

Enlightenment and Altered States of Consciousness: The Limits of Tibetan Shamanic Buddhism

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Introduction

Necessary to the fulfillment of the shaman's vocation is the attainment of altered states of consciousness through which the shaman can affect change in the human realm. Geoffrey Samuel's *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*¹ characterizes the role of the shaman amongst differing approaches to Buddhism within Tibetan society and he compares two aspects of Tibetan Buddhism – *Shamanic* and *Clerical* – as approaches which ultimately “share the common goal of Enlightenment.”² His comparison revolves around the fact that both approaches utilize tantric visualization techniques as a method of achieving altered states of consciousness. Samuel's assertion is that the altered states in shamanic practice are preparatory and conducive to the enlightened state (Nirvana). I intend to show, however, that Samuel is incorrect in maintaining this association and that he has committed a *category mistake*

¹ Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

² Samuel, 9-10.

in comparing shamanic altered states with states of enlightenment – despite the fact that they both utilize tantric techniques.³ Tibetan Shamanic Buddhists operate within a dualistic point of view about the world and utilize tantric techniques to extend the limits of that view. Their aim, in effect, is to develop an expanded psychological realm of activity to gain access to a broader range of ‘worlds,’ including the spiritual realm. The enlightened state, on the other hand, represents more than a mere adjustment in the access to ‘other worlds’ and is a condition of nondual awareness which exists as a result of the actual *elimination* of conceptual framework-making altogether – including any separate or distinct notion of ‘self’ as an actually existing subject. Here, the tantric practitioner uses tantric techniques to annihilate the experience of subject-object duality altogether through the elimination of the subjective ‘self.’ From the Tibetan Clerical Buddhist’s point of view, the shaman’s use of tantric methods is erroneous and incomplete and only serves to extend and reinforce the practitioner’s illusory experience of the world (as dualistic) into the spirit realm. The shaman, with regard to his experience of the subjective world, is actually immersed in a *wider* range of illusion than is the common individual in society.

To demonstrate my thesis, I will contrast the notions put forward by Samuel regarding shamanism against the nondualist notion of enlightenment found in both

³ For the sake of clarity, a *category mistake* is a confusion in the attribution of the properties of a thing, or in the classification of things. Therefore, to suppose that a “university” is nothing more than its buildings is to commit a category mistake.

Madhyamaka and Yogacara Buddhist philosophy.⁴ This will entail an investigation and understanding of the traditionally defined nondual condition of Nirvana itself and the recognition that it is not an altered state of consciousness at all, as the shaman knows it, but rather it is a paradigm shift of awareness that is empty of all notions of a subjective self and dualist conditionings. In doing this we will see that the altered states of the shaman maintains a dualistic conception of reality despite the fact that it is a privileged perspective in relation to the average citizen in society. This state of *unconditioned consciousness*, which is the goal of Buddhist Tantra, is void of the subject-object experience, which shamans require in order to fulfill their duties associated with the community.

This project intends to point out the distinction between the dualist and nondualist positions and show that the *authentic* goal of tantric practice serves to undermine both the dualistic and the shamanistic worldviews. Further, while this in no way denies the value of the shaman within the mainstream of Tibetan Buddhist society, it establishes the limits inherent in the shaman's altered states of consciousness. Equating the dualistic aims of Tibetan Shamanic Buddhism, as Samuel does, with the nondualist goals of enlightenment for a tantric practitioner will clearly demonstrate what is classically defined as a category mistake.

⁴ Madhyamaka buddhism, while not itself a nondualist philosophical system, contains the notion of enlightenment as a nondualist principle of experience arising at the final stages. Significantly, it is the notion of enlightenment itself which I wish to employ in the text above and not specifically the philosophical systems of Madhyamaka or Yogacara Buddhism.

