



Received: 11 June 2019
Accepted: 12 December 2019
First Published: 21 December 2019

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SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

When Buddhas dissociate: A psychological perspective on the origins of great perfection Buddhism (*rdzogs chen*)

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Abstract: This contribution brings psychological theories to bear on complex textual materials in order to provide new perspectives on the formative years (ca. eighth to eleventh centuries) of the famous Tibetan Buddhist tradition known as the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*). Recovering a frequently underestimated trope of “trauma” in the tradition’s early corpus of tantric scriptures, the article modulates earlier scholarship, which argued that Dzogchen is a mystical religious movement that premises its teachings and practices on the disclosure and instantaneous liberation. Employing a critical and interdisciplinary approach, the study presents mythic narratives, historical sources, and evidence from cognitive science in order to argue that Dzogchen coalesced not under banner of “disclosure,” but rather under the pressures of “dissociation.” More specifically, the article focuses on the tradition’s central myth of the “epiphany of the ground” (*gzhi snang*) to show that it 1) represented an attempt to encode socio-political trauma, 2) served to process a series of specific symptoms of dissociation, 3) points to significant correlations between dissociative trauma suffered by the “Ancients” (*rnying ma*) and the practical power of tantric techniques imported by the “New Schools” (*gsar ma*) of Tibetan Buddhism after the eleventh century.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Geissshuesler Flavio A. is a historian of religions. Bridging contemporary theories from the cognitive sciences with textual-historical research on Buddhist scriptures, his work provides new impulses for the contemporary study of meditation in the West. More specifically, he studies the famous Tibetan Buddhist tradition known as the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) and argues that meditation should be understood as a dialectical process, according to which an increase of our freedom can only come about through a repeated confrontation with imprisonment. The present article represents a small piece of this larger project on meditation practices as it points out that trauma, marginalization, and suppression played a central role in the formation of one of Tibet’s most revered contemplative systems. He earned Ph.D. degrees in the history of religions from the universities of Virginia (USA) and Bern (Switzerland), and is currently the Khyentse postdoctoral fellow at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel).

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article explores the history of a religious tradition founded in Tibet between the eighth and the eleventh centuries, namely Great Perfection Buddhism. While this tradition is famous for believing that enlightenment is an effortless process of revelation, my study shows that this might not be the only idea that defines it. Through a careful reading of mythic narratives that tell the story of how the Buddha became enlightened, I argue that many elements in the Great Perfection point less like spiritual disclosure and more to traumatic forms of dissociation. Further, by relying on a concept used to describe a wide array of psychological experiences (detachment, depersonalization, psychosis, etc.) for increasing our understanding of a cultural phenomenon, this study enacts a transdisciplinary approach that can be used by scholars interested in other religions or cultures.

Subjects: Multidisciplinary Psychology; Cross Cultural Psychology; Trauma and Dissociation; Buddhism; Practice of Buddhism; Tibetan; Religion and Spirituality

Keywords: Great Perfection Buddhism (rdzogs chen); myth; Buddha; psychology of religion; trauma; dissociation; meditation practices; technologies of self-transformation

1. The Buddha “All Good” and effortless disclosure in Great Perfection Buddhism

The study of the earliest stirrings of Buddhism in Tibet is not an easy undertaking. Historical data is oftentimes scarce and the textual transmissions that reach into our time play out in a liminal realm, in which the lines between what is historical fact and mythical imagination are intentionally blurred. This struggle to formulate historical arguments about early Buddhism on the central Asian plateau is even more prominent when we consider esoteric movements, such as the famous tradition known as the “Great Perfection” (*rdzogs chen*, *Dzogchen*). Dzogchen is well-known for boasting a philosophical and contemplative system in which liberation is said to be an effortless process that essentially involves the revealing our already perfected Buddha-nature. Adam Lobel has recently spoken of a “radical model of the soteriological path as it affirms the complete immediacy of freedom, disclosed through effortless practice” (Lobel, 2018, p. 4). David Higgins, similarly, described the Great Perfection as an extraordinary tradition premised on the idea of “disclosure”:

But what is strikingly original in [...] rDzogs chen sources is how this return to pretheoretical immediacy, this dedicative receptivity to the originally unimpeded flux and fullness of lived experience, inspired a global reconfiguration of the entire Buddhist path around the guiding *topos* of primordial knowing and its existential disclosure. Soteriology is here seen as *aletheiology*—the understanding of truth as unconcealment, elicited in contemplative praxis, articulated in concepts, and sustained by the reciprocity between the two. (Higgins, 2013, p.136)

This particular model of enlightenment as “disclosure” is premised on a larger religious system, which might be best epitomized in the story of a Buddha known as Samantabhadra (lit. “All Good One,” Tib. *kun tu bzang po*).¹ Playing a central role in the historical, mythical, and contemplative self-depictions of the tradition, he can be seen as something of a “founding father” of the Dzogchen religious imagination.

It is said that he was the Buddha, who first taught the Great Perfection doctrine of spontaneous enlightenment. The teachings were then passed on to another divine figure known as Vajrasattva, before finally entering the world of human beings in the country of Oddiyāna, which is usually identified with the Swat Valley in present-day Pakistan. The scriptures proceed to tell how the wisdom was then transmitted through an unbroken lineage that started from Vajrapāṇi to the obscure Garab Dorjé (*dga' rab rdo rje*, Skt. *Vajraprahe*), before moving through the hands of the no less enigmatic figures like Mañjuśrīmitra, Śrīṣiṃha, Jñānasūtra, to finally make it all the way to Tibet, where it arrived in the eighth century thanks to the Indian masters Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava (Patrul Rinpoche, 1998, pp. 338–41; Karmay, 2007a, 1998).

Dzogchen, so the tradition explains, forms part of the teachings of the oldest of the major religious orders of Tibet, namely the Nyingma (*nying ma*, lit. “the Ancients”). They claim that their founding figures were closely associated with the rulers during these years of Tibet’s Royal Dynastic Period (Lingpa & Kapstein, 1991). The imagination surrounding “Great Tibet” (*bod chen po*), although particularly developed amongst the Ancients, is grandiose in the Tibetan psyche in general. Indeed, during those years, Tibet was the realm of an enormous empire reaching from Persia to China and from Nepal to Mongolia (Beckwith, 1987; McKay, 2003).

During the Tibetan empire, the Dzogchen scriptures made it into the possession of Nyang Tingzin Zangpo, who chose to not disseminate them further, but to conceal them at a meditation center associated with Tibet’s first monastery, Samye (*bsam yas*). After they have been hidden there in the eighth century, the tantras were re-discovered as treasures a century or two later by Dangma

Lhungyi Gyaltsen (*ldang ma lhun rgyal*) at the Hat Temple (*zhwa'i lha khang, Zha Lhakhang*) in central Tibet. After that, the texts were again continuously transmitted and passed along to Chetsün Sengé Wangchuk (*lce btsun seng ge dbang phyug*) and Zhangtön Tashi Dorjé (*zhang ston bkra shis rdo rje*, 1097–1167); the latter being the first datable figure related to *The Seventeen Tantras* (Lingpa & Kapstein, 1991, pp. 559–61).

