

Practice Makes Perfect: Common Grounds in the Practice Paths of Chuan Chen Tao and Dzog Chen Dharma

By Daniel Reid

As modern Western civilization continues to deteriorate and its conventional cultural institutions, particularly organized religions, become ever more meaningless to serious seekers of truth and spiritual understanding, a bewildering plethora of ancient Eastern teachings have suddenly appeared to fill the growing theosophic void in the Western world. Contending for the attention of new Western adherents, some of these old Eastern sects promise the same short-cuts to salvation made by the monotheistic religions of the West: "follow our rules, observe our rituals, worship our deities, and everything will be fine forever."

In order to avoid stumbling into the same old religious rut of promised salvation later in exchange for blind faith now, Western seekers must learn how to cultivate awareness and discover the truth themselves through personal practice and direct experience, utilizing their own energies and their own minds as a basis. To do this, one must practice effective methods taught by self-perfected masters, rather than relying on scriptural dogma preached from the pulpit.

Among the many Eastern traditions currently vying for attention in the Western spiritual marketplace, the two that place the greatest emphasis on intuitive discovery through personal practice are the nontheistic spiritual sciences of Buddhism and Taoism. Within these grand traditions and all their myriad schools and sub-sects, there are two practice lineages that provide sincere and diligent seekers a concrete, viable path that leads practitioners to direct, intuitive understanding of "Complete Reality" and an effective method for cultivating the "Great Perfection" of enlightened awareness. This is a path of practice that transcends all doctrinaire debates, eliminates all factional doubts, and awakens the practitioner to his or her own original State of primordial awareness, the State "that is not born and does not die," the Way "that has no name." This path is known in Taoism as Chuan Chen ("Complete Reality") and in Buddhism as Dzog Chen ("Great Perfection").

Two hundred years ago, the accomplished Taoist adept and writer, Liu I-ming, declared, "When you recognize that the principles of the sages are the same, you will realize that Taoism and Buddhism are alike. If you do not understand this and seek elsewhere, you will get involved in sidetracks, wasting your life in vain imagining." So let's elucidate this point by first defining the most basic principle in Buddhism and Taoism, the principle that links the two and constitutes the basis for practice in both.

In Buddhism, the ultimate goal of practice is to attain "enlightenment" by experiencing bodhicitta – the immutable, immortal State of primordial awareness – and thereby "becoming a buddha," or "awakened one" (cheng fuo). In Taoism, the goal is precisely the same, but the term is to attain "immortality" – to return to that pure and perfect State of primordial ("pre-natal") awareness that "is not born and does not die" – and thereby "become an immortal" (cheng hsien), one who has awakened to the Way things really are, always have been, and forever shall be, i.e. the Tao. These goals, though couched in different cultural terms, are one and the same and can only be reached by the path of diligent practice and continuous self-cultivation. The goal here is not to worship and obey a "supreme being," separate and superior to oneself, but rather to discover a supreme state of being, a

state of pure and perfect awareness that resides within oneself and must be directly experienced, known and utilized in life. This is the path of Complete Reality and Great Perfection, the path in which "practice makes perfect" and results depend entirely on the diligence and perseverance of the practitioner, and the time and energy he or she devotes to self-cultivation.

The essence of the Dzog Chen teachings is summarized in the famous "Three Statements of Garab Dorje," the enlightened master who founded this ancient practice lineage in northern India two thousand years ago. The first principle is "direct introduction," whereby the master introduces the student directly to the real nature, or "State," of his or her own mind – the wide open, brilliantly luminous, infinitely potential energy of primordial awareness. This is the preliminary learning stage, and it requires the direct guidance of a realized master who is qualified to transmit the essence of the State and teach the methods of practice.

The second principle is to "eliminate doubt" through actual experience of the State in the student's own personal practice, utilizing the methods taught by the master. These methods enable the student to discover his or her own real condition in actual practice, thereby eliminating any lingering doubts about the truth of the teachings.

The third and final stage of practice is "integration," which means extending the knowledge and experience of awareness – the "fruit" of the practice – into every activity of daily life. It means remaining present in the State of awareness as much as possible at all times, not only during formal meditation sessions and practice retreats, and always conducting oneself on the basis of that condition.

