

*Vimala Commentary Series*

# **Recollections of a Sea Burial**

*A Collective Telling of the Events of  
the Sacred Sea Burial of  
Venerable Gyatrul Rinpoche*



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*Swift Rebirth Prayer* courtesy of Light of Berotsana

We dedicate the merit of this publication to the long life and good health of all our precious teachers, to the propagation of the Dharma in the world, and to the happiness, well-being, and enlightenment of all beings. May complete auspiciousness prevail!



On the auspicious occasion of Guru Rinpoche Day in the Month of Saga Dawa (The 10th day of the 4th month of the Tibetan year 2150), or according to Western reckoning, May 30th, 2023, the sacred kudung of Venerable Gyatrul Rinpoche was offered into the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Santa Cruz, California. In Tibetan, *kudung* is the honorific way to refer to a lama's physical remains.

The following is a collective account of how the sea burial unfolded, bringing together observations and comments from a number of participants present at the various stages of the ceremony. Due to this group storytelling style, you might hear variations in voice as this or that detail is related. Although a great deal of factual information is included in order to be as clear as possible, it is not primarily intended to be an historical document. Rather, it is meant to be a friendly, intimate account of the perceptions of the group on that magical day. We hope it will feel like you are sitting with all of us over cups of tea, everyone taking turns telling different aspects of the story, sharing their thoughts and memories. For those not present at the time, we hope it will give a clear picture of the sequence of events as well as some flavor of the experience itself. For those who were there, may it serve as a reminder of these remarkable proceedings.

### **Background: Why A Sea Burial?**

Over the years, from time to time Venerable Gyatrul Dhomang Rinpoche would express his wishes regarding his remains. Sometimes he would say, "When I die, feed me to the animals. Just put me up on the hill for the coyotes!" But the wish he most commonly expressed was, "When I die, don't make a big deal about my body, just throw it in the ocean. Feed me to the fishes!" For many years, his listener generally would respectfully respond by explaining that, to the best of our knowledge, this would not be legal or possible in this country, and that only the mafia has this luxury. Finally, however, a sailor in our community suggested that, while not common, a sea burial might be possible. Some research confirmed this was the case.

A few years ago, some internet searching connected us with Judah Ben Hur, the owner of Argos Cremations and Burials in Torrance, CA. Argos offers the rare service of "full body sea burials," which we learned is the technical term in the industry for what Rinpoche described more informally as "feed me to the fishes." Unlike the scattering of cremated ashes at sea, which is far more well known, with a full body sea burial the entire corpse is put in a biodegradable shroud, weighted so it will stay submerged, and sunk in the ocean to decompose naturally—indeed feeding the fishes and other ocean creatures. This method of disposing of remains is perfectly legal as long as certain conditions are met. Judah oversees such green burials regularly and is well-versed in all the legal ins and outs involved. Like other special folks that Rinpoche has magnetized over the years, Judah appeared seemingly out of the blue, with just the right skills and knowledge needed to fulfill Rinpoche's wishes. Possessing immediate faith in Rinpoche and a deep respect for the Buddhist tradition, Judah's enthusiasm and confidence buoyed us up and carried us along in the process of making the sea burial happen. He said of working with us on this project, "I felt a deep sense of responsibility, almost as if I was guided or compelled by unseen forces, to contribute in a specific way."

Around the same time that we began making plans for the sea burial, Ven. Gyatrul Rinpoche also expressed his wish that Lama Sonam Tsering Rinpoche be in charge of caring for his kudung when he passed. Lama Sonam Rinpoche is a Dudjom ritual master, longtime friend to Ven. Gyatrul Rinpoche, and for many years has been a teacher to our sangha. He also is experienced in the methods of preserving and honoring a lama's kudung. Rinpoche many times expressed his admiration of Lama Sonam's pure heart, knowledge, and humility. Indeed, Rinpoche chose the perfect person for this principal role, and we were fortunate to have had Lama Sonam Rinpoche's expert and tireless guidance over the two months of Rinpoche's transition process, from parinirvana to sea burial. We will be forever grateful for his kind and crucial presence during such a demanding time.

