The Primordial Ground and Its Threefold Revelation

Dzogchen, the Christian Trinity, and the reciprocal relationship between ultimate reality, manifestation and spiritual realization

Abstract

The Dzogchen formulation of *kunzhi*, *rigpa* and *rtsal* describes a threefold relationship between primordial ground, intrinsic awareness and spontaneous expressive energy. Within the Zhang Zhung tradition of Bön, these principles are symbolically identified as Mother, Son and radiant power. Closely related formulations occur in the Buddhist Nyingma tradition, particularly in the *Kun byed rgyal po* (*All-Creating King*) and the writings of Longchen Rabjam. Their doctrinal expression through *dharmakāya*, *sambhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya* relates the intrinsic nature of enlightenment to its luminous and manifest dimensions.

A corresponding structure appears in Christian Trinitarian thought, where the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are understood through the relationship between unoriginate source, eternal self-revelation and the communication of divine life. The Johannine writings, early Christian formulations of Word and Wisdom, and Basil of Caesarea's *On the Holy Spirit* provide substantial evidence. Basil's account of divine goodness extending from Father through Son to Spirit, and spiritual knowledge ascending from Spirit through Son to Father, introduces a reciprocal dynamic comparable to the relationship between manifestation and recognition in Dzogchen.

Valentinian accounts of the hidden Father, the revelatory Logos and the restoration of divine knowledge provide further evidence, particularly in the *Gospel of Truth* and *Tripartite Tractate*. Early Syriac and related Christian traditions also demonstrate the flexibility of maternal and paternal symbolism associated with divine generation and revelation.

The central argument is that Dzogchen and Christian Trinitarian thought articulate a common metaphysical pattern in which primordial reality, intrinsic self-disclosure and expressive manifestation are inseparable. This relationship also provides the basis for a reciprocal movement of spiritual realization: ultimate reality becomes manifest, and through recognition of that manifestation its primordial nature is disclosed.

I. Primordial Unity and Its Threefold Expression

A fundamental problem confronts any metaphysical system that understands ultimate reality as undivided while acknowledging the diversity of experienced phenomena. If the absolute is primordial, complete and unlimited, how can it possess differentiated characteristics, become known while transcending conceptual determination, or manifest without compromising the unity of its source?

Dzogchen and Christian Trinitarian theology approach these questions through different philosophical vocabularies, yet their central formulations exhibit a significant structural correspondence. Dzogchen distinguishes primordial ground, intrinsic awareness and spontaneous manifestation, while Christian Trinitarian theology distinguishes the Father, eternal Son and Holy Spirit within a single divine nature. The correspondence concerns neither the numerical coincidence of three principles nor an assumed historical transmission, but a shared relationship: ultimate reality is intrinsically intelligible or luminous, and its capacity for manifestation is inseparable from its primordial nature.

This relationship also possesses a reciprocal dimension. Manifestation provides the occasion for the disclosure of ultimate reality, while recognition of that disclosure restores awareness of its source. What appears outwardly as differentiation becomes, through spiritual realization, the means of apprehending primordial unity.

II. The Dzogchen Triad: Ground, Awareness and Expressive Power

The most explicit formulation of the proposed correspondence occurs within the Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyü tradition of Yungdrung Bön. In the *Gyalwa Chaktri* lineage teachings, the primordial condition is described through *kunzhi*, the universal ground; *rigpa*, intrinsic awareness; and *rtsal*, expressive energy or potency. These are designated respectively as Mother, Son and radiant power, expressing an inseparable relationship rather than three independently existing realities. The Mother represents primordiality and the inexhaustible ground; the Son, intrinsic awareness of that ground; and radiant power, its capacity for expression and manifestation.

The traditional analogy of sky, sun and rays makes the relationship particularly clear. The sky symbolizes the open expanse of the ground, the sun its intrinsic luminosity, and the rays the radiance through which its illuminating capacity becomes manifest. The distinctions express different aspects of a single primordial condition rather than separate entities or successive stages of creation.

