Dharmakīrtian musing about Studying First-Personal Phenomena

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Various authors have described some traditional Buddhist textual corpora, especially the *Abhidharma* and *Pramāṇa* literature, as adopting an approach that is phenomenological in character. But as is generally acknowledged, these Buddhist corpora—including the dozens of traditional works that adopt a "Dharmakīrtian" approach[1]—differ from the western phenomenological tradition in ways that sometimes matter. One curious point of divergence is the use of "the first-person" as a technical term, as in the "first-personal phenomena" that we aim to discuss in this workshop. In phenomenology, this term is apparently borrowed from grammatical contexts, but this metaphorical usage would not do for Indo-Tibetan Buddhist authors who write in Sanskrit or draw on Sanskritic sources. In traditional Sanskrit grammar, the "first-person" *(prathamapuruṣa)* is so-called because it is listed first in the order of conjugation, but it is what European grammars call the "third person" (i.e., he, she, they). This terminological difference may not seem like much, but it resonates with a general tendency to avoid using forms of the first-person pronoun (in the European grammatical sense) such as "for-me-ness" in Dharmakīrtian discourse about issues such as intentionality. To some extent, this may reflect the overall Buddhist concern with negating essentialized forms of selfhood, but it also points to a more specific concern: while Dharmakīrtians hold that the intentionality relation requires a pole that constitutes a sense of subjectivity, they do not take that subjective pole as the proper referent of "I" or "me," although it can be mistaken for such. As we will see, they take even the intentional relation itself to be problematic. I mention all this because to explore the question of "first-personal phenomena" from a Dharmakīrtian perspective requires a bit of conceptual and theoretical translation. With that in mind, much of this essay will be devoted to unpacking the Dharmakīrtian approach to first-personal phenomena. I will begin by sketching the Dharmakīrtian account of intentionality, and I will then describe the crucial role of reflexivity in this model. Turning to knowledge of first-personal phenomena, I will raise some specific challenges to the scientific study of such phenomena before moving on to conclude with rather abbreviated reflections on my own and others neurophenomenological attempts to study the first-person.

[1] The term "Dharmakīrtian" refers to the views articulated in the works of Dharmakīrti (fl. 7th century CE) along with the long line of authors who draw on his work, whether through commentaries (beginning with Devendrabuddhi, fl. 7th century CE), or through direct and explicit deployment of his views or methods, which may be altered or located within a larger framework (as in the work of Kamalaśīla, 740-795 CE). In traditional Tibetan Buddhist contexts, "Dharmakīrtian" works continue to appear to this day.

1 Dharmakīrtian Model of Intentionality

If we were to poll our workshop participants, I suspect that we would find significant differences in how we each use the term "first-personal phenomena," and I confess that while there are a range of possible translations into Sanskrit and Tibetan technical terms that seem relevant, I do not find any roughly equivalent term. In the Dharmakīrtian technical vocabulary, much of what counts as first-personal phenomena" fall under the Sanskrit term *ākāra,* which I will render as "phenomenal form" (thanks to Georges Dreyfus). This term, phenomenal form, plays a key role in the Dharmakīrtian account of intentionality.

To begin, we should first note that the Dharmakīrtian account occurs at different levels of analysis, and for reasons that will eventually become obvious, the standard account of intentionality is based on the experience of "ordinary persons" *(pṛthagjana),* rather than Adepts *(ārya)* who have achieved insight into the ultimate nature of reality. In other words, this account of intentionality claims to describe ordinary, everyday consciousness, while acknowledging that it does not apply to some non-ordinary conscious states. At this ordinary level, the account assumes experience to be constituted by a causal sequence of "awareness events" *(jñāna)* that last only for a moment and are each causally conditioned by the previous awareness event. The account also argues for a strict distinction between conceptual *(savikalpaka)* and nonconceptual *(nirvikalpaka)* awareness events. Paradigmatically, nonconceptual awareness events are instances of sensory perception.

On this account, sensory perception begins with contact between a sensory stimulus and the sensory faculty, and provided that the previous awareness event has the necessary supporting conditions (including various aspects of attention), this contact produces a perceptual awareness event—an act of knowing—that presents both a "phenomenal form of the object" *(grāhyākāra*, hence forward "object-form") and a "phenomenal form of the subject" *(grāhakākāra;* henceforward, "subject-form"). Importantly, the perceptual content constituted by the object-form is causally conditioned by both the embodied capacities of the sensory faculty and various features (including affective states, goal-oriented motivations, and facets of attention) in the immediately preceding awareness event. This object-form is thus not just a "picture," so to speak, that is taken by directing the sense faculty toward a stimulus. Instead, it is the causal effect produced by the interaction of the stimulus, the faculty, and the immediately preceding awareness event, including affective states and latent dispositions. According to this account, the direct phenomenal content of a perceptual awareness is not the perceptual object or stimulus itself; rather, it is phenomenal form that is the result of a complex causal process in which the object is the "primary cause" *(pradhānahetu),* but not the sole determining factor. Thus, what is actually presented in perception is not the object *(grāhya),* but rather the object-form *(grāhya-ākāra)*. Thus, when I look at the glass on my desk, the phenomenological content of my visual perception is not that glass, but rather a mental "form" or "image" (both are good translations of the term *ākāra*) produced by a complex cognitive process that results from directing my attention to the glass.

