

# Sautrantika

This school claims to follow the sutras closely.

We mainly take the sautrantika assertions based on the base, path, and result from Dharmakirti's commentary on Dignagas *Compendium of Valid Cognition*.

The Path and Result differ very little from the Vaibashika's... the path mainly deals with the 37 aspects of the path to enlightenment, and the result is considered to be liberation instead of full enlightenments asserted in the later schools.

It is this schools assertion about the base that is especially significant. The prominence of Dharmakirti's Commentary on Valid Cognition within the gelug school is due to its comprehensive approach to epistemology and logic. The study of this school is crucial, because even though the later schools reject certain assertions, they nonetheless use this schools epistemological and logic tools.

On our spiritual journey we need to move from conceptual knowledge to direct experience of the subjects we are studying. The mechanics of how we accomplish this are the key points of the Sautrantika presentation: what conceptual and perceptual consciousness' are, how they operate, and how we move from conceptualization to direct perception. These topics constitute a major part of the base as asserted by Sautrantikas.

## Existant Objects

### Things and Nonthings

The phenomena that exist in our universe are the base studied by this school.

The base is the material we work on, in order to develop the path so that we can achieve the result. If we have a clear idea of the base, it makes our path so much easier.

The Vaibashikas, they are realist in that they assert try independently existing phenomena and that things and events are made up of aggregations of fundamental atoms (partless particles / moments of consciousness ).

They believe that objects exist inherently or intrinsically and that existent objects can be divided into 2.

There are 2 types of valid cognition and therefore there are 2 types of existent objects.

**Here we have the Sautrantika definition of what exists: it is that which is apprehended by a valid cognition**

2 Types of Valid Cognition:

1. Direct Valid Cognition - cognize their object directly, such as an eye consciousness seeing a flower.
2. Inferential Valid Cognition - get at their object through reference, such as inferring fire through seeing smoke.

From these 2 types of valid cognition there are 2 kinds of existent objects:

1. things - an object apprehended by a direct valid cognition
2. non-things - an object apprehended by a inferential valid cognition

These 2 **exist** because they are objects of a valid cognition.

**If an object is not apprehended by either type of valid cognition, then by definition is nonexistent.**

## Nonthings

Existent objects that are conceptually constructed. This doesn't mean all conceptually constructed objects exist. So to differentiate, we need to clarify the term **valid cognition**

The tradition example of non existent objects are space flowers and horns on a rabbit. These are sheer fantasies and therefore not objects of valid cognition, direct or inferential. A more important example is the concept of **atman**, or self. If we explore the concept of self with valid cognition, we would see that it does not exist.

Objects of conceptual mind that *do* exist are objects of valid inferences.

for example, if you imagine an elephant sitting on a desk, of course the elephant doesn't exist. So, if you consider the non-existence of the elephant, the *absense of the elephant* is considered an existent object to this school.

So thinking of a rabbit with horns is considered non valid and non existent, but thinking of the non existence of an elephant on the table is considered valid.

So this may seem stupid to think about, but it becomes relevant when we start considering the non-existence of the 'I', which at all levels of buddhist thought is understood to be selfless.

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These 2 types of existence objects correspond quite closely to the division of phenomena that we saw earlier in the Vaibashika school, into compounded and uncompounded phenomena. They also correspond to another very important division: 1. Specifically Characterized Phenomena 2. Generally Characterized Phenomena

## Specifically Characterized Phenomena

From the point of view of an apprehending mind, a thing is an object of a direct valid cognition, but objectively -- from the point of view of the object itself, a thing is a **specifically**

**characterized phenomena** in that it has unique properties not shared other objects. This type of phenomena is unique and is perceived directly by the mind without an intermediary.

**definition: a phenomena realized directly by the mind taking the phenomenon's unique characteristic as it's appearing object.**

so from this we can see that the object must be apprehended by our direct perception, not by our conceptual consciousness, and what the mind apprehends is unique characteristics of the object, not the general properties that it shares with other objects of the same type. **This is crucial, but it is not something that intuitively and immediately understand.**

only apprehended by direct perception

**The specific car that the eye perceives.**

## Generally Characterized Phenomena

a Non thing is an object of a inferential valid cognition, and a generally **characterized phenomena**, in that it is a conceptual construct. As such it is called a **meaning generality** , which is an image reconstructed by the conceptual consciousness from a collage of images for the purpose of bringing the object to mind.

