

An Abbreviated Phenomenological Diary

On August 20, 1986, I went into Dark Retreat at Tsegyelgar, the Dzogchen community center in Conway, Massachusetts. After dark, I entered the isolation of a hut in the woods. This hut was designed, built and equipped for the special conditions of the Dark Retreat, during which time the practitioner lives continuously in the dark, totally cut off from contact with light. I remained for seven nights and seven days, isolated in the darkness of the hut. The practices of the Dark Retreat are at the heart of the Dzogchen teachings brought to this country by Dr. Professor Namkhai Norbu. (Nurbu, Rinpoche is the Tibetan Buddhist who teaches Tibetan language and culture at the Oriental Institute of the University of Naples, Italy. He is a meditation master, a physician trained in Tibetan, Chinese, and Indian medicine, a scholar, and the author of books on Tibetan culture, medicine, and the psychology of meditation. The Yang-thig, the teachings of the Dark Retreat that he has recently begun to communicate – for the first time in Western history – were given to him by his principal teacher, Changchub dorje, and by a very old woman, Ayo Khandro, who at the time he studied with her had lived continuously in the darkness of a hut for more than fifty years.

The teachings in question, together with their practices, are intended to develop clarity of vision about the essential nature of vision. The ultimate realization of these teachings and practices is the body of light, a non-dual existence perfectly integrated into the presencing of the elemental lighting.

The Yang-thig teachings are concerned with the ‘external’ manifestations of ‘internal’ processes, ‘internal’ energy. They call for specific experiential practices: in particular, an extremely difficult set of visualizations. Although these practices are not at all ‘secret’, it would not be appropriate for me to discuss them here. In any case, however, it is not necessary for our present purposes that I do this. Suffice it to say that the visualizations are extraordinarily demanding, and that they presuppose some degree of accomplishment in other meditative practices: practices which are themselves difficult and exacting. These prior practices, belonging to the ‘Kregschod’ system, are called zhi-gnas (to develop gnas-pa, a calm and relaxed state of being in which vision is steadied in awareness by virtue of its non-duality, its neutralization of emotive energy) and lhaktong (to develop an experiential insight, working with the movement of mental activity, into stong-pa nyid, the ultimate nothingness of what we call ‘reality’ and into lhundrub, the ‘self-perfectedness’ of our primordial state).

Before I begin the phenomenological account, I would like to give a very brief summary of Abhidharma psychology and Madhyamika philosophy. Although the Dzogchen teachings and practices existed in Tibet long before the

Abhidharma and Madhyamika systems were brought there from India, one can see, today, some very deep affinities and similarities. Since the texts of the Abhidharma and Madhyamika systems have been available for some time in the West and are therefore more accessible, if not also more familiar, a brief introduction to the Dzogchen practice of the Dark Retreat by way of the Abhidharma and Madhyamika systems might therefore be useful.

Abhidharma is concerned with the analysis of our psychophysical development. In particular, it analyzes the emergence of perception as a process governed by the ego. According to its analysis, ego-logical perception manifests six stages of 'normal' development:

- 1) primordial openness, space, formlessness
- 2) the advent of bodily felt forms, or Gestalten
- 3) global feeling, moods of ontological attunement
- 4) motivating intentionalities of desire: attraction, aversion, indifference
- 5) object-oriented ego-logical perception
- 6) conceptual articulations that further shape and structure the 'perceptual situation'

The experiential realization of this analysis sets the stage; however, for an experiential 'deconstruction' of the inveterate reification tendencies inherent in the perceptual process. In other words, Abhidharma psychology shows us the possibility of 'undoing' our self-limiting fixation in the ego-logical condition and experiencing a primordial openness.

Abhidharma psychology is inseparable from its philosophical interpretation. In madhyamika philosophy, two concepts are considered to be fundamental for our understanding of human psychology: one is called, in Sanskrit, *pratityasamutpada* (*rten'brel* in Tibetan), the other *shunyata* (*stong-pa nyid*, in Tibetan). The first concept refers to the fact of functional independence: the fact that subject and object, figure and ground, form and field, self and other are always interdependently co-emergent and co-functional. It is essentially equivalent to Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'intertwining'. The second concept refers to the fact that nothing is inherently permanent or essentially substantial: all things that come to appearance in our world are ultimately 'empty' or 'void' in the sense that there is no eternal and immutable substratum underlying them. Nor is there any thing-in-itself organizing the various appearances. In the final analysis, all forms are utterly transitory, phenomenal, insubstantial, empty. Moreover, since even 'emptiness' itself, however, is a form of interpretation, Madhyamika logic calls for the deconstruction of 'emptiness' as well.

