

Exploring Consciousness: Six Years with Yogis and Tibetan Buddhists

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The data from parapsychological research is slowly becoming more accepted by the scientific community. The main sticking point is still a good theory into which psi (psychic phenomena) fits. This is essentially the same sticking point for what has been called the “hard problem” in consciousness research – how can the non-physical mind stuff interact with the physical brain?

For the past six years I have been working in India, initially at the world’s first Yoga University (Bihar Yoga Bharati) in Swami Satyananda’s ashram in Bihar, and then with Tibetan Buddhists at various monasteries in India. It has been an amazing experience, not least because the Indian ashram students showed me very clearly that my knowledge about mind and consciousness was severely limited by the Western approach. I therefore started to make a study of the Yogic and Buddhist philosophies of mind and consciousness and what follows is where I’ve got to so far, aware that I am still in primary school as far as these ideas are concerned, but feeling that my simple understanding of these complex concepts just might be helpful to others in the West who may be interested in learning about this viewpoint. The Yogic and Buddhist conception of consciousness is a top-down approach similar in some ways with the Neoplatonic philosophy found in the Western Mystery tradition, and also having links with traditional Western animist philosophy. These concepts are also profoundly similar to the Holographic Universe philosophy that I consider to be the best understanding that I have come across so far for how psi works.

1. The Vedic and Buddhist Concept of Ground Consciousness (Alaya Vijnana) In the beginning.....

According to Vedic and Buddhist teachings, Consciousness is sort of the equivalent of the Big Bang or God. This is not at all like the God of the West, but rather, as Swami Satyananda (2000) says: “By God (Ishwara) we mean . . . a superior spiritual consciousness.” I call this Big C to distinguish it from our personal consciousness. This Consciousness is infinite, eternal - that is without beginning or end - “Consciousness is.” Eternity is a concept we are still having trouble with in the West. I recently learned that it was the Buddhists who first conceptualised infinity and it was only in the Middle Ages that the mathematical concept of infinity came to the West – which is an astounding thought. So for us it is really a relatively recent concept and may be that is why we have such trouble grasping it. The West needs to come to grips with the concepts of eternity and infinity and stop thinking that the universe begins, ends and has been created only once. It might be very helpful to seriously consider the idea that this particular universe has arisen out of the ending of a previous one and will itself eventually end, with another forming, in an eternal cosmic dance that has no ultimate beginning or end. I like to visualise the Western concept of the Universe, with a beginning and end, as a straight line and with a simplified image of Eternity as a circle – everywhere is the beginning, everywhere is the middle, everywhere is the end; in other words there is no beginning, middle or end.

The Buddhist conception, as stated by the Third Karmapa, is: “Both faculties and objects arise from the mind. The manifestation of sensory objects and faculties is dependent upon an element that has been present throughout beginningless time.” (Thrangu, 2001, p.34) In other words, everything, the whole manifest universe, arises from mind. There is here a problem of translation, in this quote the word ‘mind’ is being used in the same way as Big C from the Yogis. I shall use the word Consciousness with a Big C to denote the eternal ground of all being. This is the same teaching as Advaita Vedanta, and turns our Western story of how the world began on its head from: “In the beginning there was a Bang,” the Bang became light which became matter which formed galaxies, stars, planets and ultimately life, and consciousness is just emerging out of matter (the brain) now – to: “In the infinite eternity Consciousness is” and out of Consciousness matter is formed; Consciousness is the ultimate ground of all being. The Tantric philosophy says that consciousness and energy (vibration) are both eternal principles and from the union of consciousness and vibration the Universe is manifested. This is closest to the Buddhist which says that everything is dependent on everything else, in the eternal dance.

Prof. Harishankar Singh, a Vedic philosopher from Varansi, when discussing these ideas with me, made an interesting remark that the *purpose* of Consciousness is to provide us with our ethics, our morality for life, our knowledge of good and evil, our highest purpose. Thus Consciousness is both the ground of all being and the highest spiritual aspiration or, as Wilber (2001) describes it, the ground out of which the Great Nest of Being manifests. Morality and ethics of humans are very, very different from those of animals – and this is one mark of the difference in quality of consciousness. As Tibetan Buddhists put it – we have a precious human life which makes it possible for us to attain enlightenment.

