

Three Articles on

# How to Help the Dying and the Dead



Buddha Offering His Body to the Tigers  
Woodblock print

*advice from Lama Zopa Rinpoche and others*

*compiled by FPMT Education Services*



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## How to Benefit the Dying and the Dead



*Lama Zopa Rinpoche*

During an illness the main thing is to take care of the dying person's mind. Many others can take care of the body, but we can take care of the mind.

The most worthwhile thing to do is to inspire the person to think of others with loving kindness and compassion, to wish others to be happy and free from suffering. If a person dies with the thought of benefiting others, their mind is naturally happy and this makes their death meaningful.

You can teach the person taking-and-giving meditation (*tonglen*: taking upon oneself' suffering and giving others one's happiness) or loving kindness meditation (*metta*), according to the capacity of his or her mind. If the person has a more compassionate nature, a "brave mind," they will be able to do *tonglen*, taking others' suffering and giving out happiness. If the person can do *tonglen*, it's the best way to die, as it means dying with *bodhicitta*. His Holiness the Dalai Lama calls this a "self-supporting death." For those who don't think others are more important than themselves, wishing others happiness and to be free of suffering is more difficult.

It's very important to know a person's mind. You can teach according to their capacity: check at the time, use your own wisdom, and judge how profound a method to present to them. It would be best if you could give the dying person some idea of the death process according to tantra: the evolution of the dissolution of the elements, the senses, the consciousness, all the way to the subtle consciousness.

For a person who has lost their capacity to understand because of coma, dementia, and so forth, there is not much possibility for them to



understand. We should aim to help them get at least a precious human rebirth. This should be our aim, not that the person must necessarily believe in karma, for example, but that they die with a positive, happy mind, with loving kindness and compassion; this is our precious gift. Our main aim in taking care of the physical body is so that we can take care of the mind, to transform their mind to the positive so that at least the person can die without anger, desire, etc.

You should learn various methods to benefit and calm down the mind, and to benefit now and in the future. You should get an idea of what level of method to offer.

If, for example, one visualizes Buddha in the mind or outside, or watches the conventional nature of mind, its clarity, other thoughts such as anger and attachment do not arise. If one is able to do this at the time of death, according to the person's mind you can talk about the "fully enlightened being" rather than the Sanskrit "Buddha." You can talk about God if that's more skillful: a compassionate God or a loving God, or omniscient one. Explain to the person that the nature of their mind, their heart, is completely pure; that the fully enlightened one, God, is compassionate to everyone, including them. Help them to think that their loving heart is oneness with God, that the kingdom of God is within. This frees people from guilt and anger, from their negative thoughts.

Mantra, for example, helps one to eventually attain a higher rebirth after one's positive karma is used up. Even if a person doesn't want to hear mantra, still it leaves a positive imprint on the mind, so that sooner or later that person will meet the path and have the ability to practice the teachings, to clear obscurations and attain enlightenment. Even if someone gets angry hearing mantras and dies with an angry mind, it's still better than not hearing any mantras at all and staying peaceful. In this way, step by step, a person's karma will bring them to the Mahayana path and to enlightenment. Mahayanists attain enlightenment, but arhats get stuck, even if the arhat starts off with the higher rebirth.

### *When the person is dying*

If you have studied the death process, you will be able to recognize the stages through which a person's consciousness is passing, what elements are absorbing, and so forth, when the person is actually dying.

It is better if the family members don't cry within hearing distance, as this creates clinging in the mind of the dying person. There are sounds to help the consciousness at the time of death, sounds that benefit, such as



mantras, and so on. Other than this, it is best to keep quiet and don't make any sounds. You should teach the family how to create this atmosphere.

It is okay to medicate pain in order to help the person to be able to think. But medicating for mental anguish is not okay. Sedation before death prevents working out bad karma. Anguish becomes fruitful if the person can experience it. It is hard to tell the difference. Often families want the patient medicated, but it is more for their own comfort than the patient's.

At death, invite the Sangha to chant mantras nicely, in an uplifting way, as the Chinese do. When they chant like this, the person feels that nothing is more important than Amitabha Buddha. They feel protected, supported, and guided.

