

The Illusory Self and the World of Nature: An Australian Tibetan Buddhist speaks

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This paper is based on several interviews with an Australian Tibetan Buddhist practitioner who is also an anthropologist. In her person she thereby allows the bridging of the divide between Tibetan Buddhist and Australian mores in two significant ways – scholarly and experiential. The emphasis in the paper is on Tibetan Buddhist understandings of the self in relation to nature and this theme is examined here primarily through the lens of the informant’s knowledge and experience. As she is a student of the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, a brief description of the Dzogchen Community in Australia is given, as well as an outline of some principles of Dzogchen.

In ordinary life in Australia and Tibet, ideas about self and nature are radically different. Ideas of self and nature in Australia reflect the long-standing hegemony of classical western dualistic epistemology. However many western scientists no longer adhere to the erstwhile strict separation of subject and object which was such an important part of science’s beginnings. There are some newly established scientific approaches which challenge or deny conventional dualistic logic. As there has been a dialogue between representatives of these new sciences and Tibetan Buddhist scholars, they are relevant to this discussion. Furthermore the interviewee herself has engaged in this discourse (see Stutchbury 1998b; 2004).

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Elisabeth Stutchbury, the Buddhist introduced here,¹ is an Australian follower of Tibetan Buddhist teachings who has worked, as an anthropologist, with a cultural minority of the Tibetan cultural milieu living in Northern India. Elisabeth is from the Australian elite, being highly educated and having worked for some seven years as a full time academic. She is now one of only twelve westerners worldwide (two women and ten men) that her teacher has authorised as assistant teachers in the first level of a graduated course in Buddhist philosophy and meditation he compiled for western students. Her teacher, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, is a Tibetan reincarnate lama in exile, who regularly travels to Australia to lead teaching retreats.² Chögyal Namkhai Norbu is also a recognised world expert on Tibetan culture and history, including Bön, the pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion. He has lived in Italy since 1960, where he was Professor of Tibetan and Mongolian Languages and Literature at the Oriental Institute at the University of Naples from 1964 till 1992. He now travels the world teaching and transmitting the Dzogchen teachings.

As a student of Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, Elisabeth is a member of an amorphous group known as the International Dzogchen Community. Most of the Australian members are white and born in Australia or of European origin. However, the group does have a strong international flavour with retreat centres in North and South America, Europe and Central Asia.

¹ Another Australian Tibetan Buddhist, Tensing Tsewang, was also interviewed by the writer. Although he was born into a Tibetan nomadic family, near Kailash, Tsewang has lived in Australia for many years. For details see Laudine 2005.

² See the Dzogchen Community website for information on the recognition of Chögyal Namkhai Norbu at the age of eight as the ‘mind-incarnation’ of Shabdrung Rinpoche, who was the ruler of Bhutan, comparable to the role His Holiness the Dalai Lama had in Central Tibet (www.dzogchen.org.au).

The Dzogchen teachings are neither a philosophy, nor religious doctrine, nor cultural tradition. Instead, the Dzogchen teaching is understood as a path of self-liberation. Some of those who know the Dzogchen community in Australia may feel that it exhibits elements that can readily be characterized as religious, philosophical or cultural. This is not to be disputed. However, the core of the teachings is not limited by any of these human expressions. Students, for example, cannot avoid bringing a particular cultural perspective to their studies, but that which is studied is applicable across different cultural bases and is not limited or defined by philosophical or religious elaboration.

To summarise from the Dzogchen website; the Tibetan term Dzogchen, ‘Great Perfection’, refers to what is understood as *the primordial state of every individual and not to any transcendent reality* (emphasis added). Like other Buddhist paths, it has the aim of overcoming the problem of dualistic vision in the individual. As the individual develops a subjective self, or ego, that self experiences a world-out-there as other, continually trying to manipulate that world in order to gain satisfaction and security. This becomes a barrier to achieving satisfaction and security because all the seemingly external phenomena are impermanent. The real cause of the suffering and dissatisfaction is the fundamental sense of incompleteness that is the inevitable consequence of being in the state of dualism.

