

Foreword by Bhakha Tulku Pema Rigdzin

# Original Perfection

*Vairotsana's Five  
Early Transmissions*



Translation and Commentary by

*Keith Dowman*



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To the masters of the great perfection, known and unknown,  
whoever they are, wherever they may be, however they appear.









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## FOREWORD

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THE FIVE TEXTS translated into English in this book are considered the first transmission of Dzogchen Ati to Tibet. They were transmitted by a Tibetan monk called Vairotsana who distinguished himself not only in the field of translation, emerging as the greatest of the Tibetan lotsawas, but also as a traveler and pilgrim who left the Land of the Snows for the hills of the Hindu Kush to bring back a canon of Dzogchen texts from its closely guarded source. Returning from Oddiyana, where he had received the transmission of Dzogchen Ati from Shri Singha, he immediately translated these five tantras into Tibetan, and they became known as the Five Early Transmissions or Translations (*snga 'gyur nga*). They constitute the root and essence of Dzogchen in Tibet—basic, raw Dzogchen precepts that are appropriately designated “radical Dzogchen.”

Tulkus in the Nyingma tradition, considered emanations of the heart of reality, have been trained in the rites and devotions of the lineage, in the meditations and yogas of the Vajrayana, in the Buddhist philosophy of India and Tibet, and in the skillful means of assisting others not only on the path of liberation but in the amelioration of their suffering in samsara. But what precedes all of that in significance and priority, what gives it value and meaning and what facilitates the sharing of Buddhadharma, is Dzogchen Ati. This is the special, extraordinary teaching of our Nyingma lineage. The great masters, including Vairotsana, Padma Sambhava, and Vimalamitra, have all attained realization through Dzogchen, contemporary masters all owe their status to Dzogchen, and any attainment in the future will be based on the precepts of Dzogchen Ati. And while there are a vast number of texts revealing the various precepts of Dzogchen—in the Mind, Matrix and Secret Precept Series, the Elaborate, Simplified, Simple

and Ultra-simple Cycles, the Crown Pith and Ultra Pith Teaching—these five transmissions of Vairotsana, the core of the Mind Series, constitute the seed, root, and branch of Dzogchen. Please remember after all, Garab Dorje himself, the first guru of the Dzogchen lineage, recited extemporaneously the greatest of these five early transmissions, *The Eternal Victory Banner* also known as *The Vast Space of Vajrasattva*, in his infancy.

If the Tibetan Dharma is to thrive in the West, it must be with the transmission of Dzogchen Ati, the apex path, the culmination of Vajrayana Buddhism, or a nondual equivalent. Throughout history, Dzogchen has been the subject of dispute among the various schools of philosophy in Tibet, but it is acclaimed by all yogins on the actual path of praxis. It is well known that it is among the personal secret practices of H. H. the Dalai Lama himself. In its transmission to the Western world, the methods of conveyance may undergo certain changes, but the essence of Dzogchen will remain unchanging. This was the teaching of our lamas Dudjom Rimpoche and Kanjur Rimpoche in their Dzogchen mandala in Darjeeling in India where I first encountered Keith Dowman, the eminent translator of these texts.

I hope many people will read these texts and realize the heart meaning and spontaneously attain the realization of Dzogchen Ati and join those who have realized this ultimate truth but remain anonymous. May all sentient beings be free from samsara!

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## PREFACE TO THE AMERICAN EDITION

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AFTER THE PASSING of the years since this work was published in Kathmandu, I am still satisfied with the introduction, which provides a broad introduction to Dzogchen and particularly to the radical Dzogchen that is found in the original transmissions that Vairotsana conveyed to the Tibetans in the eighth century. I found myself less satisfied, however, with the translations themselves. Vairotsana translated the original verses in a highly ambiguous poetic style that, while transmitting a powerful blast of radical Dzogchen, fell short of the didactic precision that would give a translator the grammatical clues to provision of a sure interpretation. Thus I felt that sometimes I could have been more precise in my rendering of poetic phrases—which I have taken the opportunity of this new edition to remedy. But what about the canonical commentaries? Surely they elucidate an unequivocal discursive meaning? Alas, the *Ten Sutras* was written centuries later when Dzogchen was already becoming part and parcel of a self-interested establishment and the commentaries were serving that end. Returning to the *Ten Sutras* commentary after these intervening years, it seems to read like a tool to assimilate the immediacy of Dzogchen's pathless path into the spatial-temporal graduated path of Vajrayana. On the other hand, it shows how radical an effect Dzogchen has in Vajrayana and how it may be considered inseparable from it. From this we may infer, indeed, that any cultural form whatsoever (Buddhist, shaman, humanist, or post-modernist) is likewise illuminated—and released—by the light of Dzogchen.

So in the editing of the text for this new edition, I have firstly tightened the meaning by using the terminology that I have developed in the interim. "Gnosis" (*rig pa*) is now "pure presence," for example; "equality"

is “sameness”; and “process” (path) is sometimes “modality.” “Field of reality,” which was used as the equivalent of *dharmadhatu*, is now “the spaciousness that is the field of reality” or an adaptation of those words. The transliteration of the Tibetan phonetic “Bairotsana” has been replaced by the more easily recognisable Vairotsana. The appendix “Mind Series Terminology” illuminates these changes. I recommend that the reader spend some time with this appendix before entering the text to get a feel for the way many well-known Buddhist terms—such as *buddha*, *bodhichitta*, and *tathagatagarbha*—have been treated in the present work. Secondly, I have tweaked the verses, strengthening their radical sense while heightening the distinction between them and the commentary. In the process I have corrected some errors that had crept in during the final stages of the publication of the previous edition.

Additional material relating to *Original Perfection* can be found at [www.keithdowman.net/dzogchen/eyeofthestorm.htm](http://www.keithdowman.net/dzogchen/eyeofthestorm.htm).