Samantabhādra is also an important figure in *The Seventeen Tantras* (*rgyud bcu bdun*), the core scriptures of the Seminal Heart Great Perfection. More specifically, he is the protagonist in what is the tradition's central myth, which narrates how he was liberated immediately upon being born due to the innate Buddha-nature, which is actually present within the bodies of all sentient beings.² Somewhat akin to an imagistic representation of the tradition's historical self-portrayal as emerging out of the "Great Tibet," the myth describes Samantabhādra as the ground out of which our universe was born, which is described as a perfectly self-contained "youthful body in a vase" (*gzhon nu bum pa'i sku*). In *The Tantra of Great Beauty and Auspiciousness*, Samantabhādra identifies himself as the anthropomorphized expression of the ground:

From my expressive power, from the immutable ground, my unobstructed nature has emerged. From my non-determined compassion, unawareness has spontaneously been born. For example, just as clouds do not really exist in the sky, but emerge adventitiously, in that same way there belongs no unawareness at all to the ground.³ (KSD, 213.5–214.2)

The cosmogony, then, is described as the "epiphany of the ground" (*gzhi snang*), which is understood to be an immensely creative process. It is described as the opening up of the luminous body in a vase, which is followed by the manifestation of variegated rays of light that gradually coalesce into the universe as we know it. Upon emerging out of the ground's light display, All Good—who is also appropriately equipped with the moniker "Primordial Buddha" (Tib. *dang po'i sang rgyas*, Skt. *ādibuddha*)—looked at the light surrounding him and recognized himself as an expression of the epiphany itself. As a result of this self-recognition, this insight into the mystery of his true self, he succeeded in reversing the process of the Ground's exteriorization to return back into the self-contained luminosity of the lamp. In *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, we read:

From the beginning and end of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, the Buddha has not strayed into confusion, yet through the capacity of rising from the ground, self-appearances are known to lack inherent existence. Without getting lost outside the variety of the mind of conceptualization and analysis, the flickering movement immediately cuts through itself.⁴ (GTG, 107.5–107.6)

2. Underestimated tropes of trauma and the mythical-historical accounts of origin

Naturally, this highly evocative story of the inherent, instantaneous, and effortless self-liberation of the Primordial Buddha has usually been interpreted as a perfect illustration of the Great Perfection as a tradition of disclosure. In this paper, by contrast, I take a slightly more critical stance towards the Great Perfection's mythical-historical self-description as a tradition of effortless disclosure. Importantly, I do not question the tradition's experiences. On the contrary, I see both the historical and the mythical self-descriptions as authentic means to express certain truths about the tradition's early history. In this sense, the tension between a hidden interiority and a manifest exteriority is just as real as the emphasis on the spontaneity, suddenness, and effortlessness of the process of revelation. Instead of questioning these principles, I limit my critical analysis to the true nature of this revelation, being particular adamant about scrutinizing the tradition's consistent emphasis on the wholesome, positive, and empowering nature of disclosure.

2.1. Trauma in history

In its historical self-depiction, the Great Perfection tends to omit significant traumatic dimensions of its origins. In reality, the tradition's evolution turns out to be much less linear than the emic accounts would want to make us believe. First of all, there is no literary, archeological, or historical

evidence of a movement by the names of *Atiyoga*, *Mahāsaṃdhi*, or *Mahāsaṃpanna*—the Sanskrit terms that could be used to designate Dzogchen—in the Indian Buddhism that was transmitted to Tibetan during the “early dissemination” (*snga dar*) of the teachings in the seventh and eighth centuries (Karmay, 2007b, 33; Lingpa & Kapstein, 1991, p. 353).

Further, for reasons that are not entirely clear, in the middle of the ninth century, during the reign of King Langdarma, a civil war broke out and the Tibetan empire fell shortly thereafter. What followed was the so-called “Age of Fragmentation” (*sil chad du ‘chad pa*), a roughly one hundred and fifty year-long period during which Tibet fell into oblivion. Although the depictions of this period as marked by anarchy and religious degradation has recently been qualified by Western scholars (Dalton, 2013), there is no doubt that the aristocratic clans associated with the empire suffered a massive blow to their socio-political status when the Tibetan empire came to an end.

In the following period, the late tenth and eleventh centuries, designated as the “later dissemination of the teaching” (*bstan pa phyi dar*) or as the age of the “new translations” (*gsar ‘gyur*), signified a general upswing for Tibet as the region recovered some economic and political stability. However, the Ancients, the main proponents of the Great Perfection teachings, suffered another severe blow as the so-called “New Schools” (*gsar ma*, *Sarma*) asserted their power. In a land where Buddhism served as the *lingua franca* since its introduction in the seventh century, the New Schools created themselves a big advantage by importing new tantric teachings from South Asia. The new translators of Buddhism quickly rose to prominence and became celebrated feudal lords upon their return to Tibet; thus, radically challenging the power, prestige, and authenticity of the aristocratic clans of the Ancients (Davidson, 2005, pp. 119–41, 205, 211). “With each new translation,” so one commentator recently put it, “the older Tibetan translations came to seem less genuinely Indic; and some claimed that the previous tantras were indigenous fabrications, especially without access to the Sanskrit originals” (Lobel, 2018, p. 56).

2.2. Trauma in myth

One only needs to think about the image of an explosive disruption of a young body’s integrity, in order to appreciate that trauma is also part of the Great Perfection’s myth of cosmogony. While the myth culminates in Samantabhadra’s Enlightenment, the narrative dawns in a decidedly startling fashion with the epiphany of the ground. The “ground” (*gzhi*), imaged as a perfectly self-contained and luminously shining “youthful body in a vase,” dramatically cracks open to emanate a variegated array of light rays. After the epiphany of maṇḍalic shapes of light, the radiation of luminosity gradually loses its transparency, solidifying more and more until it takes on the form of living beings and the universe of material objects as we know it.

As the myth of the ground’s epiphany unfolds, its traumatic consequences for humanity become progressively more palpable. In point of fact, the narrative is not merely one of cosmogony, but also a tale of the painful existence of ordinary human beings. The tale not only explains that human beings are born within the light rays that spill out of the rent open container, but that they quickly degenerate, coalescing into solidity and losing their luminous luster. Through a process that the tradition describes as “straying” (*khrol pa*, lit. “error”), human beings fail to recognize their own identity within the display of lights and gradually become imprisoned in their own reified conceptions of selfhood.

3. From disclosure to dissociation: a psychological interpretation of the mythical-historical origins of the great perfection

3.1. Trauma studies and the category of collective and individual “dissociation”

Despite the fact that the early history of Dzogchen is marked with socio-political upheavals, particularly the collapse of the empire and the rise of the New Schools, and the myth of cosmogenesis is saturated with symbolic portraiture of agony and human suffering, these two parts of the tradition have never been read side-by-side from a trauma-perspective. This is quite

remarkable, especially if we consider how trauma has become a popular mode of interpretation of the religious tradition of the Ancients (Gayley, 2017), also in light of the contemporary situation of Tibetan peoples (Terheggen, Stroebe, & Kleber, 2001).

Furthermore, it could be argued that trauma is the ultimate foundation myth of Buddhism as a whole. Ignorance, suffering, and alienation are omnipresent in this religious tradition. Like the Dzogchen myth of origin, many Buddhist stories—the Buddha’s life story being the first one—are tales that are dedicated to the painful existence of human beings. Subjected to the law of karmic retribution, humanity is stuck in an endless cycle of rebirths. According to Buddhist teachings, we are not always as fortunate as we are now in our human existence. On the contrary, the scriptures even depict purgatorial hells (Tib. *dmayal ba*, Skt. *naraka*, P. *niraya*), in which beings are tortured in the most gruesome ways possible: From being covered in blisters of frozen pus and being crushed into bloody jelly by huge rocks, to being shaved into tiny slices with sharp razors (Matsunaga & Matsunaga, 1972; Teiser, 1988).

