

Introduction to Dzogchen

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[For background, see: [Introductory Comparison of the Five Tibetan Traditions of Buddhism and Bon](#) {1} {5}.]

The Need for Dzogchen

Dzogchen (*rdzogs-chen*, the great completeness) is an advanced system of Mahayana practice that brings enlightenment. It is found primarily in the Nyingma and Bon traditions, but also appears as a supplementary practice in some of the Kagyu traditions such as Drugpa, Drigung, and Karma Kagyu. Let us speak here of dzogchen as formulated in the Nyingma school.

[See: [Brief History of Dzogchen](#) {2} {4}.]

To reach enlightenment, we need to remove forever two sets of obscurations:

- emotional obscurations (*nyon-sgrib*) - those that are disturbing emotions and attitudes and which prevent liberation,
- cognitive obscurations (*shes-sgrib*) -- those regarding all knowables and which prevent omniscience.

These obscurations bring us, respectively, the suffering of uncontrollably recurring existence (*samsara*) and the inability to be of best help to others. They are fleeting (*glo-bur*), however, and merely obscure the essential nature (*ngo-bo*) of the mind and limit its functioning. In essence, the mind (mental activity) is naturally pure of all fleeting stains. This is an important aspect of its Buddha-nature.

[See: [Ridding Oneself of the Two Sets of Obscurations in Sutra and Anuttarayoga Tantra According to Nyingma and Sakya](#) {3} {8}.]

In general, to remove both sets of obscuration requires bodhichitta (*byang-sems*) and nonconceptual cognition of voidness (*stong-nyid*, Skt. *shunyata*, emptiness) - the mind's natural absence of fleeting stains and its absence of impossible ways of existing (such as inherently tainted with stains). *Bodhichitta* is a mind and heart aimed at enlightenment, with the intention to attain it and thereby to benefit all beings as much as is possible. Removing obscuration also requires a level of mind (or mental activity) most conducive for bringing about this removal. Dzogchen practice brings us to that level.

Sem and Rigpa

Mental activity occurs on two levels, with limited awareness (*sems*) and pure awareness (*rig-pa*). Since many Western students are already familiar with the Tibetan terms, let us use them for ease of discussion.

- *Sem* is mental activity limited by fleeting stains.
- *Rigpa* is mental activity devoid of all fleeting stains of obscuration.

Sem may be conceptual or nonconceptual and, in either case, is always stained. Rigpa, on the other hand, is exclusively nonconceptual, in a purer manner than is nonconceptual sem, and is never stained by either of the two sets of obscurations.

Since mental activity, whether limited or pure, is naturally devoid of fleeting stains, rigpa is the natural state of sem. Thus, rigpa, with its essential nature of being devoid of all stains, can be recognized as the basis of each moment of our cognition.

Dzogchen, then, is a method of practice, grounded in bodhichitta and nonconceptual cognition of voidness, enabling us to recognize rigpa and stay forever at its level of mental activity free from all obscuration. In this way, rigpa's "great completeness" (dzogchen) of all enlightening qualities for benefiting others becomes fully operational.

Equivalency in Non-Dzogchen Systems

The non-dzogchen systems of Gelug, Sakya, and Kagyu analyze three levels of mind or mental activity:

1. Gross mental activity is sensory cognition, which is always nonconceptual.
2. Subtle mental activity includes both conceptual and nonconceptual mental cognition.
3. The subtlest mental activity underlying them all is clear light ('od-gsal), which is exclusively nonconceptual, but subtler than gross or subtle nonconceptual mental activity.

Sutra and the lower classes of tantra employ subtle mental activity for the cognition of voidness. Only anuttarayoga, the highest class of tantra, accesses and uses clear light mental activity for this purpose.

Parallel to this presentation, sutra and the lower classes of tantra in the Nyingma system employ sem for the cognition of voidness. Only dzogchen accesses and uses rigpa for this purpose.

The non-dzogchen systems explain that subtlest clear light mind manifests at the moment of death. A facsimile of it manifests for an instant when experiencing orgasm, falling asleep, fainting, sneezing, and yawning. At such times, the grosser energy-winds (*rlung*, Skt. *prana*, "lung") that support gross and subtle mental activity temporarily cease (dissolve), thus temporarily stopping these two levels of mental activity and enabling the clear light level to function.

To gain stable control of clear light mental activity, however, requires accessing this level in meditation. We accomplish this with anuttarayoga complete stage practices (*rdzogs-rim*, completion stage) of working with the body's subtle energy system to dissolve the energy-winds. As a cause for success on the complete stage, we imagine the dissolution process on the generation stage (*bskyed-rim*), modeled after the stages of death, bardo, and rebirth.

