

Module 3 Lesson 2 - final transcript and srt.

📅 Thu, Jul 20, 2023 4:17PM 🕒 13:31

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

pencil, patterns, present, real, constraining, buddhist, sense, experience, world, write, model, elephant, philosophy, warmth, idea, put, conceptualization, entity, michel, past experiences

SPEAKERS

John Dunne, Professor

J John Dunne, Professor 00:06

So, when we say that in this way, you know, what is real is what impacts the senses because it has some kind of a causal feature. (This is all at the first level of philosophy: it's just a step beyond our naive sense of what is real.) When we say that, then what does that do for us? Well, of course, as Dharmakīrti would put it: we engage in a kind of conceptual process, not just out of a bad habit, but rather when we are experiencing the world, we're experiencing the world because we want to engage with the world, right? We are doing so because there are things that we want to get, and things that we want to avoid. So the mere presence of, let's say, a kind of mental event, is not of interest to us as beings who are trying to survive - right? As "samsara survivors", so to speak, wanting to get certain things and avoid other things. Rather, what we need to do is that information that we have, is what we need to interpret: we need to interpret it in such a way that we are able to act on what we are knowing - on what we are experiencing.

J John Dunne, Professor 01:15

So paradigmatically, for example, we could say that I see something on the far side of the field, and I'm cold, I want to get warm - and what I see I conceptualise as being a fire. So this specific idea of the real being causally efficacious, is not just about the moment: it's actually a prediction of what I will be able to do when I walk over there and feel the warmth. So I see the fire on the far side of the field, I walk over, I feel the warmth. When, as I'm walking over, perhaps I'll see - there's a famous flower in Sanskrit text that is said to look like a fire from afar. So perhaps I get closer and I put my hand up and no, I don't feel any warmth at all, I just see this bed of flowers. But the confirmation in a sense of that earlier cognition is: I put my hand up and I feel the warmth.

J John Dunne, Professor 02:09

So here's the question. There's a few different things that are involved here that are going to kind of lead us to levelling up. And one of them is: how do I make this judgement about ...

something being fire? Right? Or how do I make a judgement about this object being a pencil? So when I identify it, I have something that is "Sat" to me - present to my cognition - and I'm paying attention to it, because I need something to write, otherwise, I don't even cognize it, I don't even know that it's present in my field of awareness. So I identify it as a pencil, just like I can identify this as a pencil. And what it means to identify it as a pencil is that it can function in such a way that it performs the functions that we associate with that concept. Okay.

J John Dunne, Professor 02:59

But then the key issue is: well, when we are doing that, what we're doing in a sense is we're no longer just dealing with "this" (Sat) entity - this thing that's present in my cognition in this moment - we are now dealing with our past experience. And what we've learned about the use of the concept pencil, what we've seen with other pencils - maybe pencils of different colours. And so all of that past experience goes into this moment of conceptualising this entity as a pencil. Now, as I do that, what am I doing? So the "Sat" thing is the thing that's present to me right now, right? That's the Sat thing. But just knowing that doesn't do anything for me, I want to actually engage in the world, I want to be able to predict that I will be successful when I pick this up and try to write, so I need to conceptualise it.

J John Dunne, Professor 03:53

In that process of conceptualization - and this is a key thing that Michel [Bitbol] also pointed out - in the process of conceptualization, in a certain sense, I leave behind what is Sat, what is present, what is real. Because I'm no longer dealing with this event in this moment. I am now actually, to use a contemporary term in cognitive science, I'm mentally "time travelling" back to my past experiences. I'm doing this in a way that is generally not consciously accessible to me, or phenomenally present. But I am connecting to my past experiences in such a way that I can deploy the concept pencil.

J John Dunne, Professor 04:32

And here's the key: as Michel [Bitbol] pointed out, for this style of Buddhist philosophy (and indeed really all Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, at least in India), for this style of philosophy, the things that are real are what are immediately present. They are "Sat". And therefore all conceptualizations are not real, because of course the thought - that you can think of a pencil right now - we'll maybe hold one up for a second and then invite you to think about it. And now as you think about the pencil, I invite you to take your "thought pencil" and write something with it. Unless some of you are some kind of strange wizards, I think you're not going to succeed. By writing with your "thought pencil": there's nothing you can write, other than "thought writing", right? So if you sign your check with a "thought written" pen, I don't think it's going to work very well.

J John Dunne, Professor 05:26

So, the idea here is that that act of conceptualization actually brings us out of what's immediately present to us. And that act of conceptualization, also, part of what that is doing, is enabling us to actually manipulate this information that we have from our experience, but it is

not telling us what is real anymore. It's actually obscuring what is real, right? The act of conceptualization is not picking out some kind of a pattern in reality, like the "pencil-ness of the pencils" - i.e. there is no pattern here in reality that constitutes these things as pencils. So one of the key aspects of Dharmakīrti's philosophy, as it starts to sort of level us up from just our naive level of experience, is the recognition that all of our acts of conceptualization, which involve a kind of pattern recognition, if you like, come from our side. The patterns that we see in the world, are created through our conceptual process, right? The patterns we see in the world do not exist in the world.