Clerical Buddhism: The Goal of Enlightenment and Nondualism

The Buddhist notion of enlightenment is a difficult subject to grasp. The difficulty often lies in the fact that a typical human sensory experience of the world is dualistic and, therefore, obstructive to the acceptance of a nondual perspective. Our analysis of the world is chiefly comprised of sense data – such as taste, sight, and touch – which registers within the three dimensional limitations of physical existence. Whatever reality is, it is primarily *experienced* by human sensory equipment as a *physical* reality. Any movement from this perspective involves a form of imaginative mental activity and discipline to override our sense inputs. Furthermore, to even ‘think’ about nondualism presents particular problems. Thoughts are fragments of experience and, while they can be assembled together in such a way as to form a coherent concept, they remain nothing more than a fragmented reflection or facsimile of reality and can never give the experience of nondualism itself. All thoughts are constructed of memory and, therefore, *as long as ‘thoughts’ are being utilized to investigate nondualism one can never achieve a state of nondualism, in the moment, as a direct experience* The individual will only directly experience the thoughts, memories or concepts about nonduality; never the actual state of nonduality itself.

An exploration of nonduality lies at the heart of the Mahayana Buddhist endeavor and its chief proponents argued extensively about the irrationality of our senses when engaging in ontological problems. One of the greatest expressions of the nondual notion of reality came from Nagarjuna, founder of the Madhyamaka school of

Mahayana Buddhism. In his most well known work, *Mulamadhyamakarikā*, Nagarjuna speaks of the incoherence of dualistic concepts and the incongruence of the conceptualization of a self (subject) in the world (object). “If the self were to be identical with the aggregates, it will partake of uprising and ceasing [and thereby be impermanent, unreal]. If it were to be different from the aggregates, it would have the characteristics of the non-aggregates [not-knowable].”⁵ This passage illustrates the impermanence of any concept of the self-arising out of a relationship to the impermanent aggregates or *skandhas* as well as the futility of trying to conceptualize something foreign to our sensual experience of the world. As David J. Kalupahana explains:

Nagarjuna has not given any indication that he recognizes a special intuitive faculty through which one can see beyond the world of change and impermanence. Indeed, all that he has admitted points to his recognition of sense experiences as the foundation of human knowledge. The impermanent aggregates constitute not only the human personality, but also its experiences. If the self is considered to be different from the aggregates, Nagarjuna is here implying that it is unknowable, not merely inconceivable, for it will not have any of the characteristics of the aggregates that are all that we know through sense experience.⁶

⁵ David J. Kalupahana, *Mulamadhyamakarikā of Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1986) 263.

⁶ Kalupahana, 263-64.

This 'unknowable' is the goal tantric practice and is the result that all serious tantric practitioners seek to attain. It is unknowable in that enlightenment cannot be conceived of prior to its occurrence, nor can it be described or 'thought about' in a conceptual way once achieved. Nagarjuna's argument denies the substantiality of holding to a conceptual or sensual framework of reality. Anything arising or existing out of the characteristics of the five aggregates remains within the realm of duality and is, in his framework, illusory. This is the first major blow against a shamanistic endeavor, which seeks to work in the human realm through the spiritual realm. Where the shaman's experience is specifically dualistic in nature, within a subject-object framework of reality, Nagarjuna suggests that true reality – or enlightenment, as an experience of that reality – exists outside of the paradigm of the *skandhas* altogether. Nondualism is not merely seeing the world as one interconnected world of subjects and objects but that it cannot be conceived of at all in such terms.

The intended consequence of tantric practice, as an extinction of 'self,' is further described by Nagarjuna: "In the absence of a self, how can there be something which belongs to the self? From the appeasing of the modes of self and self-hood, one abstains from creating notions of 'mine' and 'I.'"⁷ Nagarjuna is moving steadily toward a complete repudiation of a 'self' in any term that can be known or pre-conceived by the individual through his familiar modes of perception and experience. Kalupahana further elucidates:

⁷ Kalupahana, 264.

If a permanent entity does not exist, one cannot assume the existence of anything that

belongs to it. The denial of a permanent entity does not mean that Nagarjuna is committed to a rejection of self-awareness or self-consciousness. The rejection of the latter would undermine the very foundation of his epistemology. . . . Nagarjuna, following the Buddha, recognized consciousness (and this includes self-awareness), not as a pre-existent *cogito*, but as part of the human personality conditioned by factors such as the sense organs and the objects of perception. . . . The result is the ‘construction of a self’ (*aham + kara*),⁸ which eventually leads to the belief in permanence.⁹

The approach by Nagarjuna maintains its strength by showing that illusions about reality arise through any perceptions registered through the context of an ‘I,’ which is itself illusory. Where any notion of a subjective or experiencing self exists, there too, resides illusions and a misinterpretation of reality. It is not so detrimental that the individual constructs a personality utilizing the *skandhas* but that the consciousness comes to *believe* that it *is* that personality and that experiences collected through that perspective are accurate interpretations of reality. This belief constitutes the chains that bind the individual to *samsara*. This also relegates the shaman’s experiences to the realm of dualism. As such, the nondual experience of enlightenment is alien to the

⁸ Literally “I-making.”