This formulation receives strong textual support from *The Doctrine on the Six Lamps*, preserved within the Zhang Zhung oral tradition. Its section entitled *The Lamp on the Abiding Basis* first distinguishes universal basis (*kunzhi*), awareness (*rigpa*) and intellect (*blo*), subsequently restating

their relationship as ground, essence and magical display, or Mother, Son and radiant power. Giacomella Orofino's translation and analysis reproduce the relevant Tibetan passages and their commentarial interpretation. [1]

The text identifies the universal basis with primordial purity and associates it with the three kāyas. Rigpa is presented as intrinsically luminous awareness, empty of conceptual determination, while its expressive power unfolds through manifestations described as sound, light and rays. Their appearance does not establish a division between awareness and the phenomena arising within its field. The threefold differentiation is understood as provisional, their ultimate nature remaining indivisible.

The distinction between awareness and ordinary cognition

The same source provides a more subtle explanation of ordinary thought. Discriminating intellect (*blo*) arises through the expressive power of awareness, just as rays proceed from the radiance of the sun. This does not identify conceptual consciousness with liberated rigpa, but explains how thought and phenomenal differentiation arise within the primordial condition while remaining susceptible to recognition or misrecognition.

When appearances are apprehended through dualistic fixation, the distinction between perceiving subject and perceived object becomes established. When their nature is recognized, the same arising is understood as inseparable from primordial awareness. Realization does not introduce luminosity into a previously unconscious ground, but discloses the inseparability of emptiness, cognizance and manifestation.

The maternal designation expresses the generative function of the ground rather than a biological property. Similarly, the Son represents the disclosure of what is primordial, not the temporal production of a second entity. Kunzhi is primordiality; rigpa is intrinsic self-disclosure; rtsal is the expressive power through which manifestation becomes possible.

III. The Buddhist Nyingma Foundation: The All-Creating King and Longchenpa

The corresponding Buddhist formulation is especially clear in the *Kun byed rgyal po*, the *All-Creating King*, a foundational tantra of the Dzogchen Mind Series (*Semdé*). The text presents primordial awakened mind as the sovereign source of phenomena, teaching and enlightenment. Its personified language expresses the nature and manifesting capacity of awakened mind rather than a separate divine creator.

Chapter 20 describes the All-Creating Sovereign as the ground, root and source of phenomena, whose appearances arise within and remain inseparable from its primordial nature. The three kāyas are presented as manifestations proceeding from three aspects of the sovereign's nature, their distinctions being provisional rather than divisions of ultimate reality. Chapter 21 makes

the relationship still more explicit by identifying the primordial sovereign as both father and mother of the teachers appearing through the three kāyas. Eva K. Neumaier-Dargyay's translation, *The Sovereign All-Creating Mind: The Motherly Buddha*, preserves this formulation. [2]

The text establishes a threefold relationship between primordial reality and enlightened manifestation within Buddhist Dzogchen. Its use of both paternal and maternal symbolism also demonstrates that the gender assigned to the primordial ground does not determine its metaphysical function.

Chapter 48 develops the relationship through three aspects of primordial nature: the unborn, the unceasing and the source of unobstructed manifestation. These are not successive creations. The unborn ground is intrinsically beyond origination, its nature is not subject to cessation, and its expressive capacity permits phenomena to appear without altering primordial reality.

Longchenpa's systematic formulation

The Nyingma Seminal Heart (*Nyingtik*) teachings express the primordial condition through essence (*ngo bo*), nature (*rang bzhin*) and compassionate responsiveness (*thugs rje*). In Longchen Rabjam's *Essential Summary*, the ground is described as primordially pure (*ka dag*) and spontaneously present (*lhun grub*), possessing empty essence, luminous nature and unobstructed compassionate responsiveness. Its essence is empty of independent substantial existence, its nature intrinsically cognizant, and its responsiveness the capacity through which appearances and enlightened activity become possible.

Longchenpa relates these qualities to the three kāyas. Empty essence is associated with dharmakāya, spontaneous luminosity with the enlightened luminous dimension, and responsive awareness with the arising of nirmāṇakāya. The complete fruition comprises dharmakāya, sambhogakāya and nirmāṇakāya as inseparable expressions of enlightenment. [3]

The ground possesses the intrinsic capacity for manifestation, which may be misrecognized through dualistic cognition or recognized as the spontaneous display of primordial awareness.

