

The Self reflexive awareness in Tibetan Buddhist Epistemology: How can the classical Buddhist science of consciousness enter into a cross cultural dialog with the science of cognition?

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The Tibetan Buddhist presentations of the self reflexive awareness, also called apperception (Tibetan: *rang rig*), and the perspectives related to its systematic training might contribute valuable information about the first-person perspective to the science of consciousness. This would bring new resources to current cognition research while at the same time preserving valuable aspects of a central factor of the Tibetan cultural heritage, namely Tibetan Buddhism.

The relationship between the subjective consciousness and the outer world is possibly the most important scientific and philosophical problem at the present time. The science of cognition, which strives to clarify this relationship, is situated at a cross roads between the humanistic and the natural sciences, represented mainly by Western philosophy and psychology on the one hand and by neuroscience and biology on the other hand. Within this rather new field several researcher admit a lack of systematic experience based investigations of the subjective perceiving consciousness.

According to Roger Penrose, it is probable that "...in order to accommodate the mystery of the mind, we shall need a broadening of what we presently mean by "science".¹ Professor Arne Grøn from the Center for Subjectivity Research in Copenhagen has argued for the importance of investigating subjectivity from the perspective of the Philosophy of Religion, since this will bring factors that are imperative for the understanding of the complexity of subjectivity into the dialogue. According to him, these factors have been almost totally absent from the current consciousness research, which is dominated by the natural sciences.²

That the popular interest in Tibetan Buddhism is on the rise both here in Scandinavia and abroad is well known. But there is also a growing interest in Buddhist explanation models among researchers in psychology, philosophy and the science of cognition. Buddhism has refined various methods to observe consciousness from the first person perspective for two thousand years. Therefore it is meaningful to bring the explanation models of Tibetan Buddhism into a cross cultural dialogue.

¹ Penrose, 1994, p. 50.

² www.cfs.ku.dk/content_home.htm

It is not possible to investigate the perceiving consciousness with any measuring instrument known today. Neither behaviour psychologist, nor neurologists have succeeded in gaining access to the mental phenomena of their patients. Furthermore, it does not seem possible to chart the relationship between brain activity and the experience of mental states, without bringing in the first person perspective. There is a growing realization that consciousness is something entirely different from its measurable manifestations.

Since mental states only can be experienced from a first person perspective, with what methods and tools can they be observed? A systematic study would necessitate two important factors: 1. The mapping of the consciousness and its functions and 2. A training system of those layers of consciousness which would perform the observing function.

The Buddhist tradition has to a very large degree already fulfilled these two requirements. Based on the maps of consciousness developed in the Abhidharma texts,³ and in the epistemological *pramāna* texts, the basic definitions of the self reflexive awareness, *rang rig*, in the Karma bka' 'rgyud monastic university tradition can be summarized as follows: There exists an inwardly focussed awareness of any given outwardly focussed mental state, regardless whether this state is a mentally constructed state (which includes mental events, inferential valid cognition as well as mistaken cognition) or it is a non-constructed or non-conceptual state (this includes the main minds, sense direct valid cognition and mental direct valid cognition). What the self-reflexive awareness does is that it experiences the relative mental events in a non-conceptual direct manner. This makes it potentially well suited to function as a neutral observation tool in the context of a systematic study of consciousness.

Furthermore Tibetan Buddhism employs consciousness training in the form of so called analytical meditation in order to strengthen this self reflexive observing consciousness. This makes the individual capable of observing their own mind as if it was an impersonal object. This can be useful if one wishes to distance oneself from destructive emotional imbalances or if one wishes to observe ones own mental fixations in a relative perspective. This process functions at the same time, as a method for seeing through the so called "I", and, as maintained by some, finally our self reflexive awareness is that which is capable of experiencing the ultimate luminous quality of mind.

Perhaps some people will argue that it is pathological to intentionally split the mind into two parts, but Buddhism maintains that if this is done correctly, then the mind can be liberated from its identification with negative and destructive thought patterns. The theory is that when we stop identifying with a given emotion or a given point of view, the energy that was bound in that conditioned structure, that upholds the idea of an "I", will be released. This energy flows instead into the observing part of the consciousness. Thereby

³ The earliest systematic Buddhist texts were called Abhidharma and consists of lists of ontological elements which constitute the inner and the outer worlds. The descriptions of the outer world's constitutional elements are today surpassed by the modern natural sciences, but the Buddhist mapping of the consciousness is still unparalleled in modern science

the evolution of consciousness is strengthened, since the self reflexive observing awareness connects to higher and more subtle layers of consciousness. It is my hypothesis that this strategy is a useful device if we wish to develop a systematic research tool that actually has first person access to the mind.

We may note that the closest parallel to the self reflexive observing consciousness, namely the so called "auto-noetic cognition" or meta-cognition described by modern neuro-scientists, represents the highest evolution of consciousness, apparently limited to homo sapiens. It is developed based on the latest developed neural networks, interpreted by the individual as an "I".⁴

However, while this auto-noetic cognition in modern science is regarded as a result of the sense of an "I", the Buddhist science of consciousness goes one step further and trains the self reflexive awareness to potentially transcend the limitation that the sense of an "I" represents. Thereby perspectives which extend beyond the normally known functions of consciousness are reached. This is how enlightened consciousness is developed and said to culminate in the state of Buddha hood. In fact, several Tibetan Buddhist masters maintain that self-awareness as such is the so called Buddha nature.

Comparative studies of Western Science and Buddhist theories are attracting more and more attention, probably because they represent a rich interdisciplinary, cross cultural dialogue.⁵ So far the initiative to inter disciplinary dialogue has mainly come from researchers from fields outside of Tibetan Buddhism with interest in the Buddhist explanation models.⁶

There is a need, however, for qualified communication of relevant Buddhist source texts before their content can be fully implemented in any interdisciplinary dialogue. The traditional study of Tibetan in Copenhagen has to a large degree functioned as a branch of Oriental philology. In this field the establishment of critical text editions has often been a priority. The sheer magnitude of the philological process has, for the individual researcher limited the possibilities for bringing forth the actual meaning content of a given Tibetan philosophical text. The text has often represented a goal in itself instead of functioning as a point of departure. The Tibetan diaspora however, has changed this picture, since it is now possible to work closely with native Tibetan scholars, educated in the philosophical texts and their meaning in their traditional contexts. Therefore the academic study of Tibetan Buddhist text can today be based both on the texts themselves but also on their application. In this sense the field has matured to an extent that leads to the conclusion that the time has come for the classical Buddhist science of

⁴ See e.g. d'Aquili and Newberg 1999, p.181 as well as Tulving 2005 in Terrace and Metcalfe, p.30.

⁵ See e.g. Hayward 1984 and 1992, Varela 1991 and 1992 etc., Wallace 1989, 2000 and 2003, Ricard 2001, Fenner 1995, deCharms 1998 as well as publications from www.mindandlife.org

⁶ Hayward holds a ph.d. in nuclear physics from Cambridge University, Varela held a ph.d. in biology from Harvard University, Ricard holds a ph.d. in bio chemistry from Institute Pasteur, Paris, and de Charms is a cognitive neuroscientist at University of California.

consciousness to enter into a cross cultural dialogue with the science of cognition.-Sharing the specialized knowledge that each field possesses, will benefit our knowledge of the nature of consciousness in general.

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