Trauma—a “wound” or “injury” in its original meaning—is a notion that is used to describe physical harm, individual psychological circumstances, but also socio-cultural events (Alexander, 2004; Caruth, 1995, 2016; Rippl, Schweighauser, Steffen, Kirss, & Sutrop, 2013; Tal, 2004). Put differently, although trauma is conventionally conceived as a result of actual threat to bodily integrity, it has also been explored in narratives, where it can be described as “symbolic” or “collective” in nature. Most broadly then, trauma “might be defined as involving threats to the integrity of important individual and communal beliefs and systems of meaning, critical to the individual’s and group’s concepts of life and selfhood” (Rodger & Steel, 2016, p. 60).

In this article, I will not primarily draw from such studies on the symbolic, cultural, and collective nature of trauma, but rather on research in the psychological and cognitive sciences. More specifically, I follow Onno Van der Hart, Ellert R. S. Nijenhuis, and Kathy Steele, whose work has recently recovered the thinking of Pierre Janet (1859–1947), to argue that the most effective way to speak of trauma is through the rubric of “dissociation.” In light of the traumatic dimensions contained in the myth and history of early Dzogchen, my study explores whether “dissociation” might not be a more useful category than “disclosure” in order to make sense of the tradition’s origins.

In the following pages, “dissociation” takes on two primary meanings. First of all, it has a metaphorical function as I speak of the myth of cosmogony as a “dissociative myth,” which serves as a means to encode the historical dissociation from socio-political power that marked the early years of Dzogchen. The Ancient’s loss of political independence during the collapse of the powerful Tibetan empire, their subsequent increase in marginalization as the New Schools send translators to India to transform Tibet into their own realm based on a different set of priorities, and finally their complete isolation as they struggle to articulate their own version of Tibetan identity, are quite neatly encoded within the myth of the epiphany of the ground: This self-contained source of light whose boundaries are ruptured, the emitted envoys, which become dissociated from the vital origin of their power, dispersing more and more across a vast area of land, and end up in complete isolation in a sphere where they become so overpowered by alterity that they lose any sense of their own identity.

While such a broad metaphorical reversal from “disclosure” to “dissociation” is suggestive, the second meaning of “dissociation” used in the present study is more limited yet none less ambitious in nature. In its second meaning, in fact, dissociation stands for psychological consequences of trauma that manifest in the form of a series of specific trauma-symptoms. While the myth of cosmogony is, without a doubt, a collective attempt to deal with traumatic events, cultural traumas also “involve various relationships between *memory*, *body*, *language*, *sensations*, and *space*” (Ganzevoort & Sremac, 2019, p. 4). Scholars have even argued that cultures respond to trauma similar to individuals, manifesting something akin to PTSD symptoms (Heinberg, 1994). Not

only are “repression, dissociation, and denial [...] phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness” (Herman, 1992, p. 9), but “collective reactions to a history of trauma are similar in many respects to individual post-traumatic reactions” (Hirschberger, 2018, p. 5).

3.2. The cosmogonic myth as a myth of dissociation: three symptoms of psychological trauma encoded in a collective narrative

In what follows, I try to shed some light on how collective and individual trauma coexist in the early Dzogchen tradition by looking at how the myth expresses important dissociative tendencies in three specific cognitive functions, namely attention, memory, and emotion.

3.2.1. The loss of attention: the epiphany of the ground and the stirring of the wind

One of the most vexing problems in scholarship on the Great Perfection, both from within the tradition and outside of it, is the reason for the disruption of the original situation. In fact, why does the ground need to manifest and radiate outwards? Why is the youthful body in a vase rent open in the first place? Why does the cosmogony even create a situation in which human beings can stray into non-recognition? All we read in the scriptures is that the epiphany of the ground is incited by an enigmatic “stirring” (*g.yos*) of “the wisdom wind” (*ye shes rlung*), which causes the rupture of the seal (*rgya kha ral*) of the vase of light (TDD, 178.2–179.1).⁵ David Germano offers his readers a succinct summary of this initial moment when he writes:

The primeval moment when a gnostic wind stirs from within the ground’s primordially, and for obscure reasons rents open the sealing enclosure of the “vase” such that in an instant from nothing comes everything, as luminous spiraling galaxies suddenly expand outwards from the infinite singular darkness of the ground’s pure potentiality (Germano, 1992, p. 65).

This account is already present in the earliest scriptures. For instance, in *The Tantra of Great Beauty and Auspiciousness*, we read that “when the inner youthful vase body is breaking open (*kha ral*) [...] in that precise moment my epiphanies are rent (*ral*) into exteriority” (KSD, 215.2).⁶

How could the change in perspective from “disclosure” to “dissociation” help us interpret this crucial first moment of the cosmogony? Of course, the first thing that stands out in these accounts is their suddenness and violence. Trauma researchers, indeed, insist that “intense, sudden, uncontrollable, [and] unpredictable” events have the greatest potential to be traumatizing (Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, & Steele, 2006, p. 24). In the myth, this tendency is not only noticeable in the specific formulation “in that precise moment” (*dus de tsam na*), but also in the fierce vocabulary used to describe the manifestation of the world as a “tearing open” (*ral*) of the “seal” (*rgya*) of this youthful body of light.

Similarly, we are struck by language that points to hectic and overstimulation. The ground’s emergence, so we are told, is the result of a “stirring,” “quivering,” or “shaking” (*g.yo*) of the wind. In trauma research, we might call this “hyperarousal,” a group of symptoms that are extremely common in sufferers of abuse. While present-day research focuses particularly on hyperarousal as a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—as victims are sensitive and overly responsive to stimuli in the world around them—it is also a basic symptom in the original moment of trauma (van der Kolk, 1989). Hyperarousal manifests in the form of elevated heart rates and increased rhythm of breathing (Bryant & Panasetis, 2001), frequently leading to involuntary hyperventilation, which is also a standard symptom of panic attacks and trauma response (Chiarla, Giovannini, Boldrini, & Castagneto, 1989).

The stirring of the wind has also deeper connotations within the context of Buddhism. In the Indo-Tibetan world that forms the background for the Great Perfection myth, the word “wind” (*rlung*) is synonymous with “breath” and closely associated with one’s “life force” (*srog*). As Epstein and Topgay worded it,

Both medical and religious texts lay a strong emphasis on these currents of psychic energy. [...] Tibetan medical texts are filled with descriptions of the manifestations of dysfunction of the *pranic* [wind] flow, and Tantric religious texts voluminously elucidate the reorganization of these currents that occur in death or in meditation. An understanding of the Tibetan approach to mind is not possible without an appreciation of the character of these *pranic* currents. (Epstein & Sonam, 1982, p. 68).

