

GARCHEN RINPOCHE

ON DZOGCHEN

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CUTTING THROUGH

In the context of instructions on dzogchen, the “great perfection”, when you cling to the substantiality of reality, there is samsara, cyclic existence. When you do not cling to either the existence or non-existence of reality there is nirvana, the state beyond sorrow. Clinging occurs when we cling to the idea of a self and others. When we practice the practice of dzogchen *tregchö*, or “cutting through”, we cut through clinging. When we talk about the emptiness of all substantial reality, this is not something that is just to be intellectually understood. To hold in our minds that everything is empty and insubstantial is still clinging to a concept of an empty reality. We still see phenomena appear before our eyes. The thing is that these phenomena are ultimately illusory in nature. Even though they appear, they are ultimately insubstantial. When we rest without clinging to the substantiality of any outer or inner phenomena, our concepts slowly subside on their own. This is cutting through. When conceptual clinging to reality is let go, there is nothing more to do.

The practice of cutting through is explained in the *Three Statements that Strike the Key Points* by Garab Dorje.

Recognize your own true nature.
Reach certainty about the one key thing.
Liberate yourself with confidence.

For recognizing your true nature, you must see how all reality is. When you see the true nature of all things, you see that they occur in the nature of the mind. This nature of the mind is like space. Seeing this is recognizing your own true nature.

To reach certainty about the one key thing is to see that all the Buddhas and sentient beings in both samsara and nirvana have but one single ground. In Samantabhadra’s prayer it says “*There is a single ground and two paths...*”. To reach certainty about that is to see that the essence of all Buddhas and sentient beings is exactly the same. This is reaching certainty about the one key thing. If you don’t realize this, you might look at texts and think that there is this thing here and that thing there. However, holding on to such concepts, you miss the ultimate non-dual nature of reality. There’s no end to trying to have a better view. When you look at texts, it says this is better than that, and that is better than even this. There’s no end to it. If you haven’t reached certainty about the view inside yourself, it is difficult to realize the true meaning of reality.

To liberate yourself with confidence the thing to be confident about is the end of dualistic grasping. Clinging to an idea of a self and others is clinging to something that isn’t real. If you do not cling to duality, there is no distinction between afflictive emotions and primordial wisdom. There is no difference between happiness and suffering. When you experience all reality without duality, you are liberated through confidence in that. This is the hardest of the three parts of practice.

It is comparatively easy to recognize your own true nature in the beginning. Then, it is essential to reach certainty about the one key thing. Otherwise, you will keep wandering around looking for answers and asking questions endlessly. Last, you must liberate yourself with confidence. To be freed within the view is to be free of all fear. There is a realization that there is ultimately no birth and no death. There is nothing to be created or destroyed. This is called vajra-like meditative absorption. There is no hope or fear towards anything. When we talk about a vajra, the ultimate indestructible weapon, there is only one vajra. If there were two, it really wouldn't be the true nature of the vajra. The realization of the inseparability of samsara and nirvana is Vajradhara. For example, space transcends duality. If you looked at space and saw a big part of it and a small part of it that was distinct, it wouldn't be space. This great space is also called mahamudra, the great seal. It is a great seal, because all reality is sealed within it. There is nothing but this one great reality. When you see this without clinging you are liberated.

DIRECT CROSSING

When we look at light reflecting through a crystal we see rainbows. Ultimately, however, there is nothing there that we can grasp onto. When we abide in the nature of the mind without grasping onto anything, no matter what appears in the mind, this is cutting through. When we abide in this state, we can practice dzogchen *thögal*, or “direct crossing”, wherein the appearances of the enlightened bodies of the Buddhas appear. When we have no grasping to these appearances, they truly are the nature of the deities. However, if we do not have a basis in the practice of cutting through, there is no benefit to doing the practice of direct crossing. That is why it is taught, “If you do not cut through, you will not directly cross.”

In between death and future births we experience what is called the bardo, or in-between state, of reality. The pure nature of appearances arises at this time, but we don't recognize it. By being attached to duality of self and others, we enter the bardo of ordinary existence and engage in all the interdependent aspects of life that are based on dualistic attachment. If we meditate and free ourselves from such dualistic clinging, then, at the time of death we are liberated into the ultimate non-dual luminosity of reality. We can also train in the states of deep sleep and dreams to recognize this luminosity when we are asleep. There are many connections between the bardos of death, reality, and dreams. There are also special techniques in dzogchen practice by which we can train in the appearances of the luminous nature of the mind in this life.

