

Vajrasattva Nay-Dren Ceremony

EXPLANATION BY LAMA THARCHIN RINPOCHE

The name of the ceremony that we are doing is “nay-dren” in Tibetan, which means “to draw out of a certain place.” What this implies is that we are drawing an individual’s consciousness from an impure situation, which is the Wheel of Life, to a pure environment, which is the Pureland. So this is what we mean when we say that we are drawing somebody’s consciousness from one place to another. A nay-dren is a ceremony performed for persons who have passed away. Traditionally, it is done when a person dies, again when they are cremated, and for each day up until 49 days after their death when a more elaborate ceremony is performed. They can even be done many years after a person has died since time only pertains to relative phenomena and is not absolute.

By doing these special ceremonies called nay-dren, we cultivate merit and wisdom for ourselves as well as benefiting the one who has died and all beings wandering in the bardo, the intermediate state between this life and the next. These ceremonies are methods for us to purify our obscurations and negative karma, and they are beneficial for us. This is true even if at this particular point in time the one who has died has no need for such a ceremony if they are already liberated from samsara. So while we do this ceremony thinking of the dead person, we also do these prayers for all beings who find themselves at this present time in between one lifetime and the next, and for all sentient beings without any exception including ourselves since we all face death at some point.

According to this sadhana, we visualize ourselves as Vajrasattva. This actually means realizing our own original nature to be exactly the same as the wisdom deity Vajrasattva. Practice and remain in this state with total confidence, having vajra pride. Visualizing this way, truly understand that your own original purity is the true manifestation of the wisdom deity form.

We begin this ceremony by drawing the consciousness of the dead person, wherever they may be at this particular point in time, here to the tsen-jang (“name plaque”), a painting with the name and picture of the person who has died as a representative or support of the dead person’s consciousness. Through visualization, their consciousness is brought to the tsen-jang from the six realms of samsara, the three realms of cyclic existence, the four types of birth, or wherever their consciousness lies within the confused realms of samsara. If they are in a pure realm, of course, their consciousness does not need to be brought back to this support, but for the rest of us who are wandering in samsara, we do need help. We then meditate that their consciousness dissolves into the tsen-jang. We are able to draw the person’s consciousness here through our connection with them and through our invocation of the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma teachings, and the Sangha, the community of Buddhist practitioners), the Three Roots (the Lamas, the Yidam Deities, and the Dakinis), and the power of both ultimate truth and relative truth, relying upon the interconnectedness of all phenomena.

The next part of the ceremony involves offering the Zhi-Jang Drak-Jang Torma or the gektor. This is a small red, cone-shaped ritual cake offered to the demons and obstructers who caused the obstacles leading to death, and to those who cause obstacles to purification after death. We first invite all of the obstructers for the dead person during their lifetime – the ones that caused obstacles to living, obstacles that prevented them from purifying negative karma, obstacles that

prevented them from attaining both ordinary and extraordinary accomplishments – and we offer this tormo to the embodiment of these obstacles, to those obstructers and negative influences. We say to them: “Today this person’s negative karma will be purified. Today they will attain both ordinary and extraordinary accomplishment, and so we give you this offering. Please do not disturb us.” In this way, we offer the tormo to these negative influences, asking them to leave this place and not disturb the ceremony. After offering the gektor, we visualize ourselves as Vajrasattva, with our right hand as the Five Buddha Families in union with the Five Dakini Families of our left hand. From there, light emanates and touches the dead person’s consciousness, purifying all defilements. Then we throw a mixture of mustard seed and sand and chant the mantra with the six syllables appended, chasing away the obstructers.

After this, during the course of the ceremony, there are many different features, such as the recitation of mantra, the performance of mudra (ritual hand gestures), and visualization through meditation. Through the force of our meditation, there are many ways in which we invoke the blessings and the power of the five male and the five female Buddhas in order that they may purify all of the negative karma and obscurations, the veils that might prevent the dead person from receiving the blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

From countless lifetimes until now, the karma of our afflictive emotions has collected in six impure seed syllables in our body, causing rebirth in the six realms of samsara. These seed syllables are like knots in our bodies’ subtle channels and they serve as the warehouse storing all of our negative karma for each of the six realms of existence. A white AH at our forehead arises due to pride and results in rebirth in the Deva Realm. A yellow SU at the throat is caused by jealousy and results in rebirth in the Demi-God Realm. A light blue NRI at our heart is due to desire and results in rebirth in the Human Realm. A dark red TRI at the navel is caused by ignorance and results in rebirth in the Animal Realm. An ashen grey PRE at our secret center is caused by greed and results in rebirth in the Preta Realm. A black DU at the feet is caused by anger and results in rebirth in the Hell Realm. Each and every one of us has this circumstance with these impure seed syllables present until we reach enlightenment. However, these impure seed syllables can be purified. We also have within our bodies the seed syllables of primordial wisdom that have the power to purify the samsaric seed syllables. At our forehead is a brilliant white OM that is the essence of the enlightened form of all Buddhas. At our throat is a brilliant red AH that is the essence of the enlightened speech of all Buddhas. At our heart is a brilliant blue HUNG that is the essence of the enlightened mind of all Buddhas. They are the cause for the awakening of our own wisdom inseparable from the enlightened form, speech and mind of all Buddhas. Here we visualize light emanating from our heart center, igniting the blazing wisdom fire at the dead person’s three wisdom places (at the crown of the head, the throat, and the heart center). From the three wisdom seed syllables at these three places, fire in the form of light blazes and totally incinerates the six seed syllables that are the cause of their rebirth in samsara.

