

# Divine Visions at the Last Breaths: A Creative Teaching on Dying in Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's Great Perfection Anthology

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The most stunning Buddhist teachings on death and intermediate processes (*bar do*) were produced in the Tibetan Great Perfection (*rDzogs chen*) tradition. Especially the Seminal Heart (*sNying thig*) strand contains a marked emphasis on death, as the authors of the tradition creatively elaborated on the Indian Buddhist bardo (*antarabhāva*) theory over several centuries. By the 14th century, the descriptions of death and post-death bardos had become relatively standard with detailed accounts of the elemental dissolution at death and the full-blown manifestation of the peaceful and wrathful deities in the bardo of *dharmatā* (reality-as-it-is). However, despite the systematization of the bardo teachings in the 14th century, the creativity of the earlier centuries was still moistening the ground of literary production at this time. A testimony of this is Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's *Oral Instructions on the Five Rounds* (*Khug pa lnga'i gdams ngag*),<sup>1</sup> a distinctive text on the dying process that mingles the luminous wisdom (*ye shes*) of the deities with the karmic aspects of the elemental dissolution occurring in the last five rounds of breathing. I shall first discuss the general landscape of death-related literature in Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's *rDzogs chen* anthology, and then focus on the teaching of the last five rounds of breathing, followed by a translation of *The Oral Instructions on the Five Rounds*.

## *Teachings on Death and Bardos in rGod ldem's Anthology*

*The Oral Instructions on the Five Rounds* is contained in Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's Great Perfection anthology, *The Unimpeded Realization of Samantabhadra* (*Kun tu bzang po'i dgongs pa zang thal*) revealed in 1366. The anthology's texts on death and bardos present a variety of

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<sup>1</sup> *Khug pa lnga'i gdams ngag*, in *The Unimpeded Realization* (abbreviated from here on as UR) III:541-548.

approaches on the topic. Some texts contain relatively standard descriptions, while others, such as *The Five Rounds*, are dominated by heterodox explanations on the dying process that are unique to the anthology and more central in the given text than the classic presentation on the death process found for example in Klong chen pa's *Treasury of Words and Meanings* (*Tshig don mdzod*) or Karma gling pa's *Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate Process* (*Bar do thos grol*).

The classic presentation refers to the unfolding events in the well-known triad of death-related bardos. (1) In the bardo of the moment of death (*chi kha'i bar do*), the elements (*bhūta*, 'byung ba), subtle winds (*prāṇa*, *rlung*), and psycho-physical components (*skandha*, *phung po*) dissolve, from coarse to increasingly subtle, culminating in the manifestation of the most subtle awareness, the clear light of death. Recognizing the clear light of death as one's own essence results in enlightenment. (2) In the bardo of *dharmatā* (*chos nyid bar do*), the dying person perceives gnostic visions of rainbow lights and deities, which result in enlightenment upon recognition. (3) Those who did not recognize wander into the bardo of becoming (*srid pa'i bar do*) which entails chaotic, karmic visions and the process of approaching rebirth.<sup>2</sup>

Death and bardos are discussed quite frequently in *The Unimpeded Realization*, as the anthology contains four texts that focus on the topic exclusively<sup>3</sup> and 22 texts that examine it among other subjects.

Death appears across many genres of literature, for example eleven of these texts that discuss death are tantras,<sup>4</sup> two are empowerment

<sup>2</sup> See translations of the *Bar do thos grol* (Dorje, 2007, Thurman, 1993 and Trungpa and Fremantle, 1988)

<sup>3</sup> *The Pith Instruction Advice on the Five Rounds* (*Man ngag khug pa lnga'i gdams pa*), UR III: 533-540, *Oral Instructions on the Five Rounds: Pith Instructions of the Great Perfection Seminal Heart* (*rDzogs pa chen po snying tig gi man ngag khug pa lnga'i gdams ngag*), UR III:541-548 (translated below), *The Lamp of the Clear Light of Bardo* (*Bar do 'od gsal sgron ma*), UR III:549-554, and *The Tantra on the Self-Display of the Bardo from the Unimpeded Realization of Samantabhadra* (*Kun tu bzang po'i dgong pa zang thal gyi bar do rang snang gi rgyud*), UR III:565-598.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to what was mentioned above, these passages from tantras in *The Unimpeded Realization* discuss death and bardos: *The Tantra of the Great Intrinsic Buddha* (*Sangs rgyas rang chas chen po'i rgyud*), UR III:315-318, *The Tantra of the Self-Arisen Primordial Wisdom of the Exceedingly Secret Unsurpassed Great Perfection* (*Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po ye shes rang shar gyi rgyud*), UR III:341-343, *The Tantra of the Intrinsic Clarity of Awareness's Primordial Wisdom from the Exceedingly Secret Unsurpassed Great Perfection* (*Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po rig pa ye shes rang gsal ba'i rgyud*), UR III:397-407, *Supplementary cycles: The Teaching on the Essence and Expanse which are the Root of the Lamps of the Unimpeded Realization: Also Entitled The Root Tantra of the Unimpeded Realization* (*Kha skong skor: dgongs pa zang thal gyi sgron ma'i rtsa ba ngo bo dang dbyings bstan pa: dgongs pa zang thal rtsa ba'i*

texts,<sup>5</sup> and in addition we have one narrative text,<sup>6</sup> one text from the Liberation Through Wearing cycle,<sup>7</sup> and one text from each of the Oral Transmission (*snyan brgyud*) cycles attributed to Padmasambhava,<sup>8</sup> Vairocana,<sup>9</sup> and Vimalamitra.<sup>10</sup> *The Oral Transmission of Vimalamitra* outlines the classic presentation of the dying process and post-death bardos.<sup>11</sup> In addition, seven texts of the anthology discuss the post-death bardos similarly to the classic presentation involving the bardo of *dharmatā* and bardo of becoming, although there is much internal variation in these texts. For example, *The Tantra of the Quintessential Realization of the Pith Instructions Taught by Vajrasattva* describes the bardo deities in detail,<sup>12</sup> while many of the texts just refer to the visions of deities in passing.