When there is no clinging, all phenomena appear like a rainbow. When we free ourselves from karma and habitual patterns, we see that reality truly is like a rainbow. When we free ourselves from clinging to reality as being substantial, we have established the practice of cutting through. Through mastery of the practice of cutting through, the quantum particles of our bodies dissolve back into the nature of reality and we reach the state of going beyond meditation. Through the mastery of the practice of direct crossing, we accomplish the rainbow body. It is important that we don't over conceptualize the individual results of cutting through and direct crossing. When we master cutting through for instance, we realize the dharmakaya, the enlightened body of reality. From that, the sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya naturally manifest as well. In this way the accomplishment from the perspective of enlightenment is the same for cutting through and direct crossing.

When we understand the empty essence of reality, the space-like nature of the mind, in the practice of cutting through, this is dharmakaya that is the same for all the Buddhas. The nature of that is luminous. This luminous nature is self-aware of its empty essence. Thus, there is an inseparable union of emptiness and luminosity. This is the sambhogakaya, or enlightened body of enjoyment. This non-dual realization of luminosity and emptiness is great bliss. When we realize this, we see that all ordinary sentient beings are missing out on this ultimate great bliss and suffer continuously in cyclic existence. The energy of compassion arising from this manifests as nirmanakayas, or enlightened bodies of emanation, to free sentient beings from their delusions and suffering. These emanations appear naturally without any conceptual effort. They are born from the innate compassionate energy that arises from enlightenment. Ultimately the fruitions of dzogchen and mahamudra are completely the same. In particular, one of the signs of the full realization of cutting through is that ordinary human body dissolves into quantum particles and disappears. This occurs from rare highly realized practitioners. For others, although their bodies do not dissolve, they are liberated as soon as they reach the first bardo, or between state, after death. They realize the dharmakaya as it arises at the time of death. Like waking up from sleep, they awaken into the space-like nature of the mind of all the Buddhas. Thus, they become one with all the Buddhas. This is reaching Buddhahood through the dharmakaya of the first bardo at the time of death.

For the preliminaries of direct crossing practice, there are the practices of *khorde rushen*, or “separating samsara and nirvana”. These practices are designed to help you realize the ultimate one taste of all reality. All experiences of bliss and suffering are ultimately of one taste. In these practices you meditate on the experiences and sufferings of each of the six realms of samsara. You come to realize that these experiences are nothing more than the insubstantial experiences of dreams. There is no ultimate suffering. This body that suffers appears through our actions and habitual patterns. The experiences that we have through our bodies are really a dream that is created through these. You might think, well then, the frightening things in reality, the sounds we hear, the hungers we experience, and the various sensations and so forth of the body are all false. This isn’t the case. Through self-clinging, afflictive emotions in our minds, and habitual patterns of such, the fearsome experiences of reality all manifest. Without self-clinging, there is no basis for frightening experiences. When there is no clinging to a self, there is no dualistic reality of self and other. Thus, the basis of fear is eradicated. The outer appearances that are frightening and the inner mind of fear are both overcome. Then, all appearances arise like a pure realm. Everything doesn’t just disappear. Appearances still arise as the pure realms of the Buddhas. The key is to see these pure appearances without clinging, like a rainbow.

The true experience of the pure realms transcends conceptual clinging. In the context of the practice of direct crossing, these pure appearances are discussed at length. First, there are the appearances of the bindus, or circles of luminosity. All sorts of appearances arise. There are appearances like nets, various geometric designs, and a variety of other phenomena. Eventually, within these appearances you will see a very small bindu. If you focus with one-pointed concentration, this very small bindu without rainbow rings, like the size of a mustard seed, will appear. This moves all about and doesn’t stay put. It sometimes appears and sometimes doesn’t. If you are very diligent, then eventually, this bindu will stay put. It will appear naturally in time wherever you look, day and night. It is different than the other larger bindus as it possesses its own inherent luminosity, like a butter lamp flame. This light arises from the luminosity of the nature of the mind.

This inherent luminosity is like the heart of the seed syllables of all the Buddhas, like the syllable *Ah*, the essence of all sound. Sometimes, there are what are called vajra chains of many of these small bindus linked together like a garland of pearls and so forth. Eventually, you can perceive deities and mandalas as the appearances of the bindus ripen.