With the dzogchen methods, we recognize and access the subtlest mental activity - in this case, rigpa - without need to dissolve the energy-winds as the method for gaining access. But, how to recognize rigpa?

Definition of Mind

Mind, in Buddhism, refers to mental activity, not to a "thing" that is the agent of that activity or to a "tool" that a "me" uses to engage in that activity. The definition of mind describes the activity from two points of view. Thus, the two aspects of the description are simultaneous functions, not sequential:

1. the mental activity of producing or giving rise (' *char-ba*) to cognitive appearances (*snang-ba*),
2. the mental activity of cognitively engaging (' *jug-pa*) with cognitive appearances.

The former is usually translated as *clarity* (*gsal*) and the latter as *awareness* (*rig*).

Cognitive appearances do not refer to appearances of things "out there," which we may or may not notice and cognize. They refer to how things appear "to the mind" when we cognize them. In a sense, they are like mental holograms. For example, in nonconceptual sensory cognition such as seeing, colored shapes appear, which are merely mental representations (*snang-ba*, mental semblances) or mental derivatives (*gzugs-brnyan*, mental reflections) of one moment of colored shapes. In conceptual cognition, a mental representation appears of the conventional object, such as a hand, that the colored shapes in that moment are the visual sensibilia of. A sequence of mental representations of a hand each second one inch further to the right appears as motion. In other words, cognitive appearances exist only within the context of mental activity. They do not need to be clear or in focus.

Moreover, cognitive appearances do not refer merely to the images that appear "in the mind" when cognizing visible objects with our eyes. They also refer to the cognitive appearances or arisings (*shar-ba*) of sounds, smells, tastes, physical sensations, thoughts, emotions, and so on. After all, it is mental activity that makes a sequence of consonant and vowel sounds arise as words and sentences.

Note that the expressions "things appear to the mind" or "in the mind" are merely manners of speaking particular to the English idiom and reflect a dualistic concept of mind totally different from the Buddhist model.

Cognitively engaging with cognitive appearances may be in any manner, such as seeing, hearing, thinking, or feeling them, and does not need to be conscious or with understanding. It may include ignoring something and being confused about it.

The definition also adds the word *mere* (*tsam*), which implies that mental activity occurs without a concrete agent "me" making it happen. It also implies that fleeting stains are not the defining characteristic of this activity. The superficial (*kun-rdzob*, conventional) nature of mental activity is merely producing and engaging with cognitive appearances; its deepest (*don-dam*, ultimate) nature is its voidness.

Further, mental activity is individual and subjective. My seeing of a picture and my feeling of happiness are not yours. Moreover, Buddhism does not assert a universal mind that we all are part of, that we all can access, or that our mental continuums (mind-streams) merge with when

we achieve liberation or enlightenment. Even when enlightened, each Buddha's mental continuum retains its individuality.

The Differences between Mahamudra and Dzogchen

Whether on the gross, subtle, or subtlest clear light level, the nature of mental activity remains the same. *Mahamudra* (*phyag-chen*, great seal) practice, found in the Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug/Kagyu traditions, focuses on this nature. The Kagyu and Gelug/Kagyu traditions have both sutra and anuttarayoga tantra levels of the practice, while Sakya only an anuttarayoga one. In other words, Sakya mahamudra focuses only on the nature of clear light mental activity, while the other two traditions include focus on the nature of the other levels of mental activity as well.

Rigpa shares the same nature as the three levels of mental activity analyzed by the non-dzogchen schools. Dzogchen practice, however, is exclusively done on the highest level of tantra and deals only with the subtlest level of mental activity. Moreover, dzogchen does not focus merely on the conventional and deepest natures of rigpa, but also on its various aspects and facets.

The Differences between Rigpa and Clear Light

Further, rigpa is not an exact equivalent of clear light. Rather, it is a subdivision of it.

Different Degrees of Being Unstained

- The clear light level of mind is naturally devoid of grosser levels of mental activity, which are the levels at which conceptual cognition and the fleeting stains of disturbing emotions and attitudes occur. Before enlightenment, however, clear light mental activity is not devoid of the habits of grasping for true existence, which may be imputed or labeled on it. Nevertheless, when clear light is manifest, these habits do not cause clear light activity to make discordant (dual) appearances of true existence (*gnyis-srang*), nor do they prevent it from cognizing the two truths simultaneously (appearances and voidness), which they do when grosser levels of mind are active.
- Rigpa, on the other hand, is devoid of even the habits of grasping for true existence. It is the totally unstained natural state of the mind.

Difference in Terms of Recognizability

Clear light mental activity and rigpa are similar in the sense that when each is operating, grosser levels of mental activity are not functioning simultaneously.