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*rgyud kyang zer*), UR III:467-473, *The Tantra of the Self-Arisen Realization of the Buddha Vajrasattva from the Exceedingly Secret Unsurpassed Great Perfection* (Yang gsang bla na med pa'i rdzogs pa chen po sangs rgyas rdo rje sems dpa'i dgongs pa rang shar gyi rgyud), UR III:486-492, *The Tantra of the Quintessential Realization of the Pith Instructions taught by Vajrasattva: the Oral Transmission Cycle* (Man ngag snying gi dgongs pa'i rgyud rdo rje sems dpas gsungs pa: snyan brgyud skor), UR IV:17-25, *The Tantra of Becoming a Buddha by merely Seeing, Hearing, Wearing, or Praying to this Great Tantra* (rGyud chen mthong ba dang thos pa dang btags pa dang smon lam btob pa tsam gyis sangs rgyas pa'i rgyud), UR IV:147-154, *The Root Tantra of the Self-Emergent and Self-Arisen* (Rang byung rang shar rtsa ba'i rgyud), UR V:125-127, and *The Tantra of Vajrasattva that Liberates All Beings* (Kun grol rdo rje sems dpa'i rgyud), UR V:146-147.

<sup>5</sup> *The Empowerment of the Gnostic Crown Ablution* (Ye shes spyi blugs kyi dbang), UR II:69-71 and *The Commentary on the Empowerment to Awareness Creativity* (Rig pa rtsal gyi dbang gi 'grel pa), UR II:321-322.

<sup>6</sup> *The Treasury of Precious Gems Eradicating Obstructions: The Dialogues of Tsogyel* (Gegs sel nor bu rin po che'i mdzod: mtsho rgyal zhus lan), UR V:286-291.

<sup>7</sup> *The First, Middle, and Third Testaments of the Buddha* (Sangs rgyas kyi 'das rjes dang po bar pa gsum pa rnams), UR II:196, 199.

<sup>8</sup> *The Second Root Pith Instruction on the Precious Oral Transmission on the Authentic Meaning* (Yang dag don gyi snyan brgyud rin po che rtsa ba'i man ngag gnyis pa), UR II:407-420.

<sup>9</sup> *The Exceedingly Secret, Unsurpassed Later Oral Transmission of Vairocana* (Yang gsang bla na med pa bai ro tsa na'i snyan brgyud phyi ma), UR II:551-552.

<sup>10</sup> *Intrinsically Clear Primordial Wisdom - A Commentary on the Exceedingly Secret Unsurpassed Great Perfection of the Great Oral Transmission of Vimalamitra Transmitted to the King* (Bi ma mi tra'i snyan brgyud chen mo rgyal po la gdams pa yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po'i 'grel pa ye shes rang gsal), UR IV:351-381.

<sup>11</sup> *The Oral Transmission of Vimalamitra*, although presented as part of rGod ldem's revelation, is almost identical to a 12th century composition, *Rdzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, authored Nyi ma 'bum (1158-1213). Klong chen pa also used this text as a template to compose his *Treasury of Words and Meanings* (*Tshig don mdzod*). For a translation of *The Oral Transmission of Vimalamitra*, see Smith, 2016, and for a study of *Rdzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, see Yeshe, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> *Man ngag snying gi dgongs pa'i rgyud rdo rje sems dpas gsungs pa*, UR IV:17-21.

However, most of the texts do not follow the classic presentation of the post-death bardos that contains both the wisdom bardo of *dharmatā* and the karmic bardo of becoming but focus only on a particular bardo state or present an altogether different view. For example, *The First, Middle and Third Testaments of the Buddha* discuss how practicing direct transcendence enables one to see the visions of wisdom in the bardo of *dharmatā* and attain enlightenment.<sup>13</sup> *The Tantra of the Self-Arisen Primordial Wisdom of the Exceedingly Secret Unsurpassed Great Perfection* describes only the *dharmatā* visions of lights, sounds and rays,<sup>14</sup> and three texts discuss only the bardo of becoming.

In addition, *The Introduction to the Five Intermediate States* presents a discussion on the five bardos: the bardo of natural abiding (i.e., this life), bardo of meditative absorption (*samādhi*, *ting nge 'dzin*), bardo of dreaming, bardo of birth and death, and bardo of becoming. The bardo of *dharmatā* is altogether missing from this presentation, although there is a mention of the arising of *dharmatā* after dying in the context of the bardo of birth and death, but this seems to refer to the clear light of death.<sup>15</sup> *The Tantra of the Intrinsic Clarity of Awareness's Primordial Wisdom* discusses only the bardo of *dharmatā* in its short bardo section, but contains the dualism of the wisdom and karmic lights common in the Tibetan bardo literature. The text relates that if one is afraid of the bright lights of *dharmatā*, they become the dim lights of the six realms.<sup>16</sup>

One of the unique bardo teachings in rGod ldem's anthology is contained in *The Later Oral Transmission of Vairocana*. This teaching, entitled *Wandering in the Eight Consecutive Cycles* (*'Khor lo brgyad la rim gyis 'grim pa*), presents a different conceptual framework to organize the bardos of the moment of death and *dharmatā*. The eight cycles are listed as:

1. The cycle of earth: the body becomes heavy (occurs one day before dying).
2. The cycle of water: the external breath stops, one suffers from cold, and there is a visual appearance of blue.
3. The cycle of fire: one suffers from heat and there is a visual appearance of red.
4. The cycle of air: one is blown helplessly by the wind of karma and perceives green appearances.

