

# WESTERN & BUDDHIST IDEAS ABOUT THE NATURE OF MIND

James Low, 1994

*Just as in winter on a ski slope when people go on the same way again and again, it gets faster and easier. So a similar sort of thing happens with these channels. That certain sound, like sounds of one's children, or lover, or boss, makes a very quick path so we respond to it very easily. But it is more in terms of flow inside the channel. The channel itself is not conscious.*



*You see the fullness of the water but there is also an emptiness there, because it is bubbling up all the time. It is space realizing its other face, just like the fullness of the mirror.*



*What we need is the experience of the process itself. Because once we have experience of the process the way we use the words does not really matter.*



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## Introduction

I'll start by giving an example first and then relate that example to some of the ideas that we have in the west at the moment about the nature of the mind, and then I will go on to look at some of the buddhist ideas.

### BASIC CONTEXT IS SPACE

The first thing we have in any interaction is a context. The most basic context is space. We could say that's the absolute context.

Then inside that there is an ecological context in which subject and object, people, animals, all the elements, living and not-living are moving together creating one whole. That is the relative context.

Inside that context we live. In order to live we have to have a structure, a body. And that structure is maintained by a set of processes. These processes have both content and product. Thus for example when we eat, the food becomes the content of the process of digestion and is separated into two kinds of products; that which is incorporated into the structure and that which is excreted. Thus we can view our physical existence in terms of these concepts: absolute context, relative context with structure, process, content and product.

These concepts are also useful for trying to understand the mind and how it functions dynamically from moment to moment.

### EGO AND REIFICATION

In this century with the work of Freud and Jung, concepts have developed about how the mind can be understood. We are probably all familiar with the ideas of the unconscious and the conscious mind. The conscious part we can see as consisting of an ego and perhaps a super-ego, that is to say a bit of the mind that is concerned with self-identity. The super-ego is what has been taken in and learned. It is the product of the individual's interaction with the environment and it

functions with a kind of a structure. Words like 'ego' are used in many different ways—as a kind of structural concept; as a process concept; and as a content concept.

Many of the words that we use now in the West regarding mental states are used to support a general attitude of reification, as if they referred to real structural entities existing per se. Thus the unconscious is often talked of as if it were inside us, as a big, vast, infinite thing like a huge bag that is pushing out all sorts of stuff. So it is seen in a solidified concrete way, as existing as 'some thing'.

The mental structures indicated by these concepts have processes, a living energy which seems to create things. Generally we find it very difficult to think of something and understand it, without turning it into a substance. This is because we are interacting all the time as if there is an outer world and an inner self; and that the objects we can see outside have a concrete form, a definite shape.

When we look inside and have a sense of our feelings or thoughts they don't have such a form. But the language which we use to talk about the mind is also a language which has developed through external concerns. So a lot of the time we are using metaphors and examples which are based on supposedly real solid entities—things existing out there in themselves.

## **STRUCTURE AND PROCESS**

However our ability to see the outer world and the inner world in a fairly regular patterned way is very important for our mental health. When we say somebody has a mental breakdown, a collapse, there is a sense of losing structure, of not knowing where one is.

There are two functions to whatever concepts we use to understand our mind and how we are. The first is in terms of relative truth, and is to give us a sense of our own ordinary identity so that *'I know who I am and I know what the world is'*. At every moment a vast amount of information is coming into our senses and we make sense of that 'chaos of possibility' by having fixed ideas about what is happening.

Secondly, the more absolute value of these concepts of the mind is to help us to look beyond the known, beyond what we actually rely on. The clearer we are about ordinary interactions, the more possible it is to take the risk to enquire deeply.

For example if someone wants to go into psychotherapy as a client they are offered a definite place to meet, a regular time of meeting, a regular seat or couch, with the same person as a therapist who will operate according to the same model. And with this outer boundary of security the person can start to

take risks. In Buddhism when we explore the nature of the mind I think there is a very similar process at work.

## **Eight buddhist consciousnesses and the five poisons**

### **SIX SENSE CONSCIOUSNESSES**

The basic texts that deal with the nature of the mind belong to a system called 'abhidharma'. These texts were developed from the teachings of Buddha Sakyamuni which he based on his own contemplative enquiry. He has described the processes that he experienced.

