

Fundamentals of Dzogchen Meditation

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Alexander Berzin, January 2001

1 Recognizing Different Levels of Mental Activity and Appearance-Making

[As background, see [Introduction to Dzogchen](#) {1}. See also: [Major Facets of Dzogchen](#) {2} {11}.]

What is Mind?

The four facts of life (four noble truths) may be formulated in terms of mind, which means in terms of an individual being's experiencing of them:

1. the experiencing of different types of true sufferings (true problems),
2. the experiencing of their true origins (true causes),
3. the experiencing of the true stoppings (true cessations) of both,
4. the experiencing of the true pathways of mind (true paths) that bring about these stoppings and which are themselves states of mind that are devoid of the problems and their causes.

Thus, working with mind is foremost.

Mind, in Buddhism, refers to the individual and subjective mental activity of merely experiencing something - in other words, the individual, subjective mere giving rise to and cognitively engaging (cognizing) a cognitive appearance of something.

Levels of Mental Activity

There are two ways of differentiating the levels at which mental activity occurs:

1. The Sarma (new translation period) traditions (Sakya, Kagyü, and Gelug) differentiate three levels.
2. Nyingma dzogchen differentiates two levels.

The two systems overlap, since Nyingma divides the subtlest Sarma level into two, taking the subtlest of that as one level (*rig-pa*, "rigpa," pure awareness), and all the others as the other level (*sems*, "sem," limited awareness). Therefore, let us look first at the Sarma system and then at the dzogchen refinements. Here, we shall look only at the Sakya and Kagyu divisions of Sarma, since the Nyingma presentation fits with their manner of assertion and the Gelug presentation differs from all three.

According to Sarma, the three levels of mental activity are:

1. Gross experiencing of something, which is only with sensory cognition and is only of appearances.
 2. Subtle experiencing of something, which is only with mental cognition and can be of either appearances or voidness.
 3. Subtlest experiencing of something, which is only with clear light cognition and is of both appearances and voidness inseparably.
- Sensory cognition is always nonconceptual.
 - Mental cognition may be nonconceptual (dreaming, ESP) or conceptual.
 - Clear light cognition is always nonconceptual.

Sensory Cognition

In sensory cognition (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and physically feeling something), the different types of sensory consciousness, such as visual or audial, give rise to and directly cognize (*dnegos-su rig-pa*) only mental aspects (*rnam-pa*, mental holograms) or mental derivatives (*gzugs-bsnyan*) resembling external phenomena. They only indirectly cognize (*shugs-su shes-pa*) external phenomena themselves, because the moment of an external phenomenon that a sensory cognition perceives has already ceased to exist the moment that the sensory cognition of it arises. This is because the external phenomenon is the focal condition (*dmigs-rkyen*, objective condition) for the cognition of it as its result, and a cause cannot exist simultaneously with the effect it produces. Thus, external phenomena remain hidden (*lkog na-mo*) to sensory cognition.

Further, the mental aspects that appear in sensory cognition are merely aspects resembling the defining components of a specific sensory field. Thus, for example, only mental aspects resembling colored shapes appear to visual cognition and only mental aspects resembling the sounds of vowels and consonants appear to audial cognition.

Because sensory cognition does not interpolate (*sgro-'dogs*, superimpose) anything onto the mental aspects, sensory cognition is always nonconceptual.

Conceptualization

Of the three levels of experiencing something, only mental cognition may be conceptual. Since dzogchen meditation emphasizes nonconceptuality, we need to understand what conceptualization means.

As in nonconceptual sensory cognition, conceptual cognition also directly cognizes only mental aspects (mental holograms), such as mental aspects resembling colored shapes or resembling the sounds of vowels and consonants. With conceptual cognition, however, the mental aspects that arise are mixed with conceptual categories (*spyi*, universals, mental syntheses), superimposed or projected onto them. The mental aspects and conceptual categories are consequently confused with each other.

