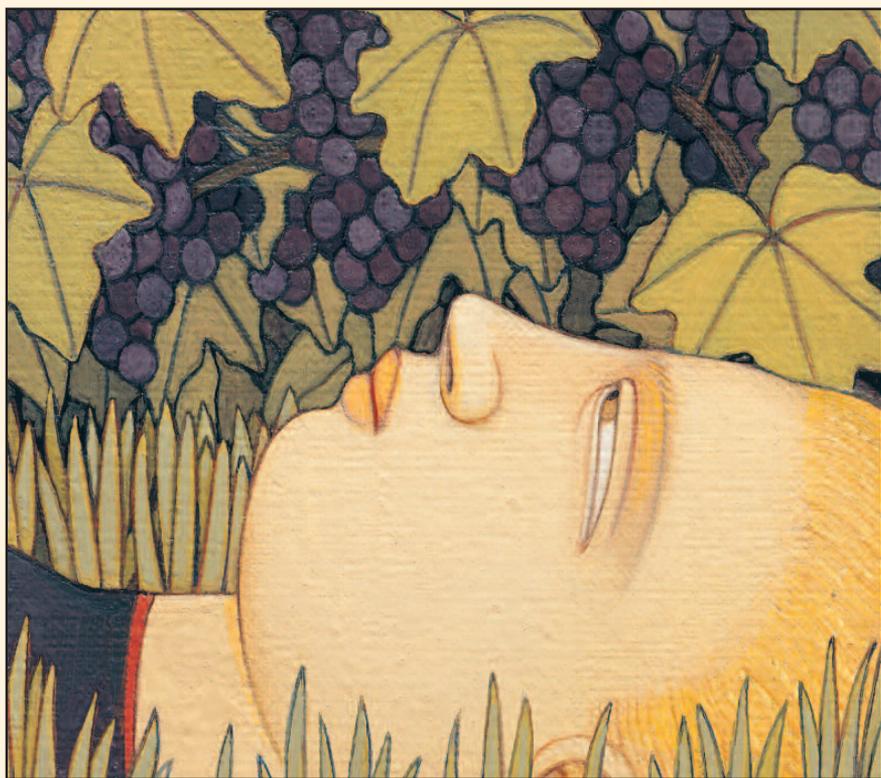


SLEEPING, DREAMING, AND DYING



An Exploration of Consciousness with
The Dalai Lama

Edited and narrated by Francisco J. Varela, Ph.D.

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*An Exploration of Consciousness
with the Dalai Lama*

Foreword by

H.H. THE FOURTEENTH DALAI LAMA

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THE DALAI LAMA

Foreword

WE LIVE IN AN ERA in which science and technology have had a tremendous impact on all our lives. Science, a great product of the human intellect, and the wonderful tool of technology, are expressions of our greatest gift—human creativity. Some of their effects, such as developments in communications and health care, have been wonderfully fruitful. Others, like sophisticated weapons systems, have been unbelievably destructive.

Many people have believed that science and technology could solve all our problems. Lately, however, we have witnessed a change in attitude. It has become clear that external progress alone cannot bring mental peace. People have begun to pay greater attention to inner science, the path of mental investigation and development. Through our own experience we have arrived at a point where there is a new awareness of the importance and value of inner mental qualities. Therefore, the explanations of the mind and its workings presented by the ancient scholars of India and Tibet are becoming increasingly valuable in our time. The strength of these traditions is related to developing mental peace. Science and technology are related to material progress. But a combination of these two can provide the complete conditions for obtaining real human happiness.

The series of meetings that we have called “Mind and Life” have been going on for several years. I consider them to be of crucial importance. It is not so long ago that many people viewed common science’s objective knowledge and the subjective understanding of inner science as mutually exclusive. In the Mind and Life meetings experts from both these fields of investigation have come together to exchange their experience and different points of view on topics

of common interest. It has been a pleasure to discover the great extent to which we have been able to enrich each other's understanding. Moreover, our meetings have been marked not merely by polite curiosity, but also by a warm spirit of openness and friendship.

On the occasion reported in this book we met to discuss sleeping, dreaming, and dying. These are topics that absorb scientists and meditators alike, but are also universal elements of human experience. We all sleep. Whether we acknowledge it or not we all dream. And certainly every single one of us will die. Although these issues affect us all, they retain a sense of mystery and fascination. Therefore, I am sure that many readers will be delighted to be able to share in the fruit of our discussions. It remains only for me to express my gratitude to everyone who has contributed to these meetings so far, and to repeat my earnest hope that they will continue to take place in the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lama', written in a cursive, flowing style.

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama
March 25, 1996

A Prelude to the Journey

ALWAYS AND EVERYWHERE, humans have faced two major life passages in which our habitual mind seems to dissolve and enter a radically different realm. The first passage is sleep, humanity's constant companion, transitory and filled with the dream life that has enchanted cultures from the beginning of history. The second is death, the grand and gaping enigma, the final event that organizes so much of individual existence and cultural ritual. These are ego's shadow zones, where Western science is often ill at ease, far from its familiar territory of the physical universe or physiological causality. In contrast, the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is fully at home here; in fact, it has accumulated remarkable knowledge in this area.

This book is an account of a week-long exploration of these two great realms of radical transformation of the human body and mind. The exploration takes the form of a unique exchange between the Dalai Lama, with a few of his colleagues in the Tibetan tradition, and representatives of Western science and humanism. The exchange was the fourth in a series of biennial meetings called Mind and Life Conferences. It was a private, highly structured dialogue, that took place over five consecutive days in October 1992 in Dharamsala, India.

On Monday morning, all the participants gathered in the Dalai Lama's living room to begin our journey. His Holiness the Dalai Lama appeared promptly at nine o'clock, as was his habit. He entered, beamed at everyone, and invited us to sit down. The speakers were grouped in an inner circle of comfortable couches, with observers and advisers in an outer circle. The atmosphere was relaxed and informal: no television cameras, no high podium, no

formal speeches. The unique magic of the Mind and Life Conferences was being created once again.

The Dalai Lama opened with some friendly words. “Welcome to all of you! There are many old friends among you, and perhaps you have the feeling that coming to Dharamsala is like coming home. I am very happy to have another Mind and Life Conference. I believe our previous conferences were of great benefit, at least to me and to people interested in these issues.”

He then turned to a more global perspective. “Since our last conference there have been many changes on this planet. One of the most important is the disappearance of the Berlin Wall. The threat of a nuclear holocaust is now more or less gone. Although problems remain, the world is now more favorable for genuine, lasting peace. Of course, killing continues here and there, but overall the situation has improved. Everywhere people are talking about democracy and freedom. That also is of great significance. I believe that the desire for happiness is an essential part of human nature. Happiness comes from freedom. On the contrary, dictatorship of any kind is very harmful for the development of the community. In the old days, certain people had some enthusiasm for authoritarian regimes, but nowadays this has changed. The younger generation is devoted to freedom and democracy. We may change the world, at least in terms of social inequalities. The strength of the human spirit again has the upper hand.”

His Holiness went on to set the context for our meeting. “Now we have these two fields, science and spirituality, in which we are supposedly involved,” and as he said this he laughed wholeheartedly and contagiously. That laughter was to be as present in the days to come as was the probing intelligence of all the participants, and the group was never far from a sense of humor. “It seems that scientific research reaches deeper and deeper. But it also seems that more and more people, at least scientists, are beginning to realize that the spiritual factor is important. I say ‘spiritual’ without meaning any particular religion or faith, just simple warmhearted compassion, human affection, and gentleness. It is as if such warmhearted people

are a bit more humble, a little bit more content. I consider spiritual values primary, and religion secondary. As I see it, the various religions strengthen these basic human qualities. As a practitioner of Buddhism, my practice of compassion and my practice of Buddhism are actually one and the same. But the practice of compassion does not require religious devotion or religious faith; it can be independent from the practice of religion. Therefore, the ultimate source of happiness for human society very much depends on the human spirit, on spiritual values. If we do not combine science and these basic human values, then scientific knowledge may sometimes create troubles, even disaster. I think the achievements of science and technology, for all their awful destructive powers, are immense. But because they bring us fear, suffering, and anxiety, some people consider them to be negative.

