

*"The principle of the Dzog chen teaching is the self-perfectedness, the already-being-perfect of every individual. Self-perfectedness means that the so-called objective is nothing else than the manifestation of the energy of the primordial state of the individual himself. An individual who practices Dzog chen must possess clear knowledge of the principle of energy and what it means."*

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Also by the author:

*The Cycle of Day and Night: Where One Proceeds along the Primordial Yoga. A Basic Text on the Practice of Dzog Chen.*

Namkhai Norbu

# Dzog Chen and Zen

*Edited  
with a Preface and Notes  
by Kennard Lipman*

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## *Preface*

This lecture by Namkhai Norbu, professor of Tibetan and Mongolian Languages and Literatures at the Istituto Orientale of the University of Naples, Italy, was originally given at the University of California, Berkeley, on July 2, 1981. In it Professor Norbu discusses the relationship between Zen (Chinese: Ch'an) and Zógqen (rDzogs chen) in the context of the encounter, during the seventh to ninth centuries, between Chinese Ch'an Buddhists and the various currents of exoteric (sutric) and esoteric (tantric) Buddhism developing in Tibet. This was the period of the initial spread of Buddhism in Tibet. In particular, Professor Norbu focuses on the Zógqen teaching, regarded by its followers as the pinnacle of Buddhist teachings. In this preface I wish primarily to outline the Tibetan approach to grading the levels of Buddhist practice which Professor Norbu has utilized.

Understanding the relation of the Zógqen system to Zen is very much a contemporary issue. In the West, the Tibetan and Zen forms of Buddhism continue to be the most widespread forms to be seriously practiced. This is no accident, for both Zógqen and Zen have managed to maintain some semblance of vitality despite many centuries of decline of Buddhism in Asia. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that both are "direct," non-gradual approaches to the Buddhist teaching, and represent in this sense the culminations of Tantric and Sutric Buddhism, respectively. In Western (and Japanese) academic circles, research into the issue of "sudden" versus "gradual" awakening, and the roles of Indian and Chinese Buddhism in early Tibet, have been given new impetus recently by detailed studies on the relevant Dunhuang documents, especially by Japanese scholars. Also, the *Sāmdan Migdrön* (*bSam gtan mig sgron*, see below, n. 11, 12), an extremely important authentic source for this issue and period, has recently been published.

The *Sāmdan Migdrön* clearly and precisely distinguishes the gradual, sutric approach of Kamalāsīla, the great Indian master;

the non-gradual sutric approach of Haxaŋ (*Ha shanḡ*) Mahāyāna, the principal representative of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism in early Tibet; the Tantrism of the Mahāyoga system of what came later to be known as the Ōiŋmaba (rNying ma pa) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism; and finally, Atiyoga, or Zōgqen, introduced into Tibet by masters such as Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra, and Vairocana. Understanding these distinctions is the key to understanding the relation of Zōgqen to Zen.

A gradual path considers it necessary to slowly progress through a series of stages in order to reach the goal, "enlightenment." The individual is viewed as possessing grosser and subtler impediments to manifesting this enlightenment; the impediments must be tackled step by step, from grosser to more subtle, primarily through the application of appropriate antidotes. This progression is epitomized in the "Five Paths": there is a preparatory stage (*sambhāramārga*) of accumulating the requisites for this long journey, which links up (*prayogamārga*) to a direct insight into oneself and reality (*darśanamārga*) that eliminates the impediments which can be eliminated by insight alone. But there are also subtler impediments which must be removed by repeated attention to them on the stage of cultivation (*bhāvanāmārga*), which fundamentally consists of the Eight-fold Noble Path. In the Mahāyāna, the ten stages of the Bodhisattva are said to be traversed through the training in the so-called "perfections" (*pāramitā*) of generosity, ethical behavior, strenuousness, patience, meditative concentration, and discernment. Finally one reaches the stage of "No More Learning" (*aśaikṣamārga*), the goal, Buddhahood. It is said that the Bodhisattva practices in this way for three eons in order to reach the goal.

