

Concept of Voidness

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Just yesterday, I was reading in the most recent reproduction of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* that was edited by Evans-Wentz. In this particular edition, there are introductory statements: for instance, the introductory preface of Evans-Wentz himself in all editions; then a psychological commentary by Dr. C. G. Jung; followed by introductory forward by Lama Anagarika Govinda; and finally a foreword, “The Science of Death,” by Sir John Woodruff. I was reading in Dr. Jung’s commentary. I have done this before—I have gone through this work, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, several times.

Death lies before all of us who are born in to a body of flesh and bone. Therefore, since we in all probability will spend more time beyond the grave than on this side of the grave, becoming acquainted therefore with the process of death and what is involved in death is a matter of premier importance. In recent years, I have devoted a good deal of time to this subject matter, for I am now ninety-four years of age, and I have lost my companion, and all the signs point to a transition that cannot be very far away. And I’ve always felt that it is wise to become, as much as possible, acquainted beforehand with that country into which you are venturing when traveling, and then be as much familiarized with it as is possible beforehand.

So I have dwelt on this subject, reading *The Book of the Dead*; reading the more modern words on the subject that are to be found in *The Mahatma Letters*, where the conceptuality is more familiar to us than in the case of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. And so, I had read through the various prefaces and had entered upon the psychological commentary of Dr. Carl G. Jung. And in that commentary, I came to the following words that appear in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*; namely:

O nobly born, listen. Now thou art experiencing the Radiance of the Clear Light of Pure Reality. Recognize it. O nobly born, thy present intellect, in real nature void, not formed into anything as regards characteristics or color, naturally void, is the very Reality, the All-Good.

Thine own intellect, which is now voidness, yet not to be regarded as of the voidness of nothingness, but as being the intellect itself, unobstructed, shining, thrilling, and blissful, is the very consciousness, the All-good Buddha.

Dr. Jung goes on to say, “This realization is the *Dharma-Kāya* state of Perfect Enlightenment.” End of the quotation.¹

I have always found the word ‘voidness’ rather unsatisfactory. It is a translation of the Sanskrit ‘*Shūnyata*’. What is it? ‘Voidness’, ordinarily as given by our dictionary definition, means “the voidness of nothing at all.” But here it is explicitly said, and in many other places in the texts also explicitly said, that it is not the voidness of nothing at all. I was contemplating these words when it suddenly dawned upon me that in my own

¹ W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New York: Oxford, 1960), xxxix.

conception of Consciousness-without-an-object-and-without-a-subject, which broke forth upon the occasion of an enlightening Realization on August 7, 1936 in about the middle of the afternoon, that it suddenly occurred to me that I had there said the same thing, but in other words.

Consciousness-without-an-object is manifestly a “void state” and could be called therefore “Voidness,” for it is consciousness without content. To be sure, content may arise, but the existence of the consciousness is not affected by the presence or absence of content, and that I was using this conception of “Consciousness-without-an-object-and-without-a-subject” in the same sense that *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* was using the word ‘Voidness’. “The Voidness” is a translation of ‘*Shūnyata*’ in the Sanskrit—I don’t find it very satisfactory. But the Consciousness-without-an-object is a state of Consciousness essentially without content, and a state of Consciousness without content could very well be called “Voidness.” But it is not the voidness of absolute nothingness, for it is an experience of consciousness even though there is no content. But, Consciousness-without-an-object permits the rising of objects and the disappearance of objects; that is, of contents and of the disappearance of contents. It is therefore not an absolute voidness; it is not nothing at all. It is a consciousness, and therefore a reality, an existence of a sort. We are not now speaking of a content, nor are we speaking of an entity who possesses, as it were, a state of consciousness; we are speaking of the state “is conscious-without-an-object and also without-a-subject.”