A *conceptual category* is a mentally constructed synthesis (*spros-pa*, mental fabrication) of individual items. Conceptual categories arise only in conceptual cognition and are mental representations (*snang-ba*, mental appearances) that partially veil the mental aspects on to which they are superimposed.

The conceptual categories with which the mental aspects are mixed and confused may be in reference either to conventional objects or to language.

In reference to conventional objects, categories include:

- collection mental syntheses (*tshogs-spyi*),
- kind mental syntheses (*rigs-spyi*),
- object mental syntheses (*don-spyi*).

A *collection mental synthesis* may be a whole imputed on spatial, sensorial, and/or temporal parts, such as a whole "table" imputed on four legs and a flat surface. The whole may also be imputed on several types of sensory information, such as both a sight and tactile physical sensation. Further, the whole may be a whole continuum imputed on a succession of moments of either of the previous two types of wholes.

A *kind mental synthesis* is the type of phenomenon that a specific individual item is an instance of, such as an item being a "table."

An *object mental synthesis* is the conceptual category of a commonsense object ('*jig-rten-la grags-pa*), such as "table," used when thinking of, verbalizing, imagining (visualizing), or remembering a commonsense object.

In reference to language, categories include:

- audio categories (*sgra-spyi*, term universals),
- meaning categories (*don-spyi*, meaning universal).

An *audio category* is an acoustic pattern adopted as a convention (*tha-snyad*) in a particular language by the members of a specific society. As the acoustic patterns of words, such as "table," and not the sounds of words (which are collection syntheses and kind syntheses), they are categories in the sense that they are imputable on sounds made in a variety of voices, pitches, volumes, and pronunciations. By themselves, audio categories do not have any meanings associated with them.

Thus, when mental aspects resembling the sounds of vowels and consonants appear one by one in sequence in aural cognition, conceptual mental cognition simultaneously

- puts them together,
- mentally synthesizes collection and kind syntheses representing words, phrases, and sentences,
- and superimposes on them audio categories of words, phrases, and sentences

A *meaning category* is a pattern of significance of an audio category, adopted as the meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence in a particular language by members of a specific society. Meanings, after all, do not exist inherently within sounds or words, but are merely conventions coined, assigned to words, and used as categories by the members of a society for thinking and communicating. Moreover, each person in that society may assign a slightly different meaning to a particular word, but still use that meaning as a category when thinking that word.

Most conceptual cognitions are verbal and thus superimpose both audio and meaning

categories onto mental aspects. Conceptual cognition, however, may also be nonverbal, in which case it superimposes onto mental aspects only collection, kind, and object syntheses, such as when visualizing or remembering what someone's face looks like.

[See: [Fine Analysis of Objects of Cognition: Non-Gelug Presentation](#) {3} {5}.]

The Difference between Conceptual Cognition and Thinking

When Buddhism speaks of conceptualization, it is speaking of moments of conceptually experiencing something. The Western term *concepts* corresponds to the categories that are mixed and confused with mental aspects in moments of conceptual cognition.

Conceptual cognition is a much broader term than the Western term *thinking*. Conceptual cognition may occur for only a moment or it may last with continuity, whereas thinking usually implies a train of thought, and most commonly verbal or abstract thought. Moreover, conceptual cognition includes imagining and remembering all types of sense objects, as well as imagining and remembering ways of being aware of something, such as being angry, and abstract things.

Conceptual Cognition Makes Appearances of True Existence

The conceptual categories that conceptual cognition fabricates are cognitive representations (*snang-ba*, mental appearances) not only of what things are (words, meanings, wholes, continuums, objects, kinds of things, and so on), but also of things truly existing in that way. Truly existing (*bden-par grub-pa*), here, means really existing in that way, independently of imputation.

Thus, conceptual cognition always entails making appearances of true existence (*bden-snang*), or dual appearance-making (*gnyis-snang*). This means appearance-making of truly existent "this"s and "that"s - appearances of items as truly existing in fixed, concrete boxes or categories as "this"s or "that"s.