Mind, Awareness and Consciousness

Vedic philosophy states that the *qualities*, or functions, of consciousness are knowledge, will and activity, of which the thinking mind is one activity. In the Vedic and Buddhist frameworks *there is a clear distinction between mind and consciousness*. Separating thinking out is something that I have found to be of central importance in grasping this other view of consciousness. Thought is related to mind and mind is connected to the senses. Consciousness is something much bigger! *Consciousness itself is not a quality, it is reality in all its different forms*. Swami Satyananda (2000, p.19) says: “The mind cannot be the source of consciousness because it too can be perceived as an object. The mind does not illuminate itself.” When you practice some forms of meditation such as Buddhist mindfulness, or Mahamudra, or the Yogic Antar Mouna, you watch the mind, watch the thoughts as they appear and disappear, you ‘rest in the awareness.’ Yogis and Buddhists conceive of mind as an organ which processes the senses, and is the means by which thought is created. “Consciousness when measured, limited, in space and time, then form and qualities appear - then it becomes chitta (mind).” Swami Satyananda defines yoga as a method, “by which consciousness is disconnected from the entanglement with mind and the manifested world.” (2000, p.18) This is also true of meditation.

In the Baghavad Gita this conception is pictured as a chariot driven by five horses. The horses are the senses and the mind is the rein leading from the horses to a driver, who is awareness or the intellect (buddhi). The overall direction to the chariot is however given by the passenger (personal atman, the soul) who instructs the driver. We can see here that in this conception mind is very limited; and I find it very helpful to use the word mind with this definition as it is helping me to get greater clarity. The

problem in the West is that these words are used in so many different ways and we never quite know in what way the person is using them! This problem is compounded when translations are made of Sanskrit or Buddhist texts. The Vedic conception is very similar to the Buddhist (Thrangu, 2001), which talks of 8 consciousnesses: the first 5 are the different sense consciousnesses, the 6th is the mind sense consciousness, the 7th the immediate (or afflicted) consciousness, and the 8th the ground consciousness.⁶ The sense of self or ego, continuity of mind, is considered to be linked with the 7th consciousness, which is the buddhi of the Yogis. This is where actual perception is located because it is the link with our memory and conceptualisation, both of which are needed for us to be able to perceive something for what it is, rather than just seeing it as a meaningless shape, taste, etc, as a new born baby does. And what in yogic terms is called the soul seems to be conceptually linked with the 8th consciousness, though Buddhists do not use the term soul. They are very clear in stating that everything is dependent on everything else and so nothing can be a cause unto itself. Thus any conception of the soul has to see it as part of the whole, interdependent with everything else. Beyond this, out of which everything is manifested into this world of multiplicity is Big C, naked awareness, Ultimate Mind – there are so many terms used for this. The Buddhists also have the philosophy that the 8 consciousnesses transform into various wisdoms as we reach enlightenment. This I like! The ultimate magic!

What I really like about these Yogic and Buddhist concepts is that thinking-mind, awareness and consciousness are clearly separate faculties. Mind is the tool by which we become aware of the senses and is the creator of thoughts. And every meditator knows the difference between the thinking process and awareness, the witness which watches the mind.

Do you have soul?

Vedic philosophy states that there are five primary levels, which manifest out of the eternal Consciousness at different evolved states. These are called soul, or universal Atman. I am just beginning to grapple with this concept of soul and what it means. I always saw soul as the essence of the person, connected with but different from the personality; something which is recognizable, unique in the new born babe and which is still there when the person dies, albeit changed by their life experience. In the Vedic view:

The soul of matter is the unconscious state of pure Consciousness;
the soul of plants is the subconscious state of pure Consciousness;
the soul of animals is the conscious state of pure Consciousness;
the soul of humans is the self-conscious state of pure Consciousness; this self-consciousness means we can choose good and bad, leading to ethics, morality and the possibility of enlightenment.

In most world-views there are other levels beyond the human, the various levels of different devas and gods, some of which relate to the Western concepts of the fair folk and of angels.