<sup>13</sup> *Sangs rgyas kyi 'das rjes dang po bar pa gsum pa rnams*, UR III:194-196.

<sup>14</sup> *Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po ye shes rang shar gyi rgyud*, UR III:347-350.

<sup>15</sup> *Bar do lnga'i ngo sprod*, UR V:411.

<sup>16</sup> *Yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po rig pa ye shes rang gsal ba'i rgyud*, UR III:402.

5. The cycle of appearances: one's cognition is blissful and there is an appearance like daybreak.
6. The cycle of touching appearances: one becomes nervous, thinks that one is dead and suffers, and there is an appearance like dusk.
7. The cycle of increasing appearances: one's cognition becomes clear and blissful and there is an appearance like the rising sun.
8. The cycle of luminous deities: ordinary people with bad karma perceive the Lord of Death and masses of weapons, while yogis perceive luminous appearances and deities.

The explanations above apply mostly to ordinary people who have obscurations and negative karma. It is said that a yogi will remain in a non-conceptual state up to the seventh cycle, during which he experiences non-conceptual bliss. In the eighth cycle, he perceives all appearances as unconstrained light, sees visions of the peaceful and wrathful deities, and hears the intrinsic sound of *dharmatā* roaring like a thousand dragons.<sup>17</sup>

Even though the eight cycles employ different concepts, they nevertheless present a very similar progression to the classical bardo doctrine, as found for example in Karma gling pa's *Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate Process*. It is curious, however, that most of the elemental cycles occur after breathing stops and the person is dead, and only the cycle of earth matches the classical presentation of the dissolution of the elements. It is also unusual that one is blown by the wind of karma in the cycle of air before the luminosity of death manifests, because this is regularly a feature associated with the bardo of becoming (*srid pa bar do*).

This brief overview on the death-related literature in rGod ldem's anthology illustrates the variety of texts and approaches on the topic. Death and bardos appear in tantras, oral transmissions, empowerment texts, a scholastic text, a narrative, and a liberation through wearing text. They are discussed as parallel with direct transcendence meditation and in connection with the rubric of the five bardos that span across all existence. Some texts follow the classic presentation, although from different angles and focusing on different parts of the process, while others, such as wandering in the eight cycles, present unique frameworks and concepts to describe the formidable transition to either enlightenment or the next life.

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<sup>17</sup> *The Exceedingly Secret, Unsurpassed Later Oral Transmission of Vairocana (Yang gsang bla na med pa bai ro tsa na'i snyan brgyud phyi ma)*, UIR II:557-560.

*The Five Rounds*

The most distinctive bardo teachings in the anthology are contained in three texts that discuss the dying person's last five rounds of breath. Two of these focus exclusively on the five rounds, namely, *The Oral Instructions on the Five Rounds: Pith Instructions of the Great Perfection Seminal Heart* (translated below) and *The Pith Instruction Advice on the Five Rounds*. These two texts are unique in their presentation of the bardo of the moment of death because they mingle the karmic aspects of the elemental dissolution process with the wisdom aspects of the lights and deities usually associated with the bardo of *dharmatā*.

The five rounds of breathing (*khug pa lnga*) are the dying person's last four rounds of exhalation and inhalation, and the fifth one is a long exhalation. During these five rounds, the five elements and five sensory faculties dissolve one by one, but surprisingly, it is said that a practitioner who obtained the pith instructions on the five rounds will perceive the five lights of wisdom during these five rounds. If he recognizes the lights as his own radiance, he will become enlightened as one of the five Buddhas without having to go to the post-death bardos. For example, when the wind element and auditory consciousness dissolve, the yogi perceives the green light of accomplishing wisdom, and if he recognizes it, he attains enlightenment as the Buddha Amoghasiddhi.<sup>18</sup> *The Pith Instruction Advice on the Five Rounds* describes the process:

During each round of respiration, one element escapes, one sensory faculty ceases, and one wisdom dawns. Then, the vibrant clear energy and the sediment of the elements are differentiated. The sediment remains in the material body, and the five clear vibrant energies, the five-colored lights of the self-arisen wisdom of awareness manifest in the space of the empty, clear *dharmatā*. By recognizing them by yourself as the supreme clear light, you will become enlightened in the state of the five families of the Blissful Ones (*sugata*). At that point, the six higher knowledges (*abhijñā*, *mngon shes*) manifest naturally. The higher knowledge of hearing arises, so you will hear the unwavering speech of the *dharmakāya* above, the echo-like speech of the *sambhogakāya* at your level, and the various sounds of the *nirmāṇakāya* below.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Man ngag khug pa lnga'i gdams pa*, UR III:534-535, and *Oral Instructions on the Five Rounds: Pith Instructions of the Great Perfection Seminal Heart* (*rDzogs pa chen po snying tig gi man ngag khug pa lnga'i gdams ngag*), UR III:541-543.

<sup>19</sup> *Man ngag khug pa lnga'i gdams pa*, UR III:535: *dbugs khug pa re la 'byung ba re 'bros: dbang po re 'gag: ye shes re 'char ro: de nas 'byung ba dangs snyig 'byed: snyigs ma phung por lus: dangs ma lnga rang byung rig pa'i ye shes kyi 'od kha dog lnga chos nyid stong*

All these aspects—the five lights of wisdom, the space of *dharmatā*, and the six higher knowledges—are usually associated with the bardo of *dharmatā*, but here they manifest in the bardo of the moment of death during the last five rounds of breathing.