When Rinpoche's health started to decline in early April (of this year, 2023), there began a flurry of activity to prepare the needed physical supports and substances with which to honor and care for the kudung properly. Rinpoche passed into parinirvana on April 8th, 2023, (the 17th day of the 2nd month, Tibetan year 2150) at 2:32 a.m. His kudung remained at his residence in Half Moon Bay until Wednesday, April 12th, when it was arranged in a brocade-covered box and transported in a van to Tashi Choling, his primary seat, in Ashland, Oregon. There, the lovely brocade box was placed in a larger structure specially constructed for this purpose—an exquisite celestial palace, brightly painted and adorned with brocades, all surrounded by offerings. After three days of ceremonies to honor the kudung at Tashi Choling, giving Rinpoche's disciples and friends a chance to pay their respects, make offerings, and practice in its presence, the kudung (along with its palace enclosure) was then taken to Orgyen Dorje Den, Rinpoche's seat in Alameda, California, on Sunday, April 16th. Many faithful disciples traveled from near and far to be in its presence. Even those who did not know Rinpoche in life went to great lengths to be there, and many others expressed the wish to come. Of all who sat in the presence of the kudung, no one came away without being touched by the profundity of the blessings, or feeling somehow changed by the experience.

The presence of the kudung was powerful, present and vivid, and at the same time the kudung itself continued to be fresh and showed no signs of decay.

For these reasons, though the sea burial had originally been planned to occur the following week, it was postponed for nearly six weeks until the holy month of Saga Dawa. In fact, the kudung remained unpreserved for three weeks and two days after parinirvana, without showing signs of decomposition, and was kept for a total of 53 days before the sea burial took place.

Regarding the sea burial itself, this is the first full body sea burial to occur in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition that anyone involved had ever heard of, including the many lamas who connected to the ceremonies in various ways. When Lama Sonam Rinpoche was preparing the liturgy for this day, he looked through the texts and practices usually used when a lama passes but of course there was no specific ceremony for a sea burial or anything similar to be found. So, Lama Sonam Rinpoche himself designed the ceremony. He compiled the liturgy from many different texts and composed parts of it himself. He pointed out that in addition to the Bodhisattva ideal of feeding the ocean creatures as Gyatrul Rinpoche had always wished to do, offering the kudung into the ocean also meant offering it into the realm of the nagas, serpentine beings who dwell there. He said:

*The nagas are powerful beings that live in the ocean and, when displeased, can cause pandemics and all kinds of calamities and suffering to arise worldwide. Rinpoche is going to the naga realm to tame these beings, in order to reduce disease, sickness, and other problems in this world, including imbalances of the outer elements which cause natural disasters, inner imbalances which cause many kinds of illness, and secret imbalances which cause strong emotions and negative mindsets. These are extremely difficult and challenging times, and Rinpoche, through compassion, is going to the source, to the powerful nagas, yakshas, and rakshas, to manifest in a special way and subdue those energies. He is taking on the karmic debts of other beings and offering his body as a bodhisattva activity to benefit them. He is doing this not for himself, but for us.*

## Sea Burial Day

### *Part 1: Procession and Practice On the Dock*

The sea burial began at 6 a.m. on the morning of May 30th with over 100 sangha members gathering on the dock in Santa Cruz<sup>1</sup>. First, the kudung arrived in a white van adorned with katas in the five colors, having made its way from Orgyen Dorje Den in the early morning. Lama Sonam Rinpoche had instructed that, since the sacred kudung was descending to the naga realm in order to tame beings there and pacify the sufferings of the world, it should be escorted to the boat in a beautiful, abundant procession. The procession began with incense, juniper smoke, colorful brocade offering banners, and the symbolic sacred umbrella. Music was played on drums, conch shells, woodwind trumpets, bells, cymbals, and damarus (small handheld drums).

The kudung was accompanied by the lamas presiding at the ceremonies, including Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal Rinpoche, Venerable Lingtrul Rinpoche, Tulku Jigme Wangdrak Rinpoche, Anyen Rinpoche and Lama Sonam Tsering Rinpoche.

Other lamas<sup>2</sup>, members of Rinpoche's household, and many sangha followed. It seemed as if the dakas and dakinis (male and female enlightened beings) themselves were in the entourage, as a young boy led the way like a graceful little daka scattering rose petals, and dakini ladies were offering scarves with gestures of dance. Many disciples lined the path, holding silk offering scarves and incense.

Once the kudung arrived at the ocean's edge, the practice commenced. The meaning of the ceremony has been summarized by Sangye Khandro and Lama Chonam, as follows:

*The ceremonies began with taking refuge and generating the bodhicitta for the sake of all sentient beings. Then the environment was blessed by the Triple Gem to become a pure realm through the strength of the two accumulations of merit.*

*Rendering the environment as such, all the buddhas and bodhisattvas were pleased, and they were presented with immeasurable clouds of mentally imagined outer, inner, and secret offerings.*

*The enlightened mind of Gyatrul Rinpoche was invoked to join us from the emptiness of the dharmadhatu, out of compassion for all living beings. The sangha held the view that Rinpoche had arrived among us. We requested that he remain firm and stable with us until samsara is empty.*

