

Dzogchen – Flawed Perfection



Though it is lesser known, there is no doubt that Dzogchen, in both its intricacy and simplicity, is one of the most insightful and elegant paths of awakening. While it is widely regarded as a part of Tibetan Buddhism, it originally existed in Tibet before the arrival of Buddhism, and as such developed an independent and unique vision of the spiritual reality in its own right. Dzogchen is a sudden path, based on a radical shift into the awakened state, which they call 'rigpa' or 'bare awareness'. This state is either transmitted directly by a master or shown to a disciple by guiding his intelligence into the recognition of his pure nature. Unlike in Mahamudra, which is a gradual path, the intermediary stages of development, such as samatha or vipassana, do not form part of the main teaching of Dzogchen. However, if an adept is less mature, he may also be given some preparatory practices.

There is a story in Dzogchen which expresses its essence very well. A student is walking with his master in the mountains. When they sit down to rest, his master says, "Do you see the light of the village below? Do you hear the dogs barking? It is just like that!" In this way he initiates his student into rigpa. In order for an adept to receive such deep instructions, the ground of his consciousness has to be ready; his access to I am must already be open. In some ways, this seems reminiscent of the Zen approach, but in truth the energies of these two traditions are quite different.

The vision of the spiritual reality in Dzogchen is comprised of three fundamentals: 'base,' 'path' and 'fruit.' What is the 'base'? In Buddhism it is called 'tathagatagarbha' (the womb of 'thus-gone' or 'tathagata') or Buddha-dhatu (the realm of Buddha). These terms refer to the 'original enlightenment' – the pure nature of reality.

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What is the ‘path?’ Usually, the term path refers to the gradual process of realizing our true nature. However, since Dzogchen is a sudden approach, in this case it points to the process of walking with and growing into the base. This means that, by their understanding, the path cannot begin before we consciously recognize rigpa, our primordial consciousness.

What is the relationship between the base and the path? If the base is tathagatagarbha, then the path refers to our evolution into the complete realization of that base. It is the ‘acquisition’ of the base, where the result is to reach ‘acquired enlightenment.’ The process that acquired enlightenment refers to varies between traditions, but they have all faced great difficulties in logically reconciling the concepts of acquired and original enlightenment. In a simplistic or idealistic non-dual path, enlightenment translates as the sudden and total realization of our pure nature. But the fact is that, even after we have recognized our Buddha nature, this recognition does not necessarily render our realization permanent. If the illusion of separate ego is removed, only absolute reality should remain – but it does not seem to work in this way.

In extreme versions of the sudden path, the event of awakening yields complete enlightenment, and no further practice or evolution is needed. But such unrealistic concepts of sudden awakening are rarely found in Buddhism; they are more common in Advaita, which tends to be excessively simplistic and impractical. In its correct interpretation, the concept of the sudden path points to an awakening that is followed by gradual cultivation, practices which support the awakening to become complete and permanent.

What is it that needs to be stabilized? Is it merely the recognition of our pure nature? It is more complex than that. Obviously, universal consciousness does not need to stabilize itself; it is me that needs to stabilize itself in I am by establishing constant access to it, followed by constant recognition and energetic unity. In short, the duality between me and I am needs to be bridged; it is their unity that constitutes the true enlightened state. In addition, throughout this process of cultivation, me is stabilizing the consciousness of its own pure subjectivity.

We could pose the question: Does the base really exist at all, prior to being recognized? After all, its original existence is purely hypothetical. Zen master Dogen devised a unique solution to this question. He said: “The principle of the Buddha-nature is that it is not endowed prior to enlightenment...the



Buddha-nature is unquestionably realized simultaneously with enlightenment." According to him, then, we cannot really conceive of the base unless we have realized it. The base and the path appear simultaneously, and their intricate relationship constitutes the further unfoldment of the path.

