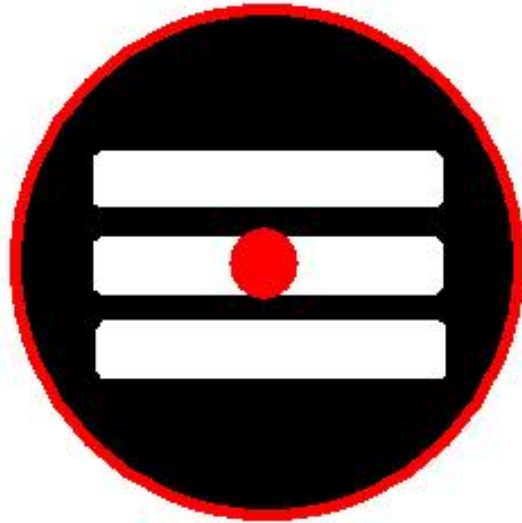


‘DEPENDENT ORINATION’, MAHAMUDRA & DEITY YOGA

**Aspects of Buddhism in the Light of
‘The Awareness Principle’**



Acharya Peter Wilberg

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DEPENDENT ORIGATION, MAHAMUDRA AND DEITY YOGA Aspects of Buddhism in the Light of ‘The Awareness Principle’

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1. Refutation of the Buddhist Doctrine of Dependent Origination

Acknowledgement of the interrelatedness of all things gave rise to the cardinal Buddhist doctrine of ‘dependent origination’ (*pratītyasamutpāda*) which concludes that by virtue of their conditioned or interdependent character, no things can be said to exist as independent identities but rather all things have the fundamental character of emptiness (*shunyata*). Put in other terms the doctrine recognises that no thing can be posited as an identity (+A) independently of a surrounding field or context of emergence that includes everything that it is not (-A).

Consequently however, the doctrine *refutes itself* for two principal reasons. Firstly, each thing can be said to possess self-hood or identity precisely by virtue of being a *self-expression* of its field or context of emergence as a whole (in the same way that a fish has identity or self-hood precisely by virtue of being a self-expression of the life of the ocean as a whole). Secondly, though any element or phenomenon (+A) arising within a field of emergence (-A) is defined by its *relation* to that field of emergence, understood dialectically, that very relation ($\pm A$) is a circular *self-relation* of the field to itself *through* its elements *and* a circular self-relation of each *element to itself* through its field of emergence (see www.thenewdialectics.org).

Thus not only does an ocean experience itself (‘its-self’) through the life-forms that it gives rise to - but so also do those life forms define and experience themselves through their relation to the ocean as a whole - and not just to other life forms within it. The essential self-being or self-hood of phenomena therefore – for example different oceanic life forms - is *not* nullified or rendered void or empty by their interdependent and mutually conditioned relation to one another, for despite this they all remain independent

self-expressions of the ocean as such. Their essential self *is* the ocean as such, not any network or fabric of interrelations to the other life forms within it. Similarly whilst the identity of an individual can be said to be defined by their relation to other human beings in a larger social field or context, that relation is both a circular self- relation of the social field to itself *through* the individual, and a circular self-relation of the individual to themselves *through* their social field, context or environment.

The doctrine of dependent origination, whilst it emphasises interrelatedness, fails to recognise the *relational* dimension of self-being or identity *as such* - understood as a *circular self-relation* of any field of emergence to the elements or phenomena that arise within it and vice versa. Identity is not nullified by interrelation. Instead identity is *circular and reciprocal self-relation* – a relation of any thing (+A) to its self mediated by its inseparable relation to that which it is not (-A). Furthermore, the entire webwork or matrix of relations that constitute manifest or experienced reality is, according to the Shaivist Tantras, the expression of a universal field of pure awareness. For as clearly stated by Sri Abhinavagupta: “The being of all things that are recognised in awareness in turn depends on awareness.”

Thus any phenomenon possesses identity or self-hood *not just* by virtue of its circular self-relation to other phenomena within a field of interrelatedness - but also by virtue of being an independent and individualised expression and portion of a universal field of pure awareness as such. Similarly, a fish is an independent expression and independent portion of the ocean *as such and as a whole* – and thus not only defined by its interrelatedness to other life forms *within* that ocean. And just as an ocean does not have the nature of a fish, crab or any other life form within it, neither does the universal awareness have the character of any thing experienced within it.