Conceptual appearance-making of truly existent "this"s and "that"s, then, underlies only imagining and verbally thinking. It does not underlie sensory cognition, such as seeing and hearing. In other words, only imagining and verbally thinking are conceptual, because only they make appearances of truly existent "this"s and "that"s.

Perceiving appearances of truly existent "this"s and "that"s and believing that they correspond to reality (*bden-'dzin*, grasping for true existence) occur simultaneously, and also only in imagining and verbally thinking. This is because perceiving and believing in truly existent "this"s and "that"s are the same activity from just two points of view. In technical language, they share the same essential nature (*ngo-bo gcig*). In other words, fabricating an appearance of a truly existent "this" or "that" only occurs when we believe in true existence, when we believe in the concrete boxes or categories of "this" and "that."

The Nonconceptuality of Sensory Cognition

Because sensory cognition, such as seeing and hearing, are not conceptual, they do not make appearances of truly existent "this"s and "that"s. They make appearances of non-true existence (*med-snang*) - appearances of what do not truly exist as "this"s or "that"s. Moreover, seeing

and hearing neither perceive nor believe in appearances as truly existent "this"s and "that"s . Seeing and hearing perceive appearances only of what do not truly exist as "this"s or "that"s. What does this mean?

Seeing and hearing occur for only a millisecond. During that millisecond, we see mental aspects resembling only sensibilia, for instance collections of patches of colored shapes, which appear non-truly existent as "this"s or "that"s. We hear only the sounds of consonants and vowels, which also appear non-truly existent as "this" or "that" word with "this" or "that" meaning. Only with conceptual cognition, which follows immediately afterwards, do we mentally synthesize the colored shapes and imagine a face as a whole, for example, which is an appearance of a truly existent object "this" or "that." Only with conceptual cognition, do we mentally put together the sounds of consonants and vowels and verbally think a whole word and a meaning, which is an appearance of a truly existent "this" or "that."

Thus, sensory cognition falls in the category of nondetermining cognition (*snang-la ma-nges-pa*), since it does not ascertain its mental aspects as an object. It does, however, distinguish (*du-shes*) characteristic colored shapes within the visual sense field, for instance - because the aggregate of distinguishing (recognition) accompanies each moment of experience, including nonconceptual cognition. Nevertheless, sensory cognition does not distinguish the mental aspects of those colored shapes as a conventional object, such as a table - and, moreover, as a truly existent table. That type of distinguishing accompanies only conceptual cognition.

[See: The Two Truths in Vaibhashika and Sautrantika {4}. See also: Fine Analysis of Objects of Cognition: Non-Gelug Presentation {3} {5} and Impure and Pure Appearances According to Non-Gelug {6}.]

How Voidness Is Known

There are two levels of voidness (*stong-pa-nyid*, Skt. *shunyata*, emptiness):

1. voidness that is a conceptual construct,
2. voidness that is beyond conceptual constructs.

Voidness, as an absolute absence (*med-dgag*, nonimplicative negation) of true existence as "this" or "that," is the conceptual construct or abstraction "there is no such thing as truly existent 'this's and 'that's." It can only be known conceptually and is that to which the word or concept "voidness" refers.

Cognizing this level of voidness is a necessary stepping-stone to cognizing definitive voidness, which is beyond all conceptual categories and beyond all words. Although voidness can be referred to by a conceptual construct or word, voidness that is beyond conceptual constructs (definitive voidness) does not correspond to anything a word or concept would correspond to, namely something existing in the fixed box or category of "voidness."

Thus, the two levels of voidness are not contradictory. It is not that voidness "beyond" is a transcendental level in the sense of being beyond the limits of all possible experience and knowledge, and only accessed through a mystical experience, perhaps gained by the grace of God. It merely means that it is beyond the limits of what conceptual cognition and nonconceptual sensory and mental cognition can cognize.