But is this really a valid proposition? It tends towards a quasi-subjective idealism, which presupposes that the perceiver fully creates the world he perceives. Perhaps what Dogen wrote can be explained by the equivocal character of the term 'Buddha nature.' It is not really clear whether 'Buddha nature' points to the universal beyond or whether it is just our own pure nature. If it is the equivalent of saying 'universal reality', it would be similar to the term 'Brahman' in Vedanta. But Buddha refuted the existence of Brahman. This would imply that the duality inherent to the Buddhist path is not between the individual and the universal I am, but between the individual and his own pure nature. That pure nature is actualized by dissolving the 'illusion' of individuality. Such an interpretation of reality indeed requires that Buddha nature be unconscious prior to its realization. In fact, we could say that it does not exist at all, other than as our own spiritual potential. If we were to compare Buddha nature to happiness, we could say: 'We all have the potential to realize happiness, but happiness does not exist of its own accord.' In a similar way, the logical conclusion of Buddhist philosophy is that Buddha nature does not have an independent ontological existence which can be separated from the one who is attaining it.

This is actually a very radical view. The truth is that, due to its transcendent nature, no one can know what the Buddha nature is like prior to it being actualized. Moreover, in the absence of a concept of higher duality, this subject can never really be illuminated. Trying to understand how Buddha nature is experienced in separation from our enlightenment is like asking how the universal I am experiences itself in separation from the soul. It simply cannot be known. We can realize unity with the universal I am, and we can realize the essence of universal I am within our own existence as the pure subjectivity of the soul, but we can never penetrate the mystery of the universal me – the intelligence and consciousness of the beloved.

Here we touch once again on the fundamental weakness of Buddhism: if the one who walks the path is not real (as is the contention in non-dualism) how can there be a process of enlightenment at all? And how is it that, in the event of enlightenment, Buddha nature is only realized by a single person? If there is no personal self, why doesn't enlightenment translate into the global awakening of Buddha nature as one, universal event? Not only is the 'unreal' person the subject of ignorance, he is also the subject of



enlightenment. As discussed in a previous article, it is necessary to revise our original spiritual assumptions and go beyond non-duality for a true resolution to these paradoxes. Only then can we clearly see there is an actual relationship between the one who walks the path (the soul) and the base (the pure nature of the universal reality).

What is the ‘fruit?’ As we have said, Dzogchen is a sudden path, based on the concept of sudden awakening and gradual cultivation. In this way it is similar to Zen, where awakening signifies the beginning of practice, not the end. Cultivation in Dzogchen is basically the practice of self-remembrance, which aims at the stabilization of the awakened state. That stabilization is the fruit, and the path occurs between the shores of the base and the fruit. As long as there is a path, there is still a dichotomy, a separation between the practitioner and his pure nature. To attain the fruit is to arrive at constant and complete unity with the base. This is described in Dzogchen with the beautiful phrase, ‘The light of the son merges with the light of the mother.’

So, this is the ‘fruit’ according to Dzogchen. But what is it really? If enlightenment is equal to the removal of ego, do we add anything to reality by becoming self-realized? In this model, the universal self does not need to realize itself, and the individual is only realizing its own unreality; in the end, nothing really happens. But is this a true picture of reality? If it were, the fruit would be no different than the base, and this is not the case. Through our enlightenment, we awaken a new dimension of existence, our higher individuality. Not only do we realize our unity with the base, we also give birth to the true subject of that unity – our soul. The real fruit is the soul, but this is not consciously acknowledged in Dzogchen.

As we are beginning to see, while Dzogchen is a beautiful path, it also has considerable limitations. One of its main shortcomings is that it does not point with any real clarity to what rigpa actually is, or how to verify if and when one has reached it. As such, one meets many Dzogchen adepts who claim to have attained rigpa, but who are not actually in the state of pure consciousness. If they are not in the state of rigpa, what do they experience? In some cases it is nothing substantial, just a calm state of mind or general sense of presence that has somehow been confused with naked awareness. In other cases, they might experience gentle absorption in being. Alternatively, they may be resting in a relaxed observer or, in the best case scenario, in the state of awareness (conscious me).



Like Mahamudra, there is no distinction in Dzogchen between awareness and consciousness. This is another significant limitation. As we explained in the article on Mahamudra, awareness is just a pale and shallow reflection of consciousness. It has spaciousness, but it does not have horizontal depth, and it is not rooted in universal reality. Due to the lack of precision in the Dzogchen description of rigpa, the state of pure consciousness can easily be confused with access to being, awareness or even just objectless attention. But existentially speaking, these are very different and much more superficial realizations.

