Death Dharma - Opening the Doors of Perception

An Analysis of Non-Conceptual Meditation Based on the *Ratnagotravibhāga*

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Table of Content

Acknowledgment....3
Abstract....4

Chapter One: Introduction....5
Literature Review....9
Methodology....14
Narrative Outline of the Chapters....15

Chapter Two: Three Principles Underlying *Death Dharma*....18
2.1. The concept of *Saṃsāra*, a Helpful *Wallpaper*....18
2.2. The Refuge of the Three Jewels....22
2.3. The Purification Process according to the RGV....29

Chapter Three: The Method of *Death Dharma:* Non-Conceptual Meditation....34
3.1. Non-Conceptual Wisdom in Tsen Khawoché's Interpretation of the RGV....34
3.2. The Dynamic of Conceptual and Non-Conceptual Awareness....39
3.3. Mapping the Effects of Non-Conceptual Awareness....44

Chapter Four: *Death Dharma* and the Doors of Perception....49
4.1. The (In-) Direct Nature of Perception....49
4.2. The Seeing of Meditation....53
4.3. Fundamental Change (Skt. *āśrayaparivṛtti*)....57

Chapter Five: Keeping the Doors of Perception Open....63
5.1. Devotion - Key to Keeping the Doors of Perception Open....63
5.2. Nāropa's Six Dharmas: Methods for Keeping the Doors of Perception Open....66
5.3. Gampopa's Simple Remedy....72

***Death Dharma*: Attempting a Conclusion**....77
Bibliography....80

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Abstract

Those contemplating or facing death are confronted with profound uncertainty. Since this study focuses on this challenging time, this research takes inspiration from the Tibetan yogi Tsen Khawoché, who found instructions for his *death dharma* in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV). Through it, he made death an opportunity. By following his footsteps, this analysis of the RGV identifies at least three principles underlying the practice of *death dharma* and a specific method that leads to the salvific effects of seeing deathlessness. At the core of this method stands the notion of Buddha Nature. Therefore, this research investigates Tsen Khawoché's meditation tradition of the RGV, as well as related Yogācāra doctrines, like fundamental change (Skt. *āśrayaparivṛtti*), and Pramāṇa teachings, like yogic perception, to examine the building blocks leading to the result of the practice of *death dharma*: direct seeing. In the end, the question of how to stabilize such seeing is investigated. Through such investigation, *death dharma* emerges to lead one beyond the habitual conceptual framework of one's rational thinking mind, including the unnerving experience of uncertainty.

Chapter One: Introduction

The *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV) is a 4th-century treatise that is essential within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition for the understanding of the doctrine of Buddha Nature (Skt. *tathāgatagarbha*; Tib. *de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po*).[1] One of its commentators, Tsen Khawoché (Tib. *btsan kha bo che dri med shes rab;* b. 1021 CE), piqued my curiosity. Khawoché traveled at age 56 from Tibet to Kashmir to request from the pandit Sajjana (11th century) instructions on the five treatises of Maitreya (*byams chos sde lnga*), stating: "Now I have grown old! I cannot master many books. I wish to make the doctrine of Maitreya my *death dharma* (Tib. *'chi chos*) [..]."[2] Karma Kagyu scholar Karl Brunnhölzl explains that making a teaching one's *death dharma* "means to take it as the basis for one's practice when dying to attain Buddhahood, become liberated from *saṃsāra*, or at least obtain another favorable rebirth."[3] Khawoché received this benefit through studying the *Ratnagotravibhāga* with Sajjana, with the help of the translator Zu Gawé Dorje (Tib. *gzu dga' ba'i rdo rje;* dates unknown). To address Khawoché's request, Sajjana further explained the oral Mahāmudrā pith instructions (Skt. *upadeśa*; Tib. *mengak*) on the RGV.[4] Mahāmudrā is a practice tradition that originated in

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[1] Karl Brunnhölzl, *When the Clouds Part: The Uttaratantra and Its Meditative Tradition as a Bridge between Sūtra and Tantra* (Boston: Snow Lion, 2014), 53. The Sanskrit term *tathāgatagarbha* has been taken to be a *bahuvrīhi* compound, meaning that all sentient beings' nature (Skt. *garbha*) is *buddha* or *tathāgata*. A closer etymological analysis of the term *tathāgatagarbha* explains *tathā* to mean thus or thusness. Its addition *gata* could mean going or *āgata* meaning arriving. The first part of the term means "thus gone" or "thus come" and is also used as an epithet for Buddha/awakening; The term *garbha* means "womb," "containing," or "embryo," "core," and "essence." Brunnhölzl explains that modern scholarship has found these variations are inherent in the Sanskrit "*garbha*" and that this is extended in the tantric context also to mean "middle" or "center" (*mādhyama*).

[2] George Roerich, *The Blue Annals* (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1949), 347. Roerich reports and translates *chis chos byed pa* as death prayer, explaining it to be a text to be reciting at the time of death. The teachings attributed to the celestial being Maitreya are five texts, whose authorship is disputed or simply unknown. These are: (1) *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (*Mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan, AA*), (2) *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* (*Theg pa chen po'i mdo sde rgyan, MSA*), (3) *Madhyāntavibhāga* (*Dbus dang mtha' rnam par 'byed pa, MV*), the (4) *Dharmadharmatāvibhaṅga* (*Chos dang chos nyid rnam par dbye ba, DDV*), and (5) *Ratnagotravibhāga (RGV)*

[3] Brunnhölzl, Cloud, 1006, fn325.

[4] Klaus-Dieter Mathes, "Pith Instruction on Mahāyāna Uttaratantra," in Illuminating Mirror, ed. Olaf Czaja et al. (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2015), 304.

India's tantric *siddha* movement around the 7-8th century.[5] It is a type of meditation specifically aiming to realize the mind's nature (i.e., Buddha Nature).[6]

It is unknown exactly how Sajjana taught Khawoché these Mahāmudrā pith instructions. Brunnhölzl considers a small text by Sajjana called the *Pith Instructions on "The Treatise on the Ultimate Continuum of the Mahāyāna"* (Skt. *mahāyānottaratantraśāstropadeśa)* to be Sajjana's *death dharma* instructions.[7] Klaus-Dieter Mathes, on the other hand, seems to suggest that those orally transmitted pith instructions are what has been passed along in the lineage and are now found within the text by Mönlam Tsultrim (Tib. *skyo ston smon lam tshul khrims*; 1219-1299) called *Pith Instructions on the Mahāyāna Uttaratantra* (Tib. *theg chen rgyud bla' i gdams pa).*[8] The works of Brunnhölzl and Mathes on these two short treatises are used for this analysis. However, *death dharma* does not emerge from these writings as an encapsulated set of instructions. Therefore, this research takes further inspiration from RGV's famous verse, translated here by Brunnhölzl. This verse is close to what later Mahāmudrā teachings emphasize:

> There is nothing to be removed from this
> And not the slightest to be added.
> Actual reality is to be seen as it really is -
> Whoever sees actual reality is liberated.[9] [RGV I.154].

According to the commentary of Jamgön Kongtrül (*'jam mgon kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho*, 1813-1899), the first two lines describe Buddha Nature, a nature considered perfect, unchanging,

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[5] Roger Jackson, "Mahāmudrā in India," *Oxford Bibliographies*: 2020, accessed June 23, 2023, DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780195393521-0084.
[6] Roger Jackson, "Mahāmudrā: Natural Mind in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism," *Religion Compass*, no. 5/7 (2011): 286. Roger Jackson explains the use of the term *Mahāmudrā* to be "an index of ultimacy, regarded as the luminous, empty nature of mind, i.e., our buddha-nature; a type of meditation for realizing mind's nature; a set of unconventional practices that express that realization; and the final fruit of meditation, Buddhahood."
[7] Brunnhölzl, Cloud, 1129, n1797.
[8] Mathes, "Pith Instructions", 304.
[9] Brunnhölzl, Cloud, 410. Translated by Brunnhölzl.

and pure.[10] Such an unchanging reality lends itself to death preparation because everything else about death is nothing but change and loss from a conventional viewpoint. The last two lines indicate that this unchanging reality merely needs to be seen. The questions follow: How is one to *see* Buddha Nature? How can such a seeing eliminate the suffering of death? And accordingly, what is the *death dharma* of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*? This is what the current research set out to investigate.

Similar questions were raised by Seyford Ruegg, who, in his article "On the Knowability and Expressibility of Absolute Reality," inquired into the possibility of cognizing Buddha Nature since 1) it is known only by the *tathāgata* himself, 2) or to the most advanced *bodhisattvas*; 3) and it is inaccessible to *śravakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*.[11] This is due to Buddha Nature being inconceivable (Skt. *atarkya*), beyond the rational thinking mind (Skt. *manovijñāna*), and free from the four extremes (Skt. *cātuṣkoṭika*).[12] In this way, it cannot be expressed verbally (Skt. *anabhilāpya*). However, Ruegg also observes that the *sūtras* and *śastras* (including the RGV) state that Buddha Nature is accessible by a mind of faith (Skt. *śraddha*), which is supported by logical insight into the matter and its resulting convinced adhesion (Skt. *adhimukti*).[13]

This research into RGV's *death dharma* investigates the RGV's principles that can be applied to death preparation in a contemporary context. To do so, it searches for the traditional Buddhist understanding underlying the RGV on how the conceptual mind yields to a non-conceptual seeing. This is relevant since, as a Buddhist Chaplain, I have observed a strong desire

[10] Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thaye, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, *Buddha Nature: The Mahayana Uttaratantra Shastra*, trans. Rosemarie Fuchs (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2000), 122.
[11] Ruegg, Knowability and Expressibility, 1-2.
[12] Ibid, 3.
[13] Ibid.

for certainty among dying patients and their families. Although a spiritual care response rarely discusses philosophy, such knowledge is central to a Chaplain's formation and informs one's response.[14] Similarly, Buddhist practitioners who approach their death as an opportunity seek a sense of certainty in their practice to counteract the emotions following the unknowns of death. Many Buddhist books on death preparation have been published thus far to fulfill that need.[15] They provide helpful tools for those interested but tend to minimize a discussion regarding the philosophy behind these techniques. In my opinion, getting at least a small understanding of the complex philosophical background of, in this case, the teachings on Buddha Nature as interpreted by Tsen Khawoché, can further contribute to the faith needed to see this ultimate reality. It can help dying patients find a sense of certainty and perhaps even liberation through such seeing. In this way, this research investigates the seeing of Buddha Nature for death preparation, just as Tsen Khawoché sought hermeneutical instructions based on a philosophical treatise to prepare himself. In addition, one of the premises of this research is that he learned to connect these teachings with Mahāmudrā meditation instructions for that same purpose.

This analysis follows the literature on Khawoché as presented in Karl Brunnhölzl's book *When the Clouds Part.* Next to a translation of the RGV and some of its commentaries, it explains the relationship between the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and the Mahāmudrā tradition, which is not repeated here.[16] However, based on these findings and through comparative analysis and hermeneutics, the current research investigates what constitutes *death dharma* within the meditation tradition. Such an investigation has not been done elsewhere.

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[14] Giles, Cheryl A., and Willa Blythe Baker, eds. *The Arts of Contemplative Care: Pioneering Voices in Buddhist Chaplaincy and Pastoral Work* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 25.
[15] See, for example, Pema Chödrön, *How We Live Is How We Die* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 2022). Or: Andrew Holecek, *Preparing to Die* (Boston: Snow Lion, 2013).
[16] Brunnhölzl, Cloud, 151-282.

This study thereby identifies at least three principles that support *death dharma*: the transitory nature of *saṃsāra*, the three refuges, and the purification process of mind as explained in the RGV. In addition, the current finding sees non-conceptual meditation as the central method and application of *death dharma*. The core of this method is direct, unmediated seeing of the nature of the mind, which is Buddha Nature. To build a bridge to this advanced practice and make it rationally accessible, this research investigates related explanations of the Yogācāra and Pramāṇa traditions that examine how this seeing is possible to provide a logical basis for the assertions on non-conceptual awareness. These traditional explanations are needed since seeing Buddha Nature is not seeing with the eyes or the intellect.[17] Yet, with the help of rational faith, one can learn to take death as an opportunity, meet uncertainty and fear, and lead the mind to go beyond conceptual constructed perception. It is in this way that this analysis has consequently been titled "*Death Dharma* - Opening the Doors of Perception."[18]

Literature Review

As mentioned, the foundational reading for this investigation into Tsen Khawoché's meditation tradition has been the extensive work of Karl Brunnhölzl. In particular, his book on the *Ratnagotravibhāga* which is called *When the Clouds Part* (2014). One finds therein the historical developments of Tsen Khawoché's transmission lineage, its relationship to the Mahāmudrā tradition that also passed through Sajjana, as well as the *shentong* (Tib. *gzhan stong*)

[17] Hookham, S. K. *The Buddha within,* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992), 57.
[18] This writer is aware of a book by Aldous Huxley (1954) titled *The Doors of Perception,* a historical landmark of first discussing psychedelics' potential benefits. Psychedelics have also been important in discussing death preparation in recent years. They are effective in various research findings, helping those on the trial to become more fearless in the face of death. This association with this paper is suggestive but not the focus of the arguments of this research, as no psychedelic usage was involved in Tsen Khawoché's search for *death dharma* as far as known. See https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/newsroom/news-releases/psychedelics-may-lessen-fear-of-death-and-dying-similar-to-feelings-reported-by-those-whove-had-near-death-experiences, last accessed 6.9.2023.

view that is found within the works of some Tibetan thinkers. Further, there are several related translations of short treaties from within the meditation tradition, two of which were cited above. In addition, there is a very brief exposition of the Mahāmudrā view for the time of death by Mönlam Tsultrim called *Pith Instruction on the Wisdom at the Point of Passing When About to Die* (Tib. *'da' ka ye shes kyi 'chi kha ma'i man ngag*); and a short treatise likewise by Mönlam Tsultrim called *Repository of Wisdom* (Tib. *ye shes kyi 'jog sa*) that affirms the RGV as a suitable *death dharma.* This latter text explains some principles of the RGV in a question-and-answer format and highlights that adhering to concepts (Skt. *vikalpa*) results in staining Buddha Nature. It further speaks of "terminating" those concepts, which led this research to analyze what it takes to do so and see Buddha Nature directly.

Further, Brunnhölzl's book on Rangjung Dorje (Tib. *rang byung rdo rje*, 1284-1339), called *Luminous Heart* (2009), explains the concept of the fundamental change (Skt. *āśrayaparivṛtti*) in the Buddha Nature context.[19] The teachings on *āśrayaparivṛtti* are also closely associated with the Maitreya text called *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* (DDV), which is related to the RGV. Brunnhölzl's introduction to his translation of the DDV, *Mining Wisdom Within Delusion*, has likewise contributed to helping understand this fundamental change in the context of the RGV. In this way, Karl Brunnhölzl greatly contributed to this study and continues to be a vast resource on this topic of the Maitreya works and the Mahāmudrā tradition.

Further, various writings by Klaus-Dieter Mathes were consulted. His extensive research on the meditation tradition, *shentong* Madhyamaka and Mahāmudrā, gave insight into their connection. He discusses the RGV through the commentary of Gö Lotsawa Zhonnu Pel (Tib. *'gos lo tsA ba gzhon nu dpal*, 1392-1481CE) in the book, *A Direct Path to the Buddha Within*,

[19] Karl Brunnhölzl, *Luminous Heart: The Third Karmapa on Consciousness, Wisdom, and Buddha Nature* (Ithaca, N.Y: Snow Lion Publications, 2009).

which presents a detailed comparison of Gö Lotsawa's view with that of other Tibetan *shentong* masters.[20] Such analysis sheds light on this project's complexity of finding *death dharma* in the RGV and its commentarial tradition. It seems the views of *shentong* and Mahāmudrā shifted considerably over generations, leading to the challenge for this research to define its boundaries. Mathes further has published many journal articles cited in this work, in particular "'Gos Lo tsā ba gZhon nu dpal's Commentary on the *Dharmatā* Chapter of the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāgakārikās*" (2005), "The *gzhan stong* Model of Reality" (2011) and "The Pith Instructions on the Mahayana Uttaratantra" (2015c).[21]

The work of Diane Denis has been instrumental in informing this writer on the subtle content of the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, a closely related text to the RGV. Her article "The Structure of the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga-kārikā* as Revealed by Vasubandhu's Method" (2020) highlights the interplay between the relative and the ultimate realities as explained in the DDV.[22] Further, it explains how the DDV connects to the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature and the implications of its structural outline. This was further informed through a translation course on the DDV with Diane Denis and a helpful lecture by her given in the context of Rangjung Yeshe Institute's guest lecture series (2014).[23] It highlights the immediacy of the possibility of awakening within perception and the inquiry of "What is one relying on?". This has a potent consequence for those integrating this query into daily awareness.

As mentioned, Seyford Ruegg's article "On the Knowability and Expressibility of

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[20] Klaus-Dieter Mathes, *A Direct Path to the Buddha within: Gö Lotsāwa's Mahāmudrā Interpretation of the Ratnagotravibhāga*, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008).
[21] Klaus-Dieter Mathes, "Gos Lo Tsā Ba GZhon Nu Dpal's Commentary on the Dharmatā Chapter of the Dharmadharmatāvibhāgakārikās," インド学仏教学研究 12 (2005): 3–101.
[22] Diane Denis, "The Structure of the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga-kārikā*", Journal of Buddhist Philosophy pp, (2020): 1-36.
[23] "Diane Denis - The Structure of the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga-kārikā* (Dhdhvk)" Soundcloud.com accessed June 23, 2023, https://soundcloud.com/rangjung-yeshe-institute/diane-denis-the-structure-of-the-dharmadharmatavibhaga-and-karika-dhdhvk.

Absolute Reality in Buddhism" raised an important question for this analysis:[24] If ultimate reality is immanent and inexpressible, what kind of mind can know or cognize it? However, his pathways of answering these questions followed those asserting, based on analytical reasoning, that Buddha Nature is cognitively not accessible.[25] Although such a conclusion is technically correct, it does not land well for those inspired to see it. Especially for those approaching their death, they may give up trying. Therefore, this research joined those discussing the seeing of Buddha Nature in more positive terms.