Chanting the names of the Thirty-five Confession Buddhas\* is extremely powerful; people can come there and chant together. Also, it is good to chant the very powerful mantras of the five deities normally used in *Jangwa puja*\* that liberate both those dying and those already dead and that purify living ones and liberate those in the lower realms. The text *Giving Breath to the Wretched*\* has powerful mantras and is a text one can use to help.

You can place a stupa on the person's chest or let them hold it. Each time the stupa touches them it purifies negative karma. Even if the consciousness has already left the body, there is still benefit in touching the body with the stupa. This is also good to do with babies or with people who don't understand. Even to a non-Buddhist you can say that the stupa is for peace or healing or purification. The person can visualize light rays coming from the stupa.

It is also good to have a few stupas on hand for healing or to dispel spirit harms. Also, a sheet of paper with the Ten Great Mantras written on it can be put on the dying person's body while reciting a dedication prayer.

### *When the breath has stopped*

The very first thing you can do after the breath has stopped is Medicine Buddha practice.\* As a group or individually (for animals as well), chant the names and the mantra. Medicine Buddha made a promise that if anyone chants his name and mantra, all their prayers and wishes will succeed. The power of prayer has been accomplished by Medicine Buddha, so this practice is very powerful to make your prayers succeed. From



among the ten powers, one is the power of prayer, so pray as if you are the Medicine Buddha's agent, on behalf of the being who has died.

Then you can do *Amitabha powa* (transference of consciousness to a pure land), followed by other practices.

You can recite *Sang Cho*, *The Prayer of Good Deeds* (commonly known as *The King of Prayers*)\*. At funerals it is also good for everyone attending to read it together.

You can recite the Nangyalma (Ushnisha Vijaya) mantra twenty-one times, then blow on water, sesame seeds or perfume or talcum powder, blessing it with the mantra, and then sprinkle that over the dead body. The Nangyalma mantra is very powerful for purifying. It is best to recite the long mantra if possible, but the short mantra can also be recited. Also, if this mantra is written on cloth or paper and placed on a mountaintop or roof where the wind can blow it, whoever is touched by the wind receives blessings and their karma is purified. Circumambulating a stupa that contains the mantra purifies all the karma to be reborn in the hot hells.

When the breath stops, in Tibet you would not touch the body until a lama in the village did *phowa*; this is important. Look for signs that the consciousness has left the body (such as after *powa*): the white drop, like pus or water from the nostril, or for a woman, blood and water from the lower part. First pull the hair in the center of the crown towards the back, so that the consciousness comes out through there. Also, hair falls out from the back of the head.

### *Preparing for death during life*

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that it is difficult at the time of death to really meditate as you did in life. If during your life you couldn't meditate well, then you won't be able to meditate at death; you won't be able to hold concentration.

The essence, therefore, is to have accumulated merit and done purification in everyday life in your relationship with sentient beings; with a sincere heart, loving kindness, and compassion to have served others; and to have done the hard work to benefit them. Also, to have made offerings to the Guru Triple Gem.

Practicing the good heart, that is, bodhichitta, during your life purifies so much negative karma, even very heavy karma, and it stops one from creating more. It is negative karma that makes the mind experience fear of death. And it is bodhichitta especially that stops the immeasurable



suffering and the suffering rebirths that arise later from these negative actions. You should live in morality, the precepts, taking the precepts from a spiritual master or in front of holy objects.

It is very important to integrate the five powers into your life and to learn the five powers to be practiced at death. These are very special practices to achieve enlightenment quickly. They involve *powa*, transference of consciousness, at the time of death into a pure land. In the pure land one receives teachings on the Vajrayana, which enable one to achieve enlightenment in one lifetime. The effectiveness of *powa* depends on how well one practices the five powers at death. And this depends on how well one does the general practices in life.

The Lam-rim explains the four ways to accumulate powerful, extensive merit. One should attempt this in everyday life while doing all the normal activities of eating, sleeping, walking, and so on, rather than doing every action with worldly desire and samsaric attachment.

### *Creating a conducive environment for the dying:*

*Advice to the staff of Tara Home, an FPMT hospice to be established in Soquel, California, USA*

Make the place as beautiful as possible: a calm, peaceful, serene, holy environment is so important. There should be beautiful views, beautiful art, flowers, Tara images. Flowers give a very special spiritual feeling. The point is to make a positive imprint on the person's mind. Because of being there, each person's mind is elevated, and they are not afraid of dying. When their families come, they will see it is a nice place, a place that makes one feel there's no need to be afraid of death, and they will want to come.

