As the Western fascination with Tibetan Buddhism continues to grow, one Tibetan Buddhist movement seems to be attracting special attention: the “Great Perfection,” or dzogchen (also transliterated as “rDzogs-chen” and “Dzokchen”). Many Tibetan Buddhist teachers (Nyingmapas in particular, but also the current Dalai Lama, a Gelugpa) consider dzogchen the ultimate, most advanced form of Buddhist practice. Though the tradition is complex, encompassing a variety of movements and trends, most of its forms tend to emphasize a few, basic themes. At the level of view, for example, dzogchen teachers often insist that one is primordially pure from the very beginning. At the level of path, they claim that the highest practice is “doing nothing” or “letting be.”

Buddhism, in its more traditional forms, is a renouncer tradition, and like other renouncer traditions, practicing it involves a good deal of inconvenience; most forms of Buddhist practice are not comfortable (see Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche’s comments on p. 132). For Westerners interested in Tibetan Buddhism, the discomfort is compounded by the cultural foreignness of its symbols and rituals, the nondemocratic, non-egalitarian ideal of guru devotion, a pantheon of “deities” (some of which appear quite hideous), and a traditional cosmology replete with hell realms and hungry ghosts. Given these aspects of the tradition, a Western attraction to dzogchen is understandable. Without having to do anything (it appears) and without having to be involved with all those uncomfortable, somewhat embarrassing practices, rituals, and doctrines, one’s self-image gets to glow in the satisfaction of being a practitioner of the “highest” form of Buddhism.

This approach to dzogchen, however, is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the tradition. Dzogchen is not practiced in a vacuum, but always engaged within the larger context of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. As practiced, dzogchen is never “just dzogchen.” In a traditional setting, being introduced to dzogchen is the culmination of years of involvement with more conventional Buddhist views and practices. Neither is dzogchen, once introduced, intended to negate these traditional practices. Until Buddhahood, continued reflection on “the basics” (unsatisfactoriness, non-self, compassion, etc.) is almost always considered essential. To think otherwise is a form of self-delusion. As Tulku...
Urgyen Rinpoche remarks, “One can fool oneself into believing one need only remain in simplicity. What this honestly means, though, is that such a person will have no spiritual progress” (p. 59).

This situation sets up ironic criteria for evaluating books about dzogchen. Presentations of dzogchen as a distinct tradition or movement may be valuable as scholarly projects and useful for the practitioner who already appreciates its history and traditional setting. But for a general, popular audience, or for those with limited background in the tradition, a book just about dzogchen can be highly misleading and promote the kind of misappropriation of the tradition described above. Depending on the audience, the best book about dzogchen is less about dzogchen than it is about the fundamentals of Buddhist views and practice considered by Tibetan Buddhists to be (1) the essential preliminary to dzogchen and (2) the ongoing context of dzogchen practice itself.

Based on these criteria, Marcia Binder Schmidt’s (ed.) The Dzogchen Primer: Embracing the Spiritual Path According to the Great Perfection is an important and welcome contribution to the popular literature about dzogchen. In spite of its title, the book has apparently little to do with dzogchen. And this is its strength. For all those who think dzogchen is hip and cool (and best of all, easy), The Dzogchen Primer is an invaluable dose of reality: a persistent and urgent reminder that until one has mastered the fundamentals of Buddhist views and practice, dzogchen can not be appreciated or practiced (see, for example, pp. 102, 104–5, 125–6, 175). If there is any one message of the book as a whole, it is this: You must do (and keep doing) the preliminaries!

The book is an anthology of Buddhist materials—the first volume of what will eventually be a three-volume series about dzogchen (presumably the next two volumes will focus more explicitly on dzogchen). Two types of materials make up the anthology: selections from classic Buddhist sources (Śāntideva’s Bodhicaryāvatāra, for example) and excerpts from books or lectures by modern Tibetan teachers (e.g., Chögyam Trungpa, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, and Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche). Most of the selections are well-chosen. The materials by modern Buddhist teachers convey Buddhist concepts in a comprehensible, informal, and often engaging style. At the same time, the reader is exposed to important primary sources, made more meaningful and accessible in relation to modern presentations. The selections are grouped by theme and arranged according to Tibetan Buddhist soteriological theory; doctrines and practices considered to be the foundation of the path are presented first, followed by progressively more advanced teachings. Schmidt’s organization specifically follows the approach of Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, which is in turn based on the Tibetan classic, The Light of Wisdom (Lamrim Yeshe Nyingpo, traditionally ascribed to Padmasambhava). The book’s organization is also
inspired by Gampopa’s *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*. (The editor presents the book as a “user-friendly” distillation of the teachings contained in both sources.) This traditional, hierarchical arrangement of teachings is not meant to imply the inferiority of the preliminaries compared to later, more advanced practices. As one develops spiritually, new teachings are incorporated into one’s practice without abandoning the foundational views and practices, which are considered essential at every stage of the path.

The book begins with a preface by the editor and (in part 1) two introductions by modern Tibetan teachers that provide an overview of some of the topics addressed in the remaining chapters of the book. The authors stress that the purpose of Buddhism is transformation, which requires (among other things) having a solid intellectual grasp of the teachings and then putting the teachings into practice. As Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche suggests, Buddhism is not just an inventory of concepts, but a path to be lived (p. 10). Other themes touched upon in the introductions include: acknowledging the deludedness of ordinary consciousness; the importance of renunciation; the need for a teacher/guru, and the importance of faith in and devotion to the guru; the importance of compassion; and the “pure perception” of Vajrayāna. All of these points are presented as essential elements of the Buddhist/dzogchen path; to consider any of them “extrinsic” or “optional” negates the path’s transformative potential.

