

When it comes to the nature of enlightenment or realization, this means that a complete, full, or nondual realization has two components: absolute (emptiness) and relative (form). The “nonconceptual mind” gives us the former, and the “conceptual mind” gives us the latter. Put it this way: when you come out of nonconceptual meditation, what conceptual forms will you embrace? If you are going to enter the manifest realm—if you are going to embrace not just nonconceptual nirvana but also conceptual samsara—then what conceptual forms will you use? By definition, a nondual realization demands both “no views” in emptiness and “views” in the world of form. Meditation in particular is designed to plunge us into the world of emptiness; and what is designed to give us “correct form”? That is, what **conceptual view** or **framework** does nondual Buddhism recommend?

Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche, one of the Tibetan masters who is as at home in the Western tradition as he is in the Eastern, is uniquely situated to comment on this (all following quotes are from *Mind at Ease: Self-liberation through Mahamudra Meditation*; emphasis added). He starts by pointing out that **correct views** are just as important as **correct meditation**; indeed, the two are inseparable:

Buddhist meditation practices and experiences are always discussed from a particular viewpoint that is always taken to be valid and true—this cannot be otherwise. **Correct views have the ability to lead us to liberation**, while incorrect views increase the delusions of our mind. ...

That is why we need a proper orientation or correct view when we embark on the path. Correct view is in fact our spiritual vehicle, the transport we use to journey from the bondage of samsara to the liberation of nirvana. Conversely, incorrect views have the potential to lead us off course and, like a poorly constructed raft, will cast us adrift and deposit us on the shores of misery. *There is no separation between the vehicle that transports us to our spiritual destination and the views that we hold in our mind.*

Unfortunately, Boomeritis (“nobody tells me what to do!”) Buddhism was used in the whole spirit of “Dharma bums,” where preconventional license was confused with postconventional liberation. Hence Buddhism was thought to be all about nothing but cultivating “no views,” which is true only on the emptiness or Hinayana side of the street, but not true on the Mahayana side, which demands the union of emptiness and views, not the trashing of one of them. But this “no view at all” notion was uniquely suited to “nobody tells me what to do!” Traleg comments on this strange Westernized Buddhism:

Buddhism states that our normal views inhibit us and chain us to the limited condition of samsara, whereas the correct view can lead us to our ultimate spiritual destination. We should not conclude from this—although modern Western Buddhists often do—that meditation is all about getting rid of views, or that all views hinder us from attaining our spiritual goal. This assumption is based on the legitimate premise that Buddhist teachings emphatically identify the need to develop a nonconceptual wisdom mind in order to attain liberation

and enlightenment. However, many people mistakenly think that this implies that we do not need to believe in anything [Nobody tells me what to do!] and that all forms of conceptuality must be dispensed with right from the beginning. It is only incorrect views that we need to overcome. **The correct and noble view is to be cultivated with great diligence.**

What is this “correct and noble view”? It is simply the Buddhist view itself, or the central ideas, concepts, and framework that is Buddhism, counting its basic philosophy and psychology—including the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Twelfefold Chain of Dependent Origination, the central recognition of Emptiness, the Nonduality of absolute Emptiness and relative Form, the luminous identity of unqualifiable or empty Spirit and all of its manifest Forms in a radiant, natural, spontaneously present display, and the central linkage of: right ethics and right views > leading to right meditation (*dhyana*) > leading to right awareness (*prajna*) > leading to right compassion (*karuna*) > leading to right action and skillful means (*upaya*) on behalf of all sentient beings.

Buddhist training does many things, but it is particularly a *state-training* that deconstructs one’s identity from mere gross ego, to subtle soul (or the root of the self-contraction), and finally to no-self Self. But as Traleg emphasizes, those experiences depend, at every point, on a correct interpretation or Right View in order to make sense of them. After all, many of those experiences are completely formless, and when you come out of them, you could just as well interpret them as an experience of Godhead, or Shiva, or *nirguna Brahman*, or Ayin, or Tao, or the Holy Spirit.

This was Daniel P. Brown’s point, so badly misunderstood at the time, but brilliant and right on the money, as Traleg independently agrees. Brown said that there were the same basic stages on the spiritual paths of the sophisticated contemplative traditions, but these same stages were experienced differently depending on the interpretation they were given. Hindus and Buddhists and Christians follow the same general stages (gross to subtle to causal), but one of them experiences these stages as “absolute Self,” one as “no-self,” and one as “Godhead,” depending on the different texts, culture, and interpretations given the experiences. In other words, depending on the Framework, the View.

Those individuals who assume otherwise are simply assuming a premodernist epistemology, that there is a single pregiven reality that I can know, and that meditation will show me this independently existing reality, which therefore must be the same for everybody who discovers it; instead of realizing that the subject of knowing co-creates the reality it knows, and that therefore some aspects of reality will literally be created by the subject and the interpretation it gives to that reality. American Buddhists at the time were particularly upset with Brown because his work showed similar stages for Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus (gross, subtle, causal, nondual)—even though they experienced them quite differently—and this implied that Buddhism wasn’t the only real way. But time and experience have vindicated Brown’s extraordinary work.