“Scientific knowledge can be seen as a faculty of human intelligence—it can be used either positively or negatively, but in itself it is morally neutral. Whether it becomes beneficial or harmful depends on one’s motivation. With proper motivation scientific knowledge becomes constructive. But if the motivation is negative, then the knowledge becomes destructive. These conferences will eventually demonstrate ways for science and spirituality to work together more closely. I think each of us has already made some contribution in this respect, and I’m quite sure this conference will as well. We may contribute something, and if not, at least there will be no harm.” This sentence was followed by a good laugh from everyone. His Holiness concluded with a beaming smile, “So that’s good. For these reasons, with these feelings, I welcome you all to my home.”

It was my turn, as chairman and scientific coordinator, to reply to his welcoming words. By then, it was easy to say that we were all quite moved to be there and to have the opportunity to be part of this singular adventure.

Charting Ego’s Shadow Zones

I went on briefly to set the stage for the week’s agenda. Basically, we would focus on areas of mind that are essential for human existence,

yet difficult for Westerners to understand: sleeping, dreaming, and dying. In keeping with the spirit of these meetings, we wanted to address these topics in the widest possible sense, so that broad surveys of what is happening in the West would be presented by researchers involved in their respective fields. The first three days would be devoted to sleep and dreaming, and the last two days to dying. I will briefly describe the reasons for these thematic choices, and introduce the invited speakers. Detailed biographical sketches of participants can be found at the end of this book.

The first day on the topic of sleep and dreams was devoted to neuroscience, which studies the brain's involvement in sleep as a biological process. It was essential to have on hand some basic results of one of neuroscience's most active fields: sleep research. This first morning presentation had been entrusted to a specialist in the field, Michael Chase (University of California at Los Angeles), who had to cancel at the last minute. Fortunately we had a distinguished group of neurobiologists present in Dharamsala: Clifford Saron (University of California at San Francisco), Richard Davidson (University of Wisconsin at Madison), Gregory Simpson (Albert Einstein School of Medicine), Robert Livingstone (University of California at San Diego), and myself (Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris). Collectively we prepared a presentation on basic sleep mechanisms, and it was decided that I should present it to His Holiness.

The second day would address dream work in psychoanalysis, which is somewhere between a scientific psychology and a humanist practice. It is a tradition that has left a deep mark on Western views of the structure of mind and the role of dreams. Although some readers might prefer that another psychotherapeutic school had taken its place at the conference, it seemed to me that the Freudian tradition was the most influential and pervasive. The point was not to champion contemporary Freudian schools, but to bring to the discussion a sense of how dream work has become part of Western thinking and culture. Joyce McDougall, a well-known and respected figure in contemporary psychoanalysis in both

Europe and in the larger English-speaking world, was chosen as the presenter.

During the third day we would move to a more recent and controversial area within the study of dreams: the phenomenon of lucid dreaming. We chose this topic because on the one hand it has received some scientific attention in the West, and on the other hand it has been a very active field of study in the Buddhist tradition. We hoped that some connections with Tibetan Buddhism would emerge. Jayne Gackenbach, a psychologist at the University of Alberta who had been active in this field for some years, would be the presenter.

On the fourth and fifth days we were to cover the issue of dying. We reduced this enormous topic to two main themes. On the fourth day we wanted to cover the biomedical understanding of the process of dying. Although medicine pervades our lives, once a person is considered over the threshold, the entire observational and experimental machine of modern biomedicine grinds to a halt. Little is known about death's intimate, final stages. We called on Jerome ("Pete") Engel to fulfill this difficult task. As a member of a large biomedical facility at the University of California at Los Angeles, and a world-renowned neurologist, he seemed better prepared than other professionals to explore this uncharted ground.

Finally, we would close on the fifth day with our second death-related theme, a view of recent research on how humans have traditionally grappled with death through so-called near-death experiences. These were, again, controversial waters for established science, but they are areas that are clearly evoking a huge interest in the West. We hoped to find links between this research and one of the most original areas of experiential and philosophical importance in the Tibetan tradition, the human encounter with death. As the day's speaker, we chose Joan Halifax, a medical anthropologist who had been a pioneer in this field in the sixties and seventies, and had extended her observations to shamanic traditions.

That was, in a nutshell, the agenda of the meeting in regard to its scientific content. However, as in the previous *Mind and Life*

Conferences, we found it essential to include an overview of the philosophical underpinnings of the Western perspective on these topics. This was crucial, though it might at first glance seem surprising. Clarifying the conceptual basis of a discipline or a history of ideas lays out fertile terrain on which to build discussion. The Tibetans, masters in the art of conceptual clarity, were always very receptive to this dimension of our previous discussions. We had asked Charles Taylor from McGill University to fulfill this role now, since he was known for his perceptive studies on the modern self and its historical roots.

Cross-Cultural Dialogue and the Mind and Life Conferences

Before we begin our journey with Charles Taylor's exploration of the concept of self, let us pause for an account of the background that led to this unique gathering. As I mentioned above, this conference is the fourth in a series of similar meetings, starting in 1987, that came to be called the Mind and Life Conferences. The rich dialogue that fills this book shows that this fourth conference was a resounding success. This was not a matter of mere chance. Intercultural exchanges are notoriously difficult to stage properly, for they easily slip into the pitfalls of superficial formality or hasty conclusions. To give some idea of how we avoided those pitfalls, I will briefly describe our approach to the process of dialogue. And since the exchanges in the previous Mind and Life Conferences were an integral part of the dialogue that unfolded in this fourth meeting, I will also sketch the content of those conferences. A more extensive account of the origins of the Mind and Life Conferences and information about the participants can be found in the Appendix.

As with all such endeavors, the Mind and Life Conferences began merely as an intriguing notion shared among a few friends and colleagues. I had been interested since 1978 in the intercultural and interdisciplinary bridges that can enrich modern science (particularly the neurosciences, my specialty). It was not until 1985, however, that an opportunity to act on these interests presented itself. In that year, Adam Engle and I began to plan a dialogue

between Western scientists and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, one of the most accomplished practitioners and theorists within contemporary Buddhist traditions. Two more years of organizational groundwork were to pass before the first Mind and Life Conference finally took place.

For the conferences to succeed, we learned that the scientists chosen need not necessarily be famous names. Of course, they needed to be competent and accomplished within their own fields, but they also had to be open-minded—and preferably not too ignorant of Buddhism. We adjusted the agenda as further conversations with His Holiness clarified how much of the scientific background we would need to fill in. In the end, His Holiness agreed to set aside a full week for us, a measure of the importance he placed on these discussions. In October 1987, the first Mind and Life Conference took place in Dharamsala. It covered the basic ground of modern cognitive science, the most natural starting point for contact between the Buddhist tradition and modern science. Many of the basic features of the meeting would be maintained and refined at subsequent Mind and Life Conferences.

One important feature ensured that the meetings would be fully participatory. We created a format that called for presentations by Western scientists each morning, with the afternoons devoted solely to discussion. In this way, His Holiness could be briefed on the topic at hand. We insisted that this presentation be made from a broad, nonpartisan point of view for fairness. The presenter could spell out his or her own preferences and judgments freely in the afternoon.

A second important issue was translation. We were able to secure the services of many wonderful interpreters, and at every session two were present, one on each side of the Dalai Lama. This allowed quick, on-the-spot clarification of terms, which is absolutely essential for moving beyond the initial misunderstandings that sometimes arise in dialogues between two vastly different traditions.

A third key aspect of the meeting was that it was entirely private: no press, no television cameras, and very few invited guests. This stood in sharp contrast to meetings in the West, where the public

image of the Dalai Lama makes relaxed, spontaneous discussion increasingly impossible. Thus, meeting in Dharamsala allowed us a kind of protective freedom to conduct our exploration.

The agenda for the first conference introduced broad themes from cognitive science: scientific method, neurobiology, cognitive psychology, artificial intelligence, brain development, and evolution.¹ The event was an enormous success in that both His Holiness and we felt that there was a true meeting of minds, and some substantial advances in bridging the gap between Western and Buddhist thinking. The Dalai Lama encouraged us to continue with further dialogues on a two-year basis, a request that we were only too happy to honor.

