

The Essential Guide to **Dzogchen & Mahamudra**



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How to Do Mahamudra Meditation

In Buddhism, wisdom is not something we acquire or develop – it is who we really are, the true nature of mind. Through Mahamudra meditation, says Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, we relax into the emptiness, clarity, and awareness of ever-present buddha wisdom.

Buddhism is rich in methods for working with the mind. One of the most renowned and powerful is the ancient wisdom tradition known as Mahamudra. Originating in India, the view and practice of Mahamudra gradually spread across Asia and today has reached the West. As a philosophy, it aims to communicate clear knowledge of the true nature of the mind. As a meditation practice, it is designed to bring about that experience swiftly and unmistakably.

Mahamudra is a contemplative Buddhist tradition known for its simplicity. The practice is to be genuine, relaxed, and aware in every situation in life, to accept and appreciate who we are. To engage in its profound methods, we aren't required to change our lifestyle, and any message contrary to that is not a true Mahamudra teaching. The practice of Mahamudra is an experience of our mind that's completely free and joyful, no matter what our life brings us. It points us to mind's true nature.

The meaning of Mahamudra is found in its name. *Maha* means “great” and *mudra* means “symbol” or “seal.” The Great Symbol referred to is the wisdom of emptiness, which is the very nature of our mind and of all phenomena—any object or idea the mind can observe or become aware of. Because it covers the totality of our experience, the Great Symbol is known as the all-encompassing reality from which there is no escape or exception.

So, how do we begin the practice of Mahamudra? First, we learn with an open and interested mind what Mahamudra is. Then we reflect on and personalize that knowledge so that it becomes our own experience, rather than a theory. Then, having digested the meaning, we simply sit, going beyond knowing about Mahamudra to becoming one with it.

Realizing the true nature of our mind doesn’t happen just by accident, pure luck, or willpower alone. We need some help. We have to rely on key instructions of the Mahamudra lineage imparted to us through a trusted and realized teacher. Mahamudra has a tradition of skillful methods for directly pointing out the nature of mind, which is a unique feature of this lineage. If we have the opportunity to receive these instructions and a sincere interest in working with them, we have a good chance of understanding and realizing Mahamudra wisdom.

Mahamudra is divided into three parts: ground Mahamudra, path Mahamudra, and fruition Mahamudra. Ground Mahamudra is where our discussion starts. It is fundamentally a view of the most

basic reality of our mind and world. We will then look briefly at path Mahamudra, which is the actual meditation practice. Last, we have fruition Mahamudra, a description of what the path leads us to. That will give us a complete picture of the Mahamudra journey of awakening.

Mahamudra teaches us with a number of special techniques for looking at our mind to see its true nature. When we look inside with a clear, steady focus, the mind we see is transparent, spacious, and open. It feels like something's there, but when we look for it, there's no "thing" we can find. Our thoughts and emotions are vivid, yet we can't put our hands on them. They melt away as soon as we notice them. Even sights and sounds, which seem to be real, distinct entities, evade our grasp when we search for their true identity. When we recognize the flowing, open, and spacious quality of all our experiences, even for a moment, that's the emptiness side of the wisdom of emptiness.

When we look at our mind, however, we see that it's not just spacious. There's a luminous, clear, and creative energy that's the source of our compassion and joy. There is also a quality of wakefulness, of all-encompassing awareness. This is the wisdom side of the wisdom of emptiness.

When we recognize the union of this brilliance, this awareness, and the open, transparent space, that's what we call the recognition of the wisdom of emptiness, or the true nature of mind.

In such a moment, we don't experience just one side of our mind; we experience the wholeness of the mind. We see the union of space, compassion, and awareness, which is called Mahamudra.

This is a way of understanding the mind of enlightenment—buddha wisdom or buddhanature. This wisdom mind is rich in qualities that bring us boundless happiness, insight, and a corresponding desire to help our world. Right from the very beginning the minds of all beings have been free of any inherent faults or defects. We might ask, “What is this ‘very beginning’ that we are talking about? Twenty years ago? A billion years ago?”

Actually, it's this very moment, now, when we fail to recognize the true nature of mind. This is the very beginning. If we can relax in this moment, we are resting in the ground or fundamental state of Mahamudra. The way we rest is through the practice of meditation, which is path Mahamudra. When we can rest well, we are naturally in union with the goal, or fruition, of the path. There's no other Mahamudra to attain: we are buddha, awake and free, in this very moment.

But when we fail to recognize the basic nature of our mind, then we have a problem. The luminous, creative energy of original mind is misperceived as the dualistic world of self and other. Confusion arises, clinging begins, and then the whole world of suffering and bewilderment manifests. Instead of enjoying peace, illumination, and happiness, we experience our mind as afflicted

with painful emotions. We're bombarded by thoughts that lead us this way and that. We endure anxiety and fear while we long for peace and contentment.

That is what we call the spinning of *samsara*, or cyclic existence, which is endless until we decide to stop it by realizing mind's true state. So the beginning of *samsara* is when we fail to recognize that ground, and the end of *samsara* is nothing more complicated than recognizing our own nature of mind. When mind recognizes itself and can rest freely and relaxed in a state of openness, that is the end of our confusion and suffering.

Luminosity, the clarity nature of mind, manifests creatively as phenomena. Because we are habituated to solidifying our experience of this luminous display, it's easier for most of us to see the luminous aspect of mind than to recognize mind's empty nature. However, if we're missing the experience of emptiness, we might start to think of luminosity as something that's solid and real enough to hold onto. Then it becomes a source of suffering and confusion instead of freedom. It's important to first learn what emptiness actually means, at least intellectually, before we jump to the conclusion that the nature of mind possesses all the qualities of enlightenment. Once we have a good understanding of the emptiness nature of mind, then we can further that view by seeing mind's luminous nature.

So before undertaking Mahamudra meditation, we should first have a theoretical understanding of the true nature of mind—as empty, luminous, and aware. Second, we should understand how

confusion develops when we don't recognize that nature. Third, we should understand that the essence of our confused thoughts and emotions is free of any innate negativity or fixation, that all expressions and experiences of mind are empty and luminous.

These three aspects of ground Mahamudra are important to understand through conceptual mind first, and then through the process of reflection to make it more experiential. Finally, we bring our understanding to complete realization through meditation.

In the beginning, Mahamudra meditation is a process of becoming familiar with our mind just as it is, and then learning how to relax within it. Our first glimpse is likely to show us that our mind often wanders aimlessly about, and there's little organization to our thinking. It's like a house with junk piled up everywhere. So, what do we need to do first? We need to bring a sense of order and clarity to our mind. By being more mindful of our thought process, our awareness naturally becomes sharper, more precise, and more discriminating. Once we've created some mental space, we can begin to glimpse mind's nature and the play of its creative energy. Gradually, we can further let go of the thoughts, labels, and judgments that keep our mind moving, unsettled, and tense. We can begin to relax, expand, and inhabit a new dimension of presence and openness.

There are two main types of meditation in the Mahamudra tradition: Mahamudra *shamatha*, or resting in the nature of mind, and Mahamudra *vipashyana*, or clear seeing. The focus of our

attention is the mind itself, as opposed to anything external. If you have a background of sitting meditation and are familiar with that practice, then learning to rest in the nature of mind can be very simple, easy, and straightforward.

What does it mean to rest in the nature of mind, and how do we do it? We may think that to meditate, we have to concentrate, we have to focus on something. The actual meditation of Mahamudra is not really about that. It's more about knowing how to rest our mind and let it relax in its own state. That can be tricky, because on one hand we need to be mindful and stay present, and on the other, we need to let go of any stress and just relax. So the best practice is the middle way, finding a balance between nondistraction and relaxation.

In the beginning, that may feel artificial, but if we keep doing it, it becomes effortless. It's like when we start learning how to drive a car. It's very stressful when we first get behind the wheel. Our eyes are glued to the road. We're holding onto the steering wheel so tightly we can feel the tension in our shoulders. At first it's an intense, scary experience, but the more we learn about driving, the more we relax.

In the same way, Mahamudra meditation can feel unnatural and stressful at first. We may be worried that we have too many thoughts and are not relaxed enough, or that our focus is not in the right place. But relaxation will come naturally if we keep doing it. That's the key thing—to keep doing it. Then the experience of space, awareness, and relaxation will come naturally.

Meditation: Mahamudra

First, take your seat on a cushion or chair in an upright and relaxed position. Take a moment to feel the cushion, the posture of your body, the attitude of the mind, and the movement of the breath. Sit quietly for several minutes, gently letting go of your thoughts until you feel a sense of calmness.

Next, bring awareness to the eyes and look directly into the space in front. Then simply relax at ease and rest in the present moment, in *nowness*. On one hand, there's a sense of focusing on the space, but on the other, there's no particular spot to focus on. The gaze is like space itself, wide and spacious.

Whatever comes up in the present, whether it's a thought, emotion, or perception, try to meet it without judgment or comment. Rest the mind in that very experience, whether you regard it as good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant. There's no need to change or improve it or look for a better place to rest. Rest the mind where it is and just as it is.

In Mahamudra meditation, it isn't sufficient just to recognize the presence of thoughts and emotions; we need to recognize their true nature and rest within that experience. So from time to time in meditation, reflect on the three basic characteristics of mind: emptiness, clarity, and awareness.

The emptiness of the mind is something we can “see,” so to speak. When we look at the mind, it's like infinite space. It has no limit. It has no material form, color, or shape. There is nothing we can touch. That space, that openness, is the empty nature of

our mind. When contemplating mind's emptiness, experience the spacious, insubstantial, nonmaterial quality of mind, of thoughts and emotions, and leave the mind in a state of ease and total openness.

This mind is not just empty, however. It also has a vivid clarity, an infinite and vast luminosity, which is the radiance of emptiness itself. It's like a wide, clear sky filled with light. This experience of space with light is the experience of great compassion and lovingkindness, or unbiased great love beyond concept. It manifests in the vibrant energy of our thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. We can see it in every experience of mind, especially in the powerful display of our emotions.

Once again, sit quietly until you feel a sense of calmness. Then contemplate the clarity aspect of mind. Look directly at whatever forms, thoughts, or emotions arise: all are the natural expression of this luminous nature. Look beyond the object and experience the radiance of emptiness, resting relaxed within that basic presence of clarity.

The clarity aspect of mind has the power of knowing, seeing, and experiencing the world. When a room is full of light, we can see all the objects surrounding us. In the same way, the light of our mind makes appearances clear and distinct. When we think about an object, our mind naturally produces an image for it. Whether we're thinking about Bart Simpson or His Holiness the Karmapa, the image we see is an expression of mind's clear, playful, creative energy.

Mind is not only empty and clear; it has the quality of panoramic and discriminating awareness. While clarity is the compassion aspect of mind, awareness is the wakeful aspect. It is the sharp, penetrating intelligence (prajna) that sees through any confusion and perfectly understands the world it sees. With clarity and awareness coming together, we experience the full power and benefit of compassion and wisdom in our lives.

As before, now rest the mind for a few moments. Let go of any thoughts of hope or fear, and calm the mind. Rest the gaze in the open space in front. Bring our mind into the present moment and relax, simply experiencing the quality of awareness. Then let go of even that and relax without any thought. Again, we bring ourselves back into the present moment of awareness. Relax at ease and experience the mind as empty and luminous.

With awareness, we experience the three aspects of mind in union and the wholeness of mind's nature. When we hear instructions to meditate on the mind or to rest in mind's true nature, it is this union of emptiness, clarity, and awareness. When we are able to rest in this nature without too much stress from trying too hard to focus or concentrate, we can begin to experience genuine relaxation.

Relaxing in this space is one of the most powerful meditations leading to a direct experience of buddha mind. With this experience, we can bring a new level of understanding and skill into our everyday life. The wisdom and compassion we manifest

will transform the once disturbing energies of our thoughts and emotions into something very useful and powerful that can bring about the experience of enlightenment.

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Meditating on the Mind Itself

A teaching on the practice of Mahamudra by the late Kagyu master Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche.

According to the Buddhist Mahayana tradition, practitioners need to eradicate certain defilements and obscurations of the mind in order to realize ultimate truth, or ultimate reality, and the most effective way to achieve this is through the practice of meditation. Generally speaking, two types of meditation are engaged in: shamatha, the “meditation of tranquillity,” and vipashyana, the “meditation of insight.” Through the practice of shamatha, the meditator learns to quiet the mind so that it becomes more focused, resilient, and aware—and therefore less susceptible to distractions. Vipashyana, on the other hand, is usually conducted as a form of analysis. While the practice of shamatha encourages the mind to be calmer and less disturbed by conceptual thoughts, vipashyana uses these thoughts to gain certain insights, such as the realization that there is no enduring or immutable self.

The way that shamatha is usually presented suggests that as the mind becomes more focused, and as discursive thoughts subside, our mind goes through different levels of concentration and absorption. Then, when we engage in vipashyana after having perfected shamatha meditation, our thinking no longer gives rise to conceptual confusion; instead, it gives rise to various insights.

Buddhist meditation is said to be different from the meditation of other traditions because of this vipashyana practice, since other traditions also have techniques of quieting and focusing the mind. It is through vipashyana meditation that we come to realize there is no such thing as an enduring or permanent self and that physical entities have no enduring or permanent essence.

Mahamudra: A Tantric Approach

Mahamudra practice includes these two techniques of shamatha and vipashyana, but according to the Mahamudra teachings, it is not important to go through the different levels of concentration and absorption in shamatha meditation. Instead, it is sufficient that we stabilize the mind. Even if you have not achieved an ultimate state of concentration and have not managed to obtain any level of absorption, if your mind has become more stable and less susceptible to distractions, you can proceed with the practice of vipashyana.

The Mahamudra practice of vipashyana is actually quite different from the conventional sutric Mahayana approach. In the Mahayana tradition, we normally use the analytical method to understand the lack of essence in all things and to realize that everything in the physical and mental realms is a product of causes and conditions. Through this vipashyana practice we can gain some conceptual understanding of what emptiness is, and that understanding will lead to a direct experience of emptiness.

However, the Mahamudra teachings say that if you focus your mind on the mind itself, you will realize the nature of the mind, and the nature of everything else. So instead of using reasoning and the analytical method to reduce everything to emptiness, you focus your mind on the mind itself and realize that the nature of the mind is emptiness. Then you realize that everything else has the same nature, which is emptiness.

According to Mahamudra teachers, the sutric Mahayana approach uses external phenomena as the object of vipashyana meditation, whereas the tantric Mahayana approach of Mahamudra uses the mind itself as the object. However, the Mahamudra approach does not analyze the mind to realize that the nature of the mind is emptiness. Instead, the meditator uses contemplation. In this practice, the meditator allows the mind to be in its natural state, so that mind itself reveals its own nature. We do not analyze the nature of mind and we do not need to have a conceptual grasp of the fact that the nature of the mind is empty. If the mind is allowed to be in its natural state and all discursive thoughts subside, the nature of the mind will be revealed as empty of an enduring essence.

In following the meditation instructions of sutric Mahayana, we employ different antidotes for different obstacles in the practice of shamatha. In contrast, according to Mahamudra, we should not become too concerned with the obstacles or with the use of antidotes to quiet the mind. We should have a general sense that

all the obstacles that arise in meditation can be divided into two categories: the obstacle of stupor, or drowsiness, and the obstacle of mental agitation.

When the obstacle of stupor arises, the mind is not disturbed by the agitation of discursive thoughts or emotional conflicts, but it lacks clarity. The mind has become dull, and sometimes this is followed by sleepiness and drowsiness. Mental agitation, on the other hand, is easier to detect because the mind has fallen under the influence of discursive thoughts, distractions, and emotional conflicts. Instead of using antidotes to control the mind in these situations, the Mahamudra approach recommends two methods: relaxation and tightening.