At this point, it is important to recall the momentary nature of awareness events, including the phenomenal forms that occur within them. Critically for Dharmakīrtians, the object-form presented in perception is always accompanied *(sahoplambhaniyama)* by and in relation with a subject-form *(grāhakākāra)*. Each of these phenomenal forms are ontologically identical to the momentary awareness event in which they occur, but they phenomenally appear to be distinct in a structural relationship described as *vyavhasthāpana,* "placing" or "arranging." This structural "arrangement" of the object-form in relation to the subject-form thus constitutes the Dharmakīrtian version of subject-object intentionality.

This account of intentionality includes several key features. First, recall that the object-form and subject-form must occur together simultaneously. Since they are ontologically identical to the awareness-event itself, and since that awareness-event is momentary *(kṣaṇika),* the forms themselves only exist for only a moment. Here, an important sequela is that, although the subject-form accounts for the phenomenal feeling of subjectivity in the perceptual experience, the subject-form cannot be the agent of the cognitive act of perception. This is so because the model of agency used in *pramāṇa* discourse to describe the act of reliable cognition *(pramā)* is based on the account of transitive actions in Sanskrit grammar. There, agency is construed within a causal process that ends in the production of an action *(kriyā)* that is the referent of a verb in a transitive sentence. The process begins when an agent *(kartṛ)* effortfully engages with an object or patient *(karma)* using some instrument *(karaṇa),* and this engagement produces an "intermediary action" *(vyāpāra)* that is the primary cause of the final transitive action *(kriyā)*. This process follows a temporal arc, such that the final transitive action occurs immediately after the intermediary action, which is itself the product of the agent's effort. As noted above, Dharmakīrtians hold that the subject-form must exist simultaneously with the object-form and that they both are ontologically identical to a momentary awareness-event. This means that, at least on the Sanskrit grammatical account, the subject-form cannot be the agent of the cognition because the subject-form does not exist before the awareness-event that constitutes the act of cognition. Hence, the relationship between the subject-form and the object-form is not causal, but rather structural. In contradistinction to many of their interlocutors, Dharmakīrtians thus hold that cognitive acts are actually "devoid of an intermediary action" *(nirvyāpāra),* to use the terminology first articulated by Dignāga, Dharmakīrti's predecessor. In short, Dharmakīrtians reject the assumptions built into Sanskrit grammar, such that a pre-existing agent or "knower" *(pramātṛ)* acts on an ontologically distinct object to produce a subsequent transitive action of knowing.

Another relevant feature of the Dharmakīrtian account is the role of conceptuality in cognition. Dharmakīrti was a strict nominalist, and while some later Dharmakīrtians (e.g., Mokṣākaragupta, fl.c. 11th century CE) wavered somewhat from his position, this style of thought strictly denies the true existence of universals *(sāmānya, jāti,* etc.) or structural patterns *(saṃsthāna, ākṛti)* in the world. Conceptual cognitions engage with universals such "pot-ness" *(ghaṭatva)* that seems to be intrinsic to all things that we call a "pot" *(ghaṭa),* to use a stock Sanskrit example, but those universals must be constructed through a process of "exclusion" *(apoha)* in each conceptual

cognition. Setting aside the details of this complex theory, we can simply note that in the context of a conceptual cognition following on a moment of sensory awareness, concept formation involves taking the rich object-form in a perceptual awareness-event and systematically ignoring some of its features while enhancing others in a way that extracts information relevant to goal-oriented action. Concepts in perceptual judgments thus amount to predictions about an object's goal-relevant capacities based on its causal history, driven in part by "imprints" *(vāsanā)* placed by prior experiences.

In the present context, it is crucial to note that, according to the *apoha*-theory, all conceptual cognitions are distorted because they involve an innate *(anādi)* cognitive mechanism for "imputing" *(samāropa)* an unreal universal that is presented as intrinsic to all things of the same class. That is, the conceptual cognition of some concrete object as a "pot" presents that object as being the same as all other things called "pot" because they all instantiate the same abstract "pot-ness." But this "pot-ness" does not actually exist, so the conceptual cognition is distorted or misleading in terms of that false imputation. This error does not prevent concepts from guiding ordinary actions effectively (under the right conditions), but it falsely presents all "pots" as the same, even though (in keeping with Dharmakīrti's radical nominalism) there is nothing whatsoever about them that is the same at all. "Sameness" *(sāmānya,* translated as "universal" above) is purely constructed. There is no real sameness in the world. When translated into extensional terms, this means that there are no real categories of classes of things in the world, not even natural kinds.

