

**THE TIBETAN STATE ORACLE IS MEDIUMISTIC.
AN EXPLANATORY CONJECTURE.***

* See Note at the end of this article.

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Abstract

This note is based on my reanalysis of an interview by Tashi & Rinzin with the current Tibetan State Oracle. I see the key for an explanation of the actions of the Tibetan State Oracle in the *simulation* of *high altitude sickness (soroche)*, or simply being in a high altitude, and in the physiological conditions of the *respiratory distress syndrome* and their conjectured effects on cognition and communicative behavior. The implicit *priming* of the problem resolution includes (a) the Dalai Lama's or the Tibetan Cabinet's demand for a trance, (b) topic-related discussions and conversations before the trance and (c) a preprogrammed *sequence of categories guiding message formation*.

I add the following correction to *Ch 10.1, of this book, 2008¹:312 (BoD) & 2010²:312 (Uni-HH & Research Gate, Internet), Table 1*: 'Descriptive schema for the classification of divination', differentiating between 'medial trance' vs. 'conscious attention'. Under the heading of 'conscious attention', I itemized "probably the *Tibetan state oracle*".

The interview *Seized by the Spirit* (here referred to as SbS:[page] in the following text) with the Tibetan State Oracle, Venerable Thupten Ngodup, conducted by Tesering Tashi & Lotsawa Tsepak Rinzin (in: Sacred Hoop, Winter 2005:6-11 [Internet, abridged version from *Tibetan Bulletin*]) makes clear that the **Tibetan State Oracle** has to be classified as **mediumistic**.

The interview is extremely informative and ethnographically interesting. The main purpose of the Tibetan State Oracle is to protect the Buddha teachings and their practitioners. The interview covers the life history of Thupten Ngodup, his professional formation, his call to the office of the Tibetan State Oracle, and his feelings, memories and actions during the state of possession. In this note I want to conjecture some aspects of explanation of the Tibetan State Oracle's performance.

1. The interview

Life history (SbS:7-8), professional training and appointment: Thupten Ngodup was born in 1958 in Tibet bordering Bhutan. Flight to Bhutan in 1966. He reports to have suffered from tuberculosis. Since 1969 in Dharamsala, India. Since 1969 admitted to Gadong monastery. Joined Nechung monastery in 1971 and became *Cho-pon*, the ritual leader. After the death of the previous medium in 1984, Thupten Ngodup becomes recognized as the medium of the state oracle in an official ceremony, September 4 1987 in Nechung monastery (SbS:10). Repeated dreaming, bleeding from mouth and nose, severe headaches, emotional experiences (incl. disturbances): e.g., "I felt a sudden electric current in me. Then instantly my vision went blurred, and my body started trembling wildly. I had no control of my body. I looked around and saw Venerable Thupten Phuntsok. All I could remember was handing over the [incense] pot. Then in a flip of a second, I was completely overwhelmed as if caught in an

electric shock. It was so swift that I could not remember anything that must have happened to me.” (SbS:10).

The experience of trance is described in somatic and perceptual terms.

Behavioral changes: Before going into a trance, what levels of change do you experience (SbS:11)?

“...sometimes my inner feelings get disturbed a day or two before the trance, and sometimes only a few hours before... If His Holiness [i.e. the Dalai Lama] or the Kashag [Tibetan cabinet] commissions the trance to take place, then it comes a day before and gets stronger as the time for the trance draws closer. The following morning – and especially when I wear the costume and sit amidst monks chanting the call for trance – the inner feeling becomes so intense that it is hard to describe.”

This statement implies that there is a preparatory phase for the State Oracle: the official demand for a trance and the date set for it. The process described as ‘disturbance’ is referring to the inner feeling and is temporally differentiated.

Recollection by the medium / Contents recalled: Do you recollect what has been said during a trance (SbS:11)?

“No, certainly not. Just before the trance, I see and sense what is going around me. But gradually even my senses dissolve and then in a kind of sleep-state I become totally absorbed, and do not correctly remember what has happened and been said. Normally, when I am seated on the throne with my costume on, I do my meditations while reciting mantras. Slowly I get possessed into a deeper state of absorption, and then gradually feel distant from my own identity and surroundings. It is like having a dream and not remembering it the next morning.”

