

Seeing Into the Nature of Mind: The Confluence of Zen and Dzogchen

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From beneath the Pipal tree in central India where Shakyamuni Buddha is said to have attained the goal of all of his lifetimes, the Buddha Dharma has spread to numerous countries and cultures throughout the world. The passage of time and the cultural proclivities of many peoples have resulted in various manifestations of Buddhism—the Buddhisms of India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, China, Tibet, Japan, and, most recently, Europe and North America. Throughout time and across cultures, however, the following characteristics unite every one of the varying traditions and ground each of them in the awakening experience of the Buddha: the understanding of suffering as a universal experience, the practice of meditation to train the mind, and the realization of freedom from all extremes, fixations, and obsessions.

All Buddhist schools hold to the foundational teaching of the Buddha's first sermon on the Four Noble Truths, in which he analyzed the causes and conditions of suffering and its cessation. In this analysis, the root of suffering is identified as the mental state of craving and one's attachment to the objects of craving. The only way to release oneself from the suffering created by mental habits rooted in ignorance is first to understand clearly how such habits arise and how they cease, then, through the practice of meditation, to gain insight into the true nature of mind, and eventually to live and die in that realization. This process manifests in a variety of ways according to different Buddhist traditions. The two that I will consider in this brief essay are the Rinzai School of Japanese Zen and the Nyingma School of Tibetan (Vajrayana) Buddhism. It is my ambition to highlight some aspects of the resonance between these two forms that developed in such different places and amidst such diverse cultures.

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Both Zen and Vajrayana Buddhism have roots in the Indian Mahāyāna tradition, specifically in the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*) literature that emphasizes “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) and the way of the Bodhisattva. The Nyingma system is unique among Tibetan Buddhist Schools in that it postulates nine *yānas* (“vehicles”) for the transmission of the Buddha’s teaching, each of which is correlated with particular personality types or stages in a person’s spiritual development. The ninth vehicle, called *Ati-yoga* or “Great Perfection” (Tib., *Dzogchen*), is based on direct seeing into the nature of mind. The nineteenth century Tibetan yogi, Shabkar, describes his experience as follows:

*Like the sun shining in a clear autumn sky, the luminous emptiness that is the true nature of mind was laid bare. In a state without center, without limits, empty like space, all phenomena—forms and sounds—were present in spontaneity, vivid as the sun, moon, planets and stars. Mind and phenomena blended completely in a single taste.*¹

It is this direct and unmediated realization of the nature of mind and phenomena that links Shabkar’s Dzogchen experience with the Zen tradition. Centuries before Shabkar, the same sense of an unbounded, centreless space—in which the universe is completely open to the experiencer—can be found in the words of the Zen monk, Mumon Ekai (1183-1260 CE). Mumon Ekai proclaims:

*The Great Way is gateless,
Approached in a thousand ways.
Once past this checkpoint
You stride through the universe.*²

Zen is traced back to the Indian monk Bodhidharma (c 470-543 CE), who is said to have brought the practice of meditative absorption (Pali, *jhāna*; Sanskrit, *dhyāna*—transliterated into Chinese as *ch’an* and into Japanese as *zen*.) to China. Bodhidharma’s emphasis on the immediacy of awakening—unmediated by words and concepts—is encapsulated in the following four lines legendarily attributed to him:

*Outside teaching; apart from tradition.
Not founded on words and letters.
Pointing directly to the human mind.
Seeing into one’s nature and attaining Buddhahood.*³

In the early development of Ch'an, two major divisions appeared, known as the Northern and Southern Schools. The Southern School, taking its inspiration from the teaching of the sixth Patriarch Hui-nêng (638-713 CE), promoted the idea of enlightenment as a "sudden" and ineffable realization, in contradistinction to the Northern School, which, they claimed, presented enlightenment as the result of a "gradual" process. While the Northern School died out, the Southern School's focus on instantaneous, direct experience, and the limitations of doctrine and ritual became the predominant view in China. Offshoots of this Ch'an sect eventually reached Japan, where it developed into Rinzai and Soto Zen, both of which flourished.

The Rinzai school of Zen, which regarded *satori* ("awakening") as a sudden breakthrough, a "radical discontinuity in the flow of everyday life..."⁴ was brought from China to Japan by the monk Eisai (1141-1215 CE). With its focus on simplicity, directness, personal discipline, and the transcendence of self, Rinzai became the training of choice for monks, samurai warriors, artists, and poets alike—each drawing from the realization of the nature of mind in order to reach the pinnacle of their practice.

There is historical evidence that Ch'an Buddhism had an impact in Tibet, which was strongly influenced, both religiously and culturally, by its contact with China. A purported debate in the eighth or ninth century between a leading Ch'an master in Tibet and Kamalāsīla, the Indian exponent of the Mahāyāna, describes the ideological clash between proponents of sudden versus gradual enlightenment. Tibetan historians report that the Indian perspective, which emphasized a gradual step-by-step approach, dominated, and Ch'an was turned out of Tibet. Although Western scholars believe that the Tibetan Dzogchen teachings likely originated with the Indian Mahasiddhas and the Sahajayana ("Way of Spontaneity") tradition, some Tibetan scholars regard Dzogchen as unorthodox and suspiciously close to the outlawed Chinese tradition.

The fundamental similarity between Zen and Dzogchen can be discerned in the following excerpt from the classic Zen Koan compilation, the *Mumonkan*:

A monk asked Joshi, "*What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming to China* [that is, what is the essence of Buddhism]?" Joshi said, "*The oak tree in the garden.*" 5

Compare with this dialogue from the life of the Dzogchen master, Patrul Rinpoché (1808-87 CE), as related by his student:

One evening, while he [Patrul Rinpoche] was lying there as usual [stretched out on the grass doing a special meditation practice], he said to me: "Lungchey...! Did you say that you do not know the

essence of the mind?” (I answered,) “Yes, sir, I don’t.”... “Oh, there is nothing not to know. Come here.” So, I went to him. (He said:) “Lie down, as I am lying, and look at the sky.” As I did so, (the conversation went on as follows:)

“Do you see the stars in the sky?”

“Yes.”

“Do you hear the dogs barking in Dzogchen monastery?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that is the meditation!”⁵

¹ Rangdrol, Shabkar Tsogdruk *The Life of Shabkar : The Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogin*. Ed. Constance Wilkinson and Michal Abrams. Trans. Matthieu Ricard, Jakob Leshly, Erika Schmidt, Marilyn Silverstone, and Lodrö Palmo. Minneapolis: Snow Lion Publications, Incorporated, 2001. 175.

² Sekida, Katsuki. *Two Zen Classics: The Gateless Gate and The Blue Cliff Records*. Minneapolis: Shambhala Publications, Incorporated, 2005. 26.

³ Watts, Alan. *The Way of Zen*. New York: Vintage, 1999. 88.

⁴ Faure, Bernard. *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991. 45.

⁵ Rabjam, Longchen, Tulku Thondup, and Tulku Thondup. *The Practice of Dzogchen*. Minneapolis: Snow Lion Publications, Incorporated, 2002. 128.