What’s in a Concept?
Conceptualizing the Nonconceptual in Buddhist Philosophy and Cognitive Science

Certain styles of Buddhist mindfulness meditation practices are traditionally said to induce “nonconceptual” forms of awareness, and neuroscientists and clinicians who study these practices often repeat this description. But what does “nonconceptual” mean? Clearly, without a precise specification of what a concept or conceptual cognition is, the notion of nonconceptuality is equally ill-defined. I present an account of concepts and nonconceptual awareness based on combining ideas from Buddhist philosophy and cognitive science. Specifically, I draw from Dhamakīrti’s “exclusion” (apoha) theory of concepts, according to which conceptualization involves the selective ignoring of differences, and I relate this theory to cognitive science research on affect-biased attention. From this perspective, the minimal form of conceptual cognition is perceptual categorization, and categorical perception is affectively and motivationally biased. In contrast, nonconceptual mental content does not undergo or result from “exclusion” from that which is categorically other. I apply these ideas to scientific studies of Buddhist mindfulness meditation practices, focusing specifically on experimental studies of the effects of these practices on the perception and experience of pain. One take-home message is that cognitive scientists, clinical scientists, philosophers, Buddhist scholars, and experienced meditation practitioners need to work together. In particular, more attention needs to be given to philosophical issues about concepts and nonconceptual awareness to clarify and advance the empirical investigation of mindfulness meditation practices.

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Evan Thompson is Professor of Philosophy at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and an Associate Member of the Department of Asian Studies and the Department of Psychology. He is an Elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. His books include Why I Am Not a Buddhist (Yale University Press, 2020), Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy (Columbia University Press, 2015), Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind (Harvard University Press, 2007), and Colour Vision: A Study in Cognitive Science and the Philosophy of Perception (Routledge Press, 1995). He is the co-author, with Francisco J. Varela and Eleanor Rosch, of The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience (MIT Press, 1991, revised edition, 2016). He received his B.A. in Asian Studies from Amherst College and his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Toronto. He was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto from 2005 to 2013, and held a Canada Research Chair in Cognitive Science and the Embodied Mind at York University from 2002 to 2005. In 2014, he was the Numata Invited Visiting Professor at the Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. He has also held invited visiting appointments at the Institute for Cross-Disciplinary Engagement (ICE) at Dartmouth College, the Faculty of Philosophy, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, the Ecole Polytechnique (Paris), the Center for Subjectivity Research at the University of Copenhagen, and the Department of Philosophy at the University of Colorado, Boulder.