In the case of the myth of cosmogony, evidence allows us to speculate that the stirring of the wind is the result of an arousal of the body's very source of vitality, what Herbert Guenther—the founding figure of research on the tradition—once called the Great Perfection's "field of bio-energetic forces" (*srog rlung*) (Guenther, 1994, p. 68). Wind is such a cardinal constituent in the Tibetan apperception of the link between body and mind that it is also closely associated to traditional Tibetan medicine (*bod kyi gso ba rig pa*), being described in detail in the most authoritative medical texts, the so-called *Four Tantras* (*rgyud bzhi*) (Millard, 2007; Rabgay, 1984). Here, various winds are associated with psychophysical symptoms: Disruptions in the "ascending wind" (Tib. *gyen rgyu rlung*), for example, manifest as difficulties in speaking, stammering, paralysis in the face, or memory loss (Dorjee, Moore, & Jones, 2005, p. 168). By contrast, the loss of rhythm in the "life-holding wind" (Tib. *srog 'dzin rlung*)—which is more directly linked to consciousness and the body-mind connection—leads to a series of other problems, such as hallucinations, confusion, restlessness, anxiety, depression, dizziness, or even insanity (Yoeli-Tlalim, 2010, p. 320).

In Tibetan medicine, the imbalance of the wind energy is such an outstanding phenomenon that we find descriptions of several dozens of diseases related to the disturbance of wind in the *Four Tantras* (Millard, 2007). If my association between collective cultural trauma and individual dysregulation of breathing patterns seems like a breach of epistemological boundaries, contemporary evidence from Tibetan communities supports my speculation. Research into the Tibetan experience of violence, persecution, and exile in the present has confirmed a very close association between socio-political marginalization and dissociative symptoms (Adams, 1998; Benedict, Mancini, & Grodin, 2009; Janes, 1999; Prost, 2006). Fascinatingly, several research groups plausibly roll out that life-wind (*srog rlung*) imbalances are an indigenously Tibetan way to speak about various forms of "mental illness" (*sems nad*), especially what we would call PTSD (Benedict et al., 2009; Clifford, 2001; Deane, 2019; Samuel, 2019). Epstein and Topgay argued already in the 1980s that it is the increase in the currents of wind, what Tibetans image as "having wind" or "high wind," which causes "symptoms of violent or hysterical behavior" (Epstein & Sonam, 1982, p. 74).

In *Heal Your Spirit, Heal Yourself* (2005), Pema Dorjee and his colleagues provide the reader with a series of intriguing references that point to anxiety, trauma, and the susceptibility to influences from the outside as reasonable causes for the increase of wind-activity. Just as the activation of the wind within the youthful body in a vase broke open the seal to then lose its centeredness by radiating into the external environment, experts on Tibetan medicine contend that the increase in *rlung* energy "can cause us to become unstable and susceptible to external occurrences" (Dorjee et al., 2005, p. 139). They even go as far as suggesting that we "compare the effect of the disordered *rlung* energy to that of a hurricane, which twists and uproots trees, and collapses buildings" (Dorjee et al., 2005, p. 163).

Just as the imagery of the hurricane and the uprooting of trees points to a completely loss of control over one's self, it is well known that it is precisely through the careful following of one's breath represents that represents one of Buddhism's most popular techniques of cultivating attention. In this sense, the epiphany of the ground due to the stirring of the wind can be regarded as a way to symbolically represent problems with the regulation of attention.

3.2.2. The loss of memory: the breaking of selves and the multiple voices of trauma

In the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist world, "memory" (Tib. *dran pa*, Skt. *smṛti*, *smaraṇa*, P. *sati*) is an immensely foundational cognitive function. Not only that, but the association between memory and attention is such a core intimation that they are actually designated with the same term in the

Tibetan language (*dran pa*).⁷ In light of this, it is worth exploring whether the Great Perfection's disruption in attention regulation could also be accompanied by difficulties in retaining memory.

From a cognitive perspective, the loss of concentration due to affective excitement is known to impair the encoding of explicit information, which, in extreme cases, may even lead to complete amnesia (Lanius et al., 2010; Ross, 2009; Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, Steele, & Brown, 2004). The neurobiological correlates of trauma—such as in states of depersonalization or derealization—have also been shown to correspond to difficulties in the formation and retention of memory. The altered activation of the posterior hippocampus, for example, has been established to be related to both states of depersonalization and the impairment of the encoding of episodic memory (Bergouignan, Nyberg, & Henrik Ehrsson, 2014). Likeminded assertions could be made for the diminished activity of the prefrontal cortex in traumatized individuals, which is—being the region of the brain responsible for the storage and retrieval of autobiographical memories—indispensable to our conceptions of both time and selfhood (Arzy, Molnar-Szakacs, & Blanke, 2008; Fuster, 2015; Gusnard, Akbudak, Shulman, & Raichle, 2001; Nyberg, Alice, Kim, Levine, & Tulving, 2010; Peer, Salomon, Goldberg, Blanke, & Arzy, 2015; Vogeley & Fink, 2003).

In the Dzogchen myth, we find textual evidence that also suggests such a mutual correlation between a loss of control over attention-processes and the encoding of memory. Longchenpa (1308–1364), the great fourteenth-century Dzogchen philosopher, discusses the epiphany of the ground in great detail and cites an astonishing passage from *The Six Spaces Tantra*, where it says:

Thus, omniscient wisdom manifests as the aspect of compassion. All of this is not something that is apprehended through memory. Aside from abiding (*gnas*) within its own intrinsic nature (*rang bzhin nyid*), it is not present (*gnas*) in terms of coarse duality (*gzung 'dzin*). Manifesting as the subtle aspect of the depth-radiance, this is the pathway of all sentient beings and, like a seed, is intensifies upward (*gong du 'phel*).⁸ (LDG, 182.2)

Although the non-dualism of traditions like Dzogchen frequently leads people to interpret phrases like the “non-apprehension through memory” (*dran pas bzung ba min*) in a positive light as an absence of “referential thought” or “ordinary mind,” I have intentionally translated the term *dran pa* literally as “memory.” In fact, if we take the idea that trauma played an important role during the time the formative scriptures of Dzogchen were written, then the “absence of memory/referential thought” (Tib. *dran med*, Skt. *vismṛti*, *asmṛti*) could be understood as “unconsciousness,” “inattentiveness,” or even “amnesia.” Even more, in light of the association between arousal and difficulties with memory, it would also make sense for this early tantra to associate amnesia with an “upward intensification” (*gong du 'phel*), which takes place during the ground's epiphany.

Trauma-related amnesia, however, is not necessarily the absence of any sort of memory. It is better imagined as an extreme form of a much larger range of memory-related symptoms; many of which are woven into the Dzogche narrative. For instance, the myth of cosmogony points to the fragmentary and disoriented nature of memory in the early Great Perfection. In the previously cited passage from *The Tantra of Great Beauty and Auspiciousness*, we read that as the “epiphanies are torn outward,” they manifest as “transparent, released, intangible, awake, undulating, shimmering, and diverse” (KSD, 215.2).⁹ The disorientation is here indicated by the unsteadiness of hallucinatory perception, which is reported as “undulating” (*'gul ba*) and “shimmering” (*'phrig pa*). Even more, the uncommon Tibetan terms recruited for “transparent” (*sang ma seng ma*), “released” (*shag ma shig ma*), “intangible” (*khral ma khrol ma*), and “awake” (*yang ma yeng ma*), sonically translate the oscillating form of the mythical vision into vocalized sounds.