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## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

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THE NATURE OF Dzogchen, the Great Perfection, is perhaps best understood as the essence of all nondual mystical aspiration. Within the Tibetan context, it lies at the heart of shamanism, Bon, and Buddhism. Taking its cultural and linguistic references from Bon and Buddhism, it may appear to be limited to those traditions, but to see its existential reality restricted to that cultural frame would contradict the Tibetan precepts that define it as utterly nonspecific and unconfined. Historically Buddhism provided the ground in which the precepts of the Great Perfection appeared, and certainly it still provides a rich and wonderful metaphysical field of reference. But the principles of radical Dzogchen are appropriate to every religious and cultural context. All religion and culture is transcended by its formless essence. It subsumes science and humanism today as it once incorporated shamanism and theism. It supersedes religion by shunning dogma and doctrine. It surpasses yoga and meditation by disavowing technique. It transcends the creativity of the human mind—whether as science or art—through identity with our intrinsic nature. Inclusivity defines the Great Perfection.

As mystical endeavor the quest for natural perfection may have continued for as long as human history. Surely it is hidden in the mysteries of Babylon and Egypt, Greece and Rome, in Indian tantra, the Chinese Tao, Muslim Sufism, and in the Jewish Torah and the Christian heresies of the Albigensians, the Knights Templar, and the Alchemists, if only because natural perfection is inherent in human being and cannot be suppressed. Deprived of a lineal tradition, guides, and precepts, it may burst out spontaneously as an imperative of the human spirit, as it did in Europe and America in the 1960s. Regardless of the cultural and religious context, the

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time and the place, the “pathless path” of nondual illumination is always the same because the nature of the mind, being the origin of time and space, is one. It has happened, however, that in the twenty-first century the exemplars and custodians of this living tradition are the Vajrayana Buddhists of the Tibetan plateau. Nondual mysticism finds its own ground everywhere in the scope of Tibetan Buddhism, particularly in the Kagyu Mahamudra tradition, but it is in its earliest transmission into Tibet, when the tradition of the Ancients (Nyingmapa) was still in its incipient phase, that we find the most pure and unequivocal statement of the principles and poetic effusion of the heart meaning of the Great Perfection. That is what is termed “radical Dzogchen.”

Given that the oldest and earliest is not necessarily the best, nevertheless, the quality of pristine freshness reverberates down the centuries from a culture on the verge of breakthrough. This quality may be discerned in eighth-century Tibet and particularly in the work of the mystic and poet Vairotsana of Pagor, who at that time wrote down the five poems presented in this book. In his work there is a sense of the light of dawn spreading over the landscape to illuminate the darkness. The word of Dzogchen had arrived to illuminate the murk of spiritualistic shamanism, to clarify the Buddhist options presented by India, China, Khotan, Brusha, and Oddiyana, and to exalt the lifestyles of the people of the Tibetan plateau. The freshness and vitality of Vairotsana’s vision, written down when the Tibetan language was as young as English when Shakespeare wrote, still has the power to illuminate, although the shadows that are dispersed today are cast by apocalyptic materialism and consumerism.

The power of Vairotsana’s five original works may lie in the magic of “transmission”—for that is how these poems are designated. Vairotsana did not attribute them to himself as the poet but cast them in the mold of revelations of Garab Dorje, the human source of the Dzogchen tradition, because all tantras, transmissions, and precepts of Dzogchen are said to have the same timeless origin. The verses of each of the five transmissions—consisting generally of a quatrain of two slokas, or couplets—can stand apart as didactic gems of Dzogchen expression, sometimes with only tangential connection between them, but they are better viewed as the facets of a crystal globe, each reflecting an aspect of the whole. The content of the transmissions is always the same—a unitary vision of the nature of mind. The nature of mind (where “nature” can only mean “essence”) is luminous mind, the one indivisible nondual mind of natural perfection. The holistic



product may be personified as the all-good buddha Samantabhadra, who at the same time is the supreme source of the transmission and the transmission itself. The reader, the recipient of the transmission, is identified, thereby, with the all-good Dzogchen vision of the transmission.

The purpose of these five poems, then, is to induce a vision of natural perfection in the mind of the reader. This is not done by logic or causal connection but through the magic, the ambiguity, of poetry. As Patrul Rimpoche writes, “We do not agree with the common dogma of traditionalists, that the only valid knowledge is mental knowledge tested by reason against textual and logical proof. Experiential understanding of the naked direct perception in primal awareness itself is the Dzogchen vision.”<sup>1</sup> In this sense, each of the five poems constitutes a direct introduction—if not initiation—into the nature of mind and the great perfection. The experience of the transmissions themselves is self-validating, and any rational evaluation of their logic or terms of reference diminishes or blights them. The sole requisite for attaining the vision set down by the poet is a wide-open mind, and since all human beings are endowed with this mind, the great perfection is available to everyone.

The vision that these transmissions induce is not like a tantric mandala of buddhas or buddha-deities or patterned light-forms. There is not the slightest hint of symbolism, abstract or anthropomorphic. There is nothing to be seen that has any cultural specificity. There is no articulated abstruse metaphysical infrastructure to the vision. There is nothing that is not intrinsic to the nature of ordinary consciousness and the common light of day. In fact there is no trace of anything there at all. There is no structure to the vision whatsoever—the nature of the transmission is ultimately deconstructive. “Simplicity” is the one single word that may describe it. It is a holistic vision in the sense that it is all-inclusive and nondual. It consists of direct, naked perception of the nature of mind in every instant of experience.