Voidness as a conceptual construct can only be cognized conceptually. We cognize it conceptually by our mental consciousness giving rise to a mental aspect resembling an empty or blank space, and superimposing or projecting onto it the audio and meaning categories "voidness." This does not mean, however, that when conceptually focusing on voidness, we necessarily also must have a mental aspect resembling the sound of the vowels and consonants of the word "voidness." The conceptual cognition of voidness may be nonverbal. Nevertheless, since the mental representations (the conceptual categories) that appear in conceptual cognition are necessarily appearances of true existence, the empty or blank space appears to be a voidness that truly exists in the concrete category "voidness." The meaning category associated with it, however, is the correct meaning of voidness - namely, the absolute absence of true existence.

Voidness that is beyond concepts can only be cognized nonconceptually, but it cannot be cognized by nonconceptual mental cognition. Nonconceptual mental cognition produces a mental aspect of something not truly existing as a "this" or a "that." However, voidness that is beyond concepts is beyond all four extremes:

1. truly existing as a "this" or a "that,"
2. not truly existing as a "this" or a "that,"
3. both truly and not truly existing as a "this" or a "that,"
4. neither truly nor non-truly existing as a "this" or a "that."

Therefore, voidness that is beyond concepts does not cognitively appear as a mental aspect of an empty or blank space that appears to be a voidness in the category of a non-truly existent "voidness."

[See: [Affirmations, Negations, and Denumerable and Nondenumerable Ultimate Phenomena {7}](#).]

Only Clear Light Mental Activity Can Cognize Voidness beyond Concepts

Only clear light mental activity can have nonconceptual cognition of voidness beyond concepts, and when it does, it has nonconceptual cognition of the two truths (*bden-gnyis*) simultaneously.

In this context, the two truths are:

- voidness beyond concepts,
- pure appearances (*dag-pa'i snang-ba*) - appearances that are beyond impure appearances (*ma-dag-pa'i snang-ba*).

Impure appearances include:

1. appearances of truly existent "this"s and "that"s,
2. appearances of sensibilia, such as momentary collections of patches of colored shapes, that are not truly existent as "this"s and "that"s.

[See: [Divisions, Causes, and Elimination of Unpurified Appearance-Making According to Non-Gelug {8}](#).]

Cognition of impure appearances resembles "periscope vision," with which we view reality through a limited perspective, as if through a periscope. We see only what is in front of our noses, seemingly separated and isolated from the state beyond the seemingly solid categories of words and concepts.

Clear light cognition, on the other hand, produces and cognizes appearances of what are beyond truly and non-truly existent "this"s and "that"s. That does not mean, however, that with clear light cognition, everything becomes an undifferentiated oneness. Objects retain their conventional identities. Moreover, clear light mental activity produces and cognizes appearances both of all phenomena and of itself, for instance as a Buddha-figure. Simultaneously, it also cognizes the voidness of them that is beyond words and concepts.

Clear light cognition, however, may be divided into two:

1. clear light that does not know that the two truths it cognizes are true,
2. clear light that knows that they are true.

Sem and Rigpa

The Nyingma dzogchen system differentiates two types of mental activity for experiencing things:

1. *sem* (*sems*, limited awareness),
2. *rigpa* (*rig-pa*, pure awareness).

Roughly speaking, *rigpa* corresponds to the second division of clear light mental activity: clear light that knows its own two-truth nature.

Sem corresponds to all levels of mind that do not know this two-truth nature. Thus, *sem* includes:

- clear light mental activity that does not know its own two-truth nature, such as the ordinary clear light awareness of death,
- the nonconceptual milliseconds of seeing and hearing appearances of non-true existence, while not knowing the totality of everything in the state beyond concepts, and not cognizing voidness beyond concepts,
- imagining or verbally thinking appearances of true existence, while not knowing that they are false, and also not cognizing voidness beyond concepts.

Clear light mental activity, then, that does not know its own two-truth nature, even though it cognizes the two truths simultaneously, is not *rigpa*. It is *sem*.

All *sem* are fleeting, whereas *rigpa* is unstained by fleeting limited mental activity. Moreover, *rigpa* is complete with all good qualities (*yon-tan*), which means that *rigpa* not only cognizes pure appearances and voidness beyond concepts simultaneously, it knows its own two-truth nature. That knowing is called:

- reflexive deep awareness (*rang-rig ye-shes*),
- self-arising deep awareness (*rang-byung ye-shes*),
- awareness of its own face (*rang-ngo shes-pa*).