Thus, according to the Dharmakīrtian *apoha*-theory, all concepts are distorted *(bhrānta)*, but at the same time, without concepts, ordinary persons would be unable to act in the world. Indeed, Dharmakīrtians hold that ordinary persons cannot consciously act on the content of momentary sensory awareness, which is necessarily nonconceptual, without first conceptualizing that content. And in this sense, sensory awareness is largely inaccessible to ordinary persons. Even if we grant that nonconceptual sensory awareness shows up in some form of "phenomenal consciousness" for ordinary persons, a report on what they are experiencing will obviously be conceptual, which means that the report will be distorted, incomplete, and contingent on the goal-oriented context that frames the report. Moreover, the very question of reportability, especially when the report is meant to be about the first-person, becomes all the more challenging when we consider the Dharmakīrtian version of its mechanism, where reflexive awareness plays a crucial role.

2 The Role of Reflexive Awareness

To understand the Dharmakīrtian approach to our knowledge of first personal phenomena, it would be helpful to first review what we have discussed so far by putting into the concrete context of, say, taking a sip of the drink on my desk. The immediately preceding moment of my awareness contains various affective features, including a desire to sip my drink. With my visual faculty directed toward the glass, and with various attentional requirements in place, a nonconceptual phenomenal form emerges for a moment in experience. This is a "phenomenal form" that, "filtered

through" or "shaped by" other subjective forms of the object presents itself in simultaneous relation to a phenomenal form of the subject. Driven by a desire to take a sip, my cognitive system interprets the object-form (i.e., the immediate phenomenal content in that moment of visual awareness) and uses the exclusion or *apoha* process to form the relevant conceptualizations (especially "glass") that enable this mind-body system to subsequently pick up the glass and take a sip. The initial, nonconceptual content (the object-form) in the visual awareness contains much more information than what is captured by the concept "glass," but these other features are ignored as irrelevant to the goal of taking a sip. At the same time, some of the object-form's features trigger imprints from previous experiences of successfully sipping a drink. These features become the focus of the cognition in a way that interprets the object's relevant causal capacity as identical to the causal capacity of things previously identified as instances of a "glass," even though all the features of present and past objects are actually unique. In this way, the concept "glass" is misleading *(vyabhicāra)* or distorted *(bhrānta)*, in that it suppresses goal-irrelevant aspects of the initial sensory experience while also imputing an unreal sameness—the "glass-ness"—to the object. Nevertheless, as noted above, the conceptualization (being well-formed in this case) successfully guides my action, and without that conceptualization, I could never act effectively to slake my thirst.

So far, we've covered most of the relevant contours of the Dharmakīrtian approach, but several key features remain to be explained. While the conceptualization of the object as a "glass" is necessary, much more is required for me to reach out and take a sip. Much of what must still be accounted for in this moment of cognition are features such as affective states, intentions, and even spatio-temporal location that are bound up with the sense of subjectivity presented in that cognition. These features are presented through the subject-form. How are they presented in the experience? The answer is what Dharmakīrtians call "reflexive awareness" *(svasaṃvitti)*.

One way to understand the role of reflexive awareness in this model is to consider how the hedonic valence *(vedanā)* of a cognition is presented. Dharmakīrti discusses this issue in the context of a particular problem: how is it that two persons can look at the same object, yet one person finds it attractive, while the other experiences it as unattractive? Given their nominalist bent, Dharmakīrtians unsurprisingly do not opt for a naïve realist approach, where both "attractiveness" and "unattractiveness" are simultaneously present as real features in the object, with each cognized by only one of the two persons. Instead, they hold that the hedonic valence of the experience, as presented in the subject-form, is conflated with the object-form when it is conceptualized. This is possible because the subject-form is simultaneously presented with the object-form in the nonconceptual moment of visual perception, and conceptualizations about that moment of awareness can include features from both the object-form and the subject-form, even though the subject-form is not taken as an object in an intentional structure.

Some opponents of Dharmakīrtians choose a different option: they maintain that the subject is known as the intentional object of a second-order cognition. But Dharmakīrtians deploy various arguments, especially one that appeals to an infinite regress, to reject that option. Instead, they hold

that the subject-form is being presented reflexively without being the object in an intentional structure. And this holds true for more straightforward cases of cognitions about subjective phenomena that occur even while attention is focused on an object. For example, while gazing at a painting, I may notice my affective state and conceptualize it as an emotion. In that case, the subject-form became sufficiently salient that, instead of creating a conceptualization based primarily on the object-form (i.e., the phenomenal presentation of the painting in my experience), my cognitive system forms a conceptualization based primarily on the subject-form. Such cases resemble the conceptualization of the object-form in an immediately preceding nonconceptual visual awareness as a "glass." But in cases such as affective salience and the conceptualization of emotions, the subject-form in a preceding nonconceptual awareness is the basis for forming the emotion concept.

