

Cycle 3 Project – What is the nature of the mind?

Beta Vanguard

Esoteric Order of Beelzebub

Priest Michael Salah Bunch

Introductory Remarks

The mind – the final frontier. Has the nature of anything else so strongly vexed us as a species? Has anything ever been so hidden, yet fully in our view throughout our daily lives? The topic of the mind makes for a fitting topic of inquiry in our series of projects within the Beta Vanguard. We started with an exploration of signs and semiotics, and then worked our way over to mindfulness and remembering practices. In a way, we've been playing in the waves of the great ocean of mind, and now we've come to the point where it is necessary to go for a diving expedition.

Each of us has taken different paths in our expedition into the nature of mind. My path has been to do a deep dive into the nature of mind, as presented by the philosophers of the Dzogchen tradition. I have been practicing meditation (or not-practicing, depending on one's perspective) in the Dzogchen style for about two years at this point in time, drawing upon the philosophy of the tradition as needed to guide my practice. I have found these practices and ideas to be of profound importance for my Initiation, and I'm pleased to find a way to make them practical for the Temple.

For this project, I've chosen three texts to do a deep dive on, with other sources utilized as needed. I've chosen to go with a looser way of citing the sources in-text, as not to make this a mere academic product, since there's enough of that drivel already in existence. Consider this more of a practitioner's exploration than a dreary, intellectual exercise. The notes I'm presenting will be followed by an attempt at synthesizing these ideas in a general form, and then a discussion of how they fit into more familiar philosophical thinking. At the end, I'm going to offer my attempt to then take that synthesis and show how it would look if it were combined with Setian Philosophy. I've chosen one of the most personally influential works, the Book of the Dead, to start with.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead: First Complete Translation

The Book of the Dead is more than a book about death; it's a book about transforming the way we live, with physical death as a means to gain enlightenment. The Tibetan name for the book (Bar-do Thos-grol Chen-mo) translated into English is The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States. This is connected directly to the Buddhist conception of mind. Unlike a Platonic tripartite soul or a more familiar body-mind-soul complex, Tantric Buddhist philosophy generally holds to a division (albeit a soft division) of body and mind. This division is further divided. There is a gross body and a gross mind, which are conditioned by environmental factors. Likewise, there is a subtle body and a subtle mind, which are an unconditioned whole rather than two different things. At the time of death, only the subtle processes remain. During the Bardo, or Intermediate\Between state, there is a gradual increase of manifestation from those subtle processes. By the time of rebirth, the subtle processes manifest as substance once more. This is something like a loop or a gradually undulating wave.

The gross and subtle distinctions we're talking about are important to consider. As the mind is purified of gross obscurations, one's perceptions and knowledge increase dramatically, allowing for clairvoyance and the ability to see reality as it is. These are the subtle abilities of the mind. The normally

rebuked Aggregates, the five Elements, the senses and their objects of sense, and so forth, are actually pure emanations of mind itself. They appear gross at first but as we further our Initiatory Work, we can grasp a subtle play at work in the world. The horrors of living in a physical world as a physical being are transformed into a passionate play of joy, pleasure, and wisdom. This is essentially how the imaginative deity practices work, in that they replace a physical conception of self with a conception of existing as a process that partakes of radiant, gods of wisdom.

When we're talking about those deities, we will want to consider them in further detail. The deities themselves are symbolic representations of mental processes. The wrathful deities are symbols for the principle of Aversion in the mind. The peaceful deities are symbols for the principle of Attachment in the mind. Working with these symbols aids the mind to transform negative internal stimuli into positive ones, a kind of cognitive alchemy - the things we view as mental poisons are actually wisdoms themselves. While this symbolic approach is rather imaginative compared to the purely analytical form of Theravada Buddhism, all teachings of the Buddhas are meant to point out the inherent Awareness of mind, and that is the key here. We are Awakening to our divine nature.

Just as we previously made distinctions between body and mind previously, we can apply distinctions to mind itself. There is a distinction in Dzogchen between the different types of consciousness and it can help us begin to get a mental diagram of our own mental processes. Ordinary mind (sems) produces the dualistic consciousness (rnam-shes) that distinguishes between objects and subjects. Pure mind (rig-pa) is the Awareness that sees everything beyond duality, essentially something like an omnijective perspective. In this arrangement, Rigpa is the cause of Sems and Rnam-Shes, or alternatively put, Awareness is the cause of mind and mind is the cause of intellectual processes. However, these two levels of mind are actually one, with the ordinary mind being like a shadow of the mind of pure Awareness, or like the rays generated by the sun. The mind is like the sun, with a core that creates radiance, and radiance as its continuous product that illuminates anything it is directed towards.

With these levels of mind in mind (no pun intended), we can also consider the Trikaya or the Three Dimensions or Bodies of Being. The Trikaya are dimensions just as much as actual bodies. Dharmakaya is the most subtle, non-dual dimension of Being. Sambhogakaya is a subtle dimension of perception, though non-substantial. Nirmanakaya is a material dimension of physical forms. Dharmakaya is essentially the real dimension of Being with the two being emanations of it, going from more subtle to more gross. What is important is that we don't create or attain these dimensions, so much as we actualize or realize them through meditation and visualization. They're like aspects of mind that need to be activated or discovered through imagining ourselves as deities, visualizing the subtle body and energies, stilling the mind, examining the mind, and so forth.

These Three Dimensions apply to the mind in terms of its tripartite qualities, like three emanations of mind. Voidness that is the Dharmakaya, radiance that is Sambhogakaya, and multiplicity of forms that is Nirmanakaya. This means that the way mind exists has a manifold nature rather than a singular one at all times, or at least, it is both singular and manifold all at once depending on your level of examination. Since mind has Voidness as its core, it is beyond the duality of existence and non-existence. Since it is essentially Voidness, it is observerless but since it possesses the nature of Sambhogakaya, it has radiant Awareness; there is no separation between its quality of Voidness and its power of Awareness. Likewise, since it has the nature of Nirmanakaya, mind is beyond the dichotomy of monism and dualism; it is singular and yet produces the forms we perceive without end. This provides us

the appearances we interact with in daily reality. Ordinary consciousness is reality and therefore we never stop interacting with mind, and it is really the only thing that we have immediate access to. As esoteric as that sounds, it helps to think of gradual waves of more subtle ways of existing to more gross ways of existing; Voidness towards manifestation of the mind.

Going from the mental processes and Dimensions back to mind itself, we can discuss the Tathagatagarbha. This is the core of the mind. It is the inherent, self-arising, and indestructible nucleus of the Self that goes on endlessly, despite the effects of reincarnation. The Tathagatagarbha or Buddha-Matrix that is the Essence of Mind that experience as the ordinary mind, and since it is essentially the ordinary mind, there is no transformation of mind that needs to be sought. The only difference between Buddha-Mind and ordinary mind is that the former has been experientially cultivated and recognized. This core can also be called the Nucleus of the Tathagata and the Expanse of Reality.

To understand the mind as the Nucleus of the Tathagata, we can think of it as the Self or Soul. The Soul of the eternalist philosophies is the ordinary mind of Dzogchen. While that seems contradictory in terms of Anatta, this could be understood by remembering the Heart Sutra: form is emptiness and emptiness is form. If there is no-self in the sense of an absolutely empty space, a total negation of the person, then this is just nihilism. The lack of self here acknowledges that there is something there, something that appears and has this quality of mind, but it is without fixed form, like space itself. It is a Void of Primordial Wisdom. We can consider Vajrasattva as a symbol for the mind, the twofold nature of appearance and Voidness. Put more bluntly, there is something in the Sentient Being that undergoes reincarnation and has the quality of being able to observe appearances. The Vedic religions call it a Soul or a Self, whereas Tantric Buddhism labels it a Mind or a Tathagatagarbha, but functionally it's the same.