In these texts he describes how we have the five sense organs. These five senses have five kinds of objects. They also have five mental functions supporting them. So that for example if I hear a sound, there is something out there which makes contact with my hearing sense organ. Our capacity for sensory awareness arises with the sense object. The capacity is not fixed and enduring but contextual and transient.

It is important to say here that it is described traditionally as only a process. So that if I was in a completely soundproof room there would be no mental co-ordinator of sound. But as soon as a sound is made, that co-ordinating function starts to operate. That process is called 'rNam Par Shes Pa' in Tibetan. rNam Par Shes Pa means 'fully knowing' –really being in touch with what is happening. This term rNam Par Shes Pa is often translated as 'consciousness', but it is important to understand here that in this buddhist view, consciousness is neither a structure nor an entity.

Hearing consciousness has a site of operation, a working place and this is the heart chakra. Around the outside of the heart chakra there are eight passageways, eight channels of energy. One of these deals with hearing. The energy moves there when sound appears. So there is a very sensitive, responsive system operating.

But there is no consciousness *per se* existing inside us like our heart or our lungs do. In modern neurophysiology people have been thinking that there were discrete spots in the brain which would deal with particular functions. That's still in rough terms how it is generally thought of although there is also the sense of patterns of responses creating their own pathways. Thus if you have a habit of always picking your ear, in the brain there will develop a particular pathway of messages so that it becomes easier and easier to replicate that action.

Just as in winter on a ski slope when people go on the same way again and again it gets faster and easier, a similar sort of thing happens with these channels. Certain sound, like sounds of one's children, or lover, or boss makes a

very quick path so we respond to it very easily. But it is more in terms of flow inside the channel. The channel itself is not conscious.

For example if you have vessels with liquids of different viscosity and next to them you hold tuning forks with different notes, different vibrations, you find that some sounds go through some viscosities, some densities, easier than through others. Similarly the quality of the wind's energy in the channels is described as being rough or fine. It moves across the spectrum. And when we engage in very dualistic activities, being very separate from the world, then the crudeness of the interaction makes the wind crude, hard.

So what you have here is the total system, an ecological system if you like, in which changes in the outer world affect the inner world; and changes in the inner world affect the outer world. And we have probably all experienced that if we do some meditation, afterwards our senses are a bit lighter and clearer, the world seems to be a bit more alive. This would be an example of that. The same thing happens for the other five senses. Thus these five ways of interaction provide a wide variety of sense data.

## **THE CO-ORDINATOR**

There is also a sixth consciousness which is the co-ordinator of the processes of the other five, of all that is coming through the senses. In Tibetan it is called 'Yid Kyi rNam Par Shes Pa'. Yid is the equivalent of the Sanskrit word 'manas' which indicates cognitive capacity. And rNam Par Shes Pa is the same as vijñana [Sanskrit] which means 'a particular kind of knowing'.

Sometimes this particular organizing function is described as being the ego because its operation generates a sense of self by its operation, in the same way that the conductor of an orchestra is the essence of the orchestra. He brings it to life, brings it to fulfilment. But if the conductor believes that he exactly *is* the whole orchestra, he can make a lot of trouble.

Similarly if we believe that the functioning is really us and that we are doing the "I am listening", "I am seeing", then instead of playing and moving and allowing the richness of the world, we put it into a box and squeeze it so that it ends up fighting against us.

The function of this sixth consciousness is rather to facilitate the effective and collaborative action of the other five. As an example of this, in modern management it is customary to give as much independence and responsibility as possible to different members of a team. The role of the manager is then to balance and harmonize the way everybody is working and not to enforce rules. So this again is a process and it is operating through the same sort of structures and energy flow as the other five.

## THE CRAZY DIRECTOR

There is a seventh function which is called the afflicted or the charged-up director, the crazy director. In Tibetan it is called 'Nyon Mong Yid Kyi rNam Par Shes Pa'. Nyon Mong are afflictions and traditionally are often described as being like five poisons. They are considered to be poisons because when you take a poison into yourself everything goes a bit wrong, you don't feel healthy, your system is not operating properly.

But as we can see many people in the modern world are deeply poisoned by their food but they do not recognize that they are poisoned. Many people give their children Coca-Cola and chocolate all the time and then are surprised to have hyper-active children. And these five poisons operate similarly, being not often recognized.