This is something the mind characterizes with a generality.

only apprehended by conception

**This is like bring to mind a later memory of a car, or the 'car-ness' of the car that the conceptual mind immediately overlays on the perception, is the generally characterized phenomena.**

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The eye perceives something unique -- the specific object in front of me, which is the specifically characterized phenomena, but then the mind overlays this with the generalization of the objects category -- 'water glass' or 'vase' -- and that is the generally characterized phenomenon

Two glasses might even share the same features, but they are not the same object.

According to the Sautrantikas we can not get at a specifically characterized phenomena with words, as soon as we use words, we have fallen into a generality.

Imagine you have just come back from an amazing vacation. And in your mind you are recalling every moment of it in vivid detail.. can you say that's a direct perception? No, Its just a memory no matter how vivid, it is imperfect and incomplete.

The Sauntrantika scholars are saying that words are by definition linguistic signs that allow us to mark objects only approxamitly so that we can make sense of the world.

## Real and Unreal Existent Objects

We can further refine our definition of existent objects. **Whether an existent phenomena is considered to be real or unreal depends on whether it can perform a function.**

Things that are Real are "real", because they can perform functions and bring about "real" results, whereas unreal things are "unreal" because they can't perform functions.

Because all [real] things essentially abide in their own essence, they partake in the differentiation between [themselves and other] similar and dissimilar things.

-Dharmakirti 'Commentary on Valid Cognition'

from this quote we can see that real specifically characterized phenomena can be determined by three criteria

1. **place-specific** - they occupy a definite, special location. Nothing else can occupy that same space, like the table in front of me. Conceptual images are different. i can imagine the same location, but it occupies not actual location; it is constructed solely by mind. As such, it is an unreal thing, and generally characterized in this instance because it cannot occupy a definite specific location.
2. **cause-specific** - real specifically characterized phenomena come in to existence due to specific causes and conditions, unlike generally characterized phenomena which are conceptually constructed. The mind imagining an image of course has causes and conditions, but they are not the specific causes and conditions that brought the object into existence.
3. **time-specific** - they are locked into a specific time frame. Coming into and going out of existence at specific moments due to causes and conditions. Conceptually constructed objects on the other hand do not have that kind of clearly determined time and duration.

This is the meaning of the words "abide in their own essence" in the quotation.

A specifically characterized phenomena abides in its own essence in the sense that it is not

mixed with other things, either in their location, or causes, or time frame.

For Dharmakirti, an object that conforms to these 3 criteria is real. It is also an object of perception.

A *thing* has additional properties aswell. Because of having these 3 characteristics and the ability to perform functions, a thing therefore possesses its own essence and is impermanent.

Because a *nothing* does not possess these three features, it is unreal, it cannot function (hence, is noneffective), and is permanent.

**This is an interesting aspect of the Sautrantikas notion of generally characterized phenomena that separates them from the Vaibashikas.** A generally characterized object is an imputation(as we have seen), and that, say the Sautrantikas means it is permanent. This conflicts with Vaibashikas idea of permanence, where there are only 3 examples of permanent phenomena: non-analytical cessation, analytical cessation, and space. According to the Sautrantika view there are countless permanent phenomena. **All concepts, which by definition do not perform a function, are permanent.**

Concepts include inferential valid cognitions as well as all the other non direct minds, many of which are quite deluded.

Deluded or not, there is *always* some degree of distortion of objects that appear to the conceptual mind; such objects may seem real, but they are not. for ex. if i see the buddha statue on my shrine, and then think of it when i don't see it, that image that appears may seem vivid and real, but it is not.. it is composed of distillations of all the images of the statue I have stored in my mind. So it is a generally characterized phenomena.

**Finally, a *thing*, which has all these aspects, is also an ultimate truth, whereas a nothing is a conventional truth.**

to sum up the existent objects according to the Sautrantika school

Things	NonThings
real	unreal
functioning	nonfunctioning
effective	noneffective
specifically characterized phenomena	generally characterized phenomena
objects of direct valid cognition	objects of conceptual valid cognition
ultimate truths	conventional truths

- Something is real because it functions
- something is specifically characterized because it is an object of direct valid cognition

- something is effective because it functions and is therefore a specifically characterized phenomena

**We can rove around this list seeing the logical connections between the various terms and in this way, clarify the distinctions between ultimate truths and conventional truths in the Sautrantika**

## **The Relationship of Mind and Object**

The Sautrantika school asserts that real things exist really, independent of the mind. This will be refuted by the Chittamatrins, so its useful to examine the Sautrantika assertion about how something is apprehended by consciousness.