If the mind becomes dull, we “tighten” it through the application of mindfulness. We try to regenerate and refuel our mindfulness of the meditation object, whatever it happens to be. And if our mind is agitated, we must be careful to not apply too much mindfulness; we just try to relax the mind a little more. We can “loosen” the mind by letting go of mindfulness or whatever we are using to make the mind more focused.

If our mind becomes dull, we could also straighten the spine, expand the chest, and tighten the body, making our posture a little more rigid. If mental agitation is present, we could soften our posture so that we feel more relaxed and focus the mind on the lower part of the body. In all situations, these two methods of either loosening or tightening are used.

How to Practice Mahamudra

In Mahamudra, beginners to shamatha meditation should use an external object, such as a piece of wood, a pebble, or any physical object in your visual field, and concentrate on that. Whenever the mind becomes distracted, remember to go back to that physical object. After practicing that for a period, you can use your own breath as the object of meditation by applying mindfulness to the incoming and outgoing breath. To help with this process, you can even count your breaths. Counting helps the mind focus on the breath when that is the object of your meditation.

Each outgoing and incoming breath should be counted as one. When you can do that with some success, move on to using the mind itself as the object of meditation. Try to be mindful of thoughts and emotions as they arise, without labeling them, without judging them, but simply by observing them. As this process of observation becomes stabilized, mindfulness will transform into awareness. If distraction arises, become aware of that distraction; if dullness or stupor arise, become aware of that; if mental agitation arises, become aware of that.

When you contemplate the mind itself and let the mind be in its natural state, you will experience a sense of clarity as well as mental stability. In the Mahamudra teachings, this is described as the aspect of stability and the aspect of clarity. Both mental clarity and stability must be present. According to the Mahamudra teachings, if you can pursue this practice and make the mind more stable and clear, then even when thoughts and emotions

arise, the stability and clarity of your mind will not be disturbed. If you can maintain mental clarity equally whether your mind is calm or agitated, that is the best form of meditation. The ultimate goal of meditation is not to eradicate thoughts and emotions but to maintain that sense of awareness when mind is in movement as well as in a restful state.

Awareness is present whether the mind is in a state of rest or a state of movement; it does not make any difference. The nature of the mind is realized when the mind does not make any distinction in meditation between mental agitation and rest. By not making this distinction, the mind is left in its natural state, and thoughts and emotions become self-liberated.

The Mahamudra teachings also say we should not think of thoughts and emotions (particularly negative ones) as having to be eradicated or removed. If we can realize the nature of these thoughts and emotions, we will understand the nature of mind itself. In the teachings, the relationship between the nature of mind and delusions is compared to a lotus blossoming in mud or grain growing in a field of manure. Just as a lotus blossoms in mud and farmers use smelly manure to cultivate their fields, we attain wisdom by realizing the nature of the defilements and obscurations, not by getting rid of them. In Tibetan it is said, “Having abandoned the delusions and conceptual confusions of the mind, one cannot speak of wisdom.” According to the Mahamudra

understanding, wisdom is not attained through the eradication of defilements but from understanding the nature of the defilements.

The Mahamudra teachings use the phrase “ordinary mind,” which means that to realize the nature of the mind, to realize buddhanature, does not involve getting rid of anything that exists within the mind. It comes from realizing the nature of this very mind we already have: the mind that thinks, wills, anticipates, and feels. The problem is not that we have thoughts and emotions; the problem is that we do not understand the nature of these thoughts and emotions. Through the practice of meditation, the mind becomes more stabilized and develops a sense of mental clarity. Then, if awareness is maintained as thoughts and emotions arise and the mind is left to itself, those thoughts and emotions will reveal the nature of mind, just as a mind undisturbed by thoughts and emotions reveals the nature of mind.

Letting the Mind Be in Its Natural State, Effortlessly

The simple technique of letting the mind be is conducted by either tightening or loosening body and mind. However, even these two methods should not be done with extreme deliberation or effort, which is why another expression in Mahamudra is very helpful: “Letting the mind be in its natural state effortlessly.” This effortlessness comes from not judging, not thinking that the arising of thoughts and emotions has somehow disturbed the mind or upset your meditation. As long as your mind is focused and

there is a sense of awareness, no matter what arises in the mind—whether the mind is stable and at rest or in a state of movement—you can realize that everything that occurs in the mind has the same nature as the nature of mind.

Through awareness, we realize that the nature of mind has the dual characteristic of being empty yet luminous. In terms of its emptiness aspect, the nature of the mind is not different from nonmental physical things, such as tables and chairs, because the nature of the table and the chair is emptiness and the nature of the mind is also emptiness. However, in terms of the clarity aspect of the nature of mind, it is different from nonmental physical things, because the nature of the mind is not just empty—it is luminous at the same time. This luminosity and clarity are what distinguish the nature of the mind from nonmental things.

Ultimately, the nature of the mind is said to have three qualities:

1. The nature of the mind is emptiness.
2. Even though the nature of the mind is emptiness, unlike the emptiness of physical things or entities, it is also luminous.
3. When the mind is stabilized and awareness is maintained even when the mind is busy with thoughts and emotions, bliss will be experienced.

In other words, even if the mind is active, bliss is revealed if the mind does not give rise to agitation or to delusions and obscurations—which are the basic cause of suffering and dissatisfaction.

The Venerable Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche (1955–2012) was president and director of the Kagyu E-Vam Buddhist Institute in Melbourne, Australia and established the E-Vam Institute in upstate New York. He is the author of *The Essence of Buddhism: An Introduction to Its Philosophy and Practice*.

Meditation Only Goes So Far

If you want to connect with the open, spacious quality of mind, says Willa Blythe Baker, at some point you have to stop trying.

One hot summer evening several years ago, I found myself listening to a teaching in a meditation hall in upstate New York, an activity that had become far too rare at that point in my life. A hush came over the crowd as the diminutive teacher entered the room and took his seat. “Do you want to know the secret to meditation?” he asked.

Vigorous nods answered his question. Who doesn’t like to be in on a secret?

“Okay,” he said, “but first we need to prepare to meditate. Get comfortable on your cushion. Straighten your back. Lower your gaze. Relax your shoulders. Take a few slow, deep breaths...” He demonstrated.

There was a shuffle around the room as people shifted, pushed cushions into place, straightened up, sighed deeply. After a minute or so, the fidgeting settled.

“Okay, now—” The teacher paused for effect. “Listen closely. I am going to share a secret with you.” A palpable sense of anticipation settled over the room.

“Are you sure you’re ready?” He was teasing us a little. Glancing up, I could see that he was smiling, enjoying our expectation.

“All right. The secret to meditation is—”

He paused again to heighten our anticipation.

“Don’t meditate.”

He drew out the word “don’t” slowly.

After pausing again to let the instruction sink in, he added, “Instead, just be present, as you are, right here, right now. No grasping. Nothing more needs to be done.”

I’m not sure what others in the room experienced, but for me there was a sudden shift. I felt myself falling into a space of being acutely, vividly, and simply aware.

Dropping the Meditation Project

The instruction to not meditate may sound a bit scandalous in the Buddhist context we inhabit, but it is in fact nothing new. The hermeneutic of nonmeditation has roots as far back as the tenth century and the Indian master Tilopa, the founder of the Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. He sings about non-meditation in his *dohas* (spiritual songs) and other instruction manuals. “Meditate alone in the forest and mountain retreats. Remain in the state of non-meditation,” he teaches in the Mahamudra instruction to Naropa.

How can one meditate and not meditate at the same time? While it sounds like a paradox, it begins to make sense when you consider that non-meditation is a kind of meditation—but in this practice we leave behind complicated notions of what we are doing on the cushion. In non-meditation practice, there is no call

to become extraordinary, no urge to change what is. Instead there is permission to accept your experience of the moment and drop the project of meditation.

Mahamudra, or “the great seal”—along with Dzogchen, “the great perfection”—is one of the simplest forms of meditation in the Tibetan tradition. In its most essential form, it is the art of just being. It is also one of the most difficult practices to successfully cultivate precisely because it is so simple.

We are naturally complex creatures, prone to taking a simple moment of experience—a sensory experience, a thought, or a feeling—and spinning a web of concepts around it. It is a real challenge, for example, to simply observe a thought without getting involved in its orbit. We tend to follow, resist, or judge our thoughts. Pretty soon, what started as a simple thought becomes a complex network of concepts and ideas accompanied by a swirling eddy of emotion and reactivity.

The same goes for our relationship to meditation. It is challenging for us to take a simple instruction such as “meditate on the breath every day” and just do it. Instead, we get involved in a vortex of thinking about the practice, framing the practice, resisting the practice, and comparing and judging our practice against a perceived ideal. Sometimes we even create a new identity around meditation practice. Whereas before we called ourselves a nurse, a teacher, a barista, or a jogger, now we are—in addition—a meditator, with all the self-concepts that accompany that label.

Meditation, in other words, is not only a practice; it is also a conceptual construct that carries weight in our life. That construct may have surprisingly little to do with the practice itself, yet we bring it with us as a subtle companion when we sit on the cushion.

The practice of non-meditation hastens recognition of this kind of conceptual baggage. It helps us see that concepts about what we are doing can sometimes inhibit the actual practice. When we drop the very thing we think we should be doing, suddenly the weight of everything we've been carrying becomes apparent. Ideas, we discover, can be heavy.

The instruction “Don't meditate” invites us to shine a light around and through the construct of meditation. As we explore non-meditation as a way of being, we might even suspend our meditation practice for a while and cease to live by its rules. Meditation is a doorway to freedom, but it will always be a doorway, not the destination. When we drop the project of meditation and suspend allegiance to a construct, we can rest in our immediate experience, just as it is, free from the filter of interpretation. This is important, because immediate experience holds the key to our freedom.

Non-Meditation Practice

The first time I heard the term “non-meditation” was in 1987, in a packed room near Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, when Kalu Rinpoche introduced the “Three Gates to Liberation,” three

key instructions on how to practice Mahamudra. They are not instructions for what to do but rather for what not to do. The practice, he told us, was this:

Do not fabricate

Do not meditate

Do not be distracted

In essence, Rinpoche explained, authentic practice is discovered when we let go and stop trying so hard. He taught that the heart of these three is nonmeditation, which involves the discovery of non-volitional space—a place where we drop striving and trust the fullness of what is already present.

When practicing non-meditation, we are not trying to accomplish a task or tether our mind to something, such as the breath. But we are not giving up either. So what are we doing? The short answer is that we are not doing—we are being. The initial task of non-meditation is to find a home in the present moment and let go of holding on to anything whatsoever. If there is a mantra of non-meditation, perhaps it is let go, let go, let go. We let go of intentions, schemes, expectations, projects, and grasping.

When we practice letting go again and again in this way, a spacious quality of mind that is naturally open and free emerges from the background of our consciousness into the foreground of our experience. If we can stay with the freshness of what is unfolding, aspects of our being conditioned by grasping and reactivity are gradually able to release.

Honing the skill of becoming a consummate non-doer does not mean becoming passive. It also does not mean our cognitive constructions—about meditation or anything else—vanish. Being, we discover, is not the antithesis of doing. Doing exists in the womb of being. So the practice of non-meditation is not so much an escape from constructions as it is a practice of noticing there is a great deal more to our experience than the constructions alone.

In non-meditation, our projections, beliefs, and opinions are held lightly, and the vibrant space around and within them becomes the refuge. In everyday life, we focus on the content of the mind's activity. In non-meditation, we focus on the energy of the mind's activity. From that vantage point, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and so on are just pure dynamic energy, neither good nor bad, neither right nor wrong. When we notice this, we ease up on ourselves. We become more aware of the relativity of our thoughts and are able to disentangle ourselves from them, which enables us to be less reactive to whatever is happening, inside or out. We trust the energy of thought more than its content and can therefore have a sense of humor about the antics of our own mind.

Natural Awareness Is Already Present

One of the assumptions I long carried with me as a meditator was that I am not good enough as I am. As a result, for many years I operated under the notion that meditation would fix me and

make me a better, more peaceful person. Many of us carry this notion deep down; we tend to come to the spiritual path wanting to make our lives and ourselves better.

In other words, when we embark on a project of meditation, we do so with a belief that it will lead us to a future state of peace. In Mahamudra practice, however, the goal is not a future peace. While the aspiration to attain inner peace or to be free from suffering may seem perfectly natural, there is a subtle kind of violence—and also a deep misunderstanding—in the notion that we are not sufficient as we are.

A basic tenet of Buddhism is that our innermost being is already aware, clear, and unwavering. Not in the future, but right now. In some traditions, this fully wise, awake aspect is called buddhanature. In Mahamudra practice, it is called natural awareness. Natural awareness is not a state; it is fundamental to who we are. We meditate in order to witness this clarity, spaciousness, and compassion as our innermost being.

When we first sit on the cushion, we may have trouble believing there is anything of that nature in a chaotic mind full of churning thoughts and feelings. But as we sit more and more, eventually we discover that a very subtle, quiet awareness is watching the chaos. Natural awareness is not thrown off by the chaos of the relative mind. It remains grounded in every moment of experience, not separate from what it sees; it is a selfless, non-dual watcher. It is completely ordinary and present in the now.

To experience this quiet watcher, we practice carefully observing the fundamental ground of present experience, the home and essence of the watcher. To the degree that meditation supports this reflexive gaze, it supports the recognition of natural awareness. But to the degree that meditation is future- or goal-oriented, it takes us away from natural awareness.

Right Here in This Wild Mind

In order to stay with a process of subtle self-observation, a commitment to tolerance is necessary. We have to become okay with our mind just as it is. Awakening is not found anywhere other than within this wild mind—not in the future nor in the past. So we need to find some friendliness toward everything arising in the mind. We cannot explore the truth of the mind while judging or reacting to it.

Non-meditation involves letting everything—the messiness and chaos—be there, creating a holding environment for the mind’s gymnastics without suppressing, fixing, judging, or getting carried away by them. The practice of non-meditation is a practice of deeply accepting the truth of our present experience. This requires a great deal of patience and love.

This love and friendliness is well worth cultivating because as it turns out, the messiness itself is not a problem in need of fixing. Our messiness harbors the essence of natural awareness. We tend to believe that chaos is not fundamental to who we are, but in fact our chaos cannot be separated out from its ground and distilled

into something more “pure.” Natural awareness saturates it. So the practice is not to escape, suppress, or fix our mind but to see natural awareness within our wild mind.

If our practice is to simply notice natural awareness, a quality of mind that is already present right here and now within every moment, then it is counterproductive to try to make something special happen—even to bring about a meditation state (*jhana*) or meditative stability. Those practices, so prevalent in Buddhism, draw us toward thinking about a before and an after, pursuing special states of being.

Natural awareness has no before and after; it is already awake. It is already happening. It cannot happen later. There is no special event, other than noticing with increasing depth and intensity what is happening right now. Sometimes natural awareness is also called “ordinary awareness,” emphasizing that it is nothing exotic or special. It is ever-present and ordinary, a constant reality. And yet to witness something this subtle directly is extraordinary and the essence of awakening.

So there is nothing to be cultivated in Mahamudra except this subtle turn of attention to what is already there, to something that we already are. Adding something onto our already present awareness, something that is labeled “meditation,” becomes a distraction.

Always a Fresh Experience

The Tibetan word for meditation is *gom*, which essentially means “to get used to something by repeating it.” When we meditate, we return to a technique again and again. This familiar return can be comfortable, but it can become repetitive or even boring, resulting in resistance to the practice itself. What can we do about this boredom and resistance?

Just as meditation carries the implication of repetition, the term “non-meditation” carries the implication that every time we sit we are not repeating the same thing again and again. We are observing something totally new in every moment. Every time you sit down, there is an encouragement to consider this meditation session as your very first. Simply by reframing our practice as non-repetition, we can acquaint ourselves with the uniqueness of each meditation session.

