

# The Cambridge Handbook of the Imagination

Edited by

Anna Abraham

*University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA*



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# 30 Imagining the Real: Buddhist Paths to Wholeness in Tibet

Anne Carolyn Klein (Rigzin Drolma)

*In the ocean of reality, here of its own accord and free of frills,*

*Swim the golden fish, no sign of thingness in them.<sup>1</sup>*

In many Buddhist traditions, confusion is intrinsic to ordinary experience. This confusion, or ignorance, consists either of imagining as existent something that isn't, like an inviolable self, or denying into no-existence something that does exist, like cause and effect. Buddhist practitioners seek freedom from all such mesmerizing imaginings. And yet the path to freedom itself involves intentional imagining. How can this be?

In making the multifaceted role of the imagination in Buddhist thought and contemplative practice our focus here, we note how such imagining differs from thinking, especially through its integration of the cognitive emotional and somatic or embodied experience. And we take particular interest in how this works in the most revered system of practice among the Ancient (Nyingma) Tibetan Buddhist paths known as Dzogchen, which translates as "Great Completeness." The path is so-called because it understands itself to include all paths, and to provide the most subtle descriptions and realizations of reality (Klein, 2011: 265–278). Most especially we consider Dzogchen's way of handling the apparent conundrum that imagination's ability to bring freedom from itself is key to Dzogchen's inclusive vision. We introduce the stages of such training by referring to an especially succinct distillation of them in the eighteenth-century Jigme Lingpa's reflections (see Dahl, 2016) on a short work by the fourteenth-century Longchen Rabjam (also referred to as Longchenpa) architect and preserver whose work remains at the core of Dzogchen traditions today. We'll begin with an overview, then introduce Jigme Lingpa's brief vignettes illustrating the entire path and, for the bulk of our discussion, note how the imagination figures in such practices as a basis for showing how this relationship goes to the heart of Buddhist phenomenologies of consciousness.

## Imagination: An Overview

"Imagination" here encompasses both confused elements of conceptual and sensory experience and the intentionally cultivated imaginaire that removes such confusion. The "imaginaire" is what one is left with as a result of intentionally

<sup>1</sup> Longchenpa (2009). For an excellent and different translation see Barron (2001: 58).



engaging the imagination. In particular, in the Tibetan context, it refers to the mental state or image one has conjured through a training that explicitly employs acts of the imagination. Any experience short of fully realized direct perception – what Buddhists call awakening (*bodhi*) – is to some degree imaginal. In so many ways, for better and for worse, the imagination is what we call home.

Intentional imagining is used to dissolve the lens of confusion. Dissolving isn't always easy or welcome, however. For one thing, we feel our perception is correct. We feel beauty is objectively present, not in the eye of the beholder, or that steady-state solidity and separateness are simply out there, not imagined at all. Buddhist analysis, like Western science, shows they are not. For Buddhists this is an inborn ignorance. Buddhist philosophy, starting with the great Indian logicians Dignaga and Dharmakirti, and later Tibetan Middle Way teachings that incorporated their perspectives, carefully categorizes what sorts of minds are associated with what sorts of errors, and what is needed to remedy them. Practitioners continually dance between imaginal confusion and the rectifying imaginaire. From the earliest to the very advanced stages of practice, artful and intentional imagining is a core strategy for getting free from such confusion. This confusion is partly learned and partly intrinsic to everyday cognitive and sensory experience.

Imagination is flexible, multipurpose, and infinitely creative. Imagining that you can succeed. Imagining what release from anger will feel like, or boundless love. Or even using imagination to magnify your own confusion so you can recognize it, dissolve the confusion, and experience authentic reality, how things really are. For Dzogchen, imagination shares with that reality an unstoppable creativity. Even confused imagination is not outside the domain:

Awakened mind, source of all that is, creates everything –  
However these appear, they are my essence.  
However they arise, they are my magical displays . . .<sup>2</sup>

Already, as we read this, we are imagining *something*. Reality in this view is, is an unceasing and unstoppable process and thus by definition can never be fully imagined. Even so, the family resemblance imagination bears to reality means that even as it participates in confusion, it can also help usher one out of confusion. In this way, imagination is bilateral. A vibrant imagination can exacerbate error – I am the worst person in the world, I am the most special – while intentional imagining furthers a felt sense of loosening up such fabrications.

