

Dzogchen | The Essence of Mind

The essence of mind is empty, luminous awareness in the Tibetan Buddhist practice of Dzogchen.

- Mingyur Rinpoche

The essence of practice in the Dzogchen tradition is not some effort to change your thoughts or your behavior so you become a better person. It is realizing that no matter what you may think of yourself and your life, in reality you are already good, whole, and complete.

What if I told you something amazing, maybe even shocking? What if I told you that you have the exact same nature as all the buddhas? That this enlightened nature, this buddhanature, is your true nature, who you really are? Taking it even further, what if I told you that your true nature and that of a dog are the same?

This is what my father, the great Buddhist teacher Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, told me when I was a child. But, I wondered, how could a dog and I have the same nature? How could we both possess buddhanature?

Though our buddhanature is empty, it is one with our luminous, or knowing, mind. They are inseparable. When I asked my father these questions, he invited me to think not about the different forms that beings take, but about their common essence. He taught me that the enlightened essence of humans and dogs and other living things is beyond forms and conditions and has existed naturally within us all since beginningless time.

Buddhanature, this innate well-being, is our true nature. So in Dzogchen, the most profound meditation form of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, practice is a way to peel away the obscurations that stop us from recognizing our buddhanature. This is

Dzogchen's unique focus—to recognize that in essence all beings are perfect, whole, and complete. That we are already buddhas.

Dzogchen is an experiential path that reveals to us the pure awareness that is mind's true nature. In the Dzogchen view, the essence of mind is understood to be empty, luminous awareness, or knowing, and that is the very nature of our experience. Once we recognize this, it fundamentally changes the way we see, experience, and interact with the world. It liberates us.

So how can we begin to recognize the essence of mind, this innate well-being? And once we have recognized it, how can we sustain the recognition of our true nature and gain confidence in it in order to discover liberation?

Not long after that conversation with my father, we decided that I should learn more about Dzogchen. He offered to send me to Bhutan to study with Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, a kind and great teacher. I was thankful for this opportunity. I traveled to Bhutan and eventually arrived at Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche's hermitage near the outskirts of Thimphu, high in the Himalayan mountains.

One day Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche suggested we go for a walk up a mountain trail behind the hermitage. The area was beautiful, with breathtaking views. As we walked, we crossed a small bubbling creek and continued ascending until we reached an outcrop of rock where the entire valley encompassing Thimphu city was on display. The Himalayan mountain peaks were visible in the background. We could hear the sounds of dogs barking in the valley below.

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche suggested we stop for a rest and take in the grand vista. We found a flat,

smooth rock and settled in. Whenever Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche sat, it was in a perfectly natural posture, very relaxed and quiet. I sat next to him and tried to practice resting in the nature of mind, just allowing the moment to be simply as it was. We sat there for some time, and then he turned to me and asked, “Can you see the sky?”

I looked up and replied, “Yes, I can see the sky.” It was a beautiful, clear day with just a few clouds.

Then he asked me, “How do you know you are seeing the sky?”

I had to think about this for some time, as it was a question that I really hadn’t thought about before. Then I replied, “I see blue and the clouds, and that is the sky.” I pointed my finger upward.

He asked, “Is the blue color the sky?”

I looked up again and answered, “Yes.”

But Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche said, “In essence, the blue color is not the sky. The sky doesn’t have color. It is space beyond color.”

I thought about this for a moment and then agreed that it was true.

He explained that normally, when we think about the sky, we say we see the sky because of the blue color, or that we see the sky because we see clouds, just as I had. But the sky is limitless. It has no form. Yet without it there would be nothing. No clouds, mountains, trees, or rocks. Everything we see on earth, even the earth itself, is included in this space. The sounds, the life below in the valley, each person’s life, the dogs barking—everything is contained in this space.

Thinking about what he said, I could see what a clear teaching on Dzogchen he had presented to me. All three aspects of Dzogchen were included. One, the essence of all things is empty, beyond all forms and conditions. Two, the nature of all things is clarity. And

three, their unceasing manifestation is compassion.

I realized that Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche was using the sky as a metaphor for our minds. Everything exists and is created by the mind. Its essence is right in front of us, and yet we cannot see it. The expanse of the sky is beyond the cliffs, pollution, form, color, shape, taste, smell, sound—everything. It is in essence emptiness.

This is the nature of all things, including our buddhanature. Their essence is free from all concepts. Their essence is not permanent, not impermanent, not born, but never ceasing since beginningless time.

Yet when we observe the sky, it is full of light. The light is everywhere, encompassing everything. This light in the sky is like the mind’s inherent luminosity, the knowing aspect of mind. Though our buddhanature is empty, it is one with our luminous, or knowing, mind. They are inseparable. It is like the example of sunlight in the sky—the sky is emptiness and yet there is light. Recognizing this is the third basic quality of mind: clarity.

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche said that while mind, like space, is empty in essence and beyond concept, it is the source of all manifestation. Through its power to illuminate, we can see people, we can talk, walk, eat, smell, live. Every thought, emotion, and perception is a display of mind, of awareness itself. This knowingness emerges naturally without beginning or end. It is the innate power of love and compassion.

He continued, “In order to get in touch with your true nature, the first thing you can do is work with the clouds. Though we cannot see the sky, we perceive it as blue, and we can connect to the sky through the blue color and the clouds.”

In this same way, he said, we can connect with the essence of mind through our perceptions, memories, thoughts, emotions. We can decide to grasp at them and get caught in them, or we can let them be and see them as they are, in their true nature. We have the power to make this decision.

That day, overlooking the valley, observing the sky, and talking with Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, is when I really began to perceive the world differently.

Dzogchen is a path that teaches us how to work with our minds. A traditional method to begin this is through the foundational practices. The foundational practices are a topic too vast to cover here fully, but here they are in brief.