Without further introduction, let me now report in phenomenological terms my experience with the Dzogchen practice. The first night and first day were extremely exciting. I suddenly realized, by direct experience, that light is a stimulant, exciting the activity of vision and drawing it out. But I also began to understand that the absence of light – deprivation of light – is an equally powerful stimulant, revealing and provoking the movement of our eyes. I had expected to find the darkness restful, but instead it aroused me. I was tense, overexcited. An incessantly changing display of forms kept me enthralled, entertained, and on the look-out: form, like clouds, making their appearance, lingering a while, and then vanishing without any enduring trace. By the second night, I understood that this ceaseless play of light, this constantly changing display of shapes and patterns, sometimes suggesting familiar objects and fantastic landscapes, was a reflection of my state of mind. The display was functioning like a mirror, showing me the inner nature of my mind. Because of a dynamic, functional interdependence, the ever-changing forms corresponded to the nervous, agitated movements of my gaze. Instead of resting, my eyes were constantly moving about, rapidly darting and jumping about. These movements were extremely fine vibrations or oscillations – quite different from the slower, grosser, REM's.

Was all this movement caused by curiosity? Perhaps at first. But the room was totally dark and objectively uneventful: nothing other than the darkness itself. There was, after all, nothing (objective) to see. I did experience some waves of anxiety from time to time, but I do not believe this anxiety, nor even occasionally projections of paranoia, can explain the incessant movement. (Experimental psychology has established that, even during sleep, there are rapid eye movements, REM's, which seem to be correlated with the process of dreaming.)⁰ By the end of that second night, I reached the conclusion that the movement was basically habitual, manifesting an inveterate tendency of embodied consciousness.

I was reminded of a remark Heidegger makes in 'Moira' his essay on Parmenides. He observes that 'ordinary' perception certainly moves within the lightedness of what is present and sees what is shining out . . . in 'color' and then comments that it is 'dazzled' by changes in color' and 'pays no attention [at all] to the still light of the lighting.

Most scholars pay no attention to this brief analysis: their eyes glide right over the words, unchallenged by their significance. I myself missed much of it; but at least I took his words to heart, i.e., I gave them an experiential reference. Remembering the text did not immediately help me. By the end of the second day, my eyes were strained, tired, and occasionally hurt. I rubbed them gently and allowed tear to come. This brought some temporary relief.

My visionary experiences during the third night and third day were not much different. But, by the end of the third day, it was clear to me that the visualization practices I was attempting to perform were only increasing the eyes' strain and mental agitation. And since this condition of strain and agitation was reflected back by the restless changing of forms, the more intense my exertions, the more these displays of light agitated and pained me. On the fourth night, I finally realized that I was caught in a vicious cycle, a wheel of suffering, unable to break out of the dualistic polarizations characteristic of my normal, habitual, routinized patterns of ego-logical vision. I was, in fact, shifting back and forth, interminably caught in one of four possible visionary attitudes in relation to the display of forms presencing in the dark:

- a) seduction, i.e., attraction, involvement, grasping and clinging
- b) resistance, i.e., attempts to fixate and control the wrathful movements of light by rigidly staring into the space before me
- c) disengagements that involved withdrawing into inner monologue, i.e., continuous conceptualization
- d) disengagement that resulted in drowsiness, i.e., a withdrawing into the 'unconsciousness' of sleep

The first two attitudes only intensified the movements of light; consequently they increased my inner agitation – which in turn, increased the play of light. Furthermore, both styles of interaction inflicted on my eyes a strain which always at some point became unbearable. But the second two attitudes were equally unsatisfactory as ultimate solutions: the monologue became repetitive, compulsive and boring; nor could I withdraw into continuous sleep for the duration of the retreat.

The third night and the following third day were extremely difficult. They tried me to the limit. As it turned out, these were in fact the most difficult hours of the week-long retreat. I could not accomplish the principle visualization. I felt discouraged and depressed. The displays of light no longer frightened, enthralled, amused, or entertained me. They no longer had the power to divert me from an extremely negative process of self-examination. I was tired, bored, impatient, skeptical. My body ached. I tried to sleep, but couldn't. I began to feel like a mouse or a mole, and wanted to escape the cold, the damp, the oppressive darkness. But I was determined to remain in the retreat for at least one week: seven nights, seven days.