Because of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's wisdom and compassion, more and more people are feeling comfortable with Buddhism these days. We need to help people have an open mind to different methods. You can make it clear to people that Tara Home is Buddhist; then if they're okay with that, they can come.

The religious tradition of the residents depends on their prior practice in daily life. The advice you give them depends on what you have been doing yourself – the lam-rim, thought transformation – what one has been practicing in daily life, beyond mere sitting meditation. In general, the Mahayana has much to offer to the dying, or to anyone with problems. And Highest Yoga Tantra is the only system that offers a real explanation of death. The precise instructions only exist in Highest Yoga Tantra,



not in other traditions. Other traditions give only general instructions; they do not provide explanations in terms of the subtle consciousness, winds, chakras, etc.

The robed Sangha can live in Tara Home for several months at a time, to distinguish the level of practice that each patient can relate to, and to create a holy environment.

The new people just joining, who haven't done this service before, need to learn from the people who have been doing service for a long time. Those who are experienced in how peoples' minds are should study different books, different teachings from different sources, and from their experience come to know the different states of mind of people who are dying.

You should meet together once or twice a month; everyone should read what has been compiled. People with more skill and wisdom can then edit this research, and it can become a book. There is no need to rush. In the long run, this book will become a guide for the organization, and to benefit other organizations.

The group should practice *powa*. Each year you should take *powa* teachings and do a *powa* retreat so that you can practice. It is very important to do *powa* retreat every year.

If one becomes accomplished at *powa* and receives the signs of accomplishment, then this can be the best public service – liberating others and helping them at the time of death.

It is okay to ask other lamas to do *powa*; one can ask any Tibetan lama who is a good practitioner. You can bring in high lamas to do *powa* and to do *Jangwa* purification. If it is difficult to invite the lama to the hospice, then the lama can do *powa* wherever they are, from a distance. You will need to inform the lama which direction the head is facing.

In general, it would be good to do the elaborate Medicine Buddha puja once a week; it is very good for success for dying. Also, you can recite *The Medicine Buddha Sutra* once a month. The special text with 100,000 Buddha's names by Pabongka Rinpoche can also be recited at death. Ribur Rinpoche got the text recently from Lhasa; it is at Tushita Meditation Center in Delhi and Tibetan monks can read it. The text is very rare.



*Advice from Lama Zopa Rinpoche compiled from various occasions of advice and teachings on the subject. Originally published in Mandala magazine, Sept/Oct 1997. Additional editing by Ven. Constance Miller, FPMT Education Department, 1999.*



## Meditations and practices to benefit the dying and the dead



Lama Zopa Rinpoche

### How to benefit someone while they are dying

When somebody is dying, take a stupa to their place and each day encourage them to hold it as often as possible, or if they are not able to hold it then put it on their chest or head. It purifies their negative karma each time the stupa touches them. [A stupa is a Buddhist reliquary monument, symbolic of the Buddha's omniscient mind. They usually contain many blessed objects and mantras and have the power to heal and purify.] While the person is actually dying, touch them with the stupa. Even if the consciousness has already left the body it can still be of benefit to touch the body with the stupa. This is also good to do with babies or with people who don't understand.

For someone who is dying (even a non-Buddhist) you can explain that the stupa is for peace, or for healing or purification. You can leave the stupa with the dying person and instruct the care-givers that when the person dies to bless them by putting it on their head or their chest. It is also good to have a few stupas on hand for healing or to dispel spirit harms.

Stupas and other holy objects can also be used as a purifying/healing meditation. But if the person is not comfortable with visualising stupas or other holy objects then other objects can be used such as crystals or universal healing energy. The person can visualise light rays coming from the holy object, as follows:

"First breathe in slowly, then breathe out. As you breathe out, visualize that all your disease, spirit harms, unskilful actions and thoughts, and



the imprints left by these on your consciousness are purified. These all come out of your body as black smoke, or pollution, and disappear beyond this earth.