In Mahamudra meditation, the present moment of awareness becomes our meditation “object.” Instead of doing something, we practice dropping effort and just resting in the here and now. If we are really in the present moment, a sense of adventure will often spontaneously arise, because anything can happen. There is an unpredictable unfolding of experience—feelings, perceptions, sounds, thoughts—as we ride the wave of now.

The past cannot be found anywhere. The future is also a fiction. This moment is indeed the only moment that has ever happened. In the practice of non-meditation, when you sit down it is the first and only time you have ever practiced. In the Mahamudra

tradition, we find the term *soma*, which means “fresh,” and it refers to the truth of the newness of our present experience. If we can find freshness in our sitting practice, it remains dynamic, adventurous, and joyful. We can reclaim that sense of discovery and excitement that we began with as practitioners.

What About Meditation?

With all this talk of non-meditation, you might wonder if there is room for a practice of meditation in this alternate universe. The answer is most definitely yes. If we can step out of the construct of meditation, enter the present moment of experience ‘with deep acceptance, and dwell in the territory of natural awareness, that is excellent. But can we stay there? Most of us cannot remain in the open ocean for long without needing a life raft. Shamatha and vipassana practices serve as a life raft, allowing us to develop focus and relaxation that we can bring to open awareness.

In Mahamudra, distraction does not mean straying from focus on an object. Distraction means straying from the relaxed, non-conceptual freshness of our present experience. When we get enmeshed in the past or future, we are distracted. When we grasp, we are distracted. Being undistracted in Mahamudra practice is a very subtle skill, much harder to master than the non-distraction of conventional shamatha. Fortunately, shamatha can strengthen the muscle of mindfulness, focus, and relaxation,

helping us recognize what it means to be distracted and what it means to be focused before we work on the subtle art of staying grounded in wakeful presence.

What this means in daily practice is that focused shamatha is frequently used within a session as a kind of “tune-up” for the mind’s attention. After focusing on the breath for a while, we then open up to a panoramic awareness of our present experience. From there, with more powerful attention, we can begin to explore the subtleties of innate natural awareness. In this way, on the heels of focused meditation, we can often stay in non-meditation with more focus and stability, and for a longer duration.

In Mahamudra training, this alternation continues for a long time. Therefore, while nonmeditation is classified as the main practice in the Mahamudra tradition, meditation is an important supportive practice. We might say that meditation and non-meditation need each other.

Non-Meditation as Fruition

This mutual reliance of meditation and non-meditation is reflected in descriptions of the fruition of Mahamudra practice, which is often expressed as a gradual refinement of consciousness unfolding as four stages of development called “the four yogas of Mahamudra.” The four yogas are essentially four phases that a yogi progressively goes through when engaging in long-term practice. These stages are one-pointedness, simplicity, equal taste, and non-meditation.

One-pointedness is a state of focus in which the mind can stay with something without wavering for a long period of time. Simplicity is a state in which the mind's tendency to complicate things begins to dissolve naturally. At the stage of equal taste, the highs and lows of meditation, and of life generally, lose their volatility. Non-meditation is a level at which a yogi no longer needs to engage in meditation at all. The state of non-grasping and open relaxation is the yogi's baseline.

In the fruitional schema of Mahamudra, it becomes apparent that there is a difference between the practice of nonmeditation and its full blossoming. Fully blossoming non-meditation seems to be a developmental achievement, requiring time and a great deal of commitment over the long term. To really experience this blossoming, the mind needs to learn how to focus (one-pointedness) and release the tendency to grasp at the content of the mind (simplicity). The practitioner also needs to develop stable equanimity toward all experiences (equal taste). When the meditator has mastered those skills to the point where it changes their ongoing conscious experience, there is a possibility for authentic non-meditation to blossom.

A Paradigm Shift

Lately I have been tempted to answer the question “Do you meditate?” with the answer “Yes and no.”

Do I sit? Yes. Do I watch my breath? Yes. Do I meditate? I hesitate to answer this question in the affirmative anymore because it is only a part of the picture.

This feels sacrilegious. How improper to be a dharma teacher who does not meditate! But this is the truth. I cannot answer “Yes” in good faith, because what the asker means by “meditation” is quite possibly not my main practice. I like to think of practice in other terms, as a kind of homecoming—a way of being present, of being in my body, of being in sacred relationship.

If we can find freshness in our sitting practice, we can reclaim that sense of discovery we began with as practitioners.

At a retreat I attended recently, Tsoknyi Rinpoche shared an old Mahamudra saying: “Sentient beings are not enlightened because they don’t meditate. Yogis are not enlightened because they do.” In other words, we need meditation to develop concentration, focus, calm, and simplicity. We need it to become more awake. But we do not need it forever. Eventually we must let go of technique and commit to the freedom it represents. Otherwise, like the yogis in the saying, we may interfere with our own enlightenment.

In a similar vein, in the *Alagaddupama Sutta*, the Buddha famously compares the dharma to a raft. You need the raft of dharma, he says, to get to the other shore of enlightenment. But once there, it makes no sense to carry the boat on dry land. Applying the same logic, meditation stabilizes states of concentration, relaxation, and ease in our mind. But once there, it may not serve to carry techniques beyond their useful life.

But how do we know when it's time to let go? The answer, the masters say, is found in innate natural awareness. Natural awareness, when we glimpse it, requires a paradigm shift: we must relinquish control and trust in natural awareness to drive the practice, rather than the other way around. At that point, while we may indeed continue to sail the waters and even—Buddha willing—reach the other shore, we will discover that we have always been standing on the same old ground.

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Empty, Pure, Luminous: Mind in Dzogchen and Mahamudra

Roger R. Jackson explains how different Tibetan schools approach the nature of mind, and why it matters.

Three great philosophical and contemplative traditions are described by many Tibetan masters as the essential standpoints of their tradition: the Great Seal, or Mahamudra, most often associated with the Kagyu school; the Middle Way, or Madhyamaka, which is the philosophical stance claimed by most Tibetan Buddhists; and the Great Perfection, or Dzogchen, best known for its centrality to the Nyingma tradition.

Do practitioners of these different systems ultimately experience the same reality? The Third Karmapa of Tibet, Rangjung Dorje (1284–1339), provided this answer:

*Free of mental activity, it is the Great Seal;
Free from extremes, it is the Great Middle Way;
Comprising everything, it is called the Great Perfection—
Be confident that by knowing one you realize the meaning of all.*

The Karmapa's assertion—echoed by lamas from all the great lineages—that these (and other) systems of thought and practice come down to the same thing suggests that beyond the differences apparent at the level of terminology and sectarian style there is a profound unity at the heart of Tibetan Buddhism.

All three systems plumb the nature of reality as deeply as possible—all three provide methods to realize it and attain spiritual freedom—but Dzogchen and Mahamudra are especially notable for their focus on uncovering the original nature of the mind. Both are what we might call gnostic traditions; that is, their main concern is the attainment of gnosis, or divine wisdom. The Greek word gnosis is etymologically related to the Sanskrit term *jnana*, which in Buddhism refers mainly to a direct, liberating realization of the nature of reality.

In certain traditions, particularly those influenced by the mind-centered Yogacara school of Mahayana, Buddhist gnosis is above all a matter of discovering the true nature of mind—which is and always has been pure, luminous, blissful, empty, and aware. By contrast, our delusions and defilements are just temporary occlusions, like clouds passing across an eternally radiant sun.

Such a notion of mind, which is detectable in many cultures, both Eastern and Western, can be traced in Buddhist literature back to the Pali canon and early Mahayana sutras. It is crucial to the development of buddhanature theory, which in turn is a key to understanding both East Asian Chan/Zen and Buddhist tantra. Zen and tantra, in strikingly different ways and in different

cultural settings, attempt to translate into practical terms the idea that we are all in some sense buddhas already, but have forgotten the fact and must rediscover, reembody, and reenact our original, awakened identity.

Dzogchen and Mahamudra both arose within the milieu of Indian Buddhist tantra, with its emphasis on reenvisioning ourselves and the world as divine, and becoming actual buddhas by transforming our physical and mental being through contemplative work within the “subtle body” widely accepted in yogic traditions.

The Great Perfection and the Great Seal were transmitted to Tibet between the eighth and twelfth centuries, and became there, in different times and settings, vital systems of theory and practice. The hallmarks of the two systems include: a philosophical view focused on the emptiness and natural purity of primordial “mind-itself” (*semnyi*), which must be distinguished from everyday mental activity; a style of meditation that largely dispenses with conceptual analysis and other forms of “mental elaboration”; and a notion of conduct that aims at expressing our liberation through behavior that is relaxed, natural, and spontaneously compassionate.

Dzogchen and Mahamudra often are presented through a “rhetoric of immediacy,” which insists that the surest way to attain buddhahood is to “cut to the chase” by transcending ritual, dropping concepts, overcoming duality, and seeing and living out our true nature right here and now—although their self-identification

as “easy” paths is belied by their insistence on devotion to the spiritual master and the practice of renunciation, compassion, wisdom, and other virtues.

It was such commonalities between Dzogchen and Mahamudra that led the Third Karmapa to equate the two, and prompted some later masters within the Nyingma and Kagyu schools to combine them into a single system of practice. Many contemporary lamas from these traditions teach both Dzogchen and Mahamudra, sometimes separately, sometimes together. This can give the impression that they are interchangeable, two superficially different expressions of a single gnostic tradition. But are they identical? Before deciding, we must first disentangle them, to see what is distinctive about each. To do this, we must briefly delve into their respective histories.

Dzogchen, the Great Perfection

Dzogchen seems to have originated primarily in the northwest corner of the Indian subcontinent, in such western Himalayan regions as Kashmir, the Swat Valley, and Gilgit. Dzogchen is a key concept and practice in a distinctive set of Buddhist tantric writings that includes such texts as the Secret Matrix (Guhyagarbha) and the All-Creating Sovereign (Kunje Gyalpo). Starting in the eighth century, these teachings were introduced to the Tibetan empire by legendary masters like Vairocana, Vimalamitra, and, especially, Padmasambhava.

Indian practitioners of Dzogchen almost certainly interacted with, and may have been influenced by, Hindu proponents of Kashmiri Shaivism, and early Dzogchen masters in Tibet intersected with Chan Buddhists from China and practitioners of the Tibetan Bön religion. Such connections, however, are common in religious history, and Dzogchen is not only Buddhist to its core, but also, despite the reservations of some later Tibetan scholars, almost certainly of Indian provenance. Within the classification scheme developed by its proponents in India and imperial Tibet, Dzogchen lay at the heart of the highest of all tantric systems, Atiyoga, which superseded eight other Buddhist vehicles (yanas) variously associated with mainstream Buddhism, “Perfection Vehicle” Mahayana, and the “lower” Buddhist tantra systems.

Translated into Tibetan, the Dzogchen-based tantras formed an important part of early Buddhism on the plateau, along with philosophical, meditative, and monastic traditions imported at the same time from Bodhgaya, Nalanda, and other Buddhist sites in the east Indian plains. With the collapse of the Tibetan empire in the mid-ninth century, many Buddhist institutions crumbled, and interchanges with India became less common, though the practices initiated by Padmasambhava and others did not disappear.

Around the year 1000, trans-Himalayan contact resumed, and a new wave of Indian masters and texts entered Tibet, sparking what is often called the Tibetan renaissance, with its translations of more recent Indian tantric writings and the rise of Buddhist orders rooted in these “new” (*sarma*) tantras’ Indian lineages.

The most important of these were the Kadam, Sakya, and Kagyu traditions. In this new religious landscape, practitioners of the “old” (*nyingma*) tantras began to identify themselves as a distinct order, traceable not only to the tantras brought to the plateau in the eighth century but also to treasure-texts—*termas*—supposedly hidden at the time by Padmasambhava and others, which their revealers, called *tertons*, now began to discover hidden in the ground, in pillars, and even in their own minds. Nyingma traditions continued to develop in Tibet over the next millennium, explicated and elaborated by such masters as Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo (1012–88), Longchen Rabjampa (1308–64), Jigme Lingpa (1730–98), Getse Mahapandita (1761–1829), and Dudjom Lingpa (1835–1904).

The apex of Nyingma was always Atiyoga, and the core of Atiyoga was the Dzogchen teaching. Dzogchen, in turn, was analyzed by Longchenpa and others into three “classes” of practice: the mind class (*semde*), which emphasizes the natural luminosity of the mind; the expanse class (*longe*), which focuses on the spaciousness, or openness, of the mind in its natural state; and, most important of all, the esoteric instruction class (*mengakde*), which provides a set of radical practices, first transmitted through oral precept and only later written down, that are said to lead directly to buddhahood. Especially as formulated by Longchenpa, the esoteric instruction class forms the heart of Nyingma theory and practice to this day.

Dzogchen theory focuses above all on mind-itself, which is seen as a primordially pure, empty, and luminous gnosis (*yeshe*) or awareness (*rigpa*), which must be distinguished from unenlightened “ordinary” mind (*sem*). Awareness is not only the true nature of each individual sentient being but the very source and substance—in Yogacara terms, the foundation (*alaya*)—of the cosmos itself. Rigpa is conventionally divisible into essence, nature, and compassionate energy, and includes within it all of samsara and nirvana. Beginninglessly pure mind-itself is captured symbolically in the figure of the primordial buddha Samantabhadra (luminosity) and his consort, Samantabhadri (emptiness). Although we and all beings—indeed, all things—are thus originally pure, we fail to recognize the fact, and hence wander in samsara, bound by delusion and defilement. In order to reclaim our primordial purity and awareness, we must understand the mind as it truly is.

If we are spiritually adept, we may, with appropriate prompting, realize our true nature quickly, even instantaneously. For most of us, though, the path is gradual, beginning with recognition of our original nature, then moving through various types of preliminary practices (*ngöndro*). These include “outer” reflections on standard Buddhist topics, like the miseries of samsara and the bodhisattva’s path to awakening, and “inner,” tantrically-in-flected preliminaries, including prostration, purification, offering, and guru-yoga, aimed at purifying negative karma and collecting merit. Whatever our practice, it must always be performed within

the framework established by the initial, profoundly tantric recognition of primordial purity, a “pure vision” (*daknang*) we must maintain at all times and in all circumstances.

With the preliminaries complete, a master will give us pointing-out instructions (*ngotrö*) by which we recognize our true nature, and we can enter the first of the two main stages of esoteric instruction class Dzogchen, cutting-through (*trekcho*). This involves contemplating and gaining direct awareness of the primordial purity, emptiness, and luminosity of the mind, then resting comfortably within that ultimate awareness.

From there, we may move on to the final stage, transcendence (*tögal*). This involves a set of physical, verbal, and mental practices for functioning insightfully and effectively within the world, which is itself seen from a visionary standpoint as the pure and spontaneous “presencing” of mind/reality itself. Through the practice of *tögal*, buddhahood may be achieved and fully expressed in this very life.

Mahamudra, the Great Seal

Like Dzogchen, Mahamudra originated in India, but primarily in the eastern plains and their surrounding hills rather than the western mountains. Mahamudra is a malleable Sanskrit term that appears throughout Indian Buddhist tantric literature. Over the course of the final centuries of the first millennium, depending on the context, it was used to refer to a ritual hand gesture, the clear visualization of oneself as a buddha-deity, a female partner

for ritual sexual yoga, a blissful gnosis attained through advanced tantric practice, the empty-yet-luminous nature of the mind, a technique for resting nonconceptually in the nature of mind, and the buddhahood achieved as the fruit of the tantric path.