The fourth night and the following day, I began to feel somewhat different. I was in the process of developing a very different attitude: toward the practices I had been struggling with and myself in relationship to them, toward the darkness,

and toward the interminable displays of light. And these changes in me were immediately reflected in corresponding changes in the environment. Briefly described, this environment was gradually beginning to feel less wrathful and more friendly – more like a nurturing, gently encompassing presence. And, as I found myself able to put into practice the meditative disciplines I had been learning for many years prior to the retreat (primarily the practice of calming and quieting the mind, and the practice of developing the deconstructive clarity of my insight into the ultimate emptiness of all passing forms), I began to see a decisive change in the phenomenal displays. The transformations of the lighting became slower, less violent; and in between the display of forms, I saw more of a clear space. There were more frequent times when I was surrounded by large curtains, or regions, of relatively constant and uniform illumination, sometimes brownish red, sometimes pale green, sometimes a dull white. Sometimes, I found myself looking out into an infinite expanse of clear, dark blue space, punctuated here and there by tiny stars of intense white light.

During the fourth day and fifth night, I gradually experienced the fact that there is a fifth attitude: a way out of the vicious cycle of suffering. The way out was to be found in the teachings and practices I had brought with me into the retreat. And finally, I knew this through direct experience, my own experience – and not by a leap of faith. The calmness and relaxation I was beginning to achieve was reflected back to me by corresponding qualities in the luminous presencing of the darkness. This different lighting in turn helped me to deepen my state of calm and relaxation and continue developing a non-dual visionary presence.

Beginning with the fifth day, then, it became progressively easier for me to experience what the Tibetans call *rig-pa*: the simple presence of awareness. Staying in this non-duality, I could begin to experience my integration into the element of light. I felt the truth of the Dzogchen teaching that I am by nature a body of light: that I am the light; that I and the phenomenal displays of light are really one. Correspondingly, the darkness became a warm, softly glowing sphere of light, an intimate space opening out into the unlimited. I felt bathed in its encompassing luminosity, an interplay of softly shimmering grey-white and blackish-red lights. I experienced a kind of erotic communion with the light, as if the light and I were entwined in a lover's embrace.

With the development of more neutralized, non-dualistic awareness, my vision was less caught up in the antithesis of movement and non-movement. With the development of my capacity for letting go and letting be, my gaze was less troubled by forms in movement. There was less need to withdraw into sleep, because *rig-pa* is a restful aliveness. There was less need for painful staring, less need to stare the forms into fixity, because the greater tranquility of my gaze

effortlessly stabilized the inevitable display of moving, changing forms. There was less visual jumping and darting about, because the gaze was not so readily seduced by the play of light into forming attachments to its transformations that would disturb my becalmed presence. And there was less compulsion to withdraw into conceptual interpretation, because the gaze. More inwardly quiet, could let me begin to enjoy simply being in and with the lighting of the dark.

On the seventh night, just as I was drifting into sleep, but still in a state which is half way between waking and dreaming, and which the Tibetans call Bardo, I was suddenly jolted back into full consciousness, eyes wide open. I had been lying down, of course: in the normal position I assumed for sleeping. But there was suddenly a peremptory 'call' to me, and simultaneously, I lifted my head up – so fast, in fact, that I almost jumped out of bed. Confronting my raised eyes was a visionary phenomenon for which my comfortable categorical scheme was completely inadequate.

Until this unnerving event, I had experienced only three essentially distinctive categories of visionary event. a) I could 'see' my own body, especially when I moved: it had a ghostly presence, luminous, yet also dark, like a shadow; but I had no doubt whatsoever that I could 'see' it – clearly, and distinctly. Although this contests our normal constructs, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body calls attention to a corporeal schematism that makes it entirely understandable. b) Pure luminosities: dots, spots, zigzag and straight lines, sudden explosions, tiny cones and pyramids, irregularly shaped regions and curtains of light and, near the end of the retreat, and embracing atmosphere of softly glowing, relatively constant illumination. And c) Rorschach phantoms: because of all the involuntary eye movements, the luminosity of the dark manifested in a continuously changing display of shapes and forms; and because of the participation of consciousness in the process of the spectacle, these apparitions were subject to continuous, and more or less effortful interpretation. (I was reminded of Wittgenstein's observations, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, in regard to the 'dawning' of an aspect.)