Pure awareness is void or empty *only* in the sense of being ‘no-thing’, and yet it has the character of ultimate reality. For like an ocean, the universal awareness field is the source of all things within it – each of which is a living, individualised portion and expression of it. Every thing is the actualisation of a potentiality latent within the universal awareness,

one that therefore necessarily takes the form of a specific potentiality *of* awareness – a potential form, shape and pattern of awareness imbued with individual tonalities and qualities of awareness.

There is and can be no such thing therefore as an insentient or unaware ‘thing’, for just as awareness is the source of everything, so is each thing an individualised awareness in its own right – thus imbued with the ultimate reality that belongs to awareness as such.

2. The Awareness Principle, Mahamudra and European Philosophy of Mind

Like the empty space around and pervading things, the universal field of pure awareness that is *Paramshiva* is inseparable and at the same time absolutely distinct from everything experienced within it. This alone is what gives ultimate reality the character of spacious and luminous emptiness recognised in Buddhism – these being transcendental qualities of awareness as such, to which alone can be granted the ‘Great Seal’ (*Mahamudra*) of constituting ultimate reality itself. What I call The Awareness Principle is the renewed recognition of Awareness itself as this ultimate reality - the 1st Principal of All That Is.

Yet in contrast to the use of the term ‘Mahamudra’ in the Buddhist Tantric tradition, it must be emphasised that ultimate reality, by its very nature, is not a state of enlightenment in need of ‘realisation’. Why should it require ‘realisation’ when it is ultimate *reality* as such? What is required is only the means to come to a living *recognition* of this reality. This is the principle behind ‘The Doctrine of Recognition’ (*Pratyabhijna*) of Shaivist Tantra, and the heart also of ‘The Awareness Principle’ and its corresponding Practices of Awareness – ‘The New Yoga of Awareness’.

In my reading on the Buddhist tantric teaching known as ‘Mahamudra’ I have found many profound truths implicit in or poetically hinted at in different texts - all pointing towards awareness as such as the “essence of mind” - albeit an essence that does tend to be described more as an ultimate state of ‘realisation’ than recognised as ultimate reality. Thus I have found few texts that seek to reach the level of painstakingly precise

philosophical and linguistic explication of this Reality that I have sought to achieve through the core precepts of The Awareness Principle (and the no less precise wordings of its key practices). Part of the problem in the text and translations I have come across lies also in what I see as a pervasive *looseness of language* and lack of clear differentiation in the use of even such basic terms as ‘mind’, ‘consciousness’, ‘awareness’ and ‘experiencing’ in both ancient and modern exponents of Mahamudra.

Thus on the one hand I found a wonderful piece on Mahamudra by Chogpa entitled ‘Luminous Emptiness’. The wording of this piece was wholly in tune with the basic Practice of Awareness that I call the ‘The Foundation Meditation’ of The New Yoga. This practice is based on what I term ‘The Fundamental Distinction’ – a distinction between all phenomenal *experiencing* on the one hand, and the pure *awareness* of that experiencing on the other. Chogpa himself uses the word ‘awareness’ in contrast to ‘experiencing’, although he sometimes refers to ‘resting in experiencing’ - where I would speak of resting in the pure awareness of experiencing. Then again, a citation from Maitripa on the same blogsite reads as follows:

*Were I to explain Mahamudra, I would say —
All phenomena? Your own mind!
If you look outside for meaning, you'll get confused.
Phenomena are like a dream, empty of true nature,
And mind is merely the flux of awareness,
No self nature: just energy flow.
No true nature: just like the sky.
All phenomena are alike, sky-like.*

Here the term ‘mind’ is used in place of awareness, not least in the phrase ‘Your own mind!’ – one which unfortunately implies that mind is ‘mine’, belonging to an individual self, ego or ‘I’ (thus in contrast to the philosophy of ‘no-self’).

Of course when he goes on to write that “mind is merely the flux of awareness, no self-nature” this implication is contradicted and corrected – but with no seeming *awareness* of the contradiction as such!

As those familiar with the history of European ‘Philosophy of Mind’ will know, it was precisely the long-held assumption that ‘mind’, ‘consciousness’, ‘experiencing’ or even ‘awareness’ – *subjectivity* – is necessarily the property of an individual ‘subject’ or ‘self’ that led Bishop Berkeley’s European version of Buddhist ‘Mind Only’ philosophy to be accused (wrongly) of leading logically to *solipsism*. Berkeley rejected this accusation by affirming that phenomenal experiencing was not a ‘projection’ of the individual mind but of God’s mind - a universal, trans-personal ‘mind’.

