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Why Altered States Are Not Enough: A Perspective from Buddhism

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Transpersonal psychology has at times employed Buddhist terminology in ways that do not reflect distinctions that underlie these tightly defined terms. From a Buddhist perspective, attempts to equate Buddhist terms with language from other traditions are misdirected, and produce results that no longer represent Buddhism. For example, it is an error to translate certain Buddhist terms as referring to a shared universal consciousness; Buddhism explicitly rejects this idea. Nor is it appropriate to assume that the generic, cross-traditional altered state of nondual awareness postulated in some transpersonally-related circles is in any way related to nirvana or other advanced states described within Buddhism. Buddhist practices are focused on the achievement of particular knowledge and capacities, not the attainment of altered states.

Keywords: *transpersonalism, altered states, Buddhism, Dzogchen, nonduality*

Transpersonal psychology draws on many Buddhist ideas, but it is troubling to note that many of these references represented as authentically Buddhist are in fact superficial or distorted representations of Buddhist theory. As a Buddhist practitioner of more than 20 years, and now also a teacher of Buddhist methods within the International Dzogchen Community, the first author respectfully offers that if the transpersonal field wishes to present ancient knowledge in a modern context, it needs to take more care than it currently does in order not to misrepresent that knowledge. This paper will outline some of the misconceptions of Buddhist thought within transpersonalism, a concern that has already been raised within the field itself (Friedman, 2009, 2010). In addition, it will offer some traditionally informed comments about several Buddhist concepts.

A frequently-encountered misconception within transpersonalism, one that is common to most of the critiques offered here, is that Buddhism is a single, uniform tradition that can be grasped and defined from outside. Another related error is that its terms have simple, singular definitions that can be equated with concepts from other very different traditions or with ideas propounded within transpersonal psychology itself. In contrast with this tendency to homogenize and universalize, this paper presents the Buddhist views of a single practitioner and

teacher located within a particular school of Buddhist teaching and practice. Even though this discourse is traditionally informed, its perspectives would likely meet with debate rather than consensus if presented within any given Buddhist *sangha*, or community.

Speaking from this very particular standpoint, then, it is possible to say that one profound difference between Buddhism and transpersonal psychology is that the latter seems to have a strong emphasis on non-ordinary states of consciousness and their transformative effect on the psyche (e.g., Garcia-Romeau, 2010; Grof, Grob, Bravo, & Walsh, 2008; Maslow, 1969; Tart, 2008). By contrast, in all Buddhist traditions of which I have any knowledge, the cognitive aspect of mind is of utmost importance. A state of consciousness, whether ordinary or non-ordinary, can have a completely different value depending on what is cognized while one is in that state. Because of its emphasis on altered states rather than cognitive content, transpersonal psychology frequently misinterprets Buddhist concepts and methods.

Because Buddhism focuses on the importance of precise and accurate cognitive content, Buddhist teachings are replete with distinctions, large and small. Important teachers such as Nagarjuna or Padmasambhava paid great attention to explaining the errors in different categories of Buddhist thought because correct understanding is

extremely subtle and intangible, and it is only through gaining a deep understanding of the teachings that these difficulties become clear. Yet this exposition of wrong views is not carried out in order to denigrate the ideas of others, but in order to discover one's own mistakes—errors that tend to be typical for all humans regardless of whether or not they claim to follow Buddhadharmā (Namkhai Norbu, 1998; Namkhai Norbu & Clemente, 1999).

Much of transpersonalism—like theosophy before it, and very unlike Buddhism—apparently wishes to imagine that all great spiritual traditions lead to the same attainment (Wilber, 1975, 2000). Scholars within this community seem to feel free to make comparisons between diverse traditions after simply reading some papers and texts pertaining to those traditions and perhaps practicing a few meditative techniques, without having a thorough lineage-based training and grounding in any of the paths that are considered. Evident differences are apparently ignored or explained as insignificant or as artifacts of cultural conditioning. Wisdom that has been culturally conditioned may have value within the transpersonal world, but not so within Buddhism.