To understand the mind as the Expanse of Reality, we can stop and contemplate the nature of how we interact with appearances. All thoughts, internal and external stimuli, deities, emotional states, appearances, and conceptualizations are nothing other than the mind. The mind is called the Expanse of Reality because all of phenomenal reality is occurring in the mind – not in the sense that the mind creates the Objective Universe but, in the sense that all appearances actually arise in the Subjective Universe. The Subjective Universe is the location of appearances, not the matter that influences those appearances when sensory data interacts with sensory organs and is interpreted by consciousness.

Quintessential Dzogchen: Confusion Dawns as Wisdom

Humans can contact and receive teachings from deities that cannot ordinarily be seen, due to the training of the mind. Deities like Vajrasattva, Shakyamuni, Padmasambhava, etc., can teach humans because they have incorporeal Sambhogakayas and/or manifest as material emanations of a Buddha. All perceptions and impressions arise within the mind, so these incorporeal Bodies may be something like psychic manifestations or mystical visions that a Tantrika sees in meditation. The Sambhogakaya and Dharmakaya are incorporeal bodies that require training and a higher state of Being to perceive, hence my thinking that this could be a reference to some sort of vision in a specific state of mind.

As mentioned earlier, the Trikaya are Dimensions or Bodies that co-exist with each other. There are typically three of them described in Tantric theory, but this book discusses Five Kayas (bodies), not just the usual three. The bodies themselves seem to be expression of mind. The Voidness of the mind is the Dharmakaya. The cognizant quality of the mind is the Sambhogakaya. The all-pervasiveness of the mind is the Nirmanakaya. The unity of the three Kayas is the Svabhavikakaya. The indestructible quality

of the mind seems to be synonymous with the Vajrakaya, though this is a tentative interpretation on my part. But really, it's not Five Bodies so much as it seems to be like one body, the True Mind itself, with a variety of qualities, dimensions, aspects, and powers.

Within the mind itself, there is an Awareness in the mind that is not altered by thoughts nor has any observable basis. Consciousness is a sensory faculty of mind and is not that Awareness, as the latter is able to perceive the former. The conscious mind creates our experiences in the world and has no origin or place of existing, at least in experiential terms. The mind and Awareness are essentially the same thing, except that the word "mind" often denotes a mind operating in a dualistic way whereas "awareness" denotes an operation that is beyond dualism. Mind is in essence non-conceptual and self-wakefulness. Even though the sensory faculty of consciousness can obscure the Buddha-Nature, the Essence of mind, it never leaves us and is in all sentient beings.

The difference between mind (Sem) and Mind-Essence (semnyi) is that the former is associated with not-knowing and discursive thinking, whereas the latter is associated with knowledge of the truth of mind and freedom from all cognitive stimuli. The Sem is the "ordinary mind" or what we typically perceive as the sense of a self. The Semnyi is like the Chan "Original Face" or Self-Essence that allows for the manifestation of the Sem. The mind is the producer of the object-subject duality, and that producer is itself a manifestation of the Mind-Essence. The secret of mind is that its nature is the Mind-Essence. The states of Samsara and Nirvana are nothing more than two sides of the same coin, and that coin is one's inherent and inalienable Awareness (Rigpa). Even if we only typically interact with ordinary mind, we also always interact with Awareness, and therefore, the Essence of mind itself. There's no work to be done to attain it or alter it. The Primordial Awareness of mind is not altered by thoughts and is superior to the thoughts themselves. The thoughts in the mind are as waves to an ocean.

If the Primordial Awareness is like an ocean, then we could describe it as an element. This element can be described as either the Buddha-Nature or Dharmata. Dharmata is the pure nature of the mind itself, the mind at its most fundamental level, or at the level of Ultimate Reality. A familiar analogy for Ultimate Reality is discussed in this text. The Buddha-Nature is the sun in the sky. Its rays are analogous to our thoughts and mental stimuli. Its reflection in a pool of water is an expression of the Buddha-Nature but not it itself, just as the rays of the sun are not the sun. Those in a cave facing north will never see the light of the sun and this cave is analogous to wrong understanding. The mind is beyond permanence and annihilation, and despite reincarnation, there is nothing in mind that is actually reincarnated in the hells. If the self is a temporary cognition, then it would make sense that it has no basis for reincarnation. Whether or not Self or Mind experiences literal reincarnation seems up for debate amongst the various Buddhist philosophers, as even the great yogi Longchenpa (check out his Excellent Path to Enlightenment for a breakdown of what the realms represent) said that the various reincarnation realms may be psychological states rather than literal places.

Going back to the Trikaya, we can discuss certain symbolic representations of the mind. Samantabhadra is represented as a deity of Tantric Buddhism but is also symbolic of one's own mind. As a symbol, Samantabhadra is the mastery of the mind, the recognition of your own consciousness as the Essence. In a more detailed way, we could say that Samantabhadra is a symbol of the Dharmakaya specifically, the First Cause of all Buddhas. The Five Buddha Families are symbols of the Sambhogakaya aspect of the mind. The figures of Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, and Vajrapani symbolize the Nirmanakaya aspect of the mind. This strikes me as distinctly like a Symbolic approach to the mind, like how the

Neteru are symbols of Principles. Samantabhadra is the deified form of our own intrinsic awareness, which is free from any conditioning and is self-arising, and is essentially the Buddha-Nature that we partake of. He could be thought of as the First Cause of Primordial Wisdom in Dzogchen, though I'm unsure how that would align with Setian philosophy (more on that later).

This Symbolic approach can be difficult to decipher, so I will give my take on it. The text seems to indicate that metaphysically, there is a soft duality in Dzogchen: mind and matter are not the same thing. Furthermore, the person is essentially mind and without mind, nothing can be perceived and the body is nothing more than a corpse. The body dies. The mind does not. Human consciousness is essentially incorporeal and beyond impurity, and everything we experience are emanations of the Five Buddha Families, aspects of the Dharmakaya that we perceive because they're aspects of mind. Essentially, we perceive a number of appearances with a number of forms due to our partaking of the Nirmanakaya. The appearances we interact with are there for our benefit. The various cognitive experiences we have, like data processing, emotional states, and ideas, are pure manifestations of the psychical Sambhogakaya, and they have no inherent impurity. The capacity for the mind to do all this is the luminant Void at the heart of the mind itself, the Dharmakaya.

To sum up the above soft-duality of Dzogchen, we are pure divine beings by our inherent nature of the mind and we are not our material bodies. As previously mentioned, the mind is the animating cause of the living body. But to go a step further, the mind itself is the prerequisite for the universe to be known at all. The universe is destructible and totally impermanent, more like illusions than anything real. The mind is the Ultimate Reality. The mind is the indestructible knower that permits the universe to be, as we know it – though Dzogchen goes one step further to say that there is nothing to be known and no knower either. For our purposes here, however, we can just be contented to say that all external and internal impressions are expressions of the mind. Understanding the true nature of the mind requires first-hand experience. Any attempt to understand it purely through theoretical or rational means is a failure. We must know it firsthand.

Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind: Trilogy of Rest, Volume 1

The word Dzogchen itself, the Natural Great Perfection, is a reference to the primordially wise mind which is free from ontological extremes and signlessness. This mind manifests both as the Voidness of mind and as the appearances that arise within it. Another name for the Primordial Wisdom is the consciousness of the universal ground. This has been previously referred to as Dharmata or Dharmadhatu. The Dharmadhatu or Element of Dharma is the primordial mind that all Sentient Beings possess intrinsically and is synonymous with the Tathagatagarbha. Phenomenal existence including samsara and Nirvana mirror Reflections in the mirror of the Mind, and that quality reflectivity is the enlightened state of Samantabhadra. All phenomena arise within the mind without being the mind, and yet, nothing other than mind.

One part that is a little tangential but important is about the mandala of Samantabhadra. This mandala describes Samantabhadra as the universal ground and his consort Samantabhadri as consciousness itself. These two figures in sexual union are then surrounded by the consciousnesses of the senses, the objects of those consciousnesses, the organs associated with those senses, the four states of time, and the sources of phenomena, all depicted as deities in sexual union. This complex mandala symbolizes the inherent purity of the mind, what mind sees, what produces sensory data, etc., and that we ourselves have the body of a god, the speech of a god, and the mind of a god. This is not

unlike the Three Dimensions concept. The Kayas are not created by effort but one's Initiatory efforts clear obscurations away from the Kayas, revealing them; they're the inherent divine aspects of a person that we don't need to actively create.

Turning to the topic of mind, this text paints a picture of the mind as something Eternal and beyond conditioning. The nature of mind transcends Good and Evil. The nature of Mind transcends Time. The mind is itself said to be unborn or bornless. The mind is both impermanent and changing, yet also without end and totally unceasing; this is another way of describing its primordial nature. The object-subject division is itself a cognition of the mind. Consciousness is a perceptual activity. Mind is a cognition of sensory data. Intellect interprets the data.

This process of various cognitive-aspects can be understood through use of analogy. The traditional analogy is the mirror and its reflections. The mirror is the mind and the reflections are the appearances we interact with through the mind. The reflective-quality of the mirror is Awareness. There is also something outside of the mirror that leads to appearances arising in the mirror, even if we can't be sure of its precise nature. Another analogy using a mirror, involves a story about a kingly giant who had a jewel knocked into his head. A revised summation of the story is that the nature of mind is like having a jewel in your forehead that you cannot perceive. Since you can't see it, you don't recognize it. But if you were able to see it in a mirror, you'd be able to recognize it.

The Tathagatas exist in a state without a dualistic mind, in the sense that they perceive at the omnijjective level; Primordial Wisdom exists even beyond the familiar mental categories. The consciousness of the universal ground is described as empty, radiant luminosity, and this consciousness is the foundation for what we experience as the ordinary mind, which is purified when the Tathagata state is attained. The non-dual aspect of mind is that appearance and Voidness are one and the same. The text talks about Tathagatas possessing a form of perception that doesn't hold to object-subject frames, intellectual interpretation, and cognition of sensory-data. This is said to be a mystery of their level of Being. Though we all possess this quality of the Tathagatagarbha, only the Tathagatas are able to tap into that quality and possess the powers associated with that state of Being.

The Tathagatagarbha is described as being timeless, essentially eternal, without any beginning and without any end. The key words that appear repeatedly in describing it are that it is vast and boundless like the sky, yet inherently luminous and radiant like a sun. Just as the Kayas exist prior to and superior to any obscurations, so too does the Tathagatagarbha, like a grain inside of a husk that must be removed to see what's within it. Another analogy would be turning lead into gold or finding gold in the earth; the idea is that the precious element is extracted from something commonplace. The Tathagatagarbha is described as our highest identity, something that has fallen into Samsaric life but can be liberated from that fall at any moment through recognition. It also described as being beyond the world without any natural analog to know it by. The text explicitly states that the Tathagatagarbha is not a self and that all phenomena are without selves, so a self isn't existent. However, the Tathagatagarbha is existent and has Luminous Voidness as its nature, despite not being a self. Elsewhere in the text, the Tathagatagarbha is the Secret Essence found within Sentient Beings. It does exist, have a stable and permanent nature, and its selfhood is one with the Voidness of Anatta. We know that we have the Secret Essence because it is the source of dissatisfaction with Samsaric existence – it makes us want more than what the natural world can provide.

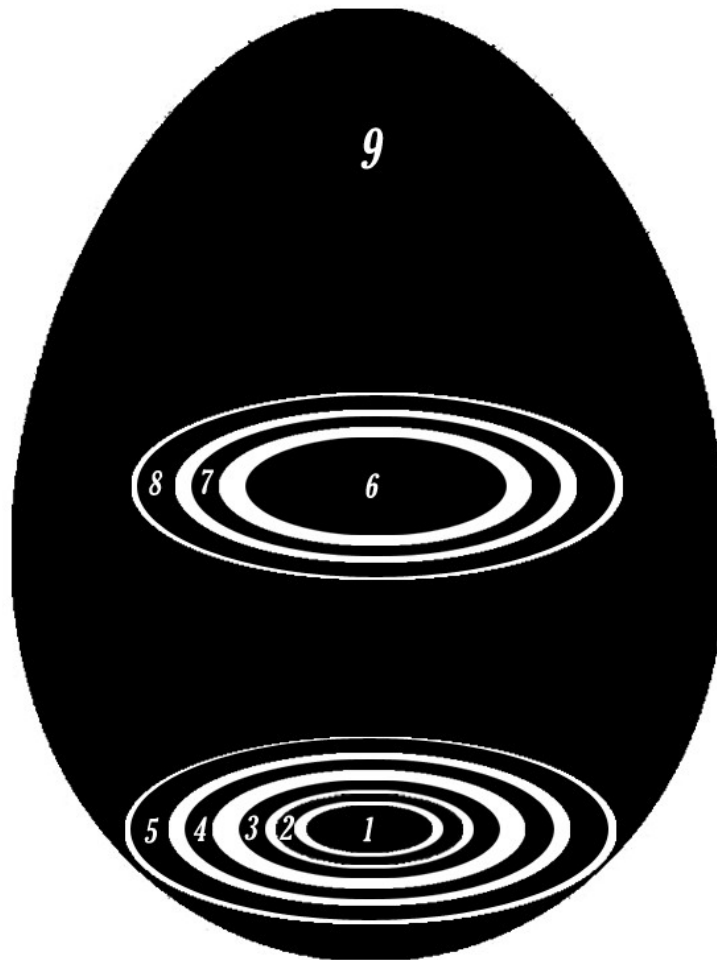
Synthesis

Translation

The first step in synthesizing the philosophy of Esoteric Tantric Buddhism is to cut through the language used and translate it into plain speech. The second step would be to then compare it to more familiar philosophical thinking, to help orient the reader. The third step would then be to return to the ideas themselves and sum them up in a concise way. I'll attempt to do those three steps before getting into a discussion of how this philosophy can be made practical and how it relates to Setian Philosophy at large, otherwise I believe the reader would not be able to make heads or tails out of Dzogchen and its view on the nature of the mind.

Towards that first step, I'll take some of the Buddhist language used to describe the mind and Being, and translate it plainly. This is important because these teachings are both phenomenological and ontological, but it's not always clear when the line is crossed from one to another. I can't claim a full mastery of these ideas (yet), so what will follow should be understood as my interpretation, and not an image of the materials understood as a Tibetan Lama would understand it.

To begin, I will introduce my own rendering of the Nine Consciousnesses.