Now, as you breathe in, visualize that strong light beams are emitted from the stupa [or whatever object you are visualising], which symbolizes the perfect, pure mind of full enlightenment. This white light illuminates your body, completely purifying you of all disease, spirit harms, unskillful actions and thoughts, and the imprints left on your consciousness. Feel that your whole body is in the nature of white light. You have no suffering or problems at all. Your mind and body are completely free. From the top of your head down to your toes, your entire body is filled with great joy, with great bliss.

After experiencing this great bliss, think that your life has been prolonged, and that your positive energy, the cause of your happiness and success, has been increased. All your qualities of wisdom and compassion have also been developed, as well as your understandings of the path. Everything is fully developed within you.

Repeat this meditation over and over again. Breathe out and purify; breathe in and receive light and healing from the holy objects. Feel that your whole body is in the nature of light and filled with great joy.”

Also, a sheet of paper with the ten great mantras written on it can be put on the dying person's body while reciting the dedication prayer at the end of this.

### How to benefit the person who has died

For a person who has died it is good to:

1. Recite *Sang Cho, The Prayer of Good Deeds* (commonly known as *The King of Prayers*). At funerals it is also good for everyone attending to have a copy of this and to read it together.
2. Recite the Namgyalma mantra 21 times, then blow on water, sesame seeds, or perfume (e.g., talcum powder) to bless it, and then sprinkle that over the dead body. [It is best to recite the long mantra if possible, but the short mantra can also be recited.]
3. The Namgyalma mantra is very powerful for purifying. For example, if it is written on cloth or paper and placed on a mountain top or roof where the wind can blow it, whoever is touched by the wind receives blessings and their negative karma is purified. Circumambulating a stupa that contains the mantra purifies all the karma to be reborn in the hot hells.



4. Purify the bones, ashes, hair, or nails with the skillful Vajrayana meditation called *jangwa*. This puja is normally performed by highly qualified lamas. When the center has a resident geshé, the geshé can be asked to do the puja. The karma of the deceased person is purified and the Buddha's wisdom is invoked into their ashes and bones so that those substances become consecrated and become relics or holy objects. The person's consciousness can be transferred to a pure land. Some people say that you shouldn't put ordinary people's ashes in holy objects, but once the *jangwa* practice is done the ashes become a holy object anyway. It is a way that allows people to accumulate merit. Kirti Tenshab Rinpoche said that once the ashes are purified or blessed, it is okay. It also says this in the text.

The ashes can then be used in one of the following highly beneficial ways:

1. Sprinkled into the wind from a high mountain. Whichever beings are touched by the ashes are purified of their obscurations and negative karma.
2. Thrown into the water. Any fish or other beings touched by that water are purified.
3. Made into a stupa or a statue. For example Medicine Buddha, Amitabha, Chenrezig, depending on what would have the strongest effect in liberating that person from the lower realms. Any of the eight types of stupa are suitable to use for this purpose, also the Kadampa stupa.

### Benefits of making holy objects

There are infinite merits in making or sponsoring the making of holy objects. In the *Sutra of King Saityal* there is an abbreviated list of the benefits of making holy objects:

1. The number of atoms in the statue or stupa equals the number of lives one will take birth as a wheel-turning king. For example, making a statue the size of your thumb creates the merit to be born as a wheel turning king in the human or god realms. As a Dharmaking you can help hundreds of thousands of people and bring them to Dharma.
2. The number of atoms equals the number of causes created to achieve perfect concentration.
3. The number of atoms equals the number of causes created to



achieve perfect enlightenment, for both oneself and the family members. Holy objects can be sponsored by someone before they die or by the family of a deceased person. There is a chapter in the Tengyur that mentions all the benefits of stupas. The seeds for enlightenment are planted in the family members when they see the holy objects.

It is mentioned in the *King of Concentration Sutra*, for example, that looking at images of the Buddha on a wall even with anger creates the cause to see numberless buddhas, hence creating the cause to achieve enlightenment.

### *How to make stupas and statues from the consecrated ashes*

Just having unblest ashes in the gompa has no benefit for the dead or the living. But if the ashes are consecrated and made into stupas or statues, this will have great benefit for both the dead person and as well for the living. The dead person can be liberated from the lower realms, and for the family members just to see the stupa creates merit. When paying respect and making offerings to the holy object containing the remains of the deceased person, the person can make prayers and dedicate merit for the deceased to receive a perfect human rebirth and attain the path to enlightenment.