Through the pioneering work of Shenpen Hookham in *The Buddha Within* (1991), the discussion on faith (Skt. *śraddha*) in this context has been analyzed and explained for a clear distinction between its function and efficacy.[26] The definition of faith is important since its understanding differs within other religions; for example, the Abrahamic traditions. Although such a needed comparison goes beyond the current research, it may well spark the discussion when faith is asserted to be the key to a direct experience of the nature of the mind.[27]

The emphasis on the mind's ability to see beyond conception is then explained positively within the *shentong* tradition.[28] Philosophical precursors to the *shentong* philosophy are seen within the Yogācāra and Pramāṇa traditions. Through this connection, this research took support from the thinkers of these traditions, such as Dharmakīrti (6th or 7th century). John Dunne's article "Realizing the Unreal" (2006) discusses Dharmakīrti's theory of valid direct yogic

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[24] Seyford Ruegg, "On the Knowability and Expressibility of Absolute Reality in Buddhism." *JOURNAL OF INDIAN AND BUDDHIST STUDIES (INDOGAKU BUKKYOGAKU KENKYU)* 20, no. 1 (1971): 495–489.
[25] Ibid, 4. Ruegg cites the position of Ngog Loden Sherab and the later dGe lugs position that do not admit for a direct seeing of Buddha Nature. Since their analysis goes beyond the scope of current research, this writer leaves it to others to compare their position to that of the meditation tradition of Tsen Khawoché.
[26] Hookham, S. K. *The Buddha within: Tathagatagarbha Doctrine According to the Shentong Interpretation of the Ratnagotravibhaga*. (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992).
[27] Ibid, 59.
[28] Sheehy, Michael R., and Klaus-Dieter Mathes, eds. *The Other Emptiness: Rethinking the Zhentong Buddhist Discourse in Tibet* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2020), 4.

perception (Tib. *rnal 'byor mngon sum tshad ma*).[29] Although the yogic perception is part of Dharmakīrti's epistemology, it was helpful to come across Roger Jackson (1990), who analyzes Dharmakīrti's reference to a Luminous Mind in the soteriological context of his epistemology.[30] This made an intriguing connection between the Pramāṇa and the language of the Buddha Nature tradition.

The analysis of Ching Keng (2019) and Jowita Kramer (2018) was consulted to understand the subtle nature of the conceptual and perceptual mind's function according to Yogācāra tradition.[31] Their research helped define *death dharma's* perception.

To understand the significant contribution of Gampopa to the Mahāmudrā tradition, this research consulted with Tenzin Buchung (2021), Trungram Gyaltrul Sherpa (2004), and Gampopa himself through the translation of Tony Duff (2011).[32]

And to clarify Mahāmudrā's traditional meditation and position on death preparation, David Higgins (2006), Dzogchen Ponlop (2008), and David Jackson (1994) were consulted.[33] In addition, the *Atyantajñānasūtra* and its interpretation by Mönlam Tsultrim in light of the

[29] John Dunne, "Realizing the Unreal: Dharmakīrti's Theory of Yogic Perception." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 34, no. 6 (December 1, 2006): 497–519. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-006-9008-y.
[30] Jackson, Roger. "Luminous Mind Among the Logicians-An Analysis of Pramāṇavārttika II.205-211." In *Buddha Nature: Festschrift in Honor of Minoru Kiyota*, ed. Paul Griffith, John P. Keenan (Tokyo: Kenkyusha Printed Co.), 1990.
[31] Ching Keng, "What Is 'Svabhāva-Vikalpa' and with Which Consciousness(es) Is It Associated?", *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 47, no. 1 (2019): 73–93. Jowita Kramer, "Conceptuality and Non-Conceptuality in Yogācāra Sources." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 46, no. 2 (2018): 321–38. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-017-9345-z.
[32] Tenzin Bhuchung, "Gampopa's Mahāmudrā: View, Meditation, Conduct." (PhD diss., Emory University, 2021). Trungram Gyaltrul, Sherpa. "Gampopa, the Monk and Yogi: His Life and Teaching." (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2004). Sgam-po-pa, transl. Tony Duff. *Gampopa Teaches Essence Mahamudra: Interviews with His Heart Disciples, Dusum Khyenpa and Others* (Kathmandu: Padma Karpo Translations, 2011).
[33] Higgins, David. "On the Development of the Non-Mentation Doctrine in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism." *Journal of International Association of Buddhist Studies* 29, no. 2 (2006): 255–303. Dzogchen Ponlop, *Mind beyond Death* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2008). David Jackson, *Enlightenment by a Single Means: Tibetan Controversies on the "Self-Sufficient White Remedy" (Dkar Po Chig Thub)*, (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1994).

Mahāmudrā view, was a helpful confirmation that death preparation indeed is settling in the non-conceptual state to attain Mahāmudrā in the intermediate state (Tib. *bardo*).[34]

Methodology

Following and consulting this literature, this research uses a close hermeneutical reading of the RGV and its commentaries within the meditation tradition. It further analyzes and consolidates the traditional accounts of the philosophies according to RGV's related soteriological, phenomenological, and epistemological traditions: These are discussions on the paths and levels (Skt. *bhūmi*) that pervade the five Maitreya works and are the soteriological backbone that explains the spiritual maturation that comes through study (Skt. *śrutamaya-),* contemplating (Skt. *cintāmaya-),* and meditating (Skt. *bhāvanāmayajñāna*). Further, the veils to Buddha Nature are asserted to be concepts (Skt. *vikalpa*), which lead to an investigation of Yogācāra and Pramāṇa teachings. Investigating the phenomenological and epistemological assertions of seeing Buddha Nature, the methods of the Mahāmudrā tradition are also investigated. Here one finds traditional death preparation instructions that were read in light of their applicability to a modern person.

This research applies three principal methods for such work: hermeneutics (textual interpretation), content analysis (textual analysis), and epistemology. Hermeneutics, as a philosophy of interpretation and a method, constitutes a careful reading of the root text - the RGV - and some of its commentaries.[35] The assessment and reassessment of the meaning of the texts proceeded in the hermeneutic circle that weaves between the text and the content, the reader

[34] Brunnhölzl, Cloud, 320.
[35] Stausberg, Michael, and Steven Engler, eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*. London; New York: Routledge, 2011, 276.

and their understanding.[36] In the case of the RGV, its presentation through repetition of themes, images, and doctrinal statements contributes to this hermeneutic circle as if its author purposefully anticipated this process of integration and habituation. In this way, the interpretation process unfolds naturally around the image of the RGV's purification process and its presentation of the ultimate reality. And yet it also gains an understanding of why the RGV would have developed two distinct interpretative traditions since its imagery is very dynamic.

The content analysis method pursues the analysis of these same themes as found in the RGV and then examines how some of the commentaries of the RGV relate to them. There are over fifty commentaries on the RGV or more.[37] Yet, it was through the help of both Brunnhölzl and Mathes that the commentaries emphasizing the *shentong* view were selected and rendered accessible to this research. In this way, through content analysis, this research establishes the boundaries of its focus and facilitates the search for *death dharma* in the material.

Finally, through epistemological questions, this research asserts that the rational mind can contribute to developing faith. Since Buddha Nature is to be found beyond the limits of subtle conceptual mental formations (Skt. *vikalpa*), this research considers the inconceivable in conceptual terms described in the RGV and the Mahāmudrā tradition.

Narrative Outline of the Chapters

The discussion on the *death dharma* of the RGV is structured in the following four chapters. Chapter two considers three *death dharma* principles: *saṃsāra*, refuge, and purification. The Buddhist teaching on *saṃsāra*'s suffering and unease is the first principle.

[36] Stausberg, Michael, and Steven Engler, eds. The Routledge Handbook, 276.
[37] See, amongst others, the work of Anne Burchardi, published in 2002 titled Towards an Understanding of *tathāgatagarbha* Interpretation in Tibet with Special Reference to the Ratnagotravibhāga. Published in Brill's Tibetan Studies Library – Religion and Secular Culture in Tibet 2.2: 59-77.

Within the Buddhist context, these teachings frame misery and uncertainty and orient the practitioner towards wholesome action. However, outside the Buddhist context, the reactions toward misery like death are often unexamined. The teaching on *saṃsāra* can replace or question old subtle philosophical ideas. Therefore, it supports the presentation of the RGV and its *death dharma*. To understand the teachings of *death dharma* in the RGV, this chapter then focuses on four of the seven so-called *vajra* points in the RGV.[38] The first three are the three refuges of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Its fourth *vajra* point discusses a purification process.[39] This purification relates to how Buddha Nature sheds its stains and how it is associated with the *dharmakāya.* In this way, Buddha Nature and *dharmakāya* are synonyms for each other.[40]

Chapter three specifically examines the method of *death dharma*, which is non-conceptual meditation. The initial examination of Tsen Khawoché's interpretation lineage sheds light on the purpose of *shentong* Madhyamaka. This approach allows for affirmative language. It opens the investigation into the dynamic between the conceptual and non-conceptual mind. Such discourse deepens within the language of the Buddhist path (Skt. *marga*, Tib. *lam*) and levels.

Chapter Four turns to Yogācāra and Pramāṇa teachings to further the investigation of the presence of the relationship of the conceptual and non-conceptual mind. It follows the question of how the non-conceptual mind can be known or seen. In this order, the literature is investigated from the perspective of how subtle concepts are present within the process of perception. Then, Buddhism's epistemological teachings are consulted for what hints they offer to someone preparing for death who wants to know and see the ultimate truth. In the third section of this Chapter, the teaching of the Fundamental Change (Skt. *āśrayaparivṛtti*) mentioned in the RGV

[38] *vajra* is a Sanskrit term that translates as "thunderbolt" or "diamond" and stands for indestructibility.
[39] The last three *vajra* points of the RGV (enlightenment, qualities, and activities) are included in the reflection on the *dharmakāya* woven throughout all chapters.
[40] Ruegg, Knowability and Expressibility, 7.

and the DDV is investigated for its presentation on how the conceptual and the non-conceptual relate.

Chapter Five then regards the traditional death instructions within the Mahāmudrā tradition. First, the key to keeping engaged with the process of going beyond conception is devotion - referred to here as "keeping the doors of perception open." It is also key in applying the instructions within the tantric Mahāmudrā tradition: The Six Dharmas of Nāropa (Tib. *nā ro chos drug).* These instructions have been partially practiced for death preparation but are mostly accessible to practitioners with the stabilization of non-conceptual meditation. Yet, they are also a landmark for those engaging in the practice of non-conceptual meditation, highlighting its potential. Finally, there is the practice of resting in the nature of the mind, which is advocated by the Mahāmudrā master Gampopa as the single sufficient means for death preparation. His contemporaries have criticized such an approach, and these concerns are also worth considering in this context. Such discussion shows that the application and efficacy of *death dharma* rests within the practitioner.

This research concludes that Tsen Khawoché's *death dharma* is the opportunity of opening and question life in the present as much as when it ends. Through rational faith, one's conceptual awareness can yield to non-conceptual wisdom by means of the pure mind, which is the nature of all beings. It is, therefore, partially recognized by all beings in the form of spaciousness, love, and a sense of connection. Through study, contemplation, and meditation on Buddha Nature, death can become an opportunity free of the limitations of certainties and uncertainties.

Chapter 2. Three Principles Underlying *Death Dharma*

The following three principles are the ground of the method and practice of *death dharma*: taking *saṃsāra* to heart, taking refuge in the three jewels, and engaging in a purification process of the mind.

2.1. *The Concept of Saṃsāra, a Helpful Wallpaper*

When I talk as Chaplain with those ill, vulnerable, and dying in my work at a trauma clinic, they frequently express the wish of "wanting to go home."[41] Home may be a referent for comfort, familiarization, and a sense of completion. In palliative care, it is also considered a metaphorical name for the afterlife. Such a comforting shelter is generally called a refuge when things don't go well.

Buddhist teachings are known to be uncompromising by not promising any variation of such a resting place within the realm of compounded phenomena. *Saṃsāra* is represented by six realms that describe the entire range of conditioned experiences for any being.[42] Beings temporarily cycle through the extreme pains of the hell realms, the god realms' intense pleasures, and so forth. These conditioned experiences continue relentlessly, and death is not an escape but a transition between them. In this way, experiences of pain and pleasure arise, abide, and cease. This can be observed within one's personal experience, but this understanding of *saṃsāra* in Tibetan Buddhism extends also to the afterlife.

Modern scientific understanding does not venture into such inference. In North America,

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[41] Dekkers, Wim. “On the Notion of Home and the Goals of Palliative Care.” Springer, 2009.

[42] Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Edited by Padmakara Translation Group (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998), 61. The six realms are hell, hungry ghosts, animals (which are the three lower realms that are filled with pain, hunger, and stupidity as the results of anger, desire, and ignorance, respectively), gods, demi-gods, and humans (which are the three higher realms as the results of the afflictions (Skt. *klésa*) of pride, jealousy, and doubt).

for example, the dominating beliefs in science have cast doubt on religious or metaphysical explanations of how the death process unfolds and what happens after death.[43] The publicly agreed definition of death remains strictly based on observable facts that define death as an "irreversible cessation of organismic functioning."[44] At the time of death, one loses one's body and everything one is familiar with – one's identity, environment, and relationships. Since such a view does not allow for the possibility of an afterlife, it provokes fears and concern or, its opposites, craving and longing for such cessation.

Such understanding of death leaves beings, especially those dissatisfied with traditional religious views, uncertain about how to engage with this situation. This is one reason why there is an increase in the employment of Interfaith Chaplains in Hospitals and Hospices.[45] Chaplains alleviate patients' anxiety and comfort based on the patient's individual and personal beliefs. Such beliefs are rooted in philosophical and religious perspectives that are culturally formed. They are conglomerations of theories and attitudes. Most often unexamined, they serve as guiding principles for understanding death. Such perceptions in the background become frames of reference for one's identification, perceptions, and orientation in the world. Since such philosophies are generally very subtle, I call them the *wallpaper* of one's mind. Like any wall color or background, they dominate the mood but generally are not the focus of one's attention. Philosophical, cultural, and social agreements are such conceptual frameworks.

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[43] Kathleen Garces-Foley, "Hospice, And the American Way of Dying," *Review of Religious Research* 44, no.4 (June 2003): 341–353.
[44] According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia*. David DeGrazia, "The Definition of Death," In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2021. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021., accessed June 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/death-definition/, 1.
[45] See, for example, the result of a survey in England/Wales that confirmed that there is a move away from traditional church-centered care for patients towards Chaplains that provide different levels of services and a wide range of non-religious spiritual care requirements. Wright, Michael. "Chaplaincy in Hospice and Hospital: Findings from a Survey in England and Wales," *Sage Journals* 15, no. 3 (April 2001), https://doi.org/10.1191/026921601678576211.

In contrast to the North American example, the Tibetan culture has embraced awareness and contemplation of death as a popular and essential human practice for centuries. Chögyam Trungpa (*chos rgyam drung pa;* 1939-1987 CE) reports that methods of guiding those dying and deceased already existed within the indigenous Tibetan Bön culture and were enhanced through Buddhist Vajrayāna practices.[46] Such practices not only advise the practitioner to accept one's death as a natural process but also help them approach it confidently. They guide the deceased toward a good rebirth, liberation, or even enlightenment.[47] Such death practices, rooted in the belief in rebirth, have been shown to contribute to resilience and creative ways of coping, as explained by Sara Lewis in her dissertation "Spacious Minds, Empty Selves: Coping and Resilience in the Tibetan Exile Community (2014)."[48] The contemplation of constant change of all compounded phenomena further contributed to the Tibetan refugees not dwelling on distress.[49] Consequently, this research considers that the cultural context and philosophical *wallpapers* influence how a person sees death: an opportunity or a doomsday event.

Foundational Buddhist teachings (also relevant to the RGV) explain that this reality is momentary: a rapid flashing in and out of the existence of any conditioned phenomena.[50] Nothing ever remains; all is seen in a flux of changing events. Anything beyond that, with an extension of that instantaneous moment, is analyzed as fabricated and unreal.[51] However, sentient beings do not see it this way. To counteract the misapprehension, foundational Buddhism taught the dynamic of *saṃsāra* by way of the three marks of existence (Skt. *trilakṣaṇa*). These

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[46] Chögyam Trungpa, and Francesca Fremantle, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1975), 6.
[47] As will be discussed later, practices like The Six Dharmas of Nāropa, guide the deceased in their death experience.
[48] Lewis, Sara. "Spacious Minds, Empty Selves: Coping and Resilience in the Tibetan Exile Community." PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2014, 24. Lewis has extensively researched the Tibetan exile community in Dharamsala in her dissertation to find that the Tibetan Buddhist philosophies have contributed to their resilience and happiness.
[49] Ibid, 4.
[50] F. Th. Statcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic,* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984), 84.
[51] Ibid.

marks assert phenomena to be impermanent (Skt. *anitya*), to necessarily lead to the experience of suffering (Skt. *duḥkha*), and to lack a true self (Skt. *anātman*). Through such an explanation, one can understand that death is neither an escape nor a transformation.[52] Instead, it is seen as the consequence of being a conditioned being.

To turn this dreadful certainty into an opportunity, the practitioner develops rational faith within Buddhism by engaging in analysis leading to insight (Skt. *vipaśyāna*) and meditative stability (Skt. *śamatha*).[53] The result of such a successful investigation is asserted to be the realization of deathlessness or *nirvāṇa,* which literally means "to be blown out." The term "blown out" refers to the dissolving of assumptions and ideas that do not accord with reality as it is, i.e., the *wallpapers* of one's mind. This also includes helpful *wallpapers*, such as the concept of *saṃsāra* or *nirvāṇa,* that may motivate one to engage in the practice path. From this practice, rational consideration of one's conditioned experience goes beyond blind faith or make-belief. It nurtures rational faith in understanding death through self-reflection, including positive attitudes like acceptance, patience, and compassion.[54] To investigate this further, this study now turns to what is explained as the refuge from cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*) and the attainment of deathlessness (*nirvāṇa)*.

