

A Short Presentation of Different Natural States of Being
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1.

According to Buddhist psychology, the relationship between subject and object is the primary source of feeling, perception, apperception, and cognition. The vehicle of this relationship is consciousness (*rNam-Shes*), which is variously described as seeing, taking, reflecting, and holding (*gSal-Zhing Rig-pa*) [1]. In the normal waking state, we usually discriminate between the inner world of consciousness and the external world of objects (*Yul*), and simultaneously experience a separation of mind and body. In exceptional states of being, however, such as advanced levels of the meditation state, the mastered dream state, and the death state, these divisions can be transcended to establish more direct contact with both the external world and ourselves. At advanced levels it is possible to achieve the experience of unity between subject and object as well as between mind and body, and this is one of the principal goals of Buddhist practice.

2.

According to the Abhidharma texts [2], consciousness functions in six distinct modes. Five of these employ the sense faculties and correspond to the functions of the eyes, ears, tongue, nose, and skin, respectively. These functional modes are referred to as the five sense consciousnesses, and in the waking state the most direct contact between subject and object is achieved by devoting full awareness to one of them.

3.

Direct contact of this kind seldom occurs in our cultural setting, however, where rational and analytical approaches to perceiving phenomena prevail. Instead we have a strong tendency to employ the sixth functional mode of consciousness, referred to as mental consciousness (*Yid-kyi rNam-Shes*), which is dependent on impressions conveyed by the five sense consciousnesses. In the ordinary waking state, mental consciousness perceives phenomena 'coarse-rationally' rather than directly, and is therefore referred to as coarse-rational consciousness.

Main Features of Coarse-Rational Consciousness

4.

When coarse-rational consciousness is dominant, the sense impressions received from a given object trigger a process of perception that is strongly influenced by the individual's existing world view. The result of this process is a mental image that is both distorted and remote from the object in focus, and which acts to reinforce that world view by conforming to it.

5.

The formation of mental images involves several steps. First, everything surrounding the object in focus is negated, isolating it from its natural condition of interdependency with the whole. The sense impressions are then filtered through a web of definitions, descriptions, and valuations derived from the established world view, which is largely a product of the individual's time, culture, and personal experience. A mental image of the object is then created to conform with this world view, and is simultaneously named and described in the individual's language. Image, name, and description are then stored in memory (*Kun-gZhi*) as a mental imprint (*Bags-Chags*), and thus become a new component of the individual's world view, ready to be projected onto the sense impressions whenever the same or similar objects are encountered.

6.

Also translated as 'the basis of all experience', *Kun-gZhi* is carried over into the next existence when

we die. According to Buddhist psychology, all mental experience, whether conscious or subconscious, rational, coarse-rational, or non-rational, leaves an impression in the basis [*Kun-gZhi*] (note that "basis" is Komito's translation for the Sanskrit *Alayavijnana*, Tib: *Kun-gShi*), from which it may emerge at any time during this or a subsequent life. Emotionally influenced mental experiences tend to create the deepest impressions in the basis [*Kun-gZhi*], as is evident in the coarse-rational process of perceiving familiar objects.

7.

When we encounter a familiar object we usually perceive only one or a few aspects of the projected mental image. These aspects are selected primarily according to personal interests, which tend to concern what feels attractive or repulsive to us. Since our self-perception is also distorted by coarse-rational consciousness, however, our self-images are as precarious as they are misinformed. The impulse to protect our self-image therefore leads us to equate what feels 'attractive' with what supports our self-identity, and what feels 'repulsive' with what threatens it. These feelings not only influence the formation of mental images but also create memories that become deeply entrenched in the basis [*Kun-gZhi*] due to their emotional nature. Ordinary perception is thus influenced not only by coarse-rational consciousness, but by emotions that are themselves partial products of coarse-rational consciousness.

8.

When coarse-rational consciousness is dominant, we are seldom aware of either the process of image creation or the direct experiences of the five sense consciousnesses. This is because our matrices of definition, description, and valuation become detached from, and effectively replace, the phenomena they interpret. As a result, our linguistic tools often become more real to us than the reality they were created to designate, as when a map is mistaken for the territory it refers to, and of which it is merely an abstract symbol.

9.

The following are two examples of how the coarse-rational perception process typically occurs:

10.

Perception of a house

First, everything surrounding the object in focus is negated, isolating the house from the whole. Then the sense impressions trigger mental imprints stored in the basis [*Kun-gZhi*] which form a general image of a house, together with its corresponding name and linguistic description. These are projected back onto the sense impressions of the actual house. At the same time, certain characteristics of the actual house trigger mental imprints based on feelings of attraction and repulsion that are largely determined by the subject's impulse to support his or her self-image. For example, the subject identifies him or herself with the importance of energy conservation; there is a solar panel on the roof of the house; therefore everything about the house, seen or unseen, becomes attractive.