Mind and Life II took place in October 1989 in Newport, California. It was a two-day event that focused more specifically on neuroscience. The event was especially memorable, as we learned on the first morning that His Holiness had been awarded the Nobel Prize. The third Mind and Life Conference dealt with the relationship between emotions and health.² At its close, His Holiness again agreed to continue the dialogue in a subsequent meeting—that meeting constitutes the adventure reported in this book.

It was against this background that we met for the fourth conference, with a sense that our efforts were beginning to bear fruit. And now, once again in Dharamsala for a week, we would push the dialogue deeper, into the territory of sleeping, dreaming, and dying. Sitting with me were the contributors whose voices the reader will hear in this book. As in the past, Thupten Jinpa and Alan Wallace would serve as our very able translators.

It seemed best to begin with a learned philosopher's account of the Western conception of what it is to be a self. Hence, I asked Charles Taylor to be the first to take the "hot seat," the armchair next to His Holiness that each participant in turn would occupy in the days to follow.

1

What's in a Self?

A History of the Concept of Self

PAST CONFERENCES WITH HIS HOLINESS in the Mind and Life series had taught us that having a professional philosopher conversant with the scientific topic at hand was very useful. One of the main reasons is that in the Tibetan tradition philosophical reflection and discipline are highly valued and cultivated. A Western philosopher among scientists often provided valuable bridges and alternative formulations that were clearer and closer to the Tibetan tradition. For the topic of this conference, Charles Taylor, a well-known philosopher and writer, was an ideal choice. In his recent book *Sources of the Self*, he had drawn a vivid and insightful picture of how we in the West have come to think about the thing we call the self.³ He launched into the subject with speed and precision.

“I’d like to talk about some of the most important aspects of the Western understanding of the self. To do that I’d like to paint a very broad picture of the concept’s historical development. I think a good place to start would be with the very expression *the self*. In our history it’s something quite new in the last couple of centuries to say ‘I am a self.’ Before this, we never used the reflexive pronoun *self* with a definite or indefinite article (such as *the* or *a*). The ancient Greeks, the Romans, and people of the Middle Ages never treated it as a descriptive expression. We could say today that there are thirty selves in the room, but our ancestors wouldn’t have said that. They would have perhaps said there are thirty *souls* in the room or employed some other description, but they wouldn’t have used the word *self*. I think this reflects something fundamental in our understanding of the human agent, something very deeply embedded in Western culture.

“In the past one would have used the words *myself* or *I* indistinctly, but the word *self* is now used to describe what a human being is. I would never describe myself as ‘I.’ I just use that word to refer to myself. I would say: What am I? I’m a human being; I’m from Canada. I describe myself in that way, but in the twentieth century I might say ‘I am a self.’ The reason I think that’s important is because we choose the descriptive expressions that reflect what we think is spiritually or morally important about human beings. That’s why our ancestors spoke of us as souls; that’s what was spiritually and morally important to them.

“Why did people become uncomfortable with that usage and why did they shift over to using *the self*? Part of the story is that they found something spiritually significant in describing us as selves. Certain capacities that we possess to reflect on ourselves and operate on ourselves became morally and spiritually central to Western human life in a crucial way. Historically, we sometimes called ourselves ‘souls’ or ‘intelligences,’ because those concepts were very important. Now we speak of ourselves as ‘selves’ because there are two forms of concentration and reflection on the self which have become absolutely central to our culture, and which are also in tension with each other in modern Western life: self-control and self-exploration.

“Let’s first look at self-control. Plato, the great philosopher of the fourth century B.C.E., spoke of self-mastery. What Plato meant was that one’s reason was in control of one’s desires. If one’s desires were in control, one would not be master of oneself.”

“Very wise!” the Dalai Lama interjected.

“But interestingly, self-control had a very different meaning for Plato than it has in the modern world. For Plato, reason was the capacity in human beings to grasp the order of the universe, the order of the ‘ideas,’ as he called them, that gave shape to the universe. To have reason commanding one’s soul was the same as having the order of the universe commanding one’s soul. If I look at the order of things, my soul comes into order from love of that order. So it was really not control by myself as an agent alone; it was control by the order of the universe. Human beings were not encour-

aged to reflect inward on the contents of their own souls, but rather to turn outward to the order of things.

“Christianity changed that very profoundly with Saint Augustine in the fourth century C.E. He was influenced by Plato, but he had a very different view. His idea was that we can get close to God by turning inward and coming to examine what we have within ourselves. We discover that at the very heart of things we depend upon the power of God, so we discover the power of God by examining our selves.

“So we had these two spiritual directions: one, Plato, turning outward and the other, Augustine, turning inward, but still with the intention of reaching something beyond ourselves, which is God. A third change comes in the modern West. Take the seventeenth-century philosopher Descartes as an example. Descartes believed in God and he thought of himself as following Augustine, but he understood something quite different by the idea of self-control: the instrumental control that I as an agent can exercise over my own thinking and over my own feeling. I stand in relation to myself as I stand to some instrument that I can use for whatever purpose I want. Descartes reinterpreted human life as the way we concentrate on our selves as instruments. We came to see our bodily existence as a mechanism we can use, and this happened in the great age when a mechanistic construct of the universe arose.

“The modern idea of self-control is very different from Plato, because the order of the universe is no longer important or relevant. It's not in control. I am no longer even turning inward to get beyond myself to God; instead I have a self-enclosed capacity to order my own thoughts and my own life, to use reason as an instrument to control and order my own life. It becomes very important for me to order my own thinking, to keep it operating in the right way by the right steps, to relate to it as an object domain that I can somehow dominate. This has become absolutely central to Western life. It's one way we begin to think of ourselves as 'selves,' because what's really important is not the particular content of our feelings or thinking but the power to control it reflexively.”

As was customary in our Mind and Life meetings, presentations were peppered with clarifying questions from the Dalai Lama. In fact, by following the type of questions asked, the reader can gain accurate insight into the gaps between the Tibetan and Western traditions. In this case, he politely interrupted Charles: “Would you say that this self as a controller has the same nature as the body and mind that are being controlled? Or is its nature distinct from those of body and mind?”

“For Descartes, it was the same thing,” came the reply. “But the self came to be seen as something distinct because it doesn’t have any particular content itself. It is just the power to control whatever thought content or bodily content occurs.”

Self-Exploration and Modernity

The discussion turned to self-exploration. “At the same time as Descartes was developing these ideas, another important human capacity appeared in the West: self-exploration. This grew out of the flourishing of Christian spirituality that was inspired by Augustine, which led people to turn to self-examination, examining their souls and examining their lives. Self-examination, too, developed beyond the original Christian form, and in just the last two hundred years it has become an extraordinarily powerful idea, which is now fundamental in the West, that each human being has their own particular, original way of being human.

“There were ancient practices of self-exploration, but they always started from the assumption that we already know what human nature is, and our task is to discover within ourselves what we already know to be true. In the last two hundred years, the assumption is that we know in general what human nature is, but because every human being has their own particular, original way of being human, we therefore have to draw that nature out of ourselves by self-exploration. This has opened a whole range of human capacities which are thought to be very important. How do you explore yourself? You find what is not yet said, what is not yet expressed, and then find a way of bringing it to expression. Self-expression becomes very significant.

“How do you find the languages of self-expression? In the West in the last two hundred years it’s been thought that people can find the best languages of self-expression in art, whether poetry, visual art, or music. It is a feature of modern Western culture that art has an almost religious significance. In particular, people who have no traditional religious consciousness often have this deep reverence for art. Some of the great performers in the West have an aura around them—famous, beloved, and admired—that is unprecedented in human history.

“So we have these two practices of self-relation: self-control and self-exploration. Because they are both crucially important, we have come to think of ourselves as ‘selves’ and to refer to ourselves that way without reflecting. Both practices belong to the same culture but they are also profoundly at odds, and our civilization is constantly battling itself over this. You see it everywhere you look.

“You see it in the conflict today in the West between people with a very strict, narrow, technological orientation to the world and themselves, and those who oppose them in the name of ecological health and openness to oneself because the technological stance of self-control also closes off self-exploration.