The Three Statements of Garab Dorje accord well with the traditional guidelines of practice in the Chuan Chen lineage of Taoism, the "mountain men" (and women) who strove to embody the immortal Tao in every deed, word, and thought of their daily lives. In the Complete Reality path of Taoist self-cultivation, every adept begins the quest for truth through a fortuitous encounter with an enlightened sage, "a man of Tao" who transmits the essence of the Way and teaches its methods of realization. The aspiring adept then retires from the world for a period of time and goes into seclusion in the mountains to practice the teachings to self-perfection, a process known as hsiou tao ("cultivating the Way"). Finally, when the "complete reality" of Tao has been realized, the adept "returns to the towns and markets" to apply the Way in all the myriad activities of daily life "among ordinary people" (ren jian).

Using these three stages of cultivation as a guideline, let's take a closer look at some of the common grounds traversed by the practice paths of Chuan Chen Tao and Dzog Chen Dharma.

Direct Introduction: The Base

In Dzog Chen tradition, the ground of spiritual practice is known as the "base." That ground is bodhicitta, the pure and perfect nature of mind, the original State of primordial awareness that shines in the heart of each and every individual. In Chuan Chen terminology, the primordial State is variously referred to as the "precious pearl," the "pre-natal mind," the "triplex unity of essence, energy, and spirit," or simply the "Way." Direct experience of this pure and perfect State is the goal of practice in both traditions.

The ground of primordial awareness has two fundamental features – stillness and movement – and both are as natural to the terrain of mind as mountains and water are to landscapes. The more conventional schools of Buddhist and Taoist meditation place preferential emphasis on the stillness aspect of mind, discounting the movement of mind as a distraction to be avoided. The result of such partial practice is that the practitioner never learns how to recognize and regulate the manifold facets and functions of his or her own energy. Energy (movement) is as natural a quality of mind as emptiness (stillness), and the spontaneous movement of energy accounts for all the thoughts and feelings, emotions and desires, functions and processes we experience in life. Energy also fuels all the forms and functions of nature, from which the energy of mind is never separate. Learning how to recognize the energy of mind at work, and how to handle its natural movement in meditation and in life, is therefore as vital a step on the path of primordial awareness as is the discovery of the essential emptiness of mind.

In Taoist tradition, the still and moving aspects of mind are known as Yin and Yang – the passive and creative, dark and light, empty and full. Both facets are ever-present and mutually co-emergent, like waves rising and falling on the sea, or wind stirring the air. “It’s real description,” writes the 18th century Taoist commentator Liu I-ming, “would be a stateless state. Tranquil and unstirring, yet sensitive and effective – call on it and it responds [movement], in quietude it is clear [still].” In Tibetan Buddhist iconography, the essential emptiness and natural movement of mind are symbolized in yab yum—the male and female aspects of buddhas locked in sexual union—and they are cultivated as the sources of wisdom and compassion respectively.

“When we are in meditation,” explains contemporary Dzog Chen master Namkhai Norbu, “we should not rest with the idea that the calm state is something to build up or to accept while movement is something to turn away ... The ultimate aim of meditation in Dzog Chen consists simply in maintaining presence of both the calm state and movement.” Therefore, as thoughts arise, we simply recognize them as the natural movement of mind’s energy, like wind rustling in the trees, and try not to get distracted by them, or treat them as something special.

Learning how to deal with our energy is a vital aspect of training in both Chuan Chen and Dzog Chen tradition. That’s why both lineages teach forms of “moving meditation” in addition to still sitting forms – to familiarize the practitioner with the movement of energy in body as well as mind, and show the adept how to control the external manifestations of energy while simultaneously remaining in a calm state of stillness inside. Thus in Taoist practice we have Tai Chi Chuan, the Eight Pieces of Brocade, and other moving chi-gung forms, while in Dzog Chen there is Yantra Yoga and the Vajra Dance. All of these practices engage the three human vehicles of body, breath, and mind in a unified and rhythmic manifestation of energy that allows the practitioner to experience the primordial unity of essence, energy, and spirit (jing, chi, shen) and grow familiar with both the still and moving nature of mind.

Another common foundation in Dzog Chen and Chuan Chen is the primary importance of receiving direct transmission from an accomplished, self-perfected master. The central role of the guru is a well known feature in Tibetan Buddhism, and in Dzog Chen, guru-yoga is one of the most basic practices. This does not mean worshipping the master, but rather trying one’s best to enter the State of awareness which the master has introduced and remain therein as much as possible in meditation as well as in daily life. The reason that the State can only be introduced by a realized master is that it is a living experience, an actual presence of mind, not a theoretical concept than can be gleaned from a

book or video. As the master orally instructs the student, much more than just his words is being transmitted. The very presence of the master conveys the essence of the State on an intuitive level, imparting the radiant energy of enlightened awareness directly from master to student and implanting its potent seed in the energy field of the student. In this way, the luminous energy of the master's awareness flows into the student's mindstream along with the oral lesson, and together they form the basis of the student's subsequent practice. The energy of the master's presence transmits the essential seed of awareness, while his words introduce the methods whereby the student may cultivate the seed to fruition in practice.