Mahamudra was especially prominent in such late, highly esoteric, and often transgressive tantra systems as the Guhyasamaja, Chakrasamvara, Hevajra, and Kalachakra. It was—along with cognate concepts of ultimacy like great bliss or sahaja, the innate purity of mind—celebrated in the songs and treatises of the charismatic and sometimes controversial great adepts, the mahasiddhas, who practiced those tantras, including Saraha, Virupa, Tilopa, Naropa, and Maitripa. Although identifiable as Buddhists, the adepts who sang of the Great Seal inhabited a milieu in which Hindu tantric ideas and practices were prominent, and as with Dzogchen, there undoubtedly were interchanges and influences across religious lines.

Although Mahamudra had a minor place within the Nyingma traditions transmitted to Tibet during the early period, it became a term of central importance on the plateau during the Tibetan renaissance, when literature related to the newer tantras began to be translated and taught. The Great Seal thus found its way into the ideas and practices of the “new-translation” schools that arose

in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, including the Kadam, Sakya, and Kagyu. The late-arriving Gelug school, founded around 1400, eventually developed its own Mahamudra system as well.

It was in the Kagyu orders—especially the branch founded by the Tibetan translator Marpa (1012–97), who had studied in India with Naropa and Maitripa—that Mahamudra became most prominent. At the hands of masters such as the peripatetic poet–yogi Milarepa (1040–1123), the great institution builder Gampopa (1079–1153), and subsequent teachers in the Drigung, Drukpa, Karma, and other sub-schools, the Great Seal became the definitive Kagyu approach to view, meditation, and conduct on the Buddhist path.

Like their Dzogchen counterparts, Mahamudra masters drew on the vocabulary of multiple Indian philosophical perspectives, including Madhyamaka, Yogacara, and the buddhanature tradition, and recognized that the Great Seal was divisible into gradual, quick, and instantaneous paths. Although in India mahamudra was typically a tantric term, Gampopa and his Kagyu successors insisted that if—as suggested by Maitripa and other late Indian masters—the Great Seal simply describes the empty, luminous, and blissful nature of the mind and a contemplative technique for realizing that nature, then tantric empowerment might not be required for its practice: the blessing of one’s master, accompanied by pointing-out instructions on the nature of mind, might suffice. The possibility of a non-tantric “Perfection Vehicle”

Mahamudra practice was much debated in Tibet, but it became a hallmark of the Kagyu approach, and was adopted as well in the Great Seal tradition that developed later within the Gelug order.

Indeed, most Kagyu Mahamudra manuals focus not on the tantric Great Seal—the “path of means” associated with such advanced subtle-body practices as the Six Yogas of Naropa—but on a series of contemplations of the nature of mind. This “path of liberation” begins with preliminary reflections and rituals like those prescribed in Dzogchen (with guru yoga given special prominence), then move into the practice of serenity (shamatha) and insight (vipashyana) meditation, with the mind itself as the main object of contemplation.

The path of liberation is typically said to involve four yogas: single-pointedness, in which we focus in a relaxed way on the nature of the mind; non-elaboration, in which (sometimes with the help of philosophical analysis) we attain a nonconceptual realization of the empty-yet-luminous nature of the mind; single taste, in which we recognize all events of both samsara and nirvana as reflecting this empty-yet-luminous nature; and non-meditation, which is effortless buddhahood in both its gnostic aspect as dharmakaya and its expressive aspects as rupakaya—the Great Seal as the culmination of the path.

Thus, Dzogchen and Mahamudra differ in several ways. They originated in separate parts of the Indian subcontinent, in tantric texts marked by distinct terminological systems. They were transmitted to Tibet by Indian masters who lived centuries apart

and flourished in quite different religious cultures. Dzogchen metaphysics suggests that everything in samsara and nirvana is simply a function of a primordially pure awareness, while not all Mahamudra traditions accept this idea. And Dzogchen, with its insistence on maintaining a vision of primordial purity from the beginning of practice to the end, is uncompromisingly tantric, whereas Mahamudra also admits of non-tantric approaches to awakening and suggests that such a vision may, for many of us, only emerge gradually, with time and effort.

The Emptiness of Mind

As noted at the outset, most Tibetan Buddhists, even those strongly influenced by Yogacara and buddhanature discourse, identify their philosophical outlook as Madhyamaka, using the compass of the “middle-way” tradition founded by Nagarjuna in the second century CE to explicate the cardinal Mahayana doctrine of emptiness and outline how a realization of emptiness leads to gnosis. The label Madhyamaka, however, admits of a multitude of perspectives, and Tibetans, including proponents and practitioners of Dzogchen and Mahamudra, have spent the better part of a millennium debating just what it means to say that all phenomena are empty—or, more to the point, what it means to say that mind is empty.

Tibetan philosophers espoused two major positions, each traceable to India, which are rooted in two different conceptions of what is and is not negated in emptiness. These are

self-emptiness (*rangtong*) and other-emptiness (*shentong*). Proponents of self-emptiness insist that all phenomena, including the mind of a buddha, are empty in the same way: they lack intrinsic existence, with nothing positive implied or left over. Proponents of other-emptiness argue that buddha-mind—along with the buddhanature that is its basis—is empty in a different way from ordinary phenomena: it is empty of anything other than itself, that is, anything impure or samsaric. Its emptiness of the samsaric implies the presence within it, either actually or potentially, of all the qualities possessed by buddhas. In other words, mind is empty-yet-luminous.

Not all theorists of Dzogchen or Mahamudra adopted the other-emptiness position, but it is widespread in the Nyingma and Kagyu settings where the two great contemplative systems are practiced most intensely. Gelugpas, on the other hand, were antagonistic to other-emptiness, and in their Mahamudra system, the emptiness of mind that must be discovered through insight meditation is a negation pure and simple, without any implication that mind's ultimate nature includes positive qualities, not even luminosity—which is, however, accepted as a conventional feature of mind. For Gelugpas, the mind's lack of intrinsic existence is itself said to guarantee our eventual transformation from deluded beings to buddhas, since, as Nagarjuna remarked, “Where emptiness is the case, anything can be the case.”

What, then, of the Third Karmapa's assertion that Dzogchen, Madhyamaka, and Mahamudra amount to the same thing? As we have seen, there are meaningful historical, terminological, philosophical, and practical differences among the three systems. In that sense, to say that they are essentially identical may be too strong a claim, as is the claim that all Tibetan or all Buddhist meditative systems—let alone mystical traditions everywhere—come down to the same perspective or experience.

Nevertheless, the Great Perfection, the Middle Way, and the Great Seal coincide in profoundly important ways—especially in their gnostic approach to view, meditation, and conduct on the Buddhist path. All three agree that the nature of mind is empty, pure, and luminous, and each, in its own way, calls us to the essential task of rediscovering our primordial mind, insisting that we can be free only if and when we recognize—not just intellectually but through deep contemplation—that this is who and what we are at the deepest level.

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You Are the Great Perfection

Rest in your true nature without effort or distraction – Mingyur Rinpoche teaches the renowned practice of Dzogchen.

You are already perfect. You are already a buddha. In fact, there's no difference between your true nature, right now as you sit reading this, and the true nature of the buddha, or any enlightened being for that matter.

That's the view of Dzogchen, a Tibetan word that means "Great Perfection." Dzogchen is treasured above all other practices in the Nyingma school of Vajrayana Buddhism because it helps us connect directly with our own enlightened nature.

Your essence, and the essence of every living creature, is pure, whole, and complete. There's nothing missing, and that's why we call it the Great Perfection. YOU are the Great Perfection. Don't forget that. Dzogchen is talking about you. This Great Perfection is you right now, right here in this moment, not some fully developed you after you do a lot more meditation.

In Dzogchen, we call this enlightened nature *rigpa*, or pure awareness. Unlike some approaches in which buddhanature is taught in a more theoretical way, and you need to study and meditate for a long time to figure out what it is, Dzogchen is experiential. You get introduced to pure awareness directly, right on the spot.

A traditional way to describe Dzogchen is in terms of the ground, the path, and the fruition.

The Great Perfection is our true nature, whether we realize it or not. That's the *ground* of Dzogchen. It's the reality of our experience and who we are.

But that doesn't help if we don't experience it for ourselves. The way to do that is by having this pure awareness introduced to us, and then getting familiar with it until it becomes stable and enduring. That process is the *path*.

Then, once we're familiar with our own true nature, once we've realized it fully and integrated it into every aspect of our lives, we will fully manifest the enlightened qualities that were there all along. That's the *fruition*.

The Ground of Dzogchen

It might be a little unclear what this "true nature" really is, so let me explain a bit more about the ground.

When we use all these fancy terms like "buddhanature" and "pure awareness," what are we actually talking about? Well, there are three main qualities to look for here. We refer to these as the "empty essence," "luminous nature," and "all-pervasive compassion." That's the ground, your true nature.

"Empty essence" means that the true nature of mind, the essence of pure awareness, transcends all our ideas, concepts, and beliefs. It is utterly beyond all our suffering and problems. It is

completely free. The term for this is “innate purity”—the essence of who we are was, is, and always will be perfect. It’s completely pure, and nothing can change that.

This empty essence is ungraspable, beyond our ordinary way of seeing things, but it’s not nothing. There is also a luminous, knowing presence. This is what we call the “luminous nature.” Sometimes it’s called “self-clarity,” because this clarity is spontaneous and natural. It’s just there, all the time. Even when we’re asleep, distracted, or completely neurotic. It’s there.

The empty essence and clear nature are one and the same. They’re inseparable. This inseparability is the third quality of the ground, which we call “all-pervasive compassion.” This open, spacious clarity manifests as all our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, just like the sun radiates light. These experiences, in fact *all* of our experiences, are none other than the manifestations or play of pure awareness.

The Path of Dzogchen

But what good does just knowing this do us? Not much. That’s why we need a path. We need to translate this from nice words and ideas to an actual experience.

The Dzogchen path is really quite simple. That’s not to say it’s easy, but it is simple.

The only thing we need to do is to recognize this pure inner nature. We need to experience it for ourselves. That's it. If we want to make it a little more complicated, we could say that first we need to have pure awareness introduced to us, and then we become familiar with it.

So, how does that happen?

This is where a teacher becomes important. There's a lot going on in our minds. We have all sorts of memories and reactions, emotions and expectations. In short, we have monkey mind.

Seeing the subtle quality of empty clarity in the midst of all this mental activity isn't easy. If it were, we would have recognized *rigpa* a long time ago! But a skilled teacher who has recognized pure awareness in him or herself, and who holds an authentic lineage, can point it out to us. They can help us find our way through all the complexities of the mind to see this simple, ever present reality.

You might think that because you are already perfect, because this awakened nature is fully present as the very nature of your mind, then you don't need to meditate or practice. Nothing could be further from the truth. The trick is *how* you practice. You still need to meditate, but meditate effortlessly. You still need to practice, but practice naturalness.

Rather than practicing with the notion that there's some level to achieve beyond where you are right now, the main practice is learning to trust that this original purity is always present, especially when it feels like it isn't. Every step you take on the path

should reinforce your trust that pure awareness is right here, right now. Until your recognition is unshakeable, you still need to do formal practice.

The Fruition of Dzogchen

As I said, the core of the path is simply recognizing the nature of mind and coming back to that recognition again and again, until it's as familiar as an old friend. If you do that, there will come a time when you've experienced this pure awareness so thoroughly and completely that you never lose touch with it. When you're meditating, you're meditating in pure awareness. When you're eating, you're eating in pure awareness. Even when you're sleeping, you're still resting in the recognition of pure awareness.

That's what we call "full realization," the fruition of the path. At this point, all the qualities of the ground, your true enlightened nature, become manifest. These were there all along, but because you didn't know they were, it was almost as though they didn't exist. But now you know them. You know them thoroughly and completely. Perfect wisdom, boundless compassion, the spontaneous capacity to benefit others—all of these manifest.

This fruition is simply the full expression of your true nature. It's as though you go out and travel the whole world, looking and searching high and low for some peace of mind. But in the end, you come home and realize that everything you were looking for was right where you started. That's the Great Perfection.

Practice: Dzogchen

The trickiest part of Dzogchen practice is that it is not something we can do. The whole point is that we are learning to recognize what is already there, while our “doing” impulse is based on the assumption that who and what we are in the present moment needs improvement. So how do we put this into practice?

Dzogchen meditation involves three important qualities: effortlessness, presence, and naturalness. In traditional terms, these three are called non-meditation, non-distraction, and non-fabrication.

To connect with effortlessness, we shift from a mode of “doing” to one of “being.” We let go of the impulse to fiddle with the knobs of experience and give ourselves permission to simply be. We rest in effortless awareness.

But while we rest in effortless awareness, we are not lost or distracted. We are fully present, alert and aware. This presence is the second quality. It’s not something we need to make happen. It’s already here, with us all the time. When we drop the effort and simply rest, we’re giving ourselves the opportunity to recognize the open clarity of awareness, to be this open clarity.

Nothing can diminish this effortless awareness. All our thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and impulses arise from this knowing presence, and dissolve back into it. For this reason, we do not need to create any special state of mind to experience the

mind's innate purity. We don't need to block our thoughts and emotions or control the movements of our attention. Just be as you are.

This is the third quality—naturalness. We let everything unfold without trying to correct, alter, or improve anything.

As we grow more comfortable with resting in awareness, these qualities of effortlessness, presence, and naturalness will emerge, and we will slowly come to see that this spacious awareness is who we truly are.

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Everything Is This Wisdom

Pema Khandro on the primordial knowing that, according to the Dzogchen teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, is the source and true nature of ourselves and all reality.

The goal of Vajrayana Buddhism, as practiced in the Tibetan tradition, is to realize and identify with the primordial wisdom that is already within us, that is our very being. The important point is that enlightenment is the realization of buddhanature, which is both one's own innate nature and the fabric of reality itself.

Some of the teachings on realizing buddhanature are framed in metaphors of becoming, like a seed that ripens or butter that is churned from milk. Others use images of something precious that is revealed when obstructions are removed, like a jewel that is discovered when a rock is broken open or a lump of gold in the mud that is uncovered when it rains.

Finally, in teachings such as *The Mirror Illuminating the Heart*, a collection of fourteenth-century revelations attributed to Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyal, buddhanature is described as the completely awakened, enlightened nature that is the fabric of our being. The path, then, is to recognize what is already there and present.

According to the *Great Perfection* (Dzogchen) teachings, since beginningless time there has always been the ground wakefulness known as yeshes—primordial knowing. It is beyond karma, yet all the elements and the whole phenomenal world arise because of it. There is no other buddhahood than this primordial wisdom. Yes, there are illusions, but they are temporary. They can be cleared away so that the vast expanse of already enlightened knowing can shine out.

The Mirror Illuminating the Heart says that we should know we are not separate from this enlightened wisdom. It is complete in our body, speech, and mind. The text says, over and over again, “This body is a buddha. You need to keep this in mind.” The field of pure, primordial knowing awaits to be rested in, to be let go into. It can be found in states of effortless clarity or sudden insight.

This view does not deny that human beings live in the tremendous suffering of *samsara*, assailed by afflictions and crowded by ignorance. Rather, it is more an acknowledgement of how and why that affliction and ignorance take place—temporarily, on the surface, not pervading to the deep recesses of being where there is only light. We experience them as long as we don’t realize the innate, primordial wisdom. This is the ultimate tragedy—in the absence of deep familiarity with our enlightened nature, we resort to afflictions to make sense of our world and lives.

What should we think of all this? Who talks of such things? Aren’t they secret? In the Nyingma lineage, with its famed practice of Dzogchen, we speak of this view quite openly. It carries us from

the beginning through the middle to the end of path. Through all the phases of the journey, this view is there as a comfort and encouragement. We do not lose heart, because however much we suffer, there is always buddhanature within us.

Pema Khandro is a teacher and scholar of Buddhist philosophy, as well as a lineage holder in the Nyingma and Kagyu traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. She founded the nonprofit organization Ngakpa International and its three projects, the Buddhist Studies Institute, Dakini Mountain, and the Yogic Medicine Institute. She is completing a doctorate specializing in Tibetan Buddhism at the University of Virginia.