Trauma frequently displays as a “symptom cluster,” which manifests on a spectrum of multiple sensory modalities, including not only our visual sense but also our senses of touch, smell, taste, hearing, and speech (Smith, Smith, Violanti, Bartone, & Homish, 2015; Woods & Margaret Wineman, 2004). For example, it is quite common for unprocessed embodied memories to cause

physiological symptoms such as pain, tics, tactile hallucinations, and so forth (El-Hage, Darves-Bornoz, Allilaire, & Gaillard, 2002; Janet, 1909; Nijenhuis & van der Hart, 1999).

During the Tibetan Renaissance, an age marked by conflict about scriptural transmission, the sense of hearing represented a particularly important realm of contestation. “The sonorous gravitas inherited from the ancient emperors,” so Davidson eloquently put it, “had become lost in a cacophony of new voices, speaking languages of different gods, borne by individuals [...] who may have come from outside the noble clans” (Davidson, 2005, p. 211). Although their thematic and stylistic characteristics make it clear that *The Seventeen Tantras* are not a random collection of unrelated scriptures—some of them even explicitly linking themselves to other texts within the corpus—it is nonetheless evident that they were not redacted by a single author and were composed over a longer period of time. As Christopher Hatchell reminds us, particularly the epiphany of the ground consists of stories that are “typically brought up in pieces, so it is difficult to point to a definitive telling of the story in a single text” (Hatchell, 2014, p. 98).

Another common symptom of trauma that affects memory is the unavailability of “information to one part, but not to another part of the personality” (Van der Hart et al., 2006, p. 93). It is as if the person suffering trauma split off certain memories, which are then only accessible to a certain part of his or her personality. The cosmogonic myth illustrates a similar tendency towards fragmentation and lack of overall integration. The epiphany of the ground is not only described as a shattering of the vase, but it is also marked by the prolific multiplication of beings that are said to epiphanize out of the body of light following its fragmentation. Longchenpa describes this as follows:

When the epiphany of the self (*rang snang*) dawns (*shar*) in the eight gateways of spontaneous presence, the originally pure Reality Body appears like a cloudless sky above. Directly in front, the epiphany of the Enjoyment Body’s clear light realm pervades the expanse of the sky. Below, through this expressive energy there is the great epiphany of the ground and through its expressive energy, in turn, the Enjoyment Body’s epiphany arises. In between, the natural Emanational Body’s realms manifest. Below that, from the gateway of cyclic existence, we witness the self-epiphany (*rang snang*) of the limitless realms of the six classes living beings. Because all of them self-arise (*rang shar*) from the epiphanies of the eight spontaneously present gateways, this is referred to as “the great epiphany of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* arising simultaneously.” (TDD, 178.5–179.1)¹⁰

Another common memory-related issue ensuing trauma is a reduction of emotional connection to one’s experiences. Van der Hart and his colleagues describe this as a lack of any “sense of personal ownership,” noting that their patients act as if “it happened, but not to me” (Van der Hart et al., 2006, p. 93). Of course, the epiphany of the ground is the ultimate narrative of how the “self” is created according to this tradition’s philosophy; so much so that it even pictures a sort of proto-self in the visceral form of a youthful body in a vase that then splitters into an endless series of *Lichtgestalten* that hold themselves to be independent “selves.” Yet at the same time, the myth seems to lack the pathos of a personally experienced trauma. To say it in the words of trauma specialists, the Nyingma writers appear to recall the events “but lack the emotional and physical feelings that belong to the memory, and the sense that it happened to them personally” (Van der Hart et al., 2006, p. 39).

Finally, one of the most characteristic difficulties with memory is that traumatized individuals remember both too much and too little of the traumatizing event. In the mythic account of the Great Perfection, we detect this discrepancy in the mixture between the extreme detail with which certain characteristics of the display are described and the simultaneous absence of some crucial details. This is nowhere as apparent as in the opening moment of the account: The actual cause for this stirring of the wind, the truly pathogenic moment that Brewin calls the “hot spot” of the trauma, remains veiled in complete darkness in the mythic accounts found in the Great Perfection tantras (Brewin, 2003).

3.2.3. *The loss of affect: the epiphany of Buddhas and the dysregulation of emotions*

As we saw, the epiphany of the ground involves the manifestation of a maṇḍalic universe that is inhabited by all sorts of beings. As the ground discloses itself, for instance, it is at one point said to do so in the form of the famous five Buddhas known as Vairocana, Akṣobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, and Amoghasiddhi. Upon closer analysis, these anthropomorphized manifestations point to the fact that the myth is not only concerned with the cognitive functioning of attention and memory, but also a third dimension of our minds, namely affect. Indeed, at the climax of the epiphany, the deities do not only shape an impressive maṇḍala consisting of one hundred figures that are drawn from the eighth-century *Guhyagarbha Tantra* (Dalton, 2013, p. 73), but they are also specified to take either a peaceful or a wrathful form.

In speaking of peaceful and wrathful deities, the Great Perfection's myth of cosmogony might reflect that the experience of dissociation is linked to two distinct yet paradoxically codependent affective states. On the one hand, the wrathful nature of the gods shows that most people are afraid of these visions, shying away from them. This affective dimension of the epiphany actually remains a constant throughout the centuries, as the later tradition highlights that ordinary people's attitude towards the visionary manifestations—markedly at the moment of death when these same maṇḍalic forms of lights are said to manifest as visions—is one of great fear and trepidation (Coleman & Jinpa, 2007).

Death is not only a moment that paradigmatically stands for a larger category of instances during which the traumatized individual is triggered and the original traumatic memory is reactivated (Brewin, 2001), but also for an important cultural symbol of the pain of human existence *per se*. As Rodger and Steel, in *Between Trauma and the Sacred*, have argued, “traumatic experience may become associated with cultural symbols, from the moment of encoding into memory, such that the same or related cultural symbols [...] may be sufficient to trigger a breaking through of sealed-over, affect-laden aspects of self or traumatic-experience into conscious awareness” (Rodger & Steel, 2016, p. 157).

Although phobias have frequently been conceived as fears of specific external cues (such as social situations, spiders, heights, and so forth), trauma research has demonstrated that inner phenomena, such as thoughts, fantasies, or memories can also be subject to phobias and avoidant behavior (Van der Hart et al., 2006, p. 92). In light of the fact that traumatic memories have been recounted as “hallucinatory, solitary, and involuntary experiences that consist of visual images, sensations, and physical acts which may occupy the entire perceptual field, and are terrifying to the individual,” it is no surprise that they too can become subject to phobia (Van der Hart et al., 2006, p. 41).

On the other hand, this very avoidance can take on a form that stands for the other half of a general pattern in post-traumatic emotion-dysregulation (Dell, 2002; Şar, Akyüz, Kundakçı, Kızıltan, & Orhan, 2004). In fact, traumatized individuals know not only emotional overmodulation—feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame (Miller & Resick, 2007)—but also the opposite, namely undermodulation. In those moments they experience detachment such as depersonalization, derealization, emotional numbing, and so forth (E. R. S. Lanius, Frewen, Vermetten, & Yehuda, 2010; Nijenhuis & den Boer, 2007).

Frequently, these two tendencies coexist within the same individual, just as the peaceful and wrathful deities share a common space in the cosmogonic maṇḍala. If one part of the personality recounts trauma with a visible loss of affect, the another part is fully immersed into the memory, experiencing terror, panic, and fear (Carrión & Steiner, 2000; Dell, 2002; Harvey & Bryant, 1998). Together, these two tendencies stand for a unified phenomenon, one of the most frequently observed symptoms in the wake of trauma, namely the “inability to regulate affect” (Van der Hart et al., 2006, p. 49).

