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Dignāga's
Investigation of the Percept

A Philosophical Legacy in India and Tibet

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Dignāga's Investigation
of the Percept

*This book is dedicated to the memory of Leslie Kawamura,
a valued member of this team who did not live to see the
completion of the project.*

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Geshe Yeshe Thabkhas of the Central University of Tibetan Studies gave two days of lectures on Dignāga's *Investigation of the Percept* (*Ālambana-parīkṣā*). This seminar was arranged by Joshua and Diana Cutler of the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center in Washington, New Jersey. Our thanks to them for organizing the seminar and for hosting the members of our group who attended.

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This project was originally conceived as a group endeavor involving scholars from the disciplines of religious studies and philosophy with expertise in Indian, Tibetan, and East Asian Buddhism. We anticipated that our research would result in a single volume that would comprise the intellectual history of the *Ālambana-parīkṣā* from its composition in sixth-century India through a millennium and a half of commentary and debate in India, Tibet, and East Asia. A group of eleven core members met together for six intensive workshops over four years and maintained an ongoing interchange of ideas and translations. As the project developed, it became clear that the output should be divided into two streams producing separate books, one addressing Indian and Tibetan literature and one focusing on the Chinese literature.

Nonetheless, our joint workshops provided invaluable cross-fertilization of research and yielded insights that have significantly improved our work, including discussion and translation of Chinese materials relating to the *Ālambana-parīkṣā* and its philosophical legacy in East Asia. We particularly thank Professor John Makeham of LaTrobe University, one of the two Chief Investigators on this project (along with John Powers and Partner Investigator Jay Garfield), who worked on the initial grant proposal and who has been involved in every facet of the research since then. John is an outstanding scholar of Chinese philosophy and one of the most intellectually generous people we know. His input into this project from its inception has made our work

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Academics at the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (TBRC) generously provided pdf versions of the Tibetan texts used in this study, and the data on their website also contained helpful background information. The Digital Dictionary of Buddhism, developed and maintained by Professor Charles Muller of Tokyo University, has been a superb resource for Chinese materials and for understanding the range of connotations of technical terms. The GRETL (Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages) site maintained at the University of Göttingen makes available a large number of critically edited Sanskrit Buddhist texts. SAT Daizōkyō and the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Texts Archive (CBETA) have provided edited and critically punctuated Chinese texts used in this study. The development and free deployment of such invaluable resources have revolutionized academic research in Buddhist Studies, and we wish to extend our sincere thanks for their generosity in making them available.

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Sonam Thakchöe is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy in the School of Humanities at the University of Tasmania and Director of the University of Tasmania Buddhist Studies in India Program. He holds an Ācārya degree from the Central University of Tibetan Studies and a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Tasmania. He is the author of *The Two Truths Debate: Tsongkhapa and Gorampa on the Middle Way* (2007), a coauthor (with the Cowherds) of *Moonpath: Ethics and Emptiness* (2015) and *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy* (2011). He has also published several academic articles.

Introduction

Investigation of the Percept and Its Reception in India and Tibet

This book charts the unusual and sometimes puzzling intellectual history of Dignāga's (c. 480–540) *Investigation of the Percept* (*Ālambana-parīkṣā*) and autocommentary (*vr̥tti*) in India and Tibet. *Investigation of the Percept* is a short epistemological text inquiring into the nature of the object (*ālambana*) of perception. Dignāga defines the percept as that which is the cause of perceptual cognition and appears to perceptual consciousness. He then asks whether the percept is an external object or an internal cognitive object. He argues that neither macroscopic external objects nor the fundamental particles that constitute them can serve this function. External objects lack causal power, in virtue of not being substantially real; fundamental particles do not appear to perception. Only an internal cognition, he argues, can serve both functions. The text comes with a brief autocommentary and was the subject of commentaries by two Indian scholars, Dharmapāla and Vinītadeva, as well as by three Tibetan scholars, Ngawang Dendar, Gungtang Könchok Denbe Drönme, and Yeshe Thabkhas. We present the text along with its Indian and Tibetan commentaries in this volume, demonstrating the way that these eight terse verses serve as the platform for an extended philosophical project and revealing the richness of commentary as a genre of philosophical expression.