Longchenpa illustrates this through the analogy of light arising within a crystal. When appearances are pursued as independently existing objects, their self-manifesting nature is obscured; when recognized without fixation, their arising becomes self-liberating. The distinction is not between a world that has appeared and a ground from which it must be physically withdrawn, but between two ways of apprehending the same manifestation.

The primordial nature is not created through realization. Its luminosity and expressive capacity are already present, and direct recognition reveals their inseparability.

The three kāyas in the wider Mahāyāna tradition

The broader Buddhist doctrine of the three bodies supports this relationship. Chapter 3 of the twenty-nine-chapter *Sūtra of the Sublime Golden Light* (Toh 556) distinguishes dharmakāya, sambhogakāya and nirmāṇakāya.

Dharmakāya is the ultimate and featureless nature of buddhahood. Sambhogakāya manifests enlightened presence and teaching to advanced bodhisattvas, while nirmāṇakāya appears in forms appropriate to the circumstances and capacities of beings. The latter two depend upon the ultimate nature without requiring its division into independently existing substances. [4]

In Dzogchen, the doctrine becomes an integrated account of ground and fruition: the empty, luminous and expressive qualities of the primordial condition are fully disclosed through realization as the three bodies of enlightenment.

IV. The Christian Trinity: Source, Logos and Spirit

The Christian scriptural foundation begins with the relationship between the unseen Father and the eternal Word. The Prologue to the Gospel of John establishes the Word's primordial existence, its inseparable relationship with God and its participation in the manifestation of creation. John 1:1–5 describes the Word as existing before the temporal world, with life and light belonging intrinsically to it; John 1:18 then identifies the Son as the one through whom the unseen Father becomes known.

This relationship is not simply that of a speaker and a message subsequently produced. The Logos belongs eternally to divine reality and constitutes its intrinsic self-disclosure. Hebrews 1:3 intensifies the relationship through the description of the Son as the radiance of divine glory and the expression of God's being.

Christian scripture also develops this relationship through the feminine personification of divine Wisdom. Wisdom 7:25–27 presents Wisdom as an emanation of divine power, a reflection of eternal light and a principle that remains one while renewing and transforming the world.

The interpretation of Christ as spiritual illumination is also explicit in early Christian theology. Origen, in *Commentary on John* I.24, distinguishes the visible sun from Christ as the light of the intelligible world, illuminating minds rather than bodies; Cyprian, in *On the Lord's Prayer* 35, similarly describes Christ as the true Sun and true Day. Their accounts present the eternal Logos as a universal principle of illumination whose revelatory power becomes accessible through Christ's manifestation.

The Spirit as divine communication

The Johannine Farewell Discourses develop the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. John 14:9–11 presents Father and Son as mutually indwelling, grounding the Son's revelation of the Father in their eternal relationship. John 14:16–26 introduces the Spirit of Truth, through whom divine revelation becomes a continuing presence within the disciples. John 15:26 associates the Spirit's procession from the Father with testimony concerning the Son, while John 16:13–15 describes the communication of divine truth through the Spirit.

Read together, these passages establish a coherent threefold relationship: the Father is the unoriginate source, the Son the eternal Word through whom the Father is revealed, and the Spirit the communication of divine presence through which revelation becomes effective in spiritual life. The Word is not an instrument external to the Father, nor the Spirit an independently operating force; their relationship is intrinsic to divine life.

Pauline theology reinforces this structure. In 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, diverse spiritual gifts, ministries and operations are associated with the same Spirit, Lord and God, grounding their multiplicity in a unified divine activity. In 2 Corinthians 3:17–18, the Spirit enables transformation through contemplation of divine glory.

V. The Early Christian Doctrine of Inseparable Divine Activity

Early Christian theology clarifies the relationship between divine source, intelligibility and activity. Theophilus of Antioch, in *To Autolycus* II.15, identifies the primordial triad of God, Word and Wisdom, associating the first three days of creation with these divine principles.

