

The Buddha-Dharma on Autopilot I

[Keith Dowman]: Welcome to the Dzogchen Mandala. I apologize for this delay; it's necessary these days with the technical part, but it's even easier than working with a sheet of paper. I must say, first of all, that I feel very much at home in this temple. There's no barrier here. We are not attached to the words that make the difference; instead, we unite in the vibration that transcends those differences. And that says a lot. What we are evoking here is the similarity, or the identity, of Dzogchen and Mahamudra. Whatever difference there is between these two, let's leave it behind in the Himalayas. It is an existential identity that we are celebrating, and "celebration" is a good word for this gathering. We should celebrate this identity through meditation—or rather, non-meditation.

It is the identity of awareness that has no name. Insofar as there is anything to do, it is looking into the words that are spoken and heard. It is the identity within them that we are concerned with, identifying everything as awareness. Can we define Dzogchen as a stage of awareness? It goes a long way, but maybe that's not enough, because what we are aware of does not become separate from awareness itself. However, it's that identity that is important. We are identified with that awareness. And if there is a doorway, it's the one we call trekchö. It's a word you can translate as "breakthrough"—breaking through the specificity of the moment. Trekchö is the meditation form that we will practice, though I don't like the word "practice." While we are practicing, we have yet to establish identity with the goal. Dzogchen is about identifying with the goal here and now—the celebration.

We celebrate this meeting of minds. There's really no difference between this moment of congregation and the rest of the 24 hours of the day. Awareness is the key; awareness is the continuum through the 365 days of the year. It's all the same. We identify with this "sameness," this "suchness." It's the awareness that is the constancy of the continuum. Call it light—not electric light or sunlight, but the light of the mind. Let's not confuse the light of awareness with the light of the sun. Can we call it clarity? It has no characteristics. But let's look at the here and now. Time is momentary. That's where clarity is found. What you find is spaciousness or—as the Buddhists say—emptiness. There's nothing there at all. If you try to point at it or pin it down, you won't succeed. If you want to communicate a certain emotion or state of mind, you lose that timeless essence in the process.

So why don't we simply relax into the nature of mind and watch whatever arises in the ocean? That's trekchö meditation—simply sitting, doing nothing, watching the colors, hearing the sounds. What makes the distinction between us, identified with that awareness, and the ordinary samsaric state? Surely there must be a difference between "us" and "them." That's another way of asking: what is the difference between samsara and nirvana? Undoubtedly, the word "realization" indicates an event, a way of consciousness. But try to pin it down, and you'll find yourself back in that place where nothing can be said—the inexpressible here and now, where there is clarity and emptiness.

That is also where compassion arises. In Vajrayana, this word is perhaps the most important. It is the quality of knowledge that brings an absence of attachment. If there is no attachment, there is no possibility of putting a word on it. Is it "preciousness," "spaciousness," or a "sense of unity"? The metaphor is that "heart feeling" that unites us—the feeling of complete identity. I think what characterizes Dzogchen primarily is an "absence of identity" in the sense of ego. It's the essence of all Buddhist schools. It cannot be pinned down because it's a stream of awareness, a constant change. The only constant is clarity, which has no characteristics other than constant change. This is simply the recognition of being human. All sentient beings have this sensibility. You can't move towards it or away from it; it's absolute.

Do we need "realization" of being human in order to awaken? What can we do to recognize the fact of being human, to awaken that sense of clarity? Starting with the basic understanding of ignorance—which is not only stupid but dysfunctional—the fact of being alive and human is itself the recognition of that clarity. There's nothing to do and nowhere to go to realize it, only to bring it into perspective, into consciousness. Whatever its characteristics are—whether deep red, purple, blue, or the colors of samsara—it is still realized by the clarity of mind. Sometimes those deep colors become lighter, like rainbow colors, but it's still the same awareness.

