

The Self-Dawning Play of Primordial Wisdom

Unbounded Wholeness: Dzogchen, Bon, and the Logic of the Nonconceptual

by Anne Carolyn Klein and Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche

New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006. 424 pp.

ISBN: 0-253-34859-5. \$35.00. Cloth.

Review by J.M. White

It is a rare event when a book is able to uncover some aspect of ancient knowledge that has been hidden in the recesses of prehistory. Not since the publication of *Hamlet's Mill: An Essay Investigating the Origins of Human Knowledge and its Transmission Through Myth* by Giorgio De Santillana and Hertha Von Dechend has a book reached back so far and revealed something so fundamental in the history of consciousness. *Unbounded Wholeness* translates a text that dates back in stages; first to its discovery in eleventh century Tibet and then, in another leap, to the pre-Buddhist eighth century Himalayan kingdom of Zhang Zhung and, in yet another leap, back much deeper into a prehistoric strata of human culture and intellectual development.

Unbounded Wholeness is a translation and detailed commentary of a Tibetan text titled *The Authenticity of Open Awareness: A Collection of Essential Reasonings* attributed to Lishu Daring. It is a text from one of the oldest surviving Tibetan literary traditions, the Bon Dzog Chen. Bon was the indigenous religion of Tibet prior to the onset of Tantric Buddhism in the eight century C. E.. Pre-Buddhist Tibet was known as Zhang Zhung and its capital was in the vicinity of Mount Kailas in what is now western Tibet. Bon continues to exist even today as a distinct religious tradition. Recently the Dalai Lama has begun to refer to Bon as the fifth school of Tibetan Buddhism. Anne Carolyn Klein has collaborated on this book with Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche who is the first representative of the Bon to establish a center in America. Anne Klein has been an influential force in establishing this tradition in America and this book is one of the first fruits of that collaboration. *Unbounded Wholeness* defines a whole new set of principles describing non conceptual logic. The text provides the rules of logic for how the mind works from the perspective of wholeness as opposed to the perspective of the individual.

The way this text looks into the mind bears comparison, in some aspects, with Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Mind*. Hegel was able to provide a detailed description of the inner workings of the logical foundation of western epistemology and ontology. This logic, which came down from Aristotle, and later from Descartes, divides the world into subjects and objects in a linear time frame. Where Hegel and later Husserl and Heidegger were working through the science of phenomenology to explore the epistemological mechanisms of the mind, they never shifted their scope of analysis beyond the level of the conceptual constitution of meanings. In this Dzog Chen tradition the phenomenological gaze goes beyond the conceptual meanings into a level of awareness that encompasses both subject and object in a unified vision.

Anne C. Klein is among the first generation of American scholars of Tibetan Buddhism. She combines an academic background with intensive interaction with the last generation of Tibetan scholars who were fully trained in old Tibet prior to the horrific Chinese invasion and the subsequent diaspora. She is uniquely qualified to deal with the topic presented in this text. She has written extensively on Buddhist logic and epistemology. And now in this book, she has shifted her gaze into an even older strata and has become involved with the Bon. The Bon speak of their tradition going back 18,000 years. They recognize a founder and a system that has proliferated into what are called the nine ways of Bon. She has brought to America and worked collaboratively with the highest ranking scholars of the Bon tradition. This places her in a unique position to take her rigorous study of logic and apply it to the most esoteric of Bon texts which is itself a study of the logic of nonconceptual apperception.

The text is a Bon terma, a hidden scripture, which, to Western standards of literary criticism, does not distinguish between the historic and the mythic. In the eleventh century C.E. three monks discovered a cache of texts hidden at a monastery in central Tibet. On examination one of the texts purported to be written in the eighth century by the great Bon master Lishu Daring. The biography of Lishu Darling is one of the most unusual in a lineage of remarkable hagiographies. According to these legends Lishu Darling was born a woman, wrote many texts then changed herself into a man via gender bending self initiation and ritual empowerments. Then he lived to be 2,5000 years old during the period when the country of Zhang Zhung was conquered by a new Tibetan reign centered in the Yarlung Valley of central Tibet.

