The Tibetan Art of Concentration

A talk by Mr. Yaron Barzilay
Director (India), New Acropolis

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Newsletter
Prepared by Dr. Catarina F. Correia, Research Fellow, ORF Mumbai
On 27 November, 2010, the Centre for the Study of Indian Knowledge Traditions at ORF Mumbai had the pleasure of inviting Mr. Yaron Barzilay for a lecture on ‘The Tibetan Art of Concentration’.

Mr. Barzilay is the director of New Acropolis India, a nonprofit cultural association founded with the purpose of promoting the study of classical philosophy as a means to integrate Science, Arts, Ethics and Metaphysics to achieve global human development.

To render justice to Mr. Barzilay’s exceptional lecture is a difficult task. Personally, after an overdosed week of noises and distractions, Mr. Barzilay’s lecture brought ninety minutes of harmonious and meaningful sounds. His spontaneity, enthusiasm and sense of humor combined with a deep understanding of his subject made his lecture most thought-provoking, enjoyable and memorable.

Through his lecture, Mr. Barzilay guided us on a journey taken by a monk, an elephant and a monkey on a mountain trek. This symbolic journey illustrates the Tibetan Art of Concentration: A means to reach Enlightenment, the unity with the Whole.

Smt. Chandrika presided over the function. She is a writer and an eloquent speaker on spiritual and cultural subjects. Her warmth, wit and scholarship brought a special light to this event.

**Why learn The Tibetan Art of Concentration?**

Today’s life is overdosed by enormous amounts of noise - external noises combined with internal noises. As Mr. Sudheendra Kulkarni, chairman of ORF Mumbai said in his opening remarks, quoting German philosopher Schopenhauer, “The amount of noise which anyone can bear undisturbed stands in inverse proportion to his mental capacity, and may therefore be regarded as a pretty fair measure of it.”

Externally, our senses are constantly bombarded by high amounts of noise and information. A significant part of our energy and resources is daily mobilized just to select the sounds hidden behind the noises. The sounds represent here all the relevant information among so much irrelevant junk.

Internally, our self is assaulted by a wide range of emotions and fears. Our own combined with our perception of those of others. To hear our true self in the middle of this cacophony is probably comparable to the effort of following a harmonious *raga* right in the center of a big city traffic jam.
These external and internal noises are a major source of distraction. This distraction leads to lack of attention and to lack of concentration. Without attention and concentration, much relevant information, in which is hidden the meaning of phenomena, passes without being noticed. When relevant information is unnoticed, true perception of reality becomes affected. Reality is absorbed as blurred images, distorted and full of empty gaps. Reality as such no longer exists to the observer; it is substituted by a fragmented and incomplete vision of the Whole. To use Mr. Barzilay’s words: “Like a painting of Gandhiji being cut down to a puzzle, divided into multiple pieces all mingled in a big tray.”

Our perceptions dictate our thoughts and actions. An incomplete view of reality may lead to severe misunderstanding and therefore unconscious ill-doing. It is here that the Tibetan Art of Concentration appears as an alternative to unconscious ill-doing: a means to graciously avoid noise and distraction, leading to a peaceful state of being. To be awakened to see reality as such. In short, a conscious way of doing the right thing and taking the right path.

**What is the Tibetan Art of Concentration?**

Mr. Barzilay answered this question in a most unconventional way: by decoding a mystical 17th century Tibetan painting by one of the Great Lamas. The painting depicts a symbolic journey undertaken by a monk, an elephant and a monkey.
The monk represents the self. The elephant represents the mind. The monkey represents distraction. This painting reveals the path to attain Enlightenment.

A global overview of the painting reveals a sinuous path punctuated by turns. These are interpreted as the necessary changes of direction required to accomplish the six Paramitas. In Buddhism, the religion of Tibet, Paramita means crossing over to the other shore, or reaching the next stage of being through acquisition of certain virtues. It also means perfection or reaching beyond limitation. Through the practice of six Paramitas – Dana, Sila, Ksanti, Virya, Dhyana and Prajna – a man crosses over the sea of suffering (samsara) to the shore of Nirvana or awakening, from ignorance and delusion to enlightenment.

The accomplishment of one Paramita is essential to the accomplishment of the following one, as a stable step in a ladder.

The first Paramita to accomplish is DANA, Presence and Generosity. To be present is to be generous, is to mobilize all our energy, resources and attention to the moment.
The second Paramita to accomplish is **SILA**, the Right Discipline. The right discipline will bring order, and the order will reduce the effort.

The third Paramita to accomplish is **KSANTI**, Patience and Trust. Patience is a form of trust, of belief.

The fourth Paramita to accomplish is **VIRYA**, Energy and Commitment. The perseverance to follow the path: the importance of synchronizing the self life time goal with its daily goals (part of human earthly existence).

The fifth Paramita to accomplish is **DHYANA**, Meditative Concentration. Only here is the self ready to meditate. Meditation requires the accomplishment of all previous Paramitas. The mind has to be still, in peace, in a sense tamed at the side of its masters.

The last Paramita to accomplish is **PRAJNA**, Wisdom and Observation. Now the self is free of its self-generating Maya, the illusion. The self can now perceive reality as a Whole.

As Mr. Barzilay took the audience on a visual journey up the mountain of enlightenment, it was impossible not to admire the enlightened art of Tibetan masters of yester-centuries.

Delusion is represented by a palace, full of luxuries, at the bottom right corner of the painting. The clouds hovering over the palace symbolize the transient nature of this life of comfort. Those who seek enlightenment must leave this palace by crossing the river and choosing the difficult path of climbing the mountain of self-perfection. Mr. Barzilay pointed out that every mythology around the world has seen mountain as a sacred representation of spiritual climbing.