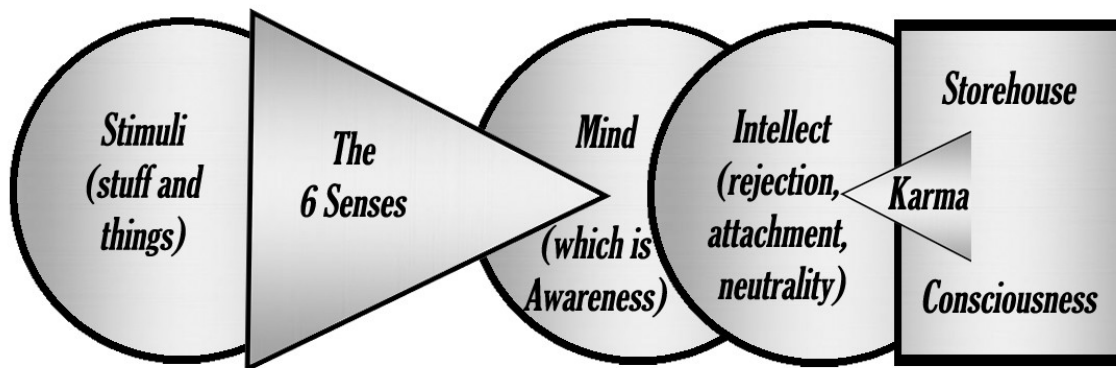


In this rendering, we can begin to conceptualize the mind as a process and not an object. It's also not just one process but something like a loop or cosmos of different sub-processes working together. What we may call the Self or Essential Self (I'm going to use "Self" going forward) is the Tathagatagarbha ("Buddha-Essence" \ "Core of the Nucleus" \ "Buddha-Matrix"). It's what we truly are at the deepest level, the inherent core of our Awareness and Wisdom. It's the foundation that all other mental processes are built upon (number 9 in the rendering). From this level, we then have the mental processes of Repository Consciousness (number 8), Volitional Consciousness (number 7), and Conceptual Consciousness (number 6). The Repository Consciousness is something like the Unconscious Mind of the psychoanalysts, which we interact with via the Subconsciousness, such as in dreams, meditation, trance-states, and so forth. It's worth noting that the Repository Consciousness is actually the Tathagatagarbha but we don't have full access to it until we purify the former enough to recognize it. The Volitional Consciousness and Conceptual Consciousness correspond to the processes of will and discursive consciousness, respectively. These then interact with the five sensory consciousnesses; essentially the cognitive processes that interpret the sensory data provided by the sensory organs. This can be described as Visual Consciousness (number 1), Auditory Consciousness (number 2), Olfactory Consciousness (number 3), Gustatory Consciousness (number 4), and Tactile Consciousness (number 5). This is how we arrive at the Nine Consciousness system developed by the Buddhist philosophers.

Now that we've discussed the processes that make up the mind, we can talk about the experience of mind itself. The "ordinary mind" of Dzogchen appears to be another way of talking about the process of discursive consciousness. When you walk outside and see a tree, your discursive consciousness gets an image of it from your sensory processes, the five sensory consciousnesses. You think "Tree" and the mental schema associated with "Treeness" arises. This process is what the texts seem to be describing as "mind"; you observe a tree in the form of sensory data that is translated cognitively and then conceptualize it in terms of "I am observing a tree" with all the associations that go with trees. This is then taken one step further by the mind when we begin to use the intellectual mind to analyze and judge the observation. For example, "Trees are stupid" or "I love trees" or "Wow I wish I could smoke a bowl under this tree". This intellectualizing process is what generates Karma or habitual patterns within the mind, specifically within the Repository Consciousness through the activity of the Conceptual and Volitional Consciousnesses.

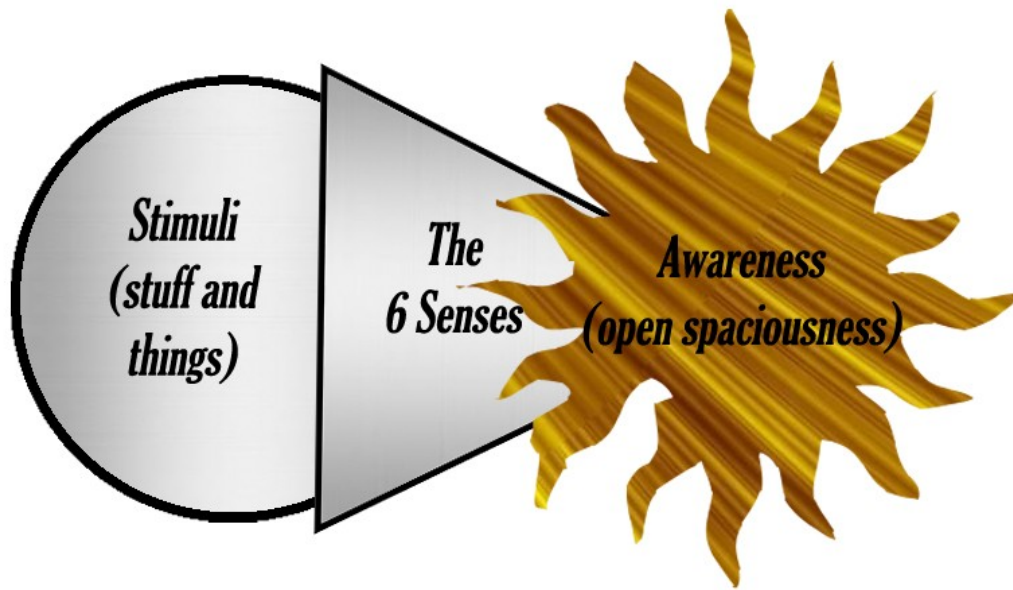
All of this is made possible through the quality of Rigpa (I'll use "Awareness" for this going forward), which is an inherent quality of the Self. At the most fundamental level, though, all of these processes and forms of mind are the Self. The Self is the core and the Complex that holds all of these processes within it. The only difference is that the Self is entirely unconditioned and the processes it holds space for are conditioned by the physical environment, your habitual responses, and the values you've imputed onto those things.

Explained alternatively, we are actively creating our experiences through a mixture of stimuli and our interpretations of them. We use the mind, a manifestation of Awareness, to interpret both internal and external stimuli. Those interpretations end up leading us to flee from experiences, cling onto them desperately and hopefully, or just be totally apathetic about what we experience. These in turn condition us to respond in a pattern for when the causes and conditions related to those stimuli, and this pattern becomes a routine of how we experience reality itself.



Using the processes above, we can describe the Dzogchen understanding of how we experience our mind. When we wake up and start our day, we see appearances around us. The Dzogchen philosophy doesn't spend much time explaining what these appearances are, like the natural philosophies do. Instead, the Dzogchen perspective is to view these appearances as just that – things that appear. The dresser in your bedroom, a hallucination of your dead ex-wife, a deity appearing before your eyes in a ritual, the thoughts in your head, and so forth, are just appearances. Their reality or non-reality is ultimately an afterthought, provided you understand that they are just appearances or apparitions. Your Awareness of them is what actually matters; you are Aware of them but you don't impute your own values on them, and you don't get mentally or emotionally entangled with them. These appearances are actually your own ordinary mind staring back at you; representations or signs created by the interaction of your mind with sensory data. This isn't solipsism but a form of Subjective Idealism; there is something out there that is not you but we only interact with their signs. And indeed, your attempt to conceptualize those signs as something foreign to you is what actually builds up the habitual patterns of reacting to them that renders us psychologically inflexible. Going back to the tree example, you are not the tree but the appearance of the tree is a sign that you're interacting with through your Subjective Universe.