From within Buddhism, it is the first author's view that traditions cannot be reconciled, and that attempts to do so create results that can no longer be considered traditional. Such efforts at homogenizing spiritual paths must be clearly distinguished from what His Holiness the Dalai Lama is doing: he is not working to reconcile different traditions, but to turn the followers of different religions toward the common human experience of compassion, thus pacifying the aggressive tendencies of human minds. Nor can different spiritual traditions be equated. Starting with Buddha Shakyamuni himself, most important Buddhist teachers have said that Buddhadharmā has very special and highly important wisdom that other traditions do not have (a number of Buddhist teachers have also acknowledged that some realizations in other traditions are not that radically different).

One of the most distinctive errors within the transpersonal world is the effort to interpret the idea of universal consciousness in Buddhist terms. The idea that there is some subconscious or unconscious mind or spirit common to all beings, or at least all humans, is never found in Buddhist texts of any tradition, except in the context where such an idea is explicitly refuted. Such a concept contradicts the Buddhist principle of *karma*, because if humans all share the same consciousness then

each time any individual performed an action, every person in the world would experience the exact same results from that action, just as if they themselves had acted in that way.

Within Buddhism, that which is common or shared among humans is not consciousness or mind or spirit, but what is called *karmic vision*, which refers to the fact that despite having individual minds, humans have shared perceptions of the sun, of mountains, music, voices, smells, and so on. It is true that within Buddhism there is a meditative experience referred to as *all is consciousness*. This does not constitute an awakening to some universal mind, but instead represents a transient state of a deluded mind. Even though some Buddhist teachers use terms such as *single mind* or *unique mind*, these refer to the fact that all phenomena manifesting to our perceptions are contained within our own mind: there is no separation between the observing mind and the mind that is observed. Not even buddhas share the same mind. Although *dharmakaya* is explained as an enlightened mind that is the same for all buddhas, sameness here means that its potential qualifications are equal for all buddhas; it does not mean that there is one single dharmakaya that all buddhas share.

In transpersonal circles the Buddhist term *alaya-vijnana* (Sanskrit) is at times translated in a way that suggests a universal mind; however, this term means *ground-consciousness*, and does not refer to universal consciousness at all, but to a strictly individual consciousness that stores all impressions and karmic traces. Similarly, when a Dzogchen practitioner speaks about discovering the *alaya* (Tibetan, *kun-gzhi*), the all-ground of all dharmas, dharmas should not be understood as objectively existing phenomena of the outer world, but as *qualia*, as events within individual experience.

As an example of the difference between (some) transpersonal and Buddhist notions of mind, consider the Christian and Vedic concepts of scripture. In these cultures there is the idea that all knowledge is contained in certain written texts. These texts are available to everyone, so that anyone can extract reliable knowledge from this single common source. The transpersonal idea of a shared subconscious or unconscious follows very much along this model, and can be used to explain why a person in a transpersonal state can discover knowledge that has no obvious physical source, or seems to come from someone else's mind even if that person is separated

in both space and time. The Buddhist concept of mind is more consistent with the structure of the internet. While at a superficial glance the worldwide web appears to be a single database accessible to all, it is in fact a network of separate data storage systems, and every single datum is stored not on the internet as a whole but on some individual server or computer. Each datum can be transferred from one storage site to another only if there is a specific connection between those two discrete sites that includes both a physical link and compatible software. In a quite similar way, for Buddhism minds are individual; karmic connections can be established through certain coincidences, and without such a connection no transfer of knowledge between persons is possible, whether conscious, subconscious, or unconscious.

Along the same line of thought is the recently-flourishing transpersonal term *non-duality* (Blackstone, 2006, 2007; Prendergast, Fenner, & Krystal, 2003). However, here again Buddhist thought demands careful distinctions that appear to be largely absent from transpersonal thought. There are many different kinds of meditative and cognitive non-dual experiences—that is, experiences that do not explicitly involve feeling that subject and object are separate entities—and in Buddhism these various kinds of experience are delineated in careful and articulate terms. Some of these are no more than transient states of what Buddhism would classify as a deluded mind. Others, though of value, are far from the realization of *nirvana*. For example, an emptiness where the separation between subject and object is neither felt nor thought is not yet the non-duality of dharmakaya. Similarly, the non-duality of absolute truth and relative truth as explained in sutras must be wholly distinguished from the non-duality of five wisdoms and eight consciousnesses that is explained in higher tantras, and both of these are distinct from the non-duality of calm state and movement taught in Dzogchen. *Light for the Eyes of Contemplation* (Tibetan, *bSam-gtan Mig-sgron*) is an encyclopedic work from the 9th century CE by Sangye Yeshe that presented the major Buddhist traditions practiced in Tibet at that time; within this work is a profound treatise on different kinds of non-duality in both Indian and Chinese *mahayana*, in *vajrayana* higher tantras, and in Dzogchen *atiyoga*.