The essence of the transmission is simple, direct perception. In the timeless moment of the here and now, there is no space for projection and filtration and no time for evaluation, reflection, and judgment. In this lies natural perfection. Herein lies the secret of nondual reality. When we speak of nondual mysticism, what is indicated is nothing but the clear light intrinsic to everyday perception; yet this perception and this function of awareness bring ultimate resolution to the human condition. All its dichotomies and contradictions are resolved in the unitary light of awareness in itself. If it can be said that conception and action exist, surely there is no gap between

the initiation of the act and its actualization. The unitary moment is its own reward. Time and space are resolved in the all-inclusive wholeness of the moment. The quandaries of embodiment are resolved in each moment. The paradox and antinomies of gender are resolved in the unity of the moment. This is transmission of the Great Perfection that does not impose a new, conditional structure upon the mind but reveals what is already, primordially present. It comes by way of confirmation, then, of what has always been known: that the nature of being, the nature of reality, and the nature of mind are immanent as consummate perfection.

There is nothing in this transmission that can be grasped or conceptualized or cultivated or practiced. To assimilate it into the logical intellect and spin it out as a philosophy or doctrine is to nullify its purpose, just as the magic of poetry is lost in analysis. The transmission itself is a timeless event, like every moment of experience, arising as spontaneity, without cause or condition, so it cannot be developed into a yoga or a meditation practice. It cannot be turned into religion: there are no tenets of belief; neither devotion nor faith is a condition of its revelation; and no ritual interprets and structures it. It is simply an existential understanding of the here and now.

Vairotsana's five transmissions are compositions of deconstructive precept, expressing the Dzogchen vision of the nature of mind. Their primal impact upon a receptive reader may open a door into the vision of the great perfection. The rational mind, however, may concoct objections to such an unreferenced state and its attendant sense of identity loss. It is here that the commentary engages, providing elaboration through causal connection, lulling the intellect with its bromide, while undermining—deconstructing—the structure of the intellect by indicating the natural state of being, the suprarational reality of the great perfection that always lies immanent in the timeless moment. Here, the self-referential language of the tradition points at the unstructured ground of all language, and since this reality lies in an absence of any characteristic, attribute, or function, the Upanishadic method of “not this!” “not that!” is employed. The mystery of the Great Perfection resides in its ineffable nondual reality that is a unity but at the same time a multiplicity. It is at once the source and the creation. It is inconceivable and inexpressible. It is enlightened mind or luminous mind. To reveal all experience as this reality is the purpose of Dzogchen, and the self-evident principles of the Dzogchen Mind Series (see appendix 2) are the transmission.

There is nothing to do! “Nonaction”—or “undirected action” or “non-

deliberate action”—defines the nature, ethos, and dynamic of the Great Perfection. The here and now is a field of immanent sameness, and any attempt to affect it or change it by any technique is counterproductive. Any engagement of effort diminishes it. Seeking it inhibits its discovery. Nonaction is the precept that defines the natural inclination, or lack of any inclination, of the nature of mind in order that the manifest dynamic of the field of reality is uncrystallized in pure presence.

No meditation! No discipline! The luminous mind that is the nature of all experience never comes into being or ceases to be; it cannot be created or destroyed: it has no structure. It cannot, therefore, be accessed through the structured activity of calculated discipline, and all goal-oriented meditation is such structured activity. Letting go of all practice whatsoever, including all the meditation techniques that condition the mind by focusing on an object of sight, sound, or thought, there is no meditation and only an endless continuum of luminous mind. The modality of nonmeditation and no-structure is illustrated particularly in the fourth transmission, *Pure Golden Ore*.

No progress! No development in a graduated process! The moment is perfect and complete in itself, and nothing superior can be effectuated. There is no possibility of attaining anything more desirable than the present moment. No personal growth is possible. Evolution toward a higher goal is precluded. There is no maturity to anticipate. The notion of process itself is redundant because it functions through time in a delusive linear pattern constructed by the intellect.

No place to go! The here and now is always complete in the present moment, so there is no path to follow, no quest, no journey to pursue, and no destination. It is impossible to move toward or away from luminous-mind reality, since it is always here and now. The inescapable, universal, and all-pervasive reality-modality is ever immanent. There is no destination other than the naturally liberating dynamic of the moment. This is taught particularly in the second transmission, *Radical Creativity*.

No discrimination! No prejudice or bias! The pristine awareness that is the mind's cognitive nature is utterly free of any judgmental inclination. It does not discriminate between what is good or bad, right or wrong. "Good" and "bad" are fictive labels projected upon a neutral screen that in itself is incapable of bias. Whatsoever occurs in everyday experience, excluding nothing, is suffused by this primal awareness and, moment by moment, dissolves into it. All is perfect as it stands, so nothing is rejected or avoided and

nothing is accepted or favored above anything else. Nothing is embraced or appropriated and nothing spurned or suppressed. All things are always all good, and activity is always indiscriminating. This is taught in the first transmission, *The Cuckoo's Song*.

No one and no thing to change! The elements of experience, inner and outer, are part of a reality field (basic spaciousness) in which no indivisible particle can be isolated either in the laboratories of science or those of the mind. The natural unified field is a nondual reality. Every moment of experience is an ineffable expression of that field, and insofar as it is recognized as a field of cognitive being, it is known as utterly perfect and complete in itself. It cannot be improved one iota. It cannot be changed or transformed into something other than pure awareness. Because our identity—nonidentity—lies in luminous mind, whatever illusion of personality arises is utterly pristine.

No controller! No control! The control functions of the ego self-articulated in the rational mind are involuntarily superseded by the pristine awareness of the natural state of being. What appears to rise and fall as sequential instants of experience is insubstantial gossamer illusion, and the dynamic of each perfect moment is spontaneity. Any belief in a substantial, material reality, or in a “self,” a “soul,” an “ens,” or an “atman,” is delusory. There is no controller on any level and so no control. The putative controlling intellect is superseded by the intrinsic dynamic of nonaction. The here and now is free-form display, perfect in its every permutation.