Discovering the True Nature of Mind

Geshe Tenzin Wangyal teaches us a five-stage Dzogchen meditation that begins with contemplating our worst enemy and culminates in the discovery that mind is empty, clear and blissful.

Vision is mind.

Mind is empty.

Emptiness is clear light.

Clear light is union.

Union is great bliss.

This is the heart instruction of Dawa Gyaltzen, a Bön meditation master who lived in the eighth century. Bön is the native, pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet, which has incorporated many Buddhist elements. This teaching is a direct introduction to the nature of mind and is not elaborate with ritual. The pith instructions of these masters—their heart advice to their students—are often only a few lines, but these few lines can guide the fortunate practitioner to recognizing his or her own true nature as Buddha.

Vision is mind

How do we work with Dawa Gyaltzen's instruction, which begins, "Vision is mind"? Vision includes everything we perceive, but I suggest that you use what bothers you as an entrance to this practice. Do you have a famous person in your life? The famous person is the one who seems to be born to create a problem for

you, as if that were his or her number-one mission in life. Sometimes we feel there are people like that. Such people can make trouble for you not only with their presence, but with one single postcard sent to you. When you see the postcard with their handwriting on it, you are immediately disturbed.

So we begin our meditation practice with this famous person as our starting point. Create a protected environment and sit in a comfortable upright position. Now invite the image of your famous person to come into your awareness. They always come anyway, but this time you are inviting them so that you can look more deeply into this experience. What exactly is this famous person composed of? See the image of the person, the character of this person who bothers you so much. Sense the energetic or emotional presence of this person. When your famous person was born, he or she did not show any physical signs or marks of what you now see. And not all people share your view of this person. What you perceive is your mind, your karmic vision, which is more karma than vision.

So in this moment, instead of looking out and focusing on that person, look inward. Step back and let the experience come in. Do not step forward but step backwards. Don't go to your office and make phone calls and send emails. Just sit and close your eyes and reflect on this person, and experience what you're experiencing at this very moment. This is your vision. It is very much in you, in your mind. That famous person is now an image or a felt sense. Perhaps you have a sense of being contracted, closed or agitated

in the presence of this person; feel this fully, not simply with your intellect. Sit with the image of your famous person, and with the resulting feelings and sensations, until you recognize that this experience is in you, and you conclude, “Vision is mind.”

Mind is empty

The next question is, “What is this mind?” Look for your mind. Look from the top of your head to the soles of your feet. Can you find anything solid? Can you find any permanent color, shape or form that you can call your mind? If you look directly, you come to the conclusion that your mind is empty. Some people come to this conclusion very quickly; for others it requires an exhausting search to discover this clear awareness. But this is what mind is. You can obviously pollute that clarity in any given moment, but by continuing to look directly, you can discover that mind itself is just clear. Clear means empty. “Empty” is a philosophical term, but as experience it is clear and open.

So what began as the famous person is now clear and open. If this is not your experience, you are grasping the image and holding on to the experience in some way. Just be. Relax into the experience. Simply be. Mind is empty. When we arrive at the experience of emptiness and vastness through the doorway of the famous person, it is possible to have quite a strong experience of emptiness.

Emptiness is clear light

Our next question is, “What is this emptiness?” Sometimes emptiness is scary to the point where someone may prefer even their famous person to this nothing where one experiences the absence of self. But this experience of open space is essential. It clears the identity that creates the famous person. In order to clear the obstacle of the famous person, you have to clear the identity that creates that famous person. There is an expression, “The sword of wisdom cuts both ways.” Don’t be scared by this. Remember: “Emptiness is clear light.” It has light. It is possible to feel the light in the absence of the stuff.

Usually we accumulate a lot of stuff in life. Then we have a big yard sale in order to get rid of that stuff. For a moment we might feel “Ahhh . . .”—a sense of relief at getting rid of our old stuff—but soon we are excited again about all the new stuff we can accumulate to decorate and fill the open space. In your meditation, when things clear, just be with this. Don’t focus on the absence of the stuff, but discover the presence of the light in that space. It’s there. I’m not saying it’s easy to recognize and connect with the light—clearly it will depend on how much you are caught up with appearances and with the famous person. I’m not talking about the clear appearance of the famous person; I’m speaking of the clear appearance of the space.

So when you look at appearance and discover it is mind, and then discover that mind is empty, clear light emerges. When you look for the mind, you don’t find the mind. When you don’t find

anything, the Dzogchen instruction is to “abide without distraction in that which has not been elaborated.” What has not been elaborated is that space, that openness. So you look for mind; you don’t find anything. What you don’t find is pure space which is not elaborated. So don’t do anything. Don’t change anything. Just allow. When you abide in that space without changing anything, what is is clear light. The experience or knowledge of emptiness is clear light. It is awareness.

Clear light is the experience of vast emptiness. The reason you have a famous person in the first place is that you experience yourself as separated from the experience of the vast, open space. Not recognizing the vast space, not being familiar with it, you experience visions. Not recognizing the visions as mind, you see them as solid and separate and out there—and not only out there, but disturbing you and creating all kinds of hassles for you that you have to deal with.

Perhaps you say, “Well, I am very clear about the direction in my life.” Here, you are clear about something. The clarity Dawa Gyaltzen points to is not clear about something; it is clear in the sense of being. You experience your essence, your existence, your being as clear. That clarity is the best. Through experiencing that clarity, you overcome self-doubt.

Clear light is union

From this experience of vast emptiness we say, “Clear light is union.” The space and the light cannot be separated. *Clear* refers to space, and *light* refers to awareness; awareness and space are inseparable. There is no separation between clear presence and space, between awareness and emptiness.

We have a lot of notions of union: yin and yang, male and female, wisdom and compassion. When you pay close attention to the experience of emptiness, you experience clarity. If you try to look for clarity, you cannot find it—it becomes emptiness. If you don’t find it, and you abide there, it becomes clear. The experiences of clarity and emptiness are union in the sense that they are not separate. Clarity is the experience of openness. If you don’t have the experience of openness, you cannot be clear. What is clear is that openness, the emptiness. What is empty and open is that clarity. The two are inseparable. Recognizing this is called union.

This means that our experiences do not affect our relation to openness. It is usually the case that experiences affect our connection to openness because immediately we get excited and attached. Then we grasp, or we become agitated, conflicted and disturbed. When that doesn’t happen, when our experience spontaneously arises and does not obscure us, that is union: the inseparable quality of clear and light. You are free; you are connected. You are connected; you are free.

This combination experience, whether in deep meditation or in life, is rare. Often, if you are “free,” that means you are disconnected. So this sense of union is important. Having the ability to do something and the ability to feel free, having the ability to be with somebody and still feel a sense of freedom, is so important. That is what is meant by “clear light is union.”

Union is great bliss

If you recognize and experience this inseparable quality, then you can experience bliss. Why is bliss experienced? Because that solid obstacle to being deeply connected with yourself has disappeared. You can have a strong experience of bliss because you have released something. Bliss spontaneously comes because there’s nothing that obscures you or separates you from your essence. You have a feeling that everything is complete just as it is.

So you begin with the famous person, and you end up with bliss. What more could you ask for? This is the basis of the whole Dzogchen philosophy in a few lines. The famous person you project is great bliss, but you must understand this as your mind, and that very mind as empty. From there, emptiness is clear light, clear light is union, union is great bliss. You can experience this in an instant. The moment you see the famous person, you can instantly see light. But sometimes we have to go through a longer process to see this. It is a question of ability. So this progression, this process, is our practice. It takes time. But there is a clear map.

These five principles can be applied in daily practice. You can do this practice anyplace, in any given moment, and especially when the famous person is bothering you. When a difficult circumstance arises, of course you could just live with it, or you could try to find one of many solutions. But as a Dzogchen practitioner, this practice of the Fivefold Teachings is what you do. Perhaps you lost a business deal and you feel bad. What does “lost” really mean? You look at that; that is vision. Whether fear-based vision or greed vision, you look directly at that experience. Be with that experience. Then you realize it is mind, and you look at your mind and discover that mind is clear— just clear. Even when we have a lot of problems, the essence of mind is always clear. It is always clear. There is always the possibility to connect with the essence of mind rather than the confusion aspect of it.

How we conclude

I love this practice very much. On the one hand, it is so practical. It gives you a tool to deal with a very specific situation. On the other hand, it guides you directly into the essence, to the root of yourself. It always amazes me when people fight with one another and say, “Oh, that terrible person. We have been good friends for a long time and I always thought that person was so honest. It took me a long time to discover that that person is really terrible.” So your conclusion is that that person is terrible. Have you heard people say things like that? This is not really a healthy solution. It’s like going to therapy and realizing, “My dad was really a bad

guy. Now I feel much better.” Of course, you might realize some difficult aspect of your situation, but realizing that is not the conclusion. You need to conclude into the essence, conclude into the root, to come to the place in yourself where you realize your mind is clear and blissful and the image that was bothering you has finally dissolved through your meditation.

What is the conclusion here? The conclusion is bliss. “Union is great bliss.” What better conclusion would you want than that? And it will be like that if you open your mind to learn, trust with your heart, and pray. It’s really important to pray, and to pray for a deep experience. Because if what you think is not that deep, the result won’t be that deep either. Through prayer, you open your heart and receive the blessings of effortlessness. The quality of effortlessness is a quality of heart, and devotion and prayer open the heart. So praying is wonderful. It sets up the intention and puts you in the right direction, so when you do the practice of meditation—of directly looking and being with your experience—it will work.

I encourage you to practice this heart advice of Dawa Gyaltzen, to look directly into what is disturbing you and discover the nature of your mind. Through the profound simplicity of these five lines, not only can you heal your day-to-day life and make it lighter and more pleasant, but you can recognize and connect with your innermost essence, the nature of your mind as Buddha.

Questions and Answers

Question: In terms of the experience of “vision is mind,” it seems that our grasping mind, our small mind, is different from the natural state of mind which is clear light. I don’t know how to bridge the gap between the grasping mind and emptiness, because the grasping mind doesn’t seem empty.

Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche: It doesn’t seem empty, but it is. If you look at the ocean you might find it calm and peaceful, or with small ripples, or bigger ripples, or small waves, or bigger waves. All these appearances – from calm to ripples to waves – have the quality of wetness. All are water in every appearance. The appearance of the ocean can never be anything other than water, no matter how terrible or peaceful the ocean appears. In the same way, no matter what vision appears, it is always empty. The essence is always there. The only question is, “Am I able to see it or not?”

Question: It is wonderful when the famous person dissolves, but I still have an obligation to him or her, a responsibility. He or she is my child. So the “famous person” situation may keep recurring. Do I keep dissolving in the same way?

Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche: Sure. The famous person can still be famous without disturbing you as much. The reason we call him or her “famous” is that they really bother you. Do they really need to bother you? No. He or she can be as they are or they can

be different, but they don't have to bother you. We have expectations that things need to be a certain way. Do they really have to be a certain way? No.

Let's take a situation in which I'm trying to help my child. How am I trying to help? I want him to go to school and study well. So what's the problem? Well, the child has some difficulty learning. O.K. So I'm trying to do the best I can under the circumstances. If I'm doing that, then what am I worrying about? Some people learn faster, some learn slower. Right?

But the problem is not about the child learning too slowly; it's that I can't accept the situation. It's not about the child; it's about me. I have some fixed idea about what would be good for my child. This is usually the case. I think, "What I want is good for you." The child probably doesn't agree. He might be interested in a completely different thing than I am. But I feel like I'm the boss, and of course I am: I have a moral responsibility and so on. But there is someplace where it is just fine. I need to realize that.

Question: Is it just the lack of practice of recognizing that "vision is mind" that makes me feel there is a hook that draws me back to, "Yeah, but that famous person really is mean"?

Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche: I am not suggesting that this is the only way to deal with life. This is one of the Dzogchen ways. It is not a samsaric way, and sometimes we have to deal in a samsaric way. If somebody is trying to cheat me, of course I don't like that. If somebody asks me for something, I don't mind giving. But if somebody is taking something from me, then I don't want to give.

If that aspect of me seems to be who I really am in this moment, then I will fight or do whatever needs to be done. It's not a question of one approach being more valid than another. Who I am and what realization I have determines how skillfully I am able to work. In the end, the real sense of victory is the practice. But in the conventional sense, we do whatever we have to do. We naturally defend and we fight. Sometimes, you defend, you fight, and you still lose. Then maybe you don't have any other choice but to see it as emptiness! That is a forceful way of discovering emptiness.

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Forum: Practicing the Great Perfection

Forum with Marcia Schmidt, Ron Garry and Mingyur Rinpoche on the view, teachings, and challenges of Dzogchen.

Sometimes the *Buddhadharma* forum asks people from different traditions to discuss a common Buddhist principle, like karma or the kleshas, or to explore issues that challenge the Buddhist community as a whole, such as how we can extend a helping hand to the world. At other times, we take a fly-on-the-wall approach, and listen in as members of one particular tradition discuss the nature of their path and practice. In this forum, we've brought together several noted practitioners of the Vajrayana tradition of Dzogchen to discuss this profound path of simplicity, which seems both utterly accessible and inaccessible all at once.

Dzogchen is called the Great Perfection (Skt., *Mahasandhi*) and is regarded as the highest tantric yogic discipline (Skt., *atiyoga*). It is the principal teaching of the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism, the Nyingma, but it is also taught, studied, and practiced by students and teachers from the other schools. Dzogchen's adherents claim there is no higher teaching or attainment in the Buddhist firmament. In fact, Dzogchen is supposed to transcend teaching and attainment. Its poetry and realization songs repeatedly stress the folly of trying to learn something, to gain anything, or to get anywhere at all—and yet the great Dzogchen master acts with fearsome or gentle power, as the situation demands.

This paragon of engaged no-big-deal can remind one of the last of the Zen oxherding pictures, where the notion of destination is extinguished yet one continues onward nonetheless. When one looks at the lovely and arresting lohan (arhat) sculptures, they also convey an intensely focused couldn't-care-less quality. The descriptions of the ultimate from the major Buddhist traditions have different flavors but they sound awfully similar.

The seventeenth century metaphysical poet George Herbert had it right, though, when he said that all comparisons are odious. True, by having a name that implies superiority, Dzogchen begs for comparisons. But as our panelists suggest, that's not a worthwhile tack to take in trying to understand Dzogchen and appreciate it for what it is: who can really say how Dzogchen compares to the paths and practices of other systems? Spiritual claims are not empirically testable. The proof of their pudding is in the tasting.

Once we have made some judgments about whether a path and its teacher make sense for us, there is still an element of faith. Those who say that Buddhism doesn't involve faith should take a glance at Dzogchen, because as our panelists passionately emphasize, this path does not work unless one puts all one's faith in a teacher and a lineage of teachers. There is no Dzogchen in the abstract. There is only Dzogchen as embodied in people.

Why is the teacher so important? It seems that what Dzogchen calls the "natural state" strains utterly the ability of language, which by its very nature is bounded by subject and object. Poetry,

metaphor, symbol, ritual, and gesture approach but never fulfill the expression of “the natural state,” which is vast like the sky and minute as an atom, simultaneously. The teacher reveals this to the student in the intimate way that can only happen person to person.

Dzogchen sounds highfalutin, but because it is so human and ordinary and intimate, its practitioners end up at some point behaving in a very ordinary way, and they end up emphasizing the basic teachings common to all practitioners. The need to get honestly in touch with our humanity, how we are actually behaving—not the fancy things we are striving for—is the beginning and the end of the path.

Dzogchen, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche once said, is the place where we finally, thankfully, get off the high horse of our spirituality and just plain be. At that point, he said, the value of all the paths, and all the different types of beings who tread them, are appreciated equally. One finds no need for comparisons of any kind at all.