11.

All these imprints result in an indirect and distorted perception of a complete house, although only the facade is actually viewed. The 'complete' house is thus constructed chiefly according to the subject's existing world view, with little basis in the actual house.

12.

Perception of a person

In the same way, a mental image of a 'whole' person is constructed from only a glimpse. This image is strongly influenced by the subject's attraction to certain aspects of the sense impressions. For

example, if a single aspect is perceived as unattractive the image of the 'whole' person will be colored by this negative perception, which may trigger additional negative imprints associated with the first. This can result in a deeply rooted negative conception which becomes increasingly more remote from the reality of the actual person to the degree that it is emotionally influenced. It is easy to become very convinced of the accuracy of such perceptions when they are the result of emotional as well as conceptual processes, a tendency of coarse-rational consciousness which further limits perception to that of aspects already anticipated and valued.

Main Features of the Meditation State of Being

13.

A principal goal of Buddhist training is therefore to diminish the coarse-rational mode of consciousness, as a necessary first step toward closing the experiential gaps separating subject from object and mind from body [3]. This may be achieved through meditation, [or] by devoting full awareness to one of the five sense consciousnesses, as mentioned above. Direct experience of a sense consciousness [*mNgon-Sum*] is possible at advanced levels of meditation because, unlike coarse-rational consciousness, the sense consciousnesses are both non-rational and free of interference from language or mental images.

14.

When coarse-rational consciousness has been calmed, it is necessary to develop the subtle being [*'Ja'-Lus-YeShes*] to fully transcend the gaps separating subject from object and mind from body. The subtle being is able to transcend the boundaries of time and space as well as its own mental and physical forms through direct perception of the subtle senses, or subtle sense consciousness. Unlike the five sense consciousnesses and ordinary mental consciousness, subtle sense consciousness acts independently of the sense impressions, perceiving the five corresponding subtle sense qualities in unison rather than individually. Comparable to advanced levels of yogi consciousness, subtle sense consciousness can be achieved in meditation by a number of methods, including breathing exercises and concentrated awareness of either subtle or ordinary sense qualities. Similar and related levels of subtle sense perception can also be attained in the visualization, or 'imagery', state, the dream state, and the death state, once coarse-rational consciousness has been brought to rest. Before discussing these states of being, however, it may be useful to outline the various levels of the meditation state of being.

Levels of the Meditation State

15.

All levels of the meditation state are developments of the sixth functional mode of consciousness, or mental consciousness. Once coarse-rational consciousness has been calmed, however, they are not influenced by coarse-rational perception and are therefore characterized as 'non-coarse-rational' forms of mental consciousness.

16.

The first two levels are calm abiding [*Zhi-gNas*], of which there are in turn several levels, and special insight [*lHag-mThong*]. When the first level of calm abiding [*Zhi-gNas*] is attained, the mind of the subject is clear and stable, abiding non-rationally and one-pointedly with the object in focus which results in a sensation of body lightness and blissfulness of mind. This is achieved either by [practicing concentrated awareness and] training the mind to be free of mental images, or through visualization techniques, which will be discussed below. The calm abiding [*Zhi-gNas*] attainment is primarily intended to induce a non-rational appreciation of reality and is not directly concerned with wisdom or insight.

17.

Attainment of the second level, on the other hand, is intended to awaken and develop the wisdom and fundamental, non-coarse-rational intellect of mental consciousness. Special insight [*lHag-mThong*] is thus characterized by a basic excitatory awareness of and insight into the void nature of phenomena. When this level of meditation is reached, the attainments of calm abiding [*Zhi-gNas*] and special insight [*lHag-mThong*] are combined and the two levels united.

18.