But the visionary apparition which compelled me to rethink my understanding of vision was fundamentally different from these fugacious Rorschach phantoms. Unlike the phantoms, it was totally spontaneous, i.e., involuntary, without any antecedent, and more or less effortful, participation by consciousness. It was sudden, instantaneous, without any gradual 'dawning' or 'unfolding'. It was totally unrelated to earlier conscious thought. And, finally, it was clear and distinct, intensely vivid, luminously present. Indeed, what made it obviously 'apparitional', rather than 'real', was precisely its extraordinary luminosity: colours of incredible, 'supernatural' purity, intensity, aliveness, and clarity. Otherwise, I might have been taken in by it, since it had the sharpness of an

outline, the distinctness, the steady duration, and also the three-dimensionality, the compelling appearing of volume and solidity, which are characteristic of the 'real' things in our normal, consensually validated world. Yet I was not at all, except for an instant, perhaps, deceived by what I saw. Were it not for the peculiar luminosity, it might perhaps have been, or seemed to be, quite 'real'; but I looked directly at it without any doubt that it was in truth 'only' an apparition – or a manifestation of some other dimension of our reality. It looked real – or rather, it looked, in fact, more than real, and I saw it as a vision, a vision of something which 'objective reality testing' would not confirm. (It was therefore different from the visions of Eleusis, which we induced, as we now know, by the ingestion of a drink containing pulverized ergot, a hallucinogenic substance derived from barley.) By contrast, my experience was not induced by any psychotropic substance, not was I in some radically altered state of mind, e.g., derived of sleep. Like the Eleusinian visions, however, it was determined by the traditional symbolic associations of the Dark Retreat. What I was was the ornamental pelt worn by Senge Dong-ma, one of the female dakkinis and a supernatural being of light associated with the Dark Retreat teachings.

There are, then, four epistemologically distinct visionary processes, and it is essential that we not confuse them"

- a) hallucination: a spontaneous, i.e., unwilled projection of consciousness taken for real
- b) phantom: a Gestalt in whose process of formation consciousness participates, but in a relatively passive or receptive attitude, in the sense that it lets whatever configurations begin to appear (perhaps in response to its own unconscious projections) suggest the interpretation that completes and stabilizes the Gestalt
- c) visualization: different from the phantom in that the participation of consciousness in the process of its formation is less passive and receptive; in other words, a deliberately produced image
- d) an authentic vision: different from hallucination in that the projection is not deceptive, but, on the contrary very deeply understood (this understanding of the projective process is in fact a necessary condition of its possibility); different from a phantom in that its formation is instantaneous and spontaneous, and does not involve the participation of consciousness in an unfolding process of formation; and different from visualization in that it does not appear while, or so long as, one's attention is absorbed in a process of willfully trying to produce it.

The 'authentic vision' is like the hallucination, however, in that its appearance is not immediately connected to conscious attention, willful exertions of a greater

or lesser degree (as in the formation of phantoms and visualizations). And it is like the visualization in that a necessary condition of its possibility is the kind of exertion, the kind of work, that goes into the production of the image in the process of visualization. A fortiori, in this respect authentic vision is unlike the hallucination, despite the spontaneity of its actual appearance.

Let me add, as part of a final note, that the darkness profoundly altered my sense of spatial distance and my sense of the passage of time. The first of these I expected; but I was surprised to find that time passed very rapidly. The nine-hour stretch from breakfast to supper, for example, often seemed to be no more than a few hours. At no time, however, was I confused or disoriented. I maintained a 'normal' sense of reality, of being grounded in the 'reality' of the world outside.

When I emerged from the retreat at the beginning of my eighth night, I found even the tree-filtered moonlight overwhelming. My eyes had developed a tremendous sensitivity to light, and even the faintest flickering concentration of illumination seemed at first almost unbearably intense. This I expected. I was surprised, however, by the nausea and dizziness which overcame me during the first few minutes in the relatively dark night outside the hut. (The moon was waning, and I was, after all, in the woods.) For one week, the eyes had been attuned by the peculiar conditions of the darkness; they needed some time – about 48 hours – to readjust and conform to the conditions of the world into which I had reemerged.

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The retreat was a rich and deeply therapeutic experience for me. I emerged from the archetypal womb of darkness feeling nourished in spirit and more deeply integrated, more whole and complete, than when I entered it. Conceivably, this sense of inner growth is nothing but an emotional rationalization. I am familiar with the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance. But, after much critical thought and self-examination, I have reason to believe that the benefits I have noted are real and that their significance for my life – and in particular, for my visionary propensities and habits – will be enduring.

Visionary habits are not easily broken – especially not when the prevailing social consensus continuously reinforces them. The Dark Retreat is an extension of the Dzogchen practice of the Chod. In Tibetan, 'chod' refers to a process of cutting off. The Dark Retreat helped me to cut myself off from the inveterate tendencies that bind human vision to the karmic wheel of endlessly reproduced suffering.