–Barry Boyce

Buddhadharma: It would be helpful to begin by defining Dzogchen and trying to distinguish it from other forms of Buddhism. What is Dzogchen and what is unique about it?

Mingyur Rinpoche: Generally speaking, the whole Vajrayana project must include all three of the yanas, or vehicles – Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana – and these subdivide further. So there are nine yanas in all.

To complete Dzogchen practice, you must begin with all the usual preliminaries – taking refuge, generating bodhicitta, and so forth. Then, the main project of Dzogchen is to look directly at the nature of mind, rigpa. *Rigpa* is not our ordinary, everyday mind. It is not conceptual mind. It is the mind that is beyond concept, the mind that is free from subject and object.

Since rigpa, the natural state of awareness, is our innate nature, not the result of a process, there are many ways to enter the Dzogchen path. In fact, Dzogchen is the essence of all the paths and all the practices.

Buddhadharma: Why is Dzogchen called “the Great Perfection” ?

Mingyur Rinpoche: Because everything is there. It is the condensed meaning of all the paths and the essence of everything, samsara and nirvana both.

Marcia Schmidt: As the pinnacle of the nine yanas, Dzogchen is a part of the total path, and you cannot extract any element of it and isolate it. It requires working directly with a master qualified in the Dzogchen tradition. It is through the kindness of one's teacher, and through the kindness of all the lineage gurus, that one is able to enter the Dzogchen path.

Even though Dzogchen is sometimes referred to as a path of simplicity and doing nothing, that describes just the isolated moment of remaining in a nonconceptual awareness. We all would love to think that we can practice Dzogchen and be able to remain for long periods of time in the nature of mind. But for some reason we can't. So it is not a path for someone without diligence. There's actually quite a lot to do to really be a Dzogchen practitioner. The complete path includes: purifying the obscurations – those things that prevent our mind from being in the natural state; gathering the accumulations, or merit – the many necessary positive circumstances that allow us to practice intensively; and working closely with a qualified teacher.

Ron Garry: From my perspective as a student, Dzogchen seems very much like everything else that most of us do in the world. It follows the same kind of process we would follow to

become successful in the arts, our work life, sports, music, or what have you. If you're going to become a musician, you first learn scales and you practice intensively. Eventually, after many years of going through a process, it becomes effortless. I think we've all had that experience in whatever we've become good at. My experience with dharma is very much the same.

Mingyur Rinpoche: It is important to emphasize the role of the teacher. Do-it-yourself Dzogchen is impossible. You need the lineage, and since everything is interdependent, you also need many other causes and conditions. We must rely on this power of interdependence, not simply our own power.

However, when you practice Dzogchen, you do not get the rigpa from someone else, or from somewhere else. It exists within all sentient beings; it's already present within us. We are buddha, but we are obscured by bad karma, by the negative causes and conditions that give us the illusion of subject and object, that cause us to experience impure body, speech, mind, and an impure world.

The power of interdependence is what makes it possible to remove the illusion. If we want to plant a flower in our garden, we need soil, water, air, sun, and seed. If we're missing one of them, the flower will not grow. The seed alone cannot grow the flower. The sun alone cannot grow the flower. The power of interdependence is the general rule of phenomena. It is also the general rule of Dzogchen. The teacher and the lineage are the soil and the water. When that lineage blessing combines with a very strong

effort from ourselves, we can become enlightened. We can recognize natural mind.

Buddhadharma: How does the teacher help us to experience the nature of mind?

Mingyur Rinpoche: The teacher's role is to point out. There are many stages of development and many experiences that can be quite similar to or confused with rigpa. For example, the practice of formless or objectless shamatha – resting the mind without an object of meditation – can be similar to Dzogchen practice, to rigpa, but it is not the same. Similarly, one may experience a kind of dullness of mind that has very little conceptualization, which we call alaya, the base consciousness. Many people think that alaya is the essence of the mind, but that's not really Dzogchen. So the teacher keeps pointing out the natural mind, so you can see very clearly the difference between conceptual mind and natural mind, between alaya and rigpa, between objectless shamatha and rigpa.

Ron Garry: In my experience, traveling the path always involves working with my various states of mind, and that's why it's so obviously critical to have a wisdom teacher. Quite often I might feel that I'm having an experience of awareness, but more likely my experience is connected with consciousness. It's only through the blessings and the connection with my teacher that I'll be able

one day to slowly come to an experience of awareness, my true nature, beyond consciousness. Based on this, my focus is more on preliminary practices and the ngondro practices of refuge, prostrations, Vajrasattva mantra recitation, mandala offering, and guru yoga. Through those practices, and through faith and devotion in my teacher, I feel I am protected from getting caught up in false states of spiritual experiences, like mistaking dull mind for rigpa.

Marcia Schmidt: The teacher can help us even when we get tripped up by the terminology, or by the translations used in the instructions. Shamatha and vipashyana, terms used in the lower vehicles, are the same terms used in the higher vehicles. My teacher, Tulku Urygen Rinpoche, Mingyur Rinpoche's father, taught that even though the words are the same, the meaning becomes more exalted as you go through the different stages. The vipashyana, or clear seeing, practice of the lower vehicles is actually a form of shamatha, stillness or calm abiding, from the perspective of Dzogchen and Mahamudra. It is not the same, but people often think it is the same.

One of the very famous phrases in this tradition comes from Milarepa: "In the gap between two thoughts, there's the possibility to recognize rigpa." Many people just focus on a gap and think, "That's rigpa," but they forget that there's something else. There's awakeness, awareness, and that's what contrasts with the dullness, which is a kind of nonconceptual state we're all in pretty

much continuously, when we're not mixed up with being angry or being attached.

Buddhadharma: What is the difference between objectless shamatha and rigpa?

Mingyur Rinpoche: In objectless shamatha, the instruction is not to meditate, not to be distracted, just to rest. Just resting is good, but just resting alone does not become rigpa practice, because you don't have recognition. The main difference between objectless shamatha and natural mind is recognition. You get that recognition from the pointing-out instruction from the teacher, and then you can cultivate it further.

To cultivate the recognition of natural mind, one can hold the gap between first and second thought. But if you wait for the gap, that is a big mistake, because you don't have to wait for natural mind. Rigpa is always present. It is spontaneous presence. People are always thinking that to meditate on rigpa, natural awareness, means you have to extinguish thought and emotions. They think, "I... have ... such ... openness ... and ... spaciousness," but what they have is strong grasping for spaciousness, openness, and rigpa. Their meditation becomes tiny, because they are focusing on having something to practice and something to abandon.

People think like that because they have been told that rigpa is beyond subject and object. Since thoughts and emotions are tied up with subject and object, they think they have to block them to experience rigpa. But rigpa doesn't do anything with thought and

emotions; it lets them be there. If you recognize natural clarity, then everything is transformed. Although something might look like an emotion, it is not a real emotion. That's why rigpa is not impermanent. But of course, that's why it's not permanent, either.

Buddhadharma: Would the modern-day Western student's experience of the Dzogchen path be different from those who practiced in Tibet for many hundreds of years?

Marcia Schmidt: Tulku Urygen gave teachings to both Westerners and Tibetans, and I was able to sit in with both of them. He taught people exactly the same thing. Some people call it Tibetan Buddhism, but it's not exclusive to the Tibetan people. There are cultural norms – salted tea, tsampa, and so forth – that are Tibetan but have nothing to do with the Buddhist teachings. To practice Dzogchen, you just have to be a sentient being.

But while the teachings are the same, there is a different level of diligence between us and practitioners of the past. We have the Internet and the five hundred channels, and our culture doesn't support people being practitioners so much. It's a different kind of value system. There is also a difference in our openness. Tibetans just do things with blind faith. They don't question and examine as much. There's a good side to blind faith, but for us it just doesn't happen. It's not our culture; it's not something we've grown up with and are encouraged to practice.

Ron Garry: Fundamentally the Dzogchen we study and practice is identical, because we're all humans. At the same time, there are some adaptations based on our culture and our upbringing, on what makes us tick. Some teachers are more familiar with our culture and others are less familiar. The actual dharma teaching is not really different, but if you're more comfortable with a lama who can really speak to our culture, you may want to find a teacher like that. The style of communicating can be different. One may sound more traditional and one may speak more to our culture, but the actual teaching isn't different. It's the very same path.

Marcia Schmidt: It's helpful to recognize that there have always been two main approaches: the path of the scholar and the path of the simple meditator. Which avenue you follow depends upon the type of person you are. The end result can be the same. The pandita, the scholar, goes through all the philosophical vehicles and works a lot with their mind in an analytical way. This is often a very good approach for Westerners, given the propensity to investigate and examine that I talked about. You question, discuss, debate, and engage in intellectual methods of reaching understanding.

The kusulu, the simple meditator, may be someone who doesn't have the time or the inclination to study all the philosophical texts. He or she is someone who can receive pith instruction, gain certainty in that pith instruction, and go out and practice. That was how Tulku Urgyen had been taught. Following the

kusulu approach doesn't mean that you don't study. You always need to study everything you are practicing. But you don't need to study all the philosophical views.

Ron Garry: Whatever approach you take, when you learn from a Dzogchen master, it speaks directly to your experience. Everything is a practice. Everything you learn points directly to your own experience – jealousy, envy, anger, and so on – and how to free yourself right on the spot. These teachings deal with the fact that you are a human being.

Buddhadharma: A lot of wonderful Dzogchen literature is now available in English, and in these works one can read profound descriptors for natural awareness – “the stainless face,” “the clear light,” “the original ground” – or statements such as “like the sky, realization is changeless” and “rigpa is self-manifest.” Furthermore, rigpa is said to be ever-present and immediate, not far away, and you attain it by not trying to attain it. This makes for lovely and inspiring reading, but how helpful can it be? Does it not cause us to grasp for experiences in the way that Rinpoche talked about?

Ron Garry: Once again, it is the teacher who makes the difference. When most of us are first connecting with spirituality, we go through a process of searching. We find books that are really inspiring and teachers whose writings move us. That's what happened to me. What I read lit a fire within me. It motivated me to look for a pure lineage and a pure teacher, because that's what you need to do to go beyond the book-reading level.

At the same time, when I think back to the state I was in, I wonder how in the world I could tell the difference between a pure teacher and one who is not. I don't have a definitive answer for how one sorts that out. I just found that the more I looked at my motivation and my intention as I went through the process, the more I tried to let go of intentions and motivations that were not so pure. As a result of letting go of these lesser motivations, it became more likely that I would find my own motivation reflected in a pure teacher.

There are texts that talk about how to find a teacher, but in the end it is based on your motivation. What you are after will influence what you connect with. It's very easy for someone to speak all these beautiful Dzogchen words, and if they're charismatic, very articulate, and maybe kind of funny, they can fulfill our desire to be entertained. But will we receive genuine teaching from them? We need to look at our own motivation carefully. If our motivation is pure, we will connect with what's pure.

Buddhadharma: So, you relied on an intelligent kind of doubt that helped you examine your own experiences and motivations?

Ron Garry: Yes. It's important to do that. I try to call everything into question in myself, and I recommend that one consider doing that. Likewise, if something a teacher says doesn't make sense, we need to really look at that. If a teacher does something, we can ask, does that work for me? It could be a great teacher, but maybe you just don't have a match.

In the West, we fall in love first. We go wild and get inspired, then a year later, we start checking out the teacher more closely. The texts counsel the reverse: first check out the teacher. And if you're the teacher, first check out the student. Then, when you're certain, you make the commitment. Once you make the commitment, you stick with that.

Marcia Schmidt: Exactly. You need to apply critical mind. Only then choose whether to follow a path or not, because once you've chosen to do it, the traditional analogy says that you are like a snake in a bamboo tube. There's no turning back. So you should make careful, discerning discriminations beforehand. Because once you've committed, there's not much choice anymore.

The Western mind of materialism thinks in terms of getting something, not in terms of committing to something. And it always wants the best, the supreme, the *crème de la crème*. That's why many people are attracted to Dzogchen. But we have to reach, to stretch, to the level of Dzogchen, instead of just making it another material object we're going to get, one that has value because we want it. Dzogchen is a path we need to engage in and utilize. We see its true value when we apply it.

Mingyur Rinpoche: The authentic Dzogchen teaching has to be received with proper timing. Some teachings you have to receive first, and some teachings you have to receive later. If you receive the later teachings too early, that is not good for your practice. You will not get the real taste of the teaching. It becomes just an idea to try. If you receive the teachings step by step, then

you can really feel the meaning of the teaching. You can get to the heart.

That's why we keep the high Dzogchen teachings secret, because if you explain them everywhere and everyone can get them, then if you really start the practice at some point, the practice might become very dry, not alive. We also keep the innermost teachings secret to protect the lineage blessing. The general idea of what Dzogchen practice is can be shared with everybody, but the real pith instruction is very secret and must be received through the lineage blessing.

Buddhadharma: What does “lineage blessing” mean?

Ron Garry: Lineage blessing means that Dzogchen is something living and it comes from a real-life teacher who is a living embodiment of that nondualistic awareness. They live it every day. That is the source of everything. The fancy words are just indications, ways of communicating with us about that living essence. So, when Dzogchen words get out into the general public, people start thinking that they have had that realization, and the power gets watered down. It's just Dzogchen words coming from dualistic minds. Then there is no lineage anymore.

The authentic lineage is something intimate and direct for the student. It is about being in the presence of buddha mind. If the teaching isn't coming from there, if it's just on paper or it's being transmitted by someone who is imitating, then even though it may be called Dzogchen, the lineage blessing has been cut at that point. People who are drawn to Dzogchen are drawn to it partly

because of its live and very human quality. If we publish everything, it impersonalizes and dehumanizes the tradition. It is not a book on a shelf or a TV program. You need human interaction.

Marcia Schmidt: You do not just receive the teaching from the teacher sitting in front of you at that moment of transmission. It comes from all the other teachers stretching back thousands of years and their disciples, in an unbroken line. When we use the word “blessing,” we are talking about this huge array of teaching and practice that comes from the transmission of the lineage.

It comes as a complete package that has built-in protection. This protection includes samayas, sacred promises, that all people involved in the tradition respect; protectors whom we ask to protect us from misusing and damaging the teachings; and the empowerment to teach.

The lineage is stabilized in the practice. Although all of the teachers may not be fully enlightened, they have a lot more realization than us to pass on. Tulku Urgyen used to say that having some recognition of rigpa is like having a candle in your hand, but if you have not stabilized that and you try to pass it on, you will hand the candle over to someone else and end up in darkness yourself.

Mingyur Rinpoche: There’s a big difference between real experience and experience that is pointed to, although they may have many apparent similarities. For example, if you are standing in front of a big mirror, there’s a reflection of you in the mirror. The reflection and you are very similar – the same complexion,

same hair, same everything. But there's a big difference. The reflection doesn't have the bones and blood that you have. That's the difference between an authentic recognition of rigpa and an apparent one, between using the words of Dzogchen and getting the meaning, the realization, of Dzogchen.

Buddhadharma: Many people have heard of both Mahamudra and Dzogchen and even seen advertisements for programs about them. We have the general idea that they're similar yet different. Both are considered ultimate teachings from some perspective. What distinguishes these two Tibetan practice traditions?

Mingyur Rinpoche: The meaning of the two is not different. They come from different angles and use different terminology. For example, in Mahamudra we talk about ordinary mind and in Dzogchen we talk about natural awareness. Mahamudra is more focused on the meditation, from the experiential point of view, and on the minute details of stillness, movement, emptiness, appearance, and so forth.

That is the style of Mahamudra: the many ways of approaching ordinary mind in meditation. Dzogchen has more emphasis on the view. You make the distinction between conceptual mind and rigpa at the level of the view, and then you have to practice. The meaning is not different, but there is a different angle and therefore different words and different styles.

