

## Embodying Enlightenment: Physical Culture in Dzogchen as revealed in Tibet's Lukhang Murals

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### Abstract

The Great Perfection or Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*) teachings of Tibet are upheld as revealing the ultimate unconditioned nature of human consciousness without recourse to the transformational rites and practices that characterise the tantric, or Vajrayāna, form of Buddhism from which it arose. While Dzogchen is commonly perceived, and presented, as pertaining principally to the reflexive 'self-liberating' potential of the mind, its practice is traditionally infused by physical exercises that push the body—and thereby consciousness—beyond conventional limits and constraints. Dzogchen's body-oriented approach to the realisation of habitually dormant perceptual and existential capacities is vividly portrayed in a series of late seventeenth-century murals in a once secret meditation chamber in Lhasa conceived during the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama. The wall paintings illustrate a Dzogchen 'treasure text' (*gtar ma*) revealed two centuries earlier by Tertön Ögyen Pema Lingpa (1450–1521) and ascribed to Padmasambhava, the 'Lotus Born' sage credited with having established Dzogchen in Tibet in the eighth century. Embellished with illuminating passages from Pema Lingpa's 'Compendium of Enlightened Spontaneity' (*Rdzogs chen kha brang dgyong 'dau*), the Lukhang murals clearly portray the pro-somatic practices (*rna chung 'dral 'khor*) held to facilitate realisation of the mind's inherent 'Buddha Nature' (*de gubegs snying pa*, Skt: *satśāgatagarbha*). Illustrated with details of the Lukhang murals, this article presents an overview of Dzogchen's core practices in an attempt to demonstrate that while the 'innate perfection' of Dzogchen can, as tradition upholds, be directly cognised without any modification of mind or body, it is more commonly a consequence of intensive *göng* and *batshayegs*-like practices, fused with Dzogchen's signature 'view' of non-duality (*gyüi mind*). A key chapter of Pema Lingpa's Dzogchen 'treasure text' is appended to the article, further illuminating the fundamental dynamics of mind and body at the heart of the Dzogchen tradition and the ways in which primordial unitary awareness (*rig pa*) arises vibrantly and unconditionally in response to physiology and perception pushed beyond their accustomed limits, whether in states of waking, sleeping, dreaming, or near-death experiences.

### Keywords

Vajrayāna Buddhism, Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*), tsalung (*rna chung*), trulkhor (*'dral 'khor*), thogal (*thod rgal*), treasure texts (*gtar ma*), Pema Lingpa (*Padma gling pa*)

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