- To access and recognize clear light mind requires actively stopping the grosser levels of mental activity, through dissolving the energy-winds that support those levels.
- Rigpa is recognizable without actively stopping the grosser levels of mental activity and of energy-wind as the method to recognize it. When recognized and accessed, however, the grosser levels automatically stop functioning.

Difference in Terms of Reflexive Deep Awareness

- The non-dzogchen systems, particularly Gelug, differentiate object clear light (*yul*) from cognitive (*yul-can*, subject) clear light. Object clear light is the actual void nature (*chos-nyid*) of clear light, while cognitive clear light is clear light mental activity itself, a phenomenon that has object clear light as its nature (*chos-can*).

Clear light mental activity is not necessarily aware of its own void nature, for example the clear light mind experienced at the moment of ordinary death. Even when the fifteenth-century Gelug master Kaydrub Norzang-gyatso (*mKhas-grub Nor-bzang rgya-mtsho*) explains that clear light mental activity naturally gives rise to a cognitive appearance resembling that which arises in nonconceptual cognition of voidness, still it does not automatically arise with an understanding of voidness, also as in ordinary death. Moreover, even when reflexive deep awareness (*rang-rig ye-shes*) of its own void nature is presented as a natural quality of clear light, as in the Sakya and Kagyu systems, still it is not always operational, also as in ordinary death. Therefore, anuttarayoga practice aims at achieving, in meditation, cognitive clear light that is fully aware of its own object clear light nature.

- Rigpa, on the other hand, is innately aware of its own void nature. When we access it, it automatically is fully aware of its own nature. In dzogchen terms, it knows its own face (*rang-ngo shes-pa*).

Effulgent and Essence Rigpa

On the path, we try to recognize two types of rigpa: first, effulgent rigpa (*rtsal-gyi rig-pa*) and then, essence rigpa (*ngo-bo'i rig-pa*) underlying it.

1. *Effulgent rigpa* is the aspect of rigpa actively giving rise to cognitive appearances.
2. *Essence rigpa* is the cognitive open space (*klong*) or cognitive sphere (*dbying*) that underlies and allows for actively producing and actively cognizing cognitive appearances.

Both types of rigpa are still rigpa, meaning that both are mental activities: the naturally pure, unstained awareness of something.

The Relation of Cognitive Appearances and Rigpa

Cognitive appearances are the play (*rol-pa*, display) of essence rigpa. When cognized with sem, they appear not to exist in this manner, and thus appearances are deceptive.

Here, appearances as the play of some type of mental activity does not mean:

- that appearances arise due to the karma collected by the mind, or exist merely as what can be mentally labeled by the mind, as in the Gelug usage of the term *play of the mind*,
- that all phenomena exist only in the mind, as in the extreme position of solipsism,
- that the cognitive appearance of a table and the visual consciousness of it come from the same natal source (*rdzas*) - namely, the same karmic legacy (*sa-bon*, seed, karmic tendency) - despite the fact that the table is still made of atoms and has true unimputed existence (it is not merely an imagined table), as in the Chittamatra explanation.

Rather, it means that the cognitive appearance of the table is something that rigpa gives rise to as its functional nature (*rang-bzhin*). In other words, what rigpa naturally does is to spontaneously establish (*lhun-grub*) cognitive appearances and, in this sense, cognitive appearances are a play of the mind.

Unlike the Chittamatra formulation, however, according to dzogchen, the table itself has its own natal source - for example, the wood and atoms that comprise it. Moreover, the table lacks true unimputed existence (*bden-par ma-grub-pa*). It exists as a table inasmuch as it can be validly mentally labeled a table. Ultimately, however, its mode of existence is beyond words and concepts, as in the non-Gelug Madhyamaka explanation.

The dzogchen formulation of appearances as the play of the mind often employs Chittamatra terminology, such as *alaya* (*kun-gzhi*, basis for all) and eight types of consciousness. However, it does not explain them as existing in the same manner as the Chittamatra system does. The usage of this terminology derives from the fact that Shantarakshita and Kamalashila, the two earliest Indian masters of Buddhist logic to teach in Tibet, who provided the sutra philosophical basis for Nyingma, taught a form of Madhyamaka that uses Chittamatra terms. The Gelug tradition calls this form "the Yogachara-Svatantrika-Madhyamaka school."

[See: [Brief History of Dzogchen](#) {2} {4}. See also: [Introductory Comparison of the Five Tibetan Traditions of Buddhism and Bon](#) {1} {5}.]

Voidness Meditation

The void nature of rigpa is its essential nature (*ngo-bo*) and is called its *primal purity* (*ka-dag*).