On this gradual path the Bodhisattva always attempts to combine compassion, as appropriate action (operating on the level of relative truth) with the discernment of emptiness, *śūnyatā* (operating on the level of absolute truth). Furthermore, the meditative practices of calm (*śamatha*) and insight (*vipāśyanā*) are also practiced in a gradual manner, focusing on different topics. In particular, insight is developed in a rather intellectual style through, first, study, then reasoning about what one has studied, and finally, meditative experience of the matter at

hand. As mentioned below (p. 24) by Professor Norbu, Kamalaśīla's *Bhāvanākrama* (*The Stages of Cultivation*), was composed as an authoritative guide to the gradual path for the Tibetans.

The non-gradual approach recognizes that the root of all impediments is dualism and that dualism can only be cut through directly, with all of one's efforts constantly directed towards this radical cure. This leads to a kind of meditative practice, such as *zazen*, which proceeds to immediately unify calm and insight, appropriate action and discernment.<sup>1</sup> Also, in this approach, intellectual study and reasoning about *śūnyatā* are not considered necessary prerequisites to its direct, meditative understanding. Here, in this directness, lies the similarity between Zen and Zōgqen.

We may sum up these gradual and non-gradual sutra teachings with the famous verse of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, his fundamental work (Ch. 18, v. 5):

By the destruction of the passions and the karmic acts  
(which result from them), liberation comes about.  
Passions and karmic acts come from conceptual fic-  
tions.

These spread from the (dualistic) naming activity of  
the mind, which is halted by *śūnyatā*.

The gradual and non-gradual traditions represent, then, more or less rapid, i.e., direct, approaches to the realization of *śūnyatā*; this directness depends on the "spiritual acumen," the sharpness of the individual's faculties. It must be remembered that the sutras are based primarily on a principle of renunciation or elimination of obstacles. In this sense then, *śūnyatā*, the fact that nothing possesses an exhaustively specifiable and unvarying mode of being, is the supreme antidote for the follower of the sutras. Thus, Professor Norbu, following the *Sāmdan Migdrōn*, has spoken below (p. 26) of the way in which the sutric practitioner is always "aiming at" *śūnyatā*, the ultimate truth. Furthermore, we can also see why the ideal sutric practitioner almost always has been the monk, Zen included.

Zen, like the teaching of the "Buddha-nature" (*tathāgata-*

*garbha*) inherent in all sentient beings, represents for the Tibetan tradition a kind of transition to Tantrism. In such transitional teachings, an understanding of *śūnyatā* which goes beyond the antidotal approach, is opened up. In such an understanding, *śūnyatā* manifests itself very positively; it is not merely an antidote. Thus, the *Sāmdan Migdrōn* goes on to explain the superiority of Tantrism to the non-gradual teaching of Haxaṅ Mahāyāna. It is considered superior because its method is superior. In Tantrism the passions are transformed through visualization and through manipulation of the bodily energies which are their support. This method is considered much more rapid than that of applying antidotes. It, in fact, presupposes the "antidotal" understanding of *śūnyatā* mentioned above; that is, an ego-centered, complacent attitude towards the world (which *śūnyatā* counters) inhibits one from imaginatively varying one's experience to the extent of seeing oneself as a divine being in a *maṇḍala*-palace, a central practice of Tantrism. In tantric terms, *śūnyatā* is also a radiant presence full of vivid imagery; by developing experience of this presence the passions can be transformed into their pristine state, which is clarity and insight. Here the passions are neither avoided nor ignored, but are rather welcomed, even accentuated, in order to be transformed. Needless to say, such an approach requires a rather special and precise method; hence its esoteric and "secret" character.

We may explain this difference between the teachings of the sutras and tantras in another way, not in terms of how they understand the absolute reality, *śūnyatā*, but in terms of how they view the relative reality of our sense-based experience. In the sutras the relative reality, summed up by our five psychophysical constituents (*skandha*), is always seen as something "impure." It is our ordinary world, subject and object of either like, dislike, or indifference. It was in this sense that we spoke above of our normal ego-centered, complacent attitude. In the tantras, on the other hand, this relative reality is seen as something primordially "pure" and transparent. In this transfigured vision, the five *skandhas*, as subject, are the Buddhas of the five "families," while the five elements, earth, fire, etc., as object, are their five feminine counterparts, with whom they

are in blissful union. This transfigured vision, however, requires immense effort and concentration. The lower tantras, for example, place great emphasis on purification ("When the gates of perception are cleansed, everything will be seen as it is: infinite") in order to achieve this transformation. The higher tantras rely more directly on the individual's capacity for visualization and for working with one's subtle bodily energies.