Completely incinerated by this wisdom fire, the six samsaric seed syllables are purified through this meditation. The essence of purified consciousness (dang-ma) is in the form of the blue seed syllable HUNG, which is the clarity of wisdom mind. Actually, when we use the word “consciousness”, it just means our ordinary state of mind. But once we have performed this purification of the six impure seed syllables, what is it that is left? While in an impure state we are ordinary beings, once this purification has taken place, what remains is enlightened mind. This syllable HUNG, which is the mind of the visualized dead person, then instantly becomes Vajrasattva, who represents the indestructible or vajra essence of all Buddhas. In this way, the dead person has transformed from their ordinary state into the enlightened state of Vajrasattva. Then from one’s own heart center as Vajrasattva emanates inconceivable lights to the Buddhas of the ten directions and the three times in the form of the Five Buddha Families. This light invites

them above the dead person who is visualized as Vajrasattva. These Buddhas are the Wang-Lha, the empowerment deities. They bestow empowerment on the dead person, pacifying the defilements of the five afflictive emotions and transforming the five aggregates into their nature of the Five Buddha Families. The nectar of the empowerment overflows from Vajrasattva's head. He wears the crown of the Five Buddha Families and the empowerment is stabilized.

You may wonder, who actually is this Buddha Vajrasattva? We say that Vajrasattva represents the changeless form of all Buddhas. However, when we consider it from our own perspective, we say that there are countless, innumerable Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who fill this world. Now, Vajrasattva is of course the body of ultimate enlightenment, the Dharmakaya, the immeasurably pure body of phenomena. He also represents the Sambhogakaya, the enlightened body of perfect rapture. But Vajrasattva represents the Nirmanakaya as well, all of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who fill this and all worlds. We say that all of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who are the manifest bodies of enlightenment, who actually appear before us, belong to the hundred families of enlightenment. Then if we consider the hundred families of enlightenment, comprised of the 42 peaceful and 58 wrathful deities, they can be grouped again into the Five Buddha Families. These in turn can be grouped into the single form of Vajrasattva. It is because Vajrasattva represents for us the essence of all forms of enlightenment, be it the ultimate body of enlightenment or any form of enlightened deity that appears in the world, that we do this particular ceremony of nay-dren based on the Buddha Vajrasattva.

The next part of the ceremony is called "showing the path." Up until this point, we imagine ourselves in the presence of the person who has died in the form of Vajrasattva. Then showing the path means to direct the person's consciousness to the eastern pureland, called the Truly Joyful Pureland (Ngönbar Gaway Shing). We make offerings of the burnt substances, transforming the wine and delicious foods into the nature of inexhaustible wisdom nectar. The manifest form is the inconceivable five desirable qualities that fill all space. We offer inconceivable kinds of beautiful form, the melodious sounds, the loveliest of scents, the most delicious tastes, and what is most pleasing to the touch – all pleasures of the phenomenal world. We imagine that these offerings are multiplied infinitely, becoming great clouds of offerings, like those offered by the Ever-Excellent Kuntuzangpo. The visualized person receives the offerings and their five senses are completely pleased and satisfied with the great exaltation and wisdom that is free from desire. We offer this person's body, speech, and mind to the mandala deities. Through this offering, the three realms of cyclic existence are liberated into great expansive shunyata (Great Emptiness). We can complete the two accumulations of merit and wisdom through such an offering.

By making this connection between the wisdom mandala and the dead person, from the heart centers of the wisdom deities, inconceivable compassion as rays of light in the form of hooks emanate to the dead person's consciousness, which is hooked by the rays of wisdom light. At this point in the ceremony, we perform a fire ritual to make these offerings.

We visualize the essential clarity of the dead person's consciousness, immaterial and insubstantial, in the form of a blue seed syllable HUNG, which exits from the person's crown aperture, shooting directly to Vajrasattva's Pureland (Ngönbar Gaway Shing). It shoots like an arrow to Vajrasattva's heart, mixing inseparably with the wisdom deity, just like water poured into water. At this time, we burn the dead person's tsen-jang. On top of the ash we visualize a moon disc and seed syllable AH that emanates light, which symbolizes the ultimate true nature of wisdom, the source of blessings. This light, the true nature of wisdom, purifies the habitual defilements of the dead person's body, represented by the ashes. Then we recite the Hundred Syllable Mantra. While performing this fire ritual, we imagine that the place where we have made the fire is the Dharmadhatu, the immeasurably pure space of phenomena. The wood is the ego

self-grasping of the five aggregates. The fire that burns away this clinging to the self is the fire of transcendent knowledge or wisdom (sherab). We imagine that within this fire we burn away all of the past dualistic habits and negative emotions of the person who has passed away, leaving no trace whatsoever. We imagine that what is being burned and what is burning are both effortlessly part of the same enlightenment. They partake of the same nature of effortless, spontaneously present enlightenment. Then when we are gazing at the fire witnessing this process, we imagine that we are in the presence of self-appearing wisdom. At this time we place the tsen-jang in the fire as well. This accomplishes whatever the person could have wished for himself or herself. It is perfect and complete enlightenment, accomplishing the benefit for oneself. Then those who have become completely enlightened fill this world with countless numbers of emanations with the sole purpose of benefiting sentient beings, accomplishing the benefit for others.