The consummation of these precepts and the transmissions themselves are predicated upon an intuitive realization of the nature of mind as intrinsically pure, an assumption that is authenticated, yet neither attested nor proven, in initiatory experience. “Luminous mind” is a rendering of the Buddhist word *bodhicitta*. In Mahayana Buddhism the discursive meaning of this word is suffused by the selfless compassionate ethic of the bodhisattva intent upon giving whatsoever is required to whomsoever is in need. More technically, it is translated as “the thought of enlightenment.” In Vajrayana Buddhism, where buddha-imminence is assumed, it is translated as “enlightened mind” or “awakened mind.” In the Dzogchen Mind Series, this enlightened mind is the ground of all, all and everything, and the starting point, the process, and the product in one. It subsumes the field of reality, the process of release, the nature of mind, and primal awareness. Luminous mind is the nondual natural state, and so it cannot possess any definable quality, but in its vastness and depth, in its ineffable greatness, it

exalts our natural state. Its primary endowment lies in direct and immediate enlightenment.

Luminous mind is personified as Samantabhadra, all-good primordial buddha—not a buddha to worship but the actuality of every moment. Those he “teaches,” or manifests, are buddha and every sentient beings upon the wheel of life is free of transmigration and rebirth. His “teaching,” or manifestation, is the expression of our every moment of experience in a vision of reality as the matrix of all things and all things in themselves as one. The time of his teaching is the one clear timeless moment of past, present, and future rolled into one. And the place of his teaching is zero-dimensional basic spaciousness.

In our state of natural perfection, the seemingly material world is consumed in its intrinsic nature as light by the pristine awareness inherent in every sensory perception. The four great elements—earth, water, fire, and air—that are a condensation of their spatial essence constitute basic spaciousness itself, and the luminous mind, wherein the delusive subjective and objective aspects of experience are unified, endows basic spaciousness with its own luminous display that never crystallizes as this or that. The subjective aspect of the unitary field, the sense of personal identity, is defined as the space where nothing can be found by seeking, nothing can be accomplished by endeavor, nothing whatsoever can be improved upon, and where there can be no progress or maturation. This is the natural state of primordial, preexistent enlightenment. But because that state cannot become an object of focus, since it is in no way conceivable or imaginable, determinable or demonstrable, it is better termed “nonenlightenment.” Only in that sense is there universal enlightenment.

The expression of luminous mind is the compassion that suffuses our experience like water in milk. Such compassion is the potential of every possible convention and variation of human character and personality, every quality and attribute, every affectation and every foible, every vice and virtue, and every weirdness and extreme manifestation of being on the wheel of life. The psychological diversity of experience therein is expressed in the equivocal terms of men, gods, titans, hungry ghosts, animals, and hell beings. Yet the wheel of life is the expression of the compassion of luminous mind, and compassion is the wheel of life. The primordial buddha Samantabhadra embraces the totality of luminous mind as its essential emptiness, its radiant luminosity, and its compassionate expression.

The vast spaciousness of luminous mind is personified as Vajrasattva,

and primal awareness is his exaltation. The spaciousness of reality is spontaneously cognitive in a nondual modality, and Vajrasattva represents the individuation of that event. That moment is inherently liberating, so there can never be any experience whatsoever that is not spontaneously and momentarily released. Vajrasattva's ineluctable presence provides that assurance. Primal awareness of the field of reality is a constant, and therefore Vajrasattva receives his name Immutable Being. The vajra is a symbol of his immovable and imperturbable nature of constant luminous awareness. His immutable dynamic is the freedom of the Great Perfection.

Insofar as there is only luminous mind in our experience, insofar as the vajra is inherent in every moment, there can never be either separation or nonseparation from Vajrasattva, which is a manner of stating the ineffable immanence of the natural state of being in the Great Perfection. So there can never be any obstacle to that natural state. What appears to obstruct the recognition of intrinsic cognitive spaciousness is attachment to the mere shimmering of gossamer phantasm, which is like a film of tarnish on pure gold. If this attachment appears to veil the nature of mind, then what is required is a fortuitous lurch into an intuition of the attachment itself as pristine awareness—a flash of realization or a recollection of initiatory experience. If the problems that arise from the exigencies of personal karma extrude into the forefront of our minds and a sense of constant interruption of the natural flow obsesses us, then what fortuitously arises is intuition of the intrinsic clarity of the glitch itself. Thus the apparent obstacles that arise in the mind provide the key to their own resolution.

Some people are convinced that their desire, anger, and emotional confusion are a thick veil over their enlightened mind, but the recognition of the light and pure pleasure in the marvelous display of energetic expression dissipates such delusive beliefs. Some are convinced that the implacable logic of the intellect and attachment to its pleasures create the trap that locks in the spaciousness, but each intellectual construct and each train of thought constitutes a door into Vajrasattva's vast space. To overcome what appear to be emotional and intellectual obstacles, people commit themselves to disciplines of lifestyle and morality, yoga and meditation, setting themselves the goal of freedom from attachment and rebirth, but the anxiety entailed by prostituting the moment for some future benefit and striving for a conceptual goal is resolved naturally in the relaxation of nonaction. The disease of calculated endeavor and goal orientation that is spiritual

materialism is healed by the spontaneous and ineluctable intuition of the pure nature of mind.

The futility of trying to catch what is already in the cage or to grope all around for spectacles that are already sitting upon the end of one's nose inevitably dawns upon the goal-obsessed yogi or yogini, and it is well that we are prepared for that disillusionment by recollection of the spaciousness and radiance that we know from fortuitous initiation into the nature of mind. Decisively, we arrive at the place where the moral imperatives instilled by the plain logic and symmetry of belief in karmic concatenation are seen to provide still more of the same anxious transmigration from one neurotic trap to another and where relaxation into the timeless moment of the here and now—doing nothing—allows the clarity and emptiness of the natural state of being to shine through. When the compulsions of karmic causality and belief in moral imperatives fall away and dissolve and we surrender to the buddha dynamic of spontaneous contemplation, pristine awareness naturally prevails, superseding any residual trust in the world of karma.