Buddhists ask: You want to train on a path? You want to meditate? In that case your imagination is indispensable. Paths to freedom require cognitive, sensory, and embodied somatic knowing. Imagination participates in all of these, either as part of the confusion being addressed or as the means of its transformation. Therefore, thinking and imagining intertwine on the path, as we see in Jigme Lingpa's essentialized sequencing, which will be our focus here, and in his Heart Essence

<sup>2</sup> Longchenpa (2009) *Chos dbyings rin po che 'i mdzod kyi 'grel pa lung gter mdzod*, citing *The Majestic Creator of Everything (Kun byed rgyal po)*: 75.14 BDRC W1KG4884-I1KG4901-65-412. For published English translation see Barron (2001: 47). See also Neumaier-Dargyay (1992).



foundational practices, which are closely related to this.<sup>3</sup> First, however, let's consider some of the wrongful impressions that Jigme Lingpa's deployments of a rectifying imagination will address.

Error starts with the sensory experience. By and large, things look pretty stable and we regard them as such. In fact there is no stability at all except what I imagine. At some level we know this, but this knowing doesn't impact our felt sense of stability. We don't feel "I imagine this"; we feel we see what is there.

To overcome this blindness, practitioners reflect on causality, interdependence, and the impermanence that is key to both. Reflection includes imagining flickering momentariness. But mind-pictures are not enough; there is resistance to overcome. Not everyone wants to hear about impermanence. It is not the intellect but the psycho-emotional self that rejects this. The young and healthy can hardly bring attention to it. And they are not the only ones. We all want and imagine an impossible stability within imagining. We don't want to feel impermanence applies to us. At least not now.<sup>4</sup> Such resistance is part of the confusion practice addresses. But our confusion isn't asking to be addressed!

Still, with practice and good will the rectifying imagination can undermine confused imaginations. In some ways Buddhism teaches what life teaches. Even without meditation, as we grow older, as impermanence becomes more and more apparent in our own bodies and minds, we notice. We recognize that this flux is what my confused imagination has long obscured from my ordinary experience. We likely digest this more readily if we have already imagined it coming.

Confusion regarding stability or permanence is a function of the imagination – we are taking as an object something that isn't there, like seeing water where there is only a mirage. Imagination errs either on the side of overreach (*'gro dog*), imagining what isn't there, or underestimation (*'gur 'debs*), denying what does exist. These errors combine to corroborate the most egregious imagined object of all – the overwrought, underanalyzed sense of self. Practice that can undo this confusion engages visual, emotional, and embodied imaginations, often coalescing these with a culturally grounded aesthetic.

In order to shift what Buddhists understand as confusion, a rectifying imaginaire must extend to the depth and source of perception itself. Much as exercise engages different muscle groups in varied ways, release from confusion requires retraining and relaxing a wide spectrum of habits. Governing our mind, emotions, embodied experience, and even the play of our senses. The bidirectional and multifaceted functioning of the imagination, as well as its intimate connection with the body is core to Buddhist scholarship and practice.

<sup>3</sup> For Jigme Lingpa's foundational practices see Klein (2009). For a classic discussion of these see Rinpoche (1994). Patrul Rinpoche died in 1887. My colleague Elizabeth Napper and I are currently translating and annotating the commentary on these verses by his renowned student Adzom Rinpoche (d. 1924), *Lamp Lighting the Path (Thar lam gsal sgron)*.

<sup>4</sup> For the psychological benefits of reckoning with impermanence and death, see the classic *Existential Psychotherapy* by Irvin D. Yalom (1980).

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## Imagination And Its Discontents: The Seven Trainings

*We are such stuff as dreams are made of.*

Prospero, *The Tempest*

Dreams are fleeting, nothing but mind-light. But while we are in them, they feel compellingly real. We suffer when things go wrong. The root problem, though, is not what happens in the dream, but our confused sense that the dream is real. Similarly, in waking life we think pleasant and painful experiences are far more real than they are. One vector of this error, already noted, is our unaware assent to the stability that seems baked into things. Our furniture, our bodies, our friends, all seem to have the heft of durability. But this exists only in our imagination. Recognizing that everything changes is a big step toward being in sync with what is real, and not erroneously imagined. And an understanding of impermanence “will ultimately release you into the clear light of your own mind” (Sangpo, 1982: 62).