You may be asking yourself, then, what is matter in the Dzogchen perspective? To put it simply and without special terminology, it is like light or a solid form of energy. At its core, Dzogchen holds that everything is a product of mind. Your body is mind, just a gross form of it. Your thoughts are mind, just gross forms of it. Your spiritual body is mind, just a subtle form of it. Your Awareness is mind, just in its more subtle form. The Esoteric Tantric Sutras paint a picture of existence that is like a kaleidoscope that applies equally to the Self and the Universe, particularly since the former acts as the foundation for the latter. At the most primordial level, there is only signless Illumination, an unrepresentable Awareness that interacts with its surroundings and creates representations. Like a hall of mirrors or a kaleidoscope, there are reflections and images, but they ultimately exist without a clear beginning and extend endlessly like fractals. Hence, Dzogchen philosophers typically don't try to explain the mechanics of this in any detail, since they view it as a question without any fixed or absolute answer.



This is where the Trikaya come into play. The Dharmakaya, the Illuminating Void that is our most primordial Being, cannot be represented, though it can be experienced. This is represented by Samantabhadra and his consort Samantabhadri, but they're only symbols for something that is ultimately signless. Unlike that Dimension or Body or Scale, there is a Scale where we can understand reality as it is through the Forms and intuitive insights, which is the Sambhogakaya. Robert Thurman has often described the Sambhogakaya through the imagery of orgasms and ecstatic revelation; I personally get the sense that this is like seeing the Form of the Good in the Platonic analogy of the Cave or the depiction of Zarathustra gazing upon the Wise Mind. The Nirmanakaya is the Dimension we see every day, the myriad of signs we interact with and project our values upon. What is important to remember is that we live in all the Dimensions at once and they are all your mind.

Let me provide one more way of considering these ideas. Take your own body as the example, as you see it right now. Literally look at your body for a moment. In the Tantric perspective we're describing, there is the matter that makes up your physical body and then there is your mind. This is the ordinary view of things. We could then take a more detailed view and say that your physical body is also a representation of Idealistic deities. We could then zoom in further and say that your mind itself is a whole universe of Idealistic deities, and that is the source of your having a body, with the matter of the body being a solidification of various elements and energies. When that physical body dies, those elements and energies return to their less solid states, and the universe of mind remains. However, at a further magnification, down to the most zoomed in level, these deities are emanations of a Void that transcends categories of classification. Even though it is a Void, it is something, not a nothing, and this something produces a fabulous and wondrous light that is the basis for all of the emanations previously discussed; the deities, energies, elements, physical atoms, and the body are a sign for and from the signless. It transcends any attempt to pin things down as mind or matter

This is my attempt to distill centuries of the highest form of Esoteric Buddhist philosophy in only a few pages, so naturally it will be missing many important details of Dzogchen that a master of it would

be able to explain. It is the product of over two thousand years of continual philosophical inquiry into the nature of the mind and Self, thus my attempt to explain it is only an attempt. Nothing more or less.

Comparison

Now that we have these ideas in order, what can we compare them to and get a better sense of what they may point to? I have heard that Kashmir Shaivism is quite similar to Dzogchen, and both philosophical schools have been called “Left Hand Path” by translator and practitioner Peter Brown. Dzogchen has been called “Left Hand Path” by Keith Dowman, a prominent Dzogchen practitioner and Sutra translator, though I would hesitate to make any definitive claims about this myself, as I don’t know the background or citations for those comments. Besides, if we’re trying to make sense of Dzogchen, it would make more sense to compare it to a more familiar philosophical system. I propose to do that with Neo-Platonism, particularly the writings of Plotinus.

At the time of this writing, I’ve only completed half of Plotinus’ Enneads and therefore my understanding may be considered incomplete. What I’ll offer here is a tentative speculation. I’d caution the reader to keep that in mind for this section.

What is most evident is that both systems are Idealist in metaphysical orientation. Like Dzogchen, Neo-Platonism seems to place its primary focus on the mind and its contents, rather than matter. Plotinus and the Neo-Platonists appeared to view matter as something evil at the worst or merely illusory at best, though not to the same degree as their contemporaries, the Gnostics. Like Dzogchen, the Neo-Platonists typically said that we never see reality as it is, but the shadows of reality. Only philosophers who contemplate the Ideas (the so-called “Forms”) and the nature of mind itself can eventually begin to increase their knowledge of Ultimate Reality. In both cases, then, reality in its true form is only accessible to individuals who cultivate their minds, and if my memory serves me correctly, the practitioners of both schools (see: Iamblichus) used theurgical ritual to aid that cultivation.

From this point on, the similarities are harder to grasp. They may even be purely my own interpretations, so take this with a grain of salt. The three levels of existence in Plotinus’ works seem not unlike the Three Dimensions of Dzogchen. Those are the level of matter, the level of the Intellect, and the level of the One. The level of the Intellect is typically called the Realm of the Forms or World of Ideas, that world where the Platonic Forms are said to inhabit in perfection and bestow their form down to the world of matter. Only the world of matter changes and is subject to time, with the higher two worlds being outside of time and change, and this is said to be so for the Trikaya as well. More than anything, the Dharmakaya seems to be a direct parallel to the One of Plotinus, both as an inexpressible matrix for reality and as the highest transcendental level of Being we can possibly fathom.

However, a key difference between the two schools is that the Dharmakaya is said to be pure mind itself, full of Primordial Wisdom and Awareness, whereas the One in Plotinus is described as being without cognitive contents. This difference could be because the Tantrikas conceive of the Dharmakaya as possessing a cognitive quality beyond subject and object, whereas Plotinus claimed that since the One is both subject and object at once, it cannot actually know anything due to the lack of reference-point. But this could be an interpretive error on my part. The two schools both hold that discursive thinking is the lowest form of cognitive activity and is a product of environmental conditional. To Plotinus, the Soul has access to true knowledge, or Gnosis, through intuition. In Dzogchen, that is done through Awareness or direct experience without interpretation. So, maybe they’re closer than not.

Probably the biggest divergence point between the two schools would be their takes on the person. Even though both schools have a Soul concept (Check out Robert Thurman's translation on the Book of the Dead for the Buddhist concept), they approach them in entirely different ways. In Neo-Platonism, people have Souls because a demiurge gave us Souls and put us in the Objective Universe to make our ways back to the Fixed Stars. There is also a World-Soul that is like an older sibling, who can aid us in our Quest back to our divine home. We are like the Platonic Ideas ourselves, a divine pattern that is hidden within the body. None of this really exists in Esoteric Tantric Buddhism. There is no demiurge and no World-Soul. The Soul is the Tathagatagarbha or Buddha-Essence and it was never created at all, hence why it is called Bornless; it's essentially self-arisen. Even the highest expression of divinity in Dzogchen, Samantabhadra, is a symbolic representation of your own mind at its highest expression. There is no lesson to be learned through incarnation or a divine home to return to; we're born because we have forgotten ourSelves and sleep in ignorance, and we can take up our divine identities once again when we see the mind for what it is. A stark difference, indeed.

