

ON TUKDAM AND THE TRANSITION OF A GREAT MASTER

Lama Sonam Tsering Rinpoche

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(with Introduction by Ila Reitz)

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, experienced practitioners and high lamas rest in a state of meditation after being pronounced clinically dead. In this state, the body remains lifelike, and even retains body heat, for one or more days. This state is called “tukdam.”

When Ven. Gyatrul Rinpoche passed into parinirvana, his sacred kudung (physical body) was placed under the care of Lama Sonam Tsering Rinpoche, who oversaw the preservation and veneration of the kudung for over 6 weeks until it was offered into the ocean. During this time, Lama Sonam Rinpoche was constantly observing the kudung and surrounding conditions for signs that would indicate to him what was occurring with Ven. Gyatrul Rinpoche’s wisdom mind as this transition took place and what should be done in terms of caring for the kudung. Since he was our leader and an expert in overseeing this transitional process for high lamas, the other lamas and students who were present requested Lama Sonam Rinpoche to give a teaching on the meaning of the term “tukdam” and how it applied in this particular case.

Although it was not possible for the teaching to be given publicly during that time, Lama Sonam Rinpoche kindly met with me to prepare the below remarks. We are extremely grateful for Lama Sonam Rinpoche’s kind and expert guidance during such a challenging time, and for the wisdom he shares with us in this teaching.

—Ila Reitz, October 2023

LAMA SONAM RINPOCHE'S REMARKS

Some people asked me to talk about tukdam. I don't know very much about it. In one way, tukdam is very simple, but in another way it is very deep and vast.

Briefly, *tukdam* is "thugs kyi dam bca'" in Tibetan. "Thugs" means heart or mind, while "dam bca'" means sacred commitment; so tukdam literally means sacred heart commitment. For a practitioner on the path, whether that person is focusing on preliminary practices, generation stage, completion stage, or dzogchen practices, they have a commitment to maintain their practice. They have a promise to practice. That promise is the meaning of the word "dam," or commitment, in the word tukdam. Since this is the case, we can understand tukdam to mean practice because for practitioners, their heart commitment is to maintain and broaden their meditation practice until they achieve accomplishment. Therefore, you should think of tukdam as practice or meditation.

In the Tibetan language, the word tukdam can be used in reference to a living lama. For example, if I ask a lama's attendant, "Can I go in to see the lama?" he might reply, "No, he is currently in tukdam. I will let you know when he arises from tukdam." So, as you can see, the word tukdam really is synonymous with practice or meditation, whether in this life or at the moment of death. When a practitioner passes away and remains in tukdam, it means they are practicing in the same way they were practicing in life.

There are many different levels of dharma practitioners, such as beginning, intermediate, and advanced, and even those categories have subdivisions. But, whatever the case, every practitioner must eventually pass from this life. At the moment of death (i.e., when the breath ceases), the most accomplished practitioner will go instantly to a pureland. In this case, they will not abide in tukdam or pass through

any kind of intermediate state. This is called *going unobstructedly upwards*, or straight up. On the other extreme, a very negative person, such as one who has committed one of the five heinous crimes, has such intense negative karma that when their breath ceases, they will go immediately downwards to the lowest realms without passing through an intermediate state. This is called *going unobstructedly downwards*, or straight down. Other than those two, all sentient beings and practitioners must pass through an intermediate state (or bardo) after death.

Regarding the dying process, first, an individual who is dying will see the common signs of death, such as the stages of dissolution of the five elements. Then, as the moment of death approaches, the particular signs of death will be experienced.

There are three particular signs of death. The first is called *appearance* and occurs when consciousness dissolves (into appearance). It is an experience of white light in space like the moon rising in a clear sky, and for this reason it is called the *white path*. At this stage, the thirty-one concepts which arise from anger are arrested as anger dissolves into its source.

The second sign is called *flaring* and it occurs when appearance dissolves (into flaring). It is an experience of red light in space like the sun rising in a clear sky, and for this reason is called the *red path*. At this stage, the forty-two aspects of desire are arrested as desire dissolves into its source. So, at this point, there is no desire and no anger.

The third sign is called *penultimate* and it occurs when flaring dissolves (into penultimate.) It is an experience of total darkness with no appearances, like a pitch black, clear sky with no clouds, and for this reason it is referred to as the *black path*. At this stage, the seven aspects of ignorance are arrested as ignorance (or the deluded aspect of the basis of all) dissolves into its source. This is also described as a dead faint

or state of unconsciousness, where all anger, desire, and ignorance have dissolved back into the alaya or basis of all.