At that time, the divergence between deistic theology on the one hand and ‘pure’ logical-analytic philosophy on the other had already taken a more extreme and dualistic character than in Buddhism. Yet I believe this very divergence has left us with a positive heritage, one that allows us now to once again overcome this dualism - not by abiding with the old and ambiguous (if not outright contradictory and therefore dualistic) forms of phrasing but by drawing upon European thought to attain a new level of linguistic and logical-analytic clarity in the explication of both Buddhist and Hindu philosophies.

The central value and purpose of ‘The Awareness Principle’ in this context lies (a) in the liberation of ultimate truth from what are otherwise still seen as ‘exotic’ languages and esoteric terminologies (whether drawn from Pali, Tibetan or Sanskrit texts) of particular ‘in-groups’ (b) the forging of a new *inter-group* language or ‘inter-language’ capable not only of articulating but also of applying these ultimate truths to a whole variety of exoteric discourse domains such as science and medicine, and (c) the use of the global language of English itself as a far more concise and clearer vehicle for both the expression and application of ultimate truths. For more than anything else, it is philosophically muddled modes of translation and expression in English and other European languages that obscure the profound wisdom still resonant in the language of the great sages and Mahasiddhas.

Thus Ole Nydahl for example, a self-proclaimed teacher of Mahamudra, describes 'meditation' in the following muddled terms:

"Meditation turns accepted information into experience."

What exactly is meant by 'information' here? Sense data in the outdated, positivistic sense? Why use such a technological buzzword in the first place? To add a sort of quasi-scientific authority to the assertion? The proposition presumes to be a profound statement but *says* nothing clear at all.

"On the first level, its purpose is to calm mind and keep it in one place."

Simply to speak of 'keeping' mind 'in one place' is to treat it as a substantive object that can be handled by a subject or self – the age-old Western dualism. Is this Mahamudra?!!!!

"It creates space between the experiencer and his experiences..."

Ah, so there is an individual "experiencer" - an experiencing subject or self - after all. Is this even Buddhism?

On 'Vipassana' or 'Lhaktong':

"Here, the meditation is formless and aims at the nature of the mind itself."

"Meditation" is here treated as an active and substantive entity - a subject or agent which "aims" at something.

"By being aware without an object to be aware of, insight and understanding arise spontaneously. So meditation is the concentrating of the mind onto something and the clarity which arises from this."

All repeated appeals to or mutterings of such mantra as 'non-dual' or 'the middle path of unity' notwithstanding, these two statements remain in outright logical contradiction to one another.

Thus one statement speaks of being ‘aware’ *without* an object, the other of concentrating ‘the mind’ onto something (ie. some object). And no attempt is made to clearly differentiate ‘mind’ and ‘awareness’.

In contrast, Maitripa – and of course countless other great Buddhist sages – have constantly emphasised the importance of ‘space’ and ‘emptiness’, thus clearly indicating something made fully explicit in The Awareness Principle – namely that pure awareness, like space, has an intrinsically *field* character – it is *field awareness* - whereas it is precisely ordinary, undeveloped consciousness that retains the character of a purely *focal awareness*, one that can do nothing *but* “concentrate the mind on something” (my stress).

One of the principal purposes of the Practices of Awareness that stem from The Awareness Principle is to remove the *long-standing misconception* that meditation is about focusing or ‘concentration’ – rather than restoring and resting in a spacious and expansive field of de-centred awareness - one that does not concentrate on or lose itself in any fixed focus or centre of awareness.

I don’t doubt for a second the sincerity or good intent behind such ‘teachings’. Yet since their linguistic and logical formulation wouldn’t pass muster in a first-grade philosophy course they are *de facto* arrogant in presuming to teach a higher and truer philosophy – indeed one which claims the seal of ultimate truth.

It is for such reasons that, irrespective of the authority of their lineages, I see more *Mahamudra* in the teachings of a Husserl and Heidegger than in those of Ole Nydahl and similar ‘spiritual’ teachers – Buddhist, Taoist or Hindu. And in the case of Heidegger, his is also a language in far deeper *resonance* with that of both the Buddhist Mahasiddhas and the Shaiva Acharyas. Both Husserl and Heidegger grasped the open, spacious or field character of awareness (*das Offene, die Lichtung/Feldung*) and its transcendental luminosity – its “luminous emptiness”. I have sought to bring this understanding of Heidegger’s thinking to expression in my book entitled [‘Heidegger, Phenomenology and Indian Thought’](#).