With recognition of the reality thus defined, there is simultaneous recognition of the samaya commitments of Dzogchen—absence, openness, spontaneity, and unity. By their very nature, these samayas cannot be guarded or sustained. On the contrary, awareness of their actuality is a constant and natural presence that can never be vouchsafed or gainsaid. These samayas are not provisional commitments to be renounced upon reaching any goal. They are the reality of buddha here and now that can be expressed as one single commitment—commitment to pristine awareness itself. This awareness always has primacy. It is coextensive and coterminous with the space of sameness that exalts all cognition as pure presence. Pure presence is the direct experience of the moment in which there is no subjective or objective component, although in it the delusive and the nondelusive are inextricably mixed. It is intrinsic awareness of being effervescent in the timeless wholeness of purity and impurity. It is the common light of day.

What constitutes the display of Samantabhadra may not differ in kind from the forms of the neurotic universes that are being neutralized. The retinue of Samantabhadra is composed of buddha as sentient beings, and the diaphanous radiance of rainbow light suffuses the very illusions that once seemed so concrete and cloying. The projections of the psychological environments of hungry ghosts, for example, may still be in place, but now

the hair-raising figments of imagination that populate those environments are like the ferocious yet empty masks of lama dance. Further, in the human realm, many people, particularly Buddhists, have entered the various graduated paths to enlightenment. Each rests on his own level, which is complete and perfect in itself. All the activities of gods and men are complete and perfect in themselves, and although they may pursue goal-oriented activity and constantly create or encounter seeming glitches in the universal process of awakened reality, the liberating capacity of Vajrasattva, who suffuses the five elements that constitute embodiment in an apparent concrete environment, is always immanent.

The different lifestyles and the associated visions, therapies, and meditation techniques employed by monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, yogis and yoginis, and tulkus and dakinis, may be conceived of hierarchically in a pyramid of increasingly deconstructed mind. This ninefold hierarchy is employed by the commentary on the root verses of the texts as an index of different mind states and allows a focus upon the varying progressive approaches that, although delusive as paths to nondual reality, are perfect in themselves. Nine is a perfect or infinite number in shamanic numerology, so that the nine conventional approaches or levels that provide the mainstay subsume all others. By the same token, the nine levels of discursive meaning in the transmission, each directed toward and heard by those for whom it is relevant, subsume all other levels in the quest for the nature of mind. Further, as the traditional metaphor has it, just as a king never leaves his palace without his entourage in appropriate association, so Dzogchen Ati is always accompanied by a retinue composed of the innumerable disciplines that seek to modify or improve the human condition—for a mark of human birth is the impulsion to attain happiness. The teacher of the Great Perfection, Samantabhadra, incorporates a vast, all-inclusive retinue of beings, each preoccupied by his personal path on which appropriate transmission may be fortuitously received.

The nine approaches or levels from the apex are atiyoga, anuyoga, mahayoga, tantra- or sattvayoga, ubhayayoga, kriyayoga, and the varying praxis of bodhisattvas, hermits (pratyekabuddhas), and disciples (shravakas). On the level of atiyoga, the hyperyogin is adept in the recognition of all experience as transmission of the great perfection. On the level of anuyoga, identity of reality and pure presence, space, and awareness is shown, so that every mind-created phenomenon becomes primal awareness. On the



mahayoga level, the elements of the psycho-organism and the elements of perception and the sense fields are revealed as our timeless enlightened identity; mahayoga is taught so that the structure of the conditioned mind is recognized as fivefold buddha. In the mind-created vision of tantrayoga, although the passions are not abandoned, attachment to them is utterly forsaken, and sacred substances are literally enjoyed; thereby, in signless, open vulnerability, primal awareness is facilitated and the four consorts are recognized. In ubhayayoga the identity of clear light with its colored diffusion, between self-sprung awareness and the sensory phantasmagoria, is taught. In the praxis of disciples engaged in listening and learning, hermits in ascetic retreat, and bodhisattvas in pursuit of loving-kindness, the nature of mind involuntarily shines through.

Finally, to distinguish between the recipients of these transmissions, there are those who are ready vessels with an innate affinity for the natural great perfection. This type attains the vision merely by reading the transmission or by hearing the precepts—thus “liberation by hearing.” Through recognition of the natural state of mind, whatever arises is released and dissolves immediately, leaving no trace. The Dzogchen yogin or yogini’s existential modality is then commensurate with the imprint of a bird in the sky. All experience is like a dance and like the free play of sensual pleasure. There is no meditation and no meditator. If glitches arise they are immediately turned into a timeless moment of mental effort and become a door back into the space of the great perfection that actually can never be relinquished. He or she assimilates the affirmation and confirmation of initiatory experience that atiyoga provides in the transmission and is absorbed without reflection in the nondiscriminatory totality of an anonymous body of light.

Then there are those who see the vision of Samantabhadra clearly through this transmission but lose it thereafter. Through a verbal introduction, or some initiatory experience, they accept the vision as the apotheosis of human nature, and with subsequent intimation of the nature of mind they enjoy nonmeditation. But then immersed in the mundane concerns of life—profit and loss, love and hate, success and failure, fame and disgrace—they see the figments of their minds as personality isolates interacting in a concrete environment, and becoming attached to seemingly external phenomena the vision of Samantabhadra is lost. Fortuitously and inevitably, however, the vision and nonmeditation does return to mind,

like the rising sun, and with increased familiarity and intimacy allows fearless, wholehearted surrender to the nature of mind. Pristine awareness then resumes its natural primacy. Confidence in nonaction is reaffirmed. Belief in mental constructs slackens. Fictive projections fade away. Through the temerity of recognition of the supreme source in whatever arises, in the bardo, natural perfection is recognized in a body of light.