The *Sāmdan Migdrōn* goes on to explain the superiority of Atiyoga or Zógqen to this tantric way of transformation. There is much confusion about the relation of Zógqen to Tantrism. In the system of the Ñiṁmaba school, for example, there is a nine-fold division of spiritual pursuits (*yāna*). There are the three ordinary or common pursuits of the sutras: that of gods and men (a worldly path which leads merely to a better rebirth through virtuous conduct, for example), that of the Śrāvakas and Pratyekabuddhas (the so-called Hinayāna), and that of the Bodhisattvas of the Mahāyāna. Then there are the three outer tantras: Kriyā, Caryā, and Yoga. Finally there are the three inner, unsurpassable pursuits: Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga. As indicated above, the three ordinary pursuits primarily teach the way of renunciation (*poñ lam*, *spong lam*), the three outer tantras primarily the way of purification (*gyòñ lam*, *sbyong lam*), and the three inner tantras primarily the way of transformation (*gyúr lam*, *sgyur lam*). It would seem from this scheme that Atiyoga, Zógqen, belongs to the path of transformation, but this is not so. Zógqen is not based on a principle of transformation through *maṇḍala* practice, but on that of intrinsic freedom, self-liberation (*ran dröl*, *rang grol*). It teaches that the primordial state of the individual, usually termed *rig ba* (*rig pa*, *vidyā\**) or *gyāñqub sem* (*byang chub sems*, *bodhicitta*), is a spontaneously-generating great *maṇḍala* in which nothing is lacking. By understanding this, passions and karmic actions are naturally freed just at and where they arise, without there being anything to reject or any means of rejection. Thus, it encompasses the path of renunciation. Since this primordial state of being can never be tainted by the passions and the karmic actions which stem from them, just as the surface of a mirror is unchanged by whatever images may appear in it, there is nothing to be purified nor any agent of purification. Thus, it

encompasses the path of purification. Also, since in this primordial condition striving to acquire a transfigured vision of the world also has come to an end, there is nothing to be transformed nor anything to do the transformation. Thus, it encompasses the way of transformation. Hence, the terms "spontaneously perfect" (*lhun drub, lhun grub*), "great primordial purity" (*gadāg qenbo, ka dag chen po*), "state of total completeness" (*Zógqen*), "state of pure and total presence" (*gyāñqubsem, byang chub sems*) are used. The word "tantra" also ultimately refers to this state which is the primordial, inalienable condition of the individual's own stream of awareness. The tantras of the way of transformation, however, primarily employ special methods, such as deity, *mantra, mudrā, samaya*, etc., in order to accomplish this transformation. Zógqen's special method, on the other hand, is intrinsic freedom, self-liberation.

We hope that Professor Norbu's lecture will serve as a useful introduction to the issues raised by a comparison of these different systems of Buddhist thought and practice. Future research will have to take a look at Zógqen in relation to Zen in its mature forms in China, Korea, and Japan, where it had contact with, and often incorporated aspects of, Tantrism as well as the all-encompassing, complete (*yuan*) doctrine of the Huayen tradition.

The term *Zen* has been used in the title of this work only because it is more well known than its Chinese original, Ch'an. This lecture is actually a discussion of Ch'an Buddhism in Tibet during a period before it ever reached Japan or even fully matured in China. The lecture well reflects the fact that the author wears two hats, one as professor of Tibetan and Mongolian Languages at the Istituto Orientale, University of Naples, Italy, and the other as meditation master in the Zógqen tradition. Thus, I have added footnotes, mostly of a scholarly nature, documenting important points relating to the principal topic of Zógqen and Zen. I have also included parts of the lecture in the footnotes, such as portions of answers to questions. In the introduction and body of the text I have utilized the transcription system for Tibetan developed and used for many years in Italy by Professor Norbu, followed by the Wylie romanization where the word first occurs. Today