“You get it in attitudes to language. On one side, language is conceived as a pure instrument controlled by the mind, and on the other side are conceptions of language that have led to some of the richest discoveries about human understanding—language as the house of being, language as what opens up the very mystery of the human being.

“What draws self-control and self-exploration together is that they have a common source: a conception of the human being that focuses on the human being in a self-enclosed way. Plato could not grasp the human being outside of the relationship to the cosmos, and Augustine couldn’t grasp the human being outside the relationship to God. But now we have a picture of the human being in which you may also believe in God, you may also want to relate to the cosmos, but you can grasp the human being in a self-enclosed fashion with these two capacities of self-control and self-exploration. It also has

meant that perhaps the most central value in the moral and political life of the West is freedom, the freedom to be in control or the freedom to understand who one is and to be one's real self."

Once more the Dalai Lama clarified a key issue: "Is there an underlying assumption that self-control necessarily implies a self-existent or autonomous self, whereas self-exploration implies that that's doubtful?" Charles answered that that was not necessarily the case, that self-exploration also presupposes a self, but opens the possibility that the exploration can go beyond that. The stance of self-control assumes that there is a controlling agency and never calls that into doubt. For instance, Descartes' philosophy famously starts with the certainty that I, myself, exist. The entire edifice of scientific understanding of the world is built on that certainty.

Science and the Self

After painting this masterful picture of what it is to be a modern self, Charles brought the discussion back to the task at hand by relating these concepts of the self to the scientific tradition, and in particular to certain modes of scientific understanding that had already figured in earlier Mind and Life Conferences. "Take, for instance, the type of cognitive psychology that understands human thinking on the model of the digital computer. This is an extraordinary idea, a crazy idea for some of us, I have to admit, but with immense imaginative power.

"Going back to Descartes himself, the stance towards the self as a domain of instrumentality views the self as a kind of mechanism. The idea that we are, at bottom, just a mechanism is very congenial to this field. At the same time, Descartes put a tremendous emphasis on clear, calculative thinking. In other words, thinking would be clearest when it followed certain formal rules where you could be absolutely certain that each stage was a valid step from which to proceed to the next valid step. The wonderful thing about computers is that they combine this absolutely formal thinking with a mechanistic embodiment. People who are deeply moved by this side of Western culture are endlessly fascinated by computers

and therefore are ready to make them the basis of their model of the human mind.

“On the other side are human sciences that grow out of the long tradition of self-exploration. One of the changes that has occurred in language in the West, along with using words like the self, is the development of a very rich language of inward exploration. Expressions like ‘inner depths’ are very much part of our culture—I would love to know if something similar exists in Tibetan. The idea is that each of us has to carry out a very long and deep exploration in ourselves; we think of that which we don’t fully understand as somewhere deep down and we think of these depths as inner. This emerges in another strand of Western scientific discourse, an example of which is psychoanalysis.

“Another direction of self-understanding that belongs to the line of self-exploration in the West today is *identity*. This is another word that is used today in a quite unprecedented sense. We often talk about discovering ‘my identity’ or we talk about our teenagers having a crisis of identity—of not knowing their identity, and the pain and drama of discovering it. My identity is who I am. In a sense, this is a way of describing myself as a spiritual being because when people talk about what they think their identity is, they’re really talking about the horizon from which they understand what is really important to them and what is vital in human life. In other words, the spiritual horizon of each person is understood as being bound by who that person is. Once again this reflects the search for what is particular to each human being. It is in this domain that explorations of new ways of understanding the human being are taking place in the West.

“This is a point that opens some very interesting and illuminating contact between the Western view and the Buddhist view. The discourse of identity allows for the possibility that I can radically rediscover and redescribe who I am; that I can discover that who I thought I was is not really correct and has to be re-understood and redescribed. Moreover, it’s in this domain that some Western philosophies have begun to question the very certainty of the self as a circumscribed entity. They have raised questions such as, ‘Is there

really a unitary self?’ This is the area in which exploration is going on, the frontier of uncertainty about the very nature of the self. Part of this philosophical movement is a reaction to the concept of self-control, which always seems very clear about the self as the controlling agency and never doubts its unity. This cultural war has resulted in modes of self-understanding that question whether we are in control, whether there are no deep resources within us that escape the self, and whether therefore self-exploration might not lead to something very different and disconcerting, something new and strange.”

The Self and Humanism

The presentation had reached its natural conclusion and a flurry of discussion started among all participants. The next question from the Dalai Lama was a bit less clear and a perfect example of the difficulty in making the leap between one tradition and another vastly different one: “Is there not a special relationship between this strong emphasis on the self and humanism? I have heard two very different connotations of the term *humanism*. On the one hand, there is the very positive sense of humanism as ennobling the self, endowing the self with a certain initiative or power. As a result, the self does not seem so much a pawn of God or any other external agency. In this sense humanism seems to be something positive. On the other hand, humanism in a very different context appears to be negative, with its emphasis on the self and its view of the environment simply as something to be manipulated and exploited by the self. If this is the case, how do these two meanings of humanism fit together, and which is in fact the more prevalent sense of the term?”

Charles replied, “One of the meanings of the word *humanism* has included this concentration on man, on the human being. As I said earlier, the two modes of self-control and self-exploration allow us to draw a circle around the human being and focus on that being. But humanism is also very varied and parts of it are in conflict. The two senses of humanism you have heard are two sides of the same coin in Western development. The original humanism of affirmation was relatively blind to the relationship of human beings

to the rest of the cosmos. And there is now indeed a chastened humanism, among other things, the one that has learned wisdom of the self's connection to the cosmos, but it is not the original one."

The Dalai Lama probed further: "When you speak of the cosmos, aren't human beings part of the cosmos rather than something separate? If the cosmos is understood as referring to the external environment and human beings are regarded as individual agents existing inside it or even outside of it, aren't human beings still thought to be products of the natural elements?"

"Yes, but in the view of the modern humanism that placed us as users in relation to instruments, the cosmos surrounding us was something that we could and ought to control. Originally, Descartes and others held a very strong dualism in which the human soul was thought to be quite separate from the cosmos; but later you are absolutely right. Another mode of humanism explains human beings in terms of these natural elements, a very reductive and a very arrogant stance of control. Indeed, I think there is a profound contradiction in this position. But a contradictory position is sometimes lived because it's very deeply embedded in a culture."

"So basically, both persons and the whole cosmos could be included in the word *humanism*. Does the term also imply a denial of the existence of a deity?"

"Not usually, but there are some people who use the word in that way," answered Charles. "In England there is a Humanist Society whose members have in common simply that they are atheists. On the other hand, a great Catholic philosopher of this century wrote a book called *Christian Humanism*."

Non-Self in the West

As tea was brought in, the Dalai Lama pursued his question on the relationship between the self and the cosmos, asking everyone around the table: "Descartes seems to define the soul as being independent from the cosmos in general and from the body in particular. What about the modern sense of the self? Is the self seen as an independent agent and something different from the body? What is

its relation to the cosmos at large? Now that the self has been secularized, is it no longer possible to continue to conceive of the self as independent of the cosmos?”

Everybody deferred to Charles: “Logically and metaphysically, it doesn’t make sense to conceive of the self as separate, but this is the interesting point here. This whole way of understanding ourselves involves each person as a scientist or agent, taking a controlling stance toward the body and the cosmos. There is an implicit self-understanding that contradicts the explicit doctrine of the science. This is one of the great pragmatic self-contradictions of this metaphysical, materialistic stance in the West. The scientific doctrine says that it’s all just mechanism, including the self, but in order to get that doctrine you have to take a stance as a controlling agency toward the world. So this same agent has a sense of almost angelic or even godlike power over the world. There is a split in consciousness that is deeply illogical but existentially very understandable.”

The Dalai Lama then asked, “In the modern West, when one thinks ‘I’ or ‘I am,’ does this necessarily imply that the ‘I’ so conceived must be posited as being independent or autonomous?”

Charles’s answer was very Buddhist in flavor. “If you ask people, they say no. But in the way they actually live it, the answer is yes, very powerfully, and much more so than our ancestors who thought of themselves more as part of a larger cosmos.”

Joan Halifax interjected, “In the evolution of the self was there ever a non-self posited, the idea that in fact human beings didn’t have a separate self-identity?”