⁹ Kalupahana, 264.

shaman in any measure. Stcherbatsky describes Nagarjuna's position on the Absolute (Nirvana) as an end to all phenomenal existence; not actually – for that is an impossible claim to make – but experientially.¹⁰ In the end, Nagarjuna leaves us without grounds to think about duality in any logically convincing way.

Yogacara's 'Mind-only' doctrine denies the ontological existence of any intrinsically objective existence. From an epistemological standpoint, it represents "a powerful critique against (1) the objectification of language, (2) the artificiality of dualistic logic, and (3) the types of conventional knowledge derived from both."¹¹ The conventional knowledge referred to in this last passage represents the conceptualizing faculties of the individual and the field of perception through which the shaman depends upon to function in his duties. It, again, is constructed of thoughts, which are fragmented instances of memory.

This kind of knowledge . . . is really no knowledge, since it can only provide the delusion of facticity, or the 'Suchness' of things, tainted as it is by the subjective factors of perception and biased judgment. True knowledge [enlightenment], on the other hand, can only be attained within the context of the *totality* of human existence, that is to say, in the direct experience of life, which transcends verbal categories, dual logic, and pseudo-ontology based

¹⁰ Th. Stcherbatsky, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvana*. (New York: Gordon Press, 1973) 5-6.

¹¹ Florin Giripescu Sutton. *Existence and Enlightenment in the Lankavatara-sutra: A Study in the Ontology and Epistemology of the Yogacara School of Mahayana Buddhism*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991) xvii.

upon the reification of thoughts and ideas (including the idea of Mind-only itself).¹²

Vasubandhu, the 4th century Yogacaric philosopher, attempts to assert a positive view of nondualism. In his commentaries on *The Separation of the Middle From Extremes*

(*Madhyanata-Vibhaga-Bhasya*) he states that, “Consciousness arises as the appearance of objects of the senses and of understanding, and as the appearance of sentient beings, self, and perceptions. There is no (real) object for it, and in its non-being, it itself is not.”¹³ In Vasubandhu’s commentaries we see the move to a more positive statement about the nature of reality in relation to our ability to perceive that reality. As we perceive objects in the world (receive sensory input), we create a subjective ‘self’ in response. Individual consciousness becomes conditioned through the impact of the environment on the senses as well as with our examination and identification with those experiences. The impact and recording of an object gives rise to a ‘subject that is recording’ and thus our sense of duality, however illusory, is created and intensified. Giuseppe Tucci renders an interpretation of the Yogacara philosophy, inspired by Maitreya through Asanga, by saying that “mysticism cannot but be monistic, and the system of Maitreya is chiefly mystic.”¹⁴ This is clearly illustrated in Asanga’s primary

¹² Sutton, xvii-xviii.

¹³ Stefan Anacker, *Seven Works of Vasubandhu: The Buddhist Psychological Doctor* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1984) 212.

¹⁴ Giuseppe Tucci, *On Some Aspects of the Doctrines of Maitreya[natha] and Asanga*. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1930, 27.

works, *The Lankavatara Sutra*. Here we see that a further illusion exists in treating Nirvana (enlightenment) as an object of attainment itself.

Some philosophers conceive nirvana to be found where a system of mentation no more operates owing to the cessation of the Skandhas, Dhatus, and Ayatanas, or to the indifference to the objective world, or to the recognition that all things are impermanent; . . .