In addition to developing the model of base, path and fruit, Dzogchen also developed many skillful mechanisms through which to maintain the correct balance between embodying rigpa and allowing the mind to function naturally, so that thinking is not suppressed, and where one is also not getting lost in the mind. They called this balance the ‘self-liberation of thought,’ and Dzogchen is sometimes referred to as the path of self-liberation. Here, whatever manifests in the field of experience is allowed to arise just as it is. It is not judged as good or bad, and is in that very instant, dissolved through our simultaneous recognition of, and surrender to, ‘naked awareness.’

Self-liberation of thought has nothing to do with observing the mind, letting go of the mind, or being mindful of thoughts. None of these practices can liberate us from the mind. When we let go of thoughts, we are still involved in them. But in self-liberation, we prevent a continuous chain of thoughts from forming, not by manipulating the mind, but by directing the light of recognition towards bare awareness (our pure subjectivity). Self-liberation occurs in the space where one thought has not yet disappeared and the next thought has not yet appeared. In our teaching, we describe this process in more precise language: each time pure attention cognizes I am (or at least conscious me), a thought is self-liberated. This liberation goes much deeper if the component of surrender is added from pure attention into pure me and I am. This surrender results in the unity of recognition of, and absorption in, I am that ultimately transcends self-liberation.

Contrary to common perception, the mind is not something independent of our pure nature, something we have no control over. Without our cooperation there is no mind; we create our thoughts, whether consciously, subconsciously or unconsciously. The mind needs the energy of consciousness to reproduce itself. So, if instead of habitually ‘leaking’ into thought, our consciousness becomes conscious of its inherent subjectivity, those thoughts disappear of their own accord; consciousness becomes sealed from



its 'leakage' into the mind. After our pure nature is recognized, we are returning to it moment-to-moment, thereby reaching increasingly deeper levels of unity with primordial consciousness and arriving at natural freedom from the mind.

The self-liberation of thought is a very insightful concept, but it lacks a complete grasp of the correct relationship between our pure nature and thinking. Again, as in Mahamudra, that relationship is depicted in a one-directional way. The consequence of this is that there is no proper integration between rigpa and the mind. Even when a thought is being liberated, there is still a split between our consciousness and that thought. This, in itself, is evidence of a lack of integration. Why would we need to be liberated from our own thoughts? Thoughts are innocent; it is our wrong relationship with them that causes us to become imprisoned in the mind.

When we reach the condition of complete consciousness, there is no need for the self-liberation of thoughts. The dimension of thinking becomes fully unified with our fundamental consciousness, and thoughts are experienced as a pleasant, blissful and creative expression of our intelligence. As such, self-liberation indicates a lower level of relationship with the mind. This is fine at the beginning of our work with consciousness, but sooner or later, it has to be transcended. To be whole is not only to become complete inside and achieve unity with existence, but also to become one with the mind. In complete consciousness, one either does not think at all (by virtue of the constant self-recognition and embodiment of our fundamental consciousness) or one thinks in a complete and integral way from the totality of consciousness.

Another significant limitation of Dzogchen is that its concept of awakening is entirely confined to consciousness. There is no vertical evolution toward the source, and there is no intention to open the spiritual heart. It is possible that the knowledge of the absolute state was present in this tradition's past, but it has since been lost; there are no longer any instructions which point to the realization of the source. Additionally, since Dzogchen is one of the few paths that does not really require sitting meditation, it is difficult for its practitioners to stabilize any significant depth of being.

In its disregard for the consciousness of me, Dzogchen has stayed faithful to Buddhism. But who is practicing self-remembrance? Who is conscious of consciousness? Who is trying to stabilize rigpa? In Buddhism there are many clever answers to this dilemma - that there is no self, and yet 'someone' must



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still realize this. But at heart there is denial of and refusal to become intimate with the personal and individual dimensions of our existence. And when we agree to live in half of the truth, we agree to live in a lie.

Establishing the ground of primordial consciousness is the fruit of Dzogchen: ‘The light of the son meets the light of the mother (Tathagatagarbha).’ But does this mean the son disappears? Who does he become once in unity with his universal self? And does his evolution end upon awakening his pure nature? Who utters, “I am!” from the absolute silence and stillness of consciousness? Who is there, living in the temple of the supreme reality? The meaning of Dzogchen is ‘great perfection,’ but its silence in the face of these essential questions, and its one-dimensional vision of evolution, reveal it to be a flawed perfection, a perfection which is imperfect and incomplete.

Blessings,

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For a full glossary of terminology please visit our website www.anaditeaching.com/glossary