The principle practice of Dzogchen is to enter directly into non-dual contemplation, and to remain in it, continuing to deepen it until one reaches total realization (emphasis added).

The term self-liberation is not meant to imply that there is some ‘self’ or ego to be liberated. It is a fundamental assumption of Dzogchen that *all phenomena are void of self-*

nature (emphasis added). ‘Self-Liberation’, in the Dzogchen sense, means that whatever manifests in the field of experience of the practitioner is allowed to arise just as it is, without judgement of it as good or bad, beautiful or ugly. And in that same moment, if there is no clinging, or attachment, without effort, or even volition, whatever it is that arises, whether as a thought or as a seemingly external event, automatically liberates itself, by itself, and of itself. “Practicing in this way the seeds of the poison tree of dualistic vision never even get a chance to sprout, much less to take root and grow.” (The explanations of Dzogchen given here were taken from the website where an edited version of the teachings of Chögyal Namkhai Norbu was published on September 24th, 2002.)³

It will be seen that the three main points which are italicized above indicate that Dzogchen teachings emphasise non-dual contemplation in this world as a way of realizing that all phenomena are truly void of self-nature. Such teachings are thereby of great interest as the base for a particular way of conceptualizing the place of humanity in relation to nature.

Elisabeth’s interview gives some idea of her experience when she first traveled to India and began to learn Tibetan ways. In the interview Elisabeth talked about how her time in India conducting research radically changed her, and her way of being, in quite powerful ways and explained that a lot of this change was in relation to how she perceives things. She feels that this happened in part because she had never lived so close to the earth before (*Interview 2000: 9*):

At one level you could say it was a magical place. Actually going there was like entering into another realm—the journey over the high passes and so on. Coming up the valley from way below ... and seeing these two twin peaks shining up the valley, marking the way in. Then you get closer, you can’t see them anymore ...

³ For more detailed information on Dzogchen, and how it is located in relation to other forms of Tibetan Buddhism, see Samuel 1993.

and then when you are right up on the pass—you look across and you see them face to face. They're the guardians—right? (There is an article I will show you.) (See Stutchbury 1998a). *So right from the very first time I went there, it was like journeying in my mind as well as journeying into the place* (emphasis added). In addition, I think that Gulaga⁴ is also a very special place in a similar, but perhaps different, sort of way. (Interview 2000:9).

In the Tibetan tradition, Guardians or Protectors can be understood as beings with whom great masters have established special relationships and who thus protect the teachings of the Buddha and help practitioners on their path. Here the mountain peaks are guardians that protect the entrance to the valley.⁵

In her PhD thesis, Elisabeth wrote about a three year, three month and three day Six Yogas of Naropa retreat, after which, it was said, the snow melted and it 'rained blossoms'. In the final months, the yogis performed répu, through which they demonstrate their ability with the tummo practice, repeatedly drying their wet robes with the heat of their bodies in the snow during the long night. As the sun rose, after the yogis had returned to their retreat house, it was surrounded by rainbows, and snowflakes in the shape of flowers fell in a cloudless sky.⁶ In her dissertation, she makes the comment that the correspondences between microcosm and macrocosm are thought to account for such occurrences. In this case, the inner, purified, elemental body of the yogic practitioner is the microcosm, which affects the surrounding environment, the macrocosm (Stutchbury 1991: 318). On the interview tape, she elaborated further as follows.

Yes, it is an opening I think—I mean it is part of the Tibetan culture and I am not sure that all Tibetans have the analytical understanding of the relationship between sound and the manifestation from the sound—sound, light, rays and

⁴ The Gulaga she refers to is a mountain, in southern New South Wales, where the Dzogchen retreat centre, Namgyalgar, is located.

⁵ For a detailed discussion, see Samuel 1993: 164-70.

