



# SATDHARMA

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## THE VAJRA REGENT ÖSEL TENDZIN AND HIS LEGACY

by Patrick Sweeney Trimé Lhawang

*On August 14<sup>th</sup> Satdharma begins a ten-day program celebrating the life, teachings, and realization of the Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin. The program also commemorates the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his parinirvana. His lineage successor Patrick Sweeney Trimé Lhawang, Lady Lila Rich and the Satdharma community, extend an invitation to attend the program to all who wish to explore the essence of the Karma Kagyü lineage transmission of Tibetan Buddhism given by Vidyadhara Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche to his Western lineage holder, Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin, and now held by Patrick Sweeney Trimé Lhawang.*

*To read more about the program, visit [www.satdharma.org/celebrate](http://www.satdharma.org/celebrate)*

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I am very pleased to extend an invitation to the 25th celebration of the parinirvana of the Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin. Parinirvana is a Sanskrit word that means the culmination of a realized person's enlightenment at the time of death. For all those who studied with the Vajra Regent during his lifetime, and those who have met him through his teachings since, the Satdharma community welcomes you to join in a celebration of his life, teachings, and realization.

The venue for the program is Pullahari Retreat Center, where a stupa of the Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin is located. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, when a realized teacher dies, a stupa (a traditional structure depicting enlightenment) containing his or her relics is consecrated and stands as a potent symbol of that teacher's realization of the lineage transmission. The Vajra Regent's stupa was consecrated by the Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche. The presence of the stupa has been an invaluable asset in my journey to share the lineage of transmission of Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin. It is my aspiration that those who attend the program and see the stupa in person will also be able to connect with the intangible, non-physical lineage of transmission that the Vajra Regent held from Vidyadhara Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and which continues to be available to those who turn their minds to it.

### **Working with obstacles fuels the path**

In order for Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche's pioneering activity to fully take root in the West, he needed a co-conspirator, someone who would yield completely to his vision and who would willingly become that vision. The Vajra Regent was that person. He surrendered to the Vidyadhara's vision, first by becoming his student, and then ultimately by becoming his principal disciple and dharma heir. The Vajra Regent's consciousness, his heart, his whole being, saw in Trungpa Rinpoche and the buddhadharma something unequivocally brilliant and true, and he surrendered to it. He also surrendered from the perspective of teaching, absorbing the very intense projections and difficulties that came his way when he sat in the teacher's seat. He took on the responsibility of administering the Vajradhatu organization (later renamed Shambhala), which was the container that allowed the larger world to connect with Trungpa Rinpoche's brilliance. He became the vehicle and the champion for Trungpa Rinpoche's vision.

Celebrating the Vajra Regent's parinirvana is a very personal event, sometimes very emotional and transformative for those who have a close connection to him. From a Buddhist philosophical perspective, we could say the Vajra Regent was many people. If

we analyze deeply, we can see he was an infinite number of people, depending on the mind that was perceiving him. For me, he was root teacher, father figure, like an older brother, great friend, and mentor. To others, he was a somewhat charismatic man from New Jersey who, as an early baby boomer, got involved with various early experiments in bringing eastern spirituality to the West. To yet others, he was seen as deeply confused and the designated “problem” with Trungpa Rinpoche’s work in the West.

From my personal perspective, spiritually he both represented and was the continuity of Trungpa Rinpoche’s grand experiment of transplanting the living heart of dharma into a modern global culture. The Vajra Regent was also the entirety of my subjective spiritual universe for a five-year period of time in my life. His intensity and insistence on being authentic are seared into the deepest fabric of my ongoing experience. His demand that I discard a “lukewarm” or “safe” resolution to the open question of my life path initiated a commitment within my heart to become what he had become, in particular to fully enter the stream of the mahamudra dharma, and to try to understand everything that it was possible to realize in relation to his example and his wisdom transmission.

I feel that the Buddhist community would benefit greatly from knowing more about how the Vajra Regent lived, how he worked with his practice, and how he died. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Vajradhatu community experienced a spiritual and social upheaval. The Vajra Regent contracted HIV and his life was cut short. Like Trungpa Rinpoche, he had had intimate relationships with some of his students. He was bisexual, and for a brief period of time he continued to have sexual relationships after he was diagnosed with HIV. He died only three years after the Trungpa Rinpoche’s parinirvana, both at age 47. It was a tragedy for all of us.

At that time, there was a great deal of misperception and confusion, and the community split into camps based on a solidification of opinions and views. All kinds of speculative and even blatantly false scenarios about what happened have since been posted on the internet and published in magazines and books. What is not known by very many is how

the Vajra Regent viewed his own responsibility for the troubles in Vajradhatu and what his fundamental error in understanding had been. He acknowledged that he had misunderstood the relationship between relative cause and effect and the transcendent spiritual truths realized by the Buddha as well as subsequent masters in our lineage. From my perspective, his acknowledgement of this misunderstanding, as well as his process of self-examination and the level of insight and realization that he manifested in the last two years of his life, are all a necessary part of a balanced assessment of his legacy—a more accurate picture than the coarse, superficial, and politically motivated judgments of his life.

The Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin was a highly realized person. He was continuing the pioneering activity of Trungpa Rinpoche in bringing Buddhist tantra to the West and in aspiring to create a living manifestation of enlightened society. To extend the metaphor, as a pioneer, a trailblazer, the Vajra Regent ended up getting hit by arrows of fear, conservatism, and jealousy. At this point, twenty-five years after his death, we have the maturity to hold all aspects of his legacy. His difficult karma became the basis for him to go further on the path. His path didn't end at a certain point. It kept going, and his realization kept unfolding. His journey is something for us all to consider in terms of our own life and how we're going to live in relation to the Trungpa Rinpoche's teachings, to his life example, to his command, and to how our own karma ripens. Karma always ripens in an unpredictable way. How we meet that ripening seems to be the whole point. My experience was that the Vajra Regent met it fully and courageously and continued to evolve and deepen his understanding until the moment of his death.

### **Continuity of the Lineage**

After the Vidyadhara's death, the Vajra Regent felt that it was his responsibility—based on his understanding of both the Vidyadhara's Will and the direct instruction he received from him—to train and empower a Western student who could maintain the continuity of the lineage that the Vidyadhara had passed to him in the same way that Tilopa passed it to Naropa, and Naropa passed it to Marpa: from teacher to student, and now to me.

Although there is still political momentum that wants to deny any sense of lineage authority from the Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin, it is my confidence that this lineage continuity cannot be destroyed, and in fact, it must be celebrated.

Devotion is the cornerstone of all vajrayana lineages. As the Vajra Regent put it, any attempt to legislate devotion fails. As members of a larger vajrayana community, we must all strive to hold in our minds the ambiguity of conflicting opinions without contesting the devotion that powers our various paths. We must learn to hold that experience as one of the qualities of a unified vajra family. We could simply acknowledge that Trungpa Rinpoche offered us many different gates through which we could enter into his heart. The Vajra Regent was one of those gates. The process of receiving transmission from the Vajra Regent and being in the mandala of transmission with him, was the most glorious thing that happened in my life and the lives of many others. It is my responsibility and great honor to say that this continuity is choiceless. I invite you into the burden and joy of keeping the heart of our unique transmission of the Practice Lineage alive!

If we look back on the turbulent history of how this lineage has been passed from teacher to student, we see that when Tilopa passed the lineage to Naropa, it was not passed on in a politically correct manner, or in a pluralist, consensus-oriented, democratic manner. It happened as a result of two minds connecting unconditionally. It is up to the succession of lineage teachers and students to determine how to hold it and transmit it, but once you have surrendered to the command of an authentic lineage master, it doesn't matter what other people think or say in light of the purity of that transmission. As the Vidyadhara wrote in the Sadhana of Mahamudra, "Even if the buddhas of the three times rise against you, you will remain in the indestructible vajra nature."

As history comes to fully understand the profundity of the lineage of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, future generations will have gained perspective on the importance of the Vajra Regent in the propagation of vajrayana Buddhism in the West. The Vajra Regent was the one unique Western student who, as has been taught, "did not give up and did not give

in.” He did not give up on himself as the location of blessings of the lineage and the location of awakened awareness, and he did not give in to external or internal voices of fear. That confidence, that fearlessness, is the insight, the realization of shunyata. It is the dharmakaya, emerging in the space of form, without ever departing from the insight of emptiness—buddhanature. That’s Mahamudra. That was the Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin.

### **Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Program**

The August program is an offering for those who are connected to the Vajra Regent, and for newcomers who have a genuine interest in exploring this particular lineage stream. Over the course of nine days we will have an opportunity to mix our minds with the lineage of Vidyadhara Chögyam Trunpa Rinpoche and Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin by listening to, contemplating, and meditating upon the core contemplative instructions of the mahamudra system unique to our lineage stream. We will also make time and space within this practice container to discuss the Vajra Regent’s life example and the main universal Buddhist principles his life puts us in touch with; discuss with Lady Lila Rich her perception of the Vajra Regent’s journey and her work in establishing a dharma archive for him; and hear about how future teaching and practice opportunities will be made available. In addition, despite the advanced age of many of us, we will endeavor to sing and dance, eat and drink, in such a manner that we dispel the ongoing and ever baffling encroachment of the setting sun and relax into the self-existing great bliss that the Vajra Regent introduced many of us to, and which he took to be his permanent dwelling place! I invite you to join me.

— Patrick Sweeney Trimé Lhawang