*Then the purification or cleansing ceremony commenced. This ceremony originated with Lord Buddha Shakyamuni, who was bathed or cleansed by the gods just moments after his birth into this world. Hence, the tradition has continued to offer this process of bathing to symbolically cleanse and purify all the followers of the Buddha through the blessed vase water that brings the blessings of the Buddha's enlightened body, speech, and mind.*

*Clean articles of clothing were offered so that disciples could accumulate merit and purify obscurations. Then the kudung was blessed by the five buddha families. Next, the main purpose of the ceremony was to praise the enlightened qualities of the guru's body, speech, and mind from the perspective of outer, inner, and secret understanding. In doing so, all non-conducive circumstances that may occur on the spiritual path were pacified and, in turn, the qualities of the guru's enlightened body, speech, and mind will be achieved.*

*Then, from the guru's three places marked with the three vajra syllables, OM AH HUNG, white, red, and blue light radiated out and the disciples received the four empowerments. This symbolized the guru's response.*

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<sup>1</sup> At 333 Lake Ave., Santa Cruz, CA.

<sup>2</sup> Other lamas present included: Lama Drimed Rinpoche, Sangye Khandro, Lama Chonam, Lama Jigme, Lama Alan Wallace, Lama Lorraine O'Rourke, Lama Freddie Trancoso, Lama Bruce Newman, Lama Les Collins, and Lama Mat Small.

*Disciples then requested the guru to listen and they committed themselves to the practice of virtue, generosity, offering, cultivation of prajna, bodhicitta, and so forth in all lifetimes and dedicated the root of all such virtue to the vidyadhara master (the guru) as an expression of gratitude.*

*Due to the sublime essence of the object of refuge, great merit was accumulated and the root of all non-virtue and associated habits was uprooted and purified. This was accompanied by the prayer to always meet with sublime gurus in every lifetime and to serve them flawlessly.*

*Further aspiration prayers were offered.*

*Then there was the consecration ceremony for the kudung, during which time the wisdom deities were invited to arrive and dissolve into the kudung. The reason for this was to ensure the kudung will remain until it either fully dissolves back into the five elements or is destroyed by the five elements. Disciples requested that the kudung remain in this world to continuously bestow both common and supreme siddhis upon all beings. Strong prayers were made that the kudung's blessings would enter every single particle of the ocean floor and the water that comprises it.*

Once the ceremonies were complete, the kudung was prepared for its voyage out to sea. Ven. Gyatrul Rinpoche's picture, which had graced the front of the kudung box throughout its travels and smiled at us from the front of the shrine room as we had practiced over the previous weeks, was removed. Then the silken brocade ornaments and decorations were detached, and the box was covered with a biodegradable shroud made of cotton sail cloth, as specified by law for sea burial. Although usually such shrouds are long and flat, shaped only to contain the physical remains of the deceased, this shroud had been custom sewn so the kudung could remain upright in its box. The shroud's overlapping cloth flaps took several minutes to be laced shut. Then, the sailcloth-wrapped box was lifted by a hoist and placed onto the rental boat. Like our fortunate discovery of Judah and Argos Cremations and Burials which so perfectly supported Rinpoche's wishes, in our search for a boat we had also fortuitously come across a local company, Sea Spirit Memorial, which just so happened to specialize in sea burials. The vessel carrying the kudung out onto the ocean was appropriately named the *Sea Spirit*.

At this point, the *Sea Spirit* proceeded from the loading site over to a nearby dock so the passengers could board. Then the lamas and sangha who stayed behind to carry out the practices on shore waved white scarves and made many prayers and auspicious wishes as the boat departed. The boat carried Tulku Jigme Wangdrak Rinpoche and Lama Sonam Rinpoche, who together presided over the ceremonies, and 32 other lamas and devoted disciples, as well as Judah Ben Hur, Captain Joe Stoops and his crew.

Once the boat departed, Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal Rinpoche, Venerable Lingtrul Rinpoche, Anyen Rinpoche, and other lamas and most of the gathered sangha drove to the Inn at Pasatiempo, a hotel just ten minutes from the dock. The banquet room there, a comfortable hall built to accommodate 150 people, had been rented for the day. At one end, we displayed a large image of H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche as well as the picture of Ven. Gyatrul Rinpoche that had been taken from the kudung box during the preparations on the dock. A large television screen at the end of the room was set to stream live footage from the sea burial, although we had been warned that the signal was likely to be lost once the *Sea Spirit* was on the ocean, and this in fact proved to be the case.