Impermanence is the first of Longchenpa’s seven trainings for Dzogchen. How do we learn to see and feel the world differently? Notice seasonal changes, he suggests, which is an outer form of impermanence. Discern inner impermanence through changes in your body. Most intimately, impermanence is the loss of friends and family or the flux of our own thoughts.<sup>5</sup> Seeing thusly can rectify our passive assent to apparent stability, unmasking its total fabrication. How do we know when this training is successful? Success, says Longchenpa, is when we immediately recognize everything we see – trees, animals, our own mind-wanderings – as instances of impermanence.

Longchenpa’s eighteenth-century spiritual heir, Jigme Lingpa, expands on this training. By way of preface he notes that although long-time learned practitioners make progress through studying scripture, many of us find insight comes more easily with story (Dahl, 2016: 29).<sup>6</sup> Jigme Lingpa therefore steps in, offering a dramatic vignette with you at the center, revving up a psycho-emotional imaginaire in which you find yourself face to face with death. The progression of the story proper and its aftermath form stages, analogues to the classic ninefold path of Nyingma, which is subdivided into three main categories of outer, inner, and secret, or *sutra*, *tantra*, and *dzogchen*. Each phase has its own distinct relationship with the practitioner’s imagination.

At the vignette opens, you are alone in an unknown place, with no sign of human habitation whatever. You are desolate. Two strangers, a man and a woman, approach and precipitously invite you to journey with them to an island of immense wealth. You agree. You join them in a rickety boat that is soon careening on sky-high waves, then plunging into cavernous depths, all in this fragile vessel whose oars now crack into total uselessness. What will you do? With rising despair, you cry out for help

<sup>5</sup> This last commentary is a personal communication from Adzom Paylo Rinpoche, winter, 2007–2008.

<sup>6</sup> Jigme Lingpa here instructs teachers as well as students: “Individuals who already have some comprehension of the Dharma will be able to invoke a sense of weariness [in samsara] by examining scripture. This is the best approach for impacting the minds of such individuals. The mind of the novice practitioner, on the other hand, will be more intractable, so it must be enticed with examples, stories, and more accessible methods.” Lightly tweaked from Dahl (2016).



and, as the boat grows ever shakier, you see a luminous figure dancing in the sky before you, clothing swaying gently in the breeze. You recognize him as your teacher in the form of the legendary and iconic Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche) who established tantric Buddhist practices in Tibet.<sup>7</sup> He speaks, reminding you of life's precariousness, noting that you have given this no attention at all until now. As the boat splits apart, ready to topple you into the sea, Guru's luminous rays pour down, wash you into light, and draw you up until you unite with Padmasambhava's awakened mind. Now fully awakened, you immediately act to awaken and free others from their own painful circumstances, extending light to them as had been given to you. This part of the sequence, beginning with your recognition of your teacher in Guru Rinpoche, distills the essential tantric practice of guru yoga. The drama seems resolved.

However, there is one more instruction:

Once you have imagined all this, relax and leave your thoughts of the three times to themselves, without support. Then, whether your mind is active or at rest, simply maintain a state of mindful vigilance (Dahl, 2009: 31).

Now all imagining is released. You attend only to your mind, inevitably either active or at rest, in harmony with the naked "mind-minding" that is a core Dzogchen practice.

Thus in a single session of meditation you moved through sutra, tantric and dzogchen modalities, the entire spectrum of the path, including the different deployments of imagination in each. Imagination remains in play until it facilitates its own dissolution, a fearless intimacy with sheer and naked knowing. Longchenpa advises repeating the steps of this process in subsequent meditation sessions for three or twenty-one days.<sup>8</sup> Likewise we now look at these steps more closely.

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In his debut sermon at the Sarnath Deer Park, the recently awakened Gautama taught that imagining the impermanent and evanescent to be permanent and stable is a key source of suffering. Understanding – really *digesting* – the fact of impermanence and insubstantiality is key. That Longchenpa makes it his first training indicates he means to include the entirety of the path in preparing practitioners for Dzogchen.

One challenge here is that we don't *feel* like we are imagining permanence or substance. Yet our surprise at inevitable change suggests otherwise. If we hadn't been assuming steadfast continuity, why when we or a friend suddenly become ill, do we feel surprise and shock? Partly because this was not what we had imagined, not really. Hence the need for reconstructive imagining.