there is no universally accepted system for transcribing spoken Tibetan. There are many *ad hoc* systems to be found in both scholarly and non-scholarly books; the problem is complicated when one does not know what dialect might be involved. Professor Norbu, on the other hand, has developed a rational system based on the Pinyin system for Chinese currently used by the People's Republic and in most academic circles. Since the footnotes are mainly intended for those with more scholarly interest in the subject matter, I have only used there the standard Wylie romanization for Tibetan. An advantage of Professor Norbu's system is that, in addition to providing a simpler guide to pronunciation than that of Goldstein,<sup>2</sup> for example, it is also fairly easily converted into Tibetan spelling by the specialist who familiarizes him or herself with it. A guide to the system follows this Preface. A concession to current usage is made, however, in the transcription of *rDzogs chen* as *Dzog chen*, instead of Zógqen, in the title.

The lecture was originally given in Italian and translated at that time by Barrie Simmons.

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#### Notes:

1. The famous *Platform Sutra*, ascribed to Hui-neng, the 6th Patriarch of Ch'an states: "Good and learned friends, calmness and wisdom are the foundations of my method. First of all, do not be deceived into thinking that the two are different. They are one substance and not two. Calmness is the substance of wisdom and wisdom is the function of calmness. Whenever wisdom is at work, calmness is within it. Whenever calmness is at work, wisdom is within it" (*The Platform Scripture*, Wing-tsit Chan, tr., New York: St. John's University Press, 1963, p. 45).
2. Goldstein, M.C., & Nornang, N. *Modern Spoken Tibetan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970).

## Guide to Pronunciation

1. This symbol ˇ indicates a low tone.
2. This symbol ˘ indicates a nasalization before the immediately preceding consonant (as in *ingot*).
3. This symbol ˈ indicates a stress in the pronunciation.

Tibetan spelling	English sound	Tibetan spelling	English sound
Ga -	karma	Na -	nine
Gă -	karma, low tone	Nà -	nine, nasalized
Gà -	singable, nasalized	Ná -	nine, stressed
Gá -	gale, stressed	Ña -	ring
Ja -	chant	Ñà -	ring, nasalized
Jă -	chant, low tone	Ñá -	ring, stressed
Jà -	angel, nasalized	Ňa -	onion
Já -	jade, stressed	Ňà -	onion, nasalized
		Ňá -	onion, stressed
Da -	tantra	Ma -	man
Dă -	tantra, low tone	Mà -	man, nasalized
Dà -	standard, nasalized	Má -	man, stressed
Dá -	day, stressed	Ka -	kha, aspirated
Ba -	path	Kà -	as above, nasalized
Bă -	path, low tone	Qa -	channel, with strongly aspirated h
Bà -	amber, nasalized	Qà -	channel, nasalized
Bá -	banner, stressed	Ta -	aspirated, t-ha
Sa -	sand	Tà -	nasalized, nt-ha
Să -	sand, low tone	Pa -	aspirated, p-ha
Sà -	sand, stressed	Pà -	nasalized, np-ha
Sá -	usual	Ca -	ts-ha, aspirated
Xa -	shore	Cà -	nasalized, nts-ha
Xă -	shore, low tone	Ya -	yes
Xà -	shore, stressed	Yá -	yes, stressed
Xá -	jour	Ra -	rainbow
Za -	cats	Rá -	rainbow, stressed
Ză -	words		
Zà -	words, nasalized		
Zá -	words, stressed		