Arriving at the inn, the lamas enjoyed an impromptu picnic breakfast together. Meanwhile, students went to rest briefly and refresh themselves with a lot of coffee after our early morning start! The sangha gradually re-assembled in the hall for the practice, with our chant leader and lamas at one end of the room and the sangha seated around the circular tables with their practice texts. Although no formal count was made, the room was full to the very back. The practice was also streaming online, and well over 100 disciples from around the world took the chance to connect in that way as well. Together we made a far-reaching mandala to hold the space of practice and meditation as the kudung went out to sea.

The principal practice we recited was the Vajrasattva practice called *The Mirror of Vajrasattva's Enlightened Mind*. This practice had been revealed by the great master Kunzang Nyima at the request of Gyatrul Rinpoche himself. A powerful treasure revealer, Kunzang Nyima was an emanation of Dudjom

Lingpa and one of Rinpoche's root gurus. Thus this practice was chosen because it contains the blessings of Vajrasattva, Kunzang Nyima, and all the Dudjom lineage—what could be more fitting? We also included the *Confession Prayer to Empty the Depths of the Hells* known as *Narak Dongtruk* in Tibetan, to purify all non-virtue and breaches of vows and samaya, such that our connection to Rinpoche and his activity could be strong and pure. We concluded with the extensive aspiration called the *Prayer for Excellent Conduct*, to dedicate the extraordinary merit of this day in as vast a manner as possible.

For those on the boat, it was such an inspiration to know those practices were being held simultaneously. It was as though the faith and beautiful energy of each person focused on the practice joined with us and sustained us during our ocean voyage. Gyatrul Rinpoche had always been delighted when group practices were taking place, mentioning in his teachings countless times that such practices were a powerful method for dispelling obstacles and helping ensure merit could be created in a vast and unhindered way. It really felt like our mandala that morning encompassed the boat, banquet room, and students joining from all over the world. United in our intention, together we were supporting the success of the precious mission to offer Rinpoche's kudung into the sea.

## *Part 2: The Voyage*

At first the boat seemed small for thirty-eight people. But once everyone had boarded, it felt just right. A couple minutes after we pulled away, two dolphins were spotted frolicking between the boat and the shore. A good sign!

There seemed to be a sort of quiet understanding amongst the sangha on the boat. We were all there for a shared purpose that drew us together. The mood was contemplative, thoughtful. Even those who are normally very chatty were subdued, although to be fair, that may have been fatigue and Drama-mine at work!

We had been warned that the voyage had every possibility of being difficult—standing for hours, windy, cold or rainy, rough seas, rampant seasickness. But Rinpoche's wisdom intent brought the opposite conditions, which made for a voyage that was peaceful, beautiful, and magical.

Only about ten minutes out from the harbor, a *Sea Spirit* crew member cut her finger. Thus the boat returned to the dock so she could receive appropriate medical attention and we could take on another crew member. As we re-entered the harbor, several sangha members were still arrayed on the rocks at the entrance, waving their katas, as though the dakas and dakinis were welcoming us back. Rather than this development feeling like an obstacle, the kudung's swift reappearance seemed like an auspicious sign that Rinpoche would go and quickly return, and not be parted from us for long.

Raina Stoops, one of the owners of the *Sea Spirit* and our main liaison in the stages of planning this day, joined us as the replacement crew member, and we set out again. Perhaps this wasn't an accident at all? In fact, it seemed very fitting for Raina to be present since she had been our principal connection to Sea Spirit Memorial all along. Moving about the boat in her flowing gold sweater, she had a strong focused energy and presence about her, a meditative quality. Surely she was a dakini meant to escort the kudung and support the skillful activity of the *Sea Spirit* crew!

The ocean was surprisingly calm that day. Even the sailors themselves remarked upon it, and Lama Sonam Rinpoche noted that this was an auspicious circumstance, since it could so easily have been otherwise. The weather was pleasant. The clouds were very low and formed what felt like a protective canopy. The sky was grey and overcast marked with patches of blue and puffs of white clouds in elaborate patterns. The light was muted, soft and soothing. As the boat powered out onto the open ocean and the land receded, there was a sense of joy and purpose in fulfilling Rinpoche's wish. The occasional seal, dolphin and whale as well as pelicans and seagulls appeared from time to time. As Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal Rinpoche observed when hearing the scene described later, "They were dancing and welcoming Rinpoche to the sea." Everyone enjoyed delicious tea and snacks as we rode along.

After about an hour and a half, we reached the destination determined by the boat's radar to be deep enough for the body to be offered. Law requires a depth of 1,000 feet for a sea burial; however, in this case the ocean floor steeply dropped off to a depth of 2,500 feet. We found ourselves 14 miles southwest of the Santa Cruz Harbor, above a canyon in the ocean floor which could be most accurately identified as Scaroni Canyon.<sup>3</sup>

In this remote location, we felt removed from the details and concerns of ordinary life, but also connected on a deeper level to the entire planet.