Consciousness is still not a totally clear concept because it is so multifaceted, but separating thinking-mind and awareness out as two distinct processes, and having a top-down approach to the Universe with consciousness present at all levels makes good sense to me. I am, however, unsure of the definition of the use of words such as sub- and un-conscious in the Vedic usage, particularly with regard to their concept of Atman, i.e., exactly what is meant by matter being the unconscious aspect of Consciousness? However, I am aware of the tangible presence of the stones at

Stonehenge and Callanish and Avebury – these stones definitely have a consciousness of sorts – perhaps this is what is meant. And see the power of stone as used in religions, eg. The Kabbah in Mecca, and king-making, e.g. the Stone of Destiny in Westminster. My understanding so far is that unconsciousness is a level of consciousness with no awareness and hence no mind. Sub-consciousness does have some measure of awareness, e.g. plants responding to sunlight, etc. Further discussion with Vedic philosophers is required here!

Thus there is Consciousness, with a capital C, which is the whole, life, the universe and everything, and a unique aspect of this manifests as the unique being we call ourself, and we call this our soul. From the Holographic Universe perspective, as I'm a part of the whole (from my perspective) and the whole is in every part, this is what is being described here in terms of soul and Consciousness. The Whole is Big C and each part contains the whole from the perspective of that part – everything is a part of the whole and manifests the whole from its unique perspective, as a tree, a person, a rock, etc. This big C in the Buddhist terminology is known as sunyata (emptiness). According to those Buddhist scholars I have read, e.g. Tai Situ-pa Rinpoche (1996), Ricard and Xuan Thuan (2001) sunyata is not nothing – it is the whole universe including the formless whole behind this manifest reality since none of it has ultimate entity, everything is impermanent coming and going like a river where the water is always different but the river stays – which I think is related to David Bohm's (1982) idea of the implicate order, out of which this see-touch reality unfolds. Tai Situpa says that emptiness is where everything has limitless possibilities and potential; there is nothing which is not the manifestation of everything, that is more than manifestation of everything, that is less than manifestation of everything; which once again takes us back to the Holographic Universe ideas.

Parapsychology and the Vedas

Theoretically this philosophy gives a solid underpinning for an understanding of psi phenomena. Psi is the direct transfer of information without the medium of the senses, more connected with awareness (buddhi) rather than thought (chitta, mind). In fact psi research suggests that thoughts get in the way of psi awareness. With the Vedic philosophy, that consciousness underpins all reality, I am beginning to understand that the active psychic processes, such as psychokinesis or psychic healing, are the motor organs of the Self-consciousness (soul). The receptive psychic processes such as telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition are the sensory organs of soul. Thus psi can be understood as the active and receptive aspects of the soul level of our being. Interestingly, the dictionary definition of the word 'psyche' has 'soul' as one of its meanings. At the psychic level we experience consciousness, at the very least awareness, rather than thinking mind, potential omniscience and omnipotence considered as attributes of the divine, and called the siddhis in yogic philosophy. It then manifests via the normal mental modes, some people becoming aware of psychic impressions through imagery, some through feelings, some intuition, etc.

As I discuss in my writings on the Holographic Universe (Roney-Dougal, 1991), recent theorising in parapsychology (e.g., Radin, 1997, 2006; Jahn & Dunne, 1988) has related the functioning of psi to quantum reality. The Vedic and Buddhist philosophy of consciousness is totally in line with this conception of consciousness being integrated with matter, as seen in such quantum paradoxes as Schrödinger's Cat and non-locality (quantum entanglement) (Ricard and Xuan Thuan, 2001). Quantum

entanglement (also known Bell's theorem, or the EPR paradox) says that, when two connected quantum particles are separated, each half of the pair will instantaneously react to whatever happens to one of the pair, i.e. outside of time and space, as happens in psi. Schrödinger's Cat paradox gives rise to the observer effect, which says that consciousness is central for material reality to take the particular form it does, as we get in psychokinesis, e.g., psychic healing occurring in accordance with the wishes of the healer. At the quantum level, matter is localized energy; matter takes both wave (energy) and particle (matter) forms. All of these quantum principles, which have been experimentally verified, are in accord with parapsychological data.