Irenaeus develops a more explicit account in *Against Heresies* IV.20. Identifying Word and Wisdom with Son and Spirit, he describes them as eternally present with the Father and inseparably active in creation. His image of Word and Spirit as the two hands of God expresses differentiated divine activity proceeding from one ultimate source. [5]

Origen adds a transformative dimension in *On First Principles* I.3.8, distinguishing the Father's conferral of existence, participation in the rationality of the Logos and sanctification through the Holy Spirit. The relationship concerns not only the origin and intelligibility of reality but also the realization of divine life within the spiritual person. [6]

Gregory of Nyssa subsequently formulates the inseparability of divine operation as a central principle of Trinitarian theology. In *On the Holy Trinity: To Eustathius*, he maintains that life, illumination and sanctification belong to the indivisible activity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The unity of divine operation expresses the unity of divine nature, so that the distinctions between the persons do not require the separation of their essence, power or activity. [7]

VI. The Reciprocal Dynamic: Basil of Caesarea and Longchenpa

The correspondence becomes particularly compelling in Basil of Caesarea's *On the Holy Spirit*. In chapter 18, section 47, Basil describes two complementary movements within the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit: divine goodness and holiness extend from the Father

through the Son to the Spirit, while spiritual knowledge proceeds from the Spirit through the Son to the Father. [8]

This establishes a reciprocal relationship between divine self-communication and the spiritual apprehension of its source.

Basil develops the argument through the imagery of illumination. The Spirit enables apprehension of the divine Image, the Son, through whom the practitioner is led toward knowledge of the invisible Father. The Spirit is therefore both an expression of the divine relationship and the immediate condition through which its source becomes accessible to spiritual knowledge. The scriptural basis is consistent with Ephesians 2:18, where access to the Father occurs through Christ in one Spirit.

The relationship can be summarized through two complementary movements:

Divine communication: Father $_s$ Son $_s$ Spirit

Spiritual realization: Spirit $_s$ Son $_s$ Father

The corresponding movement in Dzogchen

Longchenpa's account of primordial ground and manifestation provides a comparable structure. The primordial condition is empty in essence, luminous in nature and unobstructed in compassionate responsiveness. Through spontaneous presence, appearances arise without dividing the ground or establishing an independent ultimate reality.

When appearances are misrecognized, consciousness apprehends them through dualistic differentiation. When their nature is recognized, the apparent separation between awareness and display is released. The movement from primordial ground to manifestation is thus complemented by the movement from manifestation to recognition of the primordial condition.

In *Essential Summary*, Longchenpa develops this relationship through spontaneous luminosity, self-manifesting appearances and liberation within the ground.

Basil's theological movement is relational and personal; Longchenpa's concerns nondual recognition of the primordial condition. Their parallel lies in the reciprocal relationship between primordiality, revelation and realization. In each case, the threefold structure functions not only as a description of ultimate reality but as an explanation of how its nature becomes known.

VII. The Gnostic Development of the Threefold Relationship

The reciprocal relationship receives further illumination in the *Gospel of Truth*, preserved in Nag Hammadi Codex I,3. Its account of Father, Word and Spirit develops divine self-revelation and spiritual awakening within a continuous metaphysical argument.

In the passage at NHC I,3, 23:18–24:18, the Father's Wisdom contemplates the Word, which proceeds into the totality as the expression of the Father's will. The text subsequently describes the Father's bosom as the Holy Spirit and the Son as the disclosure of what is hidden within the Father. Through revelation, spiritual beings come to know their source and find rest. [9]

The relationships are closely integrated: the Father is the concealed primordial source, the Son reveals what is intrinsic to that source, and the Spirit is associated with the interior divine presence through which revelation and knowledge become effective.

The same work links divine disclosure with the overcoming of ignorance, portraying ignorance through images of forgetfulness, confusion and sleep, and restoration through awakening. Divine reality reveals itself through the Word, and those receiving that revelation are restored to knowledge of the Father.