Tibetan spelling	English sound	Tibetan spelling	English sound
La -	light	<b>Vowels</b>	
Lá -	light, stressed	A -	allah
Wa -	water	I -	me
Wá -	water, stressed	U -	moon
Va -	water, low tone	E -	way
Ha -	hut	O -	ore
Hă -	soundless h, vowel in low tone	<b>Final consonants, preceded by a vowel</b>	
Gya -	kiosk	-g -	back
Gyă -	kiosk, low tone	-ŋ -	ring
Gyà -	gya, nasalized	-b -	trip (lightly)
Gyá -	gya, stressed	-m -	hum
Jya -	chya, non-aspirated	-s -	soundless, changes the preceding vowel
Jyă -	chya, low tone	1. as -	e in met
Jyà -	jya, nasalized	2. is -	e in me
Jyá -	jya, stressed	3. us -	German ü
Kya -	k aspirated + y, khya	4. es -	é in René
Kyà -	aspirated, nasalized	5. o -	German ö
Qya -	cha, aspirated	-d -	cat, vowels change as with -s
Qyà -	ncha, nasalized	-n -	pen, vowels change as with -s
Dra -	translation	-r -	car (lightly, the vowel lengthens)
Dră -	translation, low tone	-l -	fill, vowels change as with -s
Drà -	translation, nasalized		
Drá -	translation, stressed		
Tra -	t-hra, aspirated		
Trà -	nt-hra, aspirated		
Lha -	hla		
Hra -	hra		



## *Dzog Chen and Zen*

In regard to the Zógqen teaching, I'd like to first say a few words about its origin and history, before going on to the relation between it and Zen (Chinese: Ch'an). It is important as regards any given country to understand its historical origins. In this case, that of Tibet, its historical origins are much more importantly linked to Bön than Buddhism. Scholars of Tibetan history, above all those of the Buddhist tradition, have chosen to ignore this set of facts; they have sought, as much as possible, to eliminate from history the origins of Tibet in the Bön. If we were to continue this, what would happen, particularly today when Tibet is under Chinese rule? Tibet's history and culture are in the situation of a lamp in the wind. I am not making anti-Chinese propaganda here. We all know that today Tibet is within China. Even if the Chinese were to take care of Tibet as if it were their son, we know that China is close to arriving at a population of one billion while the Tibetans are a few million. Furthermore, no one exists permanently. Thus, the only possibility of avoiding the complete cancellation, abolition of Tibetan history, is that of trying sincerely to conserve some values. In this case, for example, if one is performing scholarly work, one has to attempt to find what the value is that requires preservation. Through this search for values, we come upon the fact that the history that does exist has its origins in Bön. Unfortunately, people always wake up too late. I remember in my youth, in Tibet, after about two years of being in China, when I returned to my homeland, I understood clearly already what had to happen in Tibet if it were to avoid what eventually happened. I spoke to many people, above all to the monks, urging them to begin some process of change on their own. I had seen in Shanghai a Buddhist association where many monasteries had put their capital together and organized a kind of factory where they sent the young monks to work and earn

their living. Thus they had found a device for maintaining their existence under the guidance of the Communist Party in China. It was also a device for protecting the capital of the monasteries against the danger of the revolution. I spoke about this to the monasteries and particularly urged it on the rich monasteries. The only response of the monks and of the monasteries was, "You've become a Communist." Only later, once they had fled to India, did these people understand that what I had said to them was useful. And they would ask me, "And now what can we do?" This is an example.

Zógqen is usually presented as the highest teaching of the Ñiñmaba (rNying ma pa) school of Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhists have their own private and rather limited vision of things. According to Tibetan Buddhists, Zógqen is something that belongs to the Ñiñmaba school; therefore, whoever teaches or practices Zógqen is automatically considered to belong to the Ñiñmaba school. But this is, in fact, the limited outlook of the schools. They do not want to know and understand, for example, that the Zógqen teaching also exists independently in the Bön tradition.<sup>1</sup> All of the Tibetan Buddhist historians repetitively recite the statement that the Zógqen which exists in the Bön school has been taken from the Ñiñmaba teachings. They also say, for example, that the various teachers in the Bön school who had taught Zógqen were emanations of Buddhist figures.

