

## CARRYING THE STREAM OF PRACTICE AT THE TIME OF DEATH:

### Reflections on the Samadhi of the Vajra Regent Osel Tendzin

As you all know, the Vajra Regent passed away on Saturday, August 25. Because his was not an ordinary death, I would like to share with the sangha some of the experience of those around him and some reflections on the significance of these events.

His Holiness Khyentse Rinpoche's instructions to the Vajra Regent on his retreat were to do formal practice sessions when he felt strong enough, and that when he was not so well, to rest in the view of mahamudra, as he had practiced it and recognized it from his guru. After his death, the Vajra Regent's body manifested a strong meditative presence, as well as external physical signs of a yogin in samadhi, for three days. This was witnessed by many people at the San Francisco Dharmadhatu. These signs are a confirmation of the depth of the Regent's practice. This is an encouragement for all of us: just as it has been taught, having met the profound dharma of vajrayana, serious practitioners may be able to carry the stream of practice through the process of illness and death, so that it becomes an opportunity for liberation and realization.

At the time I visited the Vajra Regent in the hospital, he was already in critical condition and seemed to respond only to a few stimuli, such as being told that Lady Rich or His Eminence Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche had arrived. As the week went on, his conscious responses ceased altogether. Nevertheless, the meditative presence in his room through all this time was strong and unmistakable. Lama Lodro, the head of Kalu Rinpoche's center in San Francisco, visited the Regent in the hospital twice and also remarked on this.

Two hours after the physical death, Lama Dudjom Dorje came from Santa Cruz to advise us on preparation of the body. His assessment at the time was that there were definite signs of samadhi, and he instructed us on how to handle the body so as not to disturb that state. This is important because according to the tantric teaching, such a samadhi is an opportunity for realization of the dharmakaya or enlightenment. In this way the yogin can bypass the karmic bardo of becoming which is the lot of ordinary people.

The Vajra Regent's body was moved to San Francisco Dharmadhatu and placed on a throne in meditation posture. Following the tradition and instruction from His Holiness, students began "offering to the lama" — practicing the Milarepa guru sadhana and the Rain of Wisdom. The purpose of this practice is to invoke the blessings of lineage, and to connect the disciples with the lineage both directly and through their deceased teacher. During these three days, many people experienced the strong meditative presence that radiated throughout the room. The body also exhibited the traditional physical signs of samadhi — including warmth over the heart center three days after death, in contrast to the rest of the body which was distinctly cold. I witnessed much of this myself.

Lama Lodro came by on Monday afternoon, two days after the death. He commented, "Right away I can see he is deep in samadhi. Many great teachers taught me how to see the indications. Trungpa Rinpoche appointed him as his dharma heir, so knowing he was the son of a lion, I expected the Regent would show some signs. However, this is amazing. This is not an ordinary samadhi but a very powerful one. You do not have to rely on the physical signs, but anyone can just feel it. I have seen many, many people dying and after death. An ordinary person's death and signs are never like this."

On hearing Lama Lodro's assessment, His Holiness and His Eminence expressed their happiness and cautioned us to be careful not to disturb the samadhi and to do everything properly. On Tuesday evening Lama Lodro brought his students by to witness the samadhi and to practice. At that time he also did a traditional practice of requesting the samadhi to abate. As the signs were still continuing, he gave instructions not to move the body that night, but to wait until morning. On Wednesday the signs had changed, and the Regent's body was moved in preparation for transportation to Rocky Mountain Dharma Center.

According to the tantric teaching, there are many different varieties of death and after death experience, depending on the individualities of karma, illness, and especially the evolution of someone's realization. In the case of very great masters like the Vidyadhara or His Holiness Karmapa, who have attained complete realization of mahamudra or maha ati in this very life, they are already liberated in the dharmakaya, and the death of the physical body does not change anything for them. The analogy is given that the space inside a vase is the same as the space outside. When the vase is broken, the space within and the space without merge.

In the case of ordinary people, as death approaches, touch, hearing, sight, and the other senses dissolve inwardly. Consciousness tends to become dim, unsteady, and hallucinatory. As consciousness dissolves the outer breathing stops. It is taught that then in quick succession the subtle forces resulting in aggression-based, passion-based, and ignorance-based mental conceptions dissolve. Then as even the deep inborn ignorance of the alaya consciousness dissolves, for an instant as long as a finger snap there is the basic clear light, or the ground luminosity, or the bardo of dharmata. This is the sugatagarbha, the dharmakaya itself. Yogins who recognize it can attain liberation at this moment. However, ordinary sentient beings who have not practiced experience this only as unconsciousness, so that they recreate the inborn ignorance, the karmic tendencies, the visions of the bardo of becoming, and compulsive samsaric rebirth. In the ordinary case, after rigor mortis subsides eight to twelve hours after the outer breath has stopped, the connection between body and mind has completely dissolved.

It is said that those who have practiced mahamudra slightly may be able to remain in the luminosity for several times as long as they were able to sustain a meditation session during their lifetime. However, "since most people fail to recognize the ground luminosity, even though it manifests for them, or they are not sufficiently acquainted with it even if they recognize it, they are not able to remain in its continuity. Apart from that, there is no doubt that it is the true ground of liberation."

For evolved practitioners of vajrayana, the situation is more opportune. As the master Tsele Natsok Rangdrol explains in Mirror of Mindfulness, "The supreme method for recognizing the ground luminosity of the first bardo and attaining liberation is to become fully resolved about the mind right now in the bardo of the present life, and then to exclusively concentrate, beyond meditation and distraction, on continuous practice of the ultimate nature of ordinary mind, the unfabricated and natural state of dharmakaya. Knowing how to maintain it, unspoiled by the obstacle of defects or defilements, mental constructs and fabrications, is crucial not only in the first bardo but at all times."

"Practitioners possessing the confidence of realization are able to remain in composure in that state of luminosity for as long as they wish." In this case the usual procedure for those attending the body is to request the samadhi to abate after three days. During this period of time it is said that a practitioner with some realization of mahamudra can substantially increase his realization or even attain full enlightenment. As is said, the "mother luminosity," the basic dharmadhatu, and the "child luminosity," what has been practiced as the path, mingle inseparably together. In any case, if such a person is not liberated directly into the mahamudra during the basic luminosity, it is taught that there is a strong potential for realizing the sambhogakaya during the bardo visions.

As Lama Lodro said, without the higher perceptions it is not possible for us to draw definite conclusions about the Vajra Regent's realization through the death process. However, it seems to me that for those who have confidence in the spiritual instruction they received from the Vajra Regent, they now have further confirmation of their confidence. For others who did not have this kind of connection with the Vajra Regent, they might derive deep faith in the vajrayana teaching from these events.

Dorje Loppon Lodro Dorje  
August 31, 1990