

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 [Sanskrit: *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 nam 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 Kalachakra 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 square brackets [like this one], are additions of Lama Tendar 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. That was a great loss for all of us. Fortunately, his website about Kalachakra Tantra is being maintained.

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 be used to describe the difference between 'emotional attachment mind' (Sanskrit: *kleshacitta*) and 'unattached cognition of the *kleshas*, revealing their intuitive nature' (Sanskrit: *jñāna*). The unwise falls into the emotional identification trap, while the wise dwells in unstained or unattached cognition. So, unattached cognition does not produce wisdom per se, but is the **base** for it. In this sense of the 'wisdom to let go of attachment,' the phrase could be used. But that is not the sense normally applied.

Yeshe is widely translated as wisdom by many translators, 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 'unstained 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. But it is not wisdom as an ability, talent or trait of human character. It is the at best the **origin** of wisdom. The true natural intuitive clarity, that is inborn with emotionality. But being such a base, the phrase 'wisdom-mind' may be applied, since wisdom will eventually rise from this base.

It is like the Buddha Sakyamuni, who gained liberation in a split second, while his enlightenment lasted 12 hours, according to tradition. So also, wisdom may be acquired in due time, if true intuition without attachment is applied to situations, people, animals, environments and so on. It may take longer though, than just 12 hours. Whereas the transformation from attachment to pure intuition happens instantaneously. So intuitive clarity is like jumping into the water, while wisdom is like, when you have learned to swim, mastered it and start to help people in trouble and suffering in such a way, that really makes them wake up, understand and empowers them to resolve their challenges in life and death.

Another use in the West of the word 'wisdom' in connection with Dharma, is normally applied with the term 'prajña' or 'sherab' in Tibetan. This I translate as 'ascertainment of the clarity of mind' – or 'awareness of clarity' – or 'to become conscious of the inherent clarity of mind, while you experience various other experiences, without losing your appreciation of the clarity of your mind in that instant.' So your attention is on the clarity of mind – and not so much on the experiences. Prajña is simply the clarity aspect of mind in the *moment of consciousness* – **without dualism** attached to it – when you are aware of it. Like before, the possibility of wisdom lies in the non-presence of dualism, that otherwise covers or hides the nature of mind – though it is not wisdom by itself.

Wisdom may rise as a consequence of using the insight provided by this non-dual ascertainment. This ascertainment is called 'insight' – because the mind will recognise itself, when dualism has been abandoned. For most people, such an event of mind recognising itself is both very sudden and will normally last just a moment – to begin with. Then it is back to the normal state of deluded dualistic mind. It is in this way, that you may 'collect' experiences about prajña – together with experiences of merit – the so-called two kinds of collections.

The two kinds of unstained cognition or so called 'wisdoms' are characterised by a lot less mental work, when you do not construct dualism, emotional clinging, identification and thinking on top of everything. The flow of consciousness becomes unobstructed as well, making everything more easy.

Please note, that both kinds of unstained cognition are actualised by having the mind let go of attachment and identification with both experiences and the concept of an experiencer, an observer, a witness or a 'Self' – Sanskrit: *atman*. The liberating factor lies in the non-construction – in the letting go – 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 note also, that attachment and dualism is just as 'original' in the same sense. Because we have been recycled in samsara since beginningless time due to *avidya*. It is not 'original sin' – but pristine error making.

Please also note, that since the 'wisdom-mind' is concerned with emotionality, it belongs to *the fourth skandha* – while the 'ascertainment by inborn clarity' has to do with the nature of consciousness, so it belongs to *the fifth skandha*.