As mentioned, right around the time we were arriving at our destination, the lamas and sangha gathered on land were engaged in Vajrasattva practice—namely, *The Mirror of Vajrasattva's Enlightened Mind*. “Enlightened mind” could also be translated as “enlightened heart” or “wisdom heart.”

At that moment on the boat, the ocean was smooth and mirror-like, and it was as if we had arrived at the heart of the world where several realms intersected—in the Mirror of Vajrasattva's Wisdom Heart itself.

### ***Part 3: The Eulogy***

The boat came to a halt, drifting slightly to the southwest as we gathered around the kudung to begin the final ceremonies. First, Sangye Khandro offered an inspiring and fitting eulogy to recall and praise the qualities of our precious guru and to paint a picture of his life and enlightened activity, bringing tears to the eyes of the listeners.

She began by acknowledging the sacred astrological significance of the occasion, this being Guru Rinpoche Day of Saga Dawa month, quite appropriate since Rinpoche always had incredible faith in Guru Rinpoche and strove to uphold his lineage. She went on to express Rinpoche's wish to deposit his earthly remains into this great body of water as an offering to the creatures that live within it, in order to connect them with the dharma in future lives and bring about their gradual liberation. She described this as “an act of great altruism occurring without fanfare or elaborate ritual and given as a gift to the fish and nagas who inhabit the subterranean depths of the sea.” She said, “within this great body of water, home to billions of living beings, Rinpoche's kudung and its blessings will also connect the creatures to the sacred timeless truth of the holy dharma on both a molecular and an ethereal level.”

She mentioned that Rinpoche was always fond of the ocean, and how the immeasurable vast and deep oceans interlink and encircle this planet earth. She continued:

*Rinpoche in his unprecedented humility also knew that his human remains carry blessing through contact, and yet in the guise of the disposing of his body in the ocean he is able to fulfill his aim without any personal promotion.*

*This is in keeping with Rinpoche's style his entire life, a very long life, and once again serves as one of the final teachings Rinpoche bestows upon us, which is to always conceal one's qualities and openly expose one's faults, to not look for recognition through worldly concerns but rather to be an example of the true dharma practitioner through one's humility, pure conduct, and noble human qualities.*

*Today we promise you, Rinpoche, that we will try harder to always be worthy of what you have given us by choosing to dedicate your nirmanakaya to this new and foreign life in the west. You were a true pioneer and you really became one of us in all ways so that you could relate to us and so that you could shape us into what we have become in terms of spiritual development. Now you leave us with the many responsibilities to be worthy vessels of your many gifts. How can we represent you going forward? How can we please you the most?*

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<sup>3</sup>According to the true navigational coordinates used by mariners, we were at N 36°51.088' W 122°12.488'. On Google Earth, the coordinates were 36°51'05.1"N 122°12'29.7"W.



*By following your example and never forgetting your heart advice that was repeated to us over and over again..... We commit ourselves to the bodhisattva vow, to never be weary or tired when it comes to bringing benefit and eventual liberation to all beings, without bias, so that one day we can all be free from adventitious confusion..... By this act, Rinpoche's body will be merging and dissolving back into its source, the original ground of dharmakaya, the resting place of all the buddhas.* She concluded with Rinpoche's favorite dedication prayer: *namkhé tartuk taye semchan nam* <sup>4</sup>

#### **Part 4: The Sea Burial**

Next, the summoning of prosperity verses were recited, with Tulku Jigme Wangdrak Rinpoche waving the long life arrow and playing the bell. In Sangye Khandro and Lama Chonam's teaching on the sea burial ceremonies it says:

*The Calling Forth, or Summoning of Prosperity, ceremony will be performed for several reasons. First is that Rinpoche was a tulku with great merit, as demonstrated by his long life and accomplishments in life that occurred without any major obstacles to prevent what he set out to do. Also, because Rinpoche was one of the few remaining senior masters from Tibet's older generation, his brand of merit was unique to this world. Even though Rinpoche's body is being offered to the subterranean ocean, by summoning his temporal and spiritual prosperity back to the disciples, this means that disciples will be able to capture or harness this energy. This is invoked through the five elements and five dakinis, and the blessings are restorative, progressive, and meritorious on many countless levels such that future lineage practitioners will be able to flourish on the spiritual path free from obstacles.*

Then came an extensive "tashi prayer," or prayer for auspiciousness. The phrase "TASHI SHOG!"—"May all be auspicious!"—was repeated again and again in the verses, and each time the disciples tossed handfuls of rose petals and grains into the air. Passing handfuls of flower petals around the boat to make sure each person had more than enough, everyone was smiling. A great sense of lightheartedness and joy arose in us.