And Brown’s work is an example of what we are talking about here, namely, there

isn't just meditative experience per se—that simply does not exist. There is meditative experience plus the interpretations you give it. And this means, among other things, that we should choose our interpretations, view, and framework *very carefully*. Traleg Rinpoche:

In the Buddha's early discourses on the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path begins with the cultivation of the correct view. ... Without a conceptual framework, meditative experiences would be totally incomprehensible. What we experience in meditation has to be properly interpreted, and its significance—or lack thereof—has to be understood. This interpretive act requires appropriate conceptual categories and the correct use of those categories. ...

While we are often told that meditation is about emptying the mind, that it is the discursive, agitated thoughts of our mind that keeps us trapped in false appearances, meditative experiences are in fact impossible without the use of conceptual formulations. ...

As the Kagyu master Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thaye sang:

The one who meditates without the view
Is like a blind man wandering the plains.
There is no reference point for where the true path is.
The one who does not meditate, but merely holds the view
Is like a rich man tethered by stinginess.
He is unable to bring appropriate fruition to himself and others.
Joining the view and meditation is the holy tradition.

As for the typical modern Western Buddhist that Traleg is criticizing, who so often sees Buddhism as a “no concepts” and “no intellect” stance, it is unfortunately true that, among other things, this anti-intellectualism has often turned Buddhism into a type of “feelings only” school. **Cognition** is the great dirty word for these individuals. “That’s too cognitive” means “that is not spiritual.” In reality, it’s almost exactly the opposite, as Traleg is indicating. In that regard, notice that “cognition” is actually derived from the root gni (co-gni-tion), and this gni is the same as gno, which is the same root as gno-sis, or gnosis. Thus, **cognition** is really **co-gnosis**, or that which is the co-element of gnosis and nondual awareness. This is why Traleg is saying that cognition or co-gnosis is indeed the vehicle of our spiritual path. (Incidentally, this is why, as we saw, developmentalists repeatedly have found that the **cognitive line** is necessary but not sufficient for ALL of the other developmental lines, including feelings, emotions, art, and spiritual intelligence—exactly the opposite you would expect if the anti-intellectualist and anti-cognitive stance were right.)

In Sanskrit, this gno appears as jna, which we find in both *prajna* and *jnana*. Prajna is supreme discriminating awareness necessary for full awakening of gnosis (*pra-jna* = prognosis), and jnana is pure gnosis itself. Once again, cognition as co-gnosis is the root of the development that is necessary for the full awakening of gnosis, of *jnana*, of nondual

liberating awareness. So the next time you hear the word “cognitive,” you might hesitate before labeling it anti-spiritual.

As a short sidebar, it particularly helps when we realize that developmentalists view cognition as **the capacity to take perspectives**. Role-taking, or taking the view of another person, is something you can only do mentally or cognitively. You can *feel* only your own feelings, but you can cognitively take the role of others or *mentally* put yourself in their shoes (and *then* you can feel *their* feelings or empathize with *their* point of view). So **cognitive development** is defined as an **increase in the number of others with whom you can identify** and an **increase in the number of perspectives you can take**.

Thus, for example, preoperational cognition means you can take a 1st-person perspective (egocentric); concrete operational cognition means you can take a 2nd-person perspective (ethnocentric); formal operational cognition means you can also take a 3rd-person perspective (worldcentric); early vision-logic means you can also take a 4th-person perspective (beginning Kosmocentric); mature vision-logic mean you can also take a 5th-person perspective (mature Kosmocentric). That is why research shows that your feelings, your art, your ethics, and your emotions, all will follow behind the cognitive line, because in order to feel something, you have to be able to see it.

Traleg Rinpoche finishes by skillfully pointing out that what is particularly needed is not just any view, but a truly integral or comprehensive view.

In the Mahamudra tradition, we have to acquire a correct conceptual understanding of emptiness, or the nature of the mind. We cannot simply practice meditation and hope for the best; we need a conceptual framework that is based on a correct view. ...

If we are going to practice Buddhist meditation *we need to have a comprehensive view of our human nature, our place in the scheme of things, and our relationship to the world in which we live and to our fellow sentient beings*. Instead of thinking that all concepts are defiling in their nature and thus need to be overcome, we have to realize that it is only by developing an understanding of certain truths that we can gain insight. All of these considerations have to be taken into account when we do meditation, and our practice has to be informed by them. Otherwise, *our worldview may become increasingly fragmented and incommensurate with our own experience*; developing “nonconceptuality” then becomes an additional conceptual burden that leads inevitably to confusion.

Which brings us back to where we began: there is emptiness (and the formless mind), and then there is the manifest world (and the conceptual mind), and so the question is: what form in the mind will help both realize and express emptiness? Some form of view is there, like it or not, and so **correct view** has always been maintained as absolutely necessary for enlightenment. As Traleg says, it is the vehicle of realization, without which even meditation is blind.

But, as Traleg indicates, it’s even more than that. The deepest Buddhist teachings—Mahamudra and Dzogchen—maintain that the nature of the mind is not in any way

different from the forms arising in it. It is not just that there is Emptiness and View, but that Emptiness and View are not-two—exactly as *The Heart Sutra* maintained, when Form now means Forms in the mind, or View: *That which is Emptiness is not other than View; that which is View is not other than Emptiness.*

Therefore, choose your View carefully. And make your View or Framework as comprehensive or integral as possible, because your View—your cognitive system, your co-gnosis, your conceptual understanding, your implicit or explicit Framework—will help determine the very form of your enlightenment.

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