In contrast, contemporary Anglo-American ‘Philosophy of Mind’ continues to ignore and fail to recognise the most basic and radical insight of Mahamudra. Expressed in the language and terms of ‘The Awareness Principle’ this insight is that awareness cannot – *in principle* – be reduced to the property of any self or subject, being or body, thing or phenomenon, that we are conscious or aware *of*. The first and primary precept of The Awareness Principle – its ‘Great Seal’ – is that awareness as such, whilst itself ‘no-thing’, is itself the 1st principle of all that is - the ultimate reality behind *all* things. Understood as the very essence of Mahamudra, the clarification and application of this principle is more important now than it ever was – not least in challenging today’s superficial or scientific ‘philosophies of mind’, in particular those that seek to reduce consciousness and awareness as such to a mere product of the body or brain. Yet given the still ambiguous, outdated or logically muddled language in which Mahamudra is still often couched, it is no less important to offer at least some provisional ways in which such key terms as ‘awareness’, ‘mind’, ‘consciousness’ and ‘experiencing’ may be distinguished - rather than conflated or used interchangeably. One way of doing so, expressed as concisely as possible within the confines of this essay, is as follows:

1. ‘Awareness’ – awareness *as such*, like space, is both inseparable from its contents and yet at the same time absolutely *distinct* from and therefore *transcendent* of them.
2. ‘Mind’ – the cognitive reflection (arising from and within awareness) of either awareness as such *or* its experiential contents, and taking the form of verbal thought-constructs (*Vikalpa*).
3. ‘Experiencing’ – experienced *contents* of consciousness arising from and within awareness, each of which in turn constitutes a specific shape, form, pattern or quality, actual or potential, *of* awareness.
4. ‘Consciousness’ – focal awareness ie. awareness focused on or identified with its experiential contents, with that which we are aware *of*.

If the essence of ‘consciousness’ in the ordinary, undeveloped sense is a type of ‘focal awareness’, then awareness is, conversely, a universal ‘field’ consciousness - one that is the ultimate reality behind all things – and at the same time immanent in and constitutive of them.

If 'mind' is taken as synonymous with a spacious and universal 'awareness' field in the sense defined above, its nature is most certainly echoed in the philosophy of Mahamudra, for example in the following words of Tilopa:

*The mind's original nature is like space;
It pervades and embraces all things under the sun.*

Such understandings were in turn transformed into key meditational practices in the Shaivist *Vijnanabhairavatantra*:

*Meditate on space as omnipresent and free of all limitations.
Meditate on one's own body as the universe and as having the nature of awareness.*

The 'Great Seal' (Mahamudra) of ultimate truth expressed in the clear light and clearly defined language of 'The Awareness Principle' is simply that *Awareness is Everything* and that in turn, *Everything is an Awareness*.

Thus every single thing and thought, every single feeling and every single self of which there is an awareness, also *is* an awareness its own right – albeit only by virtue of being an individualised portion and expression of a singular, universal awareness.

The old but false question of academic 'Philosophy of Mind' – that of how we can come to know of the reality of 'other minds' - is rendered entirely redundant by the recognition that 'mind' in the broadest sense (subjectivity or awareness as such) is no mere private property of a subject or self in the first place. Yet without explicit recognition of a universal awareness of which each individual is an individualised portion and expression, both Mahamudra and Buddhist 'Mind Only' philosophies leave themselves open to the question of how we come to know of the reality of other, individual minds.

And without clear language and clear means of logical refutation, they can also open themselves, as Berkeley's philosophy once did, to accusations of solipsism – not to mention implying, through expressions such as 'your mind' or 'mine', a self or subject in possession of that mind.

Self or no-self? *Atman* or *Anatman*? Here again a central precept of The Awareness Principle offers new clarity, explaining that the *awareness* of any sense of self or identity cannot – in principle – be reduced to a property of that self or identity.

Thus there is no self, only awareness of selves or experienced senses of self. Unless, that is, as in Shaiva Advaita, we recognise a more essential Self that is identical *with* awareness as such, an awareness that is not yours or mine but the very essence of the divine (Shiva) understood as ultimate reality. This conception of Self is the very starting point of the Shiva Sutras - the foundational scriptures of Shaiva Advaita and ‘Kashmir Shaivism’.

Chaitanyatman – ‘the nature of the self *is* awareness’ Shiva Sutras 1.1.