First, we contemplate the preciousness and impermanence of human life. We begin to explore the concept that all things are impermanent, which is akin to working with the qualities of the clouds in the sky.

Next, we look at karma, the causes and conditions that give rise to our samsaric existence, our suffering. After this, to alleviate suffering, we take refuge. We take outer refuge with the Buddha, dharma, and sangha—the three jewels in which we find inspiration, guidance, and teachings to help us on our path. Our inner source of refuge is our own buddhanature, the union of the empty, clear essence and unceasing, compassionate manifestation. Connecting with these allows bodhichitta—the heart–mind of the buddhas—to arise in us. This nonconceptual love and compassion comes from wisdom, because when we can rest in a place without concepts, love and compassion naturally arise. We can then purify our own thoughts and emotions by allowing them to flow through us rather than grasping onto them. Over time this wisdom accumulates and grows, as does our confidence in the path.

Lastly, in the Vajrayana tradition, we practice guru yoga, visualizing our teachers and expressing appreciation and devotion to them for guiding us along the path.

To summarize, the main practice in Dzogchen is getting in touch with our awareness, our knowingness, which is our natural state. We leave our mind just as it is. We don't get lost following thoughts or emotions; we just let them come and go, with the knowledge that our empty, luminous, true nature is always

present within us. As we gently rest in open awareness, we briefly glimpse our true nature, and over time, we learn to maintain that recognition. This is the main practice of Dzogchen, and over time this experience begins to stabilize.

When we recognize our true nature, we can transform all the toxic thoughts and emotions that cause suffering into wisdom. We take everything that manifests before us as the path of liberation. What we call poison becomes medicine, obstacles become opportunities, and problems become the solution. This style of practice is called self-liberation or self-antidote.

The practice is that once you have had a glimpse of mind's pure awareness or empty clarity, come back to it again and again until it becomes so integrated into your life that you never lose sight of it.

This is how we access the mind's ability to liberate itself from negative thoughts and emotions. When we have awareness of our own condition, loving-kindness and compassion naturally arise. We can move from unhealthy attachments to healthy attachments (love and compassion without stickiness or expectation). The recognition instills within us a deep sense of confidence that we can start to relate to everything we experience through the lens of inherent self-liberation.

My father, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, used to say that recognizing the true nature of the mind was like going from a match flame to a forest fire. At first you just see a spark, but as we begin to integrate this experience into our daily lives, it becomes a fire. Our buddhanature comes to full fruition. This is awakening.

Illuminating the Path: Ngondro Instructions According to the Nyingma School of Vajrayana Buddhism

- Venerable Khenpo Rinpoches

“Our true nature—absolute, unalterable, and free from conflict and pretense—is not distinct from everyday life. We are being guided to recognize it right now, in this

life and in this body. We are offered the knowledge of ourselves as we truly are. Such knowing can only take place within us, for it is self-knowing. Such knowing is sublime and certain.

The tangibility of the experience of profound clarity happens in the present moment. It is not a future paradise nor a reward for being pious. One does not have to perform austerities, go on pilgrimages, or become celibate—one need not relinquish anything at all. One can experience one’s true nature in the city, in the bathroom, in the shopping mall, at a ball game, in a synagogue, church, or hermitage—wherever one is and whatever one is doing, one’s nature is right there.”

Liberating Duality with Wisdom Display

-Venerable Khenpo Rinpoches

“Patrul Rinpoche says that you do not have to travel to another place to discover the nature of your mind. Your mind is wherever you are. Why go somewhere else, when your mind is already here? Nor do you have to consult another person. It is your mind. When you are happy or sad, do you have to ask someone, “Am I happy?” or “Am I sad?” Of course not; you know clearly how your mind is doing. This natural capacity to know your own mind is called “self-knowledge,” “self-luminosity,” or “self-clarity.” It is also simply called “intelligence.” You should apply this natural capacity right now. Use your intelligence and look within—look at your own mind. When you do this, you do not see any subject or object. You do not see anything in particular. You go straight to the nature of your mind.

Realization is not far off. You can experience a glimpse of realization right now. Look at your present thought and ask, “What is the source of this thought?” This present thought is sometimes called “ordinary thought,” or “ordinary mind.” The moment you look for the source of this present thought, it immediately becomes something extraordinary—pristine awareness. Realization is your nature, and your nature never leaves you. It is ever-present and available. You

can transform duality into nonduality at any time, even this very instant if you wish. Patrul Rinpoche says that this is due to the unimpeded nature of the mind.

This is your original mind. From this pristine true nature of rigpa, conceptions emanate. Chains or strings of thoughts keep coming. Yet this original mind is free from thoughts, even while it is their source, abiding place, and destination. It is the same teaching again and again: look within your own mind, understand its nature clearly, then maintain this realization. This is how to practice on the nature of the mind.”

Awakened Mind in the Everyday Life

The Morality of Performing Beneficial Activities

- Venerable Khenpo Rinpoches

The Morality of Performing Beneficial Activities

“There are four moralities or guidelines we use when acting to benefit others, to make sure our activity is well directed. (1) First, we share whatever we have: if beings need it and we have it, we give it if we have the capability. (2) Second, we must be soft-spoken, respectful, and soothing so that we don’t hurt anyone’s feelings. (3) Third, we act skillfully, giving according to individuals’ needs, and with an awareness of their readiness. (4) Fourth, we are involved with others, not acting like we’re superior or detached. Basically we’re all sitting in the same boat. Our attitude should be that, “You and I are the same.” So we’re not just like an announcer on television talking about what someone else ought to do. We are doing what we’re saying, not just speaking nice words. We try to do what we say. If our activity has the context of these four moralities, it will be the activity of a bodhisattva.”