As philosophy and epistemology the text creates a new system of logical categories based on the principles of open awareness and unbounded wholeness. This logic is very distinct from the logic of conceptual reasoning thus opening a new horizon of phenomenological enquiry. The text is a scripture in a tradition of continuous revelation which has no discernable historical origin. Klein's book is laid out with four main sections: first a commentary on the text dealing with the principles of non-conceptual logic, then a section on the history of the text with a biography of its author, and then the translation of the text itself, followed by a section that places this text in the context of the Bon canon. In the text the author presents a brief narrative built around a series of poetic quotations from Bon scriptures. These quotes are used to authenticate the point he is trying to make. This is followed by a long debate framed in objections which are answered with a response followed by another objective and its response etc. The debate format takes up the greater part of the text and even here the responses often quote other sources to validate the point being made. The sources that are quoted come from texts like; *Mirror and Mindnature Treasure*, *Spontaneously Complete Open Awareness Tantra*, *Nine Circling Moons Sutra*, the *Luminous Cave Vehicle*, the *Tantra of the Blissful Wheel*, *Thoughts of the Shenrabs of a Thousand Eons*, the *Venerable Bon Awareness of Everything*, and many others. This obviously raises the issue of the nature of these texts, whether they are extant, and the great challenge of translating this body of literature.

In the text translated by Klein open awareness is explored as authentic, reflexive primordial mindnature. This experience, much like what is talked about in certain Zen traditions, cannot be accessed by thought. Yet it avoids being anti-intellectual and proceeds based on detailed philosophical analysis. The text conflates epistemology with poetic myth. It is a considerable stretch for the contemporary mind to enter this ancient chthonic mindscape. The text in *Unbounded Wholeness* incorporates its highly sophisticated and detailed logical analysis of the most esoteric potentialities of the mind with this mythopoetic literary framework.

The text defines pure perception as the dynamic display of phenomenon when it appears without clinging or attachment. The perspective of unbounded wholeness is not constituted by reason or even expressed in concepts, rather it is spontaneously arisen and presents itself as straight forward immediate direct perception. This is epistemology as myth in a poetic presentation that works with symbol and metaphor. Nonconceptual logic consists of a set of basic premises such as; direct perception, primordial wisdom,

non-recognition, uncontrived seeing and, most importantly, open awareness and unbounded wholeness. In this logic appearances are the nature of mind itself in a self-dawning play of primordial wisdom. In the text it describes the subject-object dichotomy, which is foundational for conceptual logic, as, “Neither untwo, nor one, nor different” (p. 247). In this scenario open awareness apprehends appearances as the dynamic display of uncontrived seeing. In this logic unimpeded open awareness is the heart-essence of the mind, it is the unthing of ceaseless appearance, the primordial just-is-ness of the great continuum of all that is and is not. The point of view of wholeness subsumes all distinctions. In this logic things are judged or measured by their relation to wholeness. Wholeness accommodates multiplicity and accepts diversity. Authority is not based on a comparison of a pre existing standard of judgment with a presentation of a particular instance but rather on the degree of openness in its perception. Authenticity is not the truthfulness of an individual but the shift of perspective that places the individual within the wholeness perceived with open awareness. This logic does not proceed by cause and effect but poetically by analogy and allusion.

The discipline of logic as taught in Tibetan Buddhism rests on the principle of two truths; the one ultimate, the other conventional. But the Dzog Chen logic explicated in *Unbounded Wholeness* takes one single principle as its defining characteristic. This is, of course, the principle of wholeness. The greatest of the traditional Buddhist logicians, primarily Dignaga and Dharmakirti, take logic as a form of measure whereby a subject examines an object and constitutes a valid cognition regarding that object. Conceptual reasoning is grounded in the subject-object relationship. Open awareness is direct perception from the point of view of the subjectless object and the objectless subject. Here the subject and object are both reflexively perceived as dynamic displays of unbounded wholeness. In non-conceptual logic a subject focused on an object, even if that object is its own perception, is not experiencing open awareness. With open awareness the object is perceived in a continuum which is dynamic, paradoxical and synthetic. In this frame language becomes performative and mythic and takes on a lyric and poetic tone.

While inferential reasoning is used as a validating principle in conventional logic it no longer holds in the logic of unbounded wholeness. Unbounded wholeness is holistically unrestrained and, while it includes inferential reason, the measure of authenticity is the openness of awareness not its ability to infer from one thing to another. The analytics of unbounded

wholeness are both/and rather than either/or. This type of openness is readily illuminated by lyrical and poetic verse where meanings have fluid possibilities. It has a mythical charisma that carries it toward wholeness. Open awareness is a repositioning that places the individual in an intellectual horizon of spontaneity and multiplicity. In this logic the openness of plurality is more authentic than the limitations of certainty. From the perspective of unbounded wholeness causes are not separate from their effects, they are in a continuum that is so interconnected that simultaneity is more definitive than causality. Traditional logic brings closure to units of meaning, this closure is overcome by the logic of unbounded wholeness.