The Great Perfection narrative manifests both under- and over-modulation of affect. The myth of origin presents the reader with a striking paradox because a dramatic event with serious existential

consequences is narrated in an almost serene tone. Drawing on the work of the American psychiatrist Judith Herman, we could describe the early Dzogchen myths as “pre-narratives,” which she describes as “repetitious, stereotyped, and emotionless” (Herman, 1992, p. 175).

The episode of the explosion of the youthful body of light as a result of hyperventilation is also complemented by a conspicuously unemotional attitude pervasive throughout the Great Perfection tantras. Like traumatized individuals, who “complain of feeling two dimensional, or like zombies, one-dimensional cardboard figures, or robots” (Van der Hart et al., 2006, p. 95), the myth of origin does show tendencies towards emotional numbness. Germano, for example, comments that the Great Perfection’s narratives strike us as “a type of cosmology far removed from our own lives” (Germano, 1992, p. 56).

In other moments, the ground reminds us of a vast canvass, almost like a huge screen upon which the epiphany is projected like a movie. The ground is said to be a “sphere” (*klong*) or an “expanse” (*dbyings*) and its epiphany is said to fill “entire perceptual field,” giving birth to various buddhas and pure lands, which are said to appear “above,” “in front,” or “below.” The mythic narrative of the ground’s epiphany creates the impression of a perceptual totality that encompasses the entire range of human sight. In this sense, the reader of the passages dedicated to the ground one frequently gets the impression of a lack of orientation, a sort of “spacing out” (*byams*).

Although the later tradition explicitly endorses this phenomenon as a type of experience that corresponds to the liberating power of the expansiveness of space (Gyatso, 1998, p. 202), I suggest that it might be useful to shift our perspective from “disclosure” to “dissociation.” Inside and outside, up and down, self and other—none of the categories we gather for situating ourselves ordinarily in the world are adopted in speaking about the ground. The experiences represented here are closely relatable to moments when our prefrontal cortex becomes temporarily inactive, notably when a special chemical messenger, the neuro-transmitter dopamine, is flooding our brains. This, of course, happens particularly in moments when we get excited or aroused. In such instances, to say it in the words of Susan Greenfield, dopamine is

being *released* like a fountain from the primitive region at the top of the spine (brain-stem) *outwards* and *upwards* throughout the brain, where it then changes the responsiveness of neurons in many different areas, including the prefrontal cortex. When dopamine reaches the prefrontal cortex, it inhibits the activity of the neurons there, and so recapitulates in some ways the immature brain of the child; this area of the brain is only fully active in late teenage years. Just as children are highly emotional, excitable, so adults in this condition also are more *reactive* to the *outside world* and to sensations rather than inner “cognitive” thought processes. (Greenfield, 2011, p. 49)

My emphasis on the somatic dimension of the account of cosmogony is not new in itself. Scholarship generally concedes that the Great Perfection myth must be regarded as a visceral narrative rather than a dry account of the origin of the universe. Drawing on the terminology of Guenther, we could speak of the myth as a “felt” image or as an “imaged” feeling (Guenther, 1994, 39). Higgins, similarly, reminds us that according to the Dzogchen tradition, the ground “is a matter of direct experience for [the] adherents of the path (*lam du rjes su ‘dzin pa*), whereas the intellectual, or what we can call ‘metaphysical,’ grounds are products of abstract theorizing entertained by adherents of philosophical systems (*grub pa’i mtha’ rjes su ‘dzin pa*)” (Higgins, 2013, p. 207).

However, what scholarship to date has underestimated is the traumatic dimension of bodily sensation in the Great Perfection. If we look at the narrative of cosmogony as a dissociative myth, it becomes apparent that it recites the story of a body that dissociates. The most radical articulation of this ruptured somatic presence, of course, is the formulation of the ground as a youthful body in a vase shattering into pieces.

In psychology, the manifestation of dissociative symptoms as a result of trauma has also been linked to altered perceptions of one's body and its relationship to the environing world that frequently culminate in the dissociation from one's body (Wolf et al., 2012). Not only do traumatized individuals feel variously detached from their bodies—as if their bodies belonged to someone else, or as if their mind and body were not connected—but they can be so de-sensitized that they manifest as negative somatoform symptoms, such as a loss of sensation or anesthesia of the senses of perception or of touch, loss of motor skills, or even paralysis (Butler, Mueser, Sprock, & Braff, 1996; Janet, 1907, 1909; Nijenhuis & van der Hart, 1999).

In a beautiful passage from *The Jewel Studded Tantra*, we find a discussion a sensory paralysis as a result of their traumatic existence. Specifically, the text addresses several confusions, which are all due to the “blocking of the gateways to the various faculties” (*dbang po rnams kyi sgo 'gags*) (RCP, 81.1). The “eyes” (*mig*), for example, are said to be dull (*rtul*) because they don't see (*ma mthong*) that “the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind are primordially the body of our self (*rang gi lus*)” (RCP, 79.4).¹¹ Similarly, the tantra wonders whether their “auditory faculty” (*rna ba'i dbang po*) might be missing because humans don't hear (*ma thos*) that the teachings are “self-resonating without interruption” (RCP, 79.4–5),¹² or whether their “noses are blocked” (*sna 'gags*) because humans appear to be incapable of smelling the “scent of the self-abiding expanse and wisdom” (RCP, 79.5–6).¹³ Finally, the scripture laments the inability to savor the union between the body and the mind as if one's tongue had been cut out (*lce chad*) (RCP, 79.6–80.1).¹⁴

3.3. The power of meditation: a psycho-historical perspective on tantric practices of self-transformation

The Jewel Studded Tantra's reference to the various “faculties” (*dbang po*, lit. “that which has power”), which are affected by the trauma of the epiphany of the ground, etymologically points us to the important relationship between trauma and power. The situation in Tibet during the late tenth and eleventh centuries, in fact, requires us to reflect on another structural trait of collective trauma, namely that the concatenation between perpetrators and victims is frequently enmeshed and shifting over time (Giesen, 2004; Hirschberger, 2018). In fact, the period during which the Great Perfection processed its trauma of marginalization through the myth of cosmogony, the “New Schools” experienced a significant upswing in terms of their religious, economic, and political status.

The New Schools premised much of their agenda for the rise to power on the Tibetan plateau on the creation of a new self by means of tantric techniques of self-transformation that they imported from South Asia. In India, at the end of the eighth century, we witness the emergence of certain types of tantra, known as the Mahāyoga and the Yoginī tantras. While the Nyingmapas invoked the heritage of the materials transmitted to them during the time of the Tibetan Empire, the translators of the New School journeyed to the south of the Himalayas to bring with them the latest ritual and contemplative practices associated with the tantric systems of Guhyasamāja, Hevajra, and Cakrasamvara (Davidson, 2005, p. 205).¹⁵ The central role that these techniques played in the creation of a new self is nowhere as apparent as in the so-called “deity yoga” (Skt. *devatā yoga*, Tib. *lha'i rnal byor*) (Cozort, 1986; Gray, 2007; Harding & Kongtrul, 2002; Yarnall, 2003). This practice, which operates through the precise visualization of a personal Buddha, has rightly been described as a technique for the “transformation of personality” (Davidson, 2002, p. 164). As Christian Wedemeyer put it:

The central aim of this self-creation yoga is for the practitioner to do away with the perception of herself as ordinary—as well as the pride that is believed to be associated with that perception—and to replace it with a perception of herself as a divine, enlightened being, with the sense of proud empowerment and universal efficacy that characterizes such a being (Wedemeyer, 2013, p. 117).