This still leaves open the question of what room Buddhist or Hindu tantric philosophies leave for the experience of ‘non-duality’ as a singular, non-dual *relation* to a divine Other? Together with this goes the question of what place they offer for both an intimately personal and powerfully embodied experience of unity with the divine.

3. Buddhist Tantra, Deity Yoga and the Nature of the Divine

Important clues to these questions are, I believe, offered by the difference between Buddhist and Hindu understandings and experiences of *puja* or ‘worship’. In its deepest sense, Hindu *puja* is *murti darshan* – coming to truly see the divine in and through the face of an embodied image or *murti* of a particular Hindu deity. Buddhist Tantra speaks instead of ‘deity yoga’. Is there any difference here of significance in relation to the personal, embodied and *inter-subjective dimensions* of the ultimate trans-personal awareness - that which is named in both Buddhist and Hindu tantric traditions as *anuttara* – the ‘non-higher’? In my experience I believe there is a difference.

Both Buddhist and Hindu *tantrikas* recognise the deity *murti* not merely as the image of a god-person or god-being but as the *personification* of ultimate reality in the form of a transcendental quality or state of that reality - of pure awareness itself. It is one thing however, for a practitioner to project a mental image of a particular divinity in order to

then identify with it and come to experience such transcendental qualities or states of pure awareness. The danger of this type of specifically Buddhist ‘deity yoga’ lies in (a) effectively or inadvertently reducing the god-image or *murti* to a mental projection of the practitioner’s ‘own’ mind and (b) reducing *puja* from an intimately felt *relation* to a mere technical-meditational ‘means to an end’ – rather than approaching it reverently as an end in itself.

For me, a true experience of *puja* in the Hindu-Tantric sense is therefore something different in principle from ‘deity yoga’ in the sense described above. For as *murti darshan* it is based on the recognition that it is not only the mind of the practitioner or yogin but the divine-universal awareness *Itself* that personifies and embodies itself in the image or *murti* of a particular deity. Indeed in the case of a solid, sculptured *murti*, the divine-universal awareness does not merely project a ‘mental’ image of *Itself* but materialises *Itself* as the very *body* of the *murti*. The Hindu-Tantric experience of *puja* as *murti darshan* that comes from *this* understanding is an experience of higher, transcendental and trans-personal awareness that is both aware of itself and communicates *as and through* its *murti*. What *It* communicates however, is not just a *knowing awareness* of *Itself as* the particular deity being worshipped, but *also* a knowing awareness of *Itself as* the very self (*Atman*) and body (*Deha*) of the worshipper – what I term the ‘Awareness Self’ and ‘Awareness Body’.

‘To worship a god is to become that god.’ For the Hindu who identifies – bodily and not just ‘mentally’ - with the outer form and inner bearing of the *murti* - the experience of the higher ‘trans-personal’ awareness that communicates through it thus *also* takes the form of a highly *personal* communion with that awareness – now truly seen (*darshan*) as that which personifies and embodies *Itself* as both worshipper and worshipped.

This knowledge - namely that the *murti* is no projection in or of the ‘mind’ of the yogic practitioner but rather an embodiment of the divine-universal awareness *Itself* - is central to the Hindu worshipper’s experience of their own body too, as a living image or *murti* of the divine – one that is now felt in inner resonance with the outer image of the *murti*.

The common *relation* to a higher trans-personal awareness shared by both worshipper and worshipped - a relation knowingly communicated through the *murti*, and knowingly meditated by its worshipper - is what culminates in both a profoundly *personal* and a strongly *embodied* sense of that Self (*Atman*) which knows itself *as* that higher awareness of which both worshipper and worshipped, meditator and god-image, human being and god are both a unique expression and embodiment.

In addition but no less importantly, the reality of the god or deity, not just as a human *image* of the universal awareness, but as a *trans-human* being in its own right - a no less distinct *portion and expression* of that universal awareness than the human being himself - is fully *recognised*, as are the unique qualities of that universal awareness which, like any being, that deity or god 'shines forth' (the root meaning of 'deva' and 'devi').

That 'God' which *is* the ultimate reality of an absolute and universal awareness, is a God which, though not a supreme 'god-being' nevertheless and by its very nature 'gods' - literally *godding* or *deifying* itself in the form of multiple trans-human consciousnesses, whether we call them *devas* or *asuras*, *gods* or *buddhas*.

Thus recognising and affirming both God and Self, gods and buddhas, in a manner transcendent of both theism and self-centredness, polytheism and atheism - not to mention 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism' - is a *Mahamudra* in itself - according and conferring (*rā*) great joy (*mud*).