**Our commonsense view of objects is that they exist out there, in and of themselves, and that a mind separate from them, apprehends them. This is the Sautrantika view.**

External things exist independent of the mind; not only that, they act as a cause for consciousness to arise.

By definition, the mind is clear and knowing. In order to know, it must know *something*, so when an eye consciousness sees a flower, the flower is one of the main conditions for a perception of the flower to arise.

There are three conditions needed for a consciousness to operate.

1. **the object condition** - the object of the consciousness
2. **the empowering condition** - the sense organ that operates to cause a consciousness to arise
3. **the preceding condition** - the preceding moment of consciousness that allows the next moment of consciousness to arise

The main point in this context is the *object condition*. For me to see a flower, there must be a flower there. It is a real, and independent object that is a flower sitting there on the table, whether my mind apprehends it or not.

When I look at the flower, my eye consciousness -- and unmistakable direct perception - apprehends a flower, and therefore, the flower is the object condition.

Since this is a causal relationship, it also has a temporal aspect, in that the flower is the cause and as such precedes the mind that apprehends it, which is the result.

## **The Reality of Material Objects**

The Vaibashika schools, artless particles exist ultimately, but so to do our aggregates, whereas the person, or collection of aggregates, does not.

The Sautrantika scholars wanted to refine this, so they designated different sizes of phenomena

in order to establish the dividing line between what exists ultimately and what is mere convention. The four levels they hypothesized are:

1. substantial atoms - partless particles - ultimate truths
2. larger molecules - groups of atoms
3. collections - when these molecules become larger and become apprehensible - shape and color visible to the eye, smell perceptible to the nose
4. gross objects - When a collection forms an entire object, that is designated as a *gross object* - conventional truths

The question of at what point does something become a gross object is debated, but becomes relevant when we try to separate conventional truth from ultimate truth.

ultimate truth - object of direct perception, is substantial, and is able to perform a function  
conventional truth - imputation that is insubstantial, unable to perform a function

To the Sautrantika's, a person is a conventional truth, because of being imputed on the aggregates and unable to perform a function. It is the aggregates of body and mind that perform the function.

At the other extreme, are the substantial atoms real? Sautrantika's would say they are.

Remember, these substantial particles were inferred, because they believed there must be something that is real and that is the base upon which all else is built. This is the reason why these substantial atoms were inferred, in a way similar to how scientists 'discovered' quarks and neurons.

Though these 2 schools share many aspects, they are not identical in either their emphasis or their assertions.

Even the idea of partless particles, there is a difference. The Sautrantika's assert that these partless particles are comprised of the 4 elements alone - earth, wind, fire, and air -- and do not include the sense objects of visual form, tangibility, smell, and taste asserted by the Vaibashikas.

So what is *real* according to this school? There are 3 views on this.

1. **A real object never changes and it not imputed by a conceptual consciousness.** If something is merely imputed by a conceptual consciousness Sautrantika's say it is unreal. That seems to suggest that only substantial atoms are real.
2. **Whatever is perceived by a sense consciousness is real, whereas anything else is not. Therefore, colors and shapes, tastes, tactile data, and so on are real, but the objects up from those things are imputed on them and so are not real.**
3. commonsense objects - houses, tables, pens, are real because they are not constructed by a conceptual consciousness

These are 3 slightly different views helped by Sautrantika masters.

For the gelugpas take the third stance when looking at this school. According to this argument, commonsense objects are real, because they are objects of direct perceptions and are therefore free of constructions and interpretations. The eyes see a book, and it is as simple as that, of course there is a real 'book'. The book is a collection parts, shape, color, tangibility, and so on--and each part of that collection is real, so the whole must be real.

But for the counter argument, for the book to be real, it must be intrinsic and not rely on anything... whereas it relies on its parts and a label. It would need to be intrinsically books.

Reality is not a concise thing, If something is real it must stand by itself, and we have a lot of discussion on where the dividing line is between clearly 'standing by itself' and blurring into a mere projection.

## Ultimate Truth and Conventional Truth

### Ultimate Truth in Sautrantika

the basic definition of ultimate truth in Sautrantika is

**A phenomena that exists from it's own side, without being imputed by a conceptual consciousness**

If you have studied Madhyamaka before, leave what you have heard on the shelf... these lower schools are much more basic, and for them, some things do exist from their own side.