The process of entering the trance is described in sequential terms: the perception of the environment, gradual dissolution of sensual perception, a state of sleepiness, a dissolution of memory of episodes and communication, a distance to one’s own identity. The fact that the contents of the oracle messages are not remembered points to the presence of *receivers or interpreters* who pick up the message from the medium.

Trance inducing techniques: Technically, on the part of the State Oracle, reciting mantras and meditation (two different mental activities or just one, the mantra forming the instrument?), a decoupling from the outer sensed world and the growing feeling of distance from one’s own identity are to be noted. Invocations chanted by other monks and music form part of the techniques leading to the trance of the medium: “The ceremony begins with chanted invocations and prayers, accompanied by the urgings of horns, cymbals and drums. After a short while, the Oracle enters his trance... (Dalai Lama, *in*:SbS:7)”.

Instrumental aids and the behavioral consequences of using them: The **key** to understanding the effect of trance may rest in the heavy clothing weighing more than 70 pounds and in putting on the helmet weighing 30 pounds (formerly more than 80 pounds). The medium wears a large mirror on the chest and has ritual weapons completing the image of a Tibetan warrior (SbS:7).

Dalai Lama (*in*: SbS:7), excerpted from *Freedom in Exile*: “Now the Oracle’s face transforms, becoming rather wild before puffing up to give him an altogether strange appearance, with bulging eyes and swollen cheeks. His breathing begins to shorten and he starts to hiss violently. Then, momentarily, his respiration stops.” The helmet is tightened to such a degree as to nearly strangulate the medium. “Next he leaps up with

a start and, grabbing a ritual sword from one of his attendants, begins to dance with slow, dignified, yet somehow menacing, steps.”

Note the technique of inducing strongly reduced respiration leading to movements of fight or self-defense.

Messages: As to the form of the oracle text itself, “our senior monks say that in the past the prophesies were extremely poetic and difficult to understand... normally the prophesy is spoken in the form of a poem in stanzas, or prose style, or a mixture of both (SbS:11).” This means that the structure of the messages must have been learned earlier (clearly a cognitive component) and that comprehension obviously involves interpreters (“senior monks”).

Embedding into the belief system: “The Tibetan State Oracle is a tradition many centuries old where the spirit of a *Dharmapala* (protector of Buddhist teachings) called *Dorje Drakden* enters into the body of a Buddhist monk, in order to give advise to the Dalai Lama...” (SbS, Tashi & Rinzin). This is the specification of the purpose or task of the State Oracle. “I personally consider that to become a medium is definitely a result of one’s past karmic connections and prayers” (Thupten Ngodup). The process of training and recruitment as the State Oracle is considered as both destiny and volitional action.

2. Speculative hypotheses on the effect of wearing the outfit

[1] Subcutaneous and pulmonary *blood* supply becomes reduced, with the concomitant reduction of consciousness and spatial perception (cf (1) and (3) below).

[2] *The problem (e.g. a question) and its solution (or answer) becomes detached from the current context and situative binding* (cf (5) below).

[3] A reduction of perception and cognition under the control of the vegetative or autonomous nervous system takes place emphasizing *survival* (cf (1), (2), (3) and (4) below). *This physiological variable may tie to a semantic one involving information (from memory) on personal or social survival* (cf (6) below).

3. Explanatory mechanisms

I would like to distinguish between explanations of (I) the historic origin of the State Oracle, (II) the professional formation and recruitment of the person in question, (III) the processes of entering the trance and of receiving or forming the “message”.

(1) **Repeated bleeding** of mouth (referring us to the lungs?) and nose could point to a situation that *simulates* the conditions of high altitudes or even of *soroche* (*high altitude sickness* or *high mountain sickness*): a reduced level of pO_2 , etc. A predicted consequence: Is there an increased level of erythrocyte or erythropoetin production to be noted? This is a *background hypothesis* of the structural and personal prerequisites of the Tibetan State Oracle and the historical origin of this institution. Remember that the current State Oracle is said to have suffered from tuberculosis.

(2) **Trance is induced by means of reciting mantras and meditation:** The trance is induced by the State Oracle himself as well as by a group of Lamas in the corresponding room (‘... chanted invocations and prayers... *the call to trance*...’). Are drugs to be ruled out? The State Oracle mentions the dream image of mushrooms

(implying nausea or stomach troubles?)! Note the use of incense.