When it is not thoroughly understood that there is nothing but what is seen of the Mind itself, dualistic determinations take place; when it is thoroughly understood that there is nothing but what is seen of the Mind itself, discrimination ceases.¹⁵

Nirvana is described here as being something even less than the subtlest of mind states. It is in actually seeing that all experience occurs strictly as a function of the Mind itself, and that to even think or conceptualize about our experiences in any way, that individual consciousness remains ensnared within the dualistic notion of reality. The Shamanic Buddhist, as a result, must deal with an enhanced multitude of objects, both in the material and the spiritual realm.

The 'state' of enlightenment, if such a misleading description is permitted, is only perceived when the object-discriminating activity of the mind ceases. For the practitioner, duality ceases to be, along with any conception or activity as a subjective 'self.' The experience itself is nondual and can never logically be the goal of the

¹⁵ D. T. Suzuki, *The Lankavatara Sutra*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1966) 158-61.

Shamanic Buddhist who must necessarily remain engaged with a dualistic experience of the world, albeit a much expanded and privileged conception of the world.

To achieve enlightenment is to actually extinguish the very activity that substantiates the subjective role and identity of the shaman interacting with his objective community. To think in terms of the shaman as engaged in a search for enlightenment in any way is to misunderstand the epistemological issues surrounding enlightenment. In other words, the goal of tantric practice is to achieve a nondualistic state of mind (i.e. enlightenment) whereas the goal of the shaman is to employ tantric methods to extend his dualistic perspective beyond merely the physical realm and into the spiritual realm.

Shamanic Buddhism: Altered States of Consciousness and Dualism

A variety of definitions have been attempted to describe the position and phenomenon of shaman. Samuel states that, within Tibetan culture, shamanic training often arises out of the Vajrayanic tradition. "The Vajrayana's technique for obtaining Buddhahood function in practical terms as a means of training shamanic practitioners. Lamas in Tibet function as shamans, and they do so through the techniques and practices of Vajrayana Buddhism."¹⁶ If we are to accept this statement that the use of tantra in shamanic training can be considered a *practical* application, then it seems to imply that striving to obtain Buddhahood or enlightenment may be an impractical notion. More

¹⁶ Samuel, 9.

likely, however, is that the severe difficulty in attaining enlightenment makes it more common that practitioners will utilize tantric methods for unintended purposes including the altering of one's own state of consciousness. This also suggests that the goals of Shamanic and Clerical Buddhists are not equally motivated toward enlightenment but that the former remain in *samsara* while broadening their influence there through tantra. This is *contrary* to tantric belief and practice. The central focus of tantric yoga is on enlightenment, using a system of techniques designed to break down the subject's sense of a separate identity. One of these central techniques involves the process of identifying oneself with one or another of the Vajrayanic deities in the hope of embodying those energies or qualities represented by the deity. In the meantime, one's own identity is annihilated or extinguished in the process. "The Vajrayana mythologizes the doctrine of emptiness, and teaches that the adept, through a combination of rites, is reinstated into his true *diamond-nature*."¹⁷ Samuel states that the primary mode of activity of Shamanic Buddhism is in the use of *analogy* and *metaphor*.¹⁸ The mythologizing of universal forces in Vajrayana Buddhism naturally fits it for use by the shaman in their training. Their goal appears to be more pragmatic in relation to the world of daily affairs, however, than those Buddhist practitioners who are seeking enlightenment and release from *samsara* To develop the grounds upon which

¹⁷ Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959) 178.

¹⁸ Samuel, 15.

Samuel bases his position, he provides a standard definition of his understanding of the term 'shamanic.'

I use the term 'shamanic' as a general term for a category of practices found in differing degrees in almost all human societies. This category of practices may be briefly described as *the regulation and transformation of human life and human society through the use (or purported use) of alternate states of consciousness by means of which specialist practitioners are held to communicate with a mode of reality alternative to, and more fundamental than, the world of everyday experience.*¹⁹

This lucid statement on the position and activity of the shaman in Tibet provides us with a ground for Samuel's notion of Shamanic Buddhism. He continues by explaining that a particular distinction is to be made between the shaman involved in general Tibetan folk-religion – who employ spirit-mediums to communicate with local deities – and those Shamanic Buddhists who employ Vajrayanic techniques “centered around communication with an alternative mode of reality (that of the Tantric deities) via the alternate states of consciousness of Tantric yoga.”²⁰ The common factor between the Tibetan shamans of folk-religion and Shamanic Buddhism is clearly that alternate states of consciousness are utilized in their role with Tibetan society. Both these states allow them to interact with various aspects of reality beyond the scope of the everyday

¹⁹ Samuel, 8.