On the calm flat sea with the *tashi* rose petals drifting in a beautiful pattern, a humpback whale appeared—not breaching, but surfacing to take a breath three times, calmly and peacefully, like OM AH HUNG, her timing matching the chanting of the verses. The third time she disappeared and did not resurface, as if she had gone on a deep dive to announce to the nagas that Rinpoche was coming.

At that moment, the sun slowly emerged, sending its soft rays gleaming between the gray clouds, casting a sparkle and brightness over everything. The whole space felt like we were in a clear peaceful sphere with Rinpoche radiating. With the sky looking a bit otherworldly, and the calm seas and gentle weather, whales and waterfowl, the chanting and the beautiful flower petals—everything together made for a surreal experience. It felt like a pure realm—dharmakaya with attributes would fit. There was truly a feeling that blessings were descending upon the whole world and auspiciousness would forever prevail.

Then the kudung, in its box and sailcloth shroud, was lifted by a group of strong students and lowered to a platform we had secured to one side of the *Sea Spirit*. The boat, which had been relatively gentle in its movement during the remarkable journey, now began rocking more vigorously from side to side. Although we had been fortunate to keep the seasickness among the participants to a minimum until this point, now more of us were starting to look green and we comforted those who were getting ill as best we could.

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<sup>4</sup> See back cover of pictorial *Recollections of a Sea Burial: A Collective Telling of the Events of the Sacred Sea Burial* of Venerable Gyatrul Rinpoche or sea burial day flyer for the full prayer in Tibetan and English.

The ballast, as required by law to properly sink the body, was added into the box in the form of many pounds of gravel and rocks. Then, the top of the shroud was tied shut with auspicious offering scarves. The box now weighed several hundred pounds and this new concentration of so much weight began to tilt the already-rocking boat. Everyone not directly involved in the activity around the box had to gather on the far side of the boat to act as a counterbalance. The kudung was gently released into the water—at 10:08 a.m., one student noticed—while the clear sound of the conch rang out across the sea. Milk (which is a traditional offering to the nagas and said to be their favorite thing) and naga medicine were simultaneously offered into the water, and much of the salt which had been used to preserve the kudung as well.

At this point, there were some unexpected developments, which—considering Rinpoche’s lifelong playfulness and strong tendency to do the unexpected—should actually have come as no surprise.

First, when we lowered the kudung box into the water, we were all expecting it to stay upright. But it wanted to go head first. When it rolled over on its side and started to tip downwards, we panicked and tried to hold it up to make it go down the way we wanted it to. But it seemed to have its own ideas.

Then, once the box was fully in the water, the kudung didn’t sink. None of us, save for Judah and the *Sea Spirit* crew, our trusty leaders, had ever attended a sea burial before, but from their descriptions it sounded like in general the remains would sink quickly when placed in the water, weighted by so many pounds of ballast inside their heavy shroud. However, before departing from Orgyen Dorje Den that morning, dry ice had been placed under the kudung, inside the box, for its journey in the car, and apparently some of it still remained. When the dry ice made contact with the water, lots of steam, bubbles and ice were created, filling the box and inflating the shroud. Due to this, instead of sinking immediately, the box floated there, its canvas top hovering above the water line, loosely tethered by ropes still held by students on the boat. Clouds of steam billowed out of the box and hung over the water, like a magically appearing mist.

On the boat, there was a wide range of perceptions, interpretations, and reactions to this development.

For some of us, it was simply wondrous and magical. We thought it was amazing—although we did not plan or anticipate anything like it, now it seemed as if the nagas were offering sang (special incense used in purification rituals) to welcome Rinpoche to their realm.

Others saw the plumes of smoke as part of a beautiful offering along with the flower petals, like clouds of fragrant incense. Or else perhaps it was the steamy breath of the hordes of nagas, come to greet Rinpoche.

Still others were having a completely different experience. From the previous moment of joy, we were startled back to a reality of weights and measures, physics and a heavy sense of responsibility, filled with dismay. It is required by law that any body buried at sea must sink to the depths of the ocean. Had we miscalculated so badly, bungling Rinpoche’s final request? Our minds were racing, reviewing each step of our careful plans, each decision that had brought us to this point. We wondered if further action to sink the kudung would be needed, and if so, what could possibly be done.

Our apprehension mounted the longer the box simply floated there on the surface, refusing to sink.