It is important to distinguish this way of acquiring conceptual knowledge of subjective phenomena from introspection. In terms of the way I am using this term, introspection involves voluntarily directing attention to the contents or processes of consciousness itself. For Dharmakīrtians, this is a form of mental perception *(mānasapratyakṣa)* that functions similarly to sensory perception—indeed, they hold that there are six, not five, sensory organs, with the mind as the six. In a way that is exactly parallel to visual perception, an interaction with a stimulus creates an object-form in the subsequent moment, which is a nonconceptual awareness. And then, under the right conditions, a conceptualization of that object-form is constructed. The only difference here is that, instead of attending to a visual object, the cognitive system is attending to a mental object. But in the case discussed above, where freshly salient affect is conceptualized, the initial nonconceptual awareness that is the basis for concept formation is a reflexively presented subject-form in an intentional structure, and not the object-form.[2]

For Western philosophers, this probably sounds quite a lot like the phenomenological notion of "pre-reflective self-consciousness," and indeed, the resemblance is strong. For example, akin to a Western phenomenological approach, the sense of subjectivity in a perceptual awareness—encoded also in memories of that perceptual awareness—is reflexively presented without being construed as an object. There are, however, aspects of the Dharmakīrtian approach that remain obscure, despite a long and detailed commentarial tradition. For example, in our example of affective salience, the subject-form in an object-directed, nonconceptual awareness is the basis for subsequent conceptualization, but is there an intervening moment of mental perception (essentially, an act of introspection) before the conceptualization occurs? In addition to various puzzles of this kind, there are also aspects of the Dharmakīrtian approach that are not generally reflected in Western phenomenology, especially questions around the ultimate nature of consciousness. Be that as it may, in the context of examining first-personal phenomena, the overall

[2] Although interpretations vary, it may be the case that the conceptualization of the five externally oriented forms of sensory consciousness (vision, etc.) requires the mediation of mental consciousness. That is, the sensory consciousness itself must cause an object-form in nonconceptual mental consciousness, after which the conceptualization then occurs.

Dharmakīrtian model, including not just reflexivity but also the other features discussed above, poses some notable challenges, to which we will now turn.

3 Dharmakīrtian Challenges

From a Dharmakīrtian perspective, one way to understand the issues that emerge in the study of first-personal phenomena is the metaphorical distinction between map and territory. For Dharmakīrtians, our ordinary cognitive system does not directly map things in the world; rather it directly maps phenomenal forms presented in nonconceptual experience. Most of the time, our concepts are mapping the object-form, because that is the focus of our motivations for actions that are paradigmatically about what we want to get or avoid in the world *(heyopādeya)*. But here, Dharmakīrtians hold that our cognitions are misleading or distorted through "fusion" *(ekīkaraṇa)*, where the concept is "fused" with the object that it represents. This means, first, that the features of the concept are taken to be the real features of the object such that the "territory" (the object) is construed as actually being the "map" (the concept). Second, our concepts appear to be mapping a world "out there," instead of the phenomenal contents that purport to be the effects of interactions with that world. This is a distortion because, for Dharmakīrtians, the concept "territory" that are "mapped" by concepts is not an object out in the world; rather, the territory is the phenomenal content (i.e., the object-form) that is created by that object.

In my university classes, I sometimes illustrate the Dharmakīrtian notion of these two distortions by holding up my favorite teacup lid – a round, blue, porcelain disc. Presenting it to my audience, I ask, "What shape do you see?" And nearly every time, the students respond by saying, "A circle." The first mistake—that the conceptual map is identical to the territory—is revealed through the rather pedestrian observation that there are no geometrically perfect circles in the world. Instead of being an accurate description, the concept "circle" becomes a construction that can guide action, even though it imputes false qualities to the object. Pointing out the second distortion is facilitated by a trick: I always present the porcelain disc at an angle, so I can invite students to consider, "Look again. Is there a circle in your visual awareness, or an oval?" And they invariably respond that, yes, an oval (and not a circle) is the shape that appears in their visual experience. We can use the metaphors of transparency and opacity to describe this shift. In the first case, where the report is of a "circle," cognition simply "passes through" the "transparent" phenomenal content to describe an object as a thing in the world. In that case, we feel that some world "out there" is being mapped, even though our concepts are directly mapping our phenomenal content, and not a world "out there." But when one responds that an oval is seen, the territory is not some alleged world out there. Instead, it is the phenomenal content in that visual experience, and the map is the concept, "oval." With the right prompt in place, "transparent" phenomenal content becomes "opaque," in a process something like phenomenological reduction. And this points to a key question for the scientific study of first-person phenomena: which territory is being mapped?