Marcia Schmidt: There's a famous quote from Tsele Natsok Rangdrol that says, "Mahamudra and Dzogchen, different words, but not meaning. The only difference is Mahamudra stresses

mindfulness, while Dzogchen relaxes within awareness.” For the practitioner, it has to do with the approach you take, and which path we travel will depend on the karmic propensities we have.

The path of Mahamudra is very kind. It goes through the four yogas of Mahamudra [one-pointedness, simplicity, one taste, and nonmeditation] and their various degrees and stages. The teacher takes the student through them step by step and works within the context of the student’s experience to get closer and closer to the recognition of mind nature.

Dzogchen starts right from the beginning to introduce the student to natural awareness, rigpa. There is immediate recognition, which Tsoknyi Rinpoche, Mingyur Rinpoche’s brother, calls “baby rigpa.” It’s a baby, and that baby needs to be nurtured – not in a conceptual way, by adding something to it, but it needs to be trained, developed, and strengthened. It is abrupt, but it’s unstable. Not unstable in itself, but unstable with respect to one’s ability to remain there. We would all like to believe that we are proceeding directly, Dzogchen style, but most of us in fact are proceeding in a gradual way.

Buddhadharma: All of you have stressed the difficulty of Dzogchen and the need to go through a progression, a path, in order to be fully engaged in Dzogchen. So then Dzogchen is not really a shortcut in the way it is sometimes discussed.

Mingyur Rinpoche: It’s the very best shortcut! It’s the number one shortcut.

Buddhadharma: How can it be both a shortcut and a path with many stages?

Mingyur Rinpoche: In Vajrayana, we have development-stage practice, involving visualization and mantra, and completion-stage practice, which involves working with the energy channels – prana, nadi, and bindu. Dzogchen gets right to the heart. It's more direct than any other method. You need preparation and various kinds of support, but the practice itself is direct. Even if you have a shortcut, there still needs to be a road there to travel on. Otherwise, you can't use the shortcut.

Marcia Schmidt: Dzogchen is a shortcut because you're taking the fruition as the path. One's nature can be pointed out and then you can recognize and use that nonconceptual state through all practices, through every stage along the way. Even though it is revealed, we still have to go through the path. Yes, we're told it's the effortless great perfection, that there is nothing to do and that it's your inherent nature. That's true in the absolute sense. But in the relative sense, we're not necessarily connecting with our absolute nature. We have lots of discursive thoughts, we have very little bodhicitta. So we have to be honest and ask ourselves, what's going to change that? If we do that, we can receive the training and make use of these sublime methods that have a very good track record. Then they will be a shortcut for us. But we can't avoid the path.

Buddhadharma: Is rigpa exclusive to Dzogchen? Is it possible that a practitioner of another tradition may attain the quality of natural mind, rigpa?

Mingyur Rinpoche: Rigpa is already within us twenty-four hours a day. It doesn't matter who we are – human being, animal, part of a tradition or not. But recognition is the key. If you want to practice rigpa recognition according to Dzogchen, you need all the causes and conditions from Dzogchen. Otherwise, you cannot recognize rigpa according to Dzogchen. If you miss one component – no lineage or no real pith instruction – then there is no Dzogchen, and no recognition of rigpa according to the Dzogchen tradition.

Buddhadharma: Is there any point in comparing formless meditation experiences and terminology across traditions?

Marcia Schmidt: I don't think it's necessary. I don't understand why other people in other traditions would try to mix in Dzogchen terminology with their path. Their path is perfectly complete within itself. Why do you have to think that it's the same as another path? There are similarities, but they are not the same. That's why there's Zen, that's why there's the Vipassana tradition, that's why there's Dzogchen. The essential meaning may be similar, but the whole path and training is what defines a tradition. If you're a good practitioner, you need to have confidence that whatever you're practicing is suitable for you. Don't go looking for something because you think it's superior. It may not be. You might not have the karmic connection to it.

Buddhadharma: Could you nevertheless derive inspiration from studying a Dzogchen text, even if you are not a full-fledged Dzogchen practitioner?

Marcia Schmidt: If you consider a book like *Wisdom Nectar: Dudjom Rinpoche's Heart Advice*, the songs of realization in there are meant to inspire you. It's not ordinary language; it is realized wisdom mind speaking. It is truly the nectar of the wisdom. And of course, that can be beneficial for anyone to read. It can indeed inspire you, open you. By reading the sublime literature, the divine words, you can come closer to meeting with the realization of pure beings. As part of the Dzogchen tradition, however, it is important to make the aspiration, to offer prayers, to connect with the true teacher, the true path, and the true teachings. Then, you can carry out what you were inspired to do.

Ron Garry: It's good to have lots of literature and lots of teachings. Different teachings and different teachers will inspire different people. I look for inspiration wherever I can find it, and I bring that to my path and my practice. It's rejuvenating.

Buddhadharma: Under what circumstances would people of another path benefit from a Dzogchen intensive?

Mingyur Rinpoche: People who are genuinely practicing in other paths, Theravada and Zen, for example, have a very good foundation for engaging in Dzogchen practice. Many practices are shared in common. If they decided to take part in Dzogchen practice, that could be helpful for them, because the real Dzogchen

is within the mind. In order to engage in Dzogchen practice, you don't have to change your Buddhist path. Your Buddhist path would be brought to the Dzogchen.

Ron Garry: From where I sit as a student, Dzogchen is part of an organic whole, a total path, and sometimes we tend to think of it externally like another item we would pick up at the supermarket. "How are the apples today? Oh, there's a watermelon." Sometimes I can get caught up in that getting-something kind of thinking, but when I relax a bit, I realize Dzogchen is an entire tradition. The whole concept of going to workshops is very different.

If I were a Zen practitioner, I would focus fully on the practices my teacher had given me. And if I felt a special connection to something else, I would pursue that. For example, if I became interested in Dzogchen, I would eventually go through all the processes we discussed earlier. I would start at the beginning, find a teacher, and so forth.

Many friends of mine are really attracted to Dzogchen, to the high tantras, the inner tantras, but they tend not to be attracted to the four thoughts that turn the mind to dharma [the preciousness of human rebirth, the inevitability of death, the cause and effect of karma, and the great suffering of samsara] and the preliminary practices. At the same time, they will say that tantra is missing something that they need to fill in with psychotherapy. But what's missing, what we all try to jump over, is the preliminaries.

The preliminaries are really juicy and really wonderful. Studying the four thoughts, from a text like Words of My Perfect Teacher, is very powerful, because it relates directly to my experience in my daily life. I have to be with my experience now, not with some far-off thing to be attained. Then I can benefit from instruction from the teacher. So, it's a whole path, not something to do on a weekend.

Before I discovered the power of the preliminaries, I was somewhat blinded by teachings on the view. I was doing practices but I didn't know how it all fit together. Now when I hear a Dzogchen teaching on the view from a master, it tells me where I'm headed; my eyes are opened, and I can bring that into my practice of the four thoughts and the preliminaries. It's not a matter of "I can't wait to get through all this stuff so I can get to the Dzogchen."

Marcia Schmidt: Recognizing the nature of mind is not something you have to set aside while doing the preliminary practices. It's a support for preliminary practices. You can recognize your innate nature and practice prostrations and the other preliminaries. It's not a separate thing. It enriches the preliminary practices. On the other hand, one of the criticisms on Amazon.com for a book I did said, "She says this is Dzogchen, but actually she's telling us all this other stuff that's not related." They were talking about the preliminaries and developing bodhicitta. That is a common misconception that completely misses the point. If there is a huge separation between dharma and the real life of the people

around you, then you will have dry Dzogchen, a nonconceptual state that has no bodhicitta. As Tsokyi Rinpoche says, it has no juice. Loving-kindness, compassion, and devotion are what make the Dzogchen path juicy and vibrant. Then, when people come in contact with practitioners, they will feel that this is a person who is honest, direct, and has some signs of practice.

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Fully Engaged in Body, Speech and Mind

Anne Klein on the foundational practices of Dzogchen, through which we can meet the dharma with our entire being and dissolve conceptual mind into the “great expanse” that is liberation.

Is there a paradox at work in the dharma? We enter practice because we want something—peace, liberation, openhearted presence. We learn that in order to get these we must do certain things. So we make effort. But we cannot really accomplish what we wish through effort. Effort can even be an obstacle.

We want the most profound, most penetrating, most efficacious practices, and we want them so much and in such habitual ways that we don't always recognize what they are when we have them. Moreover, we tend to want them with our heads, or out of our emotional distress. Certain kinds of wanting prevent our opening to something more profound than ordinary wanting, to the kind of deep longing that makes us truly receptive.

Although this tension is natural, even inevitable, our most vibrant contact with the teachings does not occur through effort or narrow wanting. It comes when we meet the teachings in our body and being with an open heart-mind. We can't actually do anything about this tricky setup. We can, however, sit with it and gradually allow a shift to take place. This shift is not simply a change of ideas but a shift in our being. And practice is crucial for

setting this shift in motion, even if practice itself cannot make it happen.

One can look more closely at this interesting matter through noting how Dzogchen (“Great Completeness” or “Great Perfection”) traditions work with this conundrum. Dzogchen equates any type of thinking, or even the presence of a thought-image, with a conceptual mind. And all conceptual minds are, by definition, effortful. Such a mind, Dzogchen teachers emphasize, will never contact the effortless state of liberation. Yet one must begin somehow, so one begins with foundational practices, known as ngöndro. These are practices that have traditionally provided entry to, and a vital foundation for, Dzogchen and other tantric paths. Looking closely at a few elements of these practices, we find crucial clues on how to meet the tricky situation of effort and non-effort, which affects practitioners across a broad band of traditions.

Clues to the release of the apparent paradox of effort come not only in the practices designed to melt away conception, but also in profound stories about the transmission of those practices. The practices are what you do until you realize the story is true. Sometimes we are so focused on doing a practice “right” that we don’t pay much attention to what created that practice in the first place and how it was transmitted. In oral and also in written teachings in Tibet, there are always stories of how the text or instruction one is receiving first emerged. In fact these stories are usually told before the practice itself is unveiled, and then more

stories unfold as further explanation is given. As I look for clues about the deep structure of practice, I find these stories profoundly instructive. They have helped me begin to untie the paradoxical knot of effort and letting be.

These stories speak deeply to the entire dimensions of body, mind and energy. Therefore, they connect directly to foundational practices. This is important to the extent that we are interested in discovering how we can meet the teachings with our being rather than with our usual wanting self. In other words, how we can absorb practices into ourselves, rather than holding them at arm's length, which is what happens when we wield them with effort.

The foundational practices of ngöndro are ways to bring body, speech and mind into increasing harmony with the “great expanse” talked about in the Dzogchen teachings. This expanse is another name for reality, for mind-nature, for the state of liberation. Its vastness challenges the cramped and reified self-images that temporarily obstruct our view of the whole. Finitudes of any kind—the sense of being small, contained, an urgent rush of business, passions or plans—are simply conceptions. These conceptions are both the cause and the effect of energetic holdings in the body. The foundational practices illuminate these holdings and, finally, lead to their dissolution into that expanse. As my teacher Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche has said, “Like a fire burning fuel, the mind consumes conception by working with it.”

In the Tibetan traditions, teaching and practice sessions typically open with a reference to the foundational practices. Every

lineage has its own variations, but the basic structure and principles of ngöndro are virtually identical across the Tibetan systems. The sequence usually begins, after an acknowledgement of one's guru or lineage and the intention to benefit all beings, with the Four Thoughts. These four are reflections on (1) the preciousness of one's own life, (2) its fragility and the uncertainty of death's timing, (3) the inexorable nature of karma, and (4) the impossibility of avoiding suffering so long as ignorance keeps one in samsara. In addition, there are two other contemplations: (5) the benefits of liberation compared to life in samsara and (6) the importance of a spiritual guide. These six are known as the outer foundational practices.

These six outer practices are combined with five inner practices, each of which needs to be repeated 100,000 times. The first inner foundational practice is refuge, which is accompanied by the second, prostrations. There are different styles of prostrations, but these variations can be summarized as “long” and “short.” Both begin by touching facing palms to heart, crown, throat and heart again. In the long prostration one then stretches full-length to the floor, arms extended; in the short prostration, one touches the ground with the “five points” of head, two hands and two knees (the two feet already on the ground are not part of this count). Once practiced, this is a very fluid motion, further animated by the rhythm of the refuge recitation

The bodhicitta recitation, the third of the five practices, is repeated so as to strengthen one's intention to practice with a

mind expansive enough to encompass the welfare of all living beings. The fourth practice is that of the hundred-syllable mantra associated with the radiant white Vajrasattva. It is said that Vajrasattva, whose name means “adamantine being,” prayed that when he became enlightened he would have a special power to relieve beings of the obstructions to their enlightenment. Fifth is the mandala offering, in which one symbolically offers up all of one’s wealth, possessions and sense of one’s world.

A special feature of the mandala offering in the Longchen Nyingthig (“The Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse,” a cycle of Dzogchen teachings) is the offering of the three buddha bodies—the enlightened dimensions of the emanation, resplendent and true aspects of enlightened beings. This in fact is an opportunity to experience the nature of reality as always offering and giving of itself. Indeed, every one of the foundational practices is an opportunity to experience some aspect of reality. Through the sheer process of repetition the mind is naturally drawn to discover new meaning behind the practice, and it is these discoveries that light the way. All these practices are also forms of Guru Yoga—they all provide opportunities to unify with the enlightened mind of the Buddha guru. Explicit Guru Yoga is also a crucial practice, and while it is not technically considered ngöndro, practitioners also accumulate recitations of the Vajra Guru mantra, ideally ten million over one’s lifetime.

The foundational practices thus combine mind-training through the four thoughts, surrendering oneself through

prostrations, purification through Vajrasattva, prayers to the lineage, and above all, unification with Lama Mind in Guru Yoga. All these practices together, and any one of them individually, flow into the view of Dzogchen. Each of the inner practices offers an opportunity to allow your conceptual processes, thoughts and visualizations to dissolve into vastness. That vastness is an effortless state. Concepts and striving only obstruct it. Thus, ngöndro absorbs one's effort and transforms it into effortlessness. It is a path of many blessings, gradually reconfiguring the energies of body, speech and mind.

The way of doing the foundational practices is also important with respect to the question of effort and effortlessness. Daily practice in the Tibetan traditions typically involves three deeply integrated elements: words, chanted melody and the energetically felt presence of enlightened beings who appear in front of you, dissolve into you or arise within you.

Instructions for meditation are chanted aloud rhythmically, for they are poetry. The words describe the deities who are present and then address them, making requests, asking for blessings, above all establishing a relationship with them and with the part of oneself that they in a sense express. The rhythmic melody opens and moves currents of energy; the chanted words describe the vivid colors, poses and ornaments of the enlightened beings with you in meditation. You are engaged cognitively, energetically, imaginatively and vocally.

These practices provide a point of departure from which we can step into space, letting go completely. Finding that point of departure, that foundation, is what these practices are about. Literally ngöndro means “that which goes before;” ngön in Tibetan means “before,” and dro means “to go.” So they are usually translated as “preliminary practices.” This might be bad press, because most of us like to think of ourselves as sophisticated people who don’t need preliminaries. It is also misleading, because it sounds like a kind of kindergarten, something you graduate from. But you never leave these practices behind, just like a house never moves off its foundation. You don’t build a foundation and then say, “Now we’ll put the house somewhere else.” Every time you walk into your house, you are standing on its foundation, and every time you do a practice, you do it from this foundation.

That is why no matter who you are, you do them. As another of my teachers, Lama Rinpoche, said, “His Holiness the Dalai Lama did them before receiving Longchen Nyingthig from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. I’m a tulku, and I did foundational practices five times before I received Dzogchen.” That’s what practitioners do.