For some minutes we remained like this, full of wonder, panic, amazement, inspiration, worry—so many experiences on one small boat. As we drifted on the current the box kept tipping forward, as though the kudung within was positioning itself to snorkel, observing the ocean floor below, waiting for us to reach the proper destination. Someone remarked on the beauty of the moment, which helped to bring others back into the present scene, out of their complex thoughts.

The beautiful clouds of steam continued to billow out in all directions. It seemed as though Rinpoche wished to dissolve not only into the ocean water, but into the sky and air as well, to remain in this realm forever as a formless presence. The sun was now streaming brightly, while the water was tranquil and glassy, without a ripple to disturb the slow, soft undulation of waves. As a final expression of Rinpoche’s compassionate physical form, our surroundings became suffused with his blessings. As Khenpo Tsewang Rinpoche commented later, “the elements were subdued and peaceful, and this is all a sign of Rinpoche’s bodhicitta.”

When more than ten minutes had passed in this way, the decision was made to pull the box back up onto the platform and see what could be done—perhaps further open up the holes in the box, or maybe even remove the box and place the kudung alone in the shroud with the ballast. But pulling the box up out of the water proved to be a tough task, and more students joined those hauling on the ropes. What didn't make sense was that the box seemed to be immovable. Certainly something bobbing on the water, attached to a rope being pulled by several strong people, would move, right? But it behaved instead like a boulder on land, impervious to our straining. Each of the folks on the ropes had a foot fully braced against the wall of the boat and propped themselves against the seats for leverage, but to no effect. In fact it seemed Rinpoche was only laughing at us, as if the box could never be moved by our efforts!

These were intense moments filled, for many of us, with strong concepts and emotions. Looking back, this was a familiar scene. Over the course of many dharma endeavors, whether a challenging construction project or a demanding retreat, it seems there would always be moments of pure inspiration and joy, as during the tashi prayers a few minutes before. But also, especially in the long middle stage of a project, there would be times when our ordinary, conceptual minds would be filled with doubt and discouragement. Sometimes anger, jealousy or other strong emotions would suddenly arise, almost as if they were provoked by the intensity of the dharma we were doing. We might encounter an obstacle that seemed insurmountable, and fall into feeling that things had gone wrong and couldn't be put right. At such times over the years, Rinpoche would often just completely ignore our internal turmoil. Without even needing to speak, he would kindly clarify with his “no big deal” attitude that what loomed as such a major problem in our minds was in fact workable and would pass. Or, he might give a casual but pointed reminder not to be so rigid in our thinking, such as, “What is problem?” Or sometimes, with a twinkling smile, he would confront our angst directly, saying, “You deserve!” or “Are you pissed?”

Inevitably, however, and contrary to our worst fears, things would work out and these heavy reactions would be released and freed into the space of our minds. This was no different.

The videos of these events clearly showed this sequence—first, one is struck by the sheer joy that was obvious on all our faces during the tashi prayers, followed by the abject concern when the box wouldn't sink. Another lesson in impermanence, in faith, and in letting go of our grasping to phenomena (internal and external!)—Rinpoche's last “Ha ha!”

We learned later that this magical timeless stillness lasted about a half hour from start to finish. While our attempts to retrieve the box were unsuccessful, eventually we noticed it began to pull downwards on the ropes of its own accord. We conferred with the captain and decided to release the ropes and see what would happen. Immediately and without hesitation, the box sank purposefully out of sight, disappearing into the dark blue ocean. On the boat's radar, the captain watched as the kudung descended rapidly to 500 feet where it passed out of range.

Still huddled on the far side of the boat to act as a counterbalance, many of us could not see what was going on. We asked, “What happened?” One of those holding the ropes replied, “He was waiting for us to let him go.”

### ***Part 5: The Return Voyage and Conclusion***

When Rinpoche's kudung finally submerged beneath the surface of the sea, everyone relaxed with a joyful sense of completion. The return voyage was smooth while everyone rested quietly with their own thoughts. Once we disembarked, we made our way to the banquet hall where the practice had concluded and lunch was being offered. Now that we were back on the solid ground of the “real world,” we realized we were quite famished!

At the inn, there was some sense of the solemnity of the occasion and here and there expressions of sorrow or grief, but overall the mood was of joy and celebration of our extraordinary guru. Although, as anticipated, the live video feed of the sea burial was unsuccessful once the boat had headed out, the footage of the procession and ceremony on the dock had been played on the television at the end of the hall to the

great enjoyment of the watchers. Now everyone was full of questions about the voyage, and those who had been on the boat were asked to describe the events again and again. As the afternoon wore on, our stomachs now full and many stories exchanged, we reluctantly dispersed, still full of wonder at the events of a day quite unlike any other.