2.2. *The Refuge of the Three Jewels*

In Buddhist thought, the sources of refuge from the relentless suffering of *saṃsāra* are The Three Jewels represented by Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. At the beginning of the

[52] Nattier, Jan. "Chapter 8 Buddhist Eschatology." In *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, edited by Jerry L. Walls, 151–69. Oxford University Press, 2008, 152.
[53] See, for example, the explanation of *śamatha* and *vipśayanā* in Powers, *Wisdom of Buddha: The Saṁdhinirmocana Sūtra*. Tibetan Translation Series 16. Berkeley, CA: Dharma Pub, 1995,149.
[54] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 1209, fn 2641.

Ratnagotravibhāga (RGV)*,* these three are explained to be the teacher, Buddha, who attained awakening, his teaching, Dharma, and those following this teaching, Sangha. Their function is more than framing historical and social relationships. According to the RGV, beings have different aspirations to work towards relief from their suffering. The teacher, teaching, and disciples may inspire them. Or they feel captured by the paths of deliverance (Skt. *yāna*s) displayed by them: the *śravaka-, pratyekabuddha-,* and *bodhisattvayāna*, with their different activities.[55] In sum: according to the RGV, some beings want to become like the three jewels, some want to venerate them, and others may simply want to be aligned with them.[56]

The RGV states that Buddha or awakening is the sole refuge among the three jewels since the Dharma or the teachings are abandoned upon realization, and the assembly of the followers (Skt. *saṅgha*) is still not free of fear.[57] Buddhahood has six defining characteristics. Three of them constitute the benefit for the individual, and three characteristics constitute the benefit of others. Concerning the benefit of an individual: the nature of the awakened mind is said to be unconditioned; it is not conceptually fabricated and is only realized by self-aware primordial wisdom.[58] This implies that nothing can harm the nature of the mind, not even death. Yet, such realization cannot be handed to another by any means; it has to arise from within. The three benefits for beings brought about through awakening are the knowledge of all objects of knowledge, compassionate love, and the successful ability to guide beings.[59]

The RGV clearly discerns that what protects being is awakening. This awakening is the unmediated seeing of the non-dual nature of the mind, which is the perfection of wisdom

[55] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 348.
[56] Jamgön Kongtrül, Buddha Nature, 112.
[57] Ibid, 113.
[58] Ibid, 102.
[59] Ibid.

(Skt. *prajñāpāramitā*). On the contrary, any form of duality is a construction of subject and object, which bears the burden of suffering and death. This duality arises unhindered within the mind's spacious nature but ceases once awareness settles into the spaciousness of non-duality (as seen in RGV's purification process discussed below).

Although immanently present, the spacious freedom of non-dual awareness is not what most beings habitually focus on. This is why it is said in the RGV that ordinary beings never see Buddha Nature and that noble *bodhisattva* cannot completely see it either since that habitual focus is strong. [60] Within the *sūtrayāna* explanation, direct seeing is asserted to be only possible after the so-called Path of Seeing (Skt. *darśanamārga*), when one has a direct glimpse of ultimate reality, resulting in a shift of being in the world.[61] This understanding differs in the Mahāmudrā context, where direct cognition of the mind's nature is asserted right from the beginning once a qualified Guru has pointed out that nature.[62] Such conflicting positions have been contested within the tradition and will be discussed in the section presenting Gampopa's death preparation instructions.

Nevertheless, one may ask if Buddha Nature, the nature of mind, is a refuge for those who don't see it. All beings, whether animals or humans display a strong habit of seeking refuge in places that protect them from threatening and unwanted circumstances. Although some practitioners may see Buddha Nature in such a way, this is not what this Buddhist notion offers here since anything within dualistic perception is bound to disappoint.[63] Therefore, renunciation to clinging to dualistic perception is central as one engages with the notion of Buddha Nature.

This is also a piece of advice one finds emphasized in the *Sūtra of the Wisdom of the*

[60] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 263.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid, 262.
[63] Powers, John, ed. *Wisdom of Buddha: The Saṁdhinirmocana Sūtra*, (Berkeley, CA: Dharma Pub, 1995), 107.

Hour of Death (Skt. *Atyantajñānasūtra*), in which the Buddha is said to recommend clear discernment of phenomena and the release of them at the time of death.[64] Although the *sūtra* does not speak of Buddha Nature, it refers to the mind's natural luminosity (a synonym of the ultimate nature of the mind) as a reason to cultivate the mind free of reference points that are conceptual constructions.[65] In this way, rather than establishing protective measures, the RGV and Mahāmudrā related literature encourages the release of any conceptual fabrications.

Therefore it seems important for those dying or preparing for their death to understand that the source of refuge (i.e., the nature of one's mind) is not some outside force or entity. This enables one to embrace the possibility of opening one's perception to non-dual awareness within the dying process. These teachings on that awakened nature describe ultimate reality as immanent, ever-present, and beyond construct. Even holding Buddha Nature as a conceptual frame of referent can serve the dying. Buddha Nature can act as a point of orientation and comfort when everything falls apart, and nothing else lasts.

Similarly, the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* (DDV) teachings frame losing one's existing "bases" as an opportunity. According to DDV scholar Diane Denis, this text categorizes the elements of experience (Skt. *dharmas)* to make up three bases of support for beings: seemingly common, dependently common, and uncommon support.[66] The seemingly common support is the world and all that appears in it; the dependently common are relational correspondents; and the uncommon is the experience within consciousness. Denis explains that the DDV invites the practitioner to contemplate the "sphere of the dharma of the *sūtra*s," which are the words of the

[64] The translation for this sutra is here taken from lotsawahouse.org; translated by Lowell Cook; accessed August 18, 2023; https://www.lotsawahouse.org/words-of-the-buddha/sutra-wisdom-hour-of-death.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Diane Denis, "The Structure of the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga-Kārikā* as Revealed by Vasubandhu's Method Presented in the *Vyākhyāyukti," Journal of Buddhist Philosophy* 4 (2022): 57.

awakened one (i.e., Buddha).[67] For that contemplation, Denis suggests that the DDV raises the question, "What does one rely on?". She further explains that according to the DDV, if one relies on suchness, it is possible to transform these three bases that contain that which is mistaken and defiled (i.e., *dharmas*, the five *skandhas*) to that which is unmistaken and pure (i.e., *dharmatā,* suchness). This shift in reliance is called the fundamental change (Skt. *āśrayaparivṛtti*) and is here analyzed in chapter four. In other words, a change of perception will take place through engaging the renunciation and purification process of the mind. This is what leads to the ultimate protection, that of awakening.

This is further encouraged by Mönlam Tsultrim, who describes awakening within his composition, *Repository of Wisdom* (Tib. *ye shes kyi 'jog sa*), in the following way. He states that Buddha is "the self-arisen wisdom in which thoughts are terminated through realizing the actuality of the luminosity of your own mind."[68] His statement presents two aspects of primordial wisdom mentioned in the second chapter of the RGV.[69] First, upon awakening, it is said there is the wisdom that knows correctly and therefore abandons afflictive hindrances (Skt. *kleśa-āvaraṇa*) and hindrances to knowledge (Skt. *jñeya āvaraṇa).* This wisdom arises in meditative equipoise and manifests the body of liberation called *vimuktikāya*.[70] The second primordial wisdom is said to know things in their entirety and to manifest as the body of realization (*dharmakāya*). This aspect of wisdom arises in post-meditation, and one only fully manifests it after removing all obscurations to omniscience on the path of the *bodhisattvayāna*.[71] Like the first aspect of primordial wisdom, it is uncreated by causes and conditions. Awakening is,

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[67] Ibid, 62.
[68] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 789.
[69] Jamgön Kongtrül, Buddha Nature, 185.
[70] Ibid.
[71] According to the *ekayāna* (Skt. for one vehicle) doctrine, all vehicles (Skt. yāna) for training (i.e., *śravakayāna, pratyekabuddhayāna,* and bodhisattvayāna) will in time transmute into the *bodhisattvayāna*, the only vehicle to lead to unsurpassable Buddhahood. The RGV is one of the texts to adhere to this idea within its presentation.

therefore, the twofold unfolding of release and attainment. In Mönlam Tsultrim's words, as translated by Brunnhölzl, these two aspects of wisdom are the termination of thoughts and the realization of the actuality of luminosity.

The notion of the *dharmakāya* is not a mere Mahāyāna invention. According to scholar Ruben Habito, it originated from questions that arose shortly after Shakyamuni Buddha's passing. What constitutes the source of refuge? What makes a Buddha? What is the essence of buddhahood?[72] At that time, relic worship (Skt. *buddha-* or *dharmaśarīra*) emerged in Buddhist communities. To keep the teachings relevant, a more positive formulation of the Buddha's presence brought a sense of continuity to his distressing absence, and the collection of Dharma teachings began to be called a body (Skt. *kāya*).[73]

This heartfelt historical speculation holds a powerful relative truth that the ultimate teachings do not erase: When Loved Ones are gone, they are deeply missed. Such care is central to human experience and will not change as long as one sees relationality. Such colors of love are part of *death dharma's* complexity.

The relationship between the ultimate and the relative truths is central to exploring how one sees Buddha Nature. The tri*kāya* theory plays a role in establishing a bridge between the formless ultimate reality (Skt. *dharmakāya*) and its two perceivable form bodies (Skt. *rūpakāya*). Historically, the notion of the *dharmakāya* further developed within the Mahāyāna into a

[72] Habito, "The Trikāya Doctrine in Buddhism," 53.
[73] Bruce Hall, "The Meaning of Vijñapti in Vasubhandu's Concept of Mind." *The Journal of International Association of Buddhist Studies* 9, no. 1 (1986): 7–24, 37. There is depth in the use of the word *dharma*, and translating it merely as 'teaching" reveals a small percentage of the import of this word. The etymology of *dharma* derives from the Sanskrit root *dhr*, which means to hold or to support. Within the *Abhidharma* and the *Prajñāparāmitā* literature, the building blocks of our experience that cannot be analyzed any further are referred to as *dharmas*. These building blocks or our experiences are elements of the inner and outer world and can change their places (e.g., the color blue can be seen in the sky and the dream, etc. *Dharmas* are information carriers for our intellect (Skt. *manas*), which processes this information through (defiled) mentation.

transcendental principle that is considered the true nature of awakening.[74] According to Habito, in the *Prajñāparāmitā* literature, *dharmakāya* "likewise refers to the collection of merit and superior qualities associated with the attainment of wisdom (Skt. *prajñā*)."[75] The *dharmakāya* is therefore synonymous with emptiness (Skt. *śunyatā*), "a formless, shapeless, inconceivable ultimate."[76] This ultimate is inseparable from the form bodies (Skt. *rūpakāyas)* called in Sanskrit *saṃbhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya*.[77] These two *kāyas* are experienced in the realm of perception. While the *saṃbhogakāya* can be experienced by *bodhisattvas* on the higher levels (Skt. *bhūmi),* the *nirmāṇakāya* can be experienced by sentient beings, although not all see them that way. Contemporary Buddhist master, and commentator on the RGV, Dzongsar Khyentse summarizes the three *kāya*s as being unborn (i.e., *dharmakāya*), unceasing (i.e., *saṃbhogakāya*), and non-abiding (i.e., *nirmāṇakāya*).[78] This captures a description of deathlessness, which is present as the nature of the mind of any being.

As mentioned, the *dharmakāya* within the RGV is a synonym for Buddha Nature, with the distinction that Buddha Nature, when obstructed with stains, is called *samalā tathatā*. It is the *dharmakāya* when freed from those stains (Skt. *nirmalā tathatā)*.[79] It follows that this inconceivable body of liberation, the *dharmakāya*, is the basis for both the experience of suffering and the freedom from it. The RGV describes this in form of four inconceivable points or paradoxes. It states that (1) that which is pure by nature can still be experienced as afflictions

[74] Habito, "The Trikāya Doctrine in Buddhism," 56.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Shakyamuni Buddha is said to be the supreme *nirmanakāya.*
[78] Dzongsar Khyentse, *Buddha-Nature*, Edited by Alex Trisoglio, (Siddhartha's Intent. Canada: Khyentse Foundation, 2007), 161.
[79] Jikidō Takasaki, *A Study on the Ratnagotravibhaga (Uttaratantra): Being a Treatise on the Tathagatagarbha Theory of Mahayāna Buddhism*. Roma: Istituto italiano per il medio ed estremo oriente, 1966, 187. This *nirmalā tathatā* is the perfect manifestation of the basis or fundamental change (*āśrayaparavṛitti*).

and suffering.[80] (2) Awakening is not afflicted, yet after it is attained, it is considered the result of purification. Further, (3) this permanently present awakening is endowed with powerful, immeasurable qualities that are not perceptible to the ignorant. It also states that (4) the awakened activities of the Buddhas are described as being unceasing and without conceptual consideration. These four paradoxical descriptions of Buddha Nature indicate that it cannot be conceived as an object of sense or mental perception.

In this way, the notion of refuge within Tibetan Buddhism is very closely associated with the nature of one's mind. What is required to realize Buddha Nature is a change of focus or perspective. A change in focus is more approachable as a practice path than the proposal of developing some ability one doesn't have, especially when older and approaching death. Followers of Tsen Khawoché assert that there is no more powerful protection from death than seeing the refuge of a "self-aware luminous cognition empty of the duality of apprehender and apprehended."[81] While it is not within the realm of dualistic experience, it can be experienced through self-arisen wisdom by combining meditative cultivation, rational faith, and devotion. To further investigate the accessibility of the *dharmakāya* and its characteristics, let's consider its purification process and the pathway to its understanding according to the RGV.

2.3. *The Purification Process according to the RGV*

The purification process of Buddha Nature is a dominant theme when describing the fourth *vajra* point of the Buddha element or nature (Tib. *khams*) within the RGV. It also talks about the paradox of Buddha Nature being pure yet needing purification. The process of purification is needed due to the adventitious stains that cover the pure, luminous nature.

[80] Jamgön Kongtrül, Buddha Nature, 115.
[81] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 148.

However, the RGV does not indicate why and in what sense Buddha Nature is purified.[82] Francesco Sferra argues that the foundational teachings already establish the fundamental element of experience (Skt. *dharmas*) based on the mind.[83] Further, according to the twelve links of dependent origination (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda),* the connection on how a sensation (Skt. *vedanā)* turns into the suffering of craving desire (Skt. *tṛṣṇā*) is also located in the mind.[84] It is in this context that Sferra cites Abhayākaragupta (11-12th century), a commentator of the RGV and related texts, stating:

> "the [various] maculations, that is, attachment and so on, are void in themselves [...] their purification [is possible and] depends on the purification of the mind. The mind, in its turn, in shining by its own nature."[85]

This statement reflects an important relational distinction for the current investigation: The stains are considered weaker in power than the awakened mind with all its qualities. Buddhism, including the RGV, never addresses the first cause of why the world has so many impurities of suffering and pain. Yet, it continually points out that there is an end to these stains. The discussion on purification in the RGV encourages trust that this end is possible if one engages in the actions leading to this end.

Dzongsar Khyentse, in his commentary on the RGV, explains the function of this power difference between the pure mind and its stains with an insightful analogy.[86] Using the relationship between glass and its dirt, he parallels that to the relationship between Buddha Nature with its stains. Just like glass never mingles with dirt, and dirt is never part of the glass, in this way, Buddha Nature and its stains are said not to mingle. Their opposition conveys the

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[82] Sferra, Francesco. "The Concept of Purification in Some Texts of Late Indian Buddhism." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 27 (1999), 86.
[83] Ibid, 87.
[84] Francesco. "The Concept of Purification," 87.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Dzongsar Jamyang, Khyentse. *Buddha-Nature*. Ed. Alex Trisoglio (Canada: Khyentse Foundation, 2007), 46.

possibility of purification, which is rooted in their differing ontological status: only Buddha Nature is truly real. Following this assertion, one can confidently engage in purifying practices and is not intimidated by dirty class. One knows one is able to wash glass from its dirt and rely on its "washability" each time one encounters it.

The purification process of the staining conceptual layers, is not a process between two equal entities. It rather compares to the mistaken apprehension of a rope for a snake.[87] When misapprehending a rope that is left on the ground for a snake, no snake needs to be removed for the reality of the rope to be manifest. Similarly, the dualistic conceptual layers merely need to be understood correctly, for there to be the salvific effect of seeing the true nature of self and phenomena. The RGV reports that the cause for the yearning of a correct understanding comes with the nature of the mind: Buddha Nature is said to cause sentient beings to feel weariness with the sufferings of *saṃsāra*.[88]

Suffering itself is based on the temporary impurities within the unchanging reality of mind's nature - a relationship similar to forms appearing in space. In the RGV one can read:

> Just as the worlds everywhere
> Are born and perish in space,
> So, the faculties arise and perish
> In the unconditioned basic element.[89] [RGV, I.53]

In addition to this powerful assertion of the possibility of purification and liberation, this teaching can also lead to normalizing one's death, as there is harmony in perceiving the logic of the arising, abiding, and ceasing of any compounded phenomena. A universal principle that appears on the backdrop of the unchanging nature of one's mind.

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[87] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 180.
[88] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 367. RGV Verse I.40 on Buddha Natures function.
[89] Ibid, 374. The Basic element is a synonym for *buddhadhātu* or Buddha nature.

In its fourth *vajra* point of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV) explains the attainment of this *dharmakāya* through a purification process that reveals its four perfections (Skt. *pāramitā*) of permanence (Skt. *nityapāramitā*), happiness (Skt. *sukhapāramitā*), self (Skt. *ātmapāramitā*) and purity (Skt. *śubhapāramitā*).[90] This is a standard characterization of the *dharmakāya* within some of the *tathagatāgarbha sūtras* and appears to be in opposition to the three marks of existence (*trilakṣana*) explained in foundational Buddhism. Yet, these four perfections are not within the sphere of dualistic perception, and neither are all the other characteristics of the *dharmakāya*.[91] Therefore, sentient beings who rely on dualistic perception do not understand these perfections correctly. The RGV summarizes this inability by classifying four veils that hinder this seeing. These are called veils (Skt. *malā*) because they hinder seeing things as they are. These veils are presented as follows: (1) disrespect towards the (Mahāyāna-) teachings, (2) a view of a self, (3) a desire for personal happiness, and (4) a lack of compassion for sentient beings.