Repurposing the imagination on the path cultivated is rooted in Buddhist philosophies of mind that distinguish image-making from sensory perception, or somatic experience. For Dzogchen, imagining is rooted in the mind's natural creativity and

7 On how legends associated with Padmasambhava became central to the Tibetan cultural imaginaire, see Hirshberg (2016).

8 On the significance of repetition in ritual practice, see Klein (2016). Also on Anne Carolyn Klein page, academia.edu.

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responsiveness. Creativity and responsiveness are sourced in mind's very nature (*sems nyid*), which is free from all imagining *and* the freedom to imagine anything at all. For Dzogchen practitioners, the richness and ontic status of tantric imagery can bridge the imaginary synapse between ordinary experience and mind's real nature.<sup>9</sup> In Jigme Lingpa's sequencing, and in tantra generally, imagination moves right to the cusp of that nature before dissolving into wisdom-space, undisturbed by imagery.

The reader-practitioner is invited to slow down and notice hitherto overlooked evidence of impermanence in everything we see, touch, taste, or long for, and thus to gradually weaken wrongheaded overreach of imagination that has prevented us from noticing the actual flux of things. We digest the import of seasonal change, recognize our own and dear ones' mortality; even, sometimes with surprise, note the fleeting nature of our own turbulent emotions. Finally we detect that we have been deceived by our own imaginal force field. Intentional imagining has facilitated this shift.

### Tantric Imagining

The luminous lama dancing in space who appears at the nadir of the seafaring journey marks a shift to tantric perspective in Jigme Lingpa's sequencing.

A practitioner's relationship with iconic enlightened beings, such as Guru Rinpoche, and with a human teacher as the essence of that being, is the core of tantric practice. As the traveler, you encounter and recognize a connection with Guru Rinpoche. This recognition has an emotional dimension; it is an *affective* imagination, heightening the sense of affection and closeness: The iconic figure is someone we know well, and who knows us well. Formal guru yoga practices involve chanting and a precisely articulated series of images, including one's own body imagined as light culminating, as here, in unification. One's ordinary flesh-and-bone body becomes, to one's own mind and experience, a body of light. Such imagining has a distinct kinesthetic quality, it is an embodied imaginaire, melded with a uniquely expanded mind-feeling sensibility. In all these ways the tantric imagination in particular is different from *thinking*.

This imagining is not just pictures, it is a full-being process that integrates the felt dynamics of attention, emotions, and bodily presence. It requires and fosters attention that is relaxed and clear. These qualities allow it to facilitate an emotional state fluidly open to the deep feelings that contemplation of death and impermanence can elicit, and yet not caught in anxiety or despair. Such imagination is in intimate conversation with cognitive, somatic, and emotional dimensions of actual lived experience. Integration of the imaginal, cognitive, and somatic conduce to a fulsome state of wholeness, a resolving of the alienation from parts of oneself, others, or aspects of one's culture that, from Buddhist and psychological perspectives, is a key source of suffering.

<sup>9</sup> This nature is also called primordial wisdom, the way things are, the ultimate, basic space, open awareness, awakened mind, union of primordial purity or spontaneous presence, or respectively, in Tibetan: *ye shes*; *gnas tshul*, *don dam pa*, *dbyings*, *dharma-dhātu*, *rig pa*, *byang chub sems*, *ka dag thun grub bzung 'jug*.



The significance of the embodied imagination cannot be overestimated. Dissolving into light is a key element of tantric practice; it trains subtle kinesthetic awareness tracing moving streams, both imagined and palpable, through the body's deep interior. In such practices, which accord with Tibetan and other Asian mappings of the living body, it is neither feasible, necessary, nor desirable to separate the imaginal from palpable energetic sensibility. The streams have color, sometimes imagined, sometimes seen directly, and they are also felt somatically. The point is, these dimensions are interconnected, not alienated like a fish tossed to shore or lost in unfamiliar waters. Indeed, in the seventh and final training, your body is light, your mind is space, your energy optimally flowing through both. Through the transmodal interfusion of these – no longer locked into any one sensory dimension, sometimes feeling sound and hearing color – a fuller measure of wholeness, or completeness, can occur.<sup>10</sup>

Although partly the fruit of imagination, such integration is deeply felt. The kinesthetic imaginaire is not a realm apart from felt experience. Whereas imagination, in the sense of rumination or anticipation takes us away from the present, felt experience is *always* in the present moment. When the trained imagining described here brings one to this fresh sense of the present moment, the imaginal melts away, with the resulting integration felt throughout one's organism. This is the heart of *Guru Yoga*. Within this state of integration, one looks directly at the mind-states of activity and rest (which have been occurring throughout) and as the knower aware of those states, the unmoving source of all imagining:

awareness is clean when it comes to [sense] objects, there being no interruption between thoughts' arising and being freed [i.e. action and rest].<sup>11</sup>

All that preceded has set the scene for the letting go of the imagination and resting in the invisible arena from which it emerged. No longer simply imagaic, reactively emotional, or intellectual, the horizon of experience feels expanded, all-encompassing. Practice is simple, if not easy. Rest in this wholeness.