Centers who wish to offer this service should notify people of the service and have them send the ashes to the center. Then whenever a high lama comes to the center, request them to purify and bless these ashes. This can also be done by the resident geshe. After consecrating, arrange for the ashes to be made into a stupa or statue.

Building stupas is also very beneficial for people with heavy diseases. The merits can also be dedicated for other people who are sick. It could be organized in a similar way to Chinese temples, whereby people pay to have their ashes kept in the gompa in a special container.

There could also be a suggested donation for different sized stupas – this could also cover the cost of making the stupas, including some pocket money for the stupa makers (although people could do it voluntarily if they wished). This could also provide good income for the center.

The family can decide on the size of the stupa or stupas that they want, depending on the moulds available and what the family want to sponsor. Try to have three sizes available, e.g., the smallest one about 20 cm high, the second about 60 cm, and a larger size about 90 cm.

The stupas or tsartas should have the normal statue mantras inside.



Making a stupa containing one of these particular mantras (*jangchub gyenbum*) creates the same merit as making 100,000 stupas without putting the mantra into it. The big stupas should have a life tree (*sog shing*) put in them, with the specified mantras written on it, or wrapped around it on paper.

Put the name (and perhaps a photo) of the dead person at the bottom of the stupa or statue.

Where there is space in a center, the larger stupas can be placed in a selected area of the center and the area can be made into a stupa memorial garden. The stupa should be made of a strong material that is able to withstand the elements and have a concrete base to stand on, about the height of a chair seat or arm. Make sure that all the stupas are the same height and that the layout of the area is well designed, for example in a square, triangular, or circular shape, etc.

People can plant flowers or put potted plants around the stupas, as well as making other offerings or circumambulating. A sign should be put up about how to offer the flowers or other offerings – offering to holy objects rather than the person who died, otherwise it doesn't accumulate merit, it is not a positive action. Offering to the stupa becomes the cause for inconceivable benefits and happiness up to the highest, full enlightenment, the perfected peace of mind. Then the benefits can be dedicated to the dead person for him/her to immediately have a good rebirth and to be liberated from the heaviest suffering lower realms – hell, hungry ghost, etc. Also one can dedicate for them to receive the perfect body of the happy migratory beings, to meet the holy Dharmā, the unmissaken path to full enlightenment, peerless happiness; to meet the unmissaken pure path by meeting the perfectly qualified virtuous friend (spiritual friend) and to quickly achieve full enlightenment.

By doing things this way the dead person receives incredible benefit from the family members. Otherwise, there is no benefit to the dead person and it actually creates negative karma, the cause for future suffering. The stupas could also be kept in the home, but most usually in a central place like the center. The centers offering this service need to have a group of people who know how to make the stupas etc. If it's just one person who knows how to do it, the service cannot be continued when that person leaves.

Where there is sufficient land, the center should build a special temple to hold the statues and stupas. It should be in a separate area and have a roof but not necessarily doors. Two sides can be shelves to hold the holy objects. The area should be beautified and maintained and have areas



where people can sit to meditate. If desired, the walls could be made of glass so that people can see.

Relatives, friends, and others can then come to the special temple to circumambulate and make offerings to the holy objects. As explained above, there should be a sign which explains that one should make offerings to the holy objects, not to the person who died. The merits of the offering are dedicated to the dead person. In this way every prostration, circumambulation or offering purifies their obstacles and they create merits and the cause of the highest enlightenment.

Whenever a student dies, the center should arrange for their ashes to be made into a stupa. It will be very helpful for people to meditate on impermanence when they see the stupas of those students who have passed away.

One possibility is that for all the students who die in Australia, for example, their ashes could come to Chenrezig Institute to be made into stupas and kept in one of the ways described above. Or alternatively, larger stupas could all be situated at Chenrezig and the smaller ones at the centers where the student came from. [For other countries, the larger stupas could be located at the country centers and the smaller stupas could be kept at the centers where the dead students come from.]

### *How to use holy objects to liberate animals*

Liberate means to save the life of an animal that would otherwise have died.