Charles answered, “There are such phases in Western development. For instance, the medieval Aristotelians thought that the really important part of us, the active intellect, was absolutely a universal thing and not particularized. The famous Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd Averroës thought that also, but he had great problems with mainstream Islam. It was because of Ibn Rushd that Aristotelianism had problems entering Christendom; it’s only when Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas managed to reintroduce the idea of a personal intellect that it was allowed in.”

The discussion went around for a while in this questioning vein as everybody sipped tea. It was then time to change the stage, and to plunge into the first scientific presentation: a view of the brain in sleep and dreaming.

5

Levels of Consciousness and Dream Yoga

AS WE ALL SETTLED INTO our seats at two o'clock sharp, His Holiness began briskly. "Most of you have already heard teachings on dream yoga, but it's likely that this will be fresh for a few of you who have never heard them before."

The Notion of a Self

"I will begin with a discussion of the self. As many of you already know, the basic foundation of the entire Buddhist doctrine is known as the Four Noble Truths. What is the point of recognizing these Four Noble Truths? What is the point of discussing them? It has to do with our basic longing concerning happiness and suffering, and with specific causal relationships. How does suffering arise? How does happiness arise? The central theme of the Four Noble Truths is the issue of *causality* as it pertains to happiness and suffering.

"This explanation focuses specifically on natural causality, instead of invoking some external creator or primal substance that controls the events in life. The Four Noble Truths are often expressed in the form of four statements: recognize the Noble Truth of suffering; abandon the Noble Truth of the source of suffering; accomplish the Noble Truth of cessation of suffering; and cultivate the Noble Truth of the Path. All of this is to be done by the individual who seeks happiness and wishes to avoid suffering.

"In this context, the notion of the self becomes crucial. The person who is experiencing suffering is oneself, and the one who needs to apply the means to dispel suffering is also oneself. And the cause for this is within oneself. When Buddhism first appeared in ancient India, a fundamental distinction between Buddhist versus

non-Buddhist views concerned the self. Specifically, the Buddhists refuted the existence of a permanent, unchanging self. Why? Because the very notion of an unchanging self, when applied to the self as an agent and to the self as the experiencer, is very problematic. From the very beginning, there was a great deal of thought and discussion concerning the nature of the self.

“According to non-Buddhist treatises, a self does exist quite separately and autonomously from the aggregates—the psycho-physical constituents—of the body and mind. In general, all four philosophical schools within Buddhism agree in denying the existence of a self that has a separate nature from the aggregates. However, these schools have different views concerning how the self exists among the various aggregates of the body and mind. For example, one Buddhist school asserts that the self is the collection of the five psycho-physical aggregates (Skt. *skandhas*). Another school identifies the self with the mind. Within this approach, again there are various views. For example, as I mentioned yesterday, one school asserts that mental consciousness is the self. Then, if you go to the Yogācāra school, you find the assertion that the *foundation consciousness* (Skt. *ālayavijñāna*) is the self.

“And now we move to the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka school. According to this school, all of the five aggregates are said to be experienced by the self. Since they are experienced by the self, it becomes problematic to assert that the self is also to be found among those aggregates. It is very problematic if the experienced object and the experiencer turn out to be exactly the same thing. For this reason, the self is not identified as being among the five aggregates. But if you then try to posit a self existing apart from the aggregates, it’s nowhere to be found. So that, too, is refuted. The conclusion they draw from this is that the self is designated, or imputed, upon the basis of the five aggregates. For this reason it is said to be merely a name, merely an imputation.

“Nāgārjuna, who is the founder of the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka school, says in his *Precious Garland* (Skt. *Ratnāvalī*) that the person is none of the six elements that constitute the person—not the earth

element, water element, and so on. Nor is the collection of these elements the person. The person also cannot be found independently of these elements. Just as the person is neither any of the individual elements nor the collection of these elements, similarly each element that constitutes the person can be subjected to the same analysis. They, too, can be found to be merely labels, or designations. Since the person does not exist as a self-subsistent entity that possesses a self-nature or self-identity, the only alternative left is to accept that the person exists nominally or by designation only.”

Self and Action

“What is the reason for this very strong emphasis within Buddhism on analyzing the very nature of the self? First of all, the analysis has to do with the self as agent and the self as experiencer. In this sense it’s very important. But now let us look to the flow of our experience: feelings of sadness and so forth arise in response to certain experiences. Then certain desires arise in our consciousness. From such desires the motivation to act may arise, and together with this motivation to act comes a sense of self, of ‘I.’ Together with this sense of ‘I,’ a stronger sense of grasping onto the ‘I’ arises; and this may give rise to certain types of mental afflictions, such as attachment and anger. If the sense of ‘I’ is very strong, then the resultant attachment or anger will likewise be very strong.

“Now one can ask: will the resultant mental states from this grasping onto the ‘I’ necessarily be of an afflicted nature—for example, attachment and anger—or might they possibly be wholesome? This needs to be examined. In the course of all of this, the issue of the self becomes very central. It becomes imperative to investigate carefully the nature of the self that is involved in these various mental processes. Remember that, from a Buddhist perspective, these mental processes are explained in terms of causality, without positing a self as an agent or experiencer outside the causal chain. This is very important, because our primary concern is seeking happiness and avoiding suffering; and the agent who has this concern is the self. Similarly, when we talk of experience, most of our actions result

from our motivations, and all these motivations are ultimately based on a sense of self.

“Effective action has much to do with motivation. Sometimes actions may occur spontaneously without prior motivation, but most such actions are ethically neutral, resulting in neither pleasure nor pain. There’s no *absolute* basis for distinguishing between positive and negative action. But by nature we want happiness, so we consider happiness to be positive. Accordingly, those actions and motivations that bring happiness are regarded as positive, while those that eventually create pain are considered negative.

“Now we can ask: is it a bad thing to have a sense of self? The answer, first of all, is that it makes no difference whether or not you want to have a sense of self—it is a given. This sense of self may lead to suffering, or it can lead to happiness. There are also different senses of self. For example, there is a sense of self in which one grasps onto the self as being truly, inherently, existent. Another sense of self has no grasping onto the self as being inherently existent.

“I am persuaded that a strong feeling of ‘I’ creates trouble. However, that same mental feeling is also sometimes very useful and necessary. For example, a strong feeling of ‘I’ or ‘mine’ creates trouble when we make a demarcation between attachment for my friend, and hatred towards my enemy. On the other hand, a strong feeling of ‘I’ can also create the willpower to succeed or change regardless of obstacles. That is most important. It’s not an easy task to develop the mind, and for any difficult task we need determination and effort; and tireless effort comes with a strong will. So in order to develop self-confidence and a strong will, this strong feeling of ‘I’ is necessary.

“Within a very strong sense of self, what element creates trouble for ourselves? What, exactly, is afflictive? This requires very precise investigation. Through analysis we come up with a threefold categorization of different modes of apprehending the self: (1) apprehending the self as being truly existent; (2) apprehending the self as being not truly existent; and (3) apprehending the self without making any distinction as to whether it is truly existent or not. It’s

very important to recognize the exact meaning of the phrase ‘apprehending as truly existent.’ Here, ‘truly existent’ implies existence by its very own nature.”

Motivation for Action Is Mental

“Motivation is a critical factor in the basic aspiration to experience happiness and avoid suffering. What determines motivation? The body may act as a contributing factor, but the chief influence for the formation of motivations comes from the mind.

“To repeat, motivation is the key that determines the nature of our experience, and it is our attitudes and ways of understanding that chiefly influence our motivations. The negative, or afflictive, forces that we are trying to eliminate are also mental in nature. Likewise, the instrument that we are using to eliminate, or at least weaken, these afflictive forces is also mental. Certain mental factors are used to eliminate other mental factors. For these reasons, a discussion of the nature of mind and mental factors becomes very important.

“When you speak about the utter elimination of these faults, you’re speaking about something that is a very high attainment: liberation or enlightenment, which may be far away. But in terms of our own experience, it is possible to reduce these afflictive elements in the mind by using the mind. This is something we can ascertain with our experience. To take an example, we all start out with ignorance, a mental process. To attenuate that ignorance we engage in studies and acquire new experiences, and in this gradual process ignorance is lessened.