(3) The State Oracle describes a **transition from sharp and conscious perception to trance** without any definite or consolidated memory, a decoupling from one's own identity feeling and environmental context (i.e. a process of decentering from self). If we think of space perception and its control in terms of a "buffer" we see this buffer shrinking and occupied by an alien force (or, rather, guide) called *Dharampala*. I hypothesize that this process of self-alienation can be learned and voluntarily entered.

(4) The key to understanding the **message production** by the State Oracle (or, rather, his message receiver status) is probably to be seen in his heavy clothing and outfit of a warrior: the heavy helmet, its tightening so that the State Oracle nearly becomes choked or strangulated, and the weight of the clothing. That means a *reduction of breathing*, a situation close to coma. Cf the quote from the Dalai Lama above ('bulging eyes and cheeks... breathing... respiration stops'). Cf in this context the "*respiratory distress syndrome*" and its physiological conditions.

Note that we are not dealing with a disease but with a "*clinical phenotype* (italics, E.H.) triggered by various pathologies" (ARDS *in*: Wikipedia). I hypothesize that we are dealing with a *simulation* analogous to the Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome [ARDS] and the Altitude Sickness (*soroche*). A simulation is not a disease but is based on experience, training and somatic adaptation. This fact, for example, accounts for the survival of the State Oracle who needs helpers during the trance and when terminating it.

(5) I consider my speculative hypotheses of the **effect of wearing the outfit** on the subcutaneous and pulmonary blood supply as the explanatory mechanism. It binds *physiological conditions and effects* (e.g. blood supply, baroreception, gravitation, spatial perception and parallel awareness) and *problem attention and resolution* (e.g. the formation or emergence of 'messages' or cognitive thought, in terms of contents) as well as *social communication*. I hypothesize a diminishing or even disappearing level of consciousness and egocentric focusing, activity and control affecting contextual or episodic binding. The image of a Tibetan *warrior* might point to *fight for control and survival* (vs. contemplative deliberation). In contrast, the Dalai Lama defines his role as *head of the government* and as *peaceful*.

A neurobiological hypothesis (Gaffan, David & Amanda Parker, 1996: "Interaction of perirhinal cortex with the fornix-fimbria memory for objects and 'object-in-place' memory *in*: J. Neurosc. 1996 / 16(18):5864-5869): the what-stream (*'object'-memory*) and the where-stream (*'object-in-space' memory*) in visual perception are implied. This means: *recognition memory* [= Brodman's Ar. 35, a Short-Term Memory] connected with the Mammillary Bodies via Fimbria-Fornix fibers provide for *spatial orientation*. Does a reduction in one or both of them affect contextual or episodic binding? Moreover, consider the hypothetical roles of septal inputs and the Arc of Papez in episode formation. Cf my neurobiological review *in*: Hinz, Eike, 2006¹ (BoD) and 2010² (Researchgate 2010 [Internet], "Outline of a Philosophical Anthropology", Ch. C.2.2.2 (1), p. 59ff, and (6) p. 62f.

(6) The **formation of messages** and their transmission in the form of complicated *poetic stanzas* point, at least, to a certain degree of *standardized cognitive features or modes of attention and communication*. These features must have been *learned* as a tradition or form of art. According to the State Oracle, the fact thereof is conscious but

not its actual use. Thus, the presence of *interpreters is necessary*. Videos (cf YouTube in the internet, e.g. “Spirits in Dharamsala – part 2”) actually show the interaction between the State Oracle (Nechung) and even the Dalai Lama himself. The ability of verbal expression (poetic stanzas) during trance is at least conserved: Is that fact explainable in terms of preconceived (or learned) “*priming*” or even as a “[*communicative*] *preset*” (e.g., survival [goal value] – protection [instrument/means] – action/decision [effective behavior])? Note the goal-directedness (and agglutinability) of these items. Thus we seem to have a focal sequence of *selected items guiding* the construction process in *message formation*.