⁶ Elisabeth did not see this herself but was told about it, only a couple of years after the event, by someone who manifested it and by others who were there (pers. comm. 2005).

from the light rays, moving into a solid material object.⁷ I am not sure that that is a commonly held analytical understanding but certainly for us, I guess, we need the analytical frame to enter into a cultural dimension where some things are given in other cultures. Yes that and the story about the mountain and the yogi stopping the sun for a day—I mean stopping it for long enough for the harvest to be completed—over the point of the mountain.⁸ Such things our logical minds tell us are completely impossible and yet certainly, when I was in Karzha, all of those stories became very real and very possible stories. Not something that one could dismiss because there was something quite other worldly about that place anyway. (*Interview* 2000: 4).

She went on to explain that she had many experiences there where she found herself open to unquestioningly trusting intuitions which might have been dismissed elsewhere. She gave an example of having an intuition to cook for many people even though she knew nothing of the arrival of the guests, who subsequently did come just in time for the meal.

Yes, I mean what is very interesting is when we use structural frames of time and space to order our understanding and we work with linear time. We have an understanding that, “this took place in the past”, and I feel though, that at some levels, what happens is that we’re able to access the energetic vibrations of so called structured linear time, past and future, and they are not really separate or outside of the moment in which we are perceiving them.

So certainly places where great tragedies, massacres, murders and all that sort of stuff have occurred, they really carry that energy. Other places are imbued with the vibration of the knowing or the realisation or the accomplishment or whatever else that has taken place there. (*Interview* 2000: 6).

She went on to say that in relation to bare perceptions of landscape and the energy of land, that there are a lot of similarities between how the local Aboriginal people perceive it and how Chögyal Namkhai Norbu perceives it:

⁷ In the Dzogchen system, all matter is constituted of the elements, normally constructed as five. These are understood to manifest as solid matter in their impure state and to be transformed into their pure form, light, through the various yogic and meditative techniques. There is a tripartite conceptualisation of the body associated with this understanding of matter. “The level of apparent reality, which manifests as solid matter, is *nirmanakaya*. *Sambhogakaya* arises through purification, and as such is both an embodied state and the associated perceptions, which accompany this state. *Dharmakaya*, the ultimate ground of existence, is beyond these methods, techniques and constructs, although in enlightened realisation this state is also embodied. Such being is buddha” (Stutchbury 1999: 157).

⁸ Brendan Lehane tells a story of the Irish saint Columbanus from the sixth century who is said to have posted four monks at the corners of a field in which he was harvesting hurriedly, and so kept bright sunlight in the field while all around the storm clouds brought dark and drizzle (1994: 165).

It is the same, you look at the land and you see. You can see the energetic vein, if you like. You can see there is a quartz vein running down the mountain for a start. It is directly connected, right out to Montague Island and ... the energy runs there. There is no two ways about it. The energy runs there and so it has that potential. So if you look at landscape in that way and you see those sorts of things then—well the Kooris⁹ had already seen it, of course, and Rinpoche saw it.¹⁰ (*Interview 2000:7*).

She is referring to the land on Gulaga¹¹ Mountain near Tilba Tilba in southern New South Wales, where the retreat centre is located. When the land was purchased for the retreat centre, there was much discussion along the lines of not encroaching on sites that were sacred to the Yuin¹² people but instead creating new ones. Those who had these concerns eventually learnt that what they considered to be politically correct was not in fact feasible. It became clear that any place Chögyal Namkhai Norbu found to be “a power place” had already been conceived as such by the Yuin people. Rather than causing friction, this common understanding seems to have resulted in harmonious relations between the community and local Aboriginal people.

There ensued a conversation about experiences Elisabeth had had, which caused her to learn to ‘pick up’ extra perceptions about landscape.

Yes, I can remember at the beginning, being in Manali and you are meant to be able to look up the valley from Manali and see up in the ranges a woman reclining. There is the story of Gesar of Ling flying on his horse, and the woman sits there. There are a few different Gesar stories associated with it. I was there

⁹ Kooris is an Aboriginal term originally used by Aboriginal people around the Sydney area of New South Wales to refer to themselves but now having broader currency being used widely by white Australians to refer to Aboriginal Australians. However, Aboriginal Australians still use a variety of different words to refer to themselves according to the regions they come from. This applies whether they are urban or traditional people.

