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## On Dealing with Destructive Emotions through the “Path of Self-Liberation”

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**Abstract:** In the majority of Buddhist systems and traditions, destructive emotions—hatred, craving and delusion—are considered as the main obstacle to enlightenment and dealt with as such through various methods of counteracting and neutralizing. In the supreme teaching of Dzogchen, however, they are but one of the infinite aspects of the primordially self-perfected dimension of the true nature of mind. Thus they are allowed to show their utterly harmless essence—non-ego, beyond-good-and-evil, empty and luminous—through the path of self-liberation.

**Keywords:** *Dzogchen*; self-perfected state; *Rigpa*; instantaneous presence; path; self-liberation

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### Introduction—Definition

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has defined the Three Poisons of Mind of Buddhist tradition as destructive emotions [1].

They are: hatred, craving and delusion. In other words, they are the twofold process of mentally accepting and rejecting something, a process caused by the illusory belief in some objective, self-standing existence of all phenomena.

So, in this definition, destructive emotions are "those that cause harm to ourselves or to others" ([1], p. 12).

In all Buddhist traditions these are considered the basis upon which all individuals nurture *Samsara*, the unending wheel of transmigration and suffering. These three mental factors are produced by each individual's *karma* immediately upon conception, and are the main producers of the

delusional belief in an ego. By karma we mean the “reactivity” of accepting and rejecting which binds one to these self-centered, potentially destructive, reactive emotions<sup>1</sup>.

### Basic Concepts of some Buddhist Doctrines and some Reflections

The teachings of Buddha, as is clearly evident in the wide range of different Buddhist traditions that have inhabited our planet down the centuries, are not based upon a “one size fits all” approach, because the deep truth they aim to describe exceeds ordinary words and concepts, outweighing the logical categories of everyday life. The purpose of these teachings is to make this deep and inexpressible truth available for the maximum possible number of beings, in order to eventually bring about universal liberation from suffering. They are phrased so as to comply with the numberless visions of the world and explanations of so-called reality, nurtured by all humans (and other sentient beings, too), so that the teachings may become a multiple set of comprehensible tools of liberation for all.

Such worldviews and explanations are ordinarily based on dualistic perceptions, as for example in the dyads of yes/no, good/evil, male/female, light/darkness. These perceptions are the product of our dependence upon the five senses, and what we do or how we deal with these perceptions produces in our minds an archive of concepts and judgments called consciousness (*vijñāna*). These concepts and judgments form the general idea we foster about reality and ourselves, leading us into believing in an entity called ego.

Our entire vision of reality is biased by the relationship between our makeshift ego, acting as subject, and all the phenomena we perceive as objects.

This powerful cause-effect mechanism conditions our mind very deeply, and we are compelled to consider our perception of reality and ourselves as reality itself.

That is how we grow accustomed to calling ‘knowledge’ what in fact is nothing other than our own mental assumptions.

The teachings of Buddha, on the contrary, aim at a knowledge of reality which reaches beyond our biased mental assumptions: it leads to seeing reality as it is. Thus these teachings are called, in Sanskrit, *Buddhadharma*. *Dharma* means ‘phenomena’, *Buddha* means ‘someone who is awakened’. So this expression could be liberally translated as “Insight into the reality of phenomena as perceived by an Awakened One”.

All Buddhist teachings are based upon the Four Noble Truths, which were enunciated by the Buddha in his first sermon: (1) Truth of Suffering, (2) Truth of the Origin (of suffering), (3) Truth of Extinction (of suffering), (4) Truth of the Path (leading to the extinction of suffering).

The first one proceeds from an objective observation from the Buddha’s own experience of life in all its aspects: suffering is universally present, and manifests itself in an apparently infinite array of fashions.

The second emerges from the observation that no sentient being ever wants or likes to suffer; however, the numberless strategies that each of us devises in order to escape from suffering never succeed. That is because we fail to recognize suffering for what it really is: an effect, a product originated by a cause.

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<sup>1</sup> For an explanation of the doctrine of *karman*, see [2].

This cause, the origin of suffering, is within our mind: it is the basic ignorance which produces the delusion of ego with the consequent split subject/object, and the three poisons.

The third one: it is through finding this cause, the origin of suffering, that we can eventually envisage liberation from it. This liberation is traditionally called Cessation or Extinction (*Nirvana*).

Finally, the Path: the set of trainings and behaviors that will lead us to *Nirvana* is variously articulated according to the different traditions, although in general there are four main aspects:

- Point of View, or the collection of notions that a certain practitioner can understand and admit as true;
- Meditation, or the various methods and mind trainings through which the practitioner can verify in practical experience the notions intellectually understood and accepted in his/her point of view, and eventually overcome them into enlightenment; meditation training will help the practitioner develop a natural relaxedness, and ultimately, freedom from the mechanical, compulsive demeanors that mark ordinary life;
- Behavior, derived from the insights and knowledge gathered through meditation and aimed at applying that knowledge for the benefit of sentient beings;
- and finally Fruit, or realization of being freed from suffering: that is, overcoming all limitations and becoming an awakened being (*buddha*).