Summation

Here are the key points of the Dzogchen perspective on the nature of mind, so that we may bear them in mind for the following discussion. The Self or the "Higher Self" is the mind itself and is called the Buddha-Essence. The identity we typically call a "self", the "lower self", or the "personality" is a cognitive construct that manifests as a result of interacting with the physical environment. The things we perceive around us are signs within the Subjective Universe, though there is some form of an Objective Universe beyond ourselves. Matter is of a lesser importance compared to mind, and it is through familiarity with the mind that we realize the Self. We exist in multiple Dimensions concurrently, with the physical form being the grossest manifestation of the mind, and this is a reason why Dzogchen practitioners train to gain familiarity with the mind. We can gain the knowledge and powers associated with the subtle Dimensions through the theurgical practices of Esoteric Tantric Buddhism. There is no greater deity beyond that has placed us in the Objective Universe; humans are born and reborn largely because of their own ignorance of the Self and suffer needlessly for no higher purpose whatsoever.

Discussion

Where does this leave us, as Setians? How do we use this Esoteric Tantric perspective with Setian Philosophy in mind? Naturally, there are areas where these two ways of thinking simply don't align. However, I think there is a lot of useful overlap and the two are not so different. We can begin with the parts of agreement, since that's straightforward, and then get into the murkier depths of disagreement afterwards.

To begin, we can compare a few points of interest from the Crystal Tablet (CT) with the already-discussed Dzogchen ideas. The Ancient Egyptian would find himself right at home with Dzogchen, in that the medieval Tibetan yogi did not distinguish between appearance and reality (Pg. 19 of the CT). A yogi meditating in a cave suddenly getting a sutra dictated to him by a deity would be just as legitimate as if he had learned the sutra from a human, as we see with many Tantric texts, such as the Tantra of the All-Creating King. As we can see from the previous notations described, the idea of a Neter as a representation of an abstract (Pg. 20) would also fit in nicely with Dzogchen. The distinction in the CT between a "self" or "superficial self" and the Self or Eye of Wisdom (Pg. 66) is a key point, if not the key teaching, of Dzogchen as well. So far so good, right? Right. Unless....

Unless there's a whole lot that doesn't align between established Setian thinking and the thinking of the Dzogchen Tantrika. And that's the case. However, this doesn't have to be a huge problem, if we rationally approach those misalignments. As far as I can tell, these discrepancies are a natural product of the cultures that these ways of thinking arose in. A medieval Tibetan practicing Dzogchen would likely have fit right in around the Priesthood of Ancient Egypt or the more recent Egypt of Plotinus. However, he'd likely disagree with much of the philosophical thinking that arose in medieval and Renaissance Europe, and he'd be an alien in modern day America or Europe. And sure enough, these are the philosophies that have influenced modern thinkers like those who have founded and affiliated with the Temple of Set. This isn't a matter of right and wrong, I think, so much as a matter of "it is what it is"; much of Setian Philosophy is a product of Eurocentric assumptions of how the world is, so an Indo-Chinese worldview will simply be at odds with that.

Here are some of the obvious points of disagreement, as I have identified them so far. These citations will be from our CT. To save myself and my fingers the strain of typing out a small book, I'm only going with a couple obvious ones.

Right off the bat, the divisions between natural and non-natural (Pg. 26 and Pg. 59) don't have a precise analog in Dzogchen. Dzogchen differentiates between mind and matter, but ultimately places mind before matter, which is not typical of Western thinking. In Dzogchen, the mind and its associated sensory-consciousnesses precede the Objective Universe, and at a fundamental level, are the prerequisite for the material world existing at all. We as Westerners tend to think that such an arrangement is inversed, that matter preceded mind. As far as I can discern, the cosmology of Dzogchen would hold that the Objective Universe an eternal, cyclical process of expansion and contraction, and the mind is a timeless process that exists regardless of what the Objective Universe is doing at the moment.

What I've said makes sense from the Dzogchen perspective if we consider that there is no point of creation in their cosmology. Brahma and Indra, the Hindu demiurgos and Zeus, were around when the first human Buddha gained his Enlightenment. However, even they are subject to the ceaseless creation and destruction of this material existence. Thus, there is no direct analog to the "God" that a Prince of Darkness would have rebelled against (Pg. 26). This makes the Setian definition of the Left Hand Path (LHP) and the Right Hand Path (RHP) largely insensible (Pg. 36). The mind or Self exists on its own regardless of the entire Objective Universe, and it is not a product of that Objective Universe or a bearded sky-daddy, so there is nothing meaningful to be absorbed into. From talking to Dzogchen practitioners, they seem use the terms LHP and RHP to describe Sudden Enlightenment and Gradual Enlightenment schools, respectively. Ironically enough, the RHP Tantrikas appear to view the LHP Tantrikas as dangerous perverts and the LHP Tantrikas seem to view RHP Tantrikas as puritanical idiots who are wasting their time. So hey, maybe some things are cross-cultural after all.

Let me throw one more curveball your way. So, there's no natural origin of consciousness and no God. Okay, that can work for us. But how does anything actually Come into Being then? I can't claim to fully understand this myself, at this time. There doesn't seem to be any kind of equivalent to a Theory of Forms (Pg. 34), and this School arose in a time and place without what we as Eurocentrics would call "science". Instead, as far as I can work out, the medieval Tibetan Philosophers held metaphysical views similar to both their Indian and Chinese relatives. The sutras talk about conditioned and unconditioned dharmas ("things", for our purposes), and processes of emanations. Things come into existence due to

the conjunction of causes and conditions, with everything observable existing in chains of causes and effects. The mind in its gross forms is conditioned, as is the body. The mind at its most subtle form is unconditioned. Likewise, the “self” is a product or emanation of the Self or Tathagatagarbha, just as the gross body is an emanation of the subtle one. Hence, the idea of a First Cause of Intelligence (Pg. 88) is hard to work out in a meaningful way – what could a First Cause of something endless even be?

Here Be Dragons

Relax, I won't leave you hanging like that! Is there a Prince of Darkness in Dzogchen. Allow this Mad Arab to give you a speculation, so you don't leave with intellectual blue balls or ovaries (is that a thing?). Besides, I should give some gift to those readers who hung around this far. What follows is my own highly tentative hypothesis on what the Tibetan Prince of Darkness could look like.

In terms of iconography alone, it is patently clear that the Prince of Darkness is Yamantaka, the Destroyer of Death. His name has many meanings and in general, refers to his power of helping the Initiate overcome the forces of Yama, the lord of death. This deity is a black or dark-blue deity that is depicted as a man with the head of a yak or bull, though he frequently seems to take on draconic aesthetics as well, depending on the representation. Yamantaka is the wrathful form of the god of wisdom Manjushri, so he is associated with wisdom in that way, but he is also associated with wrath and male sexuality, frequently depicted with an erect phallus. The type of wisdom he is associated with is the understanding of Sunyata, the Voidness of the “self” and the reality of the Self. He carries many knives and other weapons, to help the Initiate cut through delusion and the world of illusions.