Various Tibetan traditions of dzogchen, and masters within each tradition, have explained the primal purity of rigpa in terms of self-voidness (*rang-stong*), other-voidness (*gzhan-stong*), or both.

- Longchenpa (*Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa Dri-med 'od-zer*), for example, made no reference to other-voidness.
- There are two interpretations of the position of Mipam (*'Ju Mi-pham 'Jam-dbyangs rnam-rgyal rgya-mtsho*), made by two wings of his disciples. Botrul (*Bod-sprul*) and Kenpo Zhenga (*mKhan-po gZhan-dga'*) present Mipam as asserting self-voidness, while Zhechen Gyeltsab (*Zhe-chen rGyal-tshab Pad-ma rnam-rgyal*) and Katog Situ (*Kah-thog Si-tu*) present him as asserting other-voidness. The first group is mostly at Dzogchen Monastery (*rDzogs-chen dGon-pa*), while the second is mostly at Zhechen Monastery (*Zhe-chen dGon-pa*). There is no pervasion, however, that all masters at each of these monasteries share this interpretation and assert the corresponding view.

Moreover, they have given varying definitions of self and other-voidness. Let us stay with the most commonly accepted definitions in Nyingma.

Self-voidness is the absence of an impossible way of existing, such as true unimputed existence and, beyond that, existence that corresponds to what words and concepts imply.

Other-voidness is the absence from rigpa of all grosser levels of mental activity and tainted stains.

[See: [Making Sense of Tantra: Part II, Chapter 7](#) {6}.]

Thus, the presentation of primal purity in terms of self-voidness is roughly equivalent to the non-dzogchen systems' presentation of object clear light. The presentation in terms of other-voidness is roughly equivalent to that of cognitive clear light. Regardless of in which way it is presented and what terminology is used, primal purity is both self and other-void.

Meditation on the primal purity of rigpa, whether or not presented in terms of other-voidness, entails focus on rigpa as a cognitive state devoid of all grosser levels and of all fleeting stains. It is innately aware of its own primal purity.

Thus, voidness meditation in dzogchen does not entail analytical meditation on self-voidness. Neither does non-dzogchen object clear light meditation, for which we merely recall our understanding of self-voidness previously gained through analytical meditation.

Dzogchen meditation, however, does not entail any type of focus on the self-voidness of rigpa. Although analysis of self-voidness comprises part of the training required before attempting the practice of dzogchen, self-voidness is only understood at the time of rigpa meditation as part of the primal purity that rigpa is innately aware of. Further, when we focus on cognitive appearances being the natural play of rigpa, this implies that we have already understood their self-voidness. If cognitive appearances are the natural play of rigpa, they cannot exist in the manner that the words and concepts for the appearances imply. Words and concepts imply that things truly and independently exist in fixed concrete boxes as "this"s and "that"s, but this is an impossible mode of existence. There is no such thing.

Rigpa Is Complete with All Good Qualities

Basis rigpa (*gzhi'i rig-pa*) is the working basis of pure awareness. It is unobstructed and all-permeating (*zang-thal*) in the sense that it permeates all sem without obstruction, like sesame oil permeates sesame seeds, despite the fact that we do not recognize it. Thus, rigpa is an aspect of Buddha-nature and, according to dzogchen, it is complete with all good qualities (*yon-tan*, Buddha-qualities), such as omniscience and all-encompassing compassion. Rigpa is analogous to the sun, and just as the sun cannot exist separately from the qualities of the sun, such as light and warmth, similarly rigpa does not exist separately from the Buddha-qualities.

Thus, when we access essence rigpa in meditation and it becomes operational, we do not have to add on top of it the Buddha-qualities. We do not need to actualize on top of it a mind of omniscient awareness or of all-encompassing compassion. It is naturally and spontaneously (*lhun-grub*) there.

Comparison with the Gelug, Sakya, and Samkhya Positions

The Gelug and Sakya explanations of Buddha-nature assert that the Buddha-qualities exist now merely as potentials (*nus-pa*) of clear light mental activity. They are like seeds, which are different from the soil in which they are found. We need to cultivate them so that they grow.

Although the non-Buddhist Samkhya school of Indian philosophy does not assert Buddha-nature or Buddha-qualities, a Samkhya-style presentation of this point would be that omniscience is ultimately findable already functioning in clear light mental activity. It is

merely not manifest presently.

The dzogchen position is neither of these. We cannot say that rigpa in its present obscured state is operating as an omniscient awareness. Presently, rigpa is obscured by fleeting stains and flowing together with an automatically arising (*lhan-skyes*) factor of dumbfoundedness (*rmongs-cha*, stupidity, bedazzlement). Because of dumbfoundedness, rigpa does not recognize its own face and, consequently, it is not operational. It functions instead as an alaya for habits (*bag-chags-kyi kun-gzhi*) - foundational awareness for the habits of grasping for true existence, for karma, and for memories.