In addition to the two main texts on the five rounds, rGod ldem's anthology contains a third text, *The Tantra of Becoming a Buddha by merely Seeing, Hearing, Wearing, or Praying to This Great Tantra*, that has a short, but very interesting passage on the five rounds. This passage focuses on the subtle connection between the heart, eyes, and the visionary field of perception or expanse (*dbyings*). The Buddhas travel via the subtle channel from the heart to the eyes to be perceived by the dying person during the five rounds, and he should direct his focus on the process. The passage reads:

The individuals of average diligence will get enlightened when the breath is about to be severed. At present, you should practice continuously. Inside your heart, in the body of five lights, there reside five and three Buddha bodies as the five bodies of wisdom. Thus, when the breath is about to be severed, their appearances come out from your eyes and manifest as the radiance of the five wisdom lights in the space in front of you during the five rounds of breath. In the first round of breath, the blue light will manifest. The white light will manifest during the second, yellow during the third, red during the fourth, and green during the fifth round. At that point, from the arising of the blue light until the green one arises, focus the awareness on the eyes and the eyes on the lights. Let be in the matrix of unwavering *dharmatā* without getting distracted even for a moment. Thus, the mental consciousness is subsumed in the blue light, visual consciousness in the white light, olfactory consciousness in the yellow light, gustatory consciousness in the red light, and auditory consciousness in the green light. This is also called the secret path of Vajrasattva from the expanse of reality (*dharmadhātu*) of Akaniṣṭhā as well as the continuous rope of compassion. It resembles an extended rope of the five lights twisted together and piercing your eyes.

By focusing your eyes and awareness on this rope one-pointedly without distractions, you will go to the expanse of reality on the third instant. The blue light dissolves to Vairocana's enlightened mind at the

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*gsal gyi nam mkha' la 'char ro: de rang gis mchog gi 'od gsal du ngo shes pas rang rigs lnga'i bde bar gshegs pa'i ngang du sangs rgya'o: de'i dus su mngon par shes pa drug rang bzhiñ gyis 'char ro: snyan gyi mngon par shes pa 'char pas: yar chos sku'i gsung mi g.yo bar yod pa yang gsan: thad kar longs sku'i gsung brag ca lta bu yang gsan: mar sprul sku'i gsung sgra sna tshogs yod pa yang gsan no:*

heart, white to Vajrasattva's heart, yellow to Ratnasambhava's heart, red to Amitabha's heart, green to Amogasiddhi's heart, and you will attain Buddhahood. The enlightened mind of the five Buddhas is liberated as the five wisdoms. The five wisdoms are liberated as Samantabhadra in union with Samantabhadri, and they abide in the state of the three bodies. Therefore, by focusing the awareness on the eyes and the eyes in the expanse, you will attain the five wisdoms and go to the expanse of reality.<sup>20</sup>

In the Seminal Heart theory of the subtle body, the channel connecting the heart to the eyes is known as the hollow crystal tube (*shel gyi sbu gu can*) or the golden *kati* channel (*ka ti gser gyi rtsa*). In the practice of direct transcendence (*thod rgal*), the Buddhas travel via this channel from the palace of the exalted mind (*tsitta*) at the heart to the eyes and out into the expanse (*dbyings*) to be perceived in the visionary encounter with one's own essence. It is interesting that during the five rounds, the visions of the Buddhas also travel via this same passage into the field of vision. This is because the dying person is still inhabiting his body. In contrast, in the classical presentation of the bardos, the visions of the Buddha deities are perceived in the bardo of *dharmatā*, at which point the dying person no longer inhabits his body.

<sup>20</sup> *rGyud chen mthong ba dang thos pa dang btags pa dang smon lam btab pa tsam gyis sangs rgyas pa'i rgyud*, UR IV:133-135: gang zag brtson 'grus 'bring du gyur ba rnams dbugs ma chad pa la sangs rgya'o: da lta nyams len rgyun mi 'chad du byas pas: dbugs ma chad tsam la rang gi snying gi nang na ye shes 'od lnga'i lus su sangs rgyas sku lnga sku gsum ye shes lnga'i sku ru bzhugs pas: de'i snang ba rang gi mig gi nang nas thon te: dbugs khug pa lnga la mdun gyi nam mkha' la ye shes 'od lnga'i gdangs su 'char ro: de yang dbugs khug pa dang po la 'od mthing ga 'char: gnyis pa la dkar po: gsum pa la gser po: bzhi pa la dmar po: lnga pa la ljang gu 'char ro: de'i tshe 'od mthing ga shar nas ljang gu ma shar gi bar: rig pa mig la gtad: mig 'od la gtad: chos nyid g.yo ba med pa ma'i klong du skad cig kyang ma yengs bar bzhag pas yid kyi rnam par shes pa 'od mthing ga la 'du: mig gi rnam par shes pa 'od dkar po la 'du: sna'i rnam par shes pa 'od gser po la 'du: lce'i rnam par shes pa 'od dmar po la 'du: rna'i rnam par shes pa 'od ljang gu la 'dus pa dang: 'og min chos kyi dbyings nas rdo rje sems dpa'i gsang lam zhes kyang bya: thugs rje rgyun gyi thag pa zhes kyang bya ba kha dog dkar po'am: dmar po'am: 'od lnga ga sgril ma thag pa brkyang pa'am dkris pa lta bu gcig rang gi mig la zug yod: de la 'dun pa drag pos skad cig kyang ma yengs par mig dang rig pa rtse gcig gtad pas skad cig ma gsum la chos kyi dbyings su gshegs te: 'od mthing ga rnam par snang mdzad la thim ste grol: dkar po rdo rje sems dpa'i thugs kar thim ste grol: ser po rin chen 'byung ldan gyi thugs kar thim ste grol: dmar po snang ba mtha' yas kyi thugs kar thim ste grol: ljang gu don yod grub pa'i thugs kar thim ste grol: rigs lnga'i thugs ye shes lnga ru grol: ye shes lnga kun bzang yab yum du grol: kun bzang yab yum sku gsum gyi ngang la bzhugs so: de ltar rig pa mig la gtad: mig dbyings la gtad pas ye shes lnga dang bcas te chos kyi dbyings su gshegs so:



All the psycho-physical and elemental energies (*rlung*) have dissolved into their subtle essences and gathered at the heart in the indestructible seminal nucleus (*mi shig pa'i thig le*), which has left the body. Free from the coarse layers of corporeality and ordinary mind, the dying person perceives his subtlest, enlightened essence in the form of the divine *dharmatā* visions.

