Four Conceptual Thoughts for Resolving Doctrinal Disputes in the Abhisamayālaṅkāra

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Abstract: The Abhisamayālaṅkāra encompasses eight topics. The four types of conceptual thoughts to be eliminated appear three times in the chapters on Omniscience and the Ultimate View, corresponding to the stages of the Path of Preparation, the Path of Seeing, and the Path of Meditation. These three paths all require the elimination of these conceptual thoughts. The Path of Accumulation and the end of the ten grounds, however, discuss the obstacles to be eliminated from different perspectives. Although other treatises extensively discuss the obstacles to be eliminated as the afflictive and cognitive obscurations, the four conceptual thoughts here are not separate from these two obscurations and can be fully subsumed within them. Moreover, establishing the obstacles to be eliminated in this way has a profound and unique necessity, which is a distinctive feature of the Abhisamayālaṅkāra.

1. Introduction

The Abhisamayālaṅkāra [1] outlines the path briefly in eight topics (omniscience, path wisdom, basis wisdom, the four applications of mindfulness, the four right efforts [2], the four bases of miraculous power, the five faculties, the five powers, the seven factors of enlightenment, the eightfold noble path, and dharmakāya) and in detail in seventy, ranging from generating bodhicitta to engaging in activities that benefit beings after attaining dharmakāya. It expounds the stages of direct prajñā realization both from the perspective of the wisdom attained and that of the obstacles to be abandoned.

Thirty-six abandonable conceptual thoughts are discussed in the path of preparation, path of seeing, and path of meditation. These originate from worldly likes and dislikes—for instance, differing views on the same food leading to thoughts of grasping or rejecting. For bodhisattvas, such thoughts include clinging to pure objects, avoiding impure ones, and grasping at persons as either inherently existent or merely conventionally posited. Divided by personal and external objects, there are four main types (each with nine subdivisions), all of which conflict with emptiness and thus need to be eliminated in the course of practice.

The text mentions these thirty-six thoughts three times (in the three aforementioned paths) but not in the path of accumulation or at the end of the ten bhūmis—why is this the case? Do these stages not require eliminating obstacles? [3]. While major treatises extensively examine afflictive and cognitive obstacles, the Abhisamayālaṅkāra does not structure its discussion of bodhisattva practice around abandoning these two types of obstacles. Can the thirty-six conceptual thoughts be subsumed under

these two categories, and if so, how? This paper explores these questions.

2. Discussion on the concept

The Abhisamayālaṅkāra mentions these thirty-six thoughts three times (in the three aforementioned paths) but not in the path of accumulation or at the end of the ten bhūmis. This section examines why these specific stages are chosen for explaining the abandonments.

First, in the chapter on omniscience, after generating supreme bodhicitta, the bodhisattva must listen to teachings and, beginning from the path of accumulation, is established as a listener. The basis for practice, however, is the bodhisattva on the path of preparation. Following the "conformity with the discriminative wisdom" (the third dharma), the actual disposition for mahāyāna practice—the innate nature of mind—is posited on the path of preparation. Although the Ratnagotravibhāga teaches that this disposition pervades all sentient beings, the Abhisamayālaṅkāra establishes the path of preparation as the stage where the disposition becomes genuine, because it is here that the practitioner becomes a stable basis for the path, generates authentic path signs, and subsequently enters the path of seeing, free from major faults [4]. This aligns with the third dharma, showing that only the preparation-stage bodhisattva truly possesses the disposition and is a valid basis for practice. Since the path of preparation is immediately followed by the first bhūmi, where the bodhisattva directly perceives emptiness, the preparation stage must eliminate its own specific obstacles. Hence, the text explains the conceptual thoughts to be abandoned at this stage.

The four applications (catvāri pratyakṣaṇas) are divided into two pairs of cause and effect: the "equal application" and "peak application," which bring mastery in practice, and the "gradual application" and "momentary application," which bring stability. The peak realization (uttarābhisaṃskāra) is the fruit of perfecting the equal application. It is explained in four contexts: the peak of the path of preparation, the peak of the path of seeing, the peak of the path of meditation, and the peak of the uninterrupted path. Each is described in terms of its special qualities, wisdom, and obstacles abandoned. Unlike the equal application, which explains eleven aspects—such as the nature of the application, its practice, virtues, and faults—the peak application focuses on the resultant signs attained when the equal application reaches its highest point, without detailing additional practices. The peak realizations of seeing and meditation are explained through their respective wisdom and abandoned concepts. Although the path of seeing directly perceives reality, from the perspective of increasing clarity, the bodhisattva still needs to cultivate further and abandon remaining obstacles specific to each stage. Hence, the four types of concepts are presented for both seeing and meditation paths [5].