### What Imagination Is Not

This sense of wholeness is not an idea, it is a felt sense, to use Gendlin (1982)'s term, or a lived experience, to use a term common in the emerging field of micro-phenomenology.<sup>12</sup> In Indian-based exoteric Tibetan Buddhist philosophies of mind, your mind is a knower that is either conceptual or nonconceptual. The conceptual mind always involves images, however abstract. Compared with direct experience, thinking and the images that accompany it are generic, not precise. They function not to represent the object of thought, but simply to eliminate everything *not*

10 For descriptions of the importance of engaging cognitive and somatic learning together, see Fosha, Siegel, and Solomon (2009). Much of Buddhist practice, but especially tantra, interweaves the cognitive and somatic throughout its many otherwise different practices, and adds a third element, as well, the richly endowed imaginaire. On transmodal element of lived experience, see Petitmengin (2007).

11 Adapted from Barron (2001: 58). Tibetan text, 83.15. 12 See for example Petitmengin (2007).



that object. But it does allow direct experience to more fully ascertain what appears to it. Thinking about or imagining impermanence can facilitate full-on direct knowing of impermanence that is both emotionally and somatically impactful.

Again, imagining is bilateral. The confused imagination takes one away from the real world by imagining, for example, that we are permanent. Or the center of the universe. Or unequivocally irrelevant. None of this bears scrutiny, yet part of us is impossibly persuaded. Skillfully deployed imagination becomes part of an intentional process of gaining access to what unintentional imagining has invented and obscured.

What is this imagination? There is no exact Tibetan word for it though several terms describe it partially. The imagination described here overlaps with but is different from thought (*rtog pa, kalpanā*). In particular, I want to note how it differs from thought as detailed in the sixth-century Indian works of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti and Tibetan commentaries on them, for these are the basis for exoteric Tibetan understandings of the mind. Most significantly, their descriptions do not identify emotional, psychological, or physiological elements intrinsically related with imagining on the path.

Also distinguishing thinking from imagining is that any image appearing to thought, for example when you think “mother,” is generic, and possibly so abstract that it has no representational value at all; it functions simply to isolate any other image that is not linked with “mother.” This description, too,<sup>13</sup> takes no account of the emotions, kinesthetic impression, or overall impact of the image on your felt sense in the moment of recollection. Whatever their representational properties, these images are not *felt* abstractly.

Yet “objective distance” is not the point, either. Thought consistently conflates the image appearing to it with the actual object that image references. This error is intrinsic to thought. When you bring to mind your mother’s face, however abstract the image, you seem to see your mother herself. Thus there is an implicit intimacy with whatever appears to our minds. This is especially important with guru or deity yoga. One does not feel “I have this image,” but “I am” or, finally, simply an *am-ness* that is utterly conflated with, in this case, with the essential being of Guru Rinpoche and one’s own teacher. Thought’s tendency to conflate object with image, while in one sense an error, yields an intimacy quite beyond that of ordinary thought, yet made possible by it.<sup>14</sup> “Imagination” in the context of these practices captures this intimacy; to my knowledge this is never mentioned in classic Buddhist discourse on thought. It may in fact be that sense of focused intimacy that partly distinguishes thought from imagination.<sup>15</sup>

13 Thought is contrasted with direct perception in Klein (1978/1999) chapters 2 and 3 for thought and direct perception and chapters 5–7 on the functioning of thought by its eliminating all that is not its focal object (*apoha, gzhan gsel*). Available also on Anne Carolyn Klein academia.edu.

14 Neurological research on the effect of visual practices is relatively scarce. See Kozhevnikov et al. (2009: 645). Recent studies of experienced deity yoga practitioners suggest brain plasticity allows skill enhancement in visuospatial tasks and increased ability in image maintenance.