Although rigpa cognizes and knows its own two-truth nature, the two truths may or may not be equally prominent. The two are not equally prominent while still on the path; they are only equally prominent as a Buddha.

Three Aspects of Rigpa

Rigpa has three naturally inseparable (*rang-bzhin dbyer-med*) aspects. The three simultaneously arise (*lhan-skyes*) and have the same essential nature (*ngo-bo gcig*) - they are referring to the same phenomenon from different mental points of view. Nevertheless, they may be differentiated from each other and specified as different conceptually isolated items (*ldog-pa*).

[See: Relationships between Two Objects in Anuttarayoga Tantra {9}.]

1. Rigpa is a *primally pure awareness* (*ka-dag*), unstained, in the sense of both self-voidness (*rang-stong*) and other-voidness (*gzhan-stong*). This aspect derives from logically isolating one truth about rigpa, its voidness.
 - ◆ Rigpa is *self-void* in the sense that it is beyond or devoid of existing as anything that would correspond to concepts or words.
 - ◆ It is *other-void* in the sense of being an awareness that not only has that void nature, but that also cognizes that void nature, and which is thus devoid of all fleeting levels of "other" mental activity (*sem*).
2. Rigpa is an *awareness that spontaneously establishes pure appearances* (*lhun-grub*). This aspect derives from logically isolating the second truth about rigpa: its appearance-making aspect.
3. Rigpa is a *responsive awareness* (*thugs-rje*). It is compassionate, which implies compassionate communication or responsiveness. This aspect derives from logically isolating a subtler aspect of appearance-making: the responsiveness of appearance-making to other beings and to the environment.

The Three Types of Rigpa

There are three types of rigpa:

1. *Basis rigpa* (*gzhi'i rig-pa*) is the working basis that we all have. Although it pervades all moments of *sem*, like sesame oil pervades a sesame seed, we normally do not recognize it. The next two are the two aspects of rigpa that we recognize on the path.
2. First, we recognize *effulgent rigpa* (*rtsal-gyi rig-pa*). It is rigpa in its aspect of actively giving rise to and cognizing pure appearances in response to things. Although it has all three aspects of rigpa, the spontaneous establishing aspect is more prominent.
3. Then, we recognize *essence rigpa* (*ngo-bo'i rig-pa*) as what underlies effulgent rigpa. It is rigpa in its aspect of being the cognitive space (*klong*, spacious awareness) - referring to other-voidness - that allows for the arising and cognizing of pure appearances in response to things. Although it too has all three aspects of rigpa, the primal purity aspect is more prominent.

Dumbfoundedness and the Alaya for Habits

Although the continuity of each being's individual basis rigpa is unstained, with no beginning and no end, there is also a beginningless factor, called dumbfoundedness (*rmongs-cha* - stupidity, bedazzlement), that automatically arises simultaneously (*lhan-skyes*) with each moment of cognition. It is also called automatically arising unawareness (ignorance) (*lhan-skyes ma-rig-pa*) regarding phenomena, a nominal disturbing attitude (*nyon-mongs-kyi ming-btags-pa*) included among the obscurations regarding all knowables, and which prevent omniscience (*shes-sgrib*). It obscures rigpa's innate good quality of reflexive deep awareness of its own two-truth nature.

[See: Ridding Oneself of the Two Sets of Obscurations in Sutra and Anuttarayoga Tantra According to Nyingma and Sakya {10}.]

When basis rigpa is flowing together with this fleeting factor of dumbfoundedness, basis rigpa is functioning as an *alaya for habits* (*bag-chags-kyi kun-gzhi*) (foundational awareness for the habits of grasping for true existence, for karma, for memories). The alaya for habits is the usual clear light of death of ordinary beings, as well as that which underlies and accompanies every moment of grosser levels of sensory and mental cognition while alive.