¹⁰ Here Elisabeth uses the usual western gloss for perception in describing a particular knowing about something that is largely not, in fact, readily available to sight. Later she describes a multi sensory way of perceiving.

¹¹ Gulaga is the Australian Aboriginal name for the mountain, which is also known, in white usage, as Mt Dromedary. Where Aboriginal people saw the shape of a woman, Captain Cook saw the shape of a camel.

¹² For an interview with Bobby McLeod, one of the local Yuin people, and for other Aboriginal Australians on their perceptions of country, see Laudine 2003; 2005.

with a group of monks at my house who were saying, ‘Look there she is!’ And I said, ‘Oh yes right ...’ (dubiously), ‘describe it to me again.’ And they went through ‘Well head there and arm ...’ and I was looking and looking and right at the beginning—I just kept looking trying to see it. And not seeing it, right?

And then, I got to look, and saw it and it *was* there.

And then as that learning to see—well it starts off as a rather mundane process—they say, ‘Look there is a head, there and a shoulder, there ...’ And then you begin to see and you don’t need it to be described anymore. Then sometimes you look and you see and you mightn’t know exactly what the entity or the being is that is there, but you look and you *know* that that is a place. That is a sacred place or a power place or whatever. You know. Seeing the figures in the landscape is a little different from it being a power place or whatever but nevertheless you actually start seeing those things coming out much more easily. So your whole way of—and I mean, you can say this—it is like energetically looking at the place and its *like you’re looking not only with your eyes but with all of your perceptive organs including your energy or your life force* (emphasis added) (Interview 2000: 10-11).

The training she describes here is not the only training she had been part of at this stage. These experiences came after a time when she had spent two different lots of two full months in full retreat where she was engaged in meditative practices over twelve to fifteen hour days. It may be that these practices had some bearing upon her ability to learn this ability to read the land. In any case, Elisabeth is speaking here about a learned ability of perception, in which the process of perception is a totally embodied experience through all of the sense organs, including the very core of vitality. She is describing this as an ability, learned within a Tibetan cultural framework, to perceive something that might be called an essentialised connection between the perceptual process and the experience of the land.

In a secular western study, Marks analyzed extensive data on the experience of synaesthetics (1978: 98). Marks argues that synaesthesia is a latent and dormant capacity within most if not all people ready to come forth when properly catalyzed. Several of the consciousness-altering drugs, especially hashish, mescaline, and LSD are known to evoke

synaesthesia at least on occasion. Drugs can then be said to “energize analogies that normally are latent in the mind” (Baudelaire in Marks 1978: 100). Marks talks about such latent analogies¹³ in the mind in terms of an underlying intrinsic unity of the senses (1978: 98). This sounds like the description Elisabeth gives. Elsewhere I discuss other informants who, by training in different shamanic traditions, also came to learn an ability to perceive more than usual by means of simultaneous awareness through all of the five senses (Laudine 2005). An indication of the depth to which Elisabeth is subscribing to a Tibetan cultural understanding may be gleaned by referring to Samuel, who cites a Jigme Lingpa (Dzogchen) text translated by Guenther (1993: 535). Here *lhagt’ ong* is described as “like a man having the five senses in full”, who thus remains fully with the reality of what is. *Lhagt’ ong* is one of the practices in which Elisabeth has been trained.¹⁴

The interview with Elisabeth continued with a question about purification rituals, particularly in relation to the environment. Elisabeth described *sang*, one type of purification practice associated with the Bön tradition, which is practised very widely in Tibetan society, both by Lamas, (that is ritual experts) and also by lay folk. Sang is a purification ritual for the surrounding country, the earth that is disturbed and polluted by human activity, and also for the people and the entire dimension (Samuel 1993: 182-86).

In relation to pollution she also said:

¹³ These latent analogies are not to be understood in terms of the psyche – as for example in the latent drives referred to in Kristeva although these too are understood to have an actual disposition within the body (Roudiez 1980: 19) but rather as the whole mind experience of the simultaneous awareness of the individual input of the five sensory apparatus.