In the case of the "transparent" mapping, the distortion *(bhrānti)* here is that we do not recognize that our concepts are directly mapping phenomenal content, which is then projected onto the world. In this transparent mode, when presented with a disc on a slight angle, I report that I see a "circle." But while from one perspective this is distorted or misleading, from the standpoint of achieving practice goals in the world, the report of a "circle" would usually be far more useful than "oval." If I am seeing the top of my teacup and the porcelain disc from different angles, a close inspection of my visual phenomenal content will reveal different ovals, but this information would be useless for putting the lid on my teacup. And this raises: what good is a report from the "opaque" mode? From the Buddhist standpoint, the short answer is that in examining experience in this way, we are not seeking to engage in practical actions in the world; instead, we are trying to understand the nature of experience itself, for it is here that truly problematic distortions lie. But we will not so readily encounter those problems by focusing our inquiry on the way objects appear in perception. Certainly, the term "first-person phenomena" would seem to include the way that objects show up in our visual perception as transparent "circles" or opaque "ovals," and some forms of scientific inquiry can be advanced by first-person methods, including contemplative practices, and second-person protocols, such as microphenomenology, that generate more finely grained phenomenological descriptions of experience in these modalities. But from a Buddhist perspective, it is especially our sense of subjectivity and all else that is encoded in the subject-form that requires our most careful inquiry, for it is here that the most problematic distortions lie. But subjectivity, as encoded in the subject-form, is not easily studied.

In our example of visual awareness, we can move from a transparent description to an opaque one fairly easily, even by using a simple prompt, but to examine subjectivity and all that comes with it (as encoded in the subject-form) is far more difficult. In part, this is merely a matter of habituation. For the purposes of survival—or to put it in Buddhist terms, for the purposes of succeeding in saṃsāra—we have become experts at evaluating objects, especially in terms of being obstacles or affordances, what Dharmakīrtians call "things to be avoided or things to be acquired" *(heyopādeya)*. Dharmakīrtians claim that our conceptual system has developed precisely for this purpose—essentially, to engage in object-oriented action—and as a result, that system can readily examine objects in detail, even to the point of making them phenomenally opaque (which in most cases only requires a simple prompt, although meditative training enhances this further). But our conceptual system becomes inadequate when we try to apply it to intransitive knowing, namely, the reflexive awareness of subjectivity itself. In the case of affective salience mentioned above, reflexive awareness initially presents an affective state, encoded in the subject-form, without making it the object of a transitive action of knowing. In other words, that initial moment of salience is presented intransitively, unlike the circle/oval in my visual experience, which is presented as the object of my transitive action of "seeing." But to conceptualize (i.e., to report on) that intransitively presented affective state, it must be presented as an object of transitive conceptual cognition through the *apoha* or exclusion process, such that now, it becomes something like the circle/oval in my visual experience. In pragmatic terms, such reports are often useful in that

they can guide goal-oriented actions (e.g., "I'm getting emotional and need to calm down"), but such reports are presented as the phenomenological content of a cognition with a subject-object structure. In other words, a report about subjectivity becomes a report about an object (namely, the objectified subjectivity) that is itself made from the standpoint of a subjectivity that the report does not touch. While such reports can guide actions such as emotion regulation, do they constitute a genuine inquiry into subjectivity itself?

It is this issue—an inquiry into the nature of subjectivity itself—that is a crucial component of the Dharmakīrtian soteriological endeavor, particularly as found in the Indo-Tibetan contemplative traditions that, in their philosophical articulations, use a Dharmakīrtian approach. Overall, the soteriological perspective here follows a standard Buddhist approach, namely, that the fundamental problem is confusion or "ignorance" *(avidyā)* about the ultimate nature of reality, and to uproot that confusion and achieve one's soteriological goals, one must cultivate the "wisdom" *(prajñā)* that is constituted by direct, experiential insight into the ultimate nature of reality. This is certainly true for the Dharmakīrtian style of philosophy brought in person to Tibet by the famed Indian philosophers, Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla (8th century CE), who use Dharmakīrtian tools to articulate Madhyamaka antirealism. Later, Indian philosophers rooted in Buddhist tantric traditions, such as Advayavajra, Sahajavajra, and Ratnākaraśānti (fl. 11th century CE), explicitly used Dharmakīrtian works to articulate an approach to contemplative practice that, at hands of the Tibetans, became known as *Phyag rgya chen po*, or in Sanskrit, Mahāmudrā. Although one can easily stray into various metaphysical debates in this context, the basic point is that, for this style of Buddhism, one's final soteriological goals can only be achieved though insight into the nature of ultimate reality, and that insight itself requires a recognition of the ultimate "Nature of Mind" (the typical way to translate various Tibetan terms, such as *sems kyi rang bzhin, sems nyid, gnyug sems*, and so on). Nature of Mind (NoM) practices, in turn, rely on contemplative techniques that involve an inquiry into subjectivity as a pathway to realizing the nature of mind, typified by contemplative instructions that involve a gesture of turning and looking at subjectivity itself: "When one looks again and again at the unseeable mind, the unseeing lucidly sees the nature just as it is" *(bltar med sems la yang yang bltas pa'i tshe / mthong med don ni ji bzhin lhag ger mthong).*