Therefore, dzogchen emphasizes the importance of preliminary practices (*sngon-'gro*, "ngondro") and of strengthening the two enlightenment-building networks of positive force and deep awareness (collections of merit and insight) as strongly as the Gelug, Sakya, and non-dzogchen Kagyu traditions emphasize them. The purpose, however, is not for building up good qualities or for actualizing potentials for these qualities, but for eliminating obscurations that prevent rigpa from recognizing its own face. The "face" of rigpa is characterized as Samantabhadra (*Kun-tu bzang-po*): literally, all-excellent. Such recognition will not happen all by itself, without any causes.

The Meaning of Rigpa Being Permanent

When the dzogchen texts assert that rigpa is an unaffected ('*dus-ma-byed*, unconditioned, uncollected) permanent (*rtag-pa*) phenomenon, we must understand the meaning carefully. *Unaffected*, here, means that it is not created anew each moment and does not organically grow from something, as a sprout does from a seed. Thus, it is uncontrived (bcos-med) - not made up or fabricated, under the influence of causes and conditions, as something temporary and new. Moreover, its having good qualities does not depend on causes and conditions. It is permanent, not in the sense of being static and not performing a function, but rather in the sense of lasting forever, as do its qualities.

In each moment, however, rigpa spontaneously gives rise to and is aware of different objects. In this sense, it is fresh and clean (so-ma). Although its nature never changes, these aspects change. Focusing on this feature, Gelug would assert that rigpa is nonstatic (*mi-rtag-pa*, impermanent). There is no contradiction, however, because dzogchen and Gelug are defining and using the terms *permanent* and *impermanent* differently.

[See: [Static and Nonstatic Phenomena](#) {7}.]

Those Who Progress in Stages and Those for Whom It Happens All at Once

There are two types of dzogchen practitioners: those who progress in stages (*lam-rim-pa*) and those for whom it happens all at once (*cig-car-ba*). This differentiation regards the manner of proceeding to enlightenment for practitioners once they have realized essence rigpa. In other words, it regards those who have become *aryas* ('*phags-pa*, highly realized beings) with the attainment of a seeing pathway mind (*mthong-lam*, path of seeing) and the true stopping of the emotional obscurations.

Those who progress in stages proceed through the arya bodhisattva ten bhumi levels of minds (*sa*, Skt. *bhumi*), one by one, gradually removing the cognitive obscurations.

Those for whom it happens all at once achieve a true stopping of both sets of obscuration all at once with the first realization of essence rigpa. Thus, they become aryas and Buddhas simultaneously.

[See: Ridding Oneself of the Two Sets of Obscurations in Sutra and Anuttarayoga According to Nyingma and Sakya {3} {8}.]

Although dzogchen texts usually speak more of the second variety, only a tiny fraction of practitioners is of this type. Their elimination of both sets of obscuration with the first realization of essence rigpa is due to the enormous amount of positive force (merit) they have built up with bodhichitta and dzogchen practice in previous lives. That positive force may also enable them to proceed through the stages before achieving a seeing pathway mind more quickly than most. Nevertheless, no one asserts the attainment of enlightenment without the buildup of vast networks of positive force and deep awareness, from intense practice of preliminaries, meditation, and bodhisattva conduct - even if the majority of this has occurred in previous lifetimes.

Therefore, when dzogchen texts refer to the recognition of rigpa as *the one that cuts off all for complete liberation* (*chig-chod kun-grol*, the panacea for complete liberation), we need to understand this correctly. For those for whom it happens all at once, the first realization of essence rigpa is sufficient for cutting all obscurations for the complete attainment of enlightenment. This does not mean, however, that realization of rigpa is sufficient by itself for attaining enlightenment, without need for any preliminaries, such as bodhichitta or strengthening the two enlightenment-building networks, as the causes for achieving that realization.

Contrast with Gradual and Sudden Enlightenment as Asserted in Chinese Buddhism

Several traditions of Chinese Buddhism differentiate between gradual and sudden enlightenment. The two do not correspond to the dzogchen distinction between the manner of practice for those who progress in stages and those for whom it happens all at once.

- *Gradual enlightenment* (*tsen-min*) entails working, in graded steps, with samsaric mental activity to gain liberation from samsara.
- *Sudden enlightenment* (*ston-mun*) derives from the view that it is impossible to gain liberation from samsara by using samsaric mental activity. We need to make a total break from that level and break out "all of a sudden."