The unity of calm abiding [*Zhi-gNas*] and special insight [*lHag-mThong*] is significant because it makes the birth of the subtle being possible. This occurs when the meditation levels of means [*Thabs*] and wisdom [*Shes-Rab*] are achieved and fused together. *Thabs*, variously translated as 'the basic operational mode of being,' 'the means,' and 'the father energy,' is closely related to the non-rational calm abiding [*Zhi-gNas*] experience of clarity, stability, and bliss, while *Shes-Rab*, the 'appreciative discrimination,' 'primordial wisdom,' or 'mother energy,' is related to the rational special insight [*lHag-mThong*] experience of awareness, insight, and intellect. Attainment of calm abiding [*Zhi-gNas*] causes that of the primary level of means [*Thabs*], and attainment of special insight [*lHag-mThong*] causes that of the primary level of wisdom [*Shes-Rab*]. Correspondingly the unity of calm abiding [*Zhi-gNas*] and special insight [*lHag-mThong*] causes that of the primary levels of means [*Thabs*] and wisdom [*Shes-Rab*], and this in turn causes the subtle body ('*Jas*'-*Lug*) to merge with the subtle mind (*Ye-Shes*), creating the subtle being ('*Jas*'-*Lug*-*Ye-Shes*). The unity of means [*Thabs*] and wisdom [*Shes-Rab*] and the birth of the subtle being are essential to the attainment of all higher levels of meditation, and therefore to the existential unities of subject and object, mind and body.

19.

According to the Sutra tradition, the attainment of Buddhahood entails ten more levels of development following the unity of calm abiding [*Zhi-gNas*] and special insight [*lHag-mThong*]. In Sanskrit these ten are called the *bhumis*, the first seven of which constitute the 'path of entering the nature of being,' or *mThong-Lam*. The attainment of *mThong-Lam* represents a state of stable and genuine unity with the nature of being or reality, and thus between subject and object, mind and body. This attainment encompasses the totality of the subject's being, whereas at the special insight [*lHag-mThong*] level the subject merely experiences this unity.

20.

The last three *bhumis* constitute the *sGon-Lam* attainment, and consist of further refinements of the *mThong-Lam* unity. Attainment of all ten *bhumis* represents the achievement of Buddhahood.

21.

According to the Tantra tradition, the attainment of Buddhahood involves two stages of development: *sKedRim* and *rDzogs-Rim*.

Main features of the imagery state of being

22.

When the clarity and one-pointedness of calm abiding [*Zhi-gNas*], the first level of the meditation state, have been attained it is possible to develop the subtle being through visualization or 'imagery' techniques. This occurs in the 'clear imagery' state of being, which is comparable to the mastered dream state and advanced levels of the meditation state. Non-coarse-rational and independent of physical sense impressions, this form of mental consciousness experiences the subtle sense qualities

in unison and transcends spatio-temporal distinctions in the same way as subtle sense consciousness.

23.

In this state body and mind are in intimate contact, as are object and subject, which resembles the subtle being of subtle sense consciousness. The object, or 'imagery scene', can be reality at any level of manifestation, from the subtlest energy field to the roughly manifested level we normally think of as reality. In the clear imagery state, therefore, the subject can not only materialize in any space at any time, it can also manifest itself in and make intimate contact with all levels of reality, from the coarse-rational, ordinarily perceived level to the subtlest energy field.

24.

When coarse-rational consciousness is dominant we often experience the ordinary imagery state of being, during 'day dreams' for example. In this state subject, object, and mental consciousness are similar to those of the normal waking state. It is therefore necessary first to diminish coarse-rational consciousness, after which it is possible to achieve a clear and stable visualization or imagery scene into which the subject can begin to manifest.

25.

The clear imagery state and mastered dream state share many qualities. Not only is it possible to develop the subtle being in both states, but both are useful on the practical level as well. For example, both states enable the subject to understand psychological processes and confront conflicts. While dream state training is generally more effective and beneficial at all levels of realization, initial training in the imagery state can be very useful for developing dream state awareness and achieving lucid, self-conscious dreams.

Main features of the dream state of being

26.

Dream state consciousness is a non-rational form of mental consciousness that is indirectly dependent on the physical sense impressions. Even ordinary dreams possess the potential for experiential unity of subject and object as well as mind and body, and at advanced levels this potential can be used to achieve the fusion of means [*Thabs*] and wisdom [*Shes-Rab*] described above.

27.

According to the Yogacara scripts [4], dream appearances derive from three primary sources: mental imprints [*Bags-Chags*] stored in the basis [*Kun-gzhi*], the 'outer phenomena' of energy fields, which can appear in any state of subtle perception, and time and space transcendent phenomena perceived by subtle consciousness. Most dream appearances arise from coarse-rational imprints in the basis [*Kun-gzhi*], however, the most deeply rooted of which are emotionally influenced impressions, as described above. Dream appearances are therefore largely products of the dreamer's coarse-rational consciousness and world view and involve his or her current, usually emotional preoccupations in the ordinary waking state.

28.