There are a few reasons why this turn toward subjectivity is thematized by the Dharmakīrtian-inflected Mahāmudrā practices. One is that, in common with other Buddhist contemplative traditions, much of our "ignorance" is about our notions of self. On a Dharmakīrtian account, this ignorance manifests at the most obvious level in the conceptualizations that occur when the subject-form in a moment of awareness is the primary cause of a subsequent conceptualization. As noted above, this involves a process whereby the subject-form is the main contributor to a subsequent object-form that is the focus of a conceptualization, and as with conceptualizations of objects, the conceptualization of the subject-form necessarily involves certain distortions, such as the notion that this moment of the subject is the same as previous moments, whereby the subject is felt to be be enduring over time. Likewise, the concept of the subject itself is taken as identical to the subject-form that it characterizes, such that the properties of the conceptualization are taken to

be real properties of the subject. Here, the claim is that the conceptualization process inherently attributes a number of errors to the subject-form, including not only that it persists over time, but also that it is a unitary entity, the referent of the grammatically singular "I" or "me," the agent of perceptual acts, the experiencer of sensations, and the controller of the mind and body, which belong to it. These are all illusions induced by the process of conceptualizing the subject-form. But from a Dharmakīrtian perspective, they are rooted in a more fundamental problem that is preconceptual, namely, the structure of subject-object intentionality itself, which Dharmakīrti calls the "internal distortion" *(antarupaplava).*

Here, Dharmakīrtians draw on critiques of intentionality rooted in the Buddhist philosophical style known as Yogācāra, where the subject-object structure is understood to be the subtlest form of the ignorance that contemplative practices seek to uproot. Unpacking the arguments that justify this claim would take considerable time and space, so stipulating those arguments' conclusions, we are left with the task of articulating how one could cultivate non-intentional wisdom. That is, how can one know the nature of mind without relying on subject-object intentionality? This question explains why the turn to subjectivity is such a crucial feature of the Mahāmudrā contemplative traditions, precisely because, as noted above, the initial nonconceptual moment of presenting subjectivity, even in object-oriented cognitions, must itself be intransitive and unstructured by intentionality. In other words, the first, nonconceptual moment of even ordinary awareness, which appears to be structured by subject-object duality, contains a nondual element, which is the immediate awareness of subjectivity itself.

Hence, if subject-object intentionality is an illusion, and if we accept that every ordinary, dualistic moment of awareness already includes a nondual aspect of awareness (i.e., the subject-form) that is not known itself as an object, then the contemplative techniques that enhance this aspect of awareness will involve some kind of turn to awareness itself. But how, then, can this be studied "scientifically" or objectively? How can one verify that an individual has recognized the ultimately nondual nature of the mind? Notably, this question applies even in the traditional Tibetan context of Mahāmudrā practice, where various texts attempt to instruct meditation adepts in the process of explaining their (alleged) realization of the nature of the mind to their students. A major obstacle is the problem of "knowing" something that in principle cannot be "known," where knowledge is understood to be dualistically structured and conceptual.

There are numerous Tibetan texts directed toward teachers who are seeking to help students achieve this type of nondual awareness, and a frequent concern is that the students will know the proper conceptual response, but they will not be reporting on a nondual experience. In other words, they can proficiently use nondual rhetoric, but they are reporting on experiences that are still dualistic. As we have noted above, all conceptualizations, from a Dharmakīrtian perspective, are inherently dualistic because they are about a sentient being acting in a perceived world. And the challenge here, akin to our oval/circle, is how to induce an experience in which one attends to the oval, rather than the circle. The intuition behind the notion of opacity is that the phenomenal content—in Dharmakīrtian terms, the object-form—in both the transparent and opaque modes is

roughly the same. The prompt that leads one to produce an opaque report ("oval") does not change formerly circular visual content into a phenomenal oval. Instead, the transparent report ("circle"), while useful for action in the world, overlooks features that were already present in the phenomenal content that one is reporting on, and the right prompt allows one to notice those features by reporting on how they appear in the phenomenal presentation, in lieu of a report that is relevant to some practical action. Roughly, one can say that the same territory (the visual content) is being depicted with two different maps. How is this accomplished? Not by changing the territory, but by changing the perspective from which the map is made. In other words, the subjective frame is changed. But if one seeks to render subjectivity itself to be rendered opaque, then subjectivity itself has changed. Now there is a new territory, and every attempt to map it requires a change in subjectivity, *ad infinitum*. This is the problem faced by the Tibetan manuals that aim to guide contemplative preceptors who wish to confirm that their students have indeed realized what, on their view, is the nondual nature of the mind.