“In order to transform the mind it’s important to have a clear understanding of the mind. For example, the Buddhist Vaibhāṣika school asserts that perception is naked, which is to say that there is nothing interceding between perception and its perceived object. Perception is unmediated. The Sautrāntika school and the two Mahāyāna Buddhist schools say there is a kind of image (Skt. *ākāra*; Tib. *nam pa*) that mediates between perception and its object. This is similar to the idea of sense data mediating between perception

and the perceived object.”

Here Charles Taylor intervened to clarify a point of ethics that His Holiness had raised when he spoke of how a strong sense of “I” creates affliction. “Is there any way in which the sense of self is actually wholesome? What distinguishes a wholesome sense of self from an unwholesome one?”

His Holiness responded, “It is very important for someone seeking to overcome suffering to be able to distinguish between the two, for that is a crucial factor in determining our experience. To reemphasize a previous point, there is no *absolute* criterion for distinguishing between a wholesome and an unwholesome sense of self. Rather, in lived experience, you may note that when a certain sense of self arises, together with other mental factors and motivations, this eventually leads to suffering. Because of the nature of that result, you can conclude in retrospect that that sense of self was unwholesome. So it’s not a matter of an absolute quality within that sense of the self, but rather it is a relational quality, judged in relation to the results it gives.

“Let’s set aside just for the moment the distinction between the sense of self being wholesome or unwholesome and address another related factor, namely, whether a sense of self is in accord with reality or not. Generally speaking, a wholesome mind must be in accord with reality. Moreover, if one is to take one’s wholesome mind to its ultimate state, to carry it as far as it can possibly go, it must necessarily be in accord with reality. So let’s first of all analyze those three types of senses of self that we mentioned previously to see which of them are in accord with reality and which are not.

“Let’s examine the first one, the sense of self that apprehends the self as being inherently existent. How does one determine whether or not this mind is in accord with reality? You can check by investigating whether or not the self that is apprehended in that way exists. Simply put, if there does exist an ‘I’ which is the referent of this sense of ‘I’ apprehended as being truly existent, then that sense of ‘I’ would be in accord with reality. But if there is no referent for that sense of ‘I’—if that ‘I’ in fact doesn’t exist at all—then that

sense of ‘I’ is invalid. In Buddhism, this is exactly where the discussion of emptiness comes in.”

Charles tried to nail this down: “So in Buddhism that sense of ‘I’ does not exist by itself?”

His Holiness qualified this position: “That’s not true of all Buddhists, or of all Buddhist schools. The term *selflessness*, or *identitylessness*, is universally accepted in Buddhism but the meaning of that term varies from one school to another.”

“I thought that the two predicates ‘truly existent’ and ‘existent by imputation’ were incompatible. Aren’t they?” Charles asked. “We were told earlier that the belief that the self exists only by imputation is common to all Buddhist schools.”

His Holiness explained, “There are four major schools of Buddhist philosophy, among which we consider the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka school to be the most profound. One school of thought identifies the self essentially with consciousness, whereas the Prāsaṅgika school regards the self as something imputed on the basis of the collection of the aggregates, or the mind and body. The Svātantrika Madhyamaka and all the lower Buddhist schools regard the statement that phenomena exist merely as imputations, not by their own nature, as an expression of nihilism.”

“And *nihilism* is a pejorative term?”

“Yes. And from the Prāsaṅgika’s point of view, all these other schools erroneously hold to various forms of essentialism, or substantialism.”

“Then do you maintain that the self is not truly existent?”

“If in fact the self does not truly exist, then apprehending the self as not being truly existent is, of course, in accord with reality.”

“Then the third possibility, not distinguishing one from the other, that must be an error, too, or is it not?” Charles asked.

“When one thinks casually, without any strong sense of ‘I’ at all, ‘Maybe I’ll go over there,’ or ‘I’ll have some tea,’ or ‘I’m feeling like this,’ in such cases the sense of self does not, by and large, distinguish the self as being either truly existent or not truly existent. But as soon as the sense of self arises more strongly, for example, when

thinking, ‘Oh, I’m going to lose out!’ or ‘I must do something,’ then, in most cases, the stronger sense of self comes along with a sense of grasping the self as being truly existent.”

His Holiness continued: “For a person who has investigated whether or not the self is truly existent, and through this investigation gains some actual experience of the lack of true existence of a self, when for this person a sense of self starts to arise more strongly it would not arise with the sense of apprehending the self as truly existent. Rather, the self would be apprehended without the qualification of being either truly existent or not truly existent. It could also happen for such a person that, although the self appears as if it were truly existent, one knows that it’s not. In this situation, the self is apprehended as being like an illusion. It appears in one fashion but one knows it doesn’t exist according to that mode of appearance. Hence it’s like an illusion.”

Dense as it was, this exchange provided a vivid sense of how theories of mind and ethical behavior are not truly separate in Buddhist tradition. Now, His Holiness was ready to continue on the topic of consciousness.

Levels of Consciousness

“Speaking about the body and mind, the five psycho-physical aggregates include the aggregate of consciousness. When you speak of it in that way, it seems like consciousness, or mind, is a thing existing in and of itself. This is a false representation, because there are many degrees of subtlety of consciousness. For example, the gross level of mind and energy exists in dependence upon the gross physical aggregates. As long as the brain is functioning, there is gross consciousness, and as soon as one becomes brain-dead, one has no more consciousness at this gross level. In the absence of a properly functioning brain, gross consciousness will not arise. So far, this Buddhist perspective accords with the neurosciences.

“The point at which these two traditions diverge occurs in the Buddhist assertion of a vital energy center at the heart, in which the very subtle energy-mind is located. Some Tibetan commentaries say

that the heart center of vital energy is actually located in the physical organ of the heart. I would say that's not true, but I'm not really sure exactly where it is located!" He chuckled with delight. "However, when contemplatives concentrate very strongly at the level of the heart, strong experiences are felt, so there is some connection. At the same time, nobody can really say exactly where this heart center is located. Furthermore, there are also differences among Buddhist scriptures pertaining to meditation, philosophy, and the like; and Tibetan medical literature presents its own unique theories concerning the subtle channels, the centers, and so forth. Also, among different tantric systems you'll find certain discrepancies and variations."

Types of Causal Connections

"It's quite clear that consciousness depends on the functioning of the brain, so there is a causal relationship between brain function and the arising of gross consciousness. But here is the question I continue to consider: what *type* of causal connection is it? In Buddhism we speak of two types of causes. The first is a *substantial cause*, in which the stuff of the cause actually transforms into the stuff of the effect. The second is a *cooperative condition*, in which one event takes place as a result of a preceding event, but there's no transformation of the former into the latter.

"We identify three criteria for a causal relationship to be present between, let's say, A and B. First of all, because A is present therefore B occurs. This counters the notion that something nonexistent could cause anything at all. So, if B is to be caused by A, A must exist. The second criterion counters the notion of a permanent, unchanging cause. It states: if A is to cause B, A must itself be subject to change; it must be impermanent. Then A gives rise in turn to B, which is also impermanent. In short, the second criterion is that the cause must be of an impermanent nature; it cannot be unchanging and permanent. Moreover, the cause must also be the effect of something else. There is no first cause without a preceding cause. The third criterion is that if there is a causal relationship

between A and B, there must be some kind of accord between the cause and the effect.

“Let’s apply this to the causal origination of consciousness and its relationship to brain function. What type of causality exists here? We have, experientially, two types of phenomena which seem to be qualitatively distinct: physical and mental phenomena. Physical phenomena seem to have location in space, and they lend themselves to quantitative measurement, as well as having other qualities. Mental phenomena, in contrast, do not evidently have a location in space, nor do they lend themselves to quantitative measurement; for they are of the nature of simple experience. It seems that we’re dealing with two very different types of phenomena. In this case, if a physical phenomenon were to act as a substantial cause for a mental phenomenon, there would seem to be a certain lack of accord between the two. How could one transform into the other, when they seem qualitatively so very different? This needs to be answered, and we will return to this later.”