Then there are those who perceive the vision as through a glass darkly and, overruled by judgmental thought while reading or hearing the transmission, conceptualize it and analyze it and become susceptible to doubt. In a rationalistic process the vision is externalized and distanced and becomes a subtle and substantial goal to be achieved with a coincident sense of separation and inadequacy in the face of it. Samsara is divorced from nirvana in this process of linear thought through time, and caught on the horns of conflicting emotion we are susceptible to expectation and apprehension. "Our actions are determined by karma," we say. "We are subject to karmic retribution. We are bound to the inevitable cycle of transmigration on the wheel of time." "We have received Samantabhadra's transmission and it has given us a glimpse of perfection for a moment. But we are left with only an intellectual understanding, and it has not affected our way of being." "We live in a world of preferences and partiality, attachments and aversions, discrimination and judgment, hopes and fears." "We are not ready," we demur with a sense of our own inadequacy. "We are just beginners. We need to improve ourselves, to be good and virtuous, to control our energy patterns, to set goals and attain them, to climb the ladder of spiritual purity." Riddled by such intellectual and emotional conflict, infected by hopes and fears, we conclude that something must be done, that remedial action is prescribed in order to attain the nondual state of the vision. Such readers may go on to devote their lives to a graduated path of endeavor, practicing some meditation technique or yoga, failing to adopt recognition of the perfection of their natural state.

On the other hand, many hear the transmission and think about it, and lacking any initiatory experience they reject it and turn away. For them there never can be anything but the natural state of perfection, yet they live as beggars on the wheel of transmigration, believing that the material world is concrete and the states of mind in which they find themselves are real. Attached to the pleasant and averse to the painful, unknowingly they await the revelation of the nature of mind. So it is said.

## PAGOR VAIROTSANA: THE GREAT TRANSLATOR

In the vision of the Great Perfection, the five transmissions are Dharmakaya Samantabhadra himself. Through the medium of Vajrasattva, and the uniting of vowels and consonants, the transmission arises as a timeless display of compassionate emanation in the nature of mind. This revelation is known as Vajra Delight, or Garab Dorje, who is also the adiguru, the first nirmanakaya teacher, of the Dzogchen lineage. Pagor Vairotsana was his Tibetan translator.

In the eighth century, the locus of political and cultural vigor in Central Asia still lay in Tibet. The nomads of a united Central Tibet had created a military empire that stretched from Persia to China, from Nepal to Mongolia. Their shamanic heritage, under the influence of the sophisticated cultures that were now part of their domain, was in the process of transformation. Those cultures in the main were Buddhist, although of various hues, and along with the cavalry and diplomats, the traders and artisans, traveling the Himalayan trade routes and all bound for Lhasa, were Chan monks from China, Vajrayana panditas from Bengal, Mahayana scholars from Bihar and Khotan, tantric yogis from Kashmir and the Kathmandu Valley, Hindu sadhus from South India, and Bon shamans from the old kingdom of Zhangzhung that had dominated the Tibetan plateau before the rise of the Yarlung Valley dynasty. Buddhist temples of stone had been built in this land of yak-hair tents, and although the majority of the conservative tribal nobility opposed it, the king sponsored a monastic academy directed by a Bengali abbot who ordained a small band of Tibetan monks.

Less than a day's walk up the Yarlung Tsangpo River from the site of the new monastery, in one of the fertile side valleys to the north called Nyemo, was the village of Jekhar. It was from here that the young Vairotsana was called to Buddhist ordination by the Bengali abbot Shantarakshita. Being one of the brightest and most strongly motivated of the young monks, he was chosen to focus on the study of language. Existential concerns were a constant preoccupation among a significant element of the royal court, some of whom had also received Buddhist ordination along with Vairotsana, and discussion with visiting monks from abroad was fervent and often heated. A yogi-exorcist called Padma Sambhava, who had been invited to Samye from Kathmandu, had been successful in confronting the Bon

shamans, and the Buddhists were in the ascendant. This itinerant exorcist, a Buddhist tantric sadhu wandering the Himalayan valleys for years, leaving a trail of disconsolate dakini-consorts behind him, had already gained notoriety in Tibet by seducing a local princess. He was originally from a kingdom in the far west of the Himalayas called Oddiyana, the land of the dakinis. Oddiyana had become associated with an extraordinary discipline called Dzogchen, known to the Yarlung Tibetans through their Bon confreres from Zhangzhung who had trans-Himalayan connections in Brusha and other kingdoms in the valleys of the upper Indus tributaries. Perhaps as a reaction to an overload of doctrinal dispute, perhaps based upon a natural inclination toward an effortless discipline promising immediate fulfillment, perhaps due to a secret word passed on by Padma Sambhava himself or by another itinerant yogi, a nexus of opinion formed at Samye that Dzogchen was the answer to the existential problems of the Tibetan people. Subsequently, under the auspices of King Trisong Detsen, Vairotsana and a friend were chosen to travel to Oddiyana to bring back to Tibet the Dzogchen transmission.