Although the five paths range from accumulation to no-more-learning, the Abhisamayālaṅkāra only explains the abandonments for preparation, seeing, and meditation. The path of accumulation and the end of the tenth bhūmi are not mentioned in this context. First, the first dharma of omniscience—generating bodhicitta—is placed in the path of accumulation, illustrated by the similes of "earth, gold, and moon," indicating that the accumulation-stage bodhisattva's mind is like earth (supportive), gold (pure), and the moon (growing). Subsequent teachings on listening are also assigned to this path. This shows that accumulation-stage practitioners are still in the phase of generating bodhicitta and developing wisdom from hearing; they cannot yet suppress or eliminate afflictions as those on higher paths can. Although the equal application is said to begin in the accumulation stage, it requires long and arduous practice. As for the end of the tenth bhūmi, this stage immediately precedes buddhahood. Here, the bodhisattva primarily abandons subtle clinging to the two truths. The sixteen objections raised in the section on dispelling controversies all revolve around the inability to reconcile the two truths. At this stage, the bodhisattva eliminates all remaining obstacles through the vajra-like samādhi and attains full awakening. Therefore, the four concepts to

be abandoned are not mentioned for the path of accumulation or the end of the tenth bhūmi.

The Abhisamayālaṅkāra-ṭīkā states that the peak application arises when the equal application is perfected. This peak has four phases: on the path of preparation, the bodhisattva can suppress the four concepts but not eliminate them; on the path of seeing, the portion of these concepts that are abandoned by seeing is eliminated; on the path of meditation, the portion abandoned by meditation is removed; and finally, at the end of the tenth bhūmi, all clinging to the two truths is completely eliminated at the root.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. The Classification of the Thirty-Six Conceptual Thoughts within the Two Obstacles

In Madhyamaka, refutable objects are twofold: those refuted by the path (daṇḍasya pratipādya) and by reasoning (yuktiḥ pratipādya). The former are obstacles to abandon in practice [6], divided into afflictive (kleśāvaraṇa) and cognitive (jñeyāvaraṇa) obstacles (fruitional perspective) or personal (pudgalātmagrāha) and phenomenal (dharmātmagrāha) self-grasping (causal perspective). The latter are erroneous views to eliminate when establishing the correct stance.

The Abhisamayālaṅkāra elaborates on path-refuted obstacles [7]. While various treatises mention karmic (karmāvaraṇa) and habitual (vāsanāvaraṇa) obstacles, all are subsumable under the two main types. As the Madhyāntavibhāga states: "All obstacles are included in afflictive and cognitive obstacles; their exhaustion brings liberation." This includes the 36 conceptual thoughts to abandon in the paths of preparation, seeing, and meditation.

The Moonlight Commentary on the Lamp of Certainty [8] defines the personal self as ordinary beings' false grasp of the five aggregates as a real "I," noting that personal self-grasping generates afflictive obstacles. Since the aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness) are divisible into countless phenomena, no real "I" exists—yet clinging to this composite as inherent constitutes afflictive obstacles.

It further explains the phenomenal self as false grasp of all phenomena as real: broad (including the personal self) or narrow (excluding it). Narrow phenomenal self-grasping gives rise to cognitive obstacles, such as clinging to the three spheres (giver, receiver, gift) in generosity [9]. The Laṅkāvatārasūtra confirms: "Afflictive obstacles stem from self-grasping; cognitive obstacles from three-sphere grasping and its habitual tendencies."

The 36 thoughts divide in the preparation path into: grasping pure (nirvāṇic wisdom, to adopt) or impure (saṃsāric afflictions, to reject) objects, and grasping persons as real or conventional. In seeing/meditation paths, they divide into grasping Mahāyāna adoption/Hīnayāna rejection, and real/conventional person-grasping.

Pure/impure and adoption/rejection graspings are object-clingings (per verses: "Through basis and antidote, two object-graspings"; "Turning towards/away are object-graspings"), thus belonging to cognitive obstacles.

Real/conventional person-graspings (per verse: "Real/conventional existence divides subjective grasping") arise from persons but are not all afflictive. Afflictive obstacles are grasp of aggregates as a real "I," while conventional person-grasping (clinging to persons as posited) falls under narrow phenomenal self-grasping—hence cognitive obstacles.

Dölpopa notes these conceptions have three aspects: superimposed (abandoned in seeing path), innate (abandoned in meditation path), and subtle latent tendencies (eliminated by vajra-like samādhi). Real person-grasping's superimposed aspect is abandoned in seeing, innate seeds in the first seven bhūmis (completing afflictive obstacle elimination), and latent tendencies (cognitive obstacles) in the three pure bhūmis. Mipham Rinpoche's Sunlight Commentary states Nyingma's path: first seven bhūmis eliminate innate seeds of both obstacles; three pure bhūmis eliminate subtle cognitive

obstacles and afflictive habitual tendencies. Thus, real person-grasping's superimposed/innate aspects are afflictive, latent tendencies cognitive. Conventional person-grasping is entirely cognitive.