Various schools of Chan in China (Jap. *Zen*) assert sudden enlightenment. The methods for suddenly breaking out of samsaric mental activity include working with paradox (Jap. *koan*) to stop all conceptual thought, just sitting (Jap. *zazen*), or simply stopping all thought. Dzogchen does not employ any of these methods.

Dzogchen Explains from the Point of View of the Result

According to the early twentieth-century Rimey (nonsectarian) master Jamyang-kyentzey-wangpo (' *Jam-dbyangs mkhyen-brtse dbang-po*), the four traditions of

Tibetan Buddhism may be differentiated according to the point of view from which they explain: basis, path, or result.

1. The Gelug tradition explains from the point of view of the basis - in other words, from the viewpoint of ordinary practitioners. For example, such persons are capable of perceiving appearances or voidness only separately, although the two are inseparable. Therefore, Gelug explains appearances and voidness as the two truths and thus deepest truth is self-voidness alone. Consequently, Gelug presents the *svabhavakaya* (*ngo-bo-nyid sku*, body of self-nature) of a Buddha as the voidness of a Buddha's omniscient awareness.
2. The Sakya tradition explains from the viewpoint of the path. Although clear light mental activity on the basis level, for example at the moment of death, cannot be said to be blissful; nevertheless, it is made blissful on the anuttarayoga tantra path. Speaking from that point of view, Sakya asserts clear light awareness as naturally blissful.
3. Nyingma and Kagyu traditions explain from the resultant point of view of a Buddha. For example, Buddhas nonconceptually cognize appearances and voidness simultaneously. Therefore, Nyingma and Kagyu - and thus dzogchen - explain deepest truth as inseparable voidness and appearance and, consequently, they present *svabhavakaya* as the inseparability of the other three Buddha-bodies.

Thus, when dzogchen texts speak in terms of the natural state beyond karma, beyond the categories of constructive and destructive, they are speaking from the resultant viewpoint of a Buddha. This presentation does not give free license to practitioners on earlier levels, who are still under the influence of disturbing emotions and attitudes, to commit destructive acts. Such persons still build up karma and still experience its suffering results.

Break-Through and Skip-Ahead

The dzogchen literature includes much discussion of the stages of practice called break-through (*khregs-chod*, "tekcho") and skip-ahead (*thod-rgal*, "togel"). These are extremely advanced practices, equivalent to the final stages of the complete stage of anuttarayoga tantra.

On the *break-through* stage, once we have been led to recognize rigpa by our dzogchen masters, we are able to access essence rigpa and thus stop all sem, as the subtle energy-winds automatically dissolve. In other words, we are able to stop all grosser levels of mental activity - the levels at which the fleeting stains of disturbing emotions and attitudes and conceptual cognition occur. With this, we attain a seeing pathway mind and become an arya. Unless we are practitioners for whom it happens all at once, we are not yet able to remain forever at the level of essence rigpa. After meditation, we revert to sem.

On the *skip-ahead* stage, we gain increasing familiarity with essence rigpa. Moments of sem are the immediately preceding condition (*de-ma-thag rkyen*) for our experience being comprised of the five aggregate factors (*phung-po*, Skt. *skandha*). The more frequently and the longer we are able to remain with essence rigpa, the more we weaken the force of an immediately preceding condition for experiencing five aggregates.

[See: [The Basic Scheme of the Five Aggregate Factors of Experience](#) {9}.]

Without a strong immediately preceding condition, our five aggregates fade, including our ordinary bodies, and we arise in the form of a rainbow body ('*ja'-lus*). This occurs because among the natural qualities of rigpa is that it spontaneously establishes the appearance of five-colored rainbow light.

The rainbow body is the obtaining cause (*nyer-len rgyu*) which transforms into the *rupakaya* (*gzugs-sku*, form bodies) of a Buddha. The equivalent cause for a rupakaya in general anuttarayoga tantra (excluding Kalachakra) is either an illusory body (*sgyu-lus*) in father tantra or a light body ('*od-lus*) in mother tantra. The equivalent in Kalachakra is a devoid form (*stong-gzugs*). Although dzogchen sometimes uses the terms *light body* and *devoid form* for rainbow body, and general anuttarayoga sometimes uses *rainbow body* for light body, the types of bodies achieved and the methods for achieving them in general anuttarayoga, Kalachakra, and dzogchen remain distinct.

The Necessity of Mahayoga and Anuyoga Practice before Dzogchen

It is impossible to attain the break-through and skip-ahead stages without prior practice of mahayoga and anuyoga - if not in this lifetime, then in previous ones. For this reason, *atiyoga*, a synonym for dzogchen, usually appears in the form of *maha-atiyoga*, meaning a union of mahayoga and dzogchen.