During the five rounds, the Buddha deities must travel via the subtle *kati* channel, as the dying person is not free from the body yet. This connects the teaching of the five rounds intimately with direct transcendence and emphasizes its meditative character. Even if the luminous visions arise initially to an ordinary person, they will not progress automatically but require familiarization through visionary practice in this life. As the text explains, the practitioner must “let be in the matrix of unwavering *dharmatā* without getting distracted even for a moment,” as a result of which the mental and sensory consciousnesses dissolve in the five lights and the secret path of Vajrasattva manifests in the form of the luminous rainbow rope. Then, the dying person has to apply his meditative abilities again and focus on the luminous rope without distractions, which causes the lights to dissolve at the hearts of the five Buddhas.

However, a powerful element of compassion or mercy is there, as the splendid rainbow lights that manifest during the five rounds and coil together like a rope are called the continuous rope of compassion (*thugs rje rgyun gyi thag pa*). It is the compassion of Vajrasattva extending from Akaniṣṭhā and welcoming the dying person home to his inherently awakened nature. It is a reflection of the Buddhist idea that the compassion of the Buddhas is always there to receive practitioners if they can open themselves to it. The continuous rope of compassion is also called the secret path of Vajrasattva (*rdo rje sems dpa'i gsang lam*) because it is a subtle, esoteric passage to Akaniṣṭhā manifesting upon cultivating the abilities of subtle vision.

Connecting the manifestation of the wisdom lights of the bardo of *dharmatā* to the dissolution of the elements and sensory consciousnesses that are factors of karmic existence in *saṃsāra* not only emphasizes the connection of the five rounds with direct transcendence, but also curiously mingles the karmic and wisdom aspects of the dying process that in the classic presentation manifest at different times. Notably, it underlines the inherent divinity of the karmic aspects: the five elements in their purified form are the five female Buddhas, the five aggregates of psychophysical being (*skandha*) are the five Buddhas, and the sensory consciousnesses are the Bodhisattvas. From the point of view of ultimate reality, there is no

separation of pure and impure, but *saṃsāra* is *nirvāṇa*, living beings are Buddhas, and the world is a pure land. The ultimate unity of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* both in tantric theory and Middle Way philosophy renders credibility to the merging of the karmic and wisdom aspects in the teaching of the five rounds.

Even though the teaching of the five rounds accords with tantric theory, it is markedly different from the classical presentation of the process of death. These differences reflect the creativity in yogic techniques and literary production in 14<sup>th</sup> century Tibet. The incredible transformations and innovations of the earlier centuries of Tibetan Renaissance were still influencing the religious arena and its protagonists. The Buddhist teachings on death and bardo went through extensive evolution and reworking during the Renaissance. Even though these developments were consolidated in the works of Klong chen pa, Karma gling pa, and others, the teaching of the five rounds illustrates the fluid way the bardo teachings were understood among at least some of the yogic practitioners and authors of the Seminal Heart.

The unique character of the five rounds also speaks for the freedom of expression exercised by the non-scholastically oriented authors of *The Unimpeded Realization* not bound by the aim to compose a strictly orthodox, philosophical treatise like Klong chen pa's *Treasury of Words and Meanings*. Furthermore, this freedom of expression evident in the texts on the five rounds suggests that rGod ldem recycled or rewrote more archaic Seminal Heart materials that did not make it to the classical synthesis of writers like Klong chen pa, because they presented philosophical ideas and practices that were too creative or divergent. The five rounds also illustrate the general disposition of *The Unimpeded Realization*, which is not an airtight, systematic composition intended to convince scholastics, but has a sprawling, heterodox character designed to inspire practitioners with the unimaginable power and possibilities of spiritual practice.

*Oral Instructions on the Five Rounds:**Pith Instructions of the Great Perfection Seminal Heart -*

Translation of *rDzogs pa chen po snying tig gi man ngag khug pa lnga'i gdams ngag*, in *The Unimpeded Realization of Samantabhadra* (*Kun tu bzang po'i dgongs pa zang thal*, III:541-548)<sup>21</sup>

Homage to the Glorious Vajrasattva. I will teach the pith instructions on the five rounds to attain enlightenment before the breath is severed. To expand on that, having previously relied on the analogies, meanings, and signs, the lama introduces the meaning of the five bodies and five types of wisdom that abides within yourself as your natural possession, and the yogi practices it. Upon that, there is the teaching of the pith instructions on the five rounds.

Vajrasattva said: "If you know the meaning of the five rounds, you will attain enlightenment before you stop breathing." This means that when a living being is about to stop breathing but matter and awareness have not yet separated and the external breath is not cut off, he will breathe four rounds of breathing and the fifth one is an extended exhalation. These inhalations and exhalations last for a short while. If you recognize this, you will get enlightened before the breath is severed.