The direct route to Oddiyana lay up the Yarlung Tsangpo Valley, passing Mount Kailash to the south, and then continuing through the ancient Zhangzhung heartland and down the Indus Valley through Ladakh to Kashmir and Brusha and thence south to what is now Swat and eastern Afghanistan. Vairotsana's journey to Oddiyana and his meeting with the master Shri Singha is the stuff of legend. Near the Dhanakosha Lake, in a sandalwood forest, he found the old master Shri Singha, originally from the Chinese side of the Taklamakan desert, living in a nine-story pagoda. He needed first to circumvent a protective yogini-crone, a doorkeeper who barred his way, but with a totally ingenuous mind and a stash of gold coins, he passed her by and gained audience with the master. Shri Singha heard his plea for the extraordinary Dzogchen teaching and knew it was destined for the transmission to pass to Tibet. Yet he kept Vairotsana waiting until the following morning. Then he promised the young Tibetan that he would grant him the transmission on the condition that he joined the panditas studying the gradual, causal approaches during the day and only at night time receive the atiyoga teaching. Due to the Oddiyana king's jealousy of Dzogchen Ati, its propagation had been proscribed, so during the nights of transmission the master wrote down the Mind Series transmissions on white silk with goat-milk ink that would become visible only when exposed to heat. Then at Vairotsana's further urging, Shri Singha granted him the

Matrix Series precepts in the black, white, and variegated modes. Still Vairotsana was not satisfied, but Shri Singha would give him no more.<sup>2</sup>

After this long and intense exposure to Shri Singha, Vairotsana was finally prepared to meet the adiguru of the Dzogchen tradition, the nirmanakaya emanation of Vajrasattva, Garab Dorje himself. This apocryphal encounter occurred in a cremation ground called Dumasthira, the place of fire and smoke, and Vairotsana emerged from the meeting with the transmission of the entire 6,400,000 Dzogchen verses and a body of light.

He returned to Central Tibet by means of his newly acquired speed-walking capacity. Welcomed with all due honor, residing in the royal palace, he began a period of intense translation firstly of the five transmissions, which became known as the Five Early Translations. During this period he taught King Trisong Detsen the precepts that he was translating in the same way that Shri Singha had taught him—the progressive approach during the day and Dzogchen Ati at night. Proximity to the court, however, was to bring his honeymoon in radical Dzogchen to an end and at the same time contrive to preserve his Dzogchen lineage in Tibet during its period of greatest vulnerability. One of the king's consorts had been influenced by the long and jealous arm of the king of Oddiyana, and in order to curtail Vairotsana's teaching activity, she accused him of raping her and sought to have him banished. The king was reluctant to believe his queen, but eventually succumbing to her repeated denunciation, he exiled Vairotsana to Tsawa Rong in the country of Gyelmo Rong in Kham, in eastern Tibet. There Vairotsana taught Dzogchen to three yogins, among whom Yudra Nyingpo was the principal, establishing a separate and enduring Dzogchen tradition in the east of the country.

When the climate at court finally turned clement, Vairotsana was recalled from exile and continued to teach and translate in Central Tibet. The principal recipients of his transmission were Nyak Jnana Kumara and the Khotanese queen Liza Sherab Dronma. Later he was invited to Khotan and taught there and passed away in that foreign land. Vairotsana is part of the root of most of the Tibetan Dzogchen lineages.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES ON THE TEXT

The Five Early Translations are found in the Collected Tantras of Vairotsana (*Bairo rgyud 'bum*), a compendium that was compiled probably in the twelfth century. During the same period they were assimilated to the

*Supreme Source* (*Kun byed rgyal po*), the encyclopedic Dzogchen Mind Series tantra that took pride of place as the first text in the atiyoga section of the Collected Tantras of the Ancients (*Rnying ma rgyud 'bum*). This last collection went through various mutations and is our primary source of Dzogchen texts today (see appendix 1). The second text in the atiyoga section of the Collected Tantras of the Ancients is called the *Ten Sutras* (*Mdo bcu*), a commentary on Vairotsana's five transmissions and a rich source of Dzogchen precepts in itself. It is this text that is the source of my commentary. It was written by an unknown author, again probably in the twelfth century.

In the text herein the lines that introduce each of the transmissions are my synthesis of material taken from the *Supreme Source* and the *Ten Sutras*. The root verses are translations of the best readings I could elicit from the various sources. The commentary on the verses is my paraphrastic translation of the *Ten Sutras'* commentary with explanatory notes interpolated. *The Eternal Victory Banner: The Vast Space of Vajrasattva*, by far the longest of the transmissions, is divided into twenty-seven parts, or "timeless moments," headings found in the Collected Tantras of Vairotsana edition. The headings to the commentaries to the *Eternal Victory Banner* verses are taken from the *Ten Sutras*. The final line of the commentaries in this section is a summation of the discursive meaning of the entire verse. The annotation to the text indicates only a few of the discrepancies between the various sources.

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## THE CUCKOO'S SONG OF PURE PRESENCE

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IN TIBET'S ancient shamanic tradition, the cuckoo was a magical bird, the king of birds. As the cuckoo's first call is the harbinger of spring, so the six lines of the *Cuckoo's Song of Pure Presence* introduce the reality of Dzogchen. In this seminal transmission, Samantabhadra defines himself as spontaneously complete and perfect nonaction. It incorporates the precept of indiscriminating joyous activity. This is the root text of the Dzogchen Mind Series.<sup>4</sup>

**Hey, Mahasattva, Magnificent Being, listen!**

**The nature of multiplicity is nondual  
and things in themselves are pure and simple;  
being here and now is construct-free  
and it shines out in all forms, always all good;  
it is already perfect, so exertion is redundant  
and spontaneity is ever immanent.**

All experience, the entire phantasmagoria of the six senses, the diverse multiplicity of existence, in reality is without duality. Even if we examine the parts of the pure essence of mind in the laboratory of the mind, such specifics are seen to be illusive and indeterminate. There is nothing to grasp and there is no way to express it. The suchness of things, their actuality, left just as it is, is beyond thought and inconceivable, and that is the here and now. Yet diversity is manifestly apparent, and that is the indiscriminating, all-inclusive sphere of the all-good buddha, Samantabhadra. Total perfection has always been a fact, and there has never been anything to do to actualize

this immaculate completion. All endeavor is redundant. What remains is spontaneity, and that is always present as our natural condition.