15 Even when we imagine something not so emotionally salient or impinging on our sense of self as mortality and death, there is an intimacy that is not there in simply by bringing that thing to mind. Conversely, one could think about death without imagining in the way described here. The difference



This is tricky, because thought easily becomes entangled in, or at least flavored by imagination. Still, distinguishing “imagination” from “thought” clarifies the felt richness of practices such as Longchenpa and Jigme Lingpa describe. And there is another reason to distinguish these. The Tibetan word often, unfortunately, translated as “visualize” as in “visualize a deity” (*dmigs byed*) really simply means “take as your object.” This goes beyond seeing, or visualizing; and leaves space for sensing emotional, somatic, or other shifts in one’s experience as one takes this object in. Imagining, or taking on, an object again, is here an inclusive, full-bodied term, engaging all the creative, sensory, and emotional aspects associated with an actual felt sense of being in the world. In particular, in tantra, the somatic is crucial. Longchenpa explains, for the body gives access to wisdom:

Supreme primordial wisdom, is there of its own accord  
In the precious unbounded mansion of your heart center.<sup>16</sup>

There are many, virtually infinite, variations of using imaginative light in connection with the body, and this, too, is not only a visual endeavor. In the course of daily meditation rituals, Buddhas – that is, images vividly imagined with deep conviction – dissolve into you; or, you may dissolve into them. In either case, the dissolving doesn’t end there, for the unified luminosity melts into its own center and into space. Sometimes the body’s interior lights up, highlighting and making kinesthetically knowable constellations of subtle channels and the energies they carry. Sometimes light shines out and fills the universe, showing that universe to be intimately part of one’s own mind, and the universe of experience the mind’s own playing field. Eventually, alienation can fall away. Nothing abrogates connection and integration. One never leaves the mind behind, a point very significant for the gnostic orientation to wholeness, a great completeness from which nothing is excluded. To dissolve into light, to imagine or feel open-hearted connection to one who imaginatively *is* the fruit of wisdom-learning, engages our entire human being, not just the light of the mind, but the correlative felt senses of a body dissembling its solidity, a mind resolving its alienated solitude.<sup>17</sup>

Imagination is powerfully useful. Yet, dissolving imagination is imperative. Though differently inflected, this is true in the earliest Indian Buddhist traditions and Dzogchen. In the *Bāhiya Sutta*, from the early Indian Pāli tradition, Buddha advises a student thus:

In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself.<sup>18</sup>

has to do with a felt vitality in the process itself, a keenness of attention, and a receptivity to being impacted by what is imagined. Otherwise, there is no imaginaire. (Thanks to this volume’s editor, Anna Abraham, for her interesting questions on this and other matters.)

<sup>16</sup> For an alternative translation of this line see Barron (2001: 341). BDRC Tibetan text, *Grub mtha’ mdzod*: 1183.1

<sup>17</sup> See Kapstein (2004), especially preface and chapter X.

<sup>18</sup> Translated from the Pāli by Thanissaro Bhikkhu at [accessinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud](http://accessinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud). See also discussion in Anālayo (2003: 243ff).



Stop imagining. Stay with what is. Imagination is discouraged. In popular modern iterations of Theravada such as Goenka's *Insight Meditation*, one focuses on bare experience in the present moment. Theravada's final goal or *nibbana*<sup>19</sup> is the cessation of all cognitive and sensory overlays.

In Mahayana, ultimate freedom is not mere cessation, it is suffused with equanimity, love, compassion, and joy; qualities that are also part of Theravada but cease with one's final nirvana. For Mahayana, Buddhas model these qualities before and after awakening without, however, imagining any action, agent, or recipient of such compassion. Historically and in practice, these harbinger Dzogchen's orientation to mindnature.

### Imagination and Wholeness

Dzogchen practitioners seek to recognize the radical inclusivity of their own nature. Separateness, the perceived distance between subject and object, self and other, or even layers of oneself, is a product of confused imagination. Longchenpa often cites ancient tantras that voice this all-inclusive reality; for example, *The Six Expanses*:

I manifest as undivided and indivisible  
 Since my objects, actions, and conduct  
 cannot be differentiated from me . . .  
 I am not an object and am free of any concept or underlying bias.<sup>20</sup>

The wisdom-ground<sup>21</sup> is not an object. Practitioners don't try to imagine it, which is impossible, but to recognize it as the source and ultimate nature of images, concepts, and everything else one experiences. Nothing is excluded from the unbounded horizon of wholeness (*thig le nyag cig*).