Vajrasattva also said: "O, Lord of Secrets, when you are dying but have not stopped breathing yet, the mirage-like enlightened bodies of wisdom dawn in the space of *dharmatā*'s self-display. It is enough just to recognize them."

These visions that appear are enumerated in terms of the five rounds as well as three sets and fifteen aspects. If you wonder what they are, the duration is the five rounds of breath, the radiance is the five-colored lights, and there are the five kinds of wisdom that realize the meaning, making a total of fifteen. The duration, or the five rounds of breathing, means that when the breathing is about to cease, it is impossible for the five-colored light of awareness not to appear for all living beings during these five rounds of breath. Thus, the measure of the duration is the five rounds of breath. However, the temporal measure is indefinite. For some living beings, it lasts for a very long time. Nevertheless, even though the temporal length of that duration is generally indefinite, predominantly, the duration of the manifestations in the five rounds of breath is considered to be intense.

Then, I will differentiate the five rounds in detail. A round of breath is when you breathe out with the sound *Ha* and breathe in with the sound *Hu*. Blue luminous radiance will manifest. You should vividly

<sup>21</sup> The pagination refers to the A' dzom edition. In the gNas chung edition, the text is in IV:383-392. For the Tibetan transliteration, see the appendix below.

realize the meaning of that very radiance to be the primordially pure wisdom of reality's expanse. This is counted as the first round of breath.

Again, as above you breathe a round of breath and white luminous radiance will manifest. You should instantly realize the meaning of the white radiance to be the primordially pure mirror-like wisdom. This is counted as the second round of breath.

Again, you breathe a round of breath and yellow luminous radiance will manifest. You should instantly realize the meaning of the yellow radiance to be the primordially pure wisdom of equality. This is counted as the third round of breath.

Again, you breathe a round of breath and red luminous radiance will manifest. You should instantly realize the meaning of the red radiance to be the primordially pure wisdom of discerning. This is counted as the fourth round of breath.

Again, you breathe out an extended breath with the sound *Ha* unable to breath in. Green luminous radiance will manifest. You should vividly realize the meaning of the green luminous radiance to be the primordially pure wisdom of accomplishing. This is counted as the fifth round of breath.

These are the four rounds of breath, and the fifth one is an extended exhalation. The five lights are comprised of the four colors and blue. Their meaning is the four wisdoms and the fifth is the wisdom of reality's expanse. The lama distinguishes these in detail to the individuals on the path. Just by being introduced to the levels of the five rounds and knowing them, you will get enlightened before the breath is severed.

Vajrasattva described this topic: "O, Lord of Secrets, when you die but the external breath is not yet severed, five-colored lights will manifest in the space in front of you. These five brilliant, beautiful lights will manifest to you with the clusters of five kinds of Buddha bodies filling their center. At that time, the five Buddha clusters that arise are the nature of wisdom of your own awareness that abides within you. By knowing it to be your own appearance, you will dissolve non-dually into the appearances of the five clusters and become enlightened. O, son of a noble family, there is nothing to meditate on beyond this topic. It is enough to recognize them to be your own appearances. This reality devoid of meditation manifests to all sentient beings unobstructedly before the external breath is severed. It is enough to recognize it."

To summarize the topic, I have explained above the progression of the moments when matter and awareness are about to separate, and breathing is about to stop but the external breath is not yet severed. During the duration of the five rounds which consist of the four rounds

and an extended exhalation before the external breath is cut off, it is impossible for the clusters of the enlightened bodies and *maṇḍalas* not to fully arise in front of all sentient beings within the luminous, five-colored radiance of their own awareness. When they arise, it is impossible not to recognize the intrinsic, five-colored luminosity of awareness as the nature of the five wisdoms due to the power of earlier practice. By apprehending them in this manner, the awareness will not proliferate or whirl elsewhere. Your own awareness is introduced as the *dharmatā*, so it fully dissolves in the matrix of the five-colored radiant light that arises within yourself together with the realization of unimpeded wisdom. When this occurs, it is impossible not to attain enlightenment. This is called attaining enlightenment before the breath is severed.

At that time, the view of deathless abiding reality will also support the yogi from behind, and the *maṇḍala* of the clear light of intrinsic radiance will meet him in the front. The realization of unimpeded wisdom will bridge the boundaries, and the mind that has no attachment to anything at all is produced. It is completely blended with the radiant light of awareness. It is intensely focused and becomes expansively vast.

At this point, an important key point is that you do not generate obstacles by lamenting about adverse conditions and so forth. You have not yet obtained the vajra-like meditative absorption (*samādhi*), the realization of the dynamism of *dharmatā* that is not destroyed by adverse conditions, so if you lament about adversities and so forth, the awareness will become confused from the depths to the surface. Thus, do not lament about conditions and so forth with respect to what is close to you or beyond you. Moreover, even though the yogis of superior realization are not tainted by this flaw, the *samādhi* and realization of pith instructions of the average people on the path can be robbed away and their one-pointed mind can be destroyed, so do not wail, lament, or the like. If you do, they will become obstacles on the path, so do not engage in them.

Regarding this process, those of superior faculties who practice this teaching will attain enlightenment without a remainder of their physical bodies. The average will realize the five rounds before the breath is severed and thus attain enlightenment. The inferior will attain enlightenment during the three moments. In this way, by knowing the meaning of the five rounds, those of average capabilities will have an unimpeded ascent to enlightenment without the bardo and attain Buddhahood before the breath is severed. Abandoning the body and enlightenment are simultaneous. It is like when a baby *garuda* extends his wings inside the egg, the external seal of the egg is broken, and the baby *garuda* flies in the sky. Similarly, when a person has trained in

many paths, he does not have to meditate for a long time. Now that he has encountered a lama who has the pith instructions and has faith in them, he will know the five rounds on the verge of matter and awareness separating and will attain enlightenment through the key points of the pith instructions.