2. The Shaivite Tantric Concept.

Tantric philosophy considers that Consciousness united with energy (Shakti) enables the Unmanifest to become manifest at the various dimensions of existence as shown in Figure 1. The lowest and final state of manifestation is the material. This is the complete opposite of the Western beliefs about the origins of the Universe.

Linked with this manifestation of the universe Tantra recognises 4 levels of consciousness (also shown in Figure 1), which are both the manifestation and evolution of the Universe and of the consciousness of the individual. Each of these levels are subdivided into 4 making a total of 16. Tantra states that our purpose is to become aware at each of these levels, so that we realise the ultimate state (supra-consciousness), which is one with eternal Consciousness. In their conception, our conscious mind is the lowest and grossest level of existence, and through meditation we can become aware of aspects of consciousness of which we are normally unaware: the dream state, the deep sleep state, etc.

Swami Satyananda Saraswati (2000) has written a commentary on Patanjali's Yoga sutras called "Four Chapters on Freedom," in which he describes the four primary states of consciousness as follows:

1. Conscious mind: sthula (gross dimension [of the Universe]); jagrat (waking state) - surface thought and perception of the outside world.
2. Subconscious state: sukshma (subtle dimension [of the Universe]); swapna (dream state) - individual memory and samskaras (mental tendencies).
3. Unconscious state: karana (causal dimension [of the Universe]); sushupna [also known as nidra]¹(deep sleep state); collective samskaras and memory.

These realms contain the instinctive, intellectual, psychic and intuitive aspects.

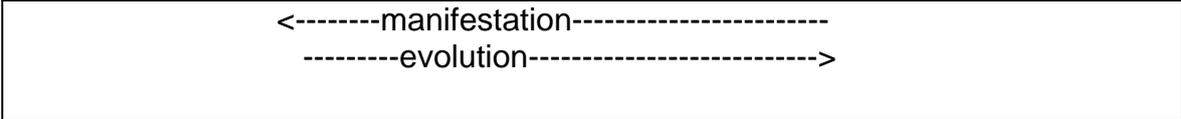
(Satyananda, 2000, p.19)

And 4: Turiya which is where consciousness goes beyond. Turiya means "simultaneous awareness of all three states" which takes us closer to the state of enlightenment. (Niranjanananda, 2002, p.25) These can be pictured as follows in Figure 1 (Adapted from Yogakanti, 1999):

Figure 1: The 4 Major Tantric States of Consciousness

	JAGRAT	SWAPNA	NIDRA	TURIYA
Dimension of the Universe	gross	subtle	causal	transcendent
State of human consciousness	waking; conscious	dream; subconscious	deep sleep; unconscious	Cosmic Consciousness; collective unconscious

¹ Comments within [] are my insertions



Lakshman Jee (1988) describes these states as follows:

Jagrat is “when the individual . . . loses consciousness of one’s subjectivity and becomes one with the objective world.” This is our normal state of consciousness. Most of us are totally unaware most of the time. We are totally caught up with living: working, reading a book, chatting with friends, doing the washing up, etc. Most of us don’t watch ourselves, don’t watch what we are saying, feeling, being, doing, thinking. In terms of manifestation of the Universe this is gross matter. And matter has evolved in our known universe from the Big Bang through to all the different elements, planets, rocks, etc. In fact, through our agency, it is still evolving in the form of plastics, computers, technology, pharmaceuticals, etc.

Swapna is our dreaming state of consciousness, which includes day dreaming, “lost in thought” as we say. Once again we lose awareness and get totally caught up in our dreams, daydreams, etc. The aim of meditation is to enable us to remain aware even when dreaming. In Tibetan Buddhism one of the teachings is Dream Yoga, which is one of the six Yogas of Naropa, and is where you learn lucid dreaming. The ultimate aim is that when you die you can go through the bardos (the intermediate state between this life and the next) with full awareness. This is considered to be a dream-like state of consciousness. In terms of Universal manifestation this is the life-energy level.