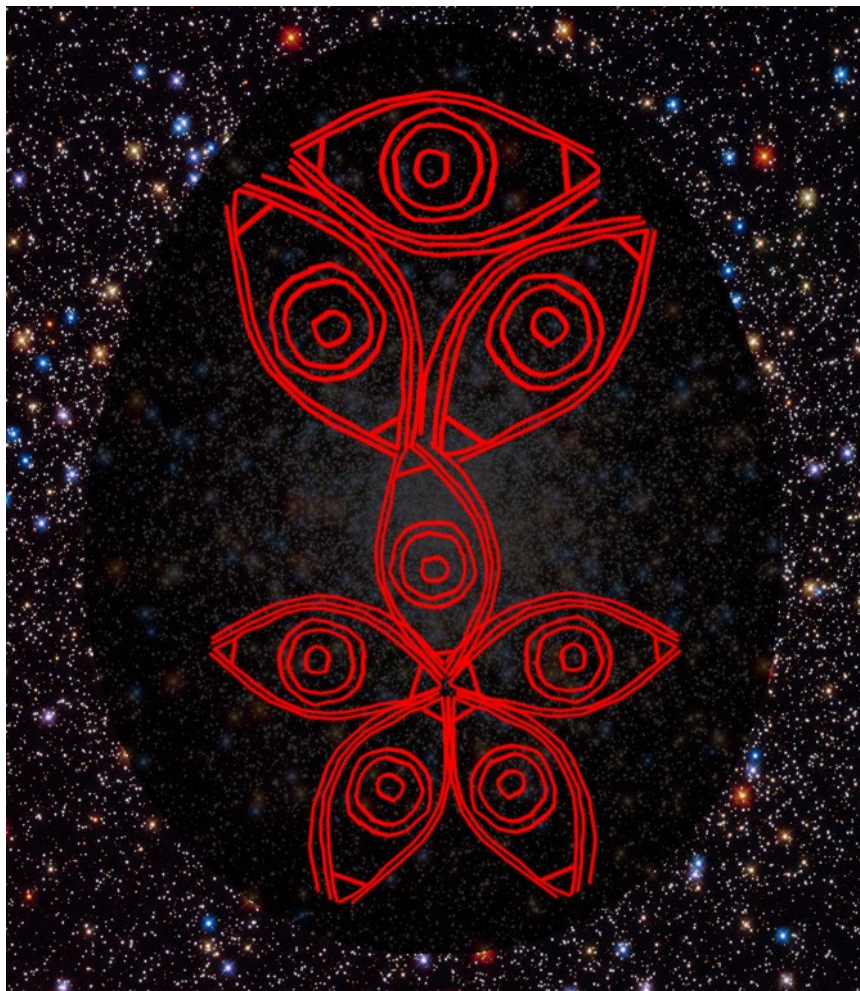
However, this is too simplistic for my tastes. It's easy to look for the spooky, horned deity and say “oh yeah, found him!” Even though Yamantaka himself is frequently perceived as Satanic by Westerners (Google “Yamantaka” and “President Nixon” for a good laugh in this regard), I think this is taking the easy way out. Instead, let's focus on the actual mechanics of Vajrayana and see what's going on under the hood.

In the Tantra of the All-Creating King, we're given a myth about how all has Come to Be. Samantabhadra talks to Vajrasattva at the very foundational level of Being itself and gives an account of creation. This would be analogous to the space outside of the Objective Universe in Neo-Platonism and Hermeticism. Samantabhadra says that before him, there was nothingness itself – the complete absence of all phenomena. He is the Primordial Womb that all phenomena arise within and because of. Even materiality and the Objective Universe partake of him. Unlike the Neo-Platonic One or Absolute, this Absolute is pure consciousness and participates in intellectual activity. Of particular interest to us, he says that existence itself is beyond what we would call Monism and Dualism – both “oneness” and “twoness” are equally correct, yet not fully correct. But it's also important to recall that Samantabhadra himself is taken to be a symbolic representation or Form of the Self at its Highest level of Being.

How can we make sense of this? If we go back to the Trikaya theory, things can make a bit more sense. We ourselves exist in three different Dimensions or scales. At the Dharmakaya scale, we are Samantabhadra and yet are not. If we wanted to go out on a limb, we could say that this is the scale of Leviathan or Macrocosmic Set (to bite off of Magistra Wendell's terminology in “The Book of Knowing the Way”). We're both us as individuals and as Leviathan. Then, there is the Dimension of Tantric deities and Gnosis associated with the Sambhogakaya scale. In my thinking, this would seem to be the Realm of the Forms and at the upper apex of that Realm is the Principle of Intelligence itself, what we call the

Prince of Darkness. Beyond the Prince of Darkness is Leviathan, the Absolute, and below the Prince of Darkness are all those Forms that we otherwise partake of, including those human-made deities and Forms related to matter. We partake of this realm too, particularly when we receive Illuminated visions and Gnosis of the Self, and this is that level of Selfhood that is articulatable before reaching the inarticulable scale of Leviathan. Below this scale is the Nirmanakaya scale, where Forms cast their shadows as matter and the physical body. This is the Dimension we're most familiar with.

What would a Setian translation of this Dzogchen perspective look like, with this in mind? Well, it certainly would seem quite different from the one we're more familiar with as Setians. For one, the familiar Greek conception of logical categories wouldn't work, and we'd probably find ourselves closer to the Ancient Egyptian conception of the world. Additionally, there would be no distinction between a "mundane world" with a lifeless Objective Universe and a sacred Subjective one. Instead, we would have something like a Kaleidoscopic Self, and a totally sacred Universe with a gradient of mind and matter existing separately-yet-complementarily. We would have our own individual manifestations of the Black Flame, or Buddha-Essence, that are also inherently connected with the Intelligence and Wisdom of Set and Leviathan. We would have to feel more comfortable with the idea that we already totally divine god-beings right now, with ephemeral superficial "selves" and an Eternal Mind that actively creates our experience of the Universe alongside the material reality of the world around us.



Concluding Thoughts

Some of the ideas I've presented here may not be well-received by everyone. I recognize and honor this. The ideas I'm presenting are nothing less than a tall order for us as Westerners to sit with, and yet, I don't find them incompatible with the Left Hand Path as we understand it. We just have to be willing to take another look, individually, at what we think that term can encapsulate. Are we going to limit ourselves to the definitions that are originally based on the writings of Orientalists who spooked themselves out in their travels abroad? Or can we broaden our understanding of what that term may mean for people who are continuing the traditions of Tantra? And in that vein, we should be willing to take a deep look at what it is we call a "self" and how it relates to the mind itself. That process of inquiry must be informed at an earnest, authentic, and honest process of self-examination and cutting through the assumptions and conceptions we hold dear. I offer this challenge to the reader, particularly if they suffer any knee-jerk reactions to anything I've written here.

Bonus Section - Practicing the Zazen of Sky

One practice that has consistently interested me, in regard to exploring the mind, has been the Zazen of Sky. I was taught this practice by a Lama during a Dzogchen retreat earlier in the summer of 2020 and I've been determined to routinely practice it since then. I would later find the practice described in more detail in Longchenpa's Trilogy of Rest, where it is simply called "the stage of focusing awareness". As an addition to this writing, I elected to engage in this practice frequently throughout the month of December with a couple variations to suit environmental context. The interested reader can find the full explanation of this practice in *Finding Rest in Meditation: The Trilogy of Rest, Volume 2* on pages 22-24, with my summation of the practice and a couple variants below.

- **Original Version:** Sit with your back towards the sun and look up at the sky. While in a non-contemplative state, experience your mind as the sky. Imagine all of the universe, including yourself, becoming the space of the sky. Sit in a relaxed, effortless state.
- **Standing Version:** The same as the previous version but standing still rather than sitting.
- **Indoor Version:** Laying down on the floor or a bed, close your eyes and visualize your mind as the sky. Visualize yourself becoming the space of the sky. View all of existence from the omnijective perspective of endless sky. Lay in a relaxed, effortless state.