In the words of the Buddha [3] there is this compendious description of the Path:

“Do not harm others  
Benefit sentient beings  
Completely tame one’s own mind  
This is the Buddha's teaching.”

### **Righteous Action: How the Teachings are Put into Practice**

From a different perspective, the Buddhist Path is threefold, according to various and increasing levels of understanding: (1) Path of Renunciation, (2) Path of Transformation, (3) Path of Self-Liberation.

The Path of Renunciation starts from accepting the concept that there are features in the products of mind activity—such as thoughts, feelings and emotions—that have positive or negative values and outcome, and in order to gain mastery over our own mind we ought to “overcome hindrances”, *i.e.*, give up certain unwholesome demeanors in favor of others, which we consider wholesome and an antidote to the former. As an example, we should try to counteract anger and hatred by cultivating compassion. Those who follow this Path mainly use the texts of the Buddhist Canon called *sutra*.

The Path of Transformation, conversely, is based upon the disclosure that the mental components which are outwardly considered as having an unwholesome or negative nature—namely the Five Destructive Emotions: attachment, aversion, dullness, pride and envy—will, as a result of the practitioner’s training in the special, secret methods of tantric *yoga*, purify and eventually transform themselves showing an entirely different facet, this time positive and wholesome, called the Five Wisdoms, characteristic of the enlightened mind of a *buddha*.

This understanding obviously undermines the belief that certain phenomena can and will only have a positive or negative nature and outcome. The basis for this lies in the celebrated teaching on emptiness (*sunyata*)<sup>2</sup>.

Those who follow the Path of Transformation, in addition to the *sutra* texts study and practice another set of texts from the Tibetan Buddhist Canon called *tantra*. These contain principles and yogic methods which consider dealing and working with energy and the use of *mantram*: these are aspects of training unknown in the *sutra* texts. For this reason, the Path of Transformation is also known as *Mantrayana*.

Finally, the Path of Self-Liberation or *Atiyoga* is based upon first-hand knowledge of the non-dual Nature of Mind, the essence of all phenomena, a state of pure and total presence beyond the level of mind that operates the distinction between subject and object. On this level of knowledge, all phenomena are called “self-perfected ornaments of the self-perfected state”. They do not present features that need to be accepted or rejected.

This state, called Total Perfection (Dzogchen), has to be revealed and actively introduced by a qualified Master into the understanding of the disciple through direct experience. The disciple must recognize it as the innermost nature of one’s own mind and subsequently must cultivate the capability to dwell permanently in its clarity.

The state of Dzogchen is of an extreme, essential simplicity. It is an uncontrived, unsullied reality that is experienced as pristine awareness, as the essence of one’s own mind, as one’s real nature.

The methods and trainings used here are specific to this Path, but the practitioner can use meditative and behavioral methods pertaining to the other two Paths at his/her discretion, should they prove useful and necessary. What marks the difference here is that all methods and trainings are based on the essential, first-hand knowledge unique to Dzogchen, of the Self Perfected State which cannot be learned intellectually but can only be known through direct experience.

### **Dzogchen: The Self-Perfected State**

Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, one of the foremost Dzogchen teachers alive, in the preface to *The Supreme Source*, explains this state [5]:

“...our primordial state... by its own nature contains all the qualities of self-perfection together with the capacity to manifest them without needing to create them, nor rely on any effort. Think of a mirror: the capacity to reflect is a natural quality of the mirror itself, and it is only thanks to this condition that diverse images can appear on its surface uninterruptedly.”

Emotions and passions in the supreme vision of the Dzogchen path are therefore not an object of renunciation as in the monastic or *sutra* system, nor are they transformed into the corresponding wisdoms through a yogic or tantric method.

They simply manifest for what they are: pure reflections, self-perfected in themselves.

In all of the Buddhist Paths, direct experience is considered the most substantial aid to knowledge.

The Dalai Lama says [6]:

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<sup>2</sup> For the teachings on Emptiness, one excellent reference is [4].

“...strictly speaking, in Buddhism scriptural authority cannot outweigh an understanding based on reason and experience....Therefore, when it comes to validating the truth of a claim, Buddhism accords greatest authority to experience, with reason second and scripture last.”

### **The Dzogchen Way of Dealing with Emotions and the other Aspects of Mind Activity**

The Teaching of Dzogchen is the most essential and apical teaching of the Threefold Path, *i.e.*, the so-called Path of Self Liberation.