Foundation Consciousness

“Now let’s return to the issue of the *foundation consciousness*. The foundation (Tib. *kun gzhi*) is a term that frequently appears in Vajrayāna Buddhist literature. This sometimes refers to emptiness, which is an object of the mind, and sometimes refers to a subjective awareness, namely *clear light*. In the latter case, the clear light is called the *foundation*, or literally *foundation of all*, because it is the foundation of both the cycle of existence and of liberation, of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. However, unlike the Yogācāra assertion about the foundation consciousness, according to Vajrayāna this need not be ethically neutral; that is, this clear light does not need to be something that is neither wholesome nor unwholesome. Why is that? Because through spiritual practice this clear light will be transformed into the mind of enlightenment.

“We also find a different usage of the term *foundation of all* in the Dzogchen, or Great Perfection, literature, where it is used in two ways. First, it refers to the basis of latent propensities, and sec-

only to primordial reality. However, I'm not entirely sure about the referent of this term in its second usage. In the first case it refers to a particular state of mind. According to the Nyingma order of Tibetan Buddhism, the mind is divided into two types: foundation consciousness, which is the foundation for latent propensities, and pristine awareness (Tib. *rig pa*). Experientially, the foundation consciousness is prior to the experience of pristine awareness. What these two kinds of awareness have in common is that appearances arise to both of them; but—unlike ordinary states of mind—they do not follow after, or engage with, appearances. However, the foundation consciousness differs from pristine awareness in that the former includes a certain degree of delusion.

“Pristine awareness and foundation consciousness both share a common quality in that they do not follow after objects. But it is very important to recognize the distinction between the two. Otherwise, one may well misconstrue the nature of Dzogchen practice, thinking that all you do is sit passively without reacting to whatever appears to your mind. It is a misconception that Dzogchen, or the experience of pristine awareness, means just hovering right in the present, without following after the object. To clear up that misconception, we make this distinction: in the foundation consciousness there is still an element of unclarity or delusion in this passive awareness. Whereas when pristine awareness arises, it is extremely vivid, luminous, and liberating. So there's a radical distinction in the quality of the awareness of these two states, but unless you have experienced the nature of pristine awareness, you could confuse the two.

“A person who is training in this practice experiences these states in sequence. As you're sitting passively, not engaging with the object, first there arises the foundation consciousness. Then following that, pristine awareness arises, which qualitatively is very different. Once you have become well trained in the experience of pristine awareness, you would not have to experience the deluded foundation consciousness first, before the luminous pristine awareness. More likely, you could slip immediately into the nondeluded pristine awareness.

This is a very important point.

“There are three types of pristine awareness. *Basic pristine awareness* (Tib. *gzhi'i rig pa*) acts as the basis for all of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and is identical to the subtle clear light. This is the pristine awareness one experiences at the time of death, but not during the ordinary waking state. It is from this awareness that the foundation consciousness arises. Then, through meditative practice, after the experience of foundation consciousness you can experience a second kind of pristine awareness, namely *effulgent awareness* (Tib. *rtsal gyi rig pa*). The third kind of pristine awareness is called *natural pristine awareness* (Tib. *rang bzhin gyi rig pa*). Where does this natural pristine awareness come in? As a result of meditative practice it is possible to gain direct experience of the subtle clear light, and the subtle clear light so experienced is said to be the natural clear light, as distinguished from the basic clear light. The basic clear light can be experienced only at the time of death.”

Continuity of Levels

“Finally, let’s pick up one dangling subject, namely the origins of consciousness itself. What is the substantial cause of the first moment of awareness following the conception of a human fetus? In Buddhism there are two views on this, the Sūtrayāna and the Vajrayāna. The Sūtrayāna view generally states that there must be a continuum of consciousness: consciousness gives rise to consciousness. There must be an accord between the cause and effect if one is to transform into the other, and for this reason there needs to be a preceding continuum of consciousness that gives rise to the first moment of consciousness following conception. That’s a general philosophical theme in the sūtra context. In addition to the prior continuum of consciousness acting as the substantial cause for later consciousness, latent propensities can also transform into consciousness; so there are two types of substantial causes for the origins of consciousness.

“In the Vajrayāna context you find a more precise discussion of this in terms of *very subtle mind*, also called *primordial consciousness*,

or *primordial clear light*. This is said to be the substantial cause of all forms of consciousness. The continuum of the very subtle energy-mind is the foundation of all of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, a quality that the Yogācāra school attributes to the foundation consciousness. They have that in common, but there are a lot of qualities that the Yogācāra school attributes to the foundation consciousness that are not attributed to the very subtle mind as asserted in the Vajrayāna. This continuum of very subtle mind is not the foundation consciousness as it is asserted in the Yogācāra, not even conventionally. However, because the continuum of very subtle mind as asserted in the Vajrayāna acts as the foundation for all of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, we can call it the *foundation of all*.

“Why do the Yogācāras affirm the existence of the foundation consciousness? The rationale is that they are searching for something that is the self. For reasons of logical argumentation they are compelled to make that assertion. But that is not at all how the assertion of the very subtle mind is made in the Vajrayāna. Vajrayāna does not assert the existence of the very subtle mind as a result of trying to find something that truly is the self.”

Attempting to link this account with the idea of the continuum of consciousness, I asked whether the continuum of consciousness is the same thing as the foundation consciousness. His Holiness confirmed that in the Dzogchen context the ever present subtle clear light, known also as natural pristine awareness, or Dharmakāya, is in fact the same as the continuum of consciousness.

Mental Factors and Sleep

His Holiness continued: “We find within Buddhism very precise and elaborate discussions of the nature of the mind. For example, distinctions are made between a mind that knows its object and one that does not know its object. And distinctions are made, for example, between valid and invalid cognition; that is to say, cognition that properly apprehends its object and one that does not. Further distinctions are made between mind and mental functions, and between conceptual and nonconceptual awareness.

“Various classifications are made, but the reason for making these elaborate theories is not simply to gain a precise understanding of the nature of the mind. Rather, it stems from the primary issue of determining how to dispel the afflictive factors of the mind and cultivating those factors which give rise to happiness. These theories of the mind try to accomplish this. The text *A Compendium of Knowledge* (Skt. *Abhidharmasamuccaya*), Ārya Asaṅga draws a distinction between mind and mental factors, and fifty-one mental factors are classified. Among those fifty-one factors there are four variable mental factors, and one of these is sleep.¹⁴ A common characteristic of the four variable mental factors is that they may be wholesome or unwholesome depending on other factors such as motivation.

“In addition to practicing during the waking state, if you can also use your consciousness during sleep for wholesome purposes, then the power of your spiritual practice will be all the greater. Otherwise at least a few hours each night will be just a waste. So if you can transform your sleep into something virtuous, this is useful. The Sūtrayāna method is to try as you go to sleep to develop a wholesome mental state, such as compassion, or the realization of impermanence or emptiness.

“If you can cultivate such wholesome mental states prior to sleep and allow them to continue right into sleep without getting distracted, then sleep itself becomes wholesome. The Sūtrayāna teaches ways of transforming sleep so that it becomes wholesome, but it does not seem to include techniques designed specifically to alter the dreams so that they become wholesome.

“There are also references to the use of certain signs in dreams to judge the level of realization of practitioners. This has to do with Pete’s question yesterday about recognizing prophetic dreams. If something like this happens just once, it is not regarded as significant, but if such dreams occur very persistently that would be noteworthy. One needs to examine whether there are other influencing factors to be taken into account.”

Clear Light, Subtle Self

“Now we move to Vajrayāna and the four classes of tantra. Among

the three lower classes of tantra, although there is much discussion concerning good dreams and bad dreams, good signs and bad signs, there is no discussion about the actual utilization of dreams in practice. However, those same three lower tantras include ways of bringing greater clarity to the dream state through meditating on one's chosen tantric deity (Skt. *iṣṭadevatā*, Tib. *yidam*).

“The Highest Yoga Tantra, which is the fourth and most profound of the four classes of tantra, speaks of the basic nature of reality. In addition to the nature of the Path and the culmination of the Path, or buddhahood, this level of tantra discusses both the mind and the body in terms of three progressively more subtle states or levels: the gross, the subtle, and the very subtle states. In this context, one can also speak of gross and subtle levels of ‘I’ or the self. Would it therefore follow that there are simultaneously two different selves, a gross self and a subtle self?