²⁰ Samuel, 8.

experience of individuals in Tibetan society. The main difference seems to be that the Shamanic Buddhist communicates with a higher grade of spirits as represented in the Vajrayana pantheon.

The question we need to ask, however, is do these altered states of the shaman, *as achieved through the particular effects, which the tantric techniques provide*, lead also to enlightenment as Samuel suggests? That is, is the experience that the shaman engages in, the *actual* experience for which that tantric practice was originally intended? Answering such questions requires a closer look at the actual altered states themselves and address the perspective(s) that they represent.

Mircea Eliade, a prominent scholar of the shamanic tradition, suggests that shamanism can be described as a “*technique of ecstasy*.”²¹ He adds to this notion by suggesting that the shaman additionally “specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave the body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld.”²² The shaman is considered the master of the technique of ecstasy and through a specific technique rises to a state of awareness of the ‘world of the spirits.’ In this spirit world the shaman learns to deal with those forces influencing the daily affairs of the community or society. Whether dealing with the death of an individual – and the subsequent guidance of that soul to the ‘other’ world – or the manipulation of the ‘elementals’ responsible for promoting human discord or illness, the shaman must enter into an ecstatic state of

²¹ Mircea Eliade. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* Translated by Willard R. Trask, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964) 4.

²² Eliade, 5.

sorts in order to acquire skills in the spirit world. These skills are distinct, for instance, from those found in the role of magician.

Shamanism exhibits a particular magical specialty . . . ‘mastery over fire,’ ‘magical flight,’ and so on. By virtue of this fact though the shaman is, among other things, a magician, not every magician can properly be termed a shaman. The direction must be applied in regard to shamanic healing; every medicine man is a healer, but the shaman employs a method that is his and his alone. As for the shamanic techniques of ecstasy, they do not exhaust all the varieties of ecstatic experience documented in the history of religions and religious ethnology.²³

So the Shamanic state of ecstasy is unique and extends beyond the limits of simple ecstatic experience but involves the ability to function *individually* within that experience and interact in such a way as to effect change. This signifies that the shaman has established some special *relation* to the ‘spirits’. Those ‘spirits’ may turn out to be “the soul of a dead person, a ‘nature spirit,’ a mythical animal, and so on.”²⁴ As Eliade interprets the skill of a shaman: “The shaman controls his ‘spirits’ in the sense that he, a human being, is able to communicate with the dead, ‘demons,’ and ‘nature spirits,’ without thereby becoming the instrument.”²⁵ This is a clear assertion about the need for

²³ Eliade, 5.

²⁴ Eliade, 6.

²⁵ Eliade, 7.

a shaman to maintain a dualistic perspective as well as some form of subjective 'self' which is antagonistic to authentic tantric practice.

The shaman develops special relationships through the technique of ecstasy and uses those relationships to manipulate the unseen affairs of the world that affect the community. The achievement of these skills can take an enormous period of time – sometimes decades. The time required to master the training often depends upon the shaman's ability to master communication in the spirit world whilst maintaining a degree of personal safety or protection. As suggested by Spence L. Rogers, "the methods of the medicine man [shaman] show great variety. Each theory of disease calls for a different way of affecting the cure. Views as to the cause of disease vary with the culture area, with the tribe and, to some degree, with the medicine man himself."²⁶ Roger's statement speaks to the need of maintaining a distinct identity. Despite this variance, however, it is the shaman's altered state of awareness as an individual, which facilitates their diagnosis and treatment of illness. The shaman must interact with the spiritual world and work to make changes that ultimately affect the material side of experience. As such, the shaman *appears* to deal with the causes of events.