J John Dunne, Professor 06:31

This is often a very challenging idea when I have conversations with my scientific colleagues: the idea that there's nothing that is the same about these pencils, a pattern that we can abstract from the pencils. That that pattern does not exist, what we can call the universal, the "pencil-ness of the pencils", the fact that that does not exist is a key aspect of this philosophy. So it exactly flips the kind of Platonism on its head, as Michel [Bitbol] pointed out, right? Whereas a Platonic point of view might be that the particular pencils, the individual pencils that we can actually touch and feel, are pale reflections of the real Ideal Pencil, right, the kind of "pencil-ness of the pencil", it's true entity. That's exactly the opposite of the Buddhist's point of view. The Buddhist point of view is that that ideal entity doesn't exist at all. It's just a fabrication. And it is not even trying to refer to some kind of real patterns in the world: there are no real patterns in the world, those are produced by our cognitive system.

J John Dunne, Professor 07:32

Now, having said that, there are some curiosities that arise, you could say. And one of them is, well, you know, why can I just say that "this is an elephant". So again, the point here is: what's real, is what impacts the senses. That mere fact doesn't do anything for us, because when we're talking about what's real, and what's present, always in the context of wanting to get things and avoid things - I should say, always as ordinary beings, right? (We're not talking about a different level of existence, so to speak.) So, the way our cognitive systems work is that they're involved in us getting into things and avoiding things. So this impacts my senses - and I want to say it's an elephant. And we all know what "elephant" means. I'm not saying I'm going to redefine elephants, so that elephants are pencils, and pencils or elephants - I mean, you know, what you think of as an elephant. And, why can't I just say that? Why can't - if there are no real patterns in the world, why can't I just say whatever I want about things?

J John Dunne, Professor 08:40

And the reason for that is that in our experience - so first of all, if that were the case, the whole idea of trying to be successful in our actions (to essentially predict that, when I walk across the field, I feel warm when I put my hand out, or that the pencil when I pick this up, I'll be able to write with it) if I can just say anything I want - and that means that all those predictions are, there's no basis for them. But I can't, in our human experience, I can't just say anything I want, because there are constraints on those conceptualizations. So to put it another way, the model that we build of the world out of our experience, that model is actually constrained by whatever

is impacting our experience. Alright? So whatever model we create of the world is based upon what's impacting our consciousness. And that whatever is impacting our consciousness is constraining those models, right?

J John Dunne, Professor 09:44

So, on one level, of course, what we can say is: even if there are no real patterns in the world, we can say that there's real matter of some kind, and that the constraints of this matter when it interacts with my visual system, is that it has certain kinds of causal properties. I conceptualise them as having certain features - there's no patterns in the world again, there are no (as Michel [Bitbo] put it), there are no universals. But nevertheless, I can effectively take these interactions with my sensory system and I can make sense of them in a way that enables me to effectively predict what I'll be able to do with these items. Because there's something about this stuff, which is constraining my model. So even though there are no patterns, there are constraints, right? And then the big question is: what are those constraints? What is the nature of those constraints? How do we determine what those constraints are? Is matter the best model for those constraints? Or is there some other model that will work better? Is there a point at which the models break down?

J John Dunne, Professor 10:55

These are the kinds of key questions that arise in this style of philosophy coming with Dharmakīrti and in the subsequent Mādhyamika philosophers who have picked up Dharmakīrti. So one thing to think about, of course, one aspect of this question is really: well, what am I coming up with from my own side? I mean, let's just suppose that I thought all pencils had small gnomes in them, you know, and that the reason they write is that the gnomes are producing the graphite: there's like a little gnome factory, you know, in the pencil, and gnomes are in there making it so I can write. And just suppose I believe that! Well, then, that wouldn't really affect my ability to write with a pencil. But if I'm trying to make pencils, it sure would make it hard to make a pencil. So as I have this kind of crazy, subjective, individual belief, in interaction with others, and in my interaction with this stuff, I kind of unlearn that belief so to speak.

J John Dunne, Professor 12:00

What I'm trying to point to here is the idea that even at this level of epistemology, part of what we're doing is we're trying to eliminate the aspects of my knowledge that are idiosyncratic, that are dependent upon my own particular subjective perspective. And this is, of course, the project in a larger sense, very much the project of science, it's also the project of Buddhist epistemology: is to come to a kind of understanding of the world that in some sense, brings us to a kind of objective stance, right? It's not just up to me what's real. It's, in fact, I can't just decide to say that this is an elephant, not only because this is constraining me, this stuff is constraining me. But the way we use the concept "elephant" is constraining me, the way in which others interact with this stuff is constraining me. So there's a kind of intersubjective world. And part of the creation of this type of knowledge is actually to embrace that intersubjectivity by no longer being caught in my own particular perspective. So there is a way in which the creation of models of the world is a kind of drive toward a kind of objectivism if you

like. Right? But the Buddhist point of view here, is that all of those models again are just kind of mental creations: they are not telling us what is real because a model is not reality - map is not territory.