The same principle applies in Chuan Chen Taoist tradition. A master appears and transmits the essence of the Way in a chance encounter, inspiring the student to embark upon the path by virtue of the master's enlightening presence of mind. Taoist lore is rich in stories of such fortuitous encounters. For example, in Shi Jing's vignette of Liu Hai-chan in the Summer 2001 issue of *The Dragon's Mouth*, we read how Liu Hai-chan, a worldly man of fame and fortune, receives his waking call from a wandering Taoist sage who visits his home and demonstrates his mastery of mind. Thereafter, "Liu realized his folly and resigned as prime minister so that he could travel to the mountains to study the Tao." In a passage entitled "Witnessing the Tao," Liu I-ming explains the importance of finding an enlightened guide:

The Tao must be witnessed ... Though you may awake to essence on your own, this is not to be relied on; the science of life, transmitted by teachers, must be ascertained through experience. Innate knowledge must be completed by learned knowledge; if you have real material, you still look for a master craftsman to make sure. It is a pity that people who consider themselves intelligent get involved in twisted byways because they act impulsively on random guesswork ... This is something you cannot guess on your own – the instruction of an enlightened guide is necessary.

What the master introduces to the student is nothing more or less than the student's own innate enlightened nature, the treasure trove of truth within, not a mysterious formula or magic elixir from external sources. As Namkhai Norbu puts it, "What is of real value is in ourselves, in our own original state: this is our wealth. Until we discover it, we are like the beggar, always seeking something from others but remaining in poverty ... If we turn outwards, nothing has any value." Liu I-ming agrees precisely on this point: "The Tao is a treasure ... This has nothing to do with material alchemy. It is utterly simple, utterly easy ... It is completely spiritual, true goodness. The ridiculous thing is that foolish people seek mysterious marvels, when they do not know enough to preserve the mysterious marvel that is actually present." In order to discover the marvel of this inner treasure and learn how to appreciate the value of its purity and perfection, we must dispense with wishful thinking, simplify our lives, and commit ourselves to concrete practice.

Eliminating Doubt: The Path of Practice

Unless you are willing to devote time and energy to practice, there is little point in embarking upon the quest for truth and self-perfection. So many people today claim, "I don't have time to practice. I'm too busy." Or else they say, "Meditation is only for monks, not for ordinary people like me." So instead they content themselves to read a few books, donate some money to worthy causes, and affiliate themselves with a prominent group or popular master, without ever taking the time to actually practice the teachings. This sort of approach may generate good intentions, but it never develops real understanding or self-perfection, nor does it contribute much to changing the world for

the better. As Yogananda pointed out, "Change yourself, and you have done your share to change the world." But the only way to change yourself is to practice self-cultivation.

The fact of the matter is this: anyone who sincerely wishes to cultivate awareness and self-perfection can certainly take the time and energy to do so within the context of his or her daily life, without becoming a monk or forsaking family and social responsibilities. What's required here is a re-arrangement of basic priorities and a simplification of lifestyle in order to make room for practice. People these days spend an average of four to six hours a day gazing at television, but it only requires less than half that time to sustain a strong, fruitful meditation practice. The real problem is not lack of time – it's lack of resolution and sincerity. "To attain the Tao requires resolution, cutting decisively through whatever holds you back," remarks Liu I-ming. "People who study Taoism and Buddhism yet cannot wrap up the complications in their lives completely and effectively are ridiculous."

A popular approach to "spirituality" these days is to join an exotic new group, learn a few new chants, take on a new nickname, and consider oneself to be a newborn spiritual being. Of this sort, Liu I-ming says, "So many practitioners are merely skipping rope – with one or two Zen phrases they pretend to be great hermits, having done a little meditating they call themselves advanced sages. Such people are insubstantial, shifty, and vacuous; they just talk to delude others, but it is themselves they delude." As Lao-tze notes in the Tao Teh Ching, "He who knows does not speak; he who speaks does not know."

The only way to realize the truth of "Complete Reality" and attain the "Great Perfection" of primordial awareness is to practice meditation, "sitting still and doing nothing" (ching jing wu wei) until awareness dawns. For those accustomed to the constant distraction of sensory entertainment, or who believe only in external short-cuts to salvation, meditation can be a very boring business. But for those who yearn to discover the "precious pearl" of luminous awareness hidden within the maze of mundane consciousness, meditation is the secret map that leads the mind slowly but surely to the mysterious marvel within.