According to Tantric texts a natural potential exists in the dream state for achieving the experiential unity of clarity and bliss with primordial wisdom and insight, and thus the birth of the subtle being, that occurs when means [*Thabs*] and wisdom [*Shes-Rab*] merge at the second level of the meditation state. This is because the ordinary dream body [*rMi-Lam Gyi-Lus*] resembles the subtle body, and the ordinary dream consciousness or mind [*rMi-Lam Gyi-Sams*] resembles the subtle mind. As a result the first steps toward attaining the first two levels of the meditation state, the calming of

coarse-rational consciousness and the experience of direct contact between subject and object, mind and body, are naturally achieved in the ordinary dream state. The experience of clarity, bliss, and one-pointedness of calm abiding [*Zhi-gNas*], the first level of the meditation state, is not naturally attained in the ordinary dream state, however.

29.

The relationship between the mastered dream state and dreamer parallels that between the clear imagery state and visualizer, as the dream subject resembles the imagery state subject and dream appearances have the same qualities as visualized images. Appearances are not only perceived directly by the mastered dream consciousness but simultaneously by subtle sense consciousness, as the dreamer apprehends the five subtle sense qualities in unison.

30.

To master the dream state it is first necessary to be aware of 'being in' or having the dream. The first step to achieve this awareness is to remember dreams upon waking. When the dreamer begins to dream self-consciously the next step is to gain awareness of the dream subject. This enables the dreamer to directly contact and understand the dream appearances.

31.

When the dream subject has been mastered it is possible to achieve several levels of realization, including the following:

32-1

Spontaneous understanding of the psychological conflicts underlying the dream and the ability to work directly with these conflicts. When confronting negativity in a dream, for example, one of two methods can be employed. The dreamer can either fight to overcome the negativity (for example, anxiety or fear), or surrender to it. Of these the latter is more effective, since the dreamer surrenders not himself but his or her coarse-rationally fabricated self-image.

32-2

Identification of dream appearances as the dreamer's own creations. When the realization that the dream is actually the mind looking at itself occurs, dream subject and object merge.

32-3

Manifestation of the dream subject in the physical world of the ordinary waking state. At this level the dreamer can transcend his or her own mental and physical forms as well as the limitations of time and space.

32-4

Perception of subtle energy fields that transcend time and space boundaries. These can be explored to reveal special knowledge in disciplines ranging from philosophy and religion to the arts and sciences.

32-5

Simulation of the mastered death state, in which the dreamer merges with 'the clear light' of the death state in order to realize the unities of body and mind, subject and object, and relative reality [*Kun-rDzob*] and the reality beyond [*Don-dam*].

32.

Unless the dream subject is mastered, however, the dreamer will be naturally carried along by the dream, and perceiving the dream as real will behave as a passive spectator without realizing the

dream's potential. Some people seem to be especially gifted in this respect and experience self-conscious or 'lucid' dreams spontaneously. It is rare, however, that these individuals are able to create lucid dreams at will, and most individuals experience only one or two lucid dreams in a lifetime. In the latter case initial training in the imagery state is usually very successful in attaining a more powerful dream state awareness.

Main features of the death state

33.

Of the different natural states in which the existential unity of subject and object can be achieved, the mastered death state is by far the most advantageous. Comparable to the highest level of the meditation state, the death state is characterized by the experience of clear light, or the 'clear light experience'. The existential unities of subject and object and means [*Thabs*] and wisdom [*Shes-Rab*] are intrinsic to the clear light experience, which naturally transcends dualism and encompasses the experiences of clarity and bliss as well as primordial wisdom and insight. Although this experience occurs naturally at the conclusion of the death process, however, it is rarely mastered and therefore seldom of benefit to the subject. Instead the subject tends to pass through the clear light state and manifest in the consciousness of the intermediary state between lives, or 'bardo body'.

34.

To understand why the death state is the most advantageous of natural states it may be useful to examine the metaphysics presented in the Abhidharma scripts. According to the Abhidharma scripts, the creation of the universe originates in the mind element, which is the intrinsic nature and essence of everything, including the universe itself and the 'universal energy'. Out of the mind element evolves the space element, which is an expression of the combined energies of the four subtle elements: air, fire, water, and earth. The subtle energies of these four elements arise in their most refined forms from the developed space element, and the fusion of two of these subtle energies results in a gradual unfolding and manifestation of coarser forms of the same element energies. These are the element energies to which the Tantras generally refer.

35.