## FIVE POISONS

The first one is stupidity. It means not being fully awake. It is as if you arrive late at a party and everyone else is drunk. They think they are very interesting and fascinating, but if all the drink is finished, since you can only drink tea, you quickly find their conversation very boring! In that way when stupidity is happening we live in confusion but do not recognize it at all. As with drunk people we tell the same story again and again and think it gets better every time.

The next poison is attraction. As an example when I look at the flowers in front of me, my eyes are drawn to this big bunch of flowers. Then I don't see the other things that are there on the table. That's the nature of attraction. It acts like a pair of blinkers. The negative aspect of this is that the attractions become habits, and then we miss out on a huge area of experience. The positive benefit of it is that it keeps us reasonably clear in situations in the sense of having a simple identity. So if you decide to follow one profession it is very important to have that attraction until you retire because if every day you have a new idea of what you want to be life, you become very disturbed.

There are similar situational benefits with all these five poisons. That is to say, they generate a sense of ordinary identity, of being someone in particular, of being me. And that has to be understood if we try to open them up.

The next poison is aversion which means responding in a negative way to things. Again, the main function of this is to cut off lots of possibilities and to charge the mind up with a lot of energy when we can't avoid the thing towards which we feel aversion. In Buddhism the simplest definition of suffering is not getting what you do want and getting what you don't want.

Then the fourth of the poisons is pride. This is a poison because it means basically a kind of self-obsession. So that someone who is always depressed is also, if you like, under the influence of pride. In the sense that the process, the

energy is focused on the self, everything coming in, affirming the same basic stand point.

The fifth poison is jealousy in which the energy is focussed outside. This means that it is very difficult to understand yourself since the attention is always on someone else.

These five poisons are like imbalances in the healthy functioning of the senses so that, when the outer world is changing and the inner energy flow is moving to respond to that, it is as if in the arteries cholesterol is building up and they become narrow. And so you get blockages and the natural, even flow of responsive energy gets distorted.

## **EIGHTH CONSCIOUSNESS**

Then there is the eighth form of consciousness called Kun Zhi rNam Par Shes Pa or alayavijnana [Sanskrit]. Basically it means the consciousness which is the root of everything.

It has two faces, one a relative face in which it is a little bit like Jung's idea of collective unconscious, a sort of huge dustbin in which all past habits and imbalances are stored, or if you prefer, like a vast database. And that means although we may feel we have gone beyond a particular habit, we may have done some work on our selves, some therapy, some meditation, whatever –we may feel we are clear of something –and yet suddenly it appears again.

In the early Mahayana texts when the idea of this consciousness which is the source of everything was developed it was seen very much in this dustbin sense. For example D.T. Suzuki when he translated the Lankavatara Sutra, translated it as 'store consciousness'. However this consciousness, this way of functioning has another face, the absolute face.

Thus, ordinarily we experience events as entities, as things that have happened. We feel we have a structure—our mind – which is a process with contents. So, if something has happened in the day we might dream about it at night. We can imagine that the event has somehow come from outside, into our mind and is held as some kind of substance in our memory. All our language supports us in this kind of perception, for that is how we talk about experience. The language used in the early texts, particularly in the Abhidharma texts when these mental events were being described, was very much the language of substances and of real processes, as if something substantial is happening.

## **Emptiness**

When the Buddha gave the second turning of the Dharma wheel—when he taught about emptiness – it was initially in terms of the emptiness of external



objects. Gradually people became more familiar with the idea that an object, such as this glass in front of me now, has no inherent self-nature, that it exists in a relative context, as a function of a process of becoming, but in itself has no definite eternal being as a glass. You don't need me to drop the glass and see it smash for you to understand that!

## **SEEING EMPTINESS OF EXTERNAL OBJECTS IS NOT SO DIFFICULT**

However the habit of conceptualizing the experience in terms of 'I am seeing a glass' – particularly if it is a very special glass with personal associations – is very strong. It would no longer be just a glass but it would be holding an enormous number of projections and hopes and memories. And so it would be very difficult to see the glass just as a glass. In this way, the next stage of seeing the glass as emptiness becomes impossible. One of the essential processes of meditation is for us to remove our many levels of projection from objects – that is to say, to make the world simple. If we make the world simple then to dissolve it into energy is a simple process of the flow of becoming.