As we follow the monk in the first stage of his trek up the mountain, we see that not only is he tailing the elephant and the monkey, but also that both the elephant and the monkey are depicted in black. However, as we follow their journey, we realize that the elephant and monkey gradually change colours. With each conscious effort made by the man, the elephant starts changing his color from black to white, and the monkey’s black appearance slowly begins to acquire the monk’s saffron hue. Eventually, both lose their blackness completely. Mr. Barzilay interpreted this as the man’s metamorphosis from an impure state to pure one.

The monk carries a rope and an axe in his hands. These represent attention and memory: two key elements to exercise in the path to Enlightenment. The fire depicted along the path represents effort. The fire gets progressively weaker until it fades away. The interpretation is that effort will become less and less necessary as the self walks through the path. A small rabbit is also depicted in the painting. The rabbit represents the danger of losing consciousness and of slipping off the path.
As the journey progresses, the elephant’s pace is slowed down. The monk tames the elephant, and it will now pay attention to the monk. The monk is now focused on the elephant. He will soon be ready to lead the elephant.

The monkey tries to capture the elephant’s attention by pulling his tail, but the elephant is now following his master. The monk dismisses the monkey and the elephant is set free. As the Dhyana Paramita comes to an end, he freely joins his enlightened master inside the cave.

The path, depicted as white, is a symbol of light. After the reunion of the monk with the elephant on the cave, this path is depicted as rainbow. The rainbow is representing the clearer perception of the Whole. Like a prism, the self can now perceive all the components of Light, the sequential metamorphosis of one color to the next one.

The journey is a non-linear path anchored on the accomplishment of the six Paramitas.

**What can we learn from the Tibetan Art of Concentration?**

According to Mr. Yaron Barzilay:

- It is a path open to all who wish to follow it.
- The journey to Enlightenment is a non-linear and difficult path: It requires changes in direction and constant self-purifying effort.
- The accomplishment of one Paramita is the trampoline for the following one.
- It is important to leave behind what is no longer needed.
- As each Paramita is accomplished, the path requires less and less effort.

The lecture aroused some interesting questions from the audience. One was related to the fear experienced by seekers along the path of their quest, to what is beyond Nirvana and to the difficulty in understanding some of the sacred texts. Mr. Barzilay answered all questions persuasively by sharing his own personal experience. “To overcome fear,” he said, “one needs to TRUST.” Regarding what is there after Nirvana, he opined that it is a personal experience that cannot be described, adding, “in any case, I have not reached there to answer the question.” However, he felt that, instead of thinking about what lies beyond Nirvana, it is better to concentrate on attaining the several initial stages of self-development by reposing unwavering TRUST in the path one has chosen. Finally, regarding the frustration of not understanding the sacred texts, his advice was: “Be patient, have TRUST and continue your effort. The understanding will come.”
Smt. Chandrika closed the session by telling a story about Krishna and Arjuna, which underscored the importance of trust.

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**About the speaker:**
Mr. Yaron Barzilay joined New Acropolis in Israel as a member on February 1998. He has since then become an enthusiastic follower of classical philosophical studies. Being a management expert, he took part in the development of the organization and its expansion under the guidance of Mr. Pierre Poulain, the director of New Acropolis in Israel. As a teacher in New Acropolis, Yaron is well versed in eastern and western philosophies, history, symbolism, moral philosophy and psychology. He has instructed new teachers of the organization in Israel. In 2000, he established a branch of New Acropolis in the city of Jerusalem, which attracted many followers and volunteers. In 2006, he received authorization to represent New Acropolis as its national director in India.

**About New Acropolis:**
New Acropolis is an international non-profit cultural association, having a philosophical, cultural and social approach. It believes that philosophy broadens human consciousness, enabling self awareness and the subsequent development of better human relationships. The human being is an integral part of nature but he is unaware of his own potential even though possibilities for self-development are almost infinite. New Acropolis was founded with the purpose of promoting the study of philosophy as a global means to integrate science, arts, ethics and metaphysics to achieve human development
worldwide. This vision is implemented through a broad range of programs that combine theoretical and practical education in different fields.

The principles of New Acropolis are: Fraternity among all human beings; Harmonious coexistence between cultures; and Development of the individual's spiritual capacity. Its objectives are founded upon classical philosophy – that is, a philosophy that is mainly practical and active, not merely intellectual and theoretical. With members of all ages, cultural backgrounds, and social levels, New Acropolis emphasizes the principles of union and mutual collaboration beyond cultural, social and religious differences. (Visit www.acropolis.org.in for further details)

About the Centre for the Study of Indian Knowledge Traditions:
The Observer Research Foundation Mumbai’s Centre for the Study of Indian Knowledge Traditions seeks to promote the rich reservoir of knowledge and wisdom in Sanskrit and other Indian languages, especially focusing on their enormous contemporary relevance. The Centre aims at studying India’s knowledge traditions not from a purely academic perspective, but from the point of their contemporary relevance and usefulness. It is the endeavor of the Centre to highlight how these traditions can enlighten and benefit our institutions of governance, political establishment and civil society initiatives.

About the Observer Research Foundation (ORF):
The Observer Research Foundation Mumbai is a not-for-profit, nonpartisan and multidisciplinary public policy think tank engaged in developing policy alternatives on a wide range of issues of local, national and international significance. ORF Mumbai conducts research and advocacy in six broad areas: Education, Health, Inclusive Development, Urban Renewal, Youth Development, and Protection of India’s Priceless Heritage of Arts and Culture.

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