Attaining enlightenment in this way entails that the result, the limitless pure lands of the three bodies will manifest and the condition of benefiting beings will naturally emerge. For example, it is like a precious wish-fulfilling jewel that has no basis for effort or conceptuality of thinking that there is a need for sublime necessities, but nevertheless all the necessities emerge spontaneously. Similarly, you will have all the great, spontaneously accomplished virtues of a Buddha without effort. That depends only on this path to enlightenment through the key points of the pith instructions. Therefore, protect these pith instructions like your eyes or heart! These words were spoken by the emanation body dGa' rab rDo rje.

This completes the handful of letters of the pith instructions that involve little effort but are very meaningful and enlighten before the breath severed.

Samaya, seal seal seal. Do not transgress the handful of letters of the treasure! This contains fine and small letters as if written with a thorn. Blessings to all.

*rDzogs pa chen po snying tig gi man ngag khug pa lnga'i  
gdams ngag bzhugs so:*

dpal rdo rje sems dpa' la phyag tshal lo: dbugs ma chad pa la sang rgya ba'i man ngag khug pa lnga bstan par bya ste: de yang sngon du dpe don rtags dang gsum la brten nas: sku lnga ye shes lnga'i don rang la rang chas su gnas pa de nyid bla mas ngo sprad de rnal 'byor pas nyams su blang ngo: de la khug pa lnga'i man ngag bstan pa ni: rdo rje sems dpa'i zhal nas: khug pa lnga'i don shes na: dbugs pa ma chad pa la sangs rgya'o gsungs so: de'i don sems can thams cad la dbugs sdud khar bem rig gnyis ma bral: phyi dbugs ma chad pa la dbugs khug pa bzhi: rkyang pa gcig dang lnga: phar 'gro tshur 'gro byed pa'i yun tsam gcig 'char ba'o: de ngo shes na dbugs ma chad pa la sangs rgya'o:

de yang rdo rje sems dpas gsungs pa: kye gsang ba'i bdag po rang nam 'chi ba'i dus su dbugs ma chad pa la chos nyid rang snang gi nam mkha' la ye shes sgyu ma lta bu'i [542] sku 'char ro: de ngo shes pas chog go: zhes gsungs so:

de ltar 'char ba de la khug pa lnga gsum bco lnga rtsi ste: gang zhe

na: yun dbugs khug pa lnga: gdangs 'od kha dog lnga: don rtogs pa'i  
 ye shes lnga ste bco lnga'o: yun dbugs khug pa lnga zhes bya ba ni:  
 dbugs sdud khar rig pa'i 'od kha dog lnga dbugs khug pa lnga'i yun  
 tsam gcig sems can thams cad la mi 'char mi srid pas: yun ring thung  
 gi tshad dbugs khug pa lnga: zhag gi tshad la nges pa med: sems can  
 'ga' zhig la ni yun ches shin tu ring ba 'ong bas na: spyir yun ring  
 thung la 'di kho na ltar nges pa med kyang: 'di ni yun khug pa lnga la  
 'char ba shas che ba dbang btsan du bzhag pa'o:  
 de la khug pa lnga bye brag tu phyes te bstan na: yun dbugs phar la  
 ha zer nas: phyir thon pa de tshur la hu zer nas nang du log pa'i bar  
 la dbugs khug pa gcig: gdangs 'od mthing ga 'char: don gdangs de  
 nyid ka dag chos kyi dbyings kyi ye shes su lhag gis rtogs pa de:  
 grangs dbugs khug pa [543] gcig go:  
 yang yun gong ltar du dbugs khug pa gcig: gdangs 'od dkar po 'char:  
 don gdangs dkar po de nyid ka dag me long lta bu'i ye shes su car  
 gyis rtogs pa de: grangs dbugs khug pa gnyis so:  
 yang yun dbugs khug pa gcig: gdangs 'od ser po 'char: don gdangs  
 ser po de ka dag mnyam pa nyid kyi ye shes su car gyis rtogs pa de:  
 grangs dbugs khug pa gsum mo:  
 yang yun dbugs khug pa gcig: gdangs 'od dmar po 'char: don gdangs  
 dmar po de nyid ka dag so sor rtog pa'i ye shes su car gyis rtogs pa  
 de: grangs dbugs khug pa bzhi'o:  
 yang dbugs phar la ha zer nas tshur sdud ma shes pa'i rkyang pa  
 gcig: gdang 'od ljang gu 'char: don gdangs 'od ljang gu de nyid ka  
 dag bya ba grub pa'i ye shes su lhangs kyi rtogs pa de: grangs dbugs  
 khug pa lnga'o:  
 de rnams ni dbugs khug pa bzhi: rkyang pa gcig dang lnga'o: 'od kha  
 dog bzhi: mthing kha gcig dang lnga: [544] don ye shes bzhi: chos kyi  
 dbyings kyi ye shes dang lnga zhes bya ste: de rnams ni gang zag  
 lam pa ba rnams la bla mas bye brag tu phye ste: khug pa lnga'i rim  
 pa ngo sprod pa tsam yin te: khug pa lnga shes na dbugs ma chad  
 par sangs rgya'o:  
 zhes pa'i don ni rdo rje sems dpas gsungs pa: kye gsang ba'i bdag po  
 rang 'chi ba'i tshe phyi'i dbugs ma chad pa la rang gi mdun gyi nam  
 mkhar 'od kha do lnga 'char ro: 'od lnga bkra yal le ba'i dkyil du:  
 sangs rgyas kyi sku tshom bu lnga ldan du khengs nas rang la 'char  
 ro: de'i tshe sangs rgyas kyi sku tshom bu lnga ldan du shar ba ste:  
 rang gi rig pa'i ye shes kyi rang bzhin rang la yod pa de: rang gi  
 snang ba yin par shes pas: rang tshom bu lnga'i snang ba la gnyis su  
 med par thim nas sangs rgya'o: rigs kyi bu don de lta bu las sgom du  
 med do: rang gi snang ba yin par ngo shes pas chog go: sgom med  
 kyi don de sems can thams cad la phyi dbugs ma chad pa la ma 'gags