Investigation of the Percept was written in the early sixth century and generated significant interest and commentary among both Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophers. Influential analyses of the text were composed by Dharmapāla (Hufa 護法, c. sixth century) and Vinītadeva (c. 645–715) in India, but it was not until the eighteenth century that a Tibetan commentary was written by the third Gungtang Rinpoche, Könchok Denbe Drönme (Gungthang dKon mchog bstan pa'i sgron me, 1762–1823). This was soon followed

by another commentary by the Mongolian scholar Ngawang Dendar (Ngag dbang bstan dar, 1759–1840). There are also numerous detailed examinations of the text in China, most of which engage with Dharmapāla's interpretations. The ideas Dignāga advances were highly significant for subsequent Buddhist epistemology, and *Investigation of the Percept* was translated into Tibetan and Chinese. Unfortunately, there are no extant Sanskrit versions of the root verses or the autocommentary, but fragments have been preserved in texts by Buddhist and non-Buddhist authors.¹

The philosophical positions defended in *Investigation of the Percept* were criticized by a number of Indian scholars, including Bhāviveka (c. 490–570) and Śāntarakṣita (c. 725–728). Chapter five of Bhāviveka's *Blaze of Reasoning: Autocommentary on Verses on the Heart of the Middle Way* (*Madhyamaka-hṛdaya-kārikā-tarkajvālā*) contains an analysis of Dignāga's presentation of perception and the percept. The "Investigation of External Objects" (*Bahir-artha-parīkṣā*) section of Śāntarakṣita's *Compendium of Metaphysics* (*Tattva-saṃgraha*) discusses the ramifications of Dignāga's rejection of the externality of the percept and cites his explanation of perception as an entirely internal process in *Investigation of the Percept*.

There are no surviving Sanskrit versions of the two Indian commentaries by Dharmapāla and Vinītadeva, both written within a century of its composition. Dharmapāla's work was translated into Chinese but not Tibetan and forms the basis of the East Asian commentarial tradition. It appears to have had little impact in India or Tibet on analyses of *Investigation of the Percept*. Neither Bhāviveka nor Śāntarakṣita mentions Dharmapāla in their discussions of Dignāga's thought. Vinītadeva's commentary mentions Dharmapāla twice, once in reference to an argument he presents but does not endorse, and a second time in a presentation of an argument he claims not to understand. He addresses a number of Dharmapāla's commentarial points but diverges from him throughout his exegesis. Dharmapāla's views are known in the Tibetan commentarial tradition only through Vinītadeva's brief discussions.

In Tibet, the Buddhist Epistemological (*Pramāṇa*) tradition—of which Dignāga is regarded as the patriarch—was enormously influential, particularly in the Gelukpa (dGe lugs pa) and Sakyapa (Sa skya pa) orders, but *Investigation of the Percept* received little attention until the eighteenth century. For Tibetan epistemologists, Dignāga's most important text was his *Compendium of Epistemology* (*Pramāṇa-samuccaya*). This work was read almost

1. Some of these have been published in articles and books, which are listed in the Bibliography. Some previously unidentified fragments have been gathered by Harada Wasō 原田和宗 (unpublished manuscript), who generously gave permission to cite them.

exclusively through the lens of Dharmakīrti's (c. seventh century) *Commentary on the Compendium of Epistemology* (*Pramāṇa-vārttika*), which became the standard for understanding Dignāga's thought in the Gelukpa tradition.

Tibetan scholars generally discussed Dignāga's work in the context of Dharmakīrti studies. Prior to the publication of Gungtang's *Ornament for Dignāga's Thought in Investigation of the Percept* in 1788, the text had largely been neglected in India and Tibet for more than 1000 years. Gungtang's work was followed by Ngawang Dendar's *Beautiful String of Pearls: A Commentary on Investigation of the Percept*, which was probably written near the end of his life. The text received no subsequent attention in Tibet until the present time.