All conceptions and preconceptions are adventitious and are bred out of oppositionality. Unbounded wholeness is not an object of open awareness nor is it caused by nor precipitated from conceptual thought yet conceptual thought takes place within it. Open awareness does not represent the world of appearance rather it views the world with an evocative mytho-poetic indifference innocent of temporality and objectivity. The principle of non-oppositionality creates openness. This replaces the law of the non-excluded middle with the law of noncontradiction. Mutually exclusive dualities are both included within unbounded wholeness. The empirical linear way of thinking is replaced by a mythophilosophical engagement with appearance. Just as there is no way of recognizing that light is present without something that reflects it so open awareness is a condition of awareness that goes unrecognized until it becomes reflexive.

Open awareness is totally spontaneous and effortless. The only way to experience it is to stop trying, paradoxically any form of effort automatically blocks it. The technique is to do nothing reflexively. It cannot be brought forward due to any causality, you can't make it happen. Klein remarks that, "Doing and not doing are equally inappropriate." (p 115) This effortlessness is referred to as "artful endeavor" and as spontaneous meditation. This vibrant interiority is called direct presence or just-is-ness or the allbase or simply the base. This allows the dynamic display to be spontaneously present without the interference of any form of effort. This creates a new metaphysical narrative that is deeply mythic and lyrically poetic. It has a mythic fulcrum that opens awareness to new layers of wholeness, it is poetic in that it comes with indicative links that move awareness to more profoundly synthetic levels of wholeness. This is not the reasoning of representational correspondence but a new logic that recognizes its participatory place in wholeness. It propels itself into a more holistic relatedness. The language of wholeness is a means

of presentation not of representation. Synthetic, not abstract, it has mirror like surety. This is nearly unspoken in modern American discourse, yet it has an immediate sense of intimacy, a deep belonging and a luminosity that illuminates beyond the limits of language.

In Western phenomenology the defining characteristic of consciousness is that it is intentional, which means that it has an object. In Western thinking to be conscious is to have an object, that object then has identity and that identity is conceptually formatted. From this point of view open awareness is not consciousness for the very reason that it does not distinguish between subject and object and has no definitive focus. The Western philosophical tradition has not explored the idea that consciousness can be awake and alert but not focused on a particular object. The idea is contradictory to the principle that consciousness is defined as having an object. Only a few widely scattered thinkers in the West ever ventured into this undiscovered country. Writers like Plotinus, Jacob Boehme, William Blake and Rudolph Steiner form a counter tradition of Western esotericism. However, in the past fifty years a stream of esoteric traditions have entered the West and are quickly finding a permanent place in the intellectual discourse of modern life. What had been highly secret tantric traditions are now openly available to anyone who has the determination to learn them. Anne Klein's book, along with the research of a small band of scholars, is raising the veil on yet another of these traditions. This one arising from pre-Buddhist Himalayan Bonpo.

There are still just a handful of scholars who are specializing in this study. David Snellgrove was among the first pioneers and he opened the way for the contemporary generation of scholars such as John Myrdhin Reynolds, Per Kvaerne, Dan Martin and John Vicent Bellezza. There are also Tibetan scholars such as Samten Karmay and Namkhai Norbu who have been actively producing scholarly work in this field of research. Now we are also beginning to see translations of texts by living Bon masters such as Lopon Tenzin Namdak and Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche. *Unbounded Wholeness* stands with *The Oral Tradition from Zhang-zhung* by Reynolds and *Spirit-mediums, Sacred Mountains and Related Bon Textual Traditions in Upper Tibet* by Bellezza as foundational texts that present a detailed picture of the Bon tradition.

In the history of Tibetan Buddhism the first great cultural heroes were the translators. They were adventurous practitioners who traveled to India, acquired the necessary language skills and met with great teachers. They collected the most pertinent texts and took them back to their home land and

worked on their translation. We are still in the first generation of the impact of Buddhism in America. It was only in the 1970's when the teachings of Buddhism became widely accessible as representatives of all the schools of Buddhism were coming to America. Anne C. Klein is one of a small handful of translators who are filling the same roll in American Buddhism as the Tibetan translators of the eighth century did in Tibet.