Mahayoga

Mahayoga practice emphasizes the equivalent of the anuttarayoga generation stage, in which we work with the imagination - in other words, conceptually. Although rigpa is beyond words and concepts, nevertheless we rely on an idea of rigpa that we use as a facsimile to represent rigpa in meditation before we are actually able to access it.

We visualize ourselves as a Buddha-figure (*yidam*, deity), such as Vajrasattva. This acts as a cause for the five-colored rainbow light that is a natural quality of rigpa to appear in the form of a rainbow body Vajrasattva and, ultimately, as the network of enlightening forms or rupakaya of a Buddha. Although the nature of rigpa is spontaneously to establish appearances with five-colored rainbow light; nevertheless, without a previous cause as a model, it is not likely to establish the appearance of a rupakaya.

Moreover, we visualize ourselves as a couple in union, experiencing simultaneously arising greatly blissful awareness (*lhan-skyes bde-ba chen-po*) - blissful awareness arising simultaneously with each moment of rigpa. This acts as a cause for eliminating the obscurations that prevent the spontaneous establishment of rigpa's natural quality of bliss.

Anuyoga

Anuyoga practice emphasizes the equivalent of the stages of general anuttarayoga tantra complete stage practice prior to the attainment of actual clear light awareness and a seeing pathway mind. Thus, it entails working with the subtle energy-system with its energy-winds, energy-channels, and energy-drops (*rtsa-rlung-thig-le*). Such practice, in a sense, "greases" the subtle energy-system so that the energy-winds will more easily dissolve automatically at the break-through stage.

[For more detail, see: [The Major Facets of Dzogchen](#) {10}.]

Basic Procedure of Dzogchen Meditation

Moments of conceptual thinking (*rnam-rtog*), specifically moments of verbal thinking, simultaneously arise, abide, and disappear, as does writing on water. No effort is required to dissolve them, which is the meaning of the term *automatic liberation* (*rang-grol*, self-liberation). Thoughts automatically free themselves, in the sense of disappearing simultaneously with arising. When we abide in this state of simultaneous arising, abiding, and disappearing, we abide in the "natural state of the mind." It is sometimes described as the space in between milliseconds of thought or as the open space underlying thoughts.

When the texts describe that this level of mental activity does not make distinctions into "this"s and "that"s, they mean that it does not make distinctions into truly existent "this"s and "that"s. They do not mean that this level of mental activity lacks distinguishing ('*du-shes*, recognition) of what anything is. It merely lacks the conceptual cognition that actively labels something with a mental construct, such as "table." It cannot be that rigpa knows nothing. After all, when fully operational, rigpa is the omniscient awareness of a Buddha.

The dzogchen presentation here does not contradict the Gelug-Prasangika assertion that things conventionally exist as "this"s or "that"s merely inasmuch as they can be validly labeled as "this"s or "that"s. Nothing exists inherently in something, making it a "this" or a "that" by its own power. Nevertheless, an object can be correctly labeled as "a table" by a valid cognition of its superficial (conventional) truth and this object has the ability to perform the function (*don-byed nus-pa*) of a table.

[See: [The Validity and Accuracy of Cognition of the Two Truths in Gelug-Prasangika](#) {11}. See also: [Fundamentals of Dzogchen Meditation, 1 Recognizing Different Levels of Mental Activity and Appearance-Making](#) {12}.]

Differences between the Dzogchen, Vipassana, and Mahamudra Meditation Methods concerning Conceptual Thought

Vipassana

Vipassana (*lhag-mthong*, Skt. *vipashyana*) meditation within the sphere of Theravada Buddhism entails noting and watching the arising and falling of moments of conceptual thinking, but not through the "eyes" of an independently existing "me" as the observer. Through this procedure, we realize the impermanence or fleeting nature of conceptual thought and of mental activity in general. We also realize that mental activity occurs without an independent agent "me" either observing it or making it happen.

Dzogchen meditation, in contrast, focuses on the simultaneous arising, abiding, and disappearing of moments of conceptual thinking - not simply noting or watching it. This allows us to recognize first effulgent rigpa - the aspect of rigpa that spontaneously establishes the appearance of simultaneously arising, abiding, and disappearing thoughts. It then allows us to recognize essence rigpa - the aspect of rigpa that serves as the cognitive space underlying every moment of mental activity and allowing for the spontaneous establishment of

simultaneously arising, abiding, and disappearing thoughts.

Moreover, vipassana deals only with the grosser levels of mental activity, whereas dzogchen accesses the subtlest level, rigpa.