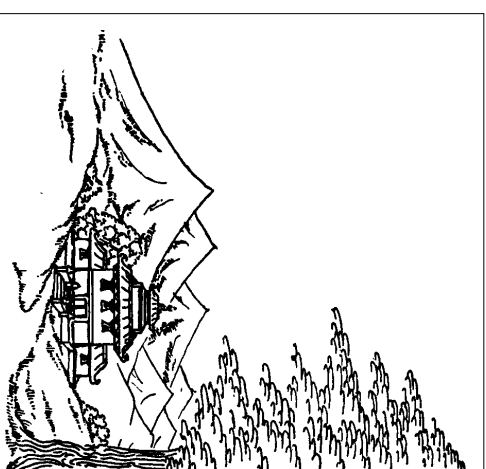
If liberating animals into the sea, take a stupa or other holy objects to the beach and set up an altar. First circumambulate the animals around the holy object(s). Then do the meditation to purify them. Then bless some water and pour it over the animals. Perform the seven limb prayer and mandala and then the short Lam-rim. Dedicate the merits for the animals. Then again circumambulate the animals and then liberate them. The first circumambulation is done so that if any of the animals die their life is meaningful because their negative karma has been purified. Don't liberate animals that are enemies in the same place. An alternative is to take the animals to the gompa to circumambulate and bless and then take them to the ocean to liberate them.

#### *Colophon*

Information compiled from *Lama Zopa Rinpoche* by Ven. Pende Hawter, former director of Karuna Hospice, Australia. Initially edited and lightly rearranged by Ven. Pende Hawter. Further copyediting by Ven. Constance Miller, FPMT Education Services, July 2000.



## DEATH AND DYING IN THE TIBETAN BUDDHIST TRADITION





Contemplation and meditation on death and impermanence are regarded as very important in Buddhism for two reasons: (1) it is only by recognizing how precious and how short life is that we are most likely to make it meaningful and to live it fully; and (2) by understanding the death process and familiarizing ourselves with it, we can remove fear at the time of death and ensure a good rebirth.

Because the way in which we live our lives together with our state of mind at death directly influence our future lives, it is said that the aim or mark of a spiritual practitioner is to have no fear or regrets at the time of death. People who practice to the best of their abilities will die, it is said, in a state of great bliss. The mediocre practitioner will die happily. Even the initial practitioner will have neither fear nor dread at the time of death. So one should aim at achieving at least the smallest of these results.

There are two common meditations on death in the Tibetan tradition. The first looks at the certainty and imminence of death and what will be of benefit at the time of death, in order to motivate us to make the best use of our lives. The second is a simulation or rehearsal of the actual death process, which familiarizes us with death and takes away the fear of the unknown, thus allowing us to die skilfully. Traditionally, in Buddhist countries, one is also encouraged to go to a cemetery or burial ground to contemplate on death and become familiar with this inevitable event.

The first of these meditations is known as the nine-round death meditation, in which we contemplate the three roots, the nine reasonings, and the three convictions, as described below:



#### A. DEATH IS CERTAIN

1. *There is no possible way to escape death.*  
No one ever has, not even Jesus, Buddha, etc. Of the current world population of around 6 billion people, almost none will be alive in 100 years time.
2. *Life has a definite, inflexible limit and each moment brings us closer to the finality of this life.*  
We are dying from the moment we are born.



3. *Death comes in a moment and its time is unexpected.*  
All that separates us from the next life is one breath.

*Conviction:* To practise the spiritual path and ripen our inner potential by cultivating positive mental qualities and abandoning disturbing mental qualities.

#### B. THE TIME OF DEATH IS UNCERTAIN

4. *The duration of our lifespan is uncertain.*  
The young can die before the old, the healthy before the sick, etc.
5. *There are many causes and circumstances that lead to death, but few that favour the sustenance of life.*  
Even things that sustain life can kill us, for example food, motor vehicles, property.
6. *The weakness and fragility of one's physical body contribute to life's uncertainty.*  
The body can be easily destroyed by disease or accident, for example cancer, AIDS, vehicle accidents, other disasters.

*Conviction:* To ripen our inner potential now, without delay.