Basically, the shaman's approach toward the universal forces is based on one or more of three fundamental assumptions. First, the essence of power is such that it can be controlled mechanically through incantations, formulas, and rituals. All of these may, with proper technique and effort, be channeled in the direction intended: healing the sick, averting plague, dealing with

²⁶ Spence L. Rogers, *The Shaman's Healing Way* (Ramona: Acoma Books, 1976) 28.

astronomical peculiarities, or solving other problems of community concern. Second is the assumption that the universe is controlled by a mysterious power which can be directed through the meticulous avoidance of certain acts or through zealous observance of certain strict obligations toward persons, places, and objects. The third assumption is that the affairs of mankind are managed through the force and will of spirits, ghosts, and divinities, whose actions can be influenced by human effort.²⁷

Rogers later points to the obvious factor that this third assumption presupposes the existence of spiritual beings that can be manipulated or directed under the instructions of a shaman.²⁸ As such, we see the shaman occupying some distinct subjective space, whether in this world or in the spiritual world. The shaman maintains a subjective state of existence in relation to a world, or realms, of objects. This dualistic experience of reality extends beyond merely their material experience and appears to accommodate their 'non-material' experiences too.

These 'non-material' experiences are often dependent upon, and function within, notions or beliefs about the cosmological make-up of the universe. As Schlesier states, the Tsistsistas shamans (Cheyenne) "acted on the highest level of achievement possible to humans in the frame of a world description that they originally formulated

²⁷ Spence L. Rogers, *The Shaman: His Symbols and His Healing Power*. (Springfield: Charles C Thomas Publishers, 1982) 43.

²⁸ Rogers, *Symbols*, 44.

long ago.”²⁹ The field of experience for the shaman is determined by their, essentially, mythological framework of the universe. The shaman creates a blueprint of the material and non-material universe that he enters either by trance or ecstatic experience. Similarly, with the Ojibway, “as the shamanic ritual evolves from the shaman’s initiating experience, the formative encounter with the *manitou*³⁰ provides the central symbols with which the shaman dramatically reenacts his vocational call.”³¹ The realm required for this interaction is established on the Ojibway cosmological order. “The concept of the multilayered earth is a recurring theme in Ojibway shamanism. Through this symbol of the mysterious regions of the universe, the Ojibway shaman structures his communication with *manitou* power.”³² The shaman is not only restricted to a dualist experience of the world but also to their conceptually constructed belief about the constitution of the universe. This cosmological framework, accessible in part only through trance, establishes the ring-pass-not for the shaman’s activities.

If we look closer at the altered state of awareness known as *trance* we see an interesting phenomenon arise. According to Wolfgang G. Jilek,

The term *trance* designates a ‘state of double consciousness, i.e., the constricted state of awareness of the personal self which co-exists with the

²⁹ Karl H Schlesier, *The Wolves of Heaven: Cheyenne Shamanism, Ceremonies, and Prehistoric Origins*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987) 6.

³⁰ John A Grim, *The Shaman: Patterns of Siberian and Ojibway Healing* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983) 6. “Among the Algonquian peoples of North America, *manitou* . . . encompasses a wide variety of spirit presences.”

³¹ Grim, 138.

³² Grim, 78.

dream-like state of consciousness of the para-personal self.' The neuropsychological basis of any trance or possession state is the dissociation of the self, which loses its experiential unity and is converted into a secondary 'dual system of relational experience,' namely, the personal self and the para-personal self."³³

Regardless of the particular 'world' in which the shaman's experience is functioning, there remains a dualist experience of subject-object relations. Within trance, the shaman undergoes a further fragmentation and a second para-personal self is 'constructed' to facilitate the shamanic encounters. This experience seems common to all descriptions of shamanic experience and the presence of some form of subjective 'self' seems not only incident to shamanic activity but also necessary. Despite a privileged interaction with other realms of existence, the shaman is still a subjective individual with a duty to fulfill. As such, the shaman cannot move beyond any form of experience that would additionally annihilate the shaman's conceptual framework of the universe and reality. Indeed, it would appear that the quality of the shamanic experience is highly dependent upon socio-cultural variables and the shaman's relationship to those variables.

