

Brief Teaching on the Practice of Tsok

By Lama Tharchin Rinpoche

We begin this retreat with a tsok (ganachakra feast) offering – the most profound method of accumulating merit and wisdom. This ceremony creates the amazing opportunity for all of us to at least begin to think that we are no longer merely ordinary sentient beings. Usually we never have any clue that we are actually deities, so without that confidence we are always ordinary. Today at least we have the opportunity to pretend that we are deities – that’s pretty good! This is the beginning of pure vision (*dak-nang*). When we recognize that we are deities, we create this entire pure mandala, and through that experience we can attain enlightenment.

The tsok offering only belongs to the path of Tantra, the Vajrayana. Neither the Hinayana nor Mahayana paths have any idea of doing tsok. It is a very powerful practice because it takes us beyond our usual ordinary concepts. For instance, Sutrayana training always relates to the mind. According to the Sutrayana, offerings should always be things that we think are nice or beautiful, such as incense, flowers, the three whites (milk, yogurt, and butter), or the three sweets (honey, sugar, and molasses). We cannot offer things like meat or alcohol. Also, practitioners are always monks or nuns, according to the Sutrayana tradition, and they do not practice together. According to the Vajrayana, practitioners may also be yogis or yoginis, and a tsok gathering traditionally includes both men and women. The Sutrayana relates to the external level, focusing on specific prescribed actions. Vajrayana practice equalizes all of these concepts.

I have one story. A few years ago, we had a visitor from Europe who came to a tsok. He was very “professional” looking, dressed up like a yogi, with a topknot, wearing a meditation belt. When I first saw him I thought, “Wow, a real yogi came today!” Then we all did tsok together. I kept looking at his face, but it was very tight, lots of muscles very tense. At the end of the tsok offering, he came up to me and said, “Do you consider yourself a Buddhist?” I said, “Yeah, kind of.” He said, “What are you thinking, eating meat and drinking wine?! Not only that, but you put them on the shrine! How can you fit that into Buddhist philosophy?” He was really seriously uptight! I felt that if I answered his question, it wouldn’t really penetrate, so I simply said, “Yeah, we’re bad Buddhists gathering here.” Then Khenpo Orgyen Thinley Rinpoché, who was new here at the time and didn’t speak much English, asked what was said. When I told him, he said, “That’s a really good answer! No more argument.”

Actually, what happened with this man is that he had concepts that Buddhists do not eat meat and drink wine. This is because he only knows about Sutrayana Buddhism. He has no clue about Vajrayana and doesn’t believe in its traditions. I’m saying that tsok is special because the point of the Buddha Dharma is not really external. Through doing the practice of tsok, we can actually get results. When our practice only relates to the external action level, it is what Patrul Rinpoché called “white samsara”. It is not really negative because we are practicing virtue, but this kind of training is based seriously upon a dualistic point of view. Maybe we make the decision that offering the three sweets and

three whites is a pure offering, while offering meat and alcohol is an impure offering. While making those offerings is virtuous and thus has a positive effect, it's maintaining a seriously dualistic attitude. Of course, I agree that the Sutrayana serves as a foundation for the Vajrayana and so how can I be against the foundation but for the building that sits on top of it? If I did that, it would simply be another form of dualism. But it's better not to get stuck at that external level of practice that focuses on specific actions. We have to really check our own minds: who is the perceiver; who makes this decision that one thing is pure and another is impure; who doesn't accept that meat and alcohol can be an offering to the mandala deities?

Vajrayana has powerful techniques that facilitate direct recognition of wisdom. There are techniques to liberate all of these dualistic concepts, equalizing everything, including the three whites and three sweets and meat and alcohol – without accepting or rejecting. That place is the borderline of the mind, the place where dualistic thought ceases. When we turn our practice to that one point, it can be really powerful. If we focus on the objective level, making judgments like, “Oh, deities don't like meat and alcohol; they like the three sweets and three whites,” it really only makes the deity very ordinary or worldly. If the deity accepts some offerings and rejects others, then how is that deity really any different from us? When we go beyond all of this conceptual thought, beyond accepting and rejecting, then the tantric substances such as the five meats have the power to hook the siddhis (spiritual accomplishments) faster. There are also five wisdom substances that act like a lamp with the ability to make our wisdom shining and bright. This wisdom appears more powerfully without accepting and rejecting, by equalizing. This kind of high view and accumulation of merit is much more powerful than other techniques that focus on our external actions because the focus is on the conceptual mind itself.

We begin our retreat with this accumulation of merit and wisdom by offering a tsok according to the Vajrayana tradition because it is such a powerful ceremony. We do it as a way to prepare for the retreat. We begin with good motivation and good accumulation. Then our main retreat will be successful. We have only a short time to do retreat, but if we do it with the proper motivation and accumulation, then it can become really meaningful and equal to a much longer retreat. Everyone should have that understanding and confidence. Then we can enjoy the tsok feast together. Tsok has six different satisfactions. First, our understanding of the perfect view satisfies the root and lineage lamas. Second, the yidams are pleased by our samadhi (meditative absorption). Third, the dakinis and dharma protectors are pleased by pure samaya (sacred vow). When we view all of us as being of the same mandala and actually being the deity, that kind of pure heart seeing all of us connected together satisfies all the dakinis. Our tantric samaya activities, anything we do to integrate the highest view with meditation, satisfy the dharmapalas. Keeping the same samaya while receiving the teachings at the same time, with the same teacher, and gathering together as the same mandala with a continual connection of vajra brothers and sisters, will satisfy the entire mandala. Fourth, the practitioners are pleased by the enjoyable qualities of food and drink. The tsok substances we're enjoying include meat (representing skillful means) and drink such as wine (representing wisdom). Fifth, the remainder offering pleases the invited guests, the outer and inner local protectors who

have taken a vow to protect the Dharma. Sixth, the singing of the Vajra Song pleases the dakinis of the 21 and 32 sacred places.

This body of ours is actually the mandala of deities. According to the Vajrayana view, all phenomena are the deity. Countless dakinis already exist in our own bodies. When scientists look into the body with their powerful microscopes, they see innumerable tiny bugs. Tantric practitioners see immeasurable deities and dakinis. We are feeding all of these deities with the inexhaustible wisdom nectar of the symbolic tsok substances. We can actually satisfy all deities with these physical bodies of ours. That's an incredibly powerful practice. Understanding that nature, integrated with knowledge, faith, and devotion, merges all wisdom energies, mingling them in oneness. It becomes really powerful. That's what we've just done here.

Also, in the West with its material knowledge and power, we can catch our Lord Protector, Kyabjé Dungsé Rinpoché's vajra speech on tape so it's available for us to hear all the time. With the presence of Rinpoché's actual voice, it becomes even more powerful. Thank you for doing tsok together. Now we can eat and enjoy, having the total experience of these six different satisfactions.

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