality? Dharmakîrti's answer is that whatever is concept-loaded is totally free from perception, it is associated only

with language and hence both of them have no ability to grasp the reality. Following Dinnāga's nominalism he argues that concepts and words are closely related to one another. All expressed verbal knowledge is conceptual and all conceptual knowledge is verbally expressible. Concepts are nothing but thought constructions and the objects of conceptual cognitions are names, classes, universals, etc. which are associated only with language, not with the external reality. Though the conceptual knowledge is originated and expressed by words, yet it is ultimately false, but empirically valid, because it has an indirect causal relation to the external reality.<sup>24</sup> In fact the concepts and words, according to Dharmakīrti, have no direct relation to the reality; the general belief in their relation is made by illusion. Word does not refer to the reality, it refers only to the negation, because it has no positive meaning, but actually it denies the contrary meaning. Concepts are the products of creative thoughts which have no direct relation to the world of reality.<sup>25</sup>

Dharmakīrti clearly holds that the meaning of a word is a mere conceptual image (*vikalpa*) which is the subjective form of mind and whose essence is the negation of all its counter-correlates (*anyāpoha*). The word "cow", for instance, does not refer to the particular cow; it refers only the exclusion of all objects that are not cow. It means that the word "cow" cannot denote the positive cow or any positive entity, but this word means only the negation of the non-cow. Similarly, the concept or the word "tree" means the process of differentiation (*atavvyāvṛtti*); it is not indicative of any real entity, because it is not directly associated with the real entity. But it simply denotes the difference (*vyāvṛtti*) from other things which are not tree.

The term "real thing" in the Buddhist philosophy and as generally known to all Buddhist scholars also, means something extra mental as well as extremely point – instant entity that is momentary, particular and causally efficient.<sup>26</sup> Whatever has existence in a particular moment depends on the capacity (power) of producing anything (*arthakriyāśakti*). Dharmakīrti admits power (*śakti*) as causal efficacy.<sup>27</sup> The unique particular (*svalakṣaṇa*) is always characterized by itself and unrelated to anything else. It is inexpressible, because it is non-verbal, but self-differentiated.<sup>28</sup>

In the later development of Dharmakīrti's system we observe that he has paid the great attention to the theory of language to give different accounts of the relation between thought, language and reality. His ontological programme however is related to the problem

that is, ‘how can thought be applied to the reality?’ According to him, thought can be expressed by language, but reality is not expressible by words, it is beyond language. Language has no capacity to express reality; it only expresses conceptual construction which is not real. Language is always associated with thought or concept of mind. A conceptual cognition is never present as an expression in absence of words. But it is possible in at least one case, i.e. in the case of a child who has no linguistic training. When a baby seeks his mother’s breast, to perform certain basic functions, in this case it is possible to say that baby has a simple concept which is called *kalpanâ* (*bâlakasyâvyutpannâ – samketasya kalpanâ*), and the concept of the baby is fit to be verbalized, but the concept is not actually associated with words. In spite of the only case Dharmakîrti holds that concepts are latently verbalizable (*abhilâpasamsargayogya*). However, he technically uses the term “fit” to emphasize the following points: (i) the association of a representation with its objects do not take place in reality, but only in the conceptual realm. (ii) Representations, according to him, are considered as *fit* to be associated with word because of link between the two which are entirely conventional. (iii) The fitness between words and meaning is not inherent but very conventional. In *Nyâyabindu*, *kalpanâ* is therefore defined as a cognition whose content is capable of a relation to a linguistic expression.<sup>29</sup>

**Conclusion:** According to Dharmakîrti, *Kalpanâ* is always involved in the process of verbalization and it is actually defined in terms of language or in terms of possible linguistic association. When a child masters language, at first he actually tries to learn how the appropriate word is used for a concept and then the relationship between words and concepts is established. So thoughts or concepts are not really independent of words, but they always depend on words. Dharmakîrti holds that *kalpanâ* as a conceptual cognition or a thought construction is related to the fictional entities which have no reality. Though *kalpanâ* is applicable to the verbal knowledge in practical life (*kapanâmâtravyavahâryatvât*)<sup>30</sup> and it represents the object of inference (*sâmânyalakṣaṇa*) through intellect, but the real thing is always free from it. Though word itself can be considered as an entity in the process of verbal knowledge, yet it is ultimately an association of a representation with its objects related to the determinate perception (*svavikalpaka pratyakṣa*) which is not free from *kalpanâ*. But *svalakṣaṇa*, the ultimate reality, is always free from verbal expressions, because point-instant reality cannot be verbally expressible. Word itself can also be considered as point-instant referent in a process of verbal cognition only for a flux of time, not for long time. Because the momentary real object

(*svalakṣaṇasadvastu*) does not exist for more than one moment in the process of verbal cognition. Therefore, thought construction (*kalpanā*) and its linguistic expression in verbal communication cannot grasp the reality. Dharmakīrti thus concludes that there is no positive meaning of word, without the exclusion of others (the negation of opposite meaning) no word can express its meaning.<sup>31</sup> Although, he does not deny the meaning of individual words (either in isolation or in the context of a sentence) for the fulfillment of communicative purposes in the practical world, but the world of language, from the ultimate point of view, is unreal like word, sentence, human speech, etc.