The capacity of attaining altered states of consciousness is a universal property of the human central nervous system as evidenced by the ubiquitous occurrence of trance phenomena through time and space. However, the

³³ Wolfgang G. Jilek, *Indian Healing: Shamanic Ceremonialism in the Pacific Northwest Today*. (Surrey: Hancock House Publishers, Ltd., 1982) 23.

prevalence of these phenomena appears to be a function of socio-cultural variables. Under the impact of rationalistic-positivistic ideologies, the normal faculty of manifesting with psychogenic dissociation appears to have diminished among members of the Western urban middle class who would nowadays not to be expected to readily enter into hysterical twilight reactions, daemonic possessions, or religious frenzy, while these states are by no means rare in more tradition-oriented pockets of Western culture.”³⁴

Where we are not under the socio-cultural expectations to undergo trance, it appears that capacity to attain this state diminishes. This last statement is important for many reasons as it provides for the distinction between the differences in experience achieved by the shamanic use of tantric exercises. In the same way that the rationalistic ideology of the West tends to deter its citizens from achieving the disassociative trance state, the shaman’s cosmological worldview *obligates* them toward these trance states, which may preclude them from achieving any true nondual state of enlightenment. Shamanic Buddhists reinforce their dual notion of reality by manifesting this quality of experience into realms not normally available to other members of the community. To shamanic practitioners, the spirit realm is also dual in nature. On the other hand, Clerical Buddhists, at least those with the Bodhi orientation,³⁵ seek a nondual experience of reality and employ the tantric methods strictly toward that end. They do not seek the

³⁴ Jilek, 24.

³⁵ Samuel describes the Bodhi Orientation as a philosophical orientation toward achieving Enlightenment.

spiritual realm, *per se*, but attempt to annihilate all dualistic conceptualizations of reality.

This dichotomy is most obviously illustrated in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Known originally as *Liberation Through Understanding in the Between*, this text exemplifies the distinction between the Shamanic and Tantric goals. The consciousness, which remains immediately after the death of the individual, is guided through several stages in an attempt to achieve liberation from *samsara*. The initial stages immediately following death offer the best opportunities for the consciousness to see that all experience is simply the activity of the Mind. If this recognition occurs then the illusion of *samsara* is seen and the individual achieves Liberation. However, if the individual consciousness fails to recognize this then it remains trapped in illusion and requires subsequent guidance through the many illusory states of experience. The hope is to lead the consciousness in a way which will establish the best opportunity for reincarnation; that being dependent upon the final state of experience which the consciousness 'adheres' itself to.

The Between is after all a time of crisis after death, when the soul (the very subtle mind-body) is in its most highly formed fluid state. Naturally much of the art of Tantra is designed to work with precisely that totally transformable subtle state. . . . This is indeed why the between-traveler can become instantly

liberated just by understanding where he or she is in the between, what the reality is, where the allies are, and where the dangers are.”³⁶

As Thurman shows, the tantric practitioner is concerned with liberation and freedom from the experience of identity and, thus, from duality and *samsara*. The recently deceased individual is led through the variety of encounters with various ‘gods’ and ‘demons’ to which the Shamanic Buddhist normally has access. It is the privilege of the trained Shamanic Buddhist to commonly interact amongst the spirit realm which ordinary individuals only now encounter upon their actual physical death and release from the body. As a result of the newly deceased failing to initially let go of a dualistic mental prison, the shamanic guide tries to produce the best of all possible outcomes for the consciousness that remains trapped within the dualist experience of mind. Having bypassed the opportunity for liberation and escape from *samsara*, it remains to struggle with the subsequent opportunities for a fortunate rebirth within *samsara*.

Samuel continues by arguing that the Buddhist’s rejection of the involvement with daily communal and societal concerns is an important part of shamanic training. “Shamans have to be able to ‘go beyond’ these [social] patterns and attain a degree of impartiality to them in order to carry out their mediatory and manipulatory function in relation to patterns.”³⁷ Eliade, likewise, suggests strong parallels between yogic tantra

³⁶ *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Translated by Robert F. Thurman. (New York: Bantam Books, 1994) 80.

³⁷ Samuel, 371.

techniques and the techniques of shamanism.³⁸ However, while the techniques may appear similar, their intents and aims are enormously dissimilar. Where the shamanic technique seeks to gain control over a broader range of 'realms' in a dualistic perspective of the world, the Tantric yogi seeks a permanent death of the psychological self and any subject-object distinctions whatsoever.