In light of the complex interrelation of collective-cultural and individual-psychological trauma, which this study has started to reveal, we need to ask the question whether such “illuminating” techniques

of self-transformation could have a darker side to them. Indeed, I suggest that we could look at the New Schools' contemplative practices as a correlate to the traumatic experience encoded in the myth of the Ancients. Consisting of breathing patterns, bodily postures, hand gestures (Skt. *mudrā*, Tib. *phyag rgya*), verbal utterances (Skt. *mantra*), empowerments (Skt. *adhiṣṭhāna*, Tib. *byin gyis brlabs pa*), initiations (Skt. *abhiṣeka*, Tib. *dbang bskur ba*), and so forth, the tantric techniques operated precisely by cultivating attention, training memory, and regulating emotions.

As for attention, just as the founding myth of the Ancients points to a pattern of losing attention in the form of a dysregulation of breathing—epitomized in the stirring of the wind that causes the rupture of the body of light—many of the tantric techniques imported from India were premised on the breath as a tool to regulate attention. Cultivating focus is the starting point of deity yoga as the first step of the practice is called the “vivid appearance of the god” (Tib. *rnam pa gsal ba*), during which the meditator develops focused attention on attributes of the god he is visualizing.

As part of their tantric program, the New Schools not only engaged in techniques of attention regulation but also in practices that directly aligned with processes of identity-formation. Specifically, just as the early Dzogchen narratives express the Ancients' experience of being split into a multitude of voices, a variety of personalities, and incommensurable memory traces, the tantric technique of deity yoga allowed the practitioner of the New School to proclaim sovereignty over his identity. More specifically, the tantric techniques were concerned with the cultivation of an autobiographical memory that could help them overcome the identity crisis of the previous centuries and formulate the socio-political power that they held during those years. This is nowhere as apparent as in the second attribute of deity yoga practice. After vividly calling to mind the attributes of the god, the practice continues with the so-called “recollection of purity” (Tib. *rnam pa dag par dran pa*), which stands for a profound identification of one's self with that of a supremely reigning deity.

The visualizations are implemented by following a standardized protocol, a so-called *sādhana* (Tib. *sgrub thabs*, lit. “means of achievement”), whose goal it is to elucidate the specific symbolic meanings of each individual attribute of the deity. Specifically, the god who is to be visualized—the so-called “personal deity” (Tib. *yi dam*, Skt. *iṣṭadevatā*, lit. “the deity to whom one is committed”)—is marked by pure attributes, which correspond to specific cognitive dimensions related to Buddhist teachings. Richard Kohn, in his excellent study of the Mani Rimdu festival in Northern Nepal, describes this mnemonic element of the practice as follows:

The commentaries, for example, explain that Lord of the Dance's clasped hands are the union of method and wisdom, and that they clasp a *vajra* because wisdom and method are bound as of one taste with the indivisible diamond of bliss. [...] Having a pure body means that Lord of the Dance's hands are not *like* the union of wisdom and method, they *are* the union of wisdom and method. In “recollecting the purity” of the deity, the meditator calls these pure attributes to mind in detail. Thus, when he has recreated himself as the deity, his hands are not flesh and blood, but wisdom and method and so on (Kohn, 2001, pp. 32–33).

Deity yoga is a practice that follows an arch of biographical identity-formation. One not only dissolves the old self in order to regenerate a new type of selfhood in the likeness of a god, but one also follows up this process of generation to act out one's new identity in new ways. Thus, as the meditation of the generation phase moves from the cultivation of concentration to the training in memory, the practitioner also starts to learn to regulate emotions. Just as we saw that the Dzogchen myth reveals the Ancients' struggles in regulating emotions and discloses a trauma-induced tendency to dissociate from the body, the tantric techniques of the New Schools successfully bridle the body—bringing it under control of mental and emotional processes through the purposeful instigation of extreme states of arousal.

The dealing with emotions is particularly apparent in the third key attribute of deity yoga practice, namely “divine pride” (Tib. *lha'i nga rgyal 'dzin pa*). Classical Tantra is usually divided

into two different sets of practices, divided into the so-called “generation stage” (Skt. *utpatti-kramah*, Tib. *bskyed rim*) practices and the techniques of the “completion stage” (Skt. *utpanna- or sampanna-kramah*, Tib. *rdzogs rim*). Divine pride, by presuming “the thought that one is oneself the deity being visualized” (Cozort, 1986, p. 57), leads directly into completion stage practices, which can be regarded as a sort of a culmination of the process of generation undertaken during deity yoga (Mullin, 2006). As Kohn puts it, “the process of perfection continues the efforts of the creation process [and] makes the yogic vision of the creation process real” (Kohn, 2001, p. 31). Gavin Kilty, likewise, noted that “the generation stage is a preparatory ripening before the completion stage, during which these imagined enlightened forms are made real” (Kilty, 2012, p. 3).

Completion stage techniques consist of rather involved techniques of bodily manipulation to grasp the soteriological potential of extreme experiences such as sexuality, violence, and death. One famous completion stage practice is the so-called “inner fire” (Tib. *gtum mo*, lit. “fierce woman”). To start this meditation, the practitioner visualizes two “drops” (Skt. *bindu*, Tib. *thig le*)—a female and a male one—which are imagined as fire and liquid respectively. Then, one is instructed to visualize a little flame in the abdomen, which blazes up as one inhales. With the increase of air, the flame grows in size and heats up the drop located the top of the central channel, at the crown of his head. As the male *thig le* melts, it runs down in the form of a nectar, which mixes with the female energy below. As it descends through his central channel, washing through the four energy wheels, the practitioner is said to experience four joys (*ānanda*).

The yogi then increases this feeling by reversing the nectar’s movement as he draws the melted mix of male and female energies upwards through the cakras all the way back to the crown of his head. Finally, the practice culminates with the expansion of the blissful experience throughout the body as the nectar is dissipated into all the minor channels running through the meditator’s subtle anatomy. Together these two sets of practices share an underlying orientation, namely the emphasis on self-transformation by regulating attention, memories, and emotions.

Ronald Davidson, in his excellent study on the rise of tantric Buddhism, has shown that religious “empowerments” (*dbang*)—playing off the political transmission of royal authority in India—fulfilled a crucial role at different moments in the history of Buddhism. In this final part of my study, I pointed to another role of “power,” namely the exertion of tantric power and the controlling of the bodily senses. I demonstrated that the active and explicit capacity for the shaping of one’s self in its various dimensions—attention, memory, and body—distinguishes the experience of the New Schools from that of the Ancients during the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Juxtaposing the negative and the positive psychological experiences that populated the minds of the two social groups during those politically contested years suggests that the Nyingma school’s dissociation from the instruments of power had specific consequences that closely corresponded to the most empowering politico-religious instruments available to the new leaders of the country. In fact, it seems hardly a coincidence that the mythic narrative of the Ancients accounts for the loss of control of three specific cognitive functions (i.e. attention regulation, memory retention, affect modulation) just as the New Schools started experimenting with powerful techniques that allowed them to precisely train those abilities, namely breath control, deity yoga, and subtle body manipulations.

