

## Edward Henning on 'jñana' - tib.: yeshe

Source: <http://www.kalacakra.org/kalaskt.htm>



Edward Henning in Kathmandu 2012 at the funeral of Tenga Rinpoche. In connection with his work about the Kalachakra Tantra on his website, he describes the 5 skandhas. There you find this text:

Translation note: *Awareness, [skt.: jñana; tib.:] ye shes*. A very important word about which there is considerable confusion. It is often translated as wisdom, which is quite misleading, and the even worse 'primordial wisdom'. This comes largely from a mis-interpretation of a standard definition of *ye shes*. Let's deal with that first.

As explained to me in the late '70s by Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso Rinpoche, *ye shes* is equivalent to *ye nas gnas pa'i don shes pa*. There are three components in that: *ye nas gnas pa'i*: the *pa'i* indicates the genitive: this is therefore qualifying the following word, *don*. The phrase literally means 'from the very beginning'. Hence the use by some of the word 'primordial'.

*don*: this is the object of the following term, *shes pa*. It means principle, significance, reality, nature, etc.

*shes pa*: this is the basic term for the general concept of perception, awareness, cognition, etc [skt.: jñā].

So, this phrase means, very loosely, 'the cognition of the primordial nature/reality'. If one really wants to use the words 'primordial' and 'wisdom', then it is important to note that it is not the wisdom or awareness that is primordial, but the object of that wisdom (can wisdom even have objects?). The translation as 'primordial wisdom' is therefore quite wrong. Also, the phrase *ye nas gnas pa* does not only concern the literal concept of time. It is a Tibetan way of indicating

the true nature of something. This is very similar to the English word 'primal', which also usefully carries both of these senses. So, if a word like this is required, then 'primal' is far more accurate than 'primordial'.

The problem with translating *ye shes* as 'wisdom', whether primal or not, is that it is a totally different type of faculty. A baby has *ye shes*, but certainly not wisdom, which is something developed over a long period of time. *ye shes* is not developed, but is revealed or freed as obscurations [skt.:moha] are removed.

Consider the definition of wisdom in the Oxford Companion to Philosophy: "...good judgement about the evaluation of complex situations and conceptions of a good life in the light of a reflective understanding of the human conditions." Is this equivalent to *ye shes*? No way! (It often comes close to the Tibetan *thabs shes*.) Guenther describes *ye shes* as "direct intuition, non-dual in nature, it is that awareness which exists before the perception process comes into operation that makes the distinction between subject and object and that identifies and labels an object as being this thing or that." Is this anything like 'wisdom'? Not in the slightest!

As *ye shes* refers to the most basic function of cognition, awareness, but free from all obscurations, mis-perceptions, and so forth, it is tempting to add an adjective to it to emphasise that point. (The Tibetans did something similar in that there is no equivalent in the original Sanskrit to the *ye* in *ye shes*.) The best attempt I have seen so far is Alex Berzin's 'deep awareness', suggesting to me that it gets to the heart, the true nature, of things. I suspect I shall end up using that myself.

One final point. Like many words, *ye shes* has different meanings in different contexts, and the discussion above concerns awareness as the basic nature of mind. In the context of the two accumulations (bsod nams dang *ye shes kyi tshogs gnyis*), I find merit and understanding to be more meaningful. Finally, as for the title of the fifth chapter of the Kalacakra Tantra (*ye shes kyi le'u*), I find that the Chapter on Knowledge is more accurate. It has been explained to me (Choekyi Nangwa Rinpoche) that there are a couple of other contexts in which *ye shes* has different meanings that perhaps should be reflected in English. These will hopefully be added here at some point. (*lam gyi ye shes*, *ye shes lnga*, etc.).

**Comment:** [Text in brackets like this one, are additions of Lama Olaf Hoeyer. Edward Henning was the great translator of both Sanskrit and Tibetan. He is most renowned for his work about the *Kalachakra Tantra*. He often translated for *Tenga Rinpoche* at various occasions. He also was an editor of the famous *PC Magazine* for many years. Lately, he resided in New Delhi and worked for various Indian PC magazines there. Unfortunately, he died in November 2016.

I share in his reservations towards the concept of ‘wisdom’ for the term ‘jñāna’ or ‘yeshe’ in Tibetan, in so far that this is not the normal way for us in the West to use this word.

Never the less, the concept of wisdom could – and maybe should – be used to describe the difference between ‘emotional attachment mind’ (Sanskrit: *kleshacitta*) and ‘original cognition’ (Sanskrit: *jñāna*). The unwise falls into the emotional identification trap, while the wise dwells in unstained or ‘original’ cognition. So, the wisdom appears, because something else does **not** appear, rather than being somehow produced on top of something else.

Besides this difference of quality, that the term ‘wisdom’ describes, *yeshe* is widely translated as wisdom by so many others for so many reasons, that the public is more or less used to this, just as we have made a habit of translating the term ‘smṛiti’ or ‘drenpa’ in Tibetan as ‘mindfulness’ - which is actually quite misleading, when you think about how this term otherwise is used in the West, and what the word really means within the Dharma.

So it is not enough to use the word ‘wisdom’ - we need to specify what exactly it means. I therefore normally translate jñāna or yeshe as ‘wisdom-mind’ while stressing the character of ‘original intuition’ in both all emotions and the very same mind manifestations, just without attachment and identification. The wisdom aspect lies in *the art of abandoning attachment and identification*, that lead to this transformation of quality.

The second use in the West of the word ‘wisdom’ in connection with Dharma, is normally applied with the term ‘prajñā’ or ‘sherab’ in Tibetan. This I translate as ‘wisdom of clarity’ - it is simply the clarity aspect of mind in the *moment of consciousness* – without dualism attached to it. Like before, the wisdom lies in the non-presence of dualism, that otherwise covers or hides the wisdom aspect.

So, the two kinds of wisdom are characterised by a lot less mental work, when you do not construct dualism, emotionality and thinking on top of everything. The flow of consciousness becomes unobstructed as well, making everything more easy.

Please note, that both kinds of wisdom are actualised by having the mind let go of attachment and identification with both experiences and the concept of an experiencer or observer, a witness or a ‘Self’ - Sanskrit: *atman*. The wisdom lies in the non-construction – in the not-doing – of dualism. Hence the idea of ‘original mind’ and ‘original cognition’ – or ‘pristine cognition’ – simply meaning uncovered, unhidden or revealed – because nothing is fabricated on top of it, hence no hiding.

Please also note, that since the ‘wisdom mind’ is concerned with emotionality, it belongs to *the fourth skandha* – while the ‘wisdom of clarity’ has to do with the nature of consciousness, so it belongs to *the fifth skandha*.]