It is not that basis rigpa is the cause of the alaya for habits. The two have the same essential nature, in that they refer to the same thing from different mental points of view. Nevertheless, we can logically isolate the two from each other, and thus the alaya for habits and basis rigpa and are not identical. They correspond to the division, made earlier, of clear light mental activity that does not know that the two truths it cognizes are true and the clear light activity that does know that they are true. The fifteenth-century Gelug master Kaydrub Norzang-gyatso (*mKhas-grub Nor-bzang rgya-mtsho*) implies a similar distinction with his explanation that the clear light of death produces an appearance of voidness, but lacks the recognition and understanding of what it is.

2 The Steps of Dzogchen Meditation

Recognizing the Alaya for Habits

In dzogchen meditation, we first access and recognize the alaya for habits, then effulgent rigpa, and then essence rigpa. How to recognize the alaya for habits?

The alaya for habits gives rise to seeing and hearing, as well as to imagining and verbally thinking. Imagining and verbally thinking give mental labels of "this" and "that" and follow things out. Seeing and hearing do not give mental labels and do not follow things out.

Like seeing and hearing, the alaya for habits also does not give labels or follow things out, but it is more subtle than seeing and hearing. It underlies them, as well as underlying imagining and verbally thinking.

Recognizing the alaya for habits, however, is extremely difficult. If we see shapes and colors as a face (either with or without an idea of who it is) or hear the sounds of consonants and vowels as a word (either with or without an idea of their meaning), this is not nonconceptual seeing or hearing, let alone the alaya for habits. It is conceptual mental cognition.

If we are able to recognize the milliseconds of nonconceptual seeing of shapes and colors, without mentally constructing or conceptualizing them into a "this" or a "that," this is still not the alaya for habits. The same is true if we are able to recognize the milliseconds of nonconceptual hearing of the sounds of consonants and vowels, without mentally constructing or conceptualizing them into the words "this" or "that." To recognize the alaya for habits during sensory cognition, we need to go deeper.

In dzogchen literature, such as *Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo* (*Bar-do thos-grol*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*), we often read of recognizing rigpa during bardo (*bar-do*). Bardo usually refers to the period in between death and conception into the next rebirth. Bardo, however, can be the "cognitive space in between" other things. Thus, rigpa - and here, the alaya for habits - can be recognized in the cognitive spaces in between moments of seeing, hearing, imagining, or verbally thinking.

Because recognizing the milliseconds of nonconceptual seeing and hearing is so difficult, let alone recognizing the cognitive spaces in between those milliseconds, we start with trying to recognize the alaya for habits in between moments of verbal thinking. This means trying to recognize it in between each word or syllable of a verbal thought.

Method of Meditating

To avoid distraction from sensory cognition, we meditate in total darkness and total silence with *three immovables* (*mi-g.yo-ba gsum*):

1. immovable body - with body straight, hands either in the meditation pose in our laps or lightly resting on the knees,
2. immovable senses - with eyes neither closed nor wide open, but gazing naturally in front,
3. immovable mind - not actively thinking, with no thoughts of the past or future, and with no analysis. We just rest in the present moment of awareness, fresh and uncontrived, without being self-conscious about what we are doing. In other words, even if a thought arises, we do not follow it out.

Verbal thoughts simultaneously arise, abide, and cease. When we focus on that happening, we reach the "space in between verbal thoughts," which is the situation in which we can recognize the alaya for habits.

The meditation method, however, is not simply to stop verbally thinking by applying restraint or discipline. The simultaneous arising, abiding, and ceasing of moments of verbal thinking occur automatically. No effort is required to make that happen. Nevertheless, we need effort to recognize it and to stay focused on it with understanding. Otherwise, with mental wandering, we follow out thoughts, or with mental dullness, we fall into a daze and understand nothing.

