

View, Meditation, and Conduct in Dzogchen and Zen

by Kokyo Henkel

Having recently received the great blessing of participating in a couple of meditation retreats in the Tibetan Dzogchen tradition, I feel more and more that Dzogchen, the “Natural Great Perfection,” is a beautiful way of understanding the practice of zazen, simple wholehearted sitting, and Soto Zen. Though Dzogchen comes from a somewhat different culture and uses a somewhat different kind of language, the teachings of the Great Perfection can help to clarify our Zen practice. These two traditions share many of the same early roots from the eighth century, when both were first beginning to blossom forth from the radiant nature of mind in Tibet and China.

Great Perfection teachings usually present the path of practice in three parts: the “view, meditation, and conduct.” The view is a clear understanding of what we’re meditating on. The culmination of meditation in all Buddhist traditions is resting at ease in selflessness, emptiness, the unfindability of any fixed identity. In Zen, we could call the view the unborn mind, or non-dual clear awareness. In both the Dzogchen and Zen traditions, it’s also called “ordinary mind.” Ordinary mind is a term that can be understood correctly and falsely. The false understanding would be our obsessive, conceptualizing, thought-grasping mind, which is quite ordinary in the sense of being our usual state. But the true ordinary mind of the Great Perfection and of Zen is the unadorned non-grasping mind, ordinary in that it’s actually very plain and simple, with nothing extra added.

Ordinary mind is the “Way” that doesn’t seek or grasp for anything. Or as Dogen Zenji presents the view, in his Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen, “The Way is originally perfect and all-pervading. How could it depend on our practice or even on our realization? This vehicle of the Zen ancestors is free and naturally at rest, unrestricted, not burdened by anything. What need is there for concentrated effort? Indeed, this whole being is far beyond the dust of the world, all our old dusty habitual ways of thinking, so it’s not an issue of washing it clean. And it’s never apart from us, always right here and now.” So Dogen begins his practice instructions by exuberantly introducing the view in such a way.

In the Great Perfection tradition, after the view is first clarified, then there’s the meditation, the actual practice. And the meditation is defined as simply “sustaining the view.” The meditation is actually just opening more and more completely to this view of the all-pervading original Way, free from all our dusty ideas about it, the Way that’s never apart from us. Just opening and relaxing into the view is the meditation, or what is sometimes called in the Great Perfection tradition “non-meditation.” The culmination of meditation practice is non-meditation, recognizing and resting in the naturally present ungraspable true nature of this life, which doesn’t depend on any particular practice or realization.

Both Zen and the Great Perfection do, of course, offer some practical ways to embody or express this all-pervading Way, like sitting as upright, still, and comfortable as possible. We take our seat and arrange our legs, either on a cushion or a chair, cross-legged or kneeling, or whatever works for us to be very settled and comfortable. And then we lift up the head through the spine, feeling the pull from the sky holding us up, in a relaxed way. And, especially if we’re coming into meditation from a stressful day, we breathe deeply at the beginning, with full abdominal breath, letting the air just fill the lower belly, then breathe out every last ounce of air. We take a few

really deep breaths. Such breath settles the body and mind. The breath can get very constricted, so we breathe very deeply and naturally, releasing any holding. And then we remember the view. Above the entrance to the zendo at Bukkokuji, where I practiced in Japan, there is a huge calligraphed sign with Dogen's words: "The Way is originally perfect and all-pervading." It points out the view to everyone who enters the zendo to meditate. The Way is originally perfect and it's not going to depend on our practice or our verification of it.

Often, as we approach this settled and open nature of mind, we start checking. We start trying to verify how we're doing in this realm. I have the tendency to ask myself, "Is this it? Is this meditation in accord with the teachings?" That very checking and assessing of how it's going actually disturbs the complete settledness. In the Great Perfection tradition it's said that "I" cannot verify this non-dual, open nature of mind. We can't verify it, but it can be verified. It verifies itself. How wonderful! The Way verifies itself, confirms itself, realizes itself. As long as I am trying to do that, even the slightest bit, that effort is the very obscuration of this non-dual mind. That's the definition of duality: the subject trying to verify some object, like emptiness of mind.

When we first sit down to meditate, it's helpful to first check our posture, our breath, and to check exactly where we're holding on conceptually—to assess the situation that so we know where to let go. Then we can let go, more and more deeply, but when we get to this very settled place and feel like we may have reached complete settledness, we don't check. Just where that point is to stop checking is quite intuitive. At some point we just drop off checking and assessing, and stop. Even stop meditating. At that point, even trying to make a little effort creates separation. As Suzuki Roshi says, we make effort right up to the very last moment when all effort disappears. If we give up effort right from the beginning, we'll never even sit down at all! So we make effort to sit upright, to breathe deeply, to relax and let the body settle, and then once we're quite settled, then we may be able to release all effort and checking and just rest.

In Dzogchen, after clarifying the view and sustaining it in meditation, finally there is conduct. Conduct is what happens after the formal meditation session, how we live our life in the world. The point of practice is actually our conduct, how to live in the world in this very ordinary way. Ordinary, without fixation or grasping. Obviously we have to do things, sometimes quite complicated activities, but we can let phenomena arise in the midst of the all-pervading Way, from that, as an expression of that. For example, thoughts can actually arise from that ground of empty clarity, thoughts can manifest without disturbing the perfection of the Way. Emotions can arise and they don't need to disturb it. Of course experiences often seem to disturb it, and that's when we've lost the recognition of the view of the clear openness of the Way.

The Great Perfection speaks of the self-liberation of thoughts and emotions. In other words, we don't liberate them; thoughts and emotions can free themselves, like writing on water. This image is used in both Dzogchen as well as early Chinese Zen. As soon as the mind "writes" a word it's gone, unlike writing on a piece of paper where it leaves ink tracks that we then grasp onto. Words and concepts, thoughts and emotions, can all arise, but they're freed at the very moment of arising. If we remember the view of the originally perfect all-pervading Way as the ground from which experiences are arising, it's possible to see how they naturally self-liberate.