According to the commentary of Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thaye (JKLT) (*'jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha 'yas*; 1813-1899CE) disrespect for the Mahāyanā is described as either a sheer disinterest or an aversion towards these teachings and their representatives. Such tendencies differ among beings and result from karmic dispositions or habitual tendencies. The *samala* and *nirmala tathatā* distinction is reflected in Mönlam Tsultrim explanation as two kinds of dispositions.[92] The natural abiding disposition is the unconditioned *dharmakāya* that pervades all beings and allows any being to attain buddhahood. The second disposition is the accomplished disposition, which refers to the accumulated ability or seed for awakening.

[90] Jamgön Kongtrül, Buddha Nature, 122. The reference to these four perfections also plays an important role in Vajrayāna literature.
[91] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 222. The RGV explains that the *dharmakāya* has beneficial and inconceivable qualities of love, wisdom, compassion, skillfulness, and the 32 major and 80 minor marks.
[92] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 790.

Although the ultimate truth pervades all beings, not everyone can recognize it in an unhindered way due to the causes and conditions that make up our ability to see.[93] From these explanations it follows that respect for diverse philosophies is a start towards learning and investigating differing views that can make a transformation (Skt. *āśrayaparivṛtti)* possible.

The second veil of having the view of a self is, according to JKLT's commentary, not only the mistaken idea of a truly existent self (Skt. *satkāyadṛṣti*) as held by non-Buddhists but also the view of thinking of the self as genuinely non-existent (Skt. *anātman*). This latter view is based on the *śravakas'* investigation into the true nature of phenomena. Here in this context of Buddha Nature teachings, it is considered a fault to solely adhere to the understanding of the three marks of existence (Skt. *trilakṣana)* of impermanence (Skt. *anitya*), suffering (Skt. *duḥkha*), and no-self (Skt *anātman*). From JKLT's perspective, this teaching is considered limited because it does not fully account for the qualities of the nature of the mind.[94] In this way, the true self in the RGV, according to JKLT and Mönlam Tsultrim, refers to the thorough application of wisdom (Skt. *prajñā*) that yields to the arising of primordial wisdom (Skt. *jñāna*), the true nature of things.

The third veil, (3) the desire for personal happiness, is likewise upheld by non-Buddhist (Skt. *tīrthikas)* and *śravakas*. They are focused on attaining freedom from existence in *saṃsāra* for themselves alone. This veil is remedied by meditative concentration (Skt. *samādhi*) that is rooted in an understanding of emptiness, which is subtle and explained to be the cause of meditative bliss.[95]

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[93] There are the varying abilities to release any external fixation and to be curious about Buddha Nature. The traditional five dispositions (Skt. *gotra*) explain groupings that are generally derived from merit: 1. one is not at all able to have the ability to look at one's mind, which is the cut-off family (Skt. iccantikas; Tib. 'dod chen) and there is disagreement on whether these lack the ability permanent or temporary – according to the RGVV it is a thick, but still temporary obscuration (see Brunnhölzl, Clouds,1080); 2. *tīrthikas,* which is the Sanskrit term for non-Buddhists; 3. *arhats*; 4. *pratyekabuddhas*; 5. *bodhisattvas.*

[94] Jamgön Kongtrül, Buddha Nature, 122.

[95] Ibid, 123.

The last veil (4) is the disregard for the welfare of sentient beings. This lack of compassion comes with the desire for freedom from conditioned existence that seeks to turn away from *saṃsāra*. Commentators of the RGV within the Nyingma and Kagyu traditions indicate that *bodhisattva*s cultivate the view of emptiness joined with compassion, to have the endurance to teach and guide beings out of *saṃsāra.*[96] They develop the skills of compassion and wisdom for this purpose. This motivation is based on the understanding that all beings have Buddha Nature and equally yearn to become free of *saṃsāra*. The commentary by JKLT explains that the longing for peace and liberation is proof of the presence of the *dharmakāya* within sentient beings.[97] The deep sensing of the unconditioned leads to discontent with that which is conditioned and feeds the wish for all beings to be free from suffering (i.e., *bodhicitta*).

This is also echoed in the short *Atyayajñānasūtra*, which has been cited by Mahāmudrā masters for its recommendation that "since the mind is the cause for the arising of wisdom, do not look for the Buddha elsewhere."[98] According to this *sūtra*, one ought to cultivate a mind free of attachment, free of conceptual fixation (literally referencelessness), and compassion.[99] Such a recommendation indeed mirrors the purification process of the RGV and echoes how *death dharma* can be understood as a purified mind of wisdom and love.

This concludes the section discussing at least three roots of *death dharma*: *saṃsāra*, refuge, and purification. Now let's turn to the method of *death dharma,* which is non-conceptual meditation.

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[96] Jamgön Kongtrül, Buddha Nature, 337.
[97] Ibid, 125.
[98] Translated by Tom Tilleman, 84000 Reading Room, version v 1.24.18 (2023); Last accessed 8.17.2023, https://read.84000.co/translation/toh122.html#UT22084-054-003-section-1.
[99] See also the alternative translation of Lowell Cook at Lotsawahouse, last accessed 8.17.2023, https://www.lotsawahouse.org/words-of-the-buddha/sutra-wisdom-hour-of-death.

Chapter 3. The Method of *Death Dharma:* Non-Conceptual Meditation

Based on the teachings of the RGV, the premise here is that the method for engaging in *death dharma* is non-conceptual meditation (Skt. *avikalpabhāvanā*). This Chapter first contextualizes this method within the meditation tradition of Tsen Khawoché. Then it is analyzed through the relationship of conceptual and non-conceptual minds. Their dynamic is further mapped within the discourse of the path and stages within Buddhism. This is a framework that the Mahāmudrā tradition evades by using the ultimate seeing as a method, coined by Maitrīpa as non-mentation (Skt. *amanasikāra*).

3.1. *Non-Conceptual Wisdom in Tsen Khawoché's Interpretation of the RGV*

Although non-conceptual resting (Skt. *śamatha*) is part of most Buddhist traditions, non-conceptual meditation is more specific as it rests within non-conceptual wisdom (Skt. *nirvikalpajñāna).* The following section investigates its status within the context of Buddha Nature in general teachings and the RGV in particular.

Non-conceptual meditation is central to the meditation tradition of Tsen Khawoché. Another approach to interpreting the RGV was developed with Ngog Loden Sherab (Tib. *rngog blo ldan shes rab*, 1059-1109). A comparison between these two provides insight into Tsen's approach.

Ngog Loden Sherab founded the analytical tradition, which sees Buddha Nature merely as a referent for the absence of inherent existence (Skt. *śūnyatā*). Later doxography designated his philosophical position as *rangtong (*Tib. *rang stong*), a Tibetan term meaning self-empty. Although the meditation tradition does not deny Buddha Nature being emptiness, Ngog's approach differs from the meditation tradition in the following two instances in particular: (1)

one's Buddha Nature gradually manifests, and (2) its awakened qualities are the outflow of the realization of emptiness. Let's look at these two to come to understand the difference to Tsen's position.

Ngog reads Buddha Nature as the seed or cause for enlightenment.[100] He sees it as the potential for awakening within beings, which develops over time (development model). This interpretation contrasts with Tsen Khawoché's approach, which considers that Buddha Nature is fully present within all beings and needs to be revealed (revelatory model).

Mathes further explains that this Buddha Nature is for Ngog the "emptiness of each mindstream, which can become the objective support of inferential cognition that negates, but does not affirm anything."[101] This means that Ngog sees the notion of Buddha Nature from the perspective of a non-implicative negation. Being ultimate, it cannot be referred to or ascertained by language. What is refuted here is an affirmative description of the ultimate through language. Such affirmative descriptions are common but particularly used within Yogācāra philosophy and the Mahāmudrā tradition of Maitrīpa. From Tsen Khawoche's perspective even the RGV is filled with affirmative description of the ultimate, but that is denied in Ngog's interpretation.

Although Ngog agrees with Tsen's interpretation that Buddha Nature's qualities are inseparable from emptiness, for Ngog, they are in a causal relationship to it.[102] In Mathes's assessment, Ngog avoids defining the Buddha's qualities in a precise way yet frames them as conditioned phenomena of apparent truth.[103] In other words, the awakened qualities, although inseparable from emptiness, are seen as a by-product of the realization of emptiness. In this way,

[100] Mathes, Direct Path, 28.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid, 30.
[103] Ibid, 32.

Ngog continues to define the status of all appearances as apparent reality and only the non-implicative negation as ultimate.

Tenpa Gyaltsen, a contemporary commentator of the Karma Kagyu lineage, explains that in Tibet, such analytical interpretation of the RGV was preferred by those adhering to a strict Prasaṅgika view.[104] The Prasaṅgika Mādhyamaka's view of emptiness implies that all phenomena, including Buddha Nature, lack an inherent existence or basis. The Prasaṅgika view, therefore, does not hold any positive statements. This is a strategy to avoid the fault of asserting any real or reified entity. Similarly, in this interpretation of the RGV, Ngog avoids asserting the Buddha qualities as truly existent.

Shenpen Hookam, a *shentong* scholar, explains that this analytical approach within the Prasaṅgika Mādhyamaka view results from a very refined investigation and leads to abandoning all conceptual constructions.[105] She cites Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso (b. 1934) as admitting that the luminous nature of the mind with all its qualities should naturally dawn as a result of this analytical practice.[106] However, in reality, this analysis tends to create a habit of deconstructing any experience that one may have. Consequently, it leads to deconstructing even pure experiences. As a result, one does not rest in one mind's nature with all its qualities. Without this ability to rest in non-conceptual meditation, one falls into the danger of adhering to nihilistic views.

It is this danger that the meditation tradition of Tsen Khawoché avoids. His analysis of emptiness is that of the *shentong* tradition's main formula: "Something is empty of that which

[104] Gyaltsen, Tenpa. *Buddha Nature Sourcebook*. Intermediate Curriculum. Vol. 2., BUD 630. Nitartha Institute, 2022, 20.
[105] Hookham, *Buddha within*, 21.
[106] Ibid.

does not exist in it."[107] For Tsen Khawoché, emptiness is fully present with all its innate awakened qualities but empty of all adventitious stains. This presentation of Buddha Nature is an affirmative description that can be associated with a true home, a refuge for any being, and a state free of suffering and its causes. Khawoché's philosophical approach has its roots in India, and later received a doxographical description as *shentong* Madhyamaka through the Tibetan Jonang Master Dölpopa (Tib. *dol pop pa shes rab rgyal mthan*; 1292-1361). For contemporary commentators, such as Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, *shentong* is not an understanding of emptiness that opposes *rangtong*, but is seen as complementing the *rangtong* account. To understand this point, let's consider the following report of Tsen Khawoché about his Kashmiri teacher Sajjana, who had given him teachings that would become Tsen's *death dharma*:

> "Sajjana, the *paṇḍita* from Kashmir, made the very significant statement that the victorious one turned the *dharmacakra* three times. The first [*dharma]cakra* concerned the Four [Noble] Truths, the middle one lacked defining characteristics, and the final careful distinction. The first two did not distinguish between the real and the imputed. During the ultimate ascertainment of the final one, he taught by distinguishing between the middle and the extremes (Skt. *Madhyāntavibhāga*) and by distinguishing between phenomena and their true nature (Skt. *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*)."[108]

Sajjana thus explained the teaching of the three turnings of the Dharma wheel (Skt. *dharmacakra),* which originated in the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* – an important Yogācāra *sūtra*.[109] Sajjana's description of the third *dharmacakra* gives it a definitive meaning that rests on the first two turnings.[110] This last *cakra* not only supersedes the first two but also includes them. This is reflected in the statement that there is "no *shentong* without a proper understanding of

[107] Mathes, Developing Shentong, 194.
[108] Mathes, Klaus-Dieter. "The *Gzhan Stong* Model of Reality." *Journal of International Association of Buddhist Studies* 34, no. 1–2 (2011): 189. The quote's references to *Madhyāntavibhāga* and *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* relate to two texts by Maitreya with these titles.
[109] Powers, Wisdom of Buddhas,139.
[110] Sheehy, Michael R., and Klaus-Dieter Mathes, eds. *The Other Emptiness: Rethinking the Zhentong Buddhist Discourse in Tibet*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2020), 4.

rangtong," with *rangtong* referring primarily to the second *dharmacakra*.[111] A proper understanding of *rangtong* is needed not to reify the seemingly dualistic distinction between ultimate and relative. This may be the case if, for example, one adheres to the teaching "Buddha Nature is permanent" as opposed to other Buddhist teachings stating that "life and death are impermanent." Holding such oppositions in mind would lead one close to a theistic understanding and, in my opinion, a grave misunderstanding. Rather, a refuge like Buddha Nature comes through a deep examination of one's mind. This examination leads one beyond all categories. Such an investigation is done through meditation and accomplished in non-conceptual meditation.

The meditation tradition of the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages is in stark contrast to the analytical tradition, followed by the Gelug tradition, which rejects the notion of mind's luminosity (Skt. *prabhāsvara,* Tib.*'od gsal ba*) as a positive description of the ultimate.[112] This luminosity is important within the meditation tradition. It further plays an important role within these Vajrayāna lineages that developed theories equating this luminosity with the ultimate reality of the *dharmakāya*.[113]

The mind's luminosity is already mentioned within the Pāli canon and discussed in early Abhidharma literature. Such a positive metaphor for the ultimate comes from meditative experience. Matthew Kapstein explored its role within the religious experience and the

[111] Hookham, Buddha Within, 26.
[112] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 75. Also, for an example of RGV's assertion of the luminosity of mind, see RGV, I.63 in Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 376.
[113] Tadeus Skorupski, "Consciousness and Luminosity in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism." In *Buddhist Philosophy and Meditation Practice*, 44. Thailand: IABU, 2012, 51. One such theory is *bodhicitta*, attributed to the mind that "arouses the pristine energies necessary to attain buddhahood. Twenty-two varieties of *bodhicitta* are seen as stages of development of the mind of awakening, with the last being *dharmakāya*. This resonates with the presentation of the RGV, which attributes the function of *bodhicitta* to Buddha Nature, and the final result is also *dharmakāya.*

experiences associated with the time of death.[114] He observed that light is discussed within the Mahāyāna texts, where the encounters with Buddhas and exalted beings are often described through light and luminosity. In this case, light is used to avoid reifying the *dharmakāya* or defining mystical experiences in concrete terms. For example, Haribhadhra's (459–529 CE) comment of the *Astasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*'s statement: "Mind is not mind. The nature of mind is clear light," is noteworthy. He explains that this is so because the nature of the mind is unoriginated and the cause of the destruction of conceptually constructed phenomena:

> "Wherefore it is far removed from the nature of the one and many, the nature, the essence of mind being unoriginated, is clear light; for the darkness of all conception of being is destroyed."[115]

In other words, the experience of light itself is not enlightening but a description of seeing the nature of the mind as the result of eliminating all philosophical views.[116] Such a position is expanded within the meditation tradition as the union of emptiness and luminosity.[117] To understand this union, let's examine conceptual and non-conceptual awareness.

3.2. *The Dynamic of Conceptual and Non-Conceptual Awareness*

Non-conceptual awareness is central to the interpretation lineage of Tsen Khawoché. Mönlam Tsultrim, in his *Repository of Wisdom*, explains adventitious stains as "mistaken appearances of thoughts."[118] The Tibetan word translated as thought here is *rnam par rtog pa,* which generally means dualistic conception.[119] His definition of the adventitious stain is the dualistic operation of perceiving a self (or experiencer) that perceives and engages objects. The

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[114] Matthew Kapstein, *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
[115] Kapstein, The Presence of Light, 125.
[116] Ibid, 126.
[117] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 78.
[118] Ibid, 792.
[119] Brunnhölzl, Luminous Heart, 14.

term *rnam par rtog pa* is the standard translation for the Sanskrit term *vikalpa.* This term broadly means conceptualization and relates to the Sanskrit terms *kalpanā* (Tib. *rtog pa*) and *parikalpa* (Tib. *kun rtog)*.[120] Brunnhölzl explains that these terms refer to "the continuous, constructive yet deluded activity of the mind that never tires of producing all kinds of dualistic appearances and experiences, thus literally building its world." This explanation highlights that when Mönlam Tsultrim identifies those thoughts as mistaken, he also defines the core of *saṃsār*ic existence. This core is a chain reaction of one's personal experiences, a reaction that lacks analysis and a thorough examination of what one is reacting to. The resulting suffering is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of who one is and what is perceived.

As discussed earlier, Mönlam Tsultrim explains that awakening is "the termination" of thoughts (Skt. *vikalpa*) through realization.[121] What Brunnhölzl translates as "termination of thoughts" can also be rendered as "exhaustion of thinking," "finishing of thoughts," or "reaching of their end."[122] One could mistakenly conclude that when concepts are exhausted, they are replaced with a void. But such an interpretation is limiting and nihilistic. Rather, relinquishing one's attachment to thoughts releases their gripping habit. Conventionally, an idea loses its power if its context changes or one's understanding of the object of thought shifts in some way, such as a mirage. Shenpen Hookham explains that cessation or termination of thoughts is possible because these concepts and their resulting *karma, kleśa*, and the wrong way of thinking never truly existed in the first place, just as a mirage of water did not exist previously. [123] However,

[120] *Parikalpa* is the term that describes one of three natures of any phenomena in the Yogācāra system and is explained as an obscuring conceptual activity that hinders the seeing of things as they are, as seen in the *trisvabhāva* doctrine that defines phenomena with three characters of (1) the imputational character (*parikalpa*); (2) the dependent character (*paratantra*) and (3) the perfected character (*pariniṣpanna*).
[121] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 789.
[122] According to Tony Duff 's dictionary Illuminator 2017. The Tibetan phrase in question is *rnam rtog zad pa.*
[123] Hookham, Buddha Within, 76.

cessation in this Tibetan Buddhist context is not only the cessation of a wrong idea. It is also the arising of a correct seeing - of the way things really are - through non-conceptual wisdom.