In talking this way, Lama Rinpoche was addressing a student who felt inclined to bypass the foundations. At some level, we all may have that feeling of wanting to bypass foundations. We think we are exceptional, our needs are very particular, we have certain innate qualities or experiences that put us in a different category from other people, and so on. Who among us has not had such

thoughts? This is merely the pleading of ordinary, unaware mind, the one that practice dissolves—eventually.

Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche, who taught me these foundational practices nearly thirty years ago, elaborates on them in a book of lectures given during his first visit to the United States in 1974. This book, called *Tantric Practice in Nyingma*, very clearly describes the chants and imagined vistas of those practices. Translated by Jeffrey Hopkins, the book is a commentary on *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, the beloved classic by Patrül Rinpoche.

Patrül Rinpoche himself said that while some see Dzogchen teachings as profound, for him the foundational practices are even more profound. This point is very easy to miss as we focus our efforts on attaining the “highest.” In my occasional role as oral translator for lamas, I have often seen this happen to students. Mara has many clever devices, and the belief that one can judge these things by ordinary criteria is one of them.

The practices known as foundational—and too easily dismissed by the limited self as merely preliminary—are brilliantly designed to reveal that the self that grasps or disdains them is in profound tension with the awakened state from which the practices themselves emerge and to which they can open us. It is a fruitful, unavoidable tension, a blessed tension that energizes the entire path.

By examining them in more detail, we can see how the foundational practices, and the stories about their ultimate origin,

contribute to dissolving the “problem” of needing effort to reach an effortless state. Let us consider how (1) mind-training, (2) the practice of Vajrasattva (which combines several elements typical of Tibetan tantric meditation) and (3) the stories of Dzogchen’s transmission contribute to such opening and to our understanding of what these traditions mean when they say we can ripen through relying on the blessings of the lineage.

Mind-Training

The chief mind-training has to do with the Four Thoughts, which yield awareness and finally acceptance of personal impermanence. No longer needing to maintain the pretense of permanence facilitates grounding in and acceptance of this mortal body. As Patrül Rinpoche wrote in *Words of My Perfect Teacher*,

In your mother’s womb, turn your mind to the Dharma
As soon as you are born, remember the Dharma of death.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche said, “Ego is always wanting to achieve spirituality. It is rather like wanting to witness your own funeral.” Remembering the dharma of death, as expressed in the traditional contemplation above, is the opposite of wanting to attend your own funeral. It is preparing to know the vastness from which we emerge.

Life is a party on death row. Recognizing mortality means we are willing to see what is true. Seeing what is true is grounding. It brings us into the present and, eventually, into presence. It also brings us into our own bodies, especially if we combine

meditation on impermanence with an energetic awareness at the base of the spine. At first, the important thing about impermanence seems to be the limited time we have in this precious life. This is crucial and foundational, and yet it is not the whole story.

The teachings on impermanence are not only about the death of the self that never existed. Understanding impermanence, Khetsun Rinpoche says in commenting on *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, will lead you into the natural clarity of your own mind. The ideas of a finite self, ideas which initially make us want to practice, can dissolve. To know impermanence is thus not only a path to what Dzogchen traditions speak of as unbounded wholeness (*thigle nyag cig*) –it is also integral to it.

The mind grasping toward wholeness at the expense of “lesser” insights is profoundly mistaken, as it will discover through trial and error. It begins to approach and sense the charisma of that reality at the point when the teachings can begin to connect with something deeper than the usual self-state. Even at the very outset, what these practices themselves contain, like that for which they provide a foundation, is beyond expression.

Vajrasattva

In this visualization practice, we find all the melodic, kinesthetic and imaginative elements that help bring all your energies to bear on your practice. Physically you are seated in meditation posture and energetically you feel the chanting vibrate through your body, connecting you with other voices in the room. With

this as a support it is easy to be wholeheartedly engaged in the contemplation. You begin by reciting:

*Ah! At the crown of my own head
Wide white lotus, full moon orb
White Hum Vajrasattva yields
Brilliant white, resplendent form
Holding vajra, consort, bell
Protect me and purify
These wrongs I rue and show you
I bind forever, on my life.
On a moon disc at your heart
Hum circled by your own mantra
Which I chant, invoking you.*

Lama Rinpoche, a monk who teaches mainly in Asia, observes that chanting in poetic rhythm brings in blessings more strongly. Blessings are most certainly a kind of energetic coursing through the body, and chanting helps energy move more fluidly. All the foundational practices move energy through the body; this is one element of their profundity. While tantra teaches even more explicitly and precisely about energy, all Buddhist practices affect energy in some way.

Tibetans attribute the power of their practices, transmissions and lamas to a type of energy literally known as “waves of splendor” (*jin lab*). The first syllable, *jin*, means “that which has been

given or bestowed,” as in “bestowed by the king.” Jin also means “grace” or “gift” or even in some contexts “splendor.” The second syllable, lab, means wave, like the waves of an ocean. Early Tibetan kings were considered direct descendants of the gods and so these kings were imbued with supernatural qualities such as jin–pomp, splendor, magnificence. Thus, jin lab, which began as the splendor of kings, later became in Buddhist understanding the waves of grace, or surges of splendor, that are the most profound gifts of lamas. This is what comes through the mind-body in practice. This is also what is transmitted from teacher to student, and in initiation. The ultimate source of these blessings is reality itself. It is reality releasing its intrinsic energy to practitioners, until they recognize the source for what it is.

The importance of recognizing our precious human body in mind-training has already been noted. The Vajrasattva practice brings attention to the body in a different way; it is a call to connect with the blessing—the light of the radiant Vajrasattva—and to bring it into every part of our body. Vajrasattva is a purification practice. The light is felt to be eradicating all that obscures your own enlightened state. In the process of incorporating this light, you may discover some psychosomatic resistance that prevents you from fully lighting up or inhabiting the space of your own body. This resistance is an inevitable part of our way of holding to a finite self, and the more we are aware of it, the more easily it will dissolve, revealing the vast expanse.

In response to our request, light flows down from Vajrasattva through our crown, filling our body; it courses through every pore and corpuscle of our material being, and fills our entire awareness as well. In the process, our coarse material body fills with and becomes light and Vajrasattva blends inseparably with us. We glow and light up the universe, giving and receiving blessings. Then we dissolve back into radiant emptiness and are present in a different way.

This combination of chanting, vivid imagination and cognitive understanding is very powerful. There is every possibility that these will transform your body, energy and mental state. At the same time, this very possibility can lure you into thinking that the important thing is what you do rather than how you are. This means you have been deluded into thinking your real purpose lies with training your usual, thought-full mind to “do” these practices well. But ego can’t attend its own funeral any more than the ordinary self can experience enlightenment. Practice is about finding the fire that dissolves the self. It is about finding a way to leave the illusion of self behind and still be there. Illusion vanishes when, as in the Vajrasattva practice, we dissolve into the radiant expanse.

Again and again in the course of these practices, we dissolve into and arise from this expanse. Every such dissolution and emergence is an opportunity to practice and learn about empty mind-space: the way emptiness relates to form, the way unconstructed inner space relates to constructs and concepts.

Part of the genius of the tradition is to repeat these foundational practices so many times. It is not that you finish with them when you complete a hundred thousand repetitions. You do them every day, even if you are the Dalai Lama. This is a daily practice. It just grows, especially if you are able to do some of these practices in retreat. To learn them is simple, and then they have unbelievable power, an effect you could not predict based just on intellectual knowledge of them or cursory dipping into them.

This power doesn't come through in a single session or a single day. It has a quality of unfolding, but this doesn't mean we always and only make steady progress toward the light. Bad days come in time, especially after good days. You don't just get happier and happier and happier. Seasoned practitioners know that. One way to conceptualize what occurs is that in practice we continually come up against who and what we are right now, and this is often at odds with the part of our being we are practicing to bring into manifestation. So I may sit down to become Vajrasattva, which is really an aspect that is always present with me, but as soon as I sit down I feel the anger or fear that is most conflated with my identity at this moment. We practice in the midst of that.

Then something else can happen: magic. Often it comes after the most terrible moments. We don't always know why one or the other arises, but we do come to see that it's a process. The wisdom of these practices is that we just do them. We just do them without focusing on whether we feel like it or not, or whether it is sufficiently "advanced" for us or not. It's a practice; it's a

commitment, an unbreakable connection with the transmission. You're tired, and you do it. You're too busy, and you do it. You don't feel like it, and you do it. You keep that solidity of practice there, no matter what. That becomes a powerful thing.

In principle, these foundational practices are themselves sufficient. They contain blessings connecting us to the ultimate source, the primordial buddha known as Samantabhadra, who personifies naked reality. They contain elements of sutra, tantra and Dzogchen; and for one who has received insight, they themselves are Dzogchen practices. They provide us with a basis to receive mind-nature instructions and a foundation for all the explicit Dzogchen teachings of Yeshe Lama, the sequence of practices bestowed upon students when they complete the foundational practices. Above all they provide us with a way to connect directly, daily and continuously to the living blessings, the “waves of splendor” that are the Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse, or whatever one's lineage might be.

Transmission

The story of how Dzogchen is transmitted is itself an introduction to reality. This does not mean we understand every story literally; however, it does mean we are open to receiving through them an understanding as yet unknown to the ordinary mind seeking those very teachings.

One dimension of reality is pure radiant truth, known as the dharmakaya, the true body or dimension of enlightened beings.

Khetsun Rinpoche says that this dimension is like glass, and the light streaming through it is like those fabulous-looking buddhas known as Resplendent Dimension, or Sambhogakaya, buddhas.

The teachings about these things are communicated in one of three ways: through mind-to-mind direct transmission, through the use of symbols, or through words. All these represent different stages of manifestation from naked truth. Of direct transmission there is little one can say, but examples of symbolic and oral transmission indicate the fluid line of transmission that connects them, and us, with the inexpressible source.

As Patrül Rinpoche puts it, from the primordial buddha Samantabhadra emerge infinite magical displays of compassion that arise as ubiquitous buddhas and their pure lands, starting with Vajrsattva. Samantabhadra's "circle of disciples is not different from himself." This is a token of confidence for practitioners, since it indicates that enlightened reality is everywhere. It cannot be lost. The ordinary mind may have forgotten it, but the ordinary mind will never find it either. Practices let the fire of reality itself consume that ordinary mind.

There are many astounding stories of transmission. Fantastic sounding as they are, especially to secularized Westerners, they present a vision of wholeness that, while inexpressible, is passionately, tangibly and kinesthetically experienced. It doesn't require effort to hear these stories, and you can be so drawn into them that you forget to make the kind of effort that divides you from the real nature you seek. In *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Patrül

Rinpoche displays this (and more) most ingeniously in a story of how the pith instructions of Dzogchen came into the world. Here are a few abbreviated scenes from this tale:

Adhichitta, living in the heavenly realms, has a vision. All the Buddhas

of past, present and future come before him and invoke Vajrasattva:

You who possess the jewel of miraculous means,
Open the gate to all that beings desire.

Vajrasattva, who as we already know emanates directly from primordial reality, responds to this invocation just the way he does in the foundational practices—light pours out from his heart. In this case, however, the light becomes a brilliant, jeweled wheel offered to Sattvavajra, the lettered reflection of Vajrasattva’s own name, and also a name for Vajrapani, the bodhisattva of power. It’s a revelatory moment—one expression of the primordial nature requesting teachings from another who equally mirrors it. This teaching is seen here less as a path to reality than as the play of reality’s presence. Practice invites us to join in the game; that is, we are beckoned to consciously and joyously participate in a game we have never left.

Receiving this gift, Sattvavajra promises to teach. Drawing on the wisdom of all Buddhas in all five Pure Lands, those same Pure Lands which we already know are expressions of Samantabhadra, the “distilled essence of all the Conquerors’ wisdom.” He transmits all these riches without a word, through symbols. Adhichitta,

uniquely capable of comprehending them, then becomes a symbol himself. He instantly transforms into the letter hum, seed syllable of enlightened beings. Emerging from the hum state in yet another guise, he brings these teachings into the human realm of writing and speech.

This fluid movement bringing primordial reality into expression through symbols and words suggests the flowing movement of “waves of splendor” through the body of practitioners. The best of these practitioners carry Dzogchen expression forward in time, into history and into the minds of new practitioners. The spontaneous arising of the teaching from the natural dynamism of naked reality mirrors the effortless spontaneity of realization. Opening to the stream means releasing the effort that, perhaps, brought one into initial contact with it.

For example, the Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse, one of the most widely renowned Dzogchen lineages, emerges from the visionary writing compiled by Jigme Lingpa. Jigme Lingpa (1729–1798) was considered an incarnation of both Trisong Detsen, the religious eighth-century king of Tibet, and Vimalamitra, a great master of Dzogchen during the same period. Going to bed one evening, Jigme Lingpa’s heart was heavy because he was not in Guru Rinpoche’s direct presence. Praying deeply, he went into luminous clarity in which he, while flying over the stupa at Boudhanath, encountered a Sky Woman, a dakini, who entrusted him with a wooden casket in which he found yellow scrolls and crystal beads. Swallowing these, as yet another dakini instructed him,

he had, in Tulku Thondup's words, "the amazing experience that all the words of the Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse cycle with their meanings had been awakened in his mind as if they were imprinted there." He had received a profound symbolic communication. His further special gift was to transpose this into words. But those words did not come to him through training and straining his ordinary mind, like the writers of ordinary words will do. The words flowed to and through him effortlessly.

Jigme Lingpa became extremely learned, not through study, but through the visionary transformation of his practice. His luminous, voluminous writings are a testament to the power of reality and nonconceptual vastness to express itself in words through the power of blessings. No effort could produce, or even permit, the clarity that he experienced. Yet, he practiced intensely for years before revelation came to him. In this story, he models the transition from effortful striving to artful endeavor.

Practicing with ease means easing away from the ordinary mind with its tightly knotted purposes. Every focus, however useful, limits us in some way. We practice in this way until concepts and images dissolve into a space that is limitless, offering no center on which to focus. No focus, therefore, for effort.

The words and symbols of the transmission, carrying the blessings of their source, are closer to the fire of wisdom, closer to "the original," primordial buddha, than our far less vibrant concepts. So long as the smoke of our effort obscures them, we cannot fully appreciate the full splendor that is their source and ours.

Finding effortless ease means burning these purposeful thoughts. We wait in simple awareness for the fire to consume them, thereby disclosing the presence that is our nature. We respond to words and symbols that have until now receded before the effortful creation of finite realities.

In 1974, in Charlottesville, Virginia, Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche concluded his teaching on Jigme Lingpa's foundational practices by saying, "My own hope is that any among you who would like to begin these foundational practices will do so. In that case I will return and teach you the paths of Dzogchen." He did indeed return nearly a half dozen times. At the age of eighty-three he is about to visit once more in order, he told us on the phone, to "say Tashi Deleg" (farewell, or best wishes) to his friends and students. He, like the tertön in Tibet, like great lamas everywhere, is for students the embodied expression of the stream of transmission emanating from the primordial field. This stream is what students receive from teachers. Even in a student's simple act of requesting this, the mind of chatter and distraction is invited to subside and so reveal what ordinary mind can never know. As Jigme Lingpa explains in his foundational practice text:

*Praying from my heart center
Not just mouthings, not just words
Bless me from your heart expanse
Fulfill my aspirations.
With strong resolve that never weakens*

*May Lama's blessed mindstream enter me.
All are from the first highest pure lands
Gods, mantras, True Bodies ever pure
With no work of "do this don't do that"
Radiant true-mind past thought or knowing
May I see reality nakedly
In rainbow space where thoughts are freed, may
My visions of spheres and Buddhas grow
Full true-mind display, Buddha Pure Lands.*

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