Sushupna, or nidra, is the causal dimension, the all-knowing. In our normal state, the common understanding of nidra is of deep sleep, a state in which we are completely unconscious. With increased awareness one can actually become aware in this state of consciousness. Thus it is said that the night of the layman is the day of the yogi. This state of consciousness occurs in the absence of both the senses and the thinking mind (Yogakanti,1999), termed the 7th Consciousness in Buddhism. In the Universe manifestation it is the Akashic, mental level.

Turiya is the state of total equilibrium between individual manifest consciousness and cosmic Consciousness. It is not an interactive state; though full of wisdom there is absence of dualistic knowledge. There is total disassociation from the seeds of gross, subtle or causal dimensions (Yogakanti, 1999). In Buddhism this state is the 8th consciousness, called, amongst other things, ‘naked awareness.’

My understanding of these states is that the path to enlightenment is becoming aware in states of consciousness in which we are normally unaware, including the dream state and the ‘beyond thought’ state. Awareness is the key concept.

Tantra and Parapsychology

According to Patanjali’s sutras and Buddhist teachings, as we develop our awareness at these different levels of consciousness so we become aware at a psychic level. In the 1970s a theoretical framework for parapsychology, known as the psi-conductive model, was developed from Patanjali’s yoga sutras (Braud, 1978; Honorton, 1981). This led to an ongoing programme of states of consciousness research which has borne rich fruit. I have been using this model as a theoretical basis for research in India, working initially with swamis in an ashram and later with Tibetan Buddhist monks in monasteries, who have done up to 40 years meditation.

The findings are still very preliminary but are suggestive that meditation does enhance psi awareness.

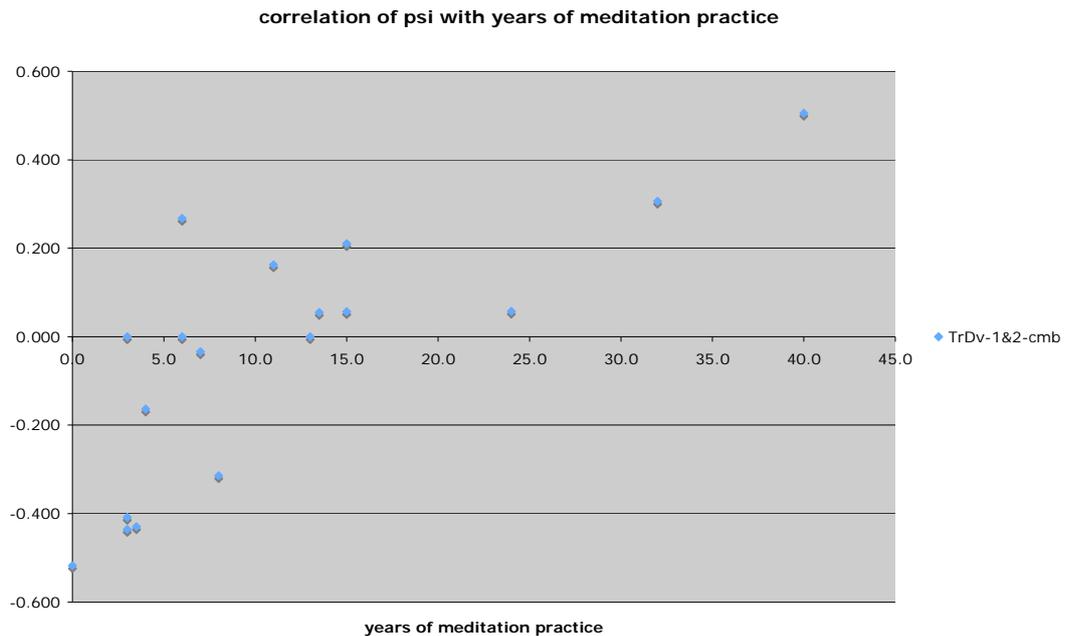


Figure 2: Correlation of Psi Score with Years of Meditation Practice.