#### C. THE ONLY THING THAT WILL HELP US AT THE TIME OF DEATH IS OUR MENTAL/SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

- [because all that goes on to the next life is our mind with its karmic (positive or negative) imprints]*
7. *Worldly possessions, such as wealth, position, and money, can't help.*
  8. *Relatives and friends can neither prevent death nor go with us.*
  9. *Even our own precious body is of no help to us.*  
We have to leave it behind like a shell, an empty husk, an overcoat.

*Conviction:* To ripen our inner potential purely, without staining our efforts with attachment to worldly concerns.



The second meditation simulates or rehearses the actual death process. Knowledge of this process is particularly important because advanced practitioners can engage in a series of yogas that are modelled on death, intermediate state (Tib: *bar-do*), and rebirth until they gain such control over them that they are no longer subject to ordinary uncontrolled processes of death and rebirth.

It is therefore essential for the practitioner to know the stages of death and the mind-body relationship behind them. The description of this is based on a presentation of the winds, or currents of energy, that serve as foundations for various levels of consciousness, and the channels in which they flow. Upon the serial collapse of the ability of these winds to serve as the bases of consciousness, the internal and external events of death unfold. Through the power of meditation, the meditator makes the coarse winds dissolve into the very subtle life-bearing wind at the heart. This yoga mirrors the process that occurs at death and involves concentration on the psychic channels and the channel-centres (chakras) inside the body.

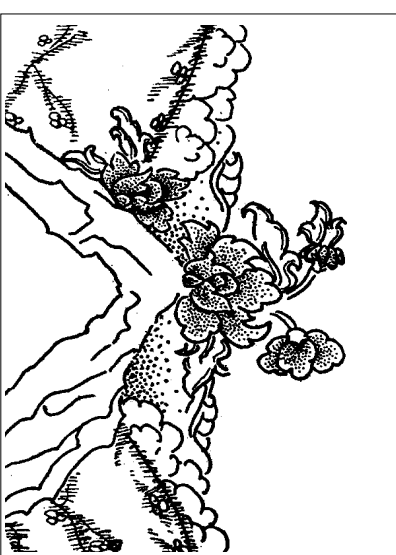
At the channel-centres there are white and red drops (Skt: *bindu*), upon which physical and mental health are based. The white is predominant at the top of the head and the red at the solar plexus. These drops have their origin in a white and red drop at the heart centre, and this drop is the size of a small pea and has a white top and red bottom. It is called the indestructible drop, since it lasts until death. The very subtle life-bearing wind dwells inside it and, at death, all winds ultimately dissolve into it, whereupon the clear light vision of death dawns.

The physiology of death revolves around changes in the winds, channels, and drops. Psychologically, due to the fact that consciousnesses of varying grossness and subtlety depend on the winds, like a rider on a horse, their dissolving or loss of ability to serve as the bases of consciousness induces radical changes in our conscious experience.

Death begins with the sequential dissolution of the winds associated with the four elements (earth, water, fire, and air). "Earth" refers to the hard factors of the body such as bone, and the dissolution of the wind associated with it means that that wind is no longer capable of serving as a mount or basis for consciousness. As a consequence of its dissolution, the capacity of the wind associated with "water" (the fluid factors of the body) to act as a mount for consciousness becomes more manifest. The ceasing of this capacity in one element and its greater manifestation in another is called "dissolution" – it is not, therefore, a case of gross earth dissolving into water.



Simultaneous with the dissolution of the earth element, four other factors dissolve (see chart 1), accompanied by external signs (generally visible to others) and an internal sign (the inner experience of the dying person). The same is repeated in serial order for the other three elements (see charts 2–4), with corresponding external and internal signs.





### CHART 1: FIRST CYCLE OF SIMULTANEOUS DISSOLUTION

<u>Factor dissolving</u>	<u>External sign</u>	<u>Internal sign</u>
earth element	body becomes very thin, limbs loose; sense that body is sinking under the earth	
aggregate of forms	limbs become smaller, body becomes weak and powerless	
basic mirror-like wisdom (our ordinary consciousness that clearly perceives many objects simultaneously)	sight becomes unclear and dark	appearance of mirages
eye sense	one cannot open or close eyes	
colours and shapes	lustre of body diminishes; one's strength is consumed	