The Need for Madhaymaka Analytical Meditation as a Preliminary

We do not gain understanding through an analytical process during the meditation. Dzogchen meditation is without analysis. To be able to focus, with understanding, on the simultaneous arising, abiding, and ceasing of moments of verbal thinking, the great Nyingma masters Mipam and the Third Dodrubchen explained instead that we need beforehand to have gained certainty of the voidness of true existence. We do this through the analytical method known as "searching for the hidden flaw of mind" (*sems-kyi mtshang btsal-ba*). We analyze:

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- where a moment of verbal thinking comes from - its origin,
- the situation of verbal thinking itself - how a moment of verbal thinking abides or remains,
- where a moment of verbal thinking ceases (disappears to) - where it dissolves or goes to.

Searching for the hidden flaw of mind resembles the Madhaymaka analytical process with which we analyze an event from the point of view of its cause, the event itself, and its effects. Only when we understand that moments of verbal thinking lack a truly existent arising, abiding, and ceasing are we able to recognize and experience, with understanding, the simultaneity of the three.

Moreover, we need also to understand beforehand the total absence (voidness) of an unaffected, monolithic, separate "me" as a boss making the arising, abiding, and ceasing of moments of verbal thinking happen, or observing them happen. This understanding enables us to recognize and experience, with understanding, that the simultaneous arising, abiding, and ceasing of moments of verbal thinking happen automatically, without any effort. To gain this understanding also requires Madhyamaka training.

With these understandings as additional preliminaries to

- the six outer and six inner preliminaries,
- enormous strengthening of our enlightenment-building networks of positive force and deep awareness (collections of merit and wisdom),
- empowerment,
- the keeping of vows, and
- inspiration from our spiritual mentors,

we are then ready to try to recognize the cognitive space in between moments of verbal thinking.

[See: [The Major Facets of Dzogchen](#) {2} {11}.]

We meditate on progressively subtler levels. These include focus on the simultaneous arising, abiding, and ceasing (disappearing) of

1. moments of verbal thinking,
2. mental images,
3. feelings of happiness, unhappiness, or neutral feelings,
4. attitudes, such as hope, expectation, disappointment, and boredom,
5. the nonverbalized conceptual construct of the blankness we perceive as being a truly existent "this" or "that." This conceptual construct is a "feeling" of true existence.

Being Helped by Our Dzogchen Masters to Recognize Rigpa

As the above meditation methods may still not enable us to recognize the alaya for habits, let alone rigpa, we need further help. Our dzogchen masters may help us to recognize it by introducing us directly (*ngo-sprod*).

There are two major methods for introducing us to rigpa:

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1. without relying on key points (*gnad*) - namely, simply through the outer circumstance of inspiration from the dzogchen master and the inner circumstance of basis rigpa as Buddha-nature,
2. in addition to these outer and inner circumstances, relying on one of six key points that use a method that fits the disciple's meditation practice:
 - a. holding the mind's attention,
 - b. having the mind be at rest, i.e. remaining stable in its own place,
 - c. getting to the root of the matter,
 - d. getting rid of a sense of substantiality, so that after having made a thorough examination, mind no longer follows out an object (like a thought) and then has nowhere to go,
 - e. using the interval between awareness and its objects,
 - f. causing distraction, such as by shouting "*phat*."

The sixth method is the most common. When distracted or startled, we stop thinking.

In most cases, we do not recognize rigpa at this stage, but merely the alaya for habits. We recognize it in between moments of verbal thinking, as the cognitive space giving rise not only to moments of verbal thinking and imagining, but also to the milliseconds of seeing colors and shapes and hearing the sounds of consonants and vowels. It is calm, steady, does not follow out objects, and does not mentally label anything as "this" or "that." Nevertheless, the alaya for habits is still sem (limited awareness) and, as such, it has a dumbfounded or bedazzled factor of not knowing its own face.

Recognizing Effulgent Rigpa

We must be careful not to confuse and take the realization of the alaya for habits to be the realization of rigpa. Further, we need to be careful not to confuse and take to be the realization of rigpa a decisive awareness (*nges-shes*) of either the conventional nature (the mere producing and perceiving of cognitive appearances) or the deepest nature (voidness) of the alaya for habits. To do so would be confusing dzogchen meditation with Gelug/Kagyü mahamudra.