The Sanskrit terms *nirvikalpa, niṣprapañca, aparikalpita,* or *asaṃjñā* are used to describe non-conceptuality.[124] It goes beyond this study to determine the subtle differences in meaning between these words. Following the *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism, nirvikalpa* refers to non-conceptuality within perception, while *niṣprapañca* refers to an absence of superimposition.[125] Jowita Kramer elaborates on the first by analyzing non-conceptuality within Yogācāra literature.[126] For the second, Hookham's exegesis conveys that non-conceptuality (Skt. *niṣprapañca)* is "freedom from artifice as well as freedom from subjection to an artificially created world."[127] To be without artifice is to be without contrivance. Even subtle concepts like time or the three spheres (Skt. *trimaṇḍala*) of actor, action, and act are said to become undone through non-conceptual meditation.[128]

According to Kramer, the Indian pandit Asaṅga (4th century CE), holds three categories of non-conceptuality (Skt. *nirvikalpatā*).[129] The first one, ordinary non-conceptuality, is called "non-conceptuality of satisfaction" (Skt. *saṃtuṣṭinirvikalpatā*). It belongs to a person who may have some cessation of thought upon contemplating impermanence and feels content with it. Their mistake is not to investigate further in order to discover "true" non-conceptuality.[130] The second type is "non-conceptuality of the unmistaken" (Skt. *aviparyāsanirvikalpatā*). It is attained

[124] Hookham, Buddha Within, 66.
[125] Buswell, Robert E., and Donald S. Lopez, eds. *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).
[126] Kramer, Jowita. "Conceptuality and Non-Conceptuality in Yogācāra Sources." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 46, no. 2 (2018): 321–38, accessed June 23, 2023, doi.org/10.1007/s10781-017-9345-z.
[127] Hookham, The Buddha Within, 66.
[128] Ibid, 51.
[129] Jowita Kramer, "Conceptuality and Non-Conceptuality," 331. This is, according to Kramer, found in the *Abhidharmasamuccaya.*
[130] Ibid.

by the practitioner of the *śravaka* vehicle (Skt. *yāna*). The third type belongs to those on the *bodhisattvayāna* as they realize non-conceptuality of non-proliferation (Skt. *niṣprapañcanirvikalpatā*). This threefold division shows that non-conceptuality refers to mind's wisdom (Skt. *prajñā*), which increases in degrees of subtly on the paths, maturing eventually into the wisdom that knows Buddha Nature.

The absence of concepts alone is not liberating. Just as there are degrees of conceptual involvement, there are also degrees of non-conceptual clarity. The function of the discourse of the Buddhist path (Skt. *mārga*; Tib. *lam*) and levels (Skt. *bhūmi*) is to map out the differing experiences of non-conceptual insight cultivated in meditation.

For beginners of meditation, even confused moments of non-conceptual awareness can serve as stepping stones toward the release from the attachment to concepts. Moments of non-conceptual awareness occur more frequently outside meditation than generally expected. Examples are moments when one is startled, after sneezing and coughing, and during deep sleep. Those are just a few instances when the mind is clear of conceptual fabrication. To encourage non-conceptual awareness in preparing for death, Pema Chödrön encourages her readers to establish an awareness of glimpses of non-conceptuality by noticing what she calls "gap"-moments.[131] She argues that the more familiar one becomes with such experiences of groundlessness and non-conceptuality, the more one can learn to value and cultivate them. For example, noticing the gap between thoughts more consciously can lead to that familiarization.[132] Once an appreciation for the gap is attained, cultivation may follow, and the subtle nature of this topic becomes accessible.

[131] Pema Chödrön, *How We Live Is How We Die*, (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications: 2022), 34.
[132] Ibid.

Different explanations of non-conceptual awareness (Skt. *nirvikalpajñāna*) are helpful to consider to understand what constitutes non-conceptual meditation. In the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, Asaṅga identifies only one qualification, the lack of conceptual activity (Skt. *anabhisaṃskāra*). He explains that through renunciation, thinking that all elements of experience (Skt. *dharmas)* are imperfect, the mind becomes absorbed without proliferation (Skt. *niṣprapañcadhātu*) into the true reality of all *dharmas*.[133] Non-conceptuality is described here as a mere turning away from *dharmas* and a change of focus.

In the *Mahāyānasaṃgraha*, Asaṅga is more precise and explains that *nirvikalpajñāna* is neither based on the discursive mind (Skt. *citta*) nor on the absence of the discursive mind (Skt. *acitta*) as that would be matter (Skt. *rūpa*).[134] Rather, through the power of cultivation through listening (Skt. *śrutamaya),* contemplating (Skt. *cintāmaya),* and meditating (Skt. *bhāvanamaya*), a deeper, non-dual understanding (Skt. *jñāna,* Tib. *ye shes*) is attained. The details of this attainment are further investigated in the next section.

The *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV) introduces non-conceptual awareness not through analysis nor typology but through various metaphors. These metaphors tend to soften the rational mind and stimulate its imagination.[135] Ulrich Kragh, a scholar of Asian languages and culture, examined such poetic references within philosophical contexts. He came to the conclusion that they aim to convey literal, figurative, and suggestive meanings simultaneously.[136] Metaphors introduce non-conceptual awareness by guiding the conceptual mind to its edge, opening the doors of conception to release or gain new perspectives. This is also an approach within the

[133] Jowita Kramer, "Conceptuality and Non-Conceptuality," 331.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Kragh, Ulrich Timme. "Of Similes and Metaphors in Buddhist Philosophical Literature: Poetic Semblance through Mystic Allusion." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, no. 73 (2010): 483. Ulrich Kragh argues that similes and metaphors in philosophical texts "allow the poet to visualize thoughts through images captivating the audience's imagination."
[136] Ibid, 493.

Mahāmudrā tradition, where non-conceptual meditation is the central practice and where pith instructions are the entry gates to *nirvikalpajñāna.*

Mahāmudrā is an index for ultimacy and meditation for realizing the mind's luminous nature. [137] The Mahāmūdra scholar, Roger Jackson, explains that meditation is divided into sudden and gradual approaches. The sudden approaches involve simply resting in non-conceptual awareness, while the gradual approaches involve manipulating the subtle body or sequences of cultivation practices, including visualizations. In this case, the conceptual mind is employed to cultivate non-conceptual awareness.

To further examine the complementing dynamic between conceptual and non-conceptual awareness, let's briefly discuss how non-conceptual awareness transforms into non-conceptual wisdom through the path process and within the Mahāmudrā tradition.

3.3. *Mapping the Effects of Non-Conceptual Awareness*

Within general Mahāyāna context, the development of non-conceptual wisdom is gradual and explained as the exhaustion of all obstructing concepts. The progression of such exhaustion is discussed through the framework of the five paths. The preparatory stage is the path of accumulation (Skt. *sambhāra-mārga*), which begins with the intention to attain awakening (Skt. *bodhicitta)*. The second path of preparation (Skt. *prayoga-mārga*) is also conceptual and the stage of the practice of faith (Skt. *adhimukticaryābhūmi*).[138] Objects are still perceived as mediated by conceptuality while simultaneously aligned with reality, as will be explored in the

[137] Roger Jackson, Jackson, Roger. "Mahāmudrā in India," *Oxford Bibliographies*: 2020, 286, accessed June 23, 2023, doi: 10.1093/OBO/9780195393521-0084.
[138] Jowita Kramer, "Conceptuality and Non-Conceptuality," 332.

next chapter.[139] This path of preparation consists of four parts, "heat" (Skt. *uṣmagata*), "summit" (Skt. *mūrdhan*), "acceptance" (Skt. *kṣānti),* and "highest worldly factors" (Skt. *laukikāgradharma*).[140] After this stage, conceptual, mediated perception is said to yield to the direct, unmediated seeing of ultimate reality: emptiness or Buddha Nature. This is the path of seeing (Skt. *darśana-mārga*), a direct apprehension free of concepts. This seeing is then stabilized on the path of cultivation (Skt. *bhāvanā-mārga*), which in the Mahāyāna consists of the progression of the ten *bhūmi*s. The fifth path is described as the path of no more learning (*aśaikṣa-mārga*), which is in the Mahāyāna a referent for buddhahood, the attainment of the *dharmakāya*.

Non-conceptual meditation, the method of *death dharma*, is central to the progression on these paths. Through *nirvikalpajñāna*, the practitioner purifies the Buddha qualities of fearlessness, etc.[141] This leads to the supramundane non-conceptual insight on the first *bhūmi* of *darśanamārga.* This actual seeing can only be experienced individually as self-arisen wisdom (Tib. *rang byung gi ye shes*). Kramer explains that this is because the realization that the practitioner experiences through self-arisen wisdom is not the basis for descriptive speech.[142]

One may wonder how conceptual knowledge can die or shift to a non-conceptual awareness. In his analysis of the Buddhist Path discourse within the *Abhisamayālamkara*, Pierre Harter points out that such consideration is based on our desire for gradual, sequential steps. This progressive approach says more about how the human mind works than about how the path "really is."[143] To make his point, Harter explains that such gnoseological and soteriological

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[139] Harter, Pierre-Julien. "Buddhas in the Making: Path, Perfectability, and Gnosis in the *Abhisamayālaṃkara* Literature," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2015, 170.
[140] Kramer, "Conceptuality and Non-Conceptuality," 332.
[141] Ibid, 333.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Harter, Pierre-Julien. "Buddhas in the Making," 86.

progress is intersected continuously by the three wisdoms of listening, reflecting, and meditating.[144] These concord with the idea that the habitual ways of perceiving and cognizing must be terminated. Just like the experience of physical death asks the individual to let go of all that is familiar, this spiritual maturation is asserted to deepen through the release of the habitual ways of perceiving the world.

The five paths are a large map for the release from conceptual overlay. Within the development of Mahāyāna, further maps emerged, such as the ten levels (Skt. *bhūmi*). They are a basis for the metaphorical description of the nine similes describing Buddha Nature's discovery within the RGV.[145] Here, the conceptual layers of comprehension are described as clouds, dirt, or figurative covers that must be removed to reveal the immanent non-conceptual Buddha Nature. Such direct seeing is said to yield the soteriological insight and confidence in the deathless nature of not only oneself but all sentient beings. The similes are, therefore, a vivid depiction of how pure and impure minds, concepts, and the non-conceptual Buddha Nature are present simultaneously within sentient beings. Pure minds are seen by removing the impurities covering them within seven of the nine similes.[146] This activity of revealing or discovering, for example, a gold lump in mud points to the sudden aspect of non-conceptual meditation. This is also how Mahāmudrā, rooted in the tantric practice tradition, orients its meditation instruction.

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[144] Harter, Pierre-Julien. "Buddhas in the Making," 110.

[145] Jamgön Kongtrül, Buddha Nature, 32. The nine similes are: 1. the tathāgata in the lotus, 2. bees surrounding honey, 3. grain in its husk, 4. gold in filth, 5. a treasure in the earth under a poor man's house, 6. the seed of a giant tree, 7. jewel statue in rags, 8. a future king in the womb of a destitute woman, 9. gold statue in its mold. 1-5 refers to removing defilements on the path of preparation. Simile #6 refers to the path of seeing; the rest refers to defilements to be removed on the subsequent *bhūmi*s.

[146] Among the nine similes, 6 (tree) & 8 (*cakravartin*) are gradual developmental, and the rest are discoveries that reveal something hidden. In personal conversation [8.2.2023], Karl Brunnhölzl stated that several scholars have argued convincingly that the changes of examples 6 & 8 are not developmental or mere potential, but the inherent power of the seed or the power of the future cakravartin that reveal the hidden as well.

Maitrīpa (1007-1085 CE), an important figure in the Mahāmudrā tradition, promoted a direct seeing of ultimate reality using the Sanskrit term *amanasikāra*, which can be rendered non-mentation. This had been a departure from the generally understood usage of the term as a dull or imbalanced state.[147] To respond to such criticism, Maitrīpa attributed ultimate meaning to this non-conceptual meditation in the following way: Maitrīpa's analysis of the Sanskrit compound *amanasikāra* interprets the initial *a* to refer to either the *prajña paramīta* literature (i.e., emptiness) or to luminosity.[148] Here, both can be considered the object of mental engagement (*manasikāra*). In this way, Maitrīpa defines *amanasikāra* as an activity and, therefore, as the "subjective side of emptiness." He explains this term as an awake presence free of all mental concepts, not a dull and withdrawn state of mind. According to Maitrīpa, it is an affirmative negation, negating the obscuring dualistic thoughts while not abandoning the mind.[149] This interpretation leaves room for ambivalence, pointing to a negation of mental, dualistic operations but affirms a positive application of the mind free of such dualistic activity. In this way, the non-conceptual meditation of Mahāmudrā is a decisive focus on that which is non-conceptual. This again is further explored in the next chapter, which focuses on the act of seeing.

At this point, the following meditation instruction by Gampopa (*sgam po pa bsod nams rin chen,* 1079 -1153CE) lends insight into the efficacy of the method of non-conceptual

[147] Mathes, Klaus-Dieter. "Maitrīpa's Amanasikārādhāra." *Journal of Nepal Research Center* XIII (2009): 4. According to Mathes, *amanasikāra* can be found in early canonical sources, such as the *Majjhimanikāya* (I.436) and *Aṅguttaranikāya* (IV.425), where it relates to the meditator having ceased to be mentally engaged in apperceptive notions of multiplicity. In this regard, it has been presented as a form of suppression of mental activity. Therefore, Maitrīpa's use of the term was subject to much criticism. See also: David Higgins, 2006. "On the Development of the Non-Mentation Doctrine." *Journal of International Association of Buddhist Studies* 29 (2): 257.
[148] Mathes, Klaus-Dieter. "Maitrīpa's Amanasikārādhāra." *Journal of Nepal Research Center* XIII (2009): 6.
[149] Higgins, David. 2006. "On the Development of the Non-Mentation Doctrine." *Journal of International Association of Buddhist Studies* 29 (2): 266.

meditation in the Mahāmudrā tradition.[150] It further gives insight into how Mahāmudrā relates to concepts. To harness the power of concepts, Gampopa explains that thoughts can be employed on the path by understanding their luminous nature.[151] In meditation, when concepts arise, one ought to realize them as having no origination.[152] If that is not realized, one should investigate their empty nature and come to that realization through analytical investigation. This realization will then lead to the conviction that what appears is non-existent. Gampopa likens this process to a fire, which, when weak, will be blown out by the wind of discursive thought. But when the fire is strong, the wind will become an aid to increase and consume all "wood soldiers" (i.e., concepts at war with the fire).[153]In this way, all conceptual constructions are consumed in the fire of the unity of luminosity and emptiness, the non-dual nature of the mind.

This completes the chapter investigating the method of *death dharma*, non-conceptual meditation. It forms the basis for understanding *death dharma*, along with the three principles analyzed in the second chapter. The next step essential to this understanding is to examine the relatively sudden act of seeing Buddha Nature.

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[150] Trungram Gyaltrul, Sherpa. "Gampopa, the Monk and Yogi: His Life and Teaching." Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2004, 197. This meditation instruction by Gampopa is found in his text called *The Introduction to Conceptualization [as] the Supreme Truth [dharmakāya]* (Tib. *rnam rtog don dam gyi ngo sprod*).
[151] Ibid.
[152] No origination is the insight into the empty aspect of thoughts.
[153] Trungram Gyaltrul, Sherpa. "Gampopa, the Monk and Yogi: His Life and Teaching." Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2004, 199.

Chapter 4. *Death Dharma* and the Doors of Perception

Sensory and mental consciousnesses are generally called doors of perception. Here more specifically, this expression refers to the fact that limited sensory and mental awareness can yield to non-conceptual wisdom. This possibility is explored in this chapter. In particular, teachings on how the traditional accounts of the Yogācāra and Pramāṇa traditions discuss this transition give insight by bringing the abstract notion of "seeing Buddha Nature" into more concrete terms. Lastly, a discussion on the Fundamental Change gives insight into the unchanging Buddha Nature.

4.1. *The (In-) Direct Nature of Perception*

The RGV identifies adventitious stains obscuring Buddha Nature as thoughts or conceptuality (Skt. *vikalpa*). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the method of removing these stains is non-conceptual meditation. Through it, one can arrive at an unmediated seeing that yields liberation, and this is what *death dharma* means in the RGV. This chapter investigates that process further by examining how one arrives at this non-conceptual unmediated seeing and the function of concepts in this process.

Contemporary scholar Jowita Kramer has investigated the usage of conceptuality (Skt. *vikalpa*) and non-conceptuality (Skt. *nirvikalpa*) within the Abhidharma and Yogācāra literature. Kramer observed that Yogācāra thinkers had compiled various lists of such conceptual experiences.[154] These lists serve multiple purposes, such as clarifying "the content and

[154] Kramer, “Conceptuality and Non-Conceptuality,” 321.

components of thought," sharpening one's attention and strengthening the ability to recognize *vikalpa* within one's experience and distinguish it from non-conceptuality.[155]

Such *vikalpa* is a component of mental processes, and the English language does not fully capture its complex and nuanced horizon of meaning with words such as conceptuality.[156] The notion of *vikalpa* is used to explain the process of perception, which involves the mind (Skt. *citta*) and its mental factors (Skt. *caitasikas*).[157] According to Ching Keng, Indian Yogācāra philosopher Stiramathi (475-555 CE) asserts this when he concludes that *vikalpa* is not only the object of thought, but it is thinking itself. Therefore, he classifies *vikalpa* as identical to mental consciousness (Skt. *manovijñāna*). It conceptually apprehends the content of sensory perception.[158]

Based on this assertion, one may wonder if *vikalpa* is also part of sense perceptions.[159] Ching Keng examined this question within Yogācāra and Abhidharmic texts. He writes that a

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[155] Kramer, "Conceptuality and Non-Conceptuality," 328. The following list, for example, aims to distinguish distractions from non-conceptuality.[155] It constitutes the entire process of cognition, naming, and categorizing: 1. abhāvanimitta (marking as non-existent); 2. bhāvanimitta (marking as existent); 3. samāropa (imputation); 4. apavāda (negation); 5. ekatva (identity); 6. pṛthagtva difference); 7. svabhāva (intrinsic nature); 8. viśeṣa (characteristics); 9. yathānāmārtha ([conceptualizing] the object according to the name); 10. yathārthanāma ([conceptualizing] the name according to the object).