Mahamudra

One of the main methods of mahamudra meditation in the Karma Kagyu tradition is to regard moments of conceptual thinking as dharmakaya (*chos-sku*) - the network of omniscient awareness of a Buddha encompassing everything. If dharmakaya is likened to the ocean, then moments of conceptual thinking are like waves on the ocean. Whether the ocean is calm or churning with waves, still the waves are water. Thus, without consciously seeking to quiet the waves, we focus on the ocean, which is never disturbed in its depths, no matter how large the waves on the surface may be. Consequently, the conceptual process naturally quiets down.

In the Gelug/Kagyu tradition of mahamudra, we regard moments of conceptual thinking to be like fleeting clouds that temporarily obscure the sky. They arise and disappear in the sky, but are not in the nature of the sky.

Both mahamudra and dzogchen deal with the subtlest level of mental activity, mahamudra accesses it by dissolving the energy-winds and the grosser levels of mental activity, whereas dzogchen accesses it by recognizing it within the grosser levels, namely sem.

Contrast between Dzogchen and Chan (Zen)

- Chan (Jap. *zen*) is exclusively a sutra practice, whereas dzogchen is exclusively tantra and, specifically, the highest class of tantra. Thus, dzogchen works with the subtlest level of mental activity, whereas Chan works with grosser levels.
- Although Chan does not explicitly teach that all good qualities are complete in the mind, nevertheless it implicitly implies this point, particularly concerning compassion. Chan has only minimal emphasis on cultivating compassion as a method to eliminate the obscurations that prevent innate compassion from shining forth. When we reach the natural state, compassion will automatically be part of that state. Dzogchen, on the other hand, not only explicitly teaches that all qualities, not only compassion, are complete in rigpa, but entails extensive sutra and tantra meditation practice for cultivating compassion.
- Chan practice does not require beforehand the common and uncommon preliminaries of sutra study and meditation and of a hundred thousand repetitions of various practices, whereas dzogchen practice requires both sets of preliminaries.
- Chan practice does not require receiving an empowerment (initiation) beforehand, whereas dzogchen practice does.
- Although enlightenment requires the subtlest level of mental activity, Chan neither explains this level nor presents explicit methods for reaching it. Moreover, it does not discuss the subtle energy-system. Nevertheless, focus on the area below the navel (Jap. *hara*) in various Chan practices undoubtedly causes the energy-winds to enter and dissolve in the central channel, which brings access to this subtlest level. Dzogchen

accesses rigpa through being led to recognize it by our spiritual masters, after we have "greased" the subtle energy-system with prior anuyoga practice.

- The Chan method, specifically in the Rinzai tradition, for stopping the conceptual process is "profound doubt" - doubting all conceptual statements - and *koan* practice, often entailing paradox. Dzogchen stops the conceptual process through focusing on the simultaneous arising and disappearing of thoughts.
- In Chan, the cause for actualizing a rupakaya, especially in the Soto tradition, is sitting in the perfect posture of a Buddha. In dzogchen, the causes are rigpa's nature of spontaneously establishing appearances, rigpa's innate feature of shining with five-colored rainbow light, and prior mahayoga practice of visualizing ourselves as Buddha-figures. Chan does not have any discussion or presentation of Buddha-figures.

Concluding Remarks

Dzogchen is an extremely advanced and difficult practice. When described as effortless (*bad-med*), this does not mean that as beginners, we do not need to do anything - just sit, relax, and everything will happen all at once. *Effortless* refers to the fact that thoughts automatically disappear simultaneously with their arising: we do not need to make an effort to make them disappear. Nevertheless, we need to recognize and realize this fact. Effortless also refers to when we realize essence rigpa, then, based on prior mahayoga and anuyoga practice, the energy-winds effortlessly dissolve and an appearance of ourselves as a rainbow body in the aspect of a Buddha-figure effortlessly arises.

Thus, although the dzogchen literature primarily speaks from the points of view of the resultant stage and of those for whom it happens all at once, we need to gather the causes for success before we are able to practice dzogchen successfully. In other words, we cannot dispense with practicing the common and uncommon preliminaries, receiving empowerment, keeping the appropriate vows, and practicing a certain amount of mahayoga and anuyoga meditation.

Now, however, we may practice a facsimile of dzogchen meditation to familiarize ourselves with the method. Focusing on the simultaneous arising, abiding, and disappearing of thoughts, on whatever level we can, is helpful for overcoming anxiety, worry, anger, and so on. However, we need to try to avoid fooling ourselves into thinking that this is the actual, deeper level of dzogchen meditation. We need to try to avoid the mistake of thinking that everything is already perfect and so there is no need to change destructive patterns in our attitudes or behavior.

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