What I have been describing relates to the relative visualization. Ultimately, there is nothing to burn, with no effort to be made, because we are all perfectly and naturally Buddha from the beginningless beginning. Effortless, spontaneous Dharmakaya awareness is attained.

If this ceremony is being done at the time of cremation, it is at this time that we actually place the body into the oven to be burned. In that case, it is unnecessary to also burn a tsen-jang since it is merely representing the body. If we continue to practice the nay-dren, then each day we offer the food and drink into a fire pit, visualizing the immeasurable offerings. We keep the tsen-jang on the table with the offerings, but we do not burn it until the 49th day. We also place into the fire something that represents the elements of the person's body at the same time that we offer other types of support. For instance, after the body is cremated, we can make sa-tsa's in the form of small stupas out of the person's ashes and use them as a support for the offering. The tsa-tsa's represent the enlightened mind of the Buddha. When the Buddha passed into mahaparinirvana, he left relics from his enlightened form following his cremation. These relics were divided into eight different parts, and in eight different locations stupas were made to contain these relics of the Buddha. The sa-tsa's we make from the ashes of the dead person are in the form of one of those stupas. After the ceremony, the sa-tsa's can be placed in very holy places or in bodies of water such as a lake, an ocean, or a river. In this way, they go to the land of the nagas, the water beings, and become a support for their offerings. This is a very great form of merit. This is what can be done with the remains of people after they have been cremated. At the time of the nay-dren, we can also make a small stupa out of tsampa and butter, mixing a little of the person's ashes or the ashes from the burnt tsen-jang.

This completes the nay-dren aspect of the ceremony. After this, we finish with the conclusion of the Vajrasattva sadhana. Sometimes there is a tsok included in the sadhana and sometimes there is not. Follow according to the instructions of the specific text.

It is a very sad circumstance when we come together to do the nay-dren ceremony, practicing for someone who has passed away. Maybe the person died at a young age, or maybe at an old age. From the point of view of the Dharma, however, there is really no difference. Impermanence is the nature of samsara. Change definitely occurs, whether we are young or old. No matter what, every single being has to travel this single path toward death. So it is very sad when we lose someone – sad for that person's suffering and sad for our loss. However, in another way, such circumstances can encourage our Dharma practice. If we all lived forever, that would be wonderful. But the reality is that we don't – not a single one of us will live forever. Someone else's death can serve to remind us of the impermanence of life and of its precious nature. Awareness of death can recharge our positive, enlightened energy. It acutely reminds us to prepare for death and not think only of this limited life. Who is actually prepared for death? Who knows how to die professionally? That person is the best practitioner. That is why we do practice.

It doesn't matter what religion we belong to. All beings' nature is exactly the same. Dharma practice, or any religious practice, provides a guide to do positive things. The result of those positive actions is what we take to our next life. Besides that, we cannot take anything. The death of someone we love is a potent reminder of this, so if we use the circumstances well, then their death becomes meaningful. Bodhisattvas can take any form – they can take a life that appears pleasurable or they can take a life that demonstrates suffering. In this way, they show to us, “Hurry up! Don't waste your time!”

Without this awareness, we just continue to cycle within our usual unending confusion. We have to reach ultimate realization, awakening into the state of Vajrasattva's enlightened mind. The result of practicing Dharma is that there is no reason to be sad, even under such difficult circumstances. Dharma can take us beyond ordinary pleasure and suffering to the unchanging state of Great Exaltation. This state is beyond the ordinary perception that someone is alive or that someone has died. Of course, on a relative level we do experience that someone has died and that there is a pureland to journey to, but on an ultimate level, we realize that neither of these truly exist. It is for both of these reasons that we do this practice.

This nay-dren is related specifically to Vajrasattva. Many different types of nay-dren exist according to many different traditions. However, the essence is always the same because all wisdom deities are of the exact same essential nature. They are simply wisdom display. Wisdom manifests in innumerable forms according to sentient beings' capacity and karma. The form may be different, the name or the tradition may appear different, but the essence is exactly the same. It is exactly the same as our own essential nature.

This explanation was taken from teachings given by Lama Tharchin Rinpoche on 12 June 2000, on the 49th day of his nephew Kalsang Norbu's death, at Pema Ösel Ling, with oral translation by Ngawang Zangpo, and from Lama Tharchin Rinpoche's additional instruction (pd).