As a sangha, it felt like we had done our very best in carrying out all aspects of the sea burial. And in a greater sense, it felt like Rinpoche had fulfilled his life's purpose in a grand and beautiful way, down to this last moment of relating to us through his physical form.

### ***Part 6: A Naga Visits Rinpoche's Residence***

Four hundred miles to the north of us, a student who was caretaking Rinpoche's main residence at Tashi Choling went outside shortly after the sea burial practice and saw a beautiful snake approach the house. In fact, it came right up to the door as if it wanted to come inside. In hearing of this later, Sangye Khandro commented, *it is very significant that this snake, an expression of the nagas, would appear on this special day. It is an amazing sign that Rinpoche's blessings, his prosperity, and all the majesty that he brings to the world are still here and are coming back in, right through the door.*

## **After The Sea Burial: Rinpoche's Love for Us**

*by Ila Reitz*

Looking back, I feel that the final lingering of Rinpoche's sacred body on the surface of the ocean was in tune with Rinpoche's style throughout the last eight years of his life. During Rinpoche's decline into old age, he moved ever so slowly and gently through the process. First, he withdrew from his dharma centers into his quiet life in Half Moon Bay. Then, "piece by piece," as he would say, he withdrew into the simplest mode of living. In his final decline, he gave the sangha several days to accustom ourselves to his passing. As he withdrew from life itself, his kudung made a final visit to his principal centers and remained there for several weeks. Disciples had a chance to bask in his presence once again, while the energy of his blessings gradually shifted from an immediate vibrancy to a more subtle, all pervasive radiance.

To me, it is one of Rinpoche's great acts of kindness in this life that he did not suddenly or abruptly pass away. Rather, it was as if he slowly receded from the world like the tide going out. Living into one's late 90's is not the most comfortable thing to do, but Rinpoche stretched his lifespan in order to treat us with such gentleness. As Lama Drimed said, Rinpoche's longevity gave us much time to accumulate merit and purify obscurations in his presence, while continuously taming beings in whatever way he could.

Now, at this final moment, Rinpoche was once again taking things, in his own words, "Slowly, slowly, step by step." Remaining on the surface for a while, Rinpoche gave each of us a final opportunity in the presence of his physical remains to work through many different emotions and concepts, feel faith and inspiration, have worries and doubts, be delighted and above all grieve, before finally reassuring us with his determined plunge that the plan would indeed work out and his wishes would be fulfilled.

They say that true love based on wisdom awareness has no far and near, no meeting and parting. I do believe Rinpoche has that kind of all-encompassing love for us, that can be felt everywhere, no matter if his body is at the bottom of the ocean or bursting with life as he gave teachings from a throne.

But Rinpoche also always had a distinctly human side. He expressed what it was like to be bewildered in a foreign country, the cranky temper of a toothache, and the frustrations of growing older. His love, too, was expressed as a very personal, earthly kind of love, which was attentive to every detail that could comfort or support his students. Like a doting parent will put off the moment of parting with their child to the very last, Rinpoche tarried on the surface of the ocean. Not wishing to be parted from us or cause us sorrow, he revealed just how much he cared for each one of his students of this life. This was surely a sign that he was sustaining his disciples with compassion.

As Sangye Khandro mentioned in her eulogy, Rinpoche's physical form has now dissolved into the ocean. It is gradually pervading wherever the ocean water might reach, making its way up the rivers and creeks on every continent to the springs that feed them and into the earth itself. As the ocean water evaporates, Rinpoche's blessings will gather as clouds in the sky and fall as rain upon the whole world.

In the same way, Rinpoche's wisdom mind has dissolved into the dharma centers and archives, conferring special blessings upon the statues and buildings, the gardens and monuments, and all the other aspects that he left for us, as living, physical supports of the dharma and our practice. And, most importantly, it has dissolved into his students, blessing our minds with his wisdom and the possibility to see what will be skillful or correct.

Over the past months, while mourning the loss of our guru's physical form, it has been a great comfort to me to think that Rinpoche is dissolving not only into my own heart but into the hearts of all of you, my sangha brothers and sisters. Whatever challenges arise, I know that each one of us possesses this seed of wisdom that will ripen unexpectedly. Perhaps it will manifest as an inspiration or intuition, as a crazy idea or as good old fashioned common sense? Of course, we are encumbered by the shortcomings of our

ordinary minds. But, if we just try to be flexible, open and keep harmony, it seems that Rinpoche's wisdom will never be far away. I am so grateful for each one of you, the connection you have to Rinpoche and your joy in the dharma. You each hold a special piece of Rinpoche's dharma legacy, and together we can uphold this on into the future.

Yours in Dharma,  
Ila Reitz  
Summer 2023

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