¹⁴ After the completion of the Preliminary practices in retreat, the disciple receives instructions in the fundamental Buddhist practices of mindfulness/awareness – Shamatha (Skt.) or shiné (*zhi gnas* Tib.), single pointed concentration or calm abiding, and vipashyana (Skt.) or lhagtong (*lhag mthong* Tib.), insight meditation. Stutchbury (1998b: 109). See also Samuel (1993:376).

I find it really interesting, for instance, that for the class of beings, the Mamo, over which Ekajati¹⁵ rules, one of the things that particularly offends them is chemical smells, burning chemicals and so on and there is one quite interesting prayer that you might come across associated with the Mamo that talks about billowing dark clouds and smells. You only can really see that it is talking about pollution when you know what pollution is because it was written centuries before industrialization and environmental pollution, but that is what it is talking about. It talks about how these phenomena angered different beings of different realms of the earth. Of course we experience the consequences of all that. (*Interview* 2000:15).

Her understanding, she says, is in that we have the rock or other natural landform and one can say, the associated ‘energies’ or ‘spirits’ and these can be provoked and are not just projections. Within the Tibetan tradition it is understood that there are indeed some illnesses we can get from unwittingly provoking these energies. The correlation of this is that they must be rectified at that level or you can’t get better. The lack of appreciation of this she sees as part of our environmental ignorance. Her experience is that the ritual practices actually work to make change and are not just symbolic representations.¹⁶

Elisabeth talks in greater detail about correspondences between the microcosm and macrocosm in her paper on converging paradigms (Stutchbury 1998a) and in Stutchbury (1991: 297-329, 345). One example related to three young men who were engaged in a Six Yogas of Naropa retreat has already been mentioned.¹⁷ She cites many other such accounts of dramatic and unusual atmospheric phenomena. The people with whom she lived whilst doing her fieldwork explained to her that the techniques of the inner yoga, which occurred within

¹⁵ Ekajati is the principal guardian of the Dzogchen tradition. Ekajati is also queen of the Mamos, one of eight classes of negative spirits. Mamos generally control pestilences and epidemics like cholera and can also create war if they are offended.

¹⁶ Here Elisabeth is making a confident assertion of beneficial outcome in the world as a result of ritual practice. This is one way Buddhists act to make change in the world. Buddhists also understand the need to work in other ways to make change in the world and there are many publications now on engaged Buddhism. See for example, Kotler 1996. For those interested in Buddhism and environmentalism see Kaza and Kraft 1999. For those interested in Buddhism and feminism see Gross 1993 and Klein 1995.

¹⁷ One of these was Lama Paljor Lharje who later became a subject of scientific examination by Herbert Benson. See Benson (1982a; 1982b; 1990; 1991).

the microcosm of the yogis' mind-body complexes, were mirrored in the macrocosm, the surrounding environment.

In the Tibetan tradition, with its refinement of understanding of mind and its nature, the relationship between body and mind, and the way in which experience is embodied, there is, I believe, a powerful framework through which such 'symbolic' correspondence between inner environment (microcosm) and outer environment (macrocosm) can be understood. Moreover, if we can penetrate into the meaning that pertains within this paradigm, we may also find that such correspondences and interdependences actually occur. (Stutchbury 1998b: 118)

Elisabeth's assertions here challenge common sense understandings of perception and self in western industrial societies which take it as given that the self as perceiver, and the world as perceived, are fixed entities which may be relied upon to stay fixed and differentiated. For those ordinary people who inhabit the world created by the marvelous success of science it does appear 'self-evident' that self and object are separate. Science, we think, is based on this distinction and science works.

Because Elisabeth's comments so radically challenge this everyday perception and because she has herself engaged in the discourse between eastern and western perspectives on mind-body relationship and perception as an embodied experience (see Stutchbury, 1998b, 2004), it is important to contextualise what she says by focusing briefly on Buddhism and science.