If the six lines are divided into three pairs of verses describing Dzogchen vision, meditation, and action respectively, the first two lines express the view that luminous mind is an ineffable singularity and cannot be analyzed; the second two lines indicate nonmeditation as the natural state of Samantabhadra's display; and the third couplet shows action as the nondirected action—nonaction—of spontaneous awareness.





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## RADICAL CREATIVITY

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SAMANTABHADRA'S RADICAL CREATIVITY is the miracle of illusory display emanated in every instant. It lies in the free-form field of reality, driven by the dynamic of nonaction. In a more limited sense, however, radical creativity is evident here in the soft touch of Samantabhadra's breath of inspiration that informs these pith instructions. This is a transmission that embodies specific instruction. It teaches that there is no path to traverse and no distinctions to be made in luminous-mind reality.<sup>5</sup>

**Hey, Mahasattva, Magnificent Being, listen!**

*r*

**All and everything emanates from me,  
so all and everything, whatever appears,  
is revealed as transmission,  
revelation of timelessly pure basic spaciousness.**

The path is the process of unfoldment of Samantabhadra's entire emanation in a timeless moment. In this respect every moment is identical and complete in itself, and there can be no progress or development in or of luminous mind. There can be no gradual increase or decrease of realization through time. Further, if all is one in the moment, how can there be any valid differentiation of luminous mind from reality or, indeed, any distinctions whatsoever? Samantabhadra's all-inclusive momentary emanation is the nonreferential field of reality, which is his transmission and his instruction. The here and now is luminous mind, the field of reality, and Samantabhadra's complete transmission. There is nothing else.

2

**All outer and inner is the timeless field of spacious reality,  
and in such an immaculate field of play,  
buddha and sentient beings are not distinct—  
so why try to change anything?**

Luminous mind and reality are one in basic spaciousness, and it is quite impossible to make any distinction. We say that all phenomena, whatever exists, composed of earth, water, fire, air, and space, is external and that luminous mind and the nature of reality are internal. But this is idle speculative thought imputing mere nominal meaning where there is no real basis for it. The field of reality is an all-inclusive unity. In this timeless sphere of activity there is no distinction between buddha and sentient beings. It is impossible to improve on the timeless moment—it is already perfect and complete, the all-good Samantabhadra. It cannot be altered or transformed because it is the immutable Vajrasattva.

3

**There is no ambition in effortless, fully potentiated creativity,  
and such free-form spontaneous perfection is always the same;  
in the pure field of reality, where the conception and the act are one,  
however misguided, how can we innocents do any wrong?**

A moment of bodhi reality is primordially perfect and lacks any goal orientation or ulterior intent; it has no desire. It is free of all aspiration. It is uncontrolled and uncontrollable free-form display. Every moment of reality is the same in the ultimate sameness of luminous mind. The heart meaning is always the same. Since it is complete and perfect as it stands, there is nothing at all to do, and there never was anything to do, and thus activity is free-form display. All strenuous practice is rendered ineffective. Here, both impulse and its simultaneous actualization, and both immaculate subject and object, are the pure field of reality. In this milieu it is impossible to err, regardless of our naive beliefs and intractable habits. Nothing we fools can do can defile this pure space.

4

**The pure-pleasure union of sentient behavior,  
conceived by the deluded as a perverse path,  
is identical to the pure modality of Samantabhadra:  
whoever understands such sameness is buddha, lord of all.**

Pure-pleasure union, sensory or sexual, whether as an integral part of human conduct or as a tantric path, is reviled as immoral or perverse by the ignorant. But the course of human behavior, from the beginning, is inseparable from Samantabhadra's transmission as revealed above—free-form play. These two paths are actually one. The “lord” of past, present, and future, buddha is the realization that these apparently incompatible modes are identical.

All dualities, all dualistic structures, are spontaneously resolved in the ultimate sameness of Dzogchen. This includes the duality of the delusive path of gender union and the luminous mind modality where the vision and the act are one. The apparent duality of the gender principles of skillful means and insight united in pure pleasure is actually always a unity from the beginning, a primordial unity, pulled apart (in anuyoga) only in order to recognize it as a unity and always for the first time.

5

**On the delusive, extremist path, thinking, “I” and “mine,”  
deluded innocents enter a structured path of Dharma practice  
with no chance to realize that it leads nowhere:  
How can reality ever be found by seeking?**

The teacher who talks in terms of “I” and “mine” implies the existence of a substantial self—or soul—in others who therefore must strive to gain and hold something that they lack. This conventional way of thinking is called “extremist” because of its lack of a sense of middle way where the “I” is deconstructed and the notion of possession becomes a fallacy. Such a teacher draws his students into a conceptual, progressive, goal-oriented dharma practice, where there is a presumption that the graduated path has an attainable goal and that realization can be obtained through analysis and where there is no possibility of spontaneous realization. The path of ritual performance and religious practice has no end. In the great perfection there

is no path—only the timeless modality of momentary unfoldment. Thus the nature of reality cannot be found by seeking; it is already present. The mind cannot objectify its own nature, so reality cannot be found by searching for it. Seeking it would be like a dog chasing its own tail.

6

**The instruction of monkey-like masters who lack direct insight  
is fraught with false concepts of preparation and technique;  
so the master who cleans the tarnish from pure gold,  
the authentic teacher, the most precious resource,  
he is worth a ransom of any vast price.**

Like a monkey who mimics without understanding is the teacher who gives precept and transmission without the valid basis of understanding that is direct insight into the nature of mind. Such teaching induces in the mind of the disciple a conceptual notion of the path, a specific starting point and a goal involving preparation, supports, and technique. The master who sees the nature of mind has eradicated any implication of a conditioned path. This is likened to removing any fine film of tarnish from pure gold through the application of black alum—a traditional practice. No refinement, like separating the dross from pure gold, is necessary. The teacher's transmission of this pathless path is worth to his students whatever price must be paid. In early times the student proved his commitment by offering gold to the master.