The quest is to establish the boundary between intrinsic and conceptual, so "without being imputed by a conceptual consciousness" tells us that this definition is point to the intrinsic, and inherent. If something is imputed by a conceptual consciousness, we take it to mean that it depends on something else, whereas an ultimate truth does not.

Does a computer exist from its own side without being imputed by a conceptual consciousness? The Sautrantika's say No. The computer is a collection of screen, keyboard, metal, or at the deeper level of artless particles. Therefore it is imputed by a conceptual consciousness in that the mind labels the collection of parts as a computer. The computer-ness does not come from the side of the computer at all. Also the concept we see as a computer cannot perform a function. It is the actually existing parts that do that. For all these reasons, the computer is a conventional truth.

this ties in with the Sautrantika's definition of a conventional truth:

**a phenomenon that is established as a mere imputation by a conceptual consciousness**

Another explanation of ultimate truth appears in the 3rd chapter of dharmakirti's commentary:



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*Those phenomena which are able to perform a function are here said to be ultimately existent. Others are said to be conventionally existent. Those two types of phenomena are specifically and generally characterized*

The have already seen that things that come into existent through causes and conditions are able to perform functions and to produce results; such phenomena are said to have substantial reality or substance. *Substance* refers to a momentary thing or event that is causally effective in any particular time or circumstance. Those things are ultimate truths because they are able to perform functions to bring effects.

'Others' refers to phenomena that are unable to perform functions. These are called *fictional non-effective-phenomena*

**We can see that ultimate truth and functioning phenomena are synonymous. As well as conventional and non-functioning.** This ties in also with the term *thing* as something that can perform a function and is an ultimate truth.

## **Conventional Truth in Sautrantika**

Dharmakirti says a generally characterized phenomena is a concealer truth because the conceptual mind apprehending it obscured the unique entity of the specifically characterized phenomena.

**The term "concealer-truth" gives a nice flavor, to the definition, because, although it is a conventionally or relatively true, such a phenomenon cancels the ultimate nature of reality from the mind. The ultimate truth of that object is unique, specifically characterized object, The mind is obscured from seeing it as it really is because it is mixed with the conceptualized image of the object.**

Take for example the glass. It is nearly impossible for us to apprehend them without any further overlay. **Whether that overlay is the concept 'glass', or 'empty glass', or 'cup', etc.**

**Whatever concept we place on top of the actual object, obscures the object in some way... generalizing a specific.**

The Sautrantika's cite certain phenomena that can be fully expressed by language.. 'space', and 'selflessness'. *Space* is the mere absence of obstruction, nothing more. Because it is nothing more or less than that, language can express it. So these are **conventional truths**. This is different than the Vaibashika's who say these are ultimate truths.

For ex. I have 2 different book of different sizes.. even just thinking about them we can attribute differences to them, but we can also attribute a similarity - their 'book-ness'. **This generic or**

**universal image is cited as a conventional truth by this school.**

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Like all Buddhist Philosophical schools, the Sautrantika is to show the practitioner ways of developing the mind so that a correct understanding of reality can be reached and difficulties and sufferings can be overcome.

Their aim is liberation, not enlightenment, so they speak of selflessness of persons, not phenomena. Nevertheless, there are some very important ideas presented here that are useful for even those striving for perfect enlightenment.

It is essential to understand the epistemology and logic in the Sautrantika if we are to understand the mind. Although we feel that why they say about ultimate and conventional truths do not go far enough, if we really look at it we haven't even yet reached their level of understanding in the way we live our lives.

In particular, understanding their ideas of ultimate truth -- phenomena that are able to perform a function and conventional truth -- phenomena that unable to perform a function but nevertheless have a parallel to real things -- helps us not jump to immediate judgements and act upon them precipitously (without consideration).

**We are searching for sense pleasures all the time, and our need is so great that it is very easy to confuse the overlay that our desire projects onto an object or event with the actual thing itself. By seeing how so much of our perceived world is, in fact, imputed by our deluded minds, we can be more skillful about where we put our energy, and concentrate more on 'real' things, seeing the danger inherent within unreal expectations and equally unreal memories.**

Studying Sautrantika views can really help us see the extent of our presumptions and so become more openminded.

In the context of tenets, understanding the Sautrantika is especially helpful for understanding the later Madhyamika views, because many of the arguments leveled by the Madhyamikas address Sautrantika positions specifically. If you understand the Sautrantika position, that will make your grasp of the highest view more profound.