Thus, for Buddhism, the term non-duality is used in a considerable number of discrete and precise ways, each of which must be understood within its own context. By contrast, some transpersonal uses of

the term seem to take the concept of non-duality as license to eschew careful distinctions, to uncritically meld together concepts that deserve precise definition and differentiation, and to conflate within a single theoretical ultimate a variety of states that may well include certain transitory experiences of a deluded mind (e.g., Blackstone, 2006, 2007; Krystal, 2003; Wilber, 2000).

This latter point represents a foundational contrast between Buddhism and transpersonal thought mentioned earlier, namely a difference in attitude toward extra-ordinary states of mind. When an individual takes LSD or goes into a flotation tank, it is quite possible to experience states of mind that are hardly accessible in normal life. It is tempting and attractive to suggest that these states are the same as those experienced by adept practitioners of Indian yoga, Tibetan vajrayana, or Chinese Taoism. Such claims seem reasonable in that the basic potentiality of all humans ought to be more or less the same. Yet even if one were to grant equivalency to these drug- or deprivation-induced non-ordinary states—unlikely if only because the number of possible states understood and described within Buddhism makes the chances of such equivalency quite small—the meaning of these induced states, in terms of the knowledge or capacity obtained, can be completely different.

For Buddhist thought, states of mind are not objective realms that exist independently of an individual, to be entered and accessed like some scriptural repository of knowledge. Rather, states of mind are events that are inseparable from their meanings, their results. So, if two instances of the same state of mind have two very different results, then saying that they were really the same state of mind is pointless. To illustrate this difference, consider that from ancient times thousands of individuals watched an apple fall from a tree, but only Newton discovered gravity. Because of its result, this event was profoundly different in meaning from any watching of falling apples that came before. In Buddhist terms, it is meaningless to equate Newton's experience with those of his predecessors. The event cannot somehow be abstracted from its result, and then categorized with other events that had superficial similarities, but very different results. An ecstatic drug-induced state of mind devoid of any increased knowledge or capacity has more in common with getting drunk and having sex with a stranger than it does with the attainments of spiritual practitioners.

Even within spiritual practice, a particular event can result in different meanings. In Tibetan Buddhism there is an important training that enables the practitioner to understand how one event can give rise to completely different meanings. It refers, for example, to studying different kinds of so called “philosophical views” related to various Buddhist systems (Namkhai Norbu 1998; Namkhai Norbu & Clemente, 1999; see especially his quotations from the above-referenced 9th century work by Sangye Yeshe). The purpose of this training is to teach discernment, to recognize that all the different possible meanings that arise from an event are limited, and how adherence to a particular meaning can block a practitioner from moving forward on the path to real knowledge that will result in liberation from suffering.

In general, Buddhism does not value special states of mind as having transformative functions. Unlike transpersonal psychology, Buddhism does not believe that deep meditative experiences as such can make people into better, kinder, more tolerant humans. They can shift the focus of attention and change the circumstances of one’s life, just as any other everyday event, but profound changes come about through meanings, not through events. An extra-ordinary state can bring attention to the fact that the world is not limited to material things, and thus prompt a re-evaluation of one’s life, but it can as easily go by and leave no trace.

Buddhist practice is thus designed to cultivate meanings rather than events. These are facilitated by factors such as moment-by-moment awareness of one’s condition, maintaining hold on particular knowledge, controlling intentions, and the impact from teachers or supportive friends who are also on the path. Moreover, Buddhist practice is designed to cultivate very particular meanings. Buddhist meditative techniques alone can be used in the service of quite different meanings. For example, taken out of the context of compassion (meaning), techniques that lead to deep levels of consciousness (events) can be applied in the context of military training (new meaning) and serve in the creation of highly efficient soldiers capable of setting aside their normal human feelings and acting ruthlessly—a result wholly at odds with the Buddhist meaning.