[156] Keng, Ching. "What Is 'Svabhāva-Vikalpa' and with Which Consciousness(es) Is It Associated?" *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 47, no. 1 (March 2019): 74.

[157] Ibid, 324.

[158] Ibid.

[159] Opinions vary regarding which layers of perception conceptualization can be found. Vasubandhu (4th century) explains in the *Abhidharmakośa* that sense perception is non-conceptual (*avikalpaka*) because they don't have the same ability as mental perceptions (*manovijnana*) to recollect (*anusmaraṇavikalpa*) or to examine *(abhinirūpaṇāvikalpa*). Yet in this exact text, Vasubandhu asserts that the five senses are accompanied by what is described as a natural conception (*svabhāvavikalpa*) to account for the memory of sense data. Dhammajoti (1949), an authority on the Abhidharma, defines in this way *svabhāvavikalpa* as "discrimination, which is the very nature of consciousness itself" (see Keng, " Svabhāva-Vikalpa," 77). Contrary to this position, Yogācāra thinkers do not assert any *vikalpa* to sense perception, including *svabhāvavikalpa*. For Dignāga (480-540CE), there are four non-conceptual means of knowledge (*pramāṇa): direct* sense-, mental-, yogic- and self-aware valid cognition. These four are asserted to have only particulars (*sva-lakṣana*) as their object. The Abhidharma and Dignāga's Yogācāra agree that sense perception must have a particular as its object. The other valid means of knowledge is valid inferential cognition, which has only universals (*sāmānya-lakṣana*) as its object. Here the relationship is that these particulars do not last longer than a moment. Although one has a momentary non-conceptual sense and mental impression, by the second moment, conceptual mental processes impute interpretations in the form of universals onto the particulars.

natural conception (Skt. *svabhāvavikalpa)* is synonymous with investigation (Skt. *vikāra)*, an important notion describing stages in meditation. This investigation can be conceptual or non-conceptual and is abandoned in higher concentrated states of mind.[160] Keng concludes that *vikalpa* is part of the sensory process and is best understood as a discernment rather than conceptualization. Conceptualization tends to imply the "involvement of error (Skt. *bhrānta*) and the employment of concept."[161] He, therefore, agrees with Sthiramati that *vikalpa* is an engaged awareness that is an object-oriented mentation (Skt. *manovijñāna*) within the process of perception.

Within Yogācāra thought, such considerations led to the assertion that one cannot prove that the objects of the senses exist as external referents at all.[162] Rather the objects of perceptions are manifestations of consciousness only (Skt. *vijñaptimātra,* Tib. *rnam par rig tsam*). According to Bruce Hall, the Sanskrit term *vijñāpti* signifies the "phenomenon of perception" or "percept."[163] He indicates that for Vasubandhu, it is synonymous with thought (Skt. *citta*), mind (Skt. *manas*), and awareness (Skt. *vijñāna*).[164] The second word composing *vijñāptimātra* (i.e., *mātra)*, means "only," but also "measure" or "extend." This instruction is often translated as "consciousness-only," "mind-only," or "mere cognizance" as indicating the extent of consciousness. One effect of this teaching is to question and release the notion that objects of perception are necessarily substantial and external. It further underlines what the other sources discussed have also been asserting: that all perception is conceptual.

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[160] Keng," Svabhāva-Vikalpa*",* 78. Keng proposed that Dignāga moved the function of *svabhāvavikalpa*, to the non-conceptual momentary mental valid cognition within his *pramāna* presentation, rendering it therefore non-conceptual.
[161] Ibid, 85.
[162] Hall, Vijñāpti, 14.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid, 7.

Hall points out that *vijñāptimātra* is, on one side, a denial of external objects; on the other, it is an affirmation of thoughts and mental activities.[165] These mental activities are subtle forms of "discrimination" or "discernment" and are the dominant characteristics of *vikalpa.* In other words, *vikalpa* is here defined as being more or less hindering the perception of the ultimate reality.[166] On one side there is contaminated *vikalpa* associated with passion (Skt. *kleśa*). On the other hand, purified forms of *vikalpa* are associated with *samyagjñāna*, which is a correct knowledge of how things are (Skt. *yathabhūta*). Kramer observed that these two categories of *vikalpa* and *samyagjñāna* share a number of essential qualities and mental characteristics.[167] Thus she concludes that *samyagjñāna* is present in non-conceptual awareness and the states after when the bodhisattva is teaching with words and concepts.[168] But how is contaminated *vikalpa* transforming into correct understanding?

The *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* (DDV) is a treatise closely related to the RGV that describes two operating modes of wisdom (Skt. *prajñā*). One is the conceptual mode of cognition associated with phenomena (Skt. *dharma*), defined as dualistic, fabricated, and illusory, and the other one is a direct, immediate, non-conceptual mode of cognition (Skt. *dharmatā*), which is non-conceptual wisdom. DDV scholar Diane Denis points out that this presentation is not only speculative but also operative in nature.[169] She explains that "the conceptual mode has a consequence on experience."[170] This indicates that if concepts are consciously employed, they can open the doors of perception to non-conceptual wisdom. This operation is rooted, according

[165] Hall, Vijñāpti, 15.
[166] Keng," Svabhāva-Vikalpa*″,* 85
[167] Kramer, “Conceptuality and Non-Conceptuality,” 322.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Denis, “The Structure of the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga-Kārikā,*” 56.
[170] Ibid.

to Denis, in the "profound understanding of the aesthetic of "language.""[171] The DDV itself explains this in verse 49, as translated by Denis:

> [When this duality] appears, the nature of phenomena does not appear.
> And when it does not appear, the nature appears.
> It is by using a reasoning mind in this way
> that bodhisattvas get access to fundamental nonconceptual intelligence. (49)[172]

This very much reflects the relationship between Buddha Nature and its stains, which are defined as *vikalpa*. The Pramāṇa tradition offers another formulation of such insight and usage into how concepts can support the effort to attain non-conceptual wisdom.

4.2. *The Seeing of Meditation*

According to John Dunne, Dharmakīrti (600-660 CE), the proponent of Buddhist epistemology, explains the soteriological seeing of the ultimate as direct yogic perception.[173] This perception is clear (Skt. *spaṣṭa*), non-conceptual (Skt. *akalpa*) awareness, and the culmination of meditative practice.[174] Such a direct perception is rendered possible through listening (Skt. *śrutamayajñāna),* contemplating (Skt. *cintāmayajñāna),* and meditating (Skt. *bhāvanamayajñāna*). The first two *jñāna*s of listening and contemplating involve engaging names (Skt. *nāman*) and symbolic expression (Skt. *vyañjana*) through which phenomena (Skt. *dharmas*) are being examined. Meaning (Skt. *artha,* Tib. *don*) arises based on this linguistic understanding.[175] Through meditation, the mind can directly experience this meaning

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[171] Denis, "The Structure of the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga-Kārikā,*" 56.
[172] Ibid, 75.
[173] Dunne, John D. "Realizing the Unreal: Dharmakīrti's Theory of Yogic Perception." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 34, no. 6 (2006): 505, accessed March 8, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-006-9008-y.
[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid, 508.

(Skt. *arthālambanaiva*) without depending on dualistic apprehension of the so-called "object" and without depending on its symbolic expression.[176] It is an integration of understanding that no longer relies on conception.[177] In this way, Dharmakīrti formulates a progression through three forms of discernment.[178] First, a linguistically derived understanding is being considered. This deepens through contemplation and then forms a rationally derived conceptual understanding. Through meditation, this understanding allows a direct and non-conceptual experience.

Kagyu scholar Tenpa Gyaltsen says one needs a precise conceptual understanding as the basis for such contemplation.[179] He compares this process to bridging one's perception of generally characterized phenomena towards the perception of extremely hidden phenomena that are not directly accessible to perception, like Buddha Nature. To reach the other side, the object generality from which one begins one's analysis needs to be the basis of unmistakable understanding (Tib. *go ba*). This becomes evident through its efficacy, as one observes a reduction in one's conceptual grasping of universals (Skt. *sāmāṇyalakṣana*). Within meditation, one releases the grip on conception in the form of universals and becomes more aware of the flow of particulars. This induces the experience of cognition's vividness, non-conceptuality, and trustworthiness.[180]

For Dharmakīrti, meditative concentration (Skt. *samādhi*) enhances yogic perception, a meditatively induced non-conceptual state.[181] He describes the process of yogic perception in the following way, as translated by Dunne:

> A cognition that apprehends a linguistic object (*artha*) is a conceptual cognition of that [object] which it is cognizing. The actual nature [of any cognition *qua* mental

[176] Dunne, "Realizing the Unreal," 508.
[177] Ibid, 509.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Notes from Nitartha Institute Summer Program 2003 via Jirka Hladis.
[180] Dunne, "Realizing the Unreal," 507.
[181] Ibid, 509.

> event] is not a linguistic object; therefore, any [awareness of awareness itself] is direct [and hence non-conceptual] [PV3.287].[182]

This indicates that any moment of conception is a momentary mental event (Skt. *manovijñāna*). Such a moment is a particular (Skt. *svālakṣana*) to the mind. It is a momentary mental particular simultaneously to being a non-conceptual self-aware cognition (Skt. *svasaṃvitti*). This non-conceptual self-aware valid cognition is called "actual nature" in the above quote. John Dunne describes this theory as the "Janus-faced aspect of concepts."[183] Any conception is also a particular mental event and, therefore, non-conceptual. This vivid non-conceptual experience is also self-aware knowing.

According to Dunne, Dharmakīrti's presentation of yogic perception has another distinguishing feature related to this investigation of a path that leads beyond conceptual cognition. For Dharmakīrti, a moment of non-conceptual awareness is characterized by vividness, similar to the vividness of valid sense perception.[184] Such vividness is asserted to be present even within deeply deluded states.[185] This is evidenced through behavioral changes such as horripilation in response to a frightening dream.[186] Consequently, the more one is involved with *vikalpa,* the more direct the experience may become. Dharmakīrti cites a grieving person seeing their loved one in a vivid, unmediated vision resulting from intense involved emotional thinking of them. However, while such confused mind states may lead to vivid, non-conceptual images, only correct understanding (Skt. *samyagjñāna)* of how things are (Skt. *yathabhūta*), have

[182] Dunne, "Realizing the Unreal," 512.
[183] Ibid, 513.
[184] Ibid, 511.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Horripilation is the erection of hair on the skin due to cold, fear, and excitement. One may draw a parallel here to Chandrakīrti's famous statement that some ordinary people tear up in response upon hearing teachings on emptiness. He, therefore, thinks they are the proper vessels for these teachings. (*Madhyamakāvatāra* Chapter Six, verse 4, as seen in: Candrakīrti, *Introduction to the Middle Way: Candrakīrti's Madhyamakāvatāra*. Translated by Padmakara Translation. 1st ed. Boston: Shambhala, 2002, 68.)

a salvific effect upon getting intensely involved with them.[187] Such objects of contemplation are the Four Noble Truths, Buddha Nature, emptiness, the pith instructions on the nature of the mind, and so on.

Dharmakīrti's soteriological epistemology rests on the single method of seeing no self (Skt. *nairātmyadarśanam;* Tib. *bdag med mthong ba*).[188] In this context he is found to asserts a natural luminous mind (Skt. *prabhāsvaracitta*) in the form of pure, immaculate consciousness.[189] Outside of Pramāṇa theory, the luminous mind is a synonym for *tathāgatagarbha*. According to Jackson, it refers to the ultimate nature of the mind in this context of epistemology as there is no mention of Buddha Nature in Dharmakirti's texts.[190] In Dharmakīrti's epistemology, the path to get to the ultimate is a purification process that comes through understanding no-self, leading to the transformation of the base (Skt. *āśrayaparivṛtti,* Tib. *gnas gyur*) on the five paths.[191] By becoming familiar with the understanding of no-self, all other faults are also abandoned.[192] However, one must first come to a conviction or faith to arrive at such fruition. Once one has a purified form of understanding in the form of a precise mental image, it will further one's yogic abilities, strengthen one's conviction, and yield to the opening of the doors of perceptions, seeing beyond their limitations.

Dharmakīrti, too, rests this process on the asymmetrical relationship between pure and impure minds. Just as in the context of the process of purification of Buddha Nature in the RGV

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[187] Dunne, "Realizing the Unreal," 511.
[188] Jackson, Luminous Mind, 101.
[189] Jackson, Roger. "Luminous Mind Among the Logicians-An Analysis of Pramāṇavārttika II.205-211." In *Buddha Nature: Festschrift in Honor of Minoru Kiyota*, edited by Paul Griffith and John P. Keenan, 95–124. Tokyo: Kenkyusha Printed Co., 1990, 96. Dharmakīrti referred to the mind's ultimate nature and not regarding "conventional epistemology," although it impacts it.
[190] Ibid, 96
[191] Ibid, 102. Jackson reports that Dharmakīrti's commentators are in disagreement in what way Dharmakīrti's mentions the *ālayavijñāna*, as Dharmakīrti did not hold the view of an *ālaya* consciousness. Thus, some assert that it simply means abandoning the belief in self.
[192] Ibid, 103.

and the DDV, mistaken thoughts are considered weaker than the teachings on ultimate reality.[193] This difference in potency means that the pure mind is more powerful than the impure mind and, therefore, cannot be overturned again into impurities.[194] It is the fundamental pure mind that can overturn the impure mind. Thus, it follows that the purification perpetuates further purification. Dharmakīrti asserts, "It is the mind's very nature to apprehend objects as they exist, whereas its apprehension of objects in ways that do not exist is adventitious." [195] Jackson explains that for Dharmakīrti and his commentators, this means that when the insight into ultimate reality has become natural, the mind cannot see it in mistaken ways again, even when trying to do so.[196] Consequently, the mind that has undergone the transformation through apprehending ultimate reality correctly can no longer be harmed by *saṃsāra*. This correct way of seeing cannot be destroyed even at the time of death. This is the power of being in accord with reality; it is the power of the awareness of non-conceptual wisdom. For those preparing for death, this is good news. That being said, before diving back into *death dharma*, per se, let's discuss the turning point from conceptual to non-conceptual experience. The explanation of Fundamental Change within the DDV is particularly helpful for looking at the consequences of directly seeing the ultimate reality of Buddha Nature and therefore attaining deathlessness.

4.3. *The Fundamental Change* (Skt. *āśrayaparivṛtti*)

According to Brunnhölzl, the Sanskrit term *āśrayaparivṛtti* can be read as change "within," "of," or "by means of" the foundation or support.[197] It carries the sense that something

[193] Jackson, Luminous Mind, 103-104.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid, 118.
[196] Ibid, 115.
[197] Brunnhölzl, Mining for Wisdom, 53.

old is removed and replaced with something new. Since it is used dominantly in a soteriological context, this change is always a change from the *saṃsār*ic confused experience to a *nirvāṇ*ic freedom endowed with wisdom.[198] This term *āśrayaparivṛtti* is generally translated as "transformation of the basis" or "fundamental change" and even as "change of what one relies on." It has been employed differently in different Buddhist contexts. In the context of the RGV and the closely related Maitreya texts of the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* (DDV*)*, *āśrayaparivṛtti* refers to the purified Buddha Nature, which is stainless suchness (Skt. *nirmalā tathatā*), the manifestation of the *dharmakāya*.[199] Therefore, fundamental change in those texts refers solely to this Buddha Nature, which is already present, pure, and unchanging.[200] This means that there is no change of "anything into anything." Rather, the emergence of clarity removes misunderstandings, like the rising sun dispersing mist.[201]

The *ālāya* consciousness, which overlays Buddha Nature, contains all impure stains of latent tendencies of afflictive and cognitive obscurations (apprehender and apprehended).[202] The pure mind of non-conceptual wisdom and the impure minds fraught with latent tendencies are not merged but are said to be like mixing water and milk.[203]

The unchanging Buddha Nature is seen as ever-present throughout the process of purification, at the time of the ground, path, and fruition, reflected in the explanation of the three phases of Buddha Nature in the RGV.[204] Buddha Nature accounts for the impure minds of sentient beings; the partially impure and partially pure minds of *bodhisattvas* on the path; and the

[198] Brunnhölzl, Mining for Wisdom, 53.
[199] Ibid, 86.
[200] Klaus-Dieter Mathes, "Gos Lo Tsā Ba GZhon Nu Dpal's Commentary on the Dharmatā Chapter of the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāgakārikās*." *インド学仏教学研究12*, 2005, 3.
[201] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 1074 fn 1216.
[202] Brunnhölzl, Mining for Wisdom, 80.
[203] Mathes, Direct Path, 60.
[204] Jamgön Kongtrül, Buddha Nature, 128.

completely pure mind that is stainless suchness, the *dharmakāya.* Buddha Nature is only fully comprehended at the stage of buddhahood and completely unchanged throughout this process of revealing the nature of the mind. [205] This process is like the parting of clouds that enables one to see the sun behind them.

To explain the subtlety of this process, Kagyu Master Rangjung Dorjé (*rang byung rdo rje* 1284-1339 CE) writes, as translated by Brunnhölzl, "This mind's essence - be it with stains or stainless - is free from being the same or other than dependent-origination."[206] This indicates that a dependently arisen purification process appears to be happening, but only on the level of relative truth. Understood from the ultimate level - likened to the sun - nothing is really happening. Therefore, the relationship between the pure and impure mind is compared to that of space (i.e., pure non-dual mind) and forms (i.e., impure, dualistic mind) that arise within it.

What causes this fundamental change is not some divine intervention or a truly established causal process. Rather, it is the consequence of listening (Skt. *śrutamaya-),* contemplating (Skt. *cintāmaya-),* and meditating (Skt. *bhāvanamayajñāna*) on Dharma teachings that awakens the power of the nature of mind, following the course that pure minds are more potent than impure minds. This is referred to as the "permeation of hearing" (Skt. *śrutavasana*), which Asaṅga refers to as the "outflow of the pure *dharmadhātu*."[207] It's a supreme knowing that is not within the four extremes.[208] On this path, the correct application of *vikalpa* leads to the arising of non-conceptual wisdom.