"To meditate," explains Namkhai Norbu, "only means to keep presence both of the state of calm and that of movement; there is nothing on which to meditate ... The truth here is that the calm state is the essence of mind, and the movement is its energy: they are two inseparable aspects of the same reality, like a river and its waves or the sun and its rays." At first, many practitioners feel disturbed by the strange thoughts and strong feelings that bubble up from their minds when they sit down to meditate. It's important therefore to realize that these thoughts are nothing more than manifestations of one's own energy, conditioned by one's own habitual ways of thinking and behaving. There's no point trying to fend them off or suppress them, or feeling guilty and inadequate for having them. Simply recognize them as your own "stuff," and if you wish to change the way your stuff manifests, all you need to do is change the way you think and act in your daily life. As long as you have a body, you cannot separate mind from matter: you are what you do as well as what you think, and what meditation does is show you a reflection of the energy you manifest in life.

Meditation is a mirror of your own mind, and what you see is a reflection of how you use your energy. In the beginning, it can be quite disturbing, because the images that arise are not always as pretty as you imagine yourself to be. Herein lies the transformative power of meditation: it shows you "where you're really at," and it can prompt you to make positive changes in the way you manifest your energy in the world. Meanwhile, as Namkhai Norbu advises, "one must simply acknowledge

whatever thoughts arise – good or bad, relevant or insignificant – and just continue observing the state of ‘movement:’ this point is vitally important.”

This work takes time and patience and requires careful attention and presence of mind. It’s not as artless as turning on the television or putting a frozen pizza into the microwave. On the other hand, we’re not talking about back-breaking work like digging ditches, or the sheer force of will required to scale Mt. Everest. We’re simply talking about giving up some unnecessary distractions (such as a few hours of TV time) and investing only a fraction of the effort and attention to spiritual practice that most people pour into the single-minded pursuit of fame and fortune, fun and games. Moreover, while fame and fortune are fleeting and fickle rewards that never last, awareness and wisdom become permanent assets in this life and beyond. To gain them, however, you must give them the proper priority in life and pay sufficient attention to the work. “If you are insubstantial and lacking in will,” asks Liu I-ming, “how can you ever transcend the ordinary crowd? ... All over the world there are people who want to get rich on this earth and also leap into the clouds and climb the nine heavens, but I have never heard of a sage coming from among them.”

At first, it may be helpful to isolate yourself from “the ordinary crowd,” or go into periodic retreat, in order to avoid distractions and concentrate on your practice in quietude. But ultimately you must realize that all sensory perceptions, just like thoughts and feelings, are only manifestations of energy moving within your own mind, not independent external events. And when you realize that, you can practice anywhere, any time, under any conditions, without disturbance or distraction from internal or external movement. Here again, the important point to remember is that movement is as natural to the primordial State of awareness as stillness, and that you need not prefer one or the other, nor try to create an artificial calm. As Namkhai Norbu suggests in *The Mirror: Advice on the Presence of Awareness*,

The most important thing when practicing meditation is not to look for anything, not to think that one is meditating or that anything particular ought to manifest. Without creating, without wishing to receive or obtain anything, remaining beyond desire and apprehension, one must continue in the presence of one’s own state ... That is why in both Dzog Chen and Mahamudra it is explained that meditation must start freely, leaving thought free and observing it, not controlling it.

In other words, just “let it be, let it be,” and you will soon discover that it is nothing and everything, empty and full, still and moving – the original and sole source of one and all. Already perfect and complete, it needs no re-defining from you. All you need to do is learn to recognize it. “Awake or asleep,” writes Liu I-ming, “it is always there; looking, listening, talking, walking, it is very very close. This is not the awareness of conditioned knowledge, it is the original sane energy, vitality, and spirit. If you seek this in terms of form or shape, you are mistaking the servant for the master.” If you wish to master your original sane State, you must order your priorities according to the dictum of Chang Po-tuan, one of the great masters of the Chuan Chen lineage: “Practicing self-refinement is the first priority.”

Integration: The Fruit

The fruit of the practice is to integrate the presence of awareness with all your daily activities by dissolving the distinction between meditation and life. This is the “Great Perfection” of Dzog Chen practice and the way of the “Perfected Man” in Chuan Chen cultivation. It means that every activity of

body, speech, and mind arises directly from the self-perfected State of pure awareness rather than the confusion and conflict of ego and emotion, and that daily life itself becomes the ground and the path of practice.