The Tripartite Tractate

The *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I,5) provides a more elaborate account of divine self-knowledge and emanation. Its opening describes the Father as the primordial root of the totality, unbegotten and beyond ordinary conceptual apprehension. It then develops the relationship between the Father's intrinsic thought, the Son and the unfolding divine fullness.

The Father is not an inert, unknowable absence. Divine self-knowledge is intrinsic to the primordial source, while the Son expresses its intelligibility and capacity for revelation. The treatise subsequently describes the emanation of the divine fullness through relationships that do not simply divide the source into separate substances. Spiritual restoration concerns the recovery of knowledge of the transcendent Father. [10]

A complementary account of Wisdom's restoration appears in a separate, later Gnostic work, the *Pistis Sophia*, chapter 60. Sophia is raised from chaos through the light-power sent by the First Mystery and a corresponding light-power proceeding from Jesus, which unite in a single stream of light. Her restoration connects divine Wisdom with the reception of revelatory luminosity and the recovery of spiritual knowledge, adding a further dimension to the reciprocal movement between illumination and realization.

The *Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII,1) presents a related conception through divine First Thought and its revelatory expressions as Voice, Speech and Word. Its threefold manifestation

culminates in the disclosure of hidden divine reality to those capable of receiving spiritual knowledge. [11]

VIII. Divine Generation and the Embodiment of Spiritual Knowledge

The symbolism of Mother, Father, Son and Spirit varies across these traditions, although its metaphysical functions are often comparable. The Bön ground is Mother because it is the primordial basis of awareness and manifestation, while the *All-Creating King* describes its primordial principle as both father and mother. Christian theology ordinarily identifies the unoriginate source as Father, yet its scriptural tradition also personifies divine Wisdom as feminine.

Early Syriac Christianity preserves a further feminine understanding of the Holy Spirit. The *Acts of Thomas* and writings associated with Aphrahat and Ephrem the Syrian contain maternal descriptions of the Spirit, reflecting both the feminine grammatical character of Syriac *ruḥa* and the spiritual functions attributed to divine presence. Johannes van Oort's examination of early Christian testimonies demonstrates the extent of this tradition. [12]

These variations indicate that maternal and paternal symbolism may express generative and revelatory relationships without establishing biological gender as an intrinsic characteristic of ultimate reality.

The same symbolic principle becomes particularly interesting in Bogomil interpretations of spiritual generation. According to an account preserved by Euthymius Zigabenus, Bogomil believers could be described as *Theotokoi*, or bearers of God, because the divine Word dwelt within them and was brought forth through spiritual teaching. The maternal function is thereby applied to spiritual realization: the practitioner receives and embodies divine knowledge, which becomes manifest through communication to others. [13]

Cathar communities similarly recognized women's capacity for full spiritual initiation through the *consolamentum*. Women known as *Good Women* exercised teaching and pastoral responsibilities, and their fundamental spiritual status was not dependent upon a separate or inferior form of initiation. Although access to particular offices varied, women's recognized capacity for spiritual perfection was significant. [14]

IX. The Three Kāyas, Divine Manifestation and Spiritual Participation

The relationship between the three kāyas and Christian Trinitarian manifestation provides a second level of comparison, extending the argument from the intrinsic constitution of ultimate reality to the forms through which that reality becomes accessible.

The three kāyas describe the ultimate, luminous and manifest dimensions of enlightened reality. Christian theology similarly distinguishes the eternal relations of Father, Son and Spirit from their expression through creation, revelation, incarnation and sanctification. These are conventionally described as the immanent and economic Trinity—not two separate divine realities, but the eternal divine life and its expression within creation and spiritual experience.

Dharmakāya expresses the ultimate nature of buddhahood, sambhogakāya its luminous and communicative dimension, and nirmāṇakāya its enlightened manifestation in forms accessible to beings. Christianity possesses a corresponding account of ultimate divine reality, its intelligible self-revelation through the Logos, and its manifestation through incarnation and the sanctifying activity of the Spirit.

The Father is the unoriginate source within the Trinity, although the divine essence belongs equally to Father, Son and Spirit. Consequently, the unity of the Trinity corresponds most closely to the indivisibility of ultimate reality, while the Father's unoriginate relationship corresponds specifically to the grounding function.