This is something that is very important for us to look at. First of all, as regards the Zógqen teaching, there is no importance given to whether it is Buddhist or not. What is most important is to know whether the Zógqen teaching is, or is not, a key for transcending our limited, dualistic condition. This has nothing to do with methods that are particularly Bönbo (Bon po) or Ñiñmaba or whatever, but rather a principle of the Zógqen teaching. Nor is it something necessarily limited to Zógqen, but could be true of other teachings. For example, when we speak of Buddhists in general, we have to understand that all the limitations of schools are created by men. The schools of Zen Buddhism, Theravāda, Tantrism, or Zógqen

may be presented in diverse fashions, but these diverse ways of presenting the teaching each deal with different individuals and what these individuals feel, think, and believe. But as for the principle of the teaching, we know, for example, that Buddha never created any schools. Man does not want to understand this. A human being has his limits. And thus in every conceivable way, with every possible means, he tries to make the teaching enter into his own limits. When we speak of a certain kind of school, we are always speaking of something presented within its limitations. Thus, the teaching can exist at many levels, in many different traditions. We can find the Zógqen teaching in the Bönbo school, but this does not mean that Zógqen is Bönbo. What it does mean is that Zógqen is a principle of the teaching, a key for transcending our limitations.

Let us take a look at the early history of Tibetan Buddhism, beginning back in the time of the King Sòñzan Gámbo (Srong btsan sgam po) in the seventh century. We know that Bön did not begin in that period. We know that Bön began long before the beginnings of the Tibetan monarchy. The person we call the king Sòñzan Gámbo was, according to Buddhist and Bön sources, the thirty-third king of Tibet. It was said that the Tibetan monarchy began with the king Ñátri Zanbo (gNya'khri btsan po).<sup>2</sup> We know that before the king Ñátri Zanbo there already had existed a famous Bönbo who was called Nāñvai Dògjan (sNang ba'i mdog can), who had been like a sustainer or spokesman of the population of what we now call Tibet.<sup>3</sup> In that period there was not even the name, Kingdom of Tibet, but even this is not the beginning. Long before that, there had been the kingdom of Xāñxūñ (Zhang Zhung) in the western part of what we now call Tibet. In this area we find the area later called Guge where Mount Kailasa and a lake called Manasarovar are located, from which are said to flow the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and so forth. The Indians, or Hindus, considered this a most holy place. That was the location of the capital of the then kingdom of Xāñxūñ. One of the first kings of Xāñxūñ, who was called Triyer (Khri yer), lived three or four hundred years before the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, according to Bön

sources. During the reign of that king, the first official Bön teacher lived and flourished.

In that period before the introduction of Buddhism, there already existed a type of Zógqen teaching, the Xāñxūñ Nāngyúd (Zhang Zhung snyan brgyud), or the oral teachings of Xāñxūñ.<sup>4</sup> This teaching was later introduced into the rest of Tibet in the period of the king Sòñzan Gámbo. How can we understand that this happened in the time of Sòñzan Gámbo? We know that it was in that time because the history of this teaching speaks of the period of the king Ligmigya (Lig mi rkya) of Xāñxūñ, and that this king Ligmigya was assassinated by the Tibetans. Having killed him, the Tibetans then took over the kingdom of Xāñxūñ. That piece of history we find in the Dunhuang documents, and we know that the Dunhuang documents are considered by all scholars to be authentic.<sup>5</sup> So we know that there did exist this Xāñxūñ Nāngyúd, the oral teaching of Xāñxūñ. If one says that this Xāñxūñ Nāngyúd, that is, an oral Zógqen teaching in the Bön school, exists, and then thinks automatically, "Ah, Zógqen came from Xāñxūñ," this is not the point. One must not think that Zógqen is like a book that is written first in such and such a place. We find, for example, in one of the tantras of Zógqen, it is said that the Zógqen teaching is found in thirteen different solar systems. How can we possibly then think that Zógqen originated in a given country and is the result of happenings in that particular location?

Furthermore, since the Buddhist schools all have a rather limited vision, whenever they speak of a given Buddhist teaching, they try to associate it, for example, with a specific saying or statement of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. This is a very limited way of looking at things. The principle is not that. If that were the principle, it would be more than sufficient to follow something like the Theravāda tradition of sutric Buddhism, because what Buddha Śākyamuni taught orally to people was something like sutric Buddhism. It was not even the sutric Buddhism of the Mahāyāna Sūtras; we know very well that Mahāyāna Buddhism developed later. In this way we would have to think of the most authentic teaching of Buddha as just the Vinaya. But the principle is not that. What we have to