The question arises: can we lose it? Everywhere? In sleep or unconsciousness? That certainly raises the question. Dzogchen—the Great Perfection, the Great Consummation—is the recognition of whatever arises as awareness. That is realization. Does childhood imply an absence of that awareness? Does old age imply an absence of that light? From birth to death, the light is presence. Whether it's the "candlelight" of childhood or the abundance or lack of light in old age, it's just different relationships with the same light. That light is humanity. Identifying with that light is the practice of Dzogchen and Mahamudra—non-dual realization. There is no difference between the light in the practice and the light in the result. We use the word "practice" simply out of humility.

Maybe we make a distinction between the constant clarity and the "heaviness" that comes with ignorance. We accept joy but cannot accept anger. We identify with the joy but leave the anger alone, separating ourselves from it. Here's an important distinction: we identify with what's easy and reject what's difficult. But Dzogchen realization places us in a position where it doesn't matter how bright or dark the light is, or how deep the suffering; the identification is the same. It's simply more of the same in a different color. "Emptying the depths of hell" is a ritual in graduated meditation where the images of the hell realms become merely "play"—perhaps play of a different caliber or coming from a different karma, but still mere movement in basic awareness.

We can distinguish between peaceful and active experiences. In Vajrayana, peaceful experiences are communicated through peaceful deities, while active or "rough" experiences are communicated as wrathful deities. But the peaceful and the wrathful are simply different manifestations in the same unchanging awareness. If we identify with that awareness, then we can travel through the "wheel of life," even the lower realms, through manifestations of jealousy, anger, or stupidity. We see them simply as different aspects of the rainbow. This applies not just to the unpleasant realms, but also to the realms of the gods and pleasure. There is no end to what we can experience, from perfect pleasure to perfect hate. Identified with basic awareness, these are just different kinds of "movies."

The more experience we have moving in those realms and finding that they are, in essence, empty, the more we can include them in our frame of reference—into our dream experience or our daily manifestations. Is there a "progression" here? Externally it might look like that, but in the moment, we are identified with different qualities of experience, yet all of it is free. There is nowhere on the wheel of life that we cannot identify with. From the outside, it looks painful, but if you are "in it," you are free. Identifying with awareness is the realization; it's the doorway. We leave behind limited identities—gender, family, nation, emotional or intellectual identities—and identify with awareness rather than form.

Awareness transcends personality and the sense of "I" and "mine." We are giving up control, but what we gain is an awareness that includes everything that is human. Tibetans have ritualized this realization as "Wang" or "Wangkur"—levels of initiation referring to different dimensions of the mind. By ritualizing it, the intellect can somehow assimilate it, even if only symbolically. Many of you have experienced the "Wang" ceremony. It's not just a religious meeting; there's a seed of transcendence that allows it to happen. In the ritual, that sense of identity with the core doesn't last long—not as long as the identity with the nature of mind attained in non-meditation. But that identity with transcendence is vital. Insofar as we identify with it, we are within the Dzogchen Mandala.

That confidence allows us to include even the most difficult or "stinky" karmic experiences—the most anti-social or self-destructive. It might look like a process of increasing aptitude, but that's not how it feels. Every moment is a wide-open door into the Dzogchen Mandala. Each time you feel that transcendence, it strengthens that identification. I don't want to give the impression of a "laddered" process; even the moment of transcendence is absolute. The identity with the nature of mind—the Dzogchen Mandala—is a timeless experience.

In my personal experience with Nyingma Dzogchen llamas, there's a level of communication characterized by simplicity. "Straightforward" is a good word—a direct give-and-take without competition or checking for "attainment." It looks like a spiritual result, a state of being that arises without cause or effect. It's not something you work towards by climbing a spiritual ladder to Buddhahood; it's the recognition of the here and now. It's simply the acceptance of what we've received through human birth.

This basic act of realization is called trekchö, which translates as "simply sitting"—doing nothing whatsoever. Is it a ritual? Not necessarily, though from the outside, it might look like one. It's difficult to call this gathering anything else. But for every individual in the room, there is the momentary awareness of the "here and now." That simple awareness is trekchö meditation. There is a point where trekchö becomes "non-meditation," and that is when you are identified with the awareness that is open to whatever karma gives you. You then continue with the rest of your 24 hours, established in that identity.

Does that sound like ordinary consciousness? Let's take a 20-minute break there. Some more tea for you.