In light of Dharmakīrti's eclipse of Dignāga in the Tibetan philosophical world and the relatively minor role *Investigation of the Percept* plays in Indian Buddhist epistemological literature, it is not surprising that this text has received less attention in Tibet than in East Asia. Surprisingly, two scholars in remote regions of Tibet suddenly developed an interest in it in the eighteenth century after a period of long neglect. It is also noteworthy that each commentary focuses almost exclusively on Dignāga's text itself, and neither can be regarded as a subcommentary on Vinītadeva's work, a relatively rare posture for a Tibetan commentary on an Indian Buddhist treatise. Neither author gives any indication of why he chose to analyze this text after it had languished so long in obscurity, nor does either indicate who requested the commentary, further deepening the mystery surrounding this episode in the literary history of *Investigation of the Percept*. Moreover, Ngawang Dendar does not mention Gungtang's work, nor does he directly address any of his commentarial points. Hence, there is no indication in the text that his decision to write a commentary was influenced by the work of his senior contemporary.

After this brief resurgence of interest in *Investigation of the Percept*, no Tibetan scholar of whom we are aware commented on the complete text until the late Geshe Lobsang Gyatso (dGe bshes bLo bzang rgya mtsho, 1928–1997) delivered a series of talks over several days in 1995 in Dharamsala, India. They were not recorded, and so his interpretations were not preserved. The most recent Tibetan commentary, by Geshe Yeshe Thabkhas (dGe bshes Ye shes thabs mkhas, 1929–), was given in lectures in 2014 and later edited as a formal written commentary and translated. This commentary appears in this volume. Members of the research team attended the lectures and asked a number of questions related to East Asian interpretations of *Investigation of the Percept*, particularly issues pertaining to Dharmapāla's exegesis. These issues were addressed in detail, and so this text represents a dialogue between the Tibetan scholastic tradition's understanding of Dignāga's thought and how it has been interpreted in China.

Investigation of the Percept in China

While in Tibet Dignāga has largely been interpreted through a Dharmakīrtian lens, China received Dignāga's works without Dharmakīrti's extrapolations, a situation that can be likened to a philosophical tradition that follows Plato (Dignāga) but without access to Aristotle (Dharmakīrti).² In East Asia, one of the primary Indic sources for discussions of Yogācāra philosophy was Dharmapāla, whose ideas were widely disseminated by Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664), particularly in his *Treatise on Mere Cognition* (*Cheng weishi lun* 成唯識論), and also in his translations of Dharmapāla's major works. In Tibet Dharmapāla had little influence. The only translated treatise in the Tibetan canon attributed to him is a short text, *Clarification of Entry into the One Hundred Dharmas* (*Śatadharma-prakāśa-mukha-śāstra*; Tib. *Chos brgya gsal pa'i sgo'i bstan bcos*), which contains a listing of 100 dharmas.

Paramārtha (Zhendi 眞諦, 499–569) produced the first Chinese translation of *Investigation of the Percept* sometime between 558 and 569,³ and Xuanzang published an interpretive translation in 657, which apparently added words in order to make it more comprehensible and possibly to correct what he regarded as errors in the earlier version.⁴ In 710 Yijing 義淨 (635–713) published a notoriously difficult edition titled *Explanation of Investigation of the Percept* (*Guan suoyuan lunshi* 觀所緣論釋).⁵ Yijing's text contains most of Dharmapāla's commentary but does not discuss the last two verses of the text. No reason is given for this omission. Despite its being characterized by Chinese Buddhist literati as impenetrable in parts,⁶ this translation became highly influential and was the basis of subsequent commentaries, including Mingyu's 明昱 (1527–1616) *Explanation of Investigation of the Percept* (*Guan*

2. Eli Franco made this comparison in a comment at a panel at the International Association of Buddhist Studies conference in Vienna in August 2014.

3. This was originally titled *Sichen lun* 思塵論 (*Treatise on the Object of Cognition*), but in Chinese Buddhist canons today it is referred to as *Wuxiang sichen lun* 無相思塵論 (*Treatise on the Object of Cognition Devoid of Attributes*): T 1619.31.882–883.

4. This is referred to in Chinese canons as *Guan suoyuanyuan lun* 觀所緣緣論 (*Treatise Investigating the Percept Condition*): T 1624.31.888–889.

5. T31 no. 1625.

6. In the preface, Wang Ye 王野 describes its language as “odd” (*qi* 奇) and “difficult” (*xian* 嶮), and he states that readers could not understand it. Mingyu (*Explanation of Investigation of the Percept*: 818c) states that when he first read the text, it was like “staring at a wall” and he was unable even to punctuate it.