4. A hypothetical model

[1] A *model* of binding the different variables and their levels looks like this:

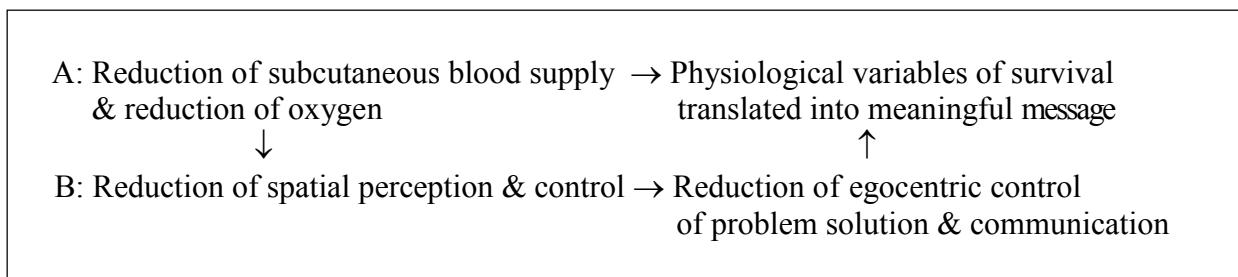


Fig. 1: Levels and binding of variables in problem development (‘message production’): input–output relations (A) and “black box” (B) in the explanatory mechanism proposed

[2] I consider the transition from being in a high altitude (>2100 m, under the condition of a dramatic drop in temperature within 1 day) to catching the *high mountain or, rather, altitude sickness* (HMS) or *sorocheor* even the *Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome* (ARDS) in terms of the following **symptoms** as listed, for instance, in Roach & Hackett or in Wikipedia. Some symptoms of altitude (or high mountain) sickness: (1) central trait: headache, (2) gastro-intestinal system: loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, (3) brain/CNS: lethargy, lassitude, fatigue or weakness, dizziness or lightheadedness, (4) respiratory system: bleeding of mouth and nose, shortness of breath upon exertion. *Aggravated symptoms* (e.g. ARDS; or: HACE [High Altitude Cerebral Edema], HAPE [High Altitude Pulmonary Edema]: (5) problems when walking, unsteady gait (ataxia), (6) consciousness notably reduced (Brown & Grocott: cognitive impairment, i.e. irrational behavior, confusion, drowsiness, or coma), (7) Speaking or communicating highly reduced (but in the interview referred to as ‘non-standard but poetic language’), (8) need of active help: distress; acute anxiety, (9) further oxygen reduction, swelling of the brain.

[3] *Conceptual distinctions and variables*: My further explanatory proposals are based on the distinction between *context of personality and consciousness* [= *ego-conscious control, i.e. by the State Oracle*] and *context of issue or decision-making* [= *the Dalai Lama or the Tibetan Cabinet*]. The latter context is characterized in terms of *possible outcomes* (danger, loss, failure; survival, success), *avoidances* (don’t do it!) and (*collective*) *decisions* (protective action, local setting or map, time frame). During

trance, message formation hypothetically involves episodic (re)binding, map integration, and behavioral facilitation (thus contributing to decision-making) through the medium in neurobiological terms. It is clear that the State Oracle is supposed to handle problems for *precise* state action but not for individual action.

[4] The *body feeling sphere* as a *sphere of identity*¹ is marked by the *skin*: touch, air pressure, temperature, subcutaneous blood supply; and by *psychological factors*: violence, coercion, expropriation, possession. Trance or, rather, possession, is here based upon the acceptance of corresponding beliefs and procedures. Stress based upon the interruption of goal-directed activity (G. Mandler) seems to be one pre-requisite for trance.

[5]*Ego- vs. allo-centric neurons in communicative interaction*: Here I consider the *control of thought*, i.e. one's own thought or, rather, speech-motor production and the other person's thoughts in terms of listening (acoustic sensory perception). As a neurobiological example, cf Brodman's area 44/45 (Broca's field; speech-motor production, "*speaking*") and Brodman's area 22(?), 39, 40 (Wernicke's field that may correspond to Pandya's fields labelled Tpt and PG-opt; "*hearing, comprehension*"), both connected by the Arcuate Bundle (*fasciculus arcuatus*); moreover cf the FOF (*fasciculus occipito-frontalis*) connecting Brodman's area 46 and Superior Temporal Sulcus via area 35 (perirhinal cortex) and 28 (entorhinal cortex). According to Deepak Pandya & Yeterian we are dealing, inter alia, with the highest, i.e. a third-level, association field of acoustic sensory modality, in area 35. This result is obtained from rhesus monkeys. Primary acoustic fields are areas 41 and 42.

[6]*Trance*: Can ego be represented by a "buffer" (e.g. points of autobiographical and self-organizational reference including arguments, opinions, episodes etc.) that protect ego against somatic, cognitive, affective and social-environmental intrusion? Can trance be explained on the basis of 'decentering' from ego, e.g. a shift from egocentric to allocentric neurons representing different focalities (Edmund Rolls)? Are we dealing with a process of decoupling the person in question from ego-identity, environment and self-control, i.e. with the shrinkage of this "buffer"? I concur with the opinion that an allocentric representation still involves an egocentric one, even under the condition of trance.