### Notes and References

1. Rajanish Kumar Mishra, *Buddhist Theory of Meaning and Literary Analysis*. D. K Print World (P) Ltd., New Delhi, 1999, p. 102.
2. *Nyāyabindu*, 1.12-17, cf. “Dharmakīrti applies the concept ‘*svalakṣaṇa*’ which is “the only real object of both perception and inference”. Shoryu Katsura, “Dignāga and Dharmakīrti on Apoha”, *Studies in the Buddhist Epistemological Tradition*, edited by Steinkellner, E; Osterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaft, 1991, p. 137.
3. Shoryu Katsura, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
4. *pramāṇamavisamvādi jñānamarthakriyāsthiti*, - *Pramāṇavārttikam* (Hereafter *PV*), 1, 3, cf. *Svoprajñāvṛtti* (hereafter *PVSV*), 1.3; See *The Pramāṇavārttikavṛtti of Ācārya Dharmakīrti: with the commentaries Svoprajñāvṛtti of the author and Pramāṇavārttikavṛtti of Manorathanandin*, edited by R.C. Pandey, 1989, p.2; *tato'rtha kriyāsamartha vastupradarūkaṃ samyak jñānaḥ*, - *Nyāyabindu*, 1.1.
5. *PV*, I, 3b – 4.
6. *ūabdāduccaritatā vivakcitārthapratibhāsi vikalpo'numīyata ityārthaḥ*, *PVSV*, 1.4.
7. According to Dharmakīrti, causality is not a relation (*sambandha*), but it is a conceptual construction (*vikalpa*). Prajñākargupta, the popular commentator of Dharmakīrti, holds that causality is the result of impression (*vāsanā – bala- sambhava*). The absolute particular is the point-instant, the unique, the thing - in - itself and causally efficient (*arthakriyākāri*). In Dharmakīrti's philosophy causality may be regarded as an objective fact, but it is nothing but subjective construction. When he uses the term “causality”, he, by it, tries to refer only to the empirical causation. See Harsh Narain, *Pratityasamutpāda*, Kendriya Ucca- Tibbati-Sikṣā-Samsthāna, Sarnath, Varanasi, 1986, p. 299.
8. In Western philosophy imagination, according to Hume, is a magical faculty of our mind, and it is sometime, as Kant puts it, called as “a concealed art of the soul”. Strawson in his essay ‘*Imagination and Perception*’ used the word “imagination” as ‘something we shall never fully understand’. According to him, imagination is the instrument of our perceptual awareness. But the Buddhist differs from the above by asserting that imagination is mere concept loaded image (*vikalpa*).
9. B. K. Matilal, *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986, Pp. 312-13.
10. *Ibid*, p. 313.

11. Stcherbatsky: *Buddhist Logic*, Vol. II, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2008, Pp. 20-21.
12. Satkari Mookerjee: *The Buddhist Philosophy of Universal Flux*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2006, p. 282.
13. Ibid.
14. J. N. Sinha, *Indian Psychology*, Vol. I (Cognition), Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2008, p. 415.
15. Ibid, Pp. 415-16.
16. Nyâya- Vaiùeṣika, the realist school of Indian philosophy, admits substance, quality, name, class etc. as real existents, but Dharmakîrti does not regard them as real existents, he regards them as mere thought- images (*kalpanâ*). Ibid, P. 417.
17. *Nyâyabindu*, 1.4-5.
18. *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*, Vol. IX, edited by Karl H. Potter, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2008, p. 328.
19. *The Pramânavârttikam of Âcârya Dharmakîrti (PV)*, edited by R.C. Pandey, 1989, p.100.
20. Georges B. J. Dreyfus: *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakîrti's Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations*, Sri Satguru Publication, Delhi, 1997, p. 218.
21. Ibid, p. 220.
22. Quoted in *The Problems of Universals in Indian Philosophy*, by Raja Ram Dravid, Matilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 2001, p.222.
23. *The Pramânavârttikam of Acarya Dharmakîrti (PV)* edited by Ramchandra Pandey, *op.cit.*, p.98.
24. See Raja Ram Dravid, *op. cit.*, p. 220.
25. Ibid, p. 221.
26. *arthakriyâsamartha yat tadatra paramârthasat, PV, 2.3*, cf. *arthakriyâṃ jñânâdikâyâṃ svarûpopadhânena samartha yat tadatra vastuvicâre paramârthasat, - PVSIV, 2.3*.
27. Amita Chatterjee: "Power and *Āekî*: A Comparative Study", *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 15, No. 3, Sept. 1987, p. 226.
28. *svalakṣaṇe ca pratyaksamvikalpatayâ vinâ, PV, 2.75*;cf. A. K. Chatterjee, "Apoha: Buddhist Theory of Meaning", *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, Vol. XXIV, No. 2, April-June, 2007, p. 14.
29. *abhilâpasamsargayogyapratibhâsapratîḥkalpanâ, -Nyâyabindu, -I, 5*, cf. *Nyâyabindu of Acarya Dharmakîrti with Dharmottara's Commentary* (in Bengali) by S. Chakraborty, Sahityashri, Kolkata, 1994, p. 11.
30. *PVSIV, 2.3*, see R. C. Pandey, 1989, p.64.
31. Prabhat Misra, *Úabdârthatattvabindu*, Avidya, Midnapore, Krantik, Kolkata, 2003, p.23.