As can be seen in Figure 2, those monks with the most years of meditation practice show far higher psi scores. For the first 10 – 15 years the scattering of psi scores is like you get with people who have not had any mental training, then after about 10 - 15 years it all starts to go more positive and get stronger. The magnitude of the correlation between psi score and years of meditation, found in Tibetan study 1 was nearly the same in study 2, and is similar to that found in the earlier research with the yogis. Combining the monks' scores from both the Tibetan studies gives a correlation of (0.73), which is shown in the graph here (Roney-Dougal & Solfvin, (2008). This research is now being continued at a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Britain, and it will be interesting to see whether Westerners show a similar pattern. In meditation it seems that we are making the shift from unconscious competence (the natural psychic) through conscious incompetence, which is where there is chance scoring and where all the psi-missing occurs (when we significantly block out and defend ourselves against the psi information), through to conscious competence as we become more and more aware. Tibetans recognize two sorts of clairvoyance: the spontaneous, natural psychic, which they consider to be unreliable, and the highly trained lama who they consider to be 100% reliable. We seem to be beginning to see this here. They also state that years of practice are needed, and this is showing up too.

For me, the central message from the Yogic Tantric teachings is that increasing awareness of those aspects of our consciousness of which we are normally unconscious, dream and pure awareness states, are in fact those states of consciousness which are related both to psi functioning and the samadhi states of meditation. This tallies with the Buddhist teachings about meditation, and with the Jungian concept of the collective unconscious as that aspect of consciousness outside of space and time which is the domain of the psychic.

3. The Union of Energy and Consciousness

In the West we normally think of energy, such as a light or electricity, as a non-conscious force that is an aspect of matter - $E = mc^2$. In the Vedic philosophy, energy has its own form of consciousness, e.g., the consciousness of light is illumination. In the Tantric philosophy the manifestation of consciousness into the different dimensions of the Universe occurs through interdependence with energy in the form of vibration (spanda). This could possibly be a spiritual philosophical link with the Western physics concept of superstring or M-theory, such as described by Carr (2008).

The subtle energy aspect of life within the body, which I have researched at the theoretical level for many years now, is the Yogic and Buddhist Tantric concept of prana, which flows in the body through the nadis, which are energy (termed wind by Tibetans) channels in the human body. There are 72,000 nadis of which the three primary nadis, sushumna, ida and pingala, run up the centre of, and on either side of, the spinal column. Where these energy channels intersect, the chakras are located. The basic concept of the chakras is as the energy aspect of the body linking body with consciousness – the body consciousness energy. I think that the Tantric concept of the way the Universe works as the mingling of Consciousness with Energy, manifesting from subtler levels to the gross level of matter, which then evolves back to the subtler levels of consciousness is as good an understanding as I've come across yet. The subtle energy aspect of the body seems to be the halfway house between consciousness and the material world. In trying to get some understanding of how mind connects with matter this seems to go some way to a reasonable understanding, particularly with quantum philosophies bringing the two together so clearly now.

Both Yogic and Buddhist tantric teachings use prana, the nadis and chakras for meditation practices and they are considered to be the most powerful way of shifting our awareness out of this see-touch reality into Big C.

Compassion – the bodhisattva principle

What the Buddhist teachings have, that for me is their most important contribution, is the Bodhisattva principle: that we are aiming for enlightenment for the good of all beings; the altruistic approach. This is of course part and parcel of the Holographic universe philosophy. If the whole is in every part, then every thought word and action of every part affects the whole. So everything I think or do affects everything else, which automatically affects me. This gives an understanding of karma which goes beyond the rather mechanistic view that most people have. We are all interconnected, the Universe is an indivisible whole, and compassion, love, is the juice that fuels the evolving principle. The more compassion and love I generate the better for all including myself. Thus, ultimately the psychic level of being is not the overt clairvoyance of a medium or fortune teller, but that sensitivity which is involved in making the choice which takes you in the best direction for the benefit of all people, that oils the wheels of life, that is part of wisdom, the wise decision, the best thing to do for all concerned. It is also that sensitivity, that awareness, that is linked with empathy, where you feel from the other person's perspective, say the right thing, do the best for them, which is part of compassion. So in parapsychology, researching psychic awareness and effect, we are looking at one aspect of the subtle level of the development of wisdom and compassion!

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