Attending to mind-images, their absence, or to mindlight itself – to a mind active or at rest – eventually points to the source from whence minding comes. Longchenpa and Jigme Lingpa express wonder, delight, and amazement at their naked recognition of this intimate reality, a state deliciously indescribable, yet about which there is much to say, and which is infinitely various. Wholeness doesn't preclude variety, but no amount of even unharmonious variety can actually broach completeness as understood in this tradition. At the emotional level, this means that one can feel whole even while present to experiences that, in theory, would cancel each other out. When relaxed and expansive, it is possible to realize that, for example, you are very happy about one thing, and devastated about another. Not identifying either as a reified "me," these two very different responses can be recognized as simultaneously present. At the ontological level, Dzogchen says that the reality they describe is equally present everywhere and in everything. Reality in this sense of whole, and always complete.

<sup>19</sup> More recent scholarship questions this description of Theravada. See Crosby (2013).

<sup>20</sup> Barron (2001: 39). Tibetan text, p. 68.16.

<sup>21</sup> Dzogchen discussions of this ground (*gzhi*) is a relevant issue here, but beyond the scope of what can be covered in this space.



A crucial event in the life of a Dzogchen practitioner is recognizing that this source, ineffable and all-suffusing, is a wholeness encompassing all the infinite varieties of life. Variety remains. Alienation does not. This topic is vast, but our point here is simple: There is nothing outside or alienated from this wisdom-nature that is also the most intimate part of lived experience and its source. How might this inclusive ubiquity relate to contemporary phenomenological and scientific reflections on consciousness?

What scientists have called the “problem of consciousness” is for Dzogchen a secret to freedom and wholeness. Dzogchen distinguishes itself from the Middle Way Mahayana schools in that while they take “a sheer emptiness which is like space” as the basic matrix for its understanding of reality, Dzogchen takes an unconfused awareness (*rig pa*), “pure and simple – originally pure in all its nakedness and unceasing, though it has never existed as anything.”<sup>22</sup> Ineffable wisdom is the actual nature of everything *as it is experienced*. Longchenpa is not saying that if you take apart a mountain you will find wisdom as its nature. He says that you cannot separate the mountain from your experience of it, and that the final nature of your all-inclusive field of knowing is this wisdom-presence.<sup>23</sup> This ubiquity is not a problem for Dzogchen, it is essential to their world view.

This knowingness is not the consciousness defined as “that which is clear and knowing” (*gsal shing rig pa*)<sup>24</sup> in classic Indian and Indian-based Tibetan exoteric texts. It does not have the subject-object structure apparent in ordinary knowing. It is not identical with the consciousness that science calls a problem either. However, like that problematic consciousness, it is part of all experience. There is no encountering any sensory or mental object free of it, and thus it can’t be subjected to scientifically objective investigation. But for Dzogchen such objectivity is itself confused imagination.

Some modern Western philosophers of mind also doubt that this ubiquity is a problem. For neuroscientist Francisco Varela, “Lived experience is where we start from and where all must link back to, like a guiding thread.” For Adam Zeman, consciousness “might be described more accurately as the fundamental fact of our human lives.”<sup>25</sup> Bitbol further observes that for Husserl consciousness is inextricably present in all experience because “any ascription of existence *pre-supposes* the existence of conscious experience” (Bitbol, 2008: 5).

The intrinsically occurring wisdom (*rang byung ye shes*) Longchenpa describes has properties that distinguish it from the consciousness that Bitbol and the others discern, but shares with it the key quality of ubiquity. *Nothing occurs outside it.*<sup>26</sup> For scientists seeking (imagining!) pure objectivity, this is a problem. In Bitbol’s reading of Husserl, it is not. Bitbol writes:

22 Also translated in Barron (2001: 163). Tibetan text, p. 162.2–7.

23 Thanks to Lama Tenzin Samphel for clarifying this crucial point.

24 See Rinbochay (1981: 45–47).

25 For these citations see Bitbol (2008: 4). For original French on this matter, see Bitbol (2014).

26 Space permitting, it would be appropriate to consider how Husserl takes consciousness to be absolute insofar as experience cannot be second guessed (Bitbol, 2008: 5).