4 Conclusion: Some Practical Conclusions

In recent times, one can readily encounter the notion that an inquiry into the fundamental nature of mind or consciousness amounts to an inquiry into intransitive, nondual awareness in ways that often resonate with the Tibetan Mahāmudrā traditions. One obvious example is Thomas Metzinger's Minimal Phenomenal Experience project. As I have suggested above, this amounts to an inquiry into the nature of phenomenal experience itself, that is, an inquiry into the most fundamental aspects of first-personal experience. My original hope for this contribution to our workshop was to unpack some concrete, empirical attempts to engage in such an inquiry, and were there space enough and time, I would happily do so. But alas, I must leave this second part of my intended contribution—which could likely be another paper in itself—to a later date. Here, I can only offer brief reflections.

To my surprise at the time, I was drawn into work on first-personal phenomena, specifically in the context of Nature of Mind (NoM) contemplative practices, at the lab of Richard Davidson in 2000, when in collaboration with a number of individuals, including the Dalai Lama and Francisco Varela, we attempted study NoM practices through a neurophenomenological approach. My main interlocutors at that time, besides Davidson, were Antione Lutz (Varela's last doctoral student, now at INSERM in Lyon) and Evan Thompson, who themselves went on to write an influential piece on neurophenomenology that, until recently, was not improved upon.

These early studies were guided not just by the contemplative practitioners' experience, but also by textual sources. It quickly became obvious that what texts say about contemplative practices can diverge significantly from what practitioners actually do, or from what they report. As a result, when we consulted Buddhist texts in Sanskrit or Tibetan that purported to be offering descriptions of practices, we often interpreted them as *prescriptions.* Likewise, when texts discussed practices in theoretical terms—for example, by discussing how a meditation for inducing

nondual states is related to the reflexive nature of consciousness—we also noticed that sometimes these discussions could be misleading. Although they appeared to be providing the theoretical background or mechanisms of practice, they sometimes seemed to be motivated primarily by the need to defend or promote a particular contemplative tradition or school of thought. I mention all this because one of the greatest challenges in scientific research on first-personal phenomena is not only the problem of truly first-personal reports—i.e., reports that are not about the first-person as an object—but also the conceptual systems and biases the color those reports and their interpretation. This is not a problem unique to this context: all empirical research is biased, and the notion of a purely first-person or completely unbiased first-person perspective is a fantasty that, on my reading, Dharmakīrtians should easily recognize. In that vein, I must confess that, on my perhaps jaded view, much of what is presented as phenomenological reports, particularly about contemplative practices, looks to me like confirmations of what contemplative traditions (or some mindfulness coaches) assume, rather than careful phenomenological reports.

As has been suggested above, a key issue here is the problem of reporting on the first-person from a truly first-personal perspective. In some ways, the very notion of a purely first-personal report is itself an oxymoron, since to make a report is to use language, and to use language is to engage in an intersubjective conceptual space that is no longer about just the first-person. Some of our earlier work with Tibetan adepts in the laboratory of Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin attempted to get around this problem by structuring phenomenological reports in a concise and value-free manner, but even there, we encountered problems. The some two dozen Tibetan practitioners sent by the Dalai Lama were clearly accomplished meditators, but when we asked them to rate their degree of say, phenomenal clarity in a meditation session, they at first gave very low responses on a Likert scale. We soon learned that this was not because their minds were dull; rather, they did not wish to appear prideful in their contemplative reports.