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[205] Brunnhölzl, Luminous Heart, 87. Gö Lotsāwa Zhonnu Pel ('gos lo tsA ba gzhon nu dpal, 1392-1481 CE) uses the DDV's teaching on a fundamental change to explain stainless suchness, the purified Buddha Nature of the fifth *vajra* point of the RGV.
[206] Ibid, 138.
[207] Brunnhölzl, Luminous Heart, 37. Asaṅga explains *śrutavasana* in chapter one of the Mahāyānasamgraha.
[208] Four extremes (Skt. *catuṣkoṭi*; Tib. *mtha' bzhi*) 1. existence (Tib. *yod mtha')*, 2. non-existence (Tib. *med mtha'*), 3. both existence and non-existence (Tib. *yod med mtha')*, and 4) neither existence nor non-existence (Tib. *yod med min*).

Such a correct application has been laid out in the DDV by contemplating the four yogas. These aim at fundamental change (Skt. *āśrayaparivṛtti*) by reversing one's externally oriented, dualistic perception toward the nature of the mind.[209] To do so, first, one engages in apprehending *vijñāptimātra*. This yoga stops at the mere percept of phenomena without positing any entity behind it.[210] Seeing appearances as dreamlike and mere thought, one can release seeming external objects of perception within meditation (the second yoga). The third yoga expands the apprehending *vijñāptimātra* to cognition itself, in other words the seeming apprehender of appearances. Once one understands that the apprehender is also merely a fabrication, one releases duality by realizing that duality is impossible.[211] This fourth yoga follows naturally as the arising of non-dual, non-conceptual awareness.

Mathes explains that these yogas are discussed within the commentary on the RGV by Gö Lotsāwa, who links them with the four stages of the yogas of Mahāmudrā (one-pointedness, freedom from elaboration, one taste, and non-meditation).[212] Here, one-pointedness is understood as looking inside and seeing that everything is one's mind. The freedom from elaboration is the understanding that there are no external objects. Mathes indicates that for Gö Lotsāwa, this does not eliminate external objects but implies seeing them as lacking own-being and establishes an internal focus.[213] The realization that external objects as well as the inner mind, are free of conceptualization is the yoga of one taste. And seeing repeatedly that neither the perceived object nor the perceiving subject exist independently is called non-meditation, the fourth Mahāmudrā yoga. Mathes observes that Gö Lotsāwa does not use an affirmative negation implied by the

[209] See Mathes, “Gos Lo Tsā Ba GZhon Nu Dpal’s Commentary," 16; and Bentor, Yael. “Fourfold Meditation: Outer, Inner, Secret, and Suchness.” *IATS*, Brill Tibetan Studies Library, 2 (2000): 57. Last accessed July 10. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004483088_005.
[210] Hall, Vijñāpti, 18.
[211] Ibid.
[212] Mathes, “Gos Lo Tsā Ba GZhon Nu Dpal’s Commentary," 17.
[213] Ibid, 18.

absence of duality. He states that on this fourth yoga, one sees Buddha Nature again and again and calls it non-meditation. This present research has already defined non-meditation in the section discussing Maitrīpa's instructions of *amanasikāra*. This discussion supports here the argument that subtle concepts can guide awareness beyond the doors of perception toward non-conceptual wisdom.

Brunnhölzl points out that the RGV and the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* (RGVV) speak of the fundamental change in the form of the light, the heat, and the color of a lamp.[214] He explains that

> "The five superknowledges resemble the light of the flame of an oil lamp because they have the characteristic of overcoming the darkness of the antagonistic factors of the wisdom of experiencing true reality. The wisdom of the termination of contamination (Skt. *āsravakṣaya*) resembles the heat of that flame because it has the characteristic of burning the entire fuel of karma and afflictions. The termination of contamination, that is the fundamental change, resembles the color of the flame because it has the characteristic of the completely stainless and pure luminosity of this fundamental change. It is stainless by virtue of the relinquishment of the afflictive obscurations; pure, by virtue of the relinquishment of the cognitive obscuration; and luminous, by virtue of not having the nature of these two adventitious stains."[215]

This description of the fundamental change shows that the transformation is not about changing stains into the qualities of the *dharmakāya* but refers to opening one's doors of perception to already present qualities. It occurs through releasing what hinders seeing stainless suchness.

This is also highlighted and applied to the time of death in Mönlam Tsultrim's short essay on the *Pith Instructions on the Wisdom at the Point of Passing When About to Die* (PIW).[216] Relying on the *Atyantajñānasūtra*, Mönlam Tsultrim points at the emptiness of phenomena and further encourages his readers to search for the mind and see for themselves that it is unborn.

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[214] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 370.
[215] Brunnhölzl, Mining for Wisdom, 86.
[216] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 801.

"Meditating like that," he states, "at the point of dying, the non-conceptuality that abides as the natural state and the non-conceptuality of meditation meet like mother and child."[217] This is the attainment of Mahāmudrā in the intermediate states, according to Mönlam Tsultrim. And it is the reassurance that the cultivation of non-conceptual meditation will lead to the attainment of the fundamental change, if not during one's lifetime, then at the time of death.

To further investigate this assertion and to connect such an understanding of fundamental change to the inquiry on *death dharma*, let's turn now to the Mahāmudrā's traditional death preparation practices. The instructions found therein can help those aspiring to practice *death dharma* to investigate how to extend one's practice of wanting to see Buddha Nature into the liminal spaces of one's life.

[217] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 801.

Chapter 5. Death Preparation in the Mahāmudrā Tradition

This chapter explores the instructions on death preparations within the Mahāmudrā tradition, which can be summarized into three instructions of devotion, the Six Dharmas of Nāropa (Tib. *nā ro chos drug),* and resting in the nature of mind.[218] The first and last have been widely propagated within the Kagyu lineage, while six yogas with their so-called *bardo* instructions were traditionally only practiced by advanced practitioners. These three traditional pathways are the closest summary of the application of *death dharma* in the Mahāmudrā tradition.

5.1. *Devotion - the Key to Keeping the Doors of Perception Open*

Devotion (Skt. *adhimukti*; Tib. *mos pa*, also: *mos gus*) is a deep level of faith (Skt. *śraddha*, Tib. *dad pa*). It is considered essential within the Mahāmudrā tradition, where the realization of the nature of mind is explained to largely depends on the teacher or Guru (Tib. *bla ma*), the object of one's devotion.[219] Such specialization of the Guru-disciple relationship aims to protect subtle non-conceptual experiences from habitual discursiveness.[220] For example, if the relationship with the teacher, who points out the nature of the mind, is considered very precious, the resulting experiences are likewise held in esteem. As already seen in the writings of *mahāsiddha* Saraha (8th century), devotion has long been part of the Mahāmudrā tradition.[221]

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[218] Dzogchen Ponlop, *Mind beyond Death* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2008), 141.
[219] Dorje Wanchuk, *Mahāmudrā, Ocean of Definitive Meaning*. trans. Elizabeth Callahan (Nitartha Institute International, Seattle: 2001), 84.
[220] For a contemporary discussion on devotion, see Capper, Daniel. *Guru Devotion and the American Buddhist Experience*. Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002. Therein, devotion is discussed within the North American context, where it is received with skepticism and difficulty. Opinions differ, therefore, on whether Guru devotion hinders or supports the spiritual path. Those perceiving it as an obstacle claim it aggravates personal, psychological problems. Those thinking of it as supportive observed that students of Buddhism, with such a trusting teacher-student relationship, are more committed to their practices path and follow through even when it is difficult. Such reactions must be considered if one acknowledges its powerful position within the Mahāmudrā traditions.
[221] Julia Stenzel, "Saraha's Dohākośa Mahāmudrā Upadeśa as an Example of Early Mahāmudrā Literature," Banaras Hindu University: Delhi Buddhist World Press, 2009, 135. Still, devotion can be observed as an important practice even within contemporary Tibetan Buddhist communities to this day.

Within the Kagyu tradition, one differentiates between four types of Gurus.[222] The first type of Guru refers to the individual lineage holders that bestow the key instructions on Mahāmudrā upon their disciples. These instructions, the words of Buddha's teachings, are the second type of Guru. The third type of Guru is the symbolic meaning of appearances, and lastly, the ultimate Guru is *dharmatā.* One may notice a parallel to the threefold process of study, reflection, and meditation discussed earlier, where the literal meaning of the words and symbolic meanings resulting from the words are focused upon until the non-conceptual realization dawns. In other words, devotion to the Guru as person eventually culminates in the devotion to Buddha Nature itself.

According to Karl Brunnhölzl, Gö Lotsāwa Zhonnu Pel (Tib. *'gos lo tsA ba gzhon nu dpal*, 1392-1481 CE) explains that the efficacy of devotion makes the mind more lucid.[223] Further, he states that devotion is the dominant condition for realizing the non-arising of the mind and its luminous quality. Hookham, in her research on Buddha Nature and Jamgön Kongtrül's commentary on the RGV, elaborates further on this when she indicates that devotion relies on faith and that this faith is the result of experience (Tib. *myong ba*) gathered in meditation.[224] Such an experience is described as being beyond the duality of apprehender and apprehended. It is a self-aware, self-illuminating mind (Tib. *rang rig rang gsal*), sometimes also described as the inner Guru.[225] In this context, devotion is the means to apprehend the ultimate, non-conceptual reality, but it can also be seen as the result of practice. As such, it has a strong place within the literature of the Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen traditions, where devotion is

[222] Wanchuk, Ocean of Definitive Meaning, 84.
[223] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 259.
[224] Hookham, The Buddha Within, 65.
[225] Ibid, 61. In the Tibetan tradition the differentiation between outer, inner and secret Guru has the function to extend devotion from the outer teacher, who points at the nature of mind, to the experience of non-dual awareness and emptiness. On a discussion on this see Khyentse, Jamyang, *The Guru Drinks Bourbon?,* Edited by Amira Ben-Yehuda (Boulder: Shambhala, 2016), 27.

venerated as a sign that realization has arisen within the mind.[226] This affirms what Hookham refers to when she speaks of faith as a result of experience.

Dzongsar Khyentse states that the *mahāsiddha* Saraha defines devotion as "trust in cause, condition, and effect" (i.e., *karma*).[227] This is significant within our discussion of *death dharma*, since such a faith would enable devotion's love and enthusiasm to be present when such qualities are needed. Devotion, therefore, bears the function of an antidote to uncertainty, enabling the practitioner to meet life's unpredictable circumstances with a positive, welcoming attitude. Through trust in cause and effect, the qualities of forgiveness, acceptance, and meaning-making enable the mind to keep the doors of perception open, even in the face of death's irreversibility.[228]

This devotion is an important stepping stone within the practice of non-conceptual meditation. It allows for the needed release and the shift of focus to the spacious mind not mingled with the many appearances. Rather than an irrational devotion, holding on to the projection of unexamined doctrines, rational devotion is based on analysis through the process of listening, contemplating, and meditating. Through this process, devotion can grow beyond conceptuality's rational and irrational limitations into the non-conceptual certainty needed to prepare for death with fearlessness.

Such stabilized faith is reflected within the RGV discussion on the efficacy of Buddha Nature teachings. Here, the teachings on Buddha Nature address five faults considered obstacles

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[226] See for example the Mahāmudrā lineage prayer of the Kagyu tradition; as of July 12, 2023, khandro.net list it on their website: http://www.khandro.net/prayer_Kagyu_lineage.htm

[227] Khyentse, The Guru Drinks, 43.

[228] This has been echoed within the works of contemporary advocates for trauma-informed health care, as for example Gabor Maté (e.g., Gabor Maté, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction* (London: Vermilion, 2018). Although the topic of devotion is not raised there as such, devotion as faith in cause and effect is echoed in their discussion of the human need for connection. Through basic trust in cause and effect, a traumatized, sick or dying person is able to stay socially and spiritually connected and not give up on the positive attitudes needed to heal or die peacefully.

to seeing the mind's nature. Of these, the first fault of faintheartedness (Skt. *līnaṃ cittaṃ*), seems relevant to this discussion since it is the greatest obstacle in the context of death preparation.[229] The notion that "it is too late to realize awakening," "awakening is out of reach," and "I don't have the qualities needed" are just a few beliefs that can get in the way of opening oneself to *death dharma*. For anyone tossed around by the stress and suffering of conditioned experience, awakening is easily seen as a future goal that is impossible in the present moment. Especially at the time of death, such a *wallpaper* may easily cause regret or resentment. Stabilization of faith and devotion can be an antidote to such doubts and negativity and enable the manifestation of one's awakened qualities. [230]

In this way, devotion can be seen as a central condition within traditional death preparation practices. Dzogchen Ponlop explains that stabilized devotion furthers the practice of pure perception, which is to see one's surrounding as divine, pure, and awake.[231] With the help of such stabilized devotion, according to tantric teachings, one can even see and rely on the Guru after one has died.[232] This devotion for the (four types of) Guru keeps the doors of perception open, actively engaging non-conceptual meditation throughout one's dying process. This dynamic continues to play a role in the death preparation of the Mahāmudrā tradition.

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[229] Jamgön Kongtrül, Buddha Nature, 176. Ibid, 40-41. The last four faults are as follows: contempt for inferior beings (Skt. *hīna-sattveṣv-avajjñā*), perceiving the untrue (Skt. *abhūtagraha*), disparaging the true nature (Skt. *bhūta-dharma-apavāda*), and self-cherishing (Skt. *ātma-sneha*). Jamgön Kongtrül explains that the teaching on Buddha Nature (Skt. *tathāgatagarbha)* counteracts contempt for inferior beings (Skt. *hīna-sattveṣv-avajjñā*) by giving insight into the equal nature of all beings, from insects to humans. It also determines correct perception by refuting the apprehension of what is not there (Skt. *abhūtagraha*). It encourages one to see the pure qualities of the *sugatagarbha* that are there (Skt. *bhūta-dharma-apavāda*). And the last of the five faults is self-cherishing (Skt. *ātma-sneha*), which hinders compassion.

[230] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 455. As verse 2a in the fifth *vajra* point of the RGV states: "The intelligent whose minds have faith in this object of the victors become the vessels for the collection of qualities."

[231] Dzogchen Ponlop, Mind Beyond Death, 222.

[232] Ibid.

5.2. *Nāropa's Six Dharmas: Methods for Keeping the Doors of Perception Open*

The meditation tradition of Tsen Khawoché is rooted in the teachings of Maitrīpa (10th century), who combined the tantric Mahāmudrā tradition with the *sūtrayāna* via the RGV.[233] Having gained faith in the unchanging, powerful nature of one's mind, one engages in practices to enhance non-conceptual awareness. The tantric tradition uses additional yogic instructions and subtle body techniques to purify and stabilize the mind. These Vajrayāna instructions point to the fundamental continuity of mind throughout all states of existence.[234] "Life" and "death" are merely concepts imputed onto the unchanging nature of beings. Within the practice of the Mahāmudrā tradition in general and the six dharmas in particular, one aims to stabilize one's focus in unchanging non-conceptual awareness.[235]

The continuous change of causes and conditions is what brings about death. The following awakening story of Maitrīpa, recorded in the *Pith Instruction on the Mahāyāna Uttaratantra* (Tib. *theg chen rgyud bla'i gdams pa*), demonstrates how mind can go beyond causes and conditions through awakened awareness. It is an awakening to the unity of change with non-conceptual awareness. This encounter with Maitreya, the celestial being to whom the RGV's authorship is attributed, occurred within a lucid dream.[236]

According to Mönlam Tsultrim's record, Maitrīpa dreamt one night that Maitreya challenged him to explain how to kill. Maitrīpa found himself unable to do so despite his vast

[233] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 151. The RGV provides the philosophical view establishing the basis for Maitrīpa's Mahāmudrā practice. Tsen Khawoche's teacher Sajjana is said to have received Maitrīpa's Mahāmudrā instruction through Maitripa's student Ākaraśānti. It is in this way that scholars like Brunnhölzl and Mathes trace the developments of the *shentong* view and *sūtra Mahāmudrā* back to this tantric adept Maitrīpa and Sajjana. Commentators of the RGV, such as Mönlam Tsultrim, Gö Lotsawa, Jamgön Kongtrül, and the Eighth Karmapa, all establish a connection between the RGV and Mahāmudrā.
[234] Dzogchen Ponlop, Mind Beyond Death, 11.
[235] Ibid.
[236] Klaus-Dieter Mathes, "The Pith Instructions on the Mahayana Uttaratantra." In *The Illuminating Mirror* (2015c): 310

learning as a Buddhist scholar. Maitreya then challenged Maitrīpa to jump first into an abyss (by which Maitrīpa became lucid to his dream) and again into a fire. Within the fire, Maitrīpa's body dissolved into space. At that very moment, Maitreya prompted him to look where the man named Maitrīpa and his fear went within this experience. Since this was all in a dream, Maitrīpa could see that after jumping into the fire and his body dissolving, he experienced non-conceptual bliss. Then, as the story goes on, the realization of no-arising and no-ceasing of all phenomena manifested within him, and Maitreya confirmed Maitrīpa's experience by stating, "You are naturally pure." Maitrīpa revealed his understanding to Maitreya by saying that his body and experiences merely arise from thoughts like appearances in the sky. Maitreya confirmed his assertion that all phenomena arise in the naturally pure mind. When Maitrīpa's body reappeared, he received further pith instructions from Maitreya, which helped him attain trust in the four inconceivable *vajra* points of the RGV [RGV I.25].[237]

This awakening story covers a wide range of meanings. What stands out in this context is Maitrīpa's awakening to his Buddha Nature through a death process: his body and mind states dissolved and ceased to be. Yet, a non-conceptual awareness was present in this process so that Maitrīpa could even converse with Maitreya and reflect on his experience. Thoughts were seen while the mind remained pure and unchanged by them, just like the sky remains unchanged by clouds. These images and explanations are also found within the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV), the *Dharmadharmtāvibhāga* (DDV), and their commentaries.