“The answer is no. As long as the gross body and mind are functioning, the gross self is designated on the basis of the gross body and mind, and on their behavior. During that time, therefore, you cannot identify a subtle self. But with the collapse of the gross body and mind, at the point of the clear light of death, the gross mind is totally gone, and the only thing left of this continuum is the very subtle energy-mind. At the time of the clear light of death, there is only the very subtle energy-mind, and upon that basis you can impute the very subtle person or ‘I.’ At that time there isn't any gross ‘I’ at all, so the two—the gross self and the very subtle self—do not manifest simultaneously. Therefore you avoid the error of two people existing at the same time.

“To return to a question you asked before, Francisco, the designation of subtle self occurs during a special dream state. This is not just imagination; the subtle self actually departs from the gross body. The subtle self does not manifest in all dreams, only in a special dream in which one has a special dream body that can separate from the gross body. That's one occasion when the subtle body and the subtle self manifest. Another occasion is during the *bardo*, or intermediate period between two lives. In order to dispel the afflictions of

the mind and to cultivate wholesome qualities, it's optimal to use both your gross mind and your subtle mind, and the latter can be cultivated through the practice of dream yoga. If it is possible to utilize all levels of the subtle and the very subtle energy-mind, this is worthwhile."

The Cycle of Embodiments

"Nāgārjuna presents another benefit of the practices of sleep yoga and dream yoga: to skillfully use the faculties that we possess as human beings on this earth, given our particular nervous system and physical constitution, which is a composite of six constituents. With this constitution we experience three states: death, the intermediate state, and rebirth. And these three states, which characterize our existence as human beings, seem to have certain similarities with the embodiments of a buddha.

"One embodiment is called the Dharmakāya, which can be described as the state of pure cessation of the proliferation of all phenomena. There are certain points of similarity between the Dharmakāya and death, in which all the gross levels of energy-mind are dissolved into the fundamental clear light. Moreover, at the point of death, all the proliferations of phenomena dissolve into the very nature of the sphere of ultimate reality (Skt. *dharmadhātu*; Tib. *chos kyi dbyings*). This is obviously not a person, but a state.

"The second state we experience is the intermediate state, which is the interval between two lives. It's the link between death and arrival into a new physical body at conception. At the point of death, from within the clear light of death arises a form which consists of subtle energy-mind, free from the gross levels of mind and body. This is analogous to the Sambhogakāya, which is the embodiment of a buddha in its primordial form, arising from the Dharmakāya. Both the Sambhogakāya and the special dream body are considered to be subtle forms, as is the form one takes in the intermediate state.

"Conception takes place with the initial formation of the gross body and energies. Similarly, from within the pure form of the

Sambhogakāya a buddha manifests in multiple gross forms, called *Nirmāṇakāya*, in accordance with the needs of various sentient beings. This is similar to conception. It is important to distinguish here between conception and emergence from the womb. The meaning here is definitely conception and not emergence from the womb.

“These are the points of similarity between the three states and the embodiments of a buddha. We also possess the faculties that allow us to go through these three stages during our existence as human beings, and Nāgārjuna suggests that we utilize these faculties according to tantric techniques of meditation. In addition to the Mahāyāna practice of meditating on emptiness and compassion, one can utilize the clear light of death for gaining insight into emptiness, thus transforming death into the spiritual path leading to full enlightenment. Just as the clear light of death can be utilized as the path leading to the attainment of Dharmakāya, the intermediate state can be used for achieving Sambhogakāya; and conception can be used for attaining *Nirmāṇakāya*.”

Dream Yoga

“In order to train in the path that would allow us to transform death, the intermediate state, and rebirth, we have to practice on three occasions: during the waking state, during the sleeping state, and during the death process. This entails integrating the self with spiritual training. Now we have three sets of three:

1. Death, intermediate state, and rebirth
2. Dharmakāya, Sambhogakāya, and *Nirmāṇakāya*
3. Sleeping, dreaming, and waking

In order to achieve the ultimate states of Dharmakāya, Sambhogakāya, and *Nirmāṇakāya*, one must become acquainted with the three stages of death, intermediate state, and rebirth. In order to become acquainted with these three, one must gain acquaintance with the states of dreamless sleep, dreaming, and waking.

“To gain the proper experience during sleep and the waking

state, I think it is crucial to become familiar, by means of imagination, with the eightfold process of dying, beginning with the waking conscious state and culminating in the clear light of death. This entails a dissolution process, a withdrawal. At each stage of the actual dying process there are internal signs, and to familiarize yourself with these, you imagine them during meditation in your daytime practice. Then in your imagination, abiding at the clear light level of consciousness, you visualize your subtle body departing from your gross body, and you imagine going to different places; then finally you return and the subtle body becomes reabsorbed in your normal form. Once you are experienced at visualizing this during daytime practice, then when you fall asleep an analogous eightfold process occurs naturally and quickly. That's the best method for enabling you to recognize the dreamless sleep state as the dreamless sleep state. But without deeper meditative experience of this in the daytime, it's very difficult to realize this dissolution as you fall asleep.

“In the Highest Yoga Tantra practice there are two stages for any *sādhana* or visualization practice: the stage of *generation* and the stage of *completion*. In the stage of generation, the more basic of these two, this whole eightfold process of dissolution is experienced only by the power of imagination; you just visualize it. But in the second stage of practice, the stage of completion, by means of *prāṇa* yoga, including the *vase meditation*, you bring the vital energies into the central channel, and you actually bring about such a dissolution, not just with imagination, but in terms of reality. You bring about such a dissolution, and at a certain level of this practice the clear light will manifest.

“If you've arrived at that point in your experience and practice, then it's very easy for you to recognize the clear light of sleep when that naturally occurs. And if you have arrived at the point where you can recognize dreamless sleep as dreamless sleep, then it's very easy for you to recognize the dream as the dream.

“This discussion concerns the means of ascertaining sleep as sleep and dream as dream by the power of vital energy. That's one avenue leading to that result. Now, going back to daytime practice,

if one has not reached that level of insight or experience through the vital energy practice, then during the daytime you accomplish this by the power of intent, rather than power of vital energy. Intent means you have to strive very diligently, with a lot of determination. In such practice, recognizing dreamless sleep is harder than recognizing the dream as dream.

“Different factors are involved in the ability to recognize the dream as dream. One is diet. Specifically, your diet should be compatible with your own metabolism. For example, in Tibetan medicine, one speaks of the three elements: wind, bile, and phlegm. One or more of these elements are predominant in some people. You should have a diet that helps to maintain balance among these various humors within the body. Moreover, if your sleep is too deep, your dreams will not be very clear. In order to bring about clearer dreams and lighter sleep, you should eat somewhat less. In addition, as you’re falling asleep, you direct your awareness up to the forehead. On the other hand, if your sleep is too light, this will also act as an obstacle for gaining success in this practice. In order to deepen your sleep, you should take heavier, oilier food; and as you’re falling asleep, you should direct your attention down to the vital energy center at the level of navel or the genitals. If your dreams are not clear, as you’re falling asleep you should direct your awareness to the throat center. In this practice, just as in using the device sent by LaBerge (see p. 106), when you begin dreaming it’s helpful to have someone say quietly, ‘You are dreaming now. Try to recognize the dream as the dream.’

“Once you are able to recognize the clear light of sleep as the clear light of sleep, that recognition can enable you to sustain that state for a longer period. The main purpose of dream yoga in the context of tantric practice is to first recognize the dream state as dream state. Then, in the next stage of the practice you focus your attention on the heart center of your dream body and try to withdraw the vital energy into that center. That leads to an experience of the clear light of sleep, which arises when the dream state ceases.

“The experience of clear light that you have during sleep is not

very subtle. As you progress in your practice of dream yoga, the first experience of the clear light occurs as a result of focusing your attention at the heart center of the dream body. Although the clear light state during sleep at the beginning is not very subtle, through practice you'll be able to make it subtler and also prolong its duration. Also, a secondary benefit of this dream body is that you can be a perfect spy.”

He laughed in his usual style. Realizing how much time the teaching had taken, and how late it was, he got up, bowed to all present, and left. We slowly gathered our notes and pads, resting in the aura of a knowledge that was both vast and difficult to grasp.