We need to go deeper and subtler, so that we experience and recognize a cognitive inbetween space that has deep awareness of its own two-truth nature. If we succeed, the factor of dumbfoundedness stops accompanying our meditation and the alaya for habits becomes rigpa. Because of having "greased" the pathways of our energy-channels with previous anuyoga practice and synchronized the winds with mantra recitation, then in the process of this meditation, all grosser levels of mental activity - and specifically the alaya for habits - automatically dissolve.

We do this by recognizing effulgent rigpa. This is rigpa in its aspect of actively giving rise to cognitive appearances and actively cognizing them, with the former more prominent. We focus now on the simultaneous arising, abiding, and ceasing of the milliseconds of seeing and hearing the cognitive appearances of what are not truly existent as "this"s and "that"s, which the alaya for habits gives rise to. When we recognize effulgent rigpa, we access the simultaneously arising, abiding, and ceasing of milliseconds of pure appearances of the state beyond the periscope field of perception of limited awareness.

Recognizing Essence Rigpa: The Stages of Break-Through and Leap-Ahead

After recognizing effulgent rigpa and being able to stay focused with it, we recognize essence rigpa. This is rigpa in its aspect of being the open space (*klong*) or cognitive sphere (*dbyings*) that allows for the arising of appearances and the cognizing of them, with the latter more prominent. When we recognize and stay focused with this, we attain break-through (*thregs-chod*), the path of seeing (*methong-lam*).

Then, as the result of practice with Buddha-figures in mahayoga, effulgent rigpa gives rise to and cognizes itself as a rainbow body ('*ja'-lus*), rather than with ordinary aggregates. Thus, on the leap-ahead stage (*thod-rgal*) - equivalent to the path of accustoming (*sgom-lam*, path of meditation) - through four stages, effulgent rigpa becomes more prominent while simultaneously maintaining prominent essence rigpa.

Primordial Mindfulness

When we access rigpa, we access its simultaneously arising innate quality of *primordial mindfulness of having dropped down to the natural state* (*rang-babs gnyug-ma'i dran-pa*), also called *deep mindfulness from having dropped down* (*ye-babs-kyi dran-pa*). The attention automatically holds on to or maintains itself in rigpa. Consequently, dzogchen meditation on rigpa is called effortless meditation, non-meditation, or non-deliberate meditation.

This does not mean that before we access rigpa and thus attain the path of seeing, we meditate without mindfulness. Meditating with sem and without any mindfulness, we experience mental flightiness (*rgod-pa*, mental agitation) and mental dullness (*bying-ba*). When practicing dzogchen, it is crucial to apply specific instructions only to the level of meditation and behavior for which they are intended.

Links

{1} http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/advanced/dzogchen/basic_points/introduction_dzogchen.html

{2} http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/advanced/dzogchen/basic_points/major_facets_dzogchen.html

{3} http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level5_analysis_mind_reality/cognition_theory/level_b_fine_analysis/fine_analysis_objects_cognition/fine_anal_obj_nongelug.html

{4} http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level5_analysis_mind_reality/truths/2_truths_vaibhashika_sautrantika.html

{5} http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level5_analysis_mind_reality/cognition_theory/level_b_fine_analysis/fine_analysis_objects_cognition/fine_anal_obj_nongelug.html

{6} http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level5_analysis_mind_reality/cognition_theory/level_b_fine_analysis/impure_pure_appearances_nongelug.html

{7} http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level5_analysis_mind_reality/cognition_theory/level_b_fine_analysis/affirmations.html

{8} http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/advanced/tantra/level3_intermediate_theory/divisions_causes_elimination.html

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- {9} http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/advanced/tantra/level4_advanced_points/relationship_2_obj_anuttarayoga.html
- {10} http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level4_deepening_understanding_path/path/eliminating_2_sets_obscurations.html
- {11} http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/advanced/dzogchen/basic_points/major_facets_dzogchen.html