Consciousness is not an object. Not a phenomenon either. Why? Because phenomenon is part of a field of consciousness. But consciousness is more than that . . . It is not a phenomenon.<sup>27</sup>

For Longchenpa and Jigme Lingpa, the very possibility of imagination arises from its intimate connection with this ubiquitous presence, which is not a subjective state separate from objects, but the unimpeded (*zang thal*) nature of everything, knower and known alike.<sup>28</sup> We cannot do justice to it here, or to the evocative, shimmering poetry that gives voice to it. Still, simply identifying this general point of agreement, that nothing exists outside the field of our own experience,<sup>29</sup> means that when imagination emerges from and dissolves back into that field, it models what is also true for every other kind of experience. The mind is always full of ideas, images, to-do lists, worries, excitations, intentions. These images can mask a consciousness masquerading as unconfused, or they can lead to its source, for the masks are themselves included in this completeness beyond all imagining.

What else can a practitioner do but see more clearly? Thinking won't get one there. One's natural completeness can only be intuited until, somehow, it spontaneously is known. Intuition is also a type of imaginaire, and its family resemblance with Dzogchen practice helps us understand both.

Claire Petitmengin, a leading figure in microphenomenology who works closely with Michel Bitbol, has extensively studied intuition. Her research finds that a similar cluster of qualities attend most first-person reports of intuition. Freedom from tension, spatial constraint, and efforting toward a goal appear to play an essential role in the arising of intuition and is, perhaps, at the source of all thinking:

Mindnature is the ground of arising (*'char gzhi*)  
from which things arise, comparable to a mirror<sup>30</sup>

Dzogchen, too, finds that ease, shift in one's sense of space, and giving up goal-orientation is crucial, and that all imagining arises from, leads to, hides, and discloses its source. Hence, in Jigme Lingpa's sequencing, the more thorough one's final dissolving into a panoramic spacious nature, the more capacity one has to rescue others from their imagined limitations. In this way, connection with one's wisdom-nature also brings responsive connection with others that is unimpeded by imagined greatness or lowliness, and is sensitive to both their confusion and potential for a richly variegated wholeness.

And as we saw, Jigme Lingpa's sequence did not end with the story, nor even with dissolving all confused imaginings, but with an orientation to the source awareness that lies beyond imagination, and ongoing responsiveness to others' pain. Only then comes the concluding instruction to set it all aside, relax, and observe your own mind, whether active or at rest.

27 My notes from his three-hour lecture, Fall 2016, Paris, as part of Claire Petitmengin's training seminar in microphenomenology.

28 Longchenpa, Discussion of iMadhyamaka and Dzogchen. Longchen Rabjam. See Barron (2007: 112, 312). Tibetan text, *Grub mtha' mdzod*: 799.2 and 1133.4–5.

29 Author/Buddhist teacher Ken McLeod reports Kalu Rinpoche often used this phrase in teaching.

30 Longchenpa. For alternate translation see Barron (2007: 312). Tibetan text, *Grub mtha' mdzod*: 1133.4–5. See also Klein (2018) and Petitmengin (2007, 1999).



And so we see that imagination is multivalent. It can bind or it can liberate, and sometimes might even need to bind in particular ways before it can liberate. And it can also simply dissolve. Working with the imagination in some of the ways described above, especially associated with creation-phase tantric essentials, easily produces the kind of transmodal experience that we knew as infants. All of which indicates there is more to mind than thinking, more to the senses than honing in on an object, more to somatic flows than a one-to-one ratio with particular sensations. Experience becomes much richer when we are not limited to thought alone, when we include the intimacy of somatic, cognitive, affective, emotional, and spatial knowings. Microphenomenology and focusing are modern ways of accessing the nuances of lived experiences. These refined sensibilities share with the contemplative arts a strategy of focusing not simply on the *what* but also, and sometimes exclusively, on the *how*. Not *what* you see, but *how* you do it, and how it affects you. In classic Buddhist practice, mindfulness is trained to move from *what* to *how*, and ultimately from reified certainty about some particular thing to an openness not just to anything, but to the similar fundamental *how* of everything. Awakening, as well as the symbols of awakening such as Padmasambhava, arise when the ordinary mind abates, leaving a different kind of space, clarity, and possibility. Similarly, intuition arises when mind and body is open, relaxed, spacious in psyche and soma. Imagination of all kinds, it seems, is furthered as it grows less inhibited by habit, weariness, self-doubt, or whatever else limits its spacious natural capaciousness.

A shift that makes a difference here is recognizing imagination as nothing more or less than the creativity intrinsic to mind's own nature. With this knowing comes the potential for any image, thought, or sensory experience to reveal the unquenchable, unbounded freshness of which it is part. An ocean as vast as space in which the golden fish finally feel at home, fully free, and definitely in wholeness. And perhaps you, kind intrepid reader, have already imagined just what that is like.

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