The fusion of two subtle element energies thus gives rise to the coarse air element, which has the energy quality of expansion. The coarse air element gives rise to the coarse fire element, which possesses the energy quality of maturation. From the coarse fire element the coarse water element arises with the energy quality of cohesion, from which the coarse earth element arises with the energy quality of solidification. These coarse elements and energy qualities give rise to the ordinary sense qualities of form and color, sound, smell, taste, and tactility, out of which all phenomenal existence evolves, including the world we normally perceive. As this evolution process occurs the coarse elements and energy qualities oppose attunement with the non-dualistic nature of the mind element, which gradually widens the experiential gaps separating subject from object and mind from body.

36.

The death process represents a reversal of this creation process: the coarse earth element evolves into the coarse water element, the coarse water element into the coarse fire element, the coarse fire element into the coarse air element, and the coarse air element into the fused pairs of the subtle energies of the four subtle elements. These pairs evolve into the space element, which merges with the mind element, and when this fusion occurs the subject transcends the gaps separating subject from object and mind from body.

37.

During the death process all coarse-rational functions cease as a result of the de-evolution of the elements. The physical senses cease operating, the physical body disintegrates, and the [? energy constituents] dissolve into the space and mind elements. As waking state consciousness transforms into the death consciousness of clear light, the bliss and clarity of means [*Thabs*] merges with the primordial wisdom and insight of wisdom [*Shes-rab*].

38.

The death state is therefore similar to the highest level of meditation, which involves training one's being to merge with its basic nature, the space and mind elements. At this level it is possible to manifest in the state of Nirmanakaya, or nirvana[?]. The Sanskrit term for the ordinary dualistic condition of human existence is samsara, of which there are many different levels ranging from the coarsest to the subtlest states of dualistic being. Beyond the subtlest state is the antithesis of samsara, referred to in Sanskrit as nirvana.

39.

The process of manifestation in the state of nirvana is represented in the higher Buddhist Tantras through the medium of the mandala. The mandala is a symbolic expression or diagram of the creation and dissolution of the universe perceived from a perspective beyond samsara. To gain the perspective of the mandala and unite with the universal energy at its base, one must experience the clear light of the death process and the dissolution of the elements. The clear light experience is therefore the turning point between experiential dualism and existential unity, samsara and nirvana.

Footnotes

(1)

'Holding' and 'reflecting' apply only to dualistic states of *Rig-pa*; in the non-dualistic state of *Rig-pa* no 'holding' is implied.

(2)

There exist two regular versions of the Abhidharma, the Hinayana Abhidharma and the Mahayana Abhidharma. All Buddhist philosophy and psychology builds upon one or both of the Abhidharma versions. The exposition found in this paper mainly draws on later tantric elaborations of the Abhidharma texts.

Phenomenal existence is presented in the Abhidharma scripts from the perspective of the five skandhas:

- 1) The first skandha [*gZugs-kyi Phung-po*], the 'materialization' or 'gestalt' aggregate.
- 2) The second skandha [*Tshor-b'iPhung-po*], the 'basic feeling' aggregate.
- 3) The third skandha [*'Du-Shes kyi Phung-po*], the 'notion' or 'conception' aggregate.
- 4) The fourth skandha, [*'Du-Byed kyi Phung-po*], the 'mentation' or 'emotion' aggregate.
- 5) The fifth skandha, [*rNam-Shes kyi Phung-po*], the 'consciousness' aggregate.

The first skandha applies to the object, and the other four apply to the subject.

(3)

Throughout the development or refinement of being our physical and mental aspects are subject to change. That which we name our physical constitution has many different levels of application, from the 'coarse' physical form with which we normally associate the term 'body', to a finer form which

we have here chosen to call the 'subtle body'.

In the process of refinement our body and mind aspects become more closely connected and merged, both experientially as well as existentially. At a highly developed stage of refinement one attains an 'energy level' of existence where it no longer makes sense to speak of the differentiation between body and mind. The terms experiential and existential therefore refer to 'the experience of unity' and 'the total involvement of the physical and mental aspects', respectively, and where these two terms are used in connection with the transformation of being, the former indicates a momentary transformation, whereas the latter indicates a total and genuine transformation.

(4)

In Tibetan the Yogacara philosophy is called *Sems-Tsam*, literally meaning 'mind only'. This school of philosophy holds that anything perceived and cognized is part of consciousness, and does not exist independently of consciousness in the form perceived and cognized.

Some relevant claims of the Yogacara philosophy are as follows:

- The basic manifestation of form and the basic manifestation of visual consciousness are one.
- The basic manifestation of sound and the basic manifestation of audible consciousness are one.
- The basic manifestation of smell and the basic manifestation of olfactory consciousness are one.
- The basic manifestation of taste and the basic manifestation of gustatory consciousness are one.
- The basic manifestation of tactility and the basic manifestation of tactile consciousness are one.

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