As Table 1 summarizes: two object-graspings and conventional person-grasping (cognitive, eliminated throughout training path); real person-grasping's superimposed/innate aspects (afflictive, eliminated in first seven bhūmis) and latent tendencies (cognitive, eliminated in three pure bhūmis). My root guru explains: "Most subjective grasping is afflictive; most object-grasping is cognitive." Classifying real person-grasping's latent tendencies as cognitive is critical—otherwise, eliminating all afflictive obstacles by the seventh bhūmi would leave no obstacles in three pure bhūmis, reducing refutables in the meditation path's peak application to three instead of four.

This logic applies to object/subjective graspings in seeing/meditation paths.

Table 1: Classification of the four conceptions into the two obstacles.

ORP / CTE	Parikalpita (Imputed)	Sahaja (Innate)	Extremely Subtle Latent Dispositions
Conceptualization of a Truly Existent Subject	Afflictive Obscuration	Afflictive Obscuration	Cognitive Obscuration
Conceptualization of a Falsely Existent Subject	Cognitive Obscuration	Cognitive Obscuration	Cognitive Obscuration
Conceptualization of a Pure/Ascendent Object	Cognitive Obscuration	Cognitive Obscuration	Cognitive Obscuration
Conceptualization of an Afflicted/Abandoned Object	Cognitive Obscuration	Cognitive Obscuration	Cognitive Obscuration

3.2. The Textual Rationale for Not Framing Obstacles through the Two-Opponent Model

To summarize, the four types of conceptual thought are fully contained within the two obstacles, yet the Abhisamayālaṅkāra does not explain the obstacles of preparation, seeing, and meditation in terms of afflictive and cognitive obstacles. Instead, it describes them as four conceptions. This approach clarifies exactly what must be abandoned, highlights distinctions with śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha realizations, and emphasizes the Mahāyāna's unique non-abiding in saṃsāra or nirvāṇa, as well as the abandonment of self-centered striving for personal peace.

While texts such as the Lamp of Certainty and Madhyamaka in General, along with Nyingma obstacle-abandonment charts, explain which obstacles are eliminated at each stage, they do not specify their precise nature. For example, it is said that the first bhūmi abandons the superimposed aspects of both obstacles, but without knowing what these superimpositions are, practitioners cannot apply this in meditation. The Abhisamayālaṅkāra, as a guide to direct realization, therefore explains obstacles through the four conceptions, showing exactly what must be abandoned at each level—such as, in the path of seeing, conceptions about the Mahāyāna disposition. This method does not contradict the two-obstacle framework but makes the path more concrete.

The path of preparation has four levels—warmth, peak, acceptance, and supreme mundane dharma—each countering one of the four conceptions: grasping impure objects, grasping pure objects, grasping persons as real, and grasping persons as conventional. Mipham Rinpoche notes that conceptions of real existence are abandoned in post-meditation, while those of conventional existence are abandoned in equipoise.

Since obstacles arise from object-clinging, the Abhisamayālaṅkāra explains them by focusing on the abandonment of concepts. Tsongkhapa, in his Golden Garland, quotes the Ornament of Light Commentary: the four conceptions do not obstruct śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha awakening, so they are said to be "as good as non-existent" for them. For bodhisattvas, however, these conceptions must

be eliminated to attain their fruit.

Regarding subjective grasping: śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas abandon grasping persons as real or conventional, but this does not lead them to their own enlightenment. Thus, the four conceptions are uniquely bodhisattva obstacles. If explained solely through the two-obstacle framework, subjective grasping would be conflated with the grasping subject, making the obstacles common to both vehicles. This would also undermine the distinction that real-existence grasping is primarily afflictive (rooted in personal self-grasping), while conventional-existence grasping is cognitive (rooted in phenomenal self-grasping). Since śrāvakas do not eliminate cognitive obstacles, this framework would incorrectly imply they do, or that all subjective grasping is afflictive.

Clinging to objects can be classified in many ways, but none reveal the unique superiority of each bodhisattva stage. At the path of preparation, the key obstacle is distinguishing saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. Śrāvakas, tormented by saṃsāra, seek nirvāṇa one-sidedly. Bodhisattvas, however, abide in neither extreme: wisdom frees them from saṃsāra, and compassion prevents them from settling in nirvāṇa. If a preparation-stage practitioner cannot abandon both extremes, they will fall into worldly or śrāvaka realization.

In the paths of seeing and meditation, the focus shifts to grasping Mahāyāna as superior and Hīnayāna as inferior. Though bodhisattvas realize both selflessnesses, they may still conceive of Mahāyāna as inherently higher—for example, grasping its object as "appearance-emptiness inseparable like an illusion," or viewing Hīnayāna as lacking the antidote to cognitive obstacles. Since all phenomena are ultimately equal, such conceptions of superiority are delusions. Thus, the obstacles of seeing and meditation are the conceptions of the two vehicles as inherently different or unequal.

4. Conclusion

The Abhisamayālaṅkāra explains the obstacles of the paths of preparation, seeing, and meditation through the four types of conceptual thought, which are not separate from the two obstacles but fall within them, and as a practical guide it specifies exactly which conceptions to abandon at each stage so that practitioners who have gained certainty through study can meditate without confusion.

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