These themes and others are then developed in parts 2 and 3 of the book, “Starting Point” (five chapters) and “Integration” (twenty-eight chapters), respectively. One of the primary topics of part 2 is buddha-nature: the idea that the true nature of the person is primordially pure, but is obscured by ordinary, dualistic consciousness. As the authors acknowledge, beginning with buddha-nature is unconventional (usually, it’s suffering). The approach is defended based on the claim that understanding one’s potential for buddhahood inspires confidence on the path and therefore functions as an important basis for all subsequent practices.

Having acquainted the reader with buddha-nature, the book builds on that foundation through discussions of a full range of beginning-to-advanced teachings on such topics as suffering and renunciation, taking refuge in the Three Jewels (as an act of faith, devotion, and existential commitment), the necessity of effort and diligence, *anātman*, the necessity of prostrations, *śamatha* and *vipaśyāna*, compassion and *bodhicitta*, etc. The selections on emptiness are helpful and include the classic presentation of the *Heart Sūtra* as well as modern explanations by Chögyam Trungpa and Thinley Norbu Rinpoche. Some of the discussion on emptiness may be challenging to the general reader, especially Thinley Norbu’s outline of the different levels of Madhyamaka analysis (pp. 213–6). Occasionally the book touches upon more explicitly dzogchen-related themes, in particular, the esoteric/tantric presentations of taking refuge and
bodhicitta. Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche’s stress on “non-distraction from mind essence” likewise expresses a dzogchen ideal, though he emphasizes at the same time cultivating devotion to the guru and faith in the Buddhist views (i.e., a firm conviction in the existence of buddha fields and hell realms, the law of karma, etc., pp. 178–80).

The overall quality of the entries is excellent, though I would dispute the editor’s claim that the book as a whole is appropriate for beginners (p. xv). Most of the chapters are, but a few are little more than outlines of Buddhist paths/doctrines full of unexplained technical vocabulary and unlikely to be useful or comprehensible to anyone but an advanced student. Without a strong background in the tradition, a summation of the paths, bhumi-s, and “factors of enlightenment” (p. 236ff) is useless. The glossary at the end of the book helps, but is incomplete. The book is also presented as a “practical guide” to Buddhist practice. While it certainly could be helpful in cultivating Buddhist attitudes, the specific practices described generally require the guidance and elaboration of a teacher. (See, for example, the “ceremony for taking the bodhicitta vow” on pp. 185–6. The visualization practice described on pp. 159–62 also requires a teacher or extensive familiarity with the tradition.) On the other hand, Schmidt hopes the book will be used in the context of a class or study-group led by a knowledgeable teacher (she includes “Facilitator Guidelines” at the end of book for just such a purpose). In that case, problems with the book’s vocabulary and conceptual content could be addressed by the group’s facilitator.

For a beginning practitioner, the most useful chapters are those by modern Tibetan lamas, discussing in a clear and sometimes moving style core Buddhist teachings on impermanence, suffering, death, karma, etc. Some of the best material in the book involves extended discussions of the four “mind changings,” intended to promote a sense of spiritual urgency and establish an ethical foundation for the path: reflection on (1) the preciousness of a human birth, (2) impermanence and death, (3) the karmic law of cause and effect, and (4) the pervasiveness of suffering. Particularly powerful statements of the Buddhist views are Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche’s “Renunciation Mind” (pp. 102–7) and Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche’s discussion of impermanence and renunciation (pp. 108–110).

As already indicated above, The Dzogchen Primer is not a book for scholars. There is no critical analysis of the tradition or attempt to historically contextualize any of the doctrines or practices. (Padmasambhava, for example, is presented as the author of a number of selections, without any indication that the texts are terma and what this means in a Tibetan context.) Schmidt, however, did not compile the book for scholars, but for practitioners. Her goal is to provide “a much-needed corrective to the many misconceptions and wrong views being promoted about dzogchen…” (p. ix). In this regard, the book is a success. The meaning of “simplicity” and
“effortlessness” is lost on the ordinary mind; on the other hand, these concepts gain the most profound significance for the mind trained in conventional Buddhist attitudes and practices. By guiding the reader in the cultivation of such attitudes, the book provides a strong foundation for an authentic understanding of dzogchen.


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The aim of the Kyoto School has been to “introduce Japanese philosophy into world philosophy while at the same time using western philosophy for a second look at Japanese thought trapped in fascination with its own uniqueness” (p. 270). Heisig’s stated goal is to introduce the thought of three principal philosophers of the School: Nishida’s foundational ideas about nothingness, Tanabe’s philosophy as their counterfoil, and the creative enlargements of Nishitani (p. 7).

Heisig’s claim (p. ix) that his book is the first general overview of the Kyoto School and that there has yet been no study of it in the context of world philosophy (p. 279) is debatable—Heisig himself mentions a few precedents. But Philosophers of Nothingness may well be the most comprehensive presentation to date focused on the three main figures of the School. Heisig proposes to pursue two somewhat disparate goals: on the one hand, to let Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani speak with their own, Eastern and Buddhist, voices; on the other, to present them in a global intellectual context. By reaching these goals, Heisig promises to demonstrate the original contribution of the Kyoto School to world philosophy. He is well prepared to deliver on the promise. Intimate familiarity with both traditions allows him to recognize both the cultural uniqueness of the Kyoto School and the instances where he believes its three philosophers do not live up to their claim of creating world-class ideas. The book is well balanced, supplementing philosophical analysis with biographical and cultural background information from diaries, letters, and second-source commentaries, and offering critical evaluation of the reception of Kyoto-School ideas in Japan and abroad. The information is multi-faceted, impartial, well researched, and comprehensive.