In this particular Path, the methods for dealing with destructive emotions, as with all mind productions, stem from a vision which does not consider phenomena as good or bad. As we have seen, here we neither speak of poisons nor seek antidotes. In fact we don't even define emotions as destructive or otherwise.

Although technically speaking in the Dzogchen texts there are no ordinary ethics<sup>3</sup>, nonetheless practitioners are strongly advised to maintain presence and awareness at all times and to avoid drifting into distraction.

This last is precisely what we do in ordinary life which compels us to react automatically to impulses generated by emotions and habitual patterns. Any action we perform while being distracted will produce *karma*, thus enveloping us more and more in the suffering wheel of *samsara*.

What distraction specifically means in the Dzogchen teaching is: letting oneself be forgetful of the primordial state, our real nature. Conversely, it must be noted that the correct way of being present in the continuity of this non-conceptual state is effortless.

Emotions manifest continually in the mind flow, as do thoughts and feelings. The trainee at first aims to recognize them immediately as they appear. This exercise of recognition is an active application of presence, or mindfulness.

Thus training here has two levels: (1) applying mindfulness and (2) dwelling in instantaneous presence, the state of contemplation.

Applying mindfulness upon rising emotions is a skill which is developed by the daily practice of contemplation: as soon as the practitioner notices an emotion, whether rising or fully manifest, he/she observes it without distraction and without interfering in any way with it. Subsequently he/she observes how thoughts, feelings or emotions dissolve by themselves, leaving a gap of stillness in the mind.

This is what is called training in relaxed presence.

By so doing, instead of being led by the emotion into action, the practitioner experiences something new: he/she sees the emotion for what it really is, a simple motion of the mind, a manifestation of its energy. Devoid of all habitual features, it proves to be neutral *per se*, and while perceiving it, the practitioner can clearly see that there is no direct, compelling link to act it out.

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<sup>3</sup> Rigorous ethical conduct based on awareness is nevertheless always recommended to trainees in oral instructions by Dzogchen Masters, as although the ideal result of the practice should unfailingly be the spontaneous arising of infinite compassion for all beings—naturally leading to wholesome behaviour—; in the meantime one should never stray into deluding oneself that one is beyond cause and effect until absolute certainty of realization appears.

The total disappearance of the sense of egotism that is the effect of realization will finally result in being utterly beyond the risk of committing negative actions.

Instead of pushing one to do something—thus creating *karma*—it will disintegrate, dissolving in the natural flow of mind activity. In the language of the Dzogchen texts, it is said that the thought/emotion “self-liberates”.

This particular approach or method is meant for fresh practitioners or trainees, as it involves something to do, something to apply.

More expert practitioners are adept in the Dzogchen state of contemplation, called in Tibetan *rigpa* or instantaneous presence. That is, the capacity to dwell inside one’s real nature.

This is a capacity acquired through experience and, once acquired and enlarged through the practice of contemplation, it becomes effortless, totally spontaneous and devoid of intentionality. When someone has reached a stage of training in which one can easily dwell in the instantaneous presence of *rigpa*, the rising emotion manifests immediately as mental energy pure and simple, devoid of whatsoever outlet into action and karmic production. So it “self-liberates” instantly into the space of the intrinsically free nature of mind.

The great Dzogchen master and erudite Longchenpa says [7]:

“Look nakedly at whatever appears at the moment it appears. By relaxing in that state, awareness—in which there is no grasping at appearances as something—arises non-dualistically, intrinsically freed. Thus, because what appears enhances reality, the objects of desire are ornaments of the reality-field.”

and,

“Though attachment, aversion, dullness, pride, and envy may arise, fully understand their inner energy; recognize them in the very first moment, before karma has been accumulated. In the second moment look nakedly at this state and relax in its presence. Then whichever of the five passions arises becomes a pure presence, freed in its own place, without being eliminated. It emerges as the pristine awareness that is clear, pleasurable, and not conditioned by thought.”

## Conclusions

Any spiritual or ethical concerns about destructive emotions as ‘something to get rid of’ should thus be somewhat redressed by the discovery of this pristine dimension which is ours from the origin, utterly beyond good and evil.

The gnosis of Dzogchen, being entirely beyond judgment, shows a new dimension to our existence. It shows that humankind is not forever stained by an indelible mark nor doomed by any external entity; quite on the contrary, humankind’s innermost essence is originally pure and contains the infinite potentiality for total realization.

We have total perfection (*Dzogchen*) as our real nature.

The real challenge is for us to bring it to the surface and make it become truly integrated with our lives, as the source of all our actions and endeavors, in order to fulfill the *Bodhisattva* commitment, our engagement ever to serve for the benefit of all, as wonderfully phrased by the great mystic and poet, Santideva [8]:

“For as long as space endures and for as long as the world lasts, may I live dispelling the miseries of the world.”

## Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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