It should be clear at this point that the altered state sought for by the Shamanic Buddhist emphasizes a dualist perspective of reality; this in the form of a greatly expanded concept of reality which experientially includes the 'spiritual realm'. This emphasis requires that they 'die' to any preconceived notion of a physical self but maintain, or even expand upon, the concept of a certain psychological para-personal 'self,' which possesses movement and influence across a broader experience of reality. While they expand the range of themselves as a subject they also *reinforce* their experience of themselves as a subject. This perpetuates and accents the dualist perspective.

With the ground covered to this point it is possible to pictorially examine the notions described here. One of the most lucid illustrations of this point in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy can be found in the *Wheel of Life*. In this symbolic illustration we see Yama, the great Lord of Illusion, holding the wheel in his grip. The wheel represents *samsara* – the world of illusion

³⁸ Eliade, 436-38.

and duality – and Yama sustains the illusions to which sentient beings within the circle have succumbed. Outside the wheel stands the Buddha representing the path to enlightenment and freedom from the illusion of subject-object duality. Within the wheel we find the six realms of existence including regions of hell, heaven, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, and the titans or demi-gods. The shaman functions within these realms and gains the mobility to move between each realm in service of those whose conscious awareness remains confined solely to the realm of humans. But the shaman cannot move outside of the *Wheel of Life* itself; they are no more intrinsically free from *samsara* than any other particular being. The shaman remains embedded within the wheel as any other resident of *samsara* although they may have a greater freedom to move within the wheel. In no way does this ability to move across the different realms advance the shaman's perspective in any way that would fit them to step outside of that dualistic category of perception. In fact, the ability to move amongst the different realms may serve only to reinforce the epistemological convictions of dualism. It should be clear from this analysis, therefore, that the goals of the Shamanic Buddhist and the Clerical Buddhist differ significantly and to draw any parallel would constitute a category mistake. While each employs tantric techniques in their training, the Shamanic Buddhist employs tantric techniques to break down the barriers between realms *within* a dualistic conception of the world and this reinforces their perception of themselves as a subject. On the other hand, the Clerical Buddhist employs tantric practices in order to

break down dualist perceptions of the world altogether and seeks to transcend *samsara* (dualism) entirely.

Conclusion

The project I have undertaken is a difficult one. This is due mainly to the problems inherent in talking about nondualism and the condition of Nirvana or enlightenment. In developing a comparison to the shaman's dualistic (altered) states of consciousness it was necessary to provide a conception or understanding of nondualism. But nondualism does not lend itself to conceptualization. It cannot even be said to be antithetical to, or the opposite of, dualism as that only serves to make nondualism another feature or conceptualization within the realm of dualistic thinking. Nondualism is a 'condition' wherein the characteristically fragmented presence of thought, memory, and conceptualization are absent altogether. In this respect, nondualism cannot be 'thought about' in any real way, but can only be accurately perceived when it is experienced directly in the moment. Our approach involved showing the incoherence of dualism as illustrated through Mahayana Buddhism. Tantra, as a method intended *exclusively* for achieving enlightenment, can be seen as a technique designed to progressively penetrate through the illusion of a dualistic perception of the world leading to the annihilation of a subjective form of 'self.' However, shamans are necessarily dualistic in their outlook in order to fulfill their goal of establishing harmony and balance in the community. Therefore, Shamanic Buddhists

borrow limited forms of tantric practice in order to weaken their notion of a personal 'self' in order to be able to re-construct and instantiate the use of a para-personal 'self' for use across a broader aspect of the dualist cosmos. This can be seen to function in a contradictory manner to the true intended purpose of tantric practice, which is Enlightenment and Liberation from *samsara*. The Shamanic Buddhist seeks to simply extend their conscious awareness within what is for them a broader manifestation of *samsara*. The Clerical Buddhist seeks a nondualistic perspective and the complete annihilation of all notions of 'self' through tantric practice. The fact that these altered states are facilitated through the application of some tantric techniques does not justify Samuel in equating these as possessing the common goal of enlightenment. Samuel has made a *category mistake* in making the goals of dualistic and nondualistic perceptions commensurate. As we have come to understand, the enlightened state is in no way directly comparable to the altered or trance states of ecstasy sought by the Shamanic Buddhists.

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