I still favor Edmund Rolls's (1990:463) clear distinction between the following classes of neurons: (1) 'ego-centric' ("hippocampal responses remained in the same position relative to the monkey's body axis"), (2) 'allo-centric-environmental' ("the field defined by its position in the room") and (3) 'allo-centric-other-system [other-person or TV screen]' ("field defined by its position on the monitor screen independently of the position of the monkey and the screen in the laboratory") ones. Distinctions are based upon considerations of the monkey's body axis. Cf Cf Hinz 2010²:33.

[7] An egocentric/allocentric representation might look like this (notwithstanding the

¹ In my book *Outline of a Philosophical Anthropology*, 2006¹/2010²:13, Pt 9, Item (1), I suggested that the sphere of body feeling might lead us to a possible integration of theories of affect and identity.

suggestive character of arrows applied):

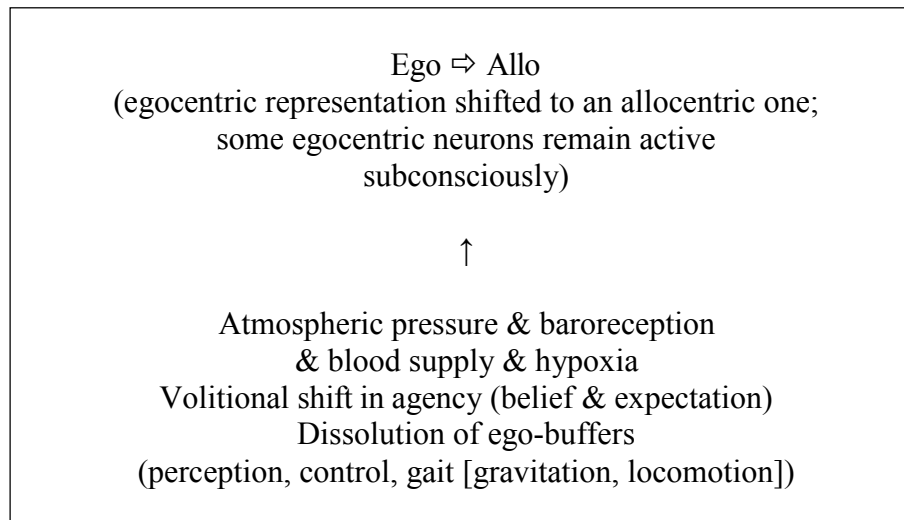


Fig.2 : Anchoring of ego in scene dissolved (\Rightarrow : transition; \uparrow : causality)

We now turn to the famous message transmitted to the Dalai Lama in 1959 (“Go, go tonight” with specification of the geographical route to be taken). I suggest to restructure the problem of decision-making in terms of the following characteristics: *staying vs. leaving (Lhasa)*, *choice of the escape route (mapping)*, *temporal conditions (if – then vs. unconditional: immediately)*. Better data being unavailable, I would like to argue that these *categories* constitute the “priming” or attitudinal “preset” of the then State Oracle probably based on discussions before the consultation. Cf Hinz 2006:182, 184; here Ch. 10.5, especially p326.

[8] *An integrated explanation*: I tried to give a ‘systematic’ explanation of some seemingly ‘opaque’ events. This explanation is based on the integration of information provided by the life sciences, social sciences and mental or cognitive-cultural sciences. The Tibetan *method* is thus highlighted in procedural and mechanistic terms. The tibetological literature contains additional details on history, training, customs and beliefs with regard to the State Oracle.

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A personal note

While trekking in Nepal in 1980 I caught the high altitude sickness at an altitude of ca 3600m after a day with temperatures of ca +22° C and a sudden fall down to -5° C to -10° C after sunset. I was lying in a sleeping-bag in a tent and experienced severe breathing problems for ca 30-40 min. I felt dizzy, drowsy, anguished, with severe headache and the feeling of quite insufficient oxygen uptake but no paranoia or abnormal heartbeat. Finally, I had the idea to bring my trunk into an upright position and the symptoms described were suddenly gone.

P.S.: This file became destroyed in Thailand by electronic interference – the words became written together as in Thai. Correspondingly, the version published here might still be deficient.

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