The experience of the dissolution of one's body does not only happen at the time of death. This is also experienced during sleep, especially deep sleep and within some deep meditative states. Tantric yoga practices have used these states by developing subtle body exercises that aim

[237] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 352.

to harness these liminal spaces' potential for awakening. To see how they relate to *death dharma*, let's turn to a specific set of instructions, called in Tibetan *nā ro chos drug*, referred to here as the Six Dharmas of Nāropa. These six practices are listed as follows: (1) mystic heat (Skt. *caṇḍāli*, Tib. *gtum mo*), (2) radiant clear light/luminosity (Skt. *prabhāsvara*, Tib. *'od gsal*), (3) illusory body (Skt. *māyakāya*, Tib. *sgyu lus*), (4) dream state (Skt. *svapna*, Tib. *rmi lam*), (5) intermediate state (Skt. *antarābhava*, Tib. *bardo*), and (6) transference of consciousness (Skt. *saṃkrānti*, Tib. *'pho ba*). [238]

The practice of mystic heat is a breath retention exercise that stabilizes and purifies the subtle body. It is foundational to the other practices that likewise aim to stabilize non-conceptual awareness. These practices can potentially benefit at the time of death because they extend non-conceptual awareness into the liminal states of sleep and dream. However, only the yoga of the transference of consciousness is directly practiced at the time of death, while the others are considered supportive.[239]

These Six Dharmas teach that there are three *bardo* states. *Bardo*, referring to intermediate states, which are transitional periods (1) between birth and death (*bardo* of ordinary life), (2) between falling asleep and waking (*bardo* of dreams), and (3) between death and the next life (*bardo* of becoming).[240] The time of death is defined as between the period before and right after the cessation of the breath and as the warmth of the corpse dissipates. At that time, the winds in the subtle body collect around the heart center and leave the corpse from there.[241] Maintaining awareness throughout this process is an exceptionally difficult task. It has so far

[238] Exhibits, ed. Jeffrey Hopkins, "The Art of Dying, Esoteric Instructions on Death and Liberation," University of Virginia Library (1998): accessed July 13, 2023, https://explore.lib.virginia.edu/exhibits/show/dead/texts/artofdying.
[239] Ibid.
[240] Exhibits, ed. Jeffrey Hopkins, "The Art of Dying, Esoteric Instructions on Death and Liberation," University of Virginia Library (1998): accessed July 13, 2023, https://explore.lib.virginia.edu/exhibits/show/dead/texts/artofdying.
[241] Dzogchen Ponlop. Mind beyond Death,133.

only been accomplished by highly-realized practitioners, who were observed to remain in meditative states (Tib. *tukdam*) or said to have attained a rainbow body (Tib. *'ja'-lus*).[242]

Kapstein investigated the phenomenon of a rainbow body at the time of death on a philosophical level in his essay "The Strange Death of Pema the Demon Tamer."[243] He writes that this phenomenon is rooted within Tibetan culture and has been observed in modern times.[244] Reports say the deceased's body shrinks and vanishes within a week, leaving only hair and nails behind. The bereaved attribute this unusual phenomenon to the spiritual abilities of the deceased, but not without skepticism, even among Tibetans.[245] Within the current analysis, this may be taken as a sign of the potential of death preparation practices. At the same time, masters of the tradition warn their followers not to fixate on such potential as an ultimate form of refuge. This is evidenced in the following emphasis made by the Mahāmudrā master Götsangpa (Rgod-tshang-pa Mgon-po-rdo-rje, 1189-1258), as translated by Kapstein:

> "The intention of all buddhas throughout the three times, naturally present in all sentient beings, and manifest in the appearance of the six aggregates [of the five physical senses and the intellect], is called "natural luminosity." But, however one designates it, it refers to the appearance of the six aggregates without contrivance. Though one may assert it to be the clear light experienced, for instance, at death, nevertheless, in the absence of the realization of the dharmakāya [the "body of reality"], the luminosity [of which I am speaking here] remains ungrasped. That [experience of clear light at death] is just mundane conceptual activity. Mundane conceptual activity is ignorance. And ignorance is the opposite of what we mean by "luminosity."[246]

Götsangpa explains here why yogic and meditation practices are conducive to death preparation. If one does not break through the apparent dualism of relative and ultimate realities by gaining at

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[242] Dzogchen Ponlop. Mind beyond Death,122.
[243] Matthew Kapstein, *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 119.
[244] Ibid, 120.
[245] Ibid, 121. Kapstein reports of a group of Tibetans addressing Mipham Gyatso (Tib. *'ju mi pham rgya mtsho,* 1846-1912 CE) in disbelieve of the occurrence of a rainbow body at their time.
[246] Ibid, 125-126.

least some glimpse of the non-dual nature of the mind, one remains stuck in the limiting conceptions that define *saṃsāra*. Götsangpa, therefore, discourages any expectation of realizing the nature of the mind and manifesting the *dharmakāya* at the time of death if one hasn't engaged in the purification process. Consequently, mere rational faith in the all-pervading Buddha Nature has its limitations.

What is at stake is the efficacy of these Buddha Nature teachings. Suppose they are absorbed merely as a replacement for old *wallpapers* (used here as the reference for subtle old patterns on the mind's background) to become the subtle concept of mere comfort within *saṃsāra*. In that case, their opportunity for liberation is not actualized. Only through engaging the practice path of purification of the mind can one access a direct experience of the nature of one's mind and transform death into an opportunity.

The *bardo* teachings take the habitual tendency to miss the opportunity for liberation in this life into account and repeatedly asserts new opportunities for realizing one's Buddha Nature.[247] According to Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, the most concrete opportunity for liberation at the time of death is the experience of the *dharmakāya* or of the *saṃbhogakāya's* luminosity right after the cessation of the breath.[248] Establishing a correct experiential understanding of one's nature of mind before dying is important for this insight to occur. According to Gampopa,

[247] The well-known, so-called Tibetan Book of Dead (Tib. *bar do thos grol*) is such a manual in that it is meant to be read to the deceased and offers them opportunities for liberation for the traditional number of 49 days after death.
[248] Dzogchen Ponlop. Mind beyond Death, 163. The understanding of clear light will yield two opportunities for liberation during the so-called intermediate or *bardo* states following the physical death of a practitioner. Those who have cultivated familiarity with their Buddha Nature will know the individual's mind's luminosity (child luminosity) and consequently recognize and merge with its source (mother luminosity) at the time of death. This mother luminosity is the *dharmakāya* or ground luminosity. The recognition of the *dharmakāya* luminosity at the time of death relieves one from any further *bardo*s or rebirth experience. If this is not recognized, this luminosity is seen by the *bardo* being in the form of peaceful and wrathful deities that evoke experiences based on unresolved karmic tendencies. The *bardo* experience described here is the *sambhogakāya* luminosity - another opportunity to attain liberation if one realizes that these deity images are one's mind's projection. If these two states of luminosity are not recognized as one's mind's nature, then the *bardo* being is propelled towards a new rebirth based on their habitual karmic tendencies.

such insight is considered all that is needed. This is an assertion that some of his contemporaries disagreed with. Considering this argumentation is helpful for continuing to discern the efficacy of *death dharma* in the contemporary context.

5.3. *Gampopa's Simple Remedy*

Although Gampopa was well trained in these highly sophisticated Vajrayāna practices, when teaching his own students, he often did not use them to present Mahāmudrā. Rather he used the RGV and fundamental Mahāyāna sources destined for a wider audience. This approach was later described as Sūtra Mahāmudrā or Essence Mahāmudrā.[249] He passed on the tantric Mahāmudrā approach only to a few. When one of Gampopa's students requested *bardo* instructions for death preparation, he responded as translated by Tony Duff:

> What will a bardo instruction do for you? Both at present and at death, bardo meditation is not necessary. Meditate on luminosity alone. Luminosity that is something that is on at all times so, by it, the bardo will not be seen. For example, if you are on a place where there are no enemies, fear of an enemy and an escort are not required.[250]

In this way, Gampopa emphasizes the meditation on luminosity, which is the nature of the mind. This nature of mind practice is the non-conceptual mediation of Mahāmudrā. Not having any enemy can be likened to not having any concepts or dualistic constructions hindering the resting in the non-dual awareness. Previously, in chapter three of the present research, Gampopa explained this in his meditation instruction, where "wooden soldiers" were burned by the fire of non-dual awareness.[251] In this quote, he reasons that familiarization with the luminous nature of

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[249] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 194.
[250] Sgam-po-pa, ed. Tony Duff. *Gampopa Teaches Essence Mahāmudrā: Interviews with His Heart Disciples, Dusum Khyenpa and Others*. 1st ed. Kathmandu: Padma Karpo Translations, 2011, 42.
[251] Trungram Gyaltrul, Sherpa. “Gampopa, the Monk and Yogi: His Life and Teaching.” Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2004, 199.

the mind is supported and encouraged through that same luminous mind.[252] Just as within the prior discussion that pure seeds overpower the stains, Gampopa encourages trust in the non-dual mind because all negative states will be subsumed by it by recognizing their non-dual nature.

It is particularly noteworthy that Gampopa emphasizes that he himself does not have any other practice for death preparation but resting in the nature of the mind.[253] It is famously reported that by the end of his life, Gampopa would not receive any students wanting tantric instructions but only let those come to him who wanted to receive the pointing-out instructions for the nature of their mind. A possible explanation for such a radical and unorthodox position can be found in the following passage, where Gampopa defends this single approach in comparison to the paths of *sūtra* and *tantra* tradition's approaches when he states,

> By the tradition of the Perfections, realization arises in the mind based on the trio of Thought of Awakening (*bodhicitta*), [the insight of] "Like an Illusion," and Emptiness. By the Mantra tradition, realization arises based on the trio of the body as deity, voice as mantra, and mind as Ultimate Reality. If you don't realize it, you don't attain Buddhahood. By my tradition, [...] by this way of practicing religion, there is no going down, only going upwards. Those of sharpest faculties become Buddhas; those of middling [faculties] will be born in the five abodes of the saints; even the worst are born as gods.[254]

The reference to the differing ability of the practitioner is noteworthy, as it gives way to a concession that the method of resting in mind's nature has differing effects among the diverse group of practitioners. Gampopa sees resting in the mind's nature as sufficient to propel the practitioner toward liberation but admits that not everyone will be able to get there.

Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen (*sa skya paṇḍita kun dga' rgyal mtshan,* 1182-1251), also called Sapaṇ, is considered according to Jackson the most outspoken critic of Gampopa's

[252] Sgam-po-pa, Gampopa Teaches Essence Mahāmudrā, 58.
[253] David Jackson, "Enlightenment by a Single Means." *Österreichische Akademie Der Wissenschaften*, Beiträge zur Kultur und Geistesgeschichte Asiens, 615, no. Philsophische Historische Klasse (1994), 153.
[254] Ibid, 26.

Mahāmudrā approach. Sapaṇ expressed concern regarding the assertion that a single practice is sufficient to attain Buddhahood. According to Sapan, this assertion leads to the false conclusion that other practices, like those of cultivating renunciation and compassion, are unnecessary. For Sapaṇ however, this assertion is flawed on an even more fundamental level. For him, a single condition cannot fully liberate all aspects of the mind.[255] Rather, through *sūtr*ic and *tantr*ic support, an interdependent connection must come together to attain buddhahood (i.e., the manifestation of the three *kāya*s).[256] This is so, particularly because of the multitude of awakened qualities, like compassion, that characterize buddhahood. If only a single cause existed, it could only produce a single result (or quality).[257]

According to Buchung, Sapan's further concern with Gampopa's single approach is based on it being considered a non-conceptual (Skt. *niṣprapañca*) approach. Sapan accuses this method of merely suppressing the conceptual mind.[258] Instead, he asserts that full realization cannot be achieved without tantric subtle-body practices. To him, the recognition of the nature of the mind outside the tantric context is merely conceptually fabricated. Such a concern is meaningful in light of the heavy task of death preparation since just relying on mere conceptual instructions alone, as discussed previously, is not sufficient.

Although Gampopa was not alive to rebut these accusations, his writings carefully reflect on the problems mentioned by Sapaṇ. These considerations, moreover, are necessary for his *sūtr*ic approach to be effective. In light of this, Gampopa is seen laying out a gradual path that focuses on cultivating renunciation, bodhicitta, concentration, and other qualities conducive to

[255] Jackson, "Enlightenment by a Single Means,"171.
[256] Tenzin Buchung, "Gampopa Mahāmudrā: View, Meditation, Conduct," Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 2021, 184.
[257] Buchung, "Gampopa Mahāmudrā: View, Meditation, Conduct," 184.
[258] Ibid.

training the mind toward seeing its true nature.[259] He further asserts that what defines a student as qualified to receive pointing-out instruction includes having previously cultivated the mind through preliminary and gradual instructions. Gampopa acknowledges that it is rare to find qualified students who are so mature to be considered instantaneous practitioners ready to awaken once they are introduced to the nature of their minds.[260]

Despite admitting this difficulty, according to Buchung, it seems Gampopa feared diminishing the power of the thunder of the sudden death approach of *Mahāmudrā*, if he equated it with the need for gradual cultivation.[261] In this way, he is known to assert that turning to other gradual practices is not beneficial once the nature of the mind is realized.[262] His reasoning for this is that the realization of the nature of the mind equals the realization that all phenomena are of the mind and all appearing mental events are empty and truly non-existent. Clarification of such insight comes through working with an authentic Guru, which Gampopa holds central for the attainment of realization.

Therefore, Gampopa establishes Mahāmudrā as the highest path that goes beyond the *tantra* and *sūtra* vehicles.[263] Having used the means of both to work the mind of his students, Gampopa then uses five types of pointing-out instructions*:* First, those that point at appearances being dream-like; second, describing the unity of emptiness and appearances with the analogy of water and ice; then pointing at the emptiness of the mind with the analogy of the sky; further, discussing the one taste of the multiplicity by the analogy of a piece of sugar; and lastly;

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[259] Gampopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* is such a text. See, for example: Sgam-po-pa, Khenpo Rinpochay Könchok Gyaltsen, and Trinlay Chödron. *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation: The Wish-Fulfilling Gem of the Noble Teachings*. Ithaca, N.Y: Snow Lion Publications, 1998.
[260] Buchung, “Gampopa Mahāmudrā,"198.
[261] Ibid, 27.
[262] Ibid,194.
[263] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 194.

discussing the continuity of the *dharmakāya* through the analogy of the continuity of a river.[264] These instructions are closely related to the four yogas of Mahāmudrā, as discussed earlier.

Whether one can take such an approach to Mahāmudrā as a basis for death preparation seems indeed based on the person's personal capacity. While the teacher may skillfully point out the nature of the mind, it is still up to the student to be able to go beyond all conceptual reference points, not cling to conceptual images or merely suppress thoughts. It is through faith that is convinced adhesion to Buddha Nature's validity that one may discover the mind's spacious and connecting essence with its usefulness for death preparation. This concludes the discussion of Gampopa's unique approach to *death dharma.*

[264] Brunnhölzl, Clouds, 194.

Death Dharma - Attempting a Conclusion

This research has investigated the building blocks of Tsen Khawoché's *death dharma*. The underlying aspect of *death dharma* is that non-conceptual awareness is continuously present. Such immediacy is the refuge and source of solace for those in need. The preceding discussion sketched a framework for seeing and maintaining the spacious nature of the mind. A personal conviction in this Buddha Nature may grow for some into faith, devotion, and realization through listening, contemplating, and meditating.

Further, the teachings of the RGV and its related explanations of the Yogācāra and Pramāṇa traditions have shown that concepts (Skt. *vikalpa*), although limited, can touch the edge of sensory or conceptual consciousnesses. This means conception can lead to transcending conceptions altogether. This may lead to seeing Buddha Nature with its powerful dynamic of being naturally perfect yet needing purification. In the context of death, this can be seen as the understanding of not going anywhere at the time of death and yet, needing to release all that is familiar to us.[265] In this way, contemplating and facing one's mortality helps one to open and explore such profound renunciation. The method for such release, or *death dharma*, is non-conceptual meditation. This analysis has discussed how this meditation is based on non-thinking and not finding anything, resulting in completely resting in the self-arisen wisdom. This is seeing Buddha Nature, which is peace. Yet, not everyone has the ability to connect with it, in particular during difficult times of unfavorable circumstances. The Buddha Nature teachings account for that when discussing beings' dispositions.[266]

[265] One doesn't go anywhere, because no phenomena come or go, since they are baseless - the insight Maitrīpa had in his dream.
[266] This was addressed in the discussion on the differing dispositions in Chapter 2.3.

Yet, one may still wonder what the practical applications of this analysis are. If one is to face death, what is one to rely on? How does *death dharma* benefit, for example, those facing death? How is it helping those serving in the field of spiritual care? A recent spiritual care encounter within my Chaplaincy work may provide insight into this query. During my shift in the hospital, a fifty-three-year-old Catholic woman shared her anxiety with me. She feared that her current heart condition would cut her life short, as it has for her mother and sister. She was worried about her family, leaving her children behind, and facing death and its unknown. In our spiritual care conversation, she shared with me how she made sense of her life and dying, her recent turning to prayer, and finding peace when going to church. Throughout my active listening of her sharing, she confirmed that her anxiety decreases when she enters or actively looks into an open space. She also appeared to relax when the conversation turned to acknowledging other beings' suffering and death, enabling her to find trust in its normalcy. From there, she raised some curiosity about the possibility of an afterlife, exploring her personal meaning of death. Although her language differed from current Buddhist terminology, the themes of faith, constancy of love, and longing for peace, naturally arose in our conversation. This left me with the impression that the teachings on Buddha Nature's spaciousness and beings' intimate connectedness are two core values that can be utilized by Interfaith Chaplains, building a bridge across religious and cultural boundaries.

Apart from that, there is the power of rational faith. It has the ability to approach Buddha Nature through its conviction that the nature of mind is "washable" from its obscuring conceptual overlay. This is further based on trust in cause and effect, which can nurture those thoughts conducive to engaging in renunciation, meditation, and relative fearlessness during difficult times. In this way, the practice of listening, contemplating, and meditating on the Buddha Nature

teachings is a death preparation that allows the individual to remain engaged throughout every stage of their dying and throughout the death process. Since Buddha Nature is already immediately present, the process of "seeing it" can and should be explored in whatever life circumstances one finds oneself in. Buddha Nature itself does not need to be produced, and seeing is more a release than an activity. Although this may seem like a lengthy process, since time itself is a construction, it too can be removed. In this way, faintheartedness can give way to devotional enthusiasm, the mind of faith that is needed to see directly.

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