To complete their quest of self-cultivation as truly Perfected Men (jen ren), adepts of Chuan Chen Tao must return from seclusion in mountains and hermitages and once again live among ordinary people in towns and markets, where the give-and-take of daily life provides a perpetual stage for continuous practice. This is the final test of the adept's attainment and the gauge that separates the real practitioner from the impostor.

In the Chuan Chen lineage, the integration of practice and daily life traditionally involved the conscious cultivation of poverty as path. "Poverty is the foundation of nurturing life," wrote the Perfected Man, Ma Tan-yang. "Such is truly the lifestyle of a person of the Tao." Liu Hai-chan, after resigning his powerful post as prime minister and forsaking the comforts of wealth in order to go to the mountains to study and practice the Tao, finally returned to the towns and spent the rest of his life hanging around public markets, where he became known as the beggar A Bao. Earning his way with odd jobs and menial tasks in wealthy households, he skillfully utilized the mundane situations of everyday life to further hone his practice and to help people in need, while constantly inspiring others to cultivate the Tao with dazzling displays of his own amazing attainments.

The founding patriarch of the Chuan Chen lineage, Wang Chung-yang, taught his disciples to beg for a living as an effective means of fusing their spiritual practice with the practical requirements of daily survival in the world. Many of his followers were educated men and women from wealthy households, and begging in public taught them the virtues of humility and non-attachment far more efficiently than book learning or meditation. Begging also insured a simple, elementary lifestyle, free from the distractions of holding office and immune to the spiritually crippling complexities of fame and fortune. The deliberate cultivation of "pure poverty" helped to tame the ego and allowed the adept to devote sufficient time and energy to nurturing the precious pearl of awareness shining within his or her own mind.

In Dzog Chen, integration is also regarded as the final and most important stage of practice. After receiving direct introduction to the true nature of mind from a master, and eliminating all doubt about it through direct experience in practice, the Dzogchenpa must learn to integrate the State of awareness with ordinary activities and erase the boundary between meditation and life, thereby dissolving the contradiction between what one knows internally and what one does externally. "Practicing only means bringing knowledge into daily life," states Namkhai Norbu, "without getting distracted ... This is the only way the teachings can become something concrete ... For this reason, it is very important to try to maintain presence as much as possible, integrating it with all our activities."

Sitting still in the tranquility of your shrine room and attending occasional meditation retreats are all well and good, but beyond that, you must extend your practice to all situations, at all times, "until there is no longer any distinction between meditation and life." To those who claim they have no time for practice, Namkhai Norbu replies that apart from sitting sessions and periodic retreats, "practicing does not mean doing anything in particular: living is enough. Only if someone told me, 'I am sorry, Master, I haven't had time to live!' would I believe that they didn't have time to practice."

The key to integration is to avoid getting distracted, to try your best to remain ever-present in the State of awareness and never lose your view of "Complete Reality." That's why so many Taoist masters choose to live in poverty – to avoid the distractions of fame and fortune and focus attention on the basics of practice and presence in daily life. "If we practice without distraction," explains Namkhai Norbu, "gradually the space of the meditation increases, becoming integrated with daily activities ... fact, in order to realize the inseparability of meditation and daily activities, we must apply the practice twenty four hours a day. And that can only be done by not getting distracted."

Unless we are prepared to apply the teachings in a concrete way in our daily lives, and extend our internal awareness to our external activities, we run the risk of becoming what Liu I-ming describes as "vacuous dilettantes ... merely skipping rope." Knowing what's true but doing what's false in daily life is sheer hypocrisy and belies the very essence of spiritual practice. As the Dalai Lama notes, "The real practice is daily life."

Herein lies the grandeur of the Dzog Chen and Chuan Chen vision – the realization that self-perfection is possible in this very lifetime, and that awareness and energy may be fully integrated in every activity of body, speech, and mind. It's a vision of Great Perfection and Complete Reality that every individual on earth has the potential to realize in his or her own life, but that few have the patience and persistence to pursue. For those who do, the same signpost appears again and again at every milestone along the path: "Practice Makes Perfect: Proceed Onward!"

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Notes:

Quotes from Liu I-ming were taken from *Awakening to the Tao*, by Liu I-ming, translated by Thomas Cleary (Shambhala, 1988)

Quotes from Namkhai Norbu were taken from *The Mirror: Advice on the Presence of Awareness*, by Namkhai Norbu, translated by Adriano Clemente and Andrew Lukianowicz (Shang-Shung Edizioni & Barrytown Ltd, 1996)