

Chögyal Namkhai Norbu: Dharma, The Meaning of Existence

What do we mean by the word "Dharma"? Generally, it is explained as "teaching", but in Sanskrit, its original meaning is "existence". Everything that exists, both on the relative and absolute levels, is Dharma.

In Buddhist teaching, we usually begin with the Four Noble Truths. Buddha Shakyamuni taught them in his first turning of the wheel of Dharma in Sarnath. He explained that life is marked by suffering (*dukkha*), that suffering has a cause (craving and ignorance), that there is a cessation of suffering (*nirvana*), and that there is a path to reach it.

However, to understand Dharma deeply, we must distinguish between the different levels of teaching: Sutra and Tantra.

Sutra: The Path of Renunciation

The Sutra level focuses mainly on external conduct and the material level. Here, the practitioner works with renunciation. If we understand that something is a cause of suffering, we avoid or renounce it. It is a gradual path linked to the body. For example, vows (*pratimoksha*) are maintained through the physical body until death.

In Mahayana, the emphasis shifts toward voidness (*shunyata*) and compassion (*karuna*). The "Heart Sutra" (*Prajnaparamita Hridaya*) analyzes our relative condition—senses, body, and mind—to demonstrate that they lack a concrete essence, leading them to the state of voidness. As Nagarjuna said: "Voidness without compassion has no function."

Tantra: The Path of Transformation

While Sutra speaks of compassion, Tantra speaks of energy. Tantra is not a teaching that the Buddha imparted in an ordinary way in a physical place like Benares. It is a transmission of the *Sambhogakaya* (the dimension of clarity and energy).

In Tantra, voidness is not an empty "nothingness". From voidness arises sound, and from sound arise light and color, which eventually manifest as matter. This is why Tantra is also called *Mantrayana*; the mantra is the symbol of sound and energy.

There are two main stages in tantric practice:

1. **Kyerim (Generation Phase):** The gradual development of a detailed visualization of a deity or mandala. It is a process of mental construction.
2. **Zogrim (Perfection Phase):** The integration of that visualization with our own internal energy, channels (*nadis*), and centers (*chakras*).

Within the Nyingma tradition, Tantra is classified into Mahayoga (gradual transformation) and Anuyoga (non-gradual transformation, based on the immediate presence of energy).

Transmission and the Rigdzins

Tantric teaching was originally received by beings with a special capacity called *Rigdzins* (Vidyadharas or knowledge-holders). These beings belong to various dimensions—divinities, nagas, and others.

An example is Padmasambhava, who manifested the "Rainbow Body" or "Body of Light". He did not undergo an ordinary death; his material body dissolved into its vibratory essence (light and color). If we were *Rigdzins*, we would see him directly; but due to our karmic obscurations, we can only perceive our impure vision.

Dzogchen: The Path of Self-Liberation

Atiyoga or Dzogchen is not a path of renunciation or transformation, but of self-liberation. While Tantra works with voice and energy, Dzogchen works directly with the mind, with the state of Samantabhadra.

The master Garab Dorje synthesized the teaching into three fundamental precepts, known as "The Three Words that Strike the Vital Point":

1. **Direct Introduction:** The master introduces the student directly into their primordial state. In Dzogchen, there is no ritual "initiation" (typical of Tantra), only "introduction" to knowledge.
2. **No Remaining in Doubt:** Through concrete experience (as in *Semde* or *Longde*), the practitioner eliminates all doubt about their own state.
3. **Continue in the State:** Once knowledge is attained, it must be integrated into every moment of daily life. This is explained in the Secret Instruction series (*Upadesha*).

Integration and Non-Distraction

Practicing Dzogchen does not mean complicating oneself with intellectual concepts or school traditions. The goal is to realize our own state. As the great master Yuntan Dorjopa said when asked if he was always meditating: "When was I ever distracted?".

Practice consists of melting the "ice" of our dualistic karmic vision so that it returns to the fluid "water" of our natural energy, and finally dissolves into the light of the essence.

Knowledge must be applicable. If it is not integrated into daily life, the teaching becomes just a concept to chatter about. The key is conscious presence in everything that arises.