To the degree that transpersonal psychology trusts in the definitively transformative function of transformative experiences *per se*, this seems a course fraught with risk. The numerous financial and sexual scandals and instances of abuse of power associated with

leaders of communities that cultivate powerful state-shifting practices serve as a sobering challenge to the position that extra-ordinary experiences are sufficient to produce positive transformation. Separated from the Buddha, no Buddhist meditative technique leads to the state of a Buddha.

The difference between a Buddhist and a transpersonal attitude toward non-ordinary states can perhaps be illustrated with a consideration of how each relates to the phenomenon of dreaming. For transpersonalists, as for Jungians, the dream state seems to be understood as one in which some deeper mind is communicating in a coded way with the rational mind, revealing truths that might otherwise never be uncovered. Here again is a belief that information arising from some alternate state of mind is somehow superior to that which is available to cultivated waking awareness.

To the Buddhist, the standard psychological process of dream interpretation perpetuates unhelpful patterns of the mind, a problem that no insight thus gleaned is likely to outweigh. Dream interpretation takes place in waking consciousness, after the dream has ended, in a dialectical process that mirrors the uncultivated waking mind. As soon as the mind has experienced something, it begins to tell itself what it has just experienced. For example, as soon as I taste something very pleasant, I immediately start to explain to myself that what I feel is pleasant. But this action of thinking is also an event, so now my mind has two events to respond to, and so on in ever more complicated rhythms that draw me farther and farther from the meaning that was embodied within the actual event.

It is in just this way that dream interpretation, rather than illuminating messages from a deep inner wisdom, actually draws the individual farther and farther from the meaning that lived within the dream *as* the dream. For the dream consists of meanings the mind already has, meanings that are immediately projected as visible dream events. If I can bring this understanding into the dream state, I can notice that all appearances within the dream are not different from my thought of them. The meaning and the dream event are two aspects of one and the same phenomenon, rather than an event that then has to be given meaning by thinking about it and explaining it within the waking mind.

Lucid dreamers work to stabilize dreams by transferring the analytical mind into the dream state,

and thus enjoying all the illusory possibilities of the dream state and the strong sensations that go with them. However entertaining this may be, from a Buddhist perspective such an approach is not fruitful, and such a process is not what is meant by suggesting that the understanding of the nature of dreaming be brought into the dream state. The goal of dream-yoga in Tibetan vajrayana, for example, is quite different than either lucid dreaming or dream interpretation: through discovering the illusory nature of dreams, one obtains experiential knowledge that there is no difference between mind and appearances (Namkhai Norbu, 2002). Appearances are themselves mind. This knowledge is then transferred to the wakeful state, so that through the experiences of perception, the processes of the mind itself can be carefully observed. It is through this attentive waking practice, and not through the power of any sort of non-ordinary states, that transformation occurs.

If an individual has at least a minimal capacity to notice the arising of thoughts and emotions in the mind, then change can begin. It is possible to notice, for example, that if attention is kept continuously on any emotion that arises, that emotion will quickly disappear. The emotion may appear again, but through direct observation it will disappear again. If the emotional background is very strong, then the emotion may appear frequently—but with diligent application of observation, this background will subside and finally disappear. The typical challenges to be overcome in applying this method are: inability to directly notice one's emotions, being instead distracted by the flow of mental images or bodily sensations produced by the emotion, and inability to maintain attention directly on the emotion. Every aspect of this process requires focus, attention, discernment, and wakefulness, and is not in any way reliant on extra-ordinary states of mind. From the perspective of Buddhism, it is this sort of keen-minded process, carried out in the context of compassion that a Buddhist teacher and/or community holds, that leads toward the extinction of suffering.

It is gratifying to see the transpersonal community's healthy interest in spirituality in general, and in Buddhism in particular. No doubt many transpersonalists have had very real and meaningful experiences. However, the ways in which certain Buddhist terminology has been misappropriated leads to the suggestion that the field needs to follow up its enthusiasm with more careful and detailed study of the

distinctions made within Buddhist teachings. It would be unfortunate if the movement became associated with superficial understandings of the traditions that it seeks to emulate: if transpersonal Buddhism or yoga or Taoism or shamanism came to signify shallow and popularized reductions of those traditions, versions which allowed would-be students of spiritual work to have various sorts of transient experiences which were then inflated to equality with the attainments of long-term, traditionally trained spiritual practitioners.

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