

Report of BuddhistRoad Guest Lecture

14 September 2022 Dylan Esler (CERES)

EFFORTLESSNESS IN EARLY DZOGCHEN: PARADOX, DEMARCATION AND TRANSCENDING PROCESS

invited lecture at the BuddhistRoad project, CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

The team of the *BuddhistRoad* project invited Dr. Dylan Esler, who has been working as a researcher in Bochum for more than three years, to give a lecture on the topic of effortlessness in early Dzogchen (Tib. rDzogs chen). The talk summarized some of the main findings of the three-year *Dzogchen* research project, which is sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and is based at CERES in Bochum. It introduced some of the ideas discussed at length in Dr. Esler's forthcoming book, *Effortless Spontaneity: The Dzogchen Commentaries by Nubchen Sangye Yeshe*, which will be published open access in 2023 by Brill in Leiden.

The paradox examined in this talk and alluded to in the title is the following: Given that all forms of training involve some form of effort, how is one to learn to practise in an effortless manner?

The lecture began by providing an overview of the Dzogchen commentaries by Nubchen Sangye Yeshe (ca. 844–mid 10th c., Tib. gNubs chen chen Sangs rgyas ye shes), the textual corpus that forms the basis of the study. Dr. Esler discussed issues of style as well as the relationship of the commentaries to their root texts.

The first part of the lecture looked at effortlessness as a manner of demarcating Dzogchen from the tantric milieu of Mahāyoga. Several examples were provided of the way in which Nubchen reinterprets key tantric notions (e.g. *mantra*, *mudrā*, *sādhana*) in more effortless terms. Typically, this reinterpretation does not involve rejecting or denying the validity of the tantric ritual terms and the practices they refer to, but rather entails transposing them on a higher and inward level.

In the second part of the lecture, the transcendence-immanence relational polarity was introduced as a heuristic device enabling one to examine the Dzogchen notion of effortlessness in the wider framework of comparative Religious Studies. Dr. Esler emphasized that both the terms of this polarity need to be looked at not as substantial entities but relationally. With this



background, he spoke of the manner in which mainstream Buddhist teachings generally establish a dichotomy between the conditioned world of cyclic existence and the ineffable peace and bliss of *nirvāṇa*. This, he argued, is one way of coming to terms with the transcendence-immanence relational polarity, one that emphasizes separation (even though, Buddhistically speaking, this separation is epistemological rather than ontological). There are also other ways of dealing with this polarity, however. Citing as examples the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature and Chan Buddhism, Dr. Esler suggested that these forms of Buddhism emphasize the coalescence of both poles, a feature that we can also observe in Tantric Buddhism and in Dzogchen. While Dzogchen shares with these other Buddhist traditions the view that religious perfection (i.e. enlightenment) is already present within, Dzogchen is particularly radical in its uncompromising insistence that the only adequate response to this state of affairs is a practice of effortlessness.

The speaker suggested that this radical stance has wide-ranging repercussions for the conception of the Buddhist path, which might be called, in comparative terms, a transcending process. Whereas in general Buddhist terms the path can be conceived of as a roadmap leading from 'here' to 'there', i.e. from the conditioned plight of cyclic existence to the peace of *nirvāṇa* or to enlightenment, the coalescence of the transcendence-immanence distinction we witness in early Dzogchen texts calls for a new paradigm of the process of goal realization. Dr. Esler argued that this paradigm can perhaps best be visualized in spiralic terms, as the spiralling unfolding of an inner potential, variously described in the texts as 'self-originated wisdom' (Tib. *rang byung ye shes*), 'intrinsic awareness' (Tib. *rang rig*) and the 'enlightened mind' (Skt. *bodhicitta*). All of this, however, raises interesting issues about the ontologizing of soteriology, as became clear in the Q&A session that followed the lecture.

The third part of the lecture looked at the contemplative method used to access the state of inner completeness and perfection evoked in the Dzogchen texts. Dr. Esler pointed out at the outset that Nubchen rejects tantric procedures, such as the identification of the enlightened mind with seed-syllables (Skt. *bīja*). The method of meditation hinted at is in fact quite simple and might disappoint those scanning early Dzogchen texts in the hope of finding the particulars of meditative techniques. In describing this form of formless meditation (often referred to as non-meditation), the speaker introduced Michael Sells' term of 'meaning event' to evoke the shift in perspective that takes place when the meditator turns inwards to find the nature of mind. Dr. Esler emphasized that the shift can only occur once effort has been suspended. This



underscores the fact that effortlessness is more than a feature of rhetoric, being on the contrary central to contemplative praxis in the Dzogchen tradition. Further discussion was devoted to the frequent comparisons of mind and sky in the Dzogchen commentaries and what this implies for the manner of dealing with thoughts during meditation.

In the final section, the speaker pointed out that apophatic and formless types of contemplative practice, of which Chan and Dzogchen are prominent examples in the Buddhist tradition, may present a certain similarity in the ways they tend to deconstruct the doctrines and practices that constitute their background. However, rather than concluding that there need be a historical or doctrinal level of identity, it seems more helpful and realistic to focus less on the process of deconstruction itself and more on the background that is deconstructed. This allows us to perceive more clearly the differences between these traditions. In attending to this background, Dr. Esler also highlighted the context of human relatedness and encounter that gives these texts their meaning, drawing attention to the way this dimension is thematized in the texts themselves.