This raises the overall question of phenomenological reports themselves. How can we be sure that they are reliable? This question, to my mind, has not been adequately addressed, even though some recent work on neurophenomenology has been robustly advanced by the lab of Antoine Lutz and other colleagues. This recent work by Lutz, my close friend and early collaborator at Wisconsin, is impressive, and it is truly moving neurophenomenology to the next level, so to speak. It is also highly relevant to my own work in this area, since I am happy to say that Lutz and I are again collaborating on a longitudinal study of NoM practices during a three-year retreat to be held at a retreat center in Portugal. Lutz has been delving deeply into the neurophenomenological method, occasionally with my assistance, and in a forthcoming and impressive book chapter, he and other colleagues have articulated a fivefold progression that characterizes this work. Here is an image drawn directly from that work:

Approaches	Domains	Methods	Epistemic outcomes	Examples
A1. Phenomenological inquiries	1PP ("thick")	- Training in a *first-person method* (e.g., mindfulness meditation, *phenomenological epoche*) - *Second-person method* (e.g., micro-phenomenological interview, clinical interview)	- Increase in meta-cognitive skills (e.g., meta-awareness, *dereification*) - Produce and maintain a target state or phenomenological feature (e.g., compassion) - Insights about and identification of novel phenomenological *structural invariants* about the 'what' and 'how' of experience for the trained participant and researcher	Alcaraz-Sánchez et al., 2022; Petitmengin et al., 2019; Poletti et al., 2021; Przyrembel and Singer, 2018
A2. Experimental or clinical phenomenology	1PP ("thin" or "thick" reduced to "thin")	A1 + quantitative methods using phenomenological scales	Statistical regularities in phenomenological reports across time and individuals, as well as between phenomenological dimensions	Abdoun et al., 2024; Jachs et al., 2022; Kok and Singer, 2017; Nave et al., 2021; Segal et al., 2019
A3. Experimental neurophenomenology	1PP+3PP (behavior + physiology)	Participants trained in A1 or A2 to help the scientist to create mutual constraints between 1PP and 3PP	Identification of novel (neuro)physiological correlates from A1 or A2	Dor-Ziderman et al., 2016, 2013; Garrison et al., 2013; Lutz, 2002; Petitmengin et al., 2007; Trautwein et al., 2024; van Lutterveld et al., 2017
A4. Computational Phenomenology	Formal modeling, with or without 3PP	Modeling of existing data from formal phenomenology (A1)	- Explanatory and predictive models of specific phenomenological invariants from A1 - *Isomorphic relationships* between 1PP and 3PP	Bogotá and Djebbara, 2023; Costa et al., 2024; Farb et al., 2015; Moye and Van Vugt, 2019; Pagnoni, 2019; Ramstead et al., 2022; Sandved-Smith et al., 2021
A5. Deep computational neurophenomenology	1PP + formal modeling + 3PP	Disciplined circulation between 1PP and 3PP (A3) enabled by the formalism (A4). A paradigmatic formalism is deep parametric active inference.	*Generative passage* between 1PP and 3PP: explanatory and predictive model of specific neurophenomenological invariants	Beckmann et al., 2023; Sandved-Smith et al., 2024

These five layers or steps toward "deep computational phenomenology" are promising, and I will send along the chapter with this paper. Overall, the notion that we can computationally model phenomenological reports does not trouble me; indeed, I am intrigued and even excited by where this might lead. My main concern is with what is marked as A1, the phenomenological inquiries themselves. To put it succinctly, I am not convinced that the current means to gather phenomenological reports through questionnaires or other means differ in any significant way from standard self-reports, or from our earlier efforts with Tibetan adepts. And second, while microphenomenology has some promise, so far the means to gather the data is under-theorized, especially in relation to the notion of *evocation* that is so central to the method. Likewise, the method for interpreting interview data has neglected machine-learning tools to a surprising extent.

I am convinced that second-person approaches are crucial for understanding first-personal phenomena, but I don't think that we have quite found the best tools and methods yet.

Overall, to my mind one of the most promising approaches to the scientific study of first-personal phenomena emerge from a perhaps less speculative approach: namely, behavioral studies. We attempted this with some success in our earlier studies of Tibetan adepts, and we hope to do so in our projected (if funded!) longitudinal study of a 3-year NoM retreat in Portugal. In brief, the notion here is not to attempt to tie "phenomenological data" directly to only neuroscientific measures, but also to predicted behavioral expressions of phenomenological states. In our early work, some of these predicted behaviors did not work out at all. For example, based on interviews with advanced Tibetan adepts and our study of Mahāmudrā texts, we hypothesized that advanced Mahāmudrā practitioners should not exhibit habituation to an "oddball" audio paradigm, where a mismatched tone in a sequence of tones exhibits a very fundamental, almost sub-phenomenal, "surprise" response measured by EEG that quickly disappears when the sequence is repeated a few times. Needless to say, our hypothesis was wrong (and as a negative finding, never published), but it was nevertheless informative. Our latest version of a behavioral hypothesis concerns fragile visual short-term memory (FVSM), where out=r tentative hypothesis is that NoM practices should induce a state in which the contents of FVSM are more stable because the attentional selection of individual elements that degrades FVSM is inhibited by the nondual states induced by NoM practice.

Clearly, the empirical inquiry into first-personal phenomena is a remarkably rich and promising domain of research, but in the interest of sending along this long overdue contribution to our workshop, I will leave it here for now.