Sometimes Buddhism is referred to as a religion. This may often be the case, in practice, despite the absence of belief in god. Buddhism,¹⁸ nevertheless, also has a scientific (that is, investigative, rational, analytical and methodical) approach, which differs from most religions, in that it invites its followers to test its philosophy, and psychology, of mind. The

¹⁸ The discussion of Buddhism in this paper refers primarily to modern western interpretations unless otherwise specified.

practitioner performs again, the original experiments of its founder in following certain practices of the mind, to discover the relationship of the self to that which is perceived. In this sense, it is about a deep introspective examination of the process of perception, rather than about revelation or some other idea of received truth. Or, to put it another way, it is about experiential knowing rather than a belief system.

Because these experiential techniques lead to a deeper understanding of consciousness, the Buddhist metaphysics differs from a western commonsense worldview where self and object are radically separate. For the Buddhist practitioner neither the world alone causes our perceptions, nor are external objects the products of perception only. Rather, in the Buddhist view, the knower and the known, mind and world, are understood as dependently co-arising¹⁹ or mutually conditioning.

The senses are the doors of perception and the self is merely part of a larger circuit, not a separate discrete entity. None of this is to deny the individuality of the knower. In Buddhism, on the contrary, the individual is understood to react in their own particular way to the sense stimulus encountered because of their own particular experience and because of the habits of mind that result from this experience. What Buddhism does do is point to the non-existence of the self apart from perception and interaction with the external world. Should the practitioner wish to take this path, there is ample scope for the dismantling of the ego-self in Buddhism and for the re-identification of the self with the larger field.

A recent book on Buddhism and science, edited by Wallace (2003), provides a useful review of the current dialogue between the two and is worth mentioning here to give some

¹⁹ Macy, a western student and practitioner of Buddhism, refers to dependent co-arising as an equivalent for the deep ecology of all things (Macy 1996: 421).

indication of the breadth of engagement between cutting edge science in several disciplines and the epistemology of Buddhism. The Dalai Lama suggested writing the book to Wallace, and contributes two pieces on Tibetan Buddhist theories of the mind and modes of transforming the mind. It includes a history of previous writing on Buddhism and science. It also includes chapters by biologists and psychologists who have been recently directly engaged in the scientific dialogue with Buddhism (David Galin; Francisco Varela and Natalie Depraz; Stephen LaBerge). Other chapters are by physicists or philosophers of physics (Victor Mansfield, Michel Bitbol, David Finkelstein, Anton Zeilinger, Piet Hut). This book demonstrates that scientists from all these fields give genuine epistemic status to some Tibetan Buddhist practices and philosophy.

Systems theory, the biology of cognition, neuroscience and physics have all moved away from dualistic epistemology into a new understanding that recognizes the needful interaction of subject and object and it is these new sciences that allow the fruitful dialogue with Buddhist scholarship and practice. This is a complex area, only briefly touched upon here, in order to contextualise some of what Elisabeth says. It can be said however that recent studies show that scientists themselves are becoming more aware that there are areas of investigation that may never be fully grasped through intellectual analysis alone.

Both Stutchbury and Wallace argue that it is only by performing the practices that a true understanding of Buddhist concepts can arise. Stutchbury further argues that to the extent that some scientists have investigated Buddhist ideas they are only looking at some of the external manifestations and not at the core substance. Scientific validation, in other

words, is only looking at a small part of what can be known, in Buddhist terms, and not the central part.

For those who read these words and who are not practitioners, it may be that the partial scientific validation of Buddhist epistemology will give some weight to Elisabeth's words. It can at least be acknowledged readily enough that science is moving beyond dualistic concepts and that in this respect the epistemology of Buddhism resonates more with current scientific knowledge than with its dualistic past. Even those of us who do not engage in contemplative practices may acknowledge the relevance of both the new science and of Buddhist epistemology for our current circumstances. If we truly acknowledge a world of necessary interaction with the field, or of dependent co-arising, then we are in a better position to see how deeply we are part of nature. By truly acknowledging these insightful views we might better appreciate that it is our sense of separation, from nature and each other, that is illusory, and that our 'self' interest cannot be separated from that of the all the rest.

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