To be clear, by focusing on the dysregulation of the same three cognitive functions that marked the tantric practices—attention, memory, and emotion—I do not mean to argue for a causal link between the Great Perfection’s mythically encoded symptoms of trauma and the Sarma practices of self-transformation. However, the correlation allows us nonetheless to make a few observations.

Most obviously, their shared focus on attention, memory, and emotion encourages us to reflect on how tantric techniques can have dissociative repercussions—not only for those who practice them—but also for the traditions that are not explicitly relying on these technological innovations.

More importantly, by arguing that “psychological-mental” techniques of self-transformation can have very real historical consequences for the communities that do not have access to these techniques, I reinforce a more general message of this paper, namely that the parallel study of psychology and history can give us new insights into both areas of investigation.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I conscientiously implemented a transdisciplinary approach that integrates tools from religious studies—in this case, primarily textual-historical research—with findings from psychology, cognitive sciences, and trauma studies. This methodological choice enabled me to critically evaluate and fruitfully complement the standard accounts of Great Perfection Buddhism, according to which the tradition’s marking characteristic is effortless and instantaneous enlightenment, with new perspectives.

By shifting my focus from disclosure to dissociation, I provided a number of new suggestions for how we could explain some of the most perplexing traits of Dzogchen thought and practice. Moving forward, the rejection of referential thought, the pervasiveness of spacing out, or the visceral descriptions of cosmogony can no longer be simply received as expressions of the Great Perfection’s conscious choice to endorse disclosive enlightenment. On the contrary, because the early history of this mysterious religious tradition was defined by traumatic socio-political upheavals and systematic marginalization, some of Dzogchen’s marking characteristics might be better understood as the result of an exposure to vulnerability and symptoms of dissociation, rather than the revelation of our inherent Buddha-nature.

This being said, despite its innovative thrust, my study is by no means intended to recast the cardinal reception of Great Perfection Buddhism. On the contrary, precisely because the myth of Samantabhadra is not only the story of a dissociation but also one of liberation, we cannot but appreciate the tradition’s steadfast endorsement of disclosure as the paradigmatic mode of spiritual transformation. Here, it is opportune to recall Matthew Kapstein’s commentary on the myth of cosmogenesis:

What is crucial for the Nyingmapa is that this account establish an essential relationship between the primordial Buddha and sentient beings, such that it be *possible for us to recover* the ground of our being and thus to participate in Samantabhadra’s beginningless enlightenment (Kapstein, 2000, p. 169).

Thus, this small contribution can be understood as a first step in a larger project on disclosure in Dzogchen thought and practice. What seems clear now, is that even later understandings of disclosure can no longer be simply understood as an expression of instantaneous and spontaneous enlightenment, but might be better appreciated as reflections on human growth, recovery, and redemption.

Funding

This research was funded by the U.S. Department of Education (Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad), P022A150029.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Citation information

Cite this article as: When Buddhas dissociate: A psychological perspective on the origins of great perfection

Buddhism (*rdzogs chen*), Geissshuesler Flavio A., *Cogent Psychology* (2019), 6: 1707055.

Notes

1. The Dzogchen tradition consists a complex amalgamation of teachings, lineages, and orientations. Unless otherwise indicated, I use the terms Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) and Seminal Heart (*snying thig*) interchangeably in this study since my focus is on the latter, and it itself self-identifies as the Great Perfection.
2. Throughout Dzogchen teachings, there exist many different versions of this myth of creation. I am drawing particularly from its earliest versions in *The Seventeen Tantras* as well as Longchenpa’s retelling in his *Treasury of Words and Meaning*. For secondary literature on this myth, see Achard 1999, pp. 103–9; Bertrand 2011, pp. 21–28; Arguillère 2007, pp. 334–438; Kapstein 2000, pp. 167–70; Germano 1992; Kongtrul 1995.

3. All texts cited in Tibetan are translated by the author. Nga'i rtal las gzhi mi 'gyur ba las/rang bzhin ma "gags par nas/thugs rje ma nges pa las ma rig pa rang byung ste/dper nan as mkha" la sprin yang dag par yod pa ma yin te/glo bur du sprin byung ba dang 'dra bar.
 4. De ltar 'khor 'das thog mtha' la/sangs rgyas 'khrul par ma gyur pa/gzhi las 'phags pa'i dbang po yis/rang snang rang bzhin med par shes/rtog dpyod yid rnam phyir ma shor/gyu ba rang thog chod pa'o.
 5. nang dbyings ka dag gi ye gzhi gzhon nu bum pa sku'i kha ral te ye shes kyi rlung g.yos pas. [...] nang gzhon nu bum pa sku'i rgya kha ral te.
 6. nang gzhon nu bum pa'i sku zhes bya ba kha ral te [...]dus de tsam na nga'i snang ba phyir ral te.
 7. For the association between memory and mindfulness in Buddhist contexts more generally, see Gyatso (1992).
 8. de phyir thams cad mkhyen pa yi/ye shes thugs rje'i cha la snang/'di kun dran pas bzung ba min/rang bzhin nyid du gnas pa las/gzung 'dzin rags par mi gnas so/gting gsal phra ba'i char snang ba/'di ni sems can rnam kyi lam/gong du sa bon bzhin du 'phel.
 9. dus de tsam pa'i snang ba phyir ral te/sang ma seng ma/shag ma shig ma/khral ma khrol ma/ yang ma yeng ma/gul ba/'phrig pa/sna tshogs su 'phro ba 'byung ngo.
 10. rang snang lhun kyi sgo brgyad shar dus steng du ka dag chos sku'i snang ban am mkha' sprin med lta bu/thad kar longs sku 'od gsal gyi zhing snang nam mkha'i dbyings khyab pa/de'i rtal las 'og na gzhi snang chen po dang de'i rtal las 'og na longs sku'i snang ba dang phyogs mtshams na rang bzhin sprul sku'i zhing snang dang/mar 'og na 'khor ba'i sgo las 'gro drug rang snang gi zhing kham tsad med pa sde/de thams cad lhun grub sgo brgyad kyi snang ba las rang shar bas 'khor 'das kyi snang ba chen po dus gcig la shar ba zhes bya.
 11. sa chu me rlung 'byun ba bzhi/ye nas rang gi lus yin par/sus ma mthong ba mig re rtul.
 12. yang gsang bsdu pa'i man ngag bcud/bar mtshams med par rang brag pa/gang gis 'di nyid ma thos par/ rna ba'i dbang po med dam ci. *I corrected rags pa for brag pa based on TDD.
 13. rang gnas dbyings dang rig pa'i dri/bral ba'i skabs med rang 'khor ba/tshor m myong ba sna 'gags sam.
 14. bcud gsum man ngag gi dril lo/ye nas lus sems bcud yin pas/'di nyid ma myong lce chad dam.
 15. While Yamāntaka and Guhyasamāja would become key deities for the Gelug school (*dge lugs*), Heruka Cakrasamvara became the principal deity for the Kagyū (*bka' brgyud*) and Hevajra for the Sakya (*sa skya*). (Cozort, 1996; 1986, pp. 117–33; Skorupski, 1996; Gray, 2007; Newman, 2000; Wallace, 2001).
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