I have introduced this idea here because this is the other face of the 'consciousness that is the ground of everything'. Starting from external objects we can see fairly easily that they are empty of inherent self-nature. When we look at our emotions and our thoughts we can see that they are very transitory.

## **SEEING EMPTINESS OF THE 'THINKER OF THE THOUGHT', OF THE 'FEELER OF EMOTIONS' IS MORE DIFFICULT**

But somehow the sense that there is some thinker of the thought, some feeler of the emotions, is very, very difficult to get rid of. And it is by looking at this point, of what is the nature of the thinker and the looker that the nature of this 'consciousness that is the source of everything' changes. It is a bit like looking into your mirror when you are shaving or putting on make-up or whatever, somehow it is very habitual. You know who is there. And because of that you don't see very much.

But if you actually look at the mirror it is something very mysterious. This mirror is empty and yet something is inside. And whatever you hold up suddenly appears there. We can only have that experience of the mystery of the mirror if we allow it to be empty. Because when you look at yourself in the mirror you have already filled the mirror with the image that you know. You only see what you already know. In this way all the possibilities of the mirror are hidden by whatever thing you need to see there.

In the same way when meditating, you come to a point where you see the same person again and again. You get to know your mind. This can be seen as a kind of self-knowledge. If you know everything in the dustbin then it is very difficult to go beyond the boundary of the dustbin because the more you know, the more fascinating the patterns become.



## **Emptiness of the container revealing itself like a spring bubbling up**

But by bringing the awareness of emptiness onto that basic holding nature, onto the basic dustbin or container itself, it is transformed into –or rather revealed as – something like a source, like a spring. It is like when you go into the mountains and you see a spring. If you are thirsty you see “Oh, there is some water, some container of water” and you drink it. You see the fullness of the water but there is also an emptiness there, because it is bubbling up all the time. It is space realizing its other face, just like the fullness of the mirror.

It is accepting that nature of the process of the unfolding of the ground, which is the breakthrough into the real nature of the source or the ‘ground nature’ of the mind. Why? Because at that point the notion of the mind being an entity is completely released. There is the sense of the absolute context which I talked about in the beginning.

We can see that the earth is floating in space and is suffused by space, exists in space, is not an enemy of space, is an expression of space, and that inside that large expression of space there are many interactions which seem to be real but are in effect just interacting processes whose basic nature is space.

Similarly on having this experience of the source nature, this flowing source – not source as a big rich pot with lots of things in it – but source like a spring in the mountain, ceaselessly bubbling up with a flow that both reveals and conceals the source. Then everything that is arising is contained within this process, absolutely clear and not solidifying into entities. In the same way the mirror is vast in its emptiness. The images that appear in it are not real, and yet they are absolutely clear and perfect in their definition.

I think the essential point is this: that this is a flow of ideas. Each of these stages can be seen in terms of a structure, or a process, or content, or product. And that's what makes it very very difficult, because traditional texts move around the frame of reference within which they are using technical terms at any given time. Sometimes they are talking in a very relative subject-object interactive way. So, a term like ‘Sems’ which can be translated as ‘mind’ may have a similar range of usages as its English equivalent. Thus I can have thoughts in my mind in the same way as I can have money in my pocket. We can use a linguistic metaphor like this and it affirms reification. There is no real meaning in any of these words. Studying definitions of them again and again won't help. What we need is the experience of the process itself. Because once we have experience of the process the way we use the words does not really matter.

At the moment I am thinking of learning to drive a car. So if am sitting in a car I look at what the driver does and I keep trying to remember all the different things that his feet do when he comes to a corner. I get very, very troubled by the

complexity of it and yet the drivers never seem troubled, they just do it. And this is the essential thing. We have to take responsibility and do the practice and have the experience, because the meaning is in the experience and not in the words.

## **C.R. Lama**

“Lord Buddha is the highest of people who have talked of relaxation. Lord Buddha says you can get the necessary relaxation in your next life. If you stop sin then afterwards you will get freedom or buddhahood. Now, at this time, people teaching relaxation do not speak about future lives. Perhaps they don't believe in a next life but anyway they teach about this life. To become peaceful. My idea is that if you become peaceful in this life there will also be benefit for the next life.

Therefore I think this talk about how mind is, might be of a little benefit for you.”