The first version, the Original, is what is described by Longchenpa in the book. I suspect that this is easier to do in a high altitude area, where the sky is easier to see in a panoramic way, as opposed to flat or urban areas where you really have to strain to see the whole sky from a seated posture. The second version, the Standing variant, is what I started doing to train in the practice while waiting for trains and buses, a far better use of time than being on a phone. The third version, the Indoor variant, is the one that I was taught at the Dzogchen retreat. For total transparency, it is unclear to me that this practice is the same as the one in the book, or just inspired from the book and created by Lama Pema Khandro. I feel it necessary to explicitly state this and give all credit to Lama Pema Khandro for this form of the practice. I am operating under the assumption her version and the one in the book are essentially the same, or at least do the same thing, since they both produce the same results and feel similar.

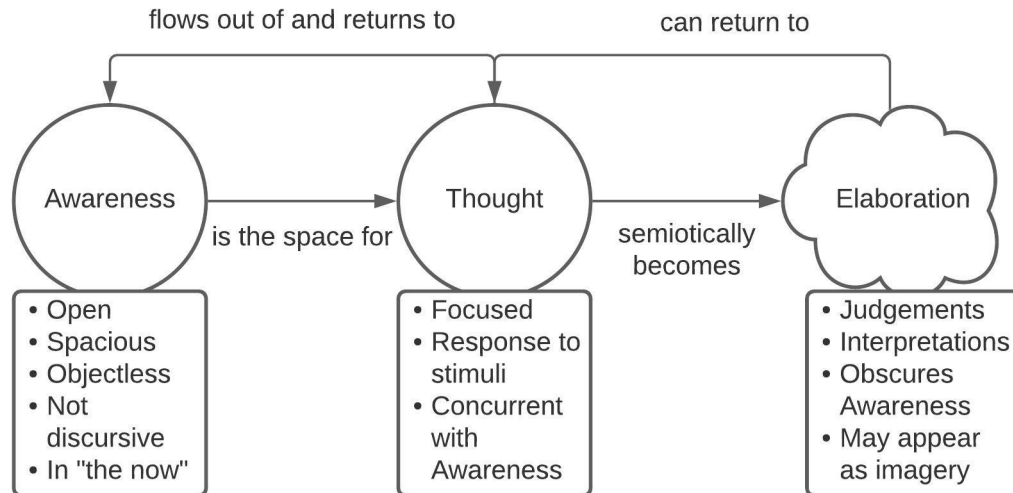
Regardless of the different versions, they all produce similar results and states of mind that are worthy of investigation. I've taken my notes from practicing these three different versions and have summarized them into three different categories of experience. The first category is what I've dubbed as

the “Phenomenological Experiences”, which is a summation of what I was experiencing during the practice. The second category is dubbed as “Cognitive Experiences”, which is the interpretative quality of the experiences, how I made sense of them afterwards. The third category is what I’ve dubbed as “Feelings and Sensations”, which refers to all of the non-discursive qualities arising from the practice.

1. **Phenomenological Experiences:** The sky appears a matrix or a womb. Or a theatre, with things appearing to play upon it as a stage. The sky flattens out, or objects in the sky do, so the objects are one with it. The sky becomes a screen, like a scrying surface. Everything, including thoughts, merge and dissolve into the sky. The inner dialogue dissolves into open space. Despite everything dissolving into the sky, everything retains its individual qualities, so they’re still recognizable and distinct. There were times when thoughts felt so large that they blotted the sky out, and yet, the sky was still there and visible. Other times, there was only the sky, which seemed to radiate this calm white and golden light everything, leaving only Awareness itself. The sky sometimes alternated between a blank canvas and a rippling surface, and once the clouds in the sky seemed transform into a rainbow right before my very eyes, despite no physical rainbow being there. Clouds started to become like moving thoughts and birds were the objects of mind. The sky became the very matrix of my being, the space of Mind itself, holding room for all these things to spring up in.
2. **Cognitive Experiences:** Awareness is the black womb that all images are born from. Awareness as a portal or matrix. A vast, open expanse. A characterless state of being. Total blackness. Emptiness with observation mixed into it. A nothingness, in the sense pregnant darkness. A feeling of total encapsulation, something larger than both individuality and collectivity. Things are both distinctly themselves in their movement and also mix into the whole oneness of the background. There is nothing to need, only space to bring dreams into creation.
3. **Feelings and Sensations:** The practice leads to feeling grounded and relaxed. There is a quality of being calm and soothed. As an opening practice for other practices or activities, it leaves one feeling decompressed. As a relaxation technique during a Working, it takes on the form of mental stillness leading to visions and insights emerging. Other times, this practice gave me a sense of possibility, as if I was seeing new ways of being and thinking. The Objective Universe itself seemed refreshed, as if it was limitless in its potentiality. A feeling of being “in the world” and part of everything around me. A sense of self-wholeness and self-perfection. An immense feeling of gratitude and the opportunity afforded to me by being alive right here, right now. Timelessness.

Now, the astute reader may get the sense that these three categories have substantial overlap and the experiences bleed into each other. And this is accurate. One thing that I can’t get across in writing is that there is a subtle, but clear, connection between the mind, the visual field, thoughts, and the act of mental elaboration on those thoughts. When you spend enough time in a non-conceptual state of mind while looking at the sky, eventually the sky becomes a mirror for your own mind. If you’ve ever spent a lot of time watching the waves at a beach, star-gazing, or even just staring at a wall, you’ll know this experience. This sky meditation is a great exercise for getting in touch with the deeper, nonrational elements of the mind. With sufficient practice, one develops a clearer sense of their own

Awareness, and how it relates to the thoughts and emotions that will naturally arise throughout the day. And with that sense of Awareness, one can see how utterly empty those thoughts and emotions are.



Sources Referenced

Brown, P. (2020) *Essence of Recognition: The Yoga of Radiant Presence Revealed Within the PRATYABHIJNA HRIDAYAM for Modern Yogis*. Independently published.

Coleman, G., Jinpa, T., Dorje, G., & Lama, D. (2007). *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: First Complete Translation*. New York: Penguin.

Karma-glin-pa, & Thurman, R. A. (1994). *The Tibetan book of the dead liberation through understanding in the between*. New York: Bantam Books.

Lingpa, D., & Wallace, A. (2017). *The Vajra Essence: Dudjom Lingpa's Visions of the Great Perfection*. Wisdom Publications.

Longchenpa. (2020). *Finding Rest in the Nature of Mind: The Trilogy of Rest, Volume 1*. Translated by the Padmakara Translation Group. Boulder: Shambala.

Longchenpa. (2020). *Finding Rest in Meditation: The Trilogy of Rest, Volume 2*. Translated by the Padmakara Translation Group. Boulder: Shambala.

Maitreya, A., Lordo Taye, J.K., Gyamtso, T.K., & Fuchs, R. (2018). *Buddha Nature: The Mahayana Uttaratantra Shastra with Commentary*. Boulder: Snow Lion.

Norbu, C.G., & Clemente, A. (1999). *The Supreme Source: The Fundamental Tantra of Dzogchen Semde Kunjed Gyalpo*. Ithaca: Snow Lion.

Plotinus. (1969). *Ennead, Volumes I-IV*. Translated by Armstrong, A.H. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Rinpoche, T.U., Kunsang, E.P., & Schmidt, M.B. (2006). *Quintessential Dzogchen: Confusion Dawns As Wisdom*. Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe Publications.

Shaw, G., Milbank, J., & Riches, A. (2014). *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus (2nd edition)*. Angelico Press.

Thurman, R. (1999). *Inner Revolution*. New York: Penguin.