The eternal Logos is particularly comparable to luminous self-disclosure, while the incarnate Christ possesses a further functional resemblance to the nirmāṇakāya as revelation made accessible within manifest existence. The Holy Spirit, as vivifying and sanctifying divine presence, corresponds most directly to the expressive and transformative dimension of enlightened activity.

Fundamental dimension	Dzogchen and three-kāya doctrine	Christian Trinitarian expression
Primordial reality	Empty, unconditioned ground; dharmakāya	Undivided divine nature; Father as unoriginate source
Intrinsic revelation	Rigpa, luminosity; sambhogakāya	Eternal Logos, divine Wisdom and revelation
Expressive manifestation	Rtsal, compassionate responsiveness; nirmāṇakāya	Divine manifestation, incarnation and sanctifying activity of the Spirit
Spiritual realization	Recognition of primordial awareness	Participation in divine life through Spirit and Son

The fourth dimension—spiritual realization—requires particular attention because it identifies the significance of these relationships for the practitioner rather than introducing another metaphysical principle.

In Dzogchen, recognition of primordial awareness discloses the nature of appearances without producing a new ultimate reality. The three kāyas are related to the fruition of qualities already intrinsic to the ground, becoming fully evident when obscuration is exhausted.

Christian scripture presents spiritual participation through a different doctrinal framework. John 14:20 describes mutual indwelling between Christ, the Father and the disciple, while John 17:20–26 presents participation in divine unity as the culmination of revelation. In 2 Corinthians 3:17–18, contemplation of divine glory is associated with transformation through the Spirit; 2 Peter 1:3–4 describes participation in the divine nature.

These passages extend the Christian account beyond the disclosure of divine truth as something merely understood. Revelation becomes effective through spiritual participation, transforming the practitioner's relationship to divine reality.

The distinction between the traditions remains significant. Dzogchen realization concerns recognition of the natural state, whereas Christianity describes participation in divine life through revelation and grace. Yet the three-kāya doctrine and the Christian economy of revelation each connect their account of ultimate reality with its communicative and transformative expression.

This completes the second level of comparison. The reciprocal movement of manifestation and recognition established earlier explains the contemplative dynamic; the three kāyas and the Christian economy of revelation explain how that dynamic is expressed through enlightened embodiment and divine participation.

Conclusion

The correspondence between Dzogchen and Christian Trinitarian thought rests upon coherent bodies of primary teaching rather than isolated analogies. The Bön formulation of kunzhi, rigpa and rtsal, the Nyingma *All-Creating King*, and Longchenpa's account of primordial purity and spontaneous presence establish the inseparability of ground, awareness and expressive manifestation. The Johannine writings, early Trinitarian theology and Basil of Caesarea articulate a comparable relationship between divine source, eternal self-revelation and the communication of divine life. Valentinian sources further illuminate the relationship between concealed divinity, revelatory knowledge and spiritual awakening.

The decisive correspondence is the reciprocal relationship between manifestation and realization. Ultimate reality possesses an intrinsic capacity for disclosure; that disclosure becomes the occasion for recognition; and recognition reveals the primordial source without negating its

manifestations. The three kāyas and the Christian economy of revelation extend this relationship into enlightened embodiment and spiritual participation.

Dzogchen and Christian Trinitarian thought thus articulate distinctive religious understandings of a common threefold dynamic: primordial unity, intrinsic self-disclosure and expressive manifestation, joined by a reciprocal movement through which manifestation becomes the means of realizing its source.

The threefold structure is consequently not merely an account of how ultimate reality is constituted, but also an account of how it becomes known.

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3. Longchenpa's Nyingma exposition

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6. Origen

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- Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Book I, §24, on Christ as the spiritual light illuminating the intelligible world.

7. Gregory of Nyssa

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8. Basil of Caesarea

- Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, chapter 18, section 47. The reciprocal formulation concerning knowledge of God proceeding from Spirit through Son to Father, and divine goodness, holiness and dignity extending from Father through Son to Spirit.

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