par 'char ro: de ngo shes pas chog go: zhes rdo rje [545] sems dpas  
gsungs so:

de'i don hril gyis dril na: bem rig gnyis ma bral ba'i dbugs sdud khar:  
phyi dbugs ma chad pa la: yun ring thung gi tshad ni gong ltar du'o:  
dbugs khug pa bzhi rkyang pa gcig dang lnga'i yun tsam gcig la:  
rang gi mdun kyi nam mkha' la: rang gi rig pa'i gdangs 'od kha dog  
lnga'i klong du: sku tshom bu'i dkyil 'khor dang bcas pa mer gyis  
phyi dbugs ma chad pa la sems can thams cad la mi 'char mi srid do:  
de ltar shar ba la sngar nas nyams su blangs pa'i stobs kyis: rig pa'i  
rang 'od kha dog lnga po de nyid ye shes lnga'i rang bzhin du ngos  
tsir gyis mi zin mi srid do: de ltar zin pas rig pa gzhan du 'tshub pa  
dang 'phro rgyu med de: rang gi rig pa chos nyis du ngo sprad pas:  
ye shes zang thal gyi dgongs pa bcas te rang la shar ba'i gdangs 'od  
kha dog lnga'i klong du ltem gyis thim nas sangs mi rgya mi srid do:  
dbugs ma chad pa la sangs rgya ba zhes bya'o:

de'i dus su rnal 'byor pas kyang gnas lugs [546] 'chi rgyu med pa'i lta  
ba la rgyab brten: rang gdangs 'od gsal kyi dkyil 'khor gyis mdun  
bsus: ye shes zang thal gyi dgongs pas mtshams sbyar la: ci la yang  
chags pa med pa'i sems bskyed: rig pa'i gdangs 'od du hril gyis dril:  
cher gyis gtad: rgyangs kyi 'phangs la 'gro'o:

de'i dus su rkyen ngu 'bod la sogs pas bar mi bcad pa ni gnad che ste:  
da dung de'i dus su chos nyid kyi rtsal dgongs pa rkyen kyis mi shig  
pa'i rdo rje lta bu'i ting nge 'dzin ma thob pas ngu 'bod la sogs pa  
byas na rig pa gting thob nas 'chug nas phyi na yod pa dang rtsa na  
yod pa rnam kyis ngu 'bod la sogs pa mi bya'o: de yang rnal 'byor  
pa dgongs pa yang rab tu gyur pa rnam la de'i skyon gyis gos pa  
med kyang: gang zag lam pa blo 'bring man chad kyi dgongs pa  
dang ting nge 'dzin 'phro gcing: rtse gcig gi shes pa bshig pas: du co  
dang smre sngags la songs pa mi bya: byas na lam gyi gegs su 'gyur  
bas mi bya'o:

[547] de yang chos di'i lugs kyi dbang po rab phung po lhag ma med  
par sangs rgya'o: 'bring dbugs ma chad pa la khug pa lnga shes pas  
sangs rgya'o: tha ma ni skad cig ma gsum la sangs rgya'o: de ltar  
dbang po 'bring po rnam kyis khug pa lnga'i don shes pas: bar do  
med par yar gyi zang thal chen por sangs rgyas pas na: dbugs ma  
chad pa la sangs rgya ba yin te: lus bor ba dang sangs rgya ba dus  
mnyam mo: de yang khyung phrug sgo nga'i nang du gshog pa rgyas  
pas: phyi sgo nga'i rgya zhig pa dang: nang gi khyung phrug nam  
mkha' la 'phur 'gro ba dang 'dra'o: de bzhin du 'di ni lam mang po la  
sbyangs pa dang: yun ring du sgom mi dgos te: da lta bla ma man  
ngag can dang 'phrad de: man ngag la yid ches pas: bem rig 'bral  
khar khug pa lnga shes nas: man ngag can gnad kyis sangs rgya ba



yin no:

de ltar sangs rgya nas 'bras bu sku gsum gyi zhing khams dpag tu  
 med pa 'char: 'gro ba'i don ngang ngam shugs kyis 'byung ste: dper  
 na yid bzhin gyi [548] nor bu rin po che la dgos 'dod phun sum  
 tshogs pa dgos snyam pa'i rtog pa dang rtsol gzhi med kyang: dgos  
 'dod thams cad lhun grub tu 'byung ba dang 'dra ste: sangs rgyas kyi  
 yon tan thams cad rtsol ba med par lhun gyis grub pa'i che ba dang  
 ldan pa yin no: de ni man ngag can gnad kyis sangs rgya pa'i lam 'di  
 kho na la rag las pa'o: de'i phyir na man ngag 'di ni rang gi mig gam  
 snying ltar chongs shig: ces sprul pa'i sku dga' rab rdo rjes gsungs so:  
 tshegs chung la don che ba'i man ngag dbugs ma chad par sangs rgya  
 ba'i man ngag yi ge mkhyid gang ba rdzogs so:  
 samaya: rgya rgya rgya: gter gyi yi ge mkhyid gang ba las mi gda'o:  
 yi ge phra la chung ba tsher mas bris pa 'dra ba gcig dga'o //  
 //sar+ba mang+ga laM// //

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