These three experiences (i.e., the passions of anger, desire, and ignorance) obscure or stain the buddha nature. When they cease, actual wisdom appears!

After this state of unconsciousness, then there is an experience like an unpolluted sky at dawn, free from any contributing conditions such as moonlight, sunlight, or darkness. It is just a state of clarity. This is the actual clear light of death. It is not recognized by ordinary individuals, so for them it lasts just a fleeting moment. But experienced practitioners recognize it and abide there in tukdam. Tukdam is meditation upon this clear light dharmata bardo. This is the time when clear light is introduced and practiced. At this point, the practitioner's own experience of clear light, which is called the *child luminosity*, merges with the clear light of death, called the *mother luminosity*, just like a child coming directly to its mother's lap.

Practitioners have many different levels of recognizing and not recognizing the clear light of death, based on their level of practice in this life. Some have just a minor recognition. Others have good or excellent recognition, but still have not perfected the dynamic strength of their realization. So, they remain there in tukdam to perfect their realization, in order to complete their practice of this life.

Thus, for all of us who are practicing on the path, this clear light dharmata bardo is a very special opportunity because, even if we have not been able to complete our practice in this life and achieve realization, we have the opportunity to do so at this moment. Also, for an ordinary individual, the clear light dharmata bardo presents another special opportunity. At this moment, the previous life's phenomena have disappeared, the coming life's phenomena have not started to appear, and one is not overpowered by karma. In this state, it is relatively easy to do phowa (the transference

of consciousness). After this, the consciousness travels on to the next bardo and phowa becomes more difficult.

Returning to the discussion of tukdam, it should be clear that it is extremely special and unusual for anyone to enter into tukdam for any length of time, short or long. It is surely a sign that they were an extraordinary practitioner in this life. Once they have entered tukdam, the length of time that they remain in tukdam is also significant. We must understand that practitioners remain in tukdam because the strength of their meditation is not perfected in this lifetime. They are extending their meditation at death in order to complete their practice.

Therefore, once a practitioner has entered into tukdam, if they pass through it more quickly, this is a sign that they had higher realization in this life. Since their practice and experience in this life was already more developed, they have less to do at the moment of death. Conversely, a longer tukdam shows that the practitioner needs to take more time to develop and complete their practice. Generally, individuals will abide in tukdam for three, five, or seven days. One lama that I knew of in Orissa remained in tukdam for three weeks.

When Ven. Gyatrul Rinpoche passed into parinirvana, there were definite signs that he remained in tukdam. For example, it was possible to feel body heat in the heart area (by touching under the armpits) even 24 hours or more after he was pronounced clinically dead. Also, his countenance appeared lifelike—in fact, he looked peaceful, radiant, and youthful during this time. His skin when pinched would return quickly to its usual form, as happens on a living body. After about 48 hours, signs that Rinpoche had arisen from tukdam and gone on to a pureland occurred. At this point, his body leaned forward and the red and white bodhicitta dripped from his nose. Since he arose

from tukdam after only two days, it became clear that Rinpoche was a great practitioner who did not need to abide in tukdam for long.

After Rinpoche arose from tukdam, through the power of his aspirations and also through the power of the pure faith of his disciples, his sacred kudung remained for many days without needing any preservation at all. The kudung was not preserved with salt until three weeks later, all the while remaining fresh with no odor or signs of decay.

The abiding of the kudung is the lama's last activity that is being performed for his students of this life to directly see. Therefore, this is a very crucial time to deepen our faith and our connection to the lama. Then the lama changes locations, goes to a pureland or other realms, and also changes students, encountering new gatherings of students in different places and different circumstances.

When the lama is in tukdam, it is an extremely blessed time to pray, make offerings, and practice. It's a thousand times more powerful than at another time. Even for a beginning practitioner, to pray and practice while a lama is in tukdam is very, very sacred and profound.

Similarly, when in the presence of the kudung, and for one year after the lama's passing, the disciple's prayers, offerings, practice, and good deeds are extremely powerful. Why are they particularly powerful at this time and not at other times? This is not because the blessings disappear. It is because people's minds slowly lose faith or many different concepts arise. When the parinirvana has just occurred, people have extremely solid, focused faith, and so the blessings are very immediate and vivid.

Therefore, we should make a commitment in our hearts that we will practice and do as many virtuous activities as possible during the year after the lama's parinirvana.

Although most people must work, that doesn't have to stop you from practicing or doing virtuous things. For example, to recite the *Seven-Line Prayer* just one time takes one minute. In twenty-four hours, surely you must have at least one minute to spend on practice? So, everyone, please practice every single day during this time. That is very important.