In our historic approach to the subject of consciousness, both psychologically and philosophically, we have thought of it as consisting of three components: first, that which is conscious, very often called the “self” or the “I”; then the consciousness itself; and finally, the content of consciousness. Philosophic schools have been divided in their form of emphasis with respect to these components. Those who have been called the Realists and the Materialists have oriented primarily to that which is the content of consciousness, but thinking of it as an existence apart from all consciousness. This we may call “the world”—the object of consciousness. And the problem as presented here—both psychologically and philosophically—is as to whether consciousness is necessary. Is world process independent of consciousness? Among the Realists, including the Materialists, the answer is “yes.” The world or the object is the primary fact. But there is an opposed school of philosophy, which takes its primary orientation with respect to that which is conscious—that which we commonly call the “self”—and this is the school of Idealism, which has many representatives in historic time.²

Which is the primary determinant, the world or the subjective aspect? It has not been characteristic in the story of our Western philosophy to view consciousness as a subject matter in itself. Generally, it is viewed as something which arose at some time in the history of the world. There are those who even say it need never have been. But this is the more or less Materialistic or Realistic point of view. The Idealistic one presupposes a pre-existent subject or self, which determines in considerable degree the cognition of that world which lies about us. The point of view presented here, and which broke out in my consciousness on the occasion of the Realization of August 7, 1936, was a view which

² Wolff says “consciousness” in this sentence, but clearly meant to say “that which is conscious.”

gave the primacy to consciousness itself, a view which implied the subordination of the subject and of the object or the world, to pure Consciousness. This is a view that I haven't found developed in the West, but here it does appear to be important in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and my own Realization gave primacy to Consciousness.

It is characteristic of my philosophy that consciousness is not viewed as a mere function or faculty or organ of a being, but that Consciousness *is* before a being became, and also Consciousness *is* before a world or universe or, in other words, the object of consciousness became. Consciousness thus is not viewed as a relation between a knower and a known in its most fundamental usage. It is, as it were, present before both the knower and the known became. This is not something derived from ordinary states of consciousness. It was something that came to me out of a luminous or enlightened stage of consciousness, so that Consciousness becomes as it were, a fact more fundamental than I or the world; that I and the world are in some way derivative from this Root Consciousness.

In *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, there is a distinction made between consciousness and intellect. Pure Consciousness, which is not aware of content, or in other words, phenomena, is called "*Rig-pa*." But when it is aware of phenomena or content—I prefer the word 'content' as it includes ideation as well as sensuous phenomena—when it is concerned with content, it is called "*Shes-rig*." We have therefore a different approach to the whole field of our cognitions that is atypical so far as Western philosophy is concerned. We place ourselves on the foundation of Consciousness; I, as a self, stand subordinate to that. And the world which I cognize also stands subordinate to that. I do not know of any philosophy indigenous to the West which takes this stand.

Now, one might raise the difficulty that he doesn't seem to experience it that way. I just wonder if that is a real difficulty. We start out with the habit, philosophic and psychological, of viewing consciousness as a relationship between a knower and a known, and the existence of the knower and the known was necessary in order that the consciousness might become. But here we have the view that Consciousness is original—not the knower, not the known, but Consciousness is the original.

Now, I would suggest to the reader or the hearer that he step aside from his prejudices and just assume this position as a hypothesis, as a postulate, and consider what the orientation toward world might be. In *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, this Consciousness is viewed as the Buddha, the "All-good Buddha." Now 'Buddha', in part of our usage, is a referent to a living being, but in its most fundamental usage, it refers to the state of Enlightenment. Enlightenment *is* Buddha. There is one entity connected with this world today, who is the best known of the enlightened individuals, and we call him by that name, but it is not truly a personal designation. Buddha *is* Enlightened Consciousness. Now, the view that would emerge from this is that all we experience, all we think, is contained in what we might call the "drama of Consciousness." Consciousness is the all in all.

Postscript: There is a predilection in the West to orient first of all to unconsciousness, or non-consciousness, and then ask the question, "How did

consciousness arise?” Now, what is implied here is that we take the perspective of that which we do not know and then try to explain how knowing could arise. And isn't this utterly silly? We ask: How does consciousness arise out of that which is unconscious? We start by assuming that which we cannot possibly know and then try to explain that which we do know. Nobody ever experienced unconsciousness or the non-conscious, for that is an obvious contradiction. We know consciousness and its content; we know nothing about the unconscious or the non-conscious. Isn't it utterly silly to try to explain what we know on the basis of that which we cannot possibly know? And yet, that is what our psychologists and our philosophers have attempted to do.