These appearances are ultimately the external perception of what abides within the subtle channels inside our bodies. The electricity inside the body can be externally perceived in such a way before the eyes. These appearances shift just as the subtle energies inside our bodies shift. When our internal energies are brought to rest, the external appearances are stabilized. Ultimately, these external appearances are manifestations of the inherent luminosity of our minds within us. Thus, we really can see our minds in this way. This is a very special way of seeing your mind. The key for working with such appearances is to perceive them without any dualistic grasping. It is possible for some people to see many different things and even deities, because of their individual constitutions, sometimes without even meditating. However, just seeing these things is not profound or necessarily beneficial. If we grasp objectively upon these, they remain ordinary. If we transcend dualistic concepts when we perceive reality, then everything arises as the pure mandala of the deities. We must be careful not to confuse a simple state of the mind at peace and the qualities of such with seeing the true nature of the mind.

When we are truly abiding in the nature of mind, we are not looking at ordinary space. We directly perceive the space-like expanse of reality. This is very subtle and difficult to understand at first. It is different than just looking at the sky. Inner awareness and the outer expanse of space are not ultimately different, because they occur both within our minds. When we inseparably merge our awareness fully with the expanse of all reality without any conceptual clinging, we see the true expanse of reality. The practice of direct crossing builds upon this. Through it, we can come to see the luminosity of the mind clearly. My teacher Khenpo Münsel, however, emphasized the underlying importance of first realizing the practice of cutting through. Without it, the practice of direct crossing is not profound. Thus, for dzogchen practitioners the most important practice is cutting through. I also mainly practice cutting through.

In the practice of direct crossing there are four stages of visionary experiences that arise. These correspond precisely to the four yogas of mahamudra: one-pointedness, beyond elaboration, one taste, and non-meditation. In the dzogchen context, first, there is vision of seeing reality directly (*chos nyid mngon sum*). This is when you seeing the true nature of reality without any doubt. This is having the confidence of the view. In the context of direct crossing, you are certain that you are seeing the arising nature of reality without a doubt. In the dzogchen texts there are details about specific experiences of this in relationship to the arising of visions and so forth. Ultimately, in this context there is no duality. The mind transcends self and others. It is like space. Space does not have concepts of self and other. When you see reality directly there is no duality. This is seeing the nature of the mind. In the context of meditation practice, when you have a decisive experience of perceiving reality without any duality this is seeing reality directly.

Second, there is the vision of the increase of visionary experiences (*nyams snang gong 'phel*). When you abide in the state of seeing reality directly for a long time, you begin to have control over conceptual thoughts, which leads to the increase of the perception of pure appearances. There are elaborate descriptions in the direct crossing instructions. Ultimately, you begin to see appearances with greater pure perception. When you see this, you also give rise to great compassion for those beings that do not see the true nature of reality. When you give rise to great compassion for the plights of sentient beings throughout the six realms, you begin to see the pure Buddha nature within all of them. You see that the obscurations of beings are only temporary. You see the Buddhas hidden inside them. The increase of visionary experiences is essentially the increase of pure perception.

Third, there is vision of the culmination of awareness (*rig pa tshad phebs*). At this stage, the power of our awareness is able to cut through anything. All discursive thoughts and afflictive emotions that appear in our minds are penetrated by our awareness. Whether we experience happiness or sadness, we do not cling to it and it is overcome. Our awareness becomes like an indestructible weapon that destroys all afflictive emotions. Thus, as we do not experience the dualistic experiences of pure and impure reality, we see the one taste of samsara and nirvana. Sentient beings are perceived as being like a temporary illusion. As our obscurations are purified, we begin to truly see the universe as the pure mandala with Buddhas inside.

Fourth, there is vision of the consummation of reality (*chos nyid zad pa*). This refers to how all concepts about reality are consumed and finished. It refers to the end of clinging to things being substantial and real. What is consumed and finished is dualistic clinging. At this stage all dualistic clinging is naturally finished without any effort. When you fully realize the ultimate truth of the non-duality of reality, all dualistic conceptual thoughts are finished. If there is still duality in your experience, a concept about one thing leads to another and so forth. When there is not duality, there is nothing else to see outside this realization. There is no separate investigator or separate thing to perceive. Dualistic clinging is consumed and finished. When duality is finished, there is no one to have thoughts and no thing to have thoughts about. For example, it might seem that we have separate bodies. However, the nature of our minds that perceives this reality is exactly the same. By clinging to the delusion that we are different, we do not see the non-dual nature of the mind. We think duality is real, but it is an illusion. When we fully realize this, all thoughts are consumed and finished. Ultimately, we come to naturally dwell, as we truly are, in the single non-dual mind of all the Buddhas.