### CHART 2: SECOND CYCLE OF SIMULTANEOUS DISSOLUTION

<u>Factor dissolving</u>	<u>External sign</u>	<u>Internal sign</u>
water element	saliva, sweat, urine, blood and regenerative fluid dry greatly	
aggregate of feelings (pleasure, pain and neutrality)	body consciousness can no longer experience the three types of feelings that accompany sense consciousnesses	
basic wisdom of equality (our ordinary consciousness mindful of pleasure, pain and neutral feelings as feelings)	one is no longer mindful of the feelings accompanying the mental consciousness	appearance of smoke
ear sense	one no longer hears external or internal sounds	
sounds	'ur' sound in ears no longer arises	



### CHART 3: THIRD CYCLE OF SIMULTANEOUS DISSOLUTION

<u>Factor dissolving</u>	<u>External sign</u>	<u>Internal sign</u>
fire element	one cannot digest food or drink	
aggregate of discriminations	one is no longer mindful of affairs of close persons	
basic wisdom of analysis (our ordinary consciousness mindful of the individual names, purposes and so forth of close persons)	one can no longer remember the names of close persons	appearance of fireflies or sparks within smoke
nose sense	inhalation weak, exhalation strong and lengthy	
odours	one cannot smell	

### CHART 4: FOURTH CYCLE OF SIMULTANEOUS DISSOLUTION

<u>Factor dissolving</u>	<u>External sign</u>	<u>Internal sign</u>
wind element	the ten winds move to heart; inhalation and exhalation ceases	
aggregate of compositional factors	one cannot perform physical actions	
basic wisdom of achieving activities (our ordinary consciousness mindful of external activities, purposes, etc.)	one is no longer mindful of external worldly activities, purposes and so forth	appearance of a sputtering butter-lamp about to go out
tongue sense	tongue becomes thick and short; root of tongue becomes blue	
tastes	one cannot experience tastes	
body sense and tangible objects	one cannot experience smoothness or roughness	



## CHART 5: FIFTH TO EIGHTH CYCLES OF DISSOLUTION

<u>Factor dissolving</u>	<u>Cause of appearance</u>	<u>Internal sign</u>
<b>FIFTH CYCLE</b> eighty conceptions	winds in right and left channels above heart enter central channel at top of head	at first, burning butter-lamp; then, clear vacuity filled with white light
<b>SIXTH CYCLE</b> mind of white appearance	winds in right and left channels below heart enter central channel at base of spine	very clear vacuity filled with red light
<b>SEVENTH CYCLE</b> mind of red increase	upper and lower winds gather at heart; then winds enter drop at heart	at first, vacuity filled with thick darkness; then, as if swooning unconsciously
<b>EIGHTH CYCLE</b> mind of black near-attainment	all winds dissolve into the very subtle life-bearing wind in the indestructible drop at the heart	very clear vacuity free of the white, red and black appearances – then the mind of clear light of death

(The above charts are taken from *Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism* by Lati Rinbochay and Jeffrey Hopkins, Snow Lion Publications.)



Upon the inception of the fifth cycle the mind begins to dissolve, in the sense that coarser types cease and subtler minds become manifest. First, conceptuality ceases, dissolving into a mind of white appearance. This subtler mind, to which only a vacuity filled by white light appears, is free from coarse conceptuality. It, in turn, dissolves into a heightened mind of red appearance, which then dissolves into a mind of black appearance. At this point all that appears is a vacuity filled by blackness, during which the person eventually becomes unconscious. In time this too clears away, leaving a totally clear emptiness (the mind of clear light) free from the white, red and black appearances (see chart 5). This is the final vision of death.

This description of the various internal visions correlates closely with the literature on the near-death experience. People who have had a near-death experience often describe moving from darkness (for example, a black tunnel) towards a brilliant, peaceful, loving light. A comprehensive study comparing death and near-death experiences of Tibetans and Euro-Americans has shown many similarities between the two (Carr, 1993). Care must be taken though in such comparisons because the near-death experience is not actual death, that is, the consciousness permanently leaving the body.

Since the outer breath ceases some time before (in the fourth cycle) the moment when the consciousness actually leaves the body, from this point of view the point of actual death is related not to the cessation of the outer breath but to the appearance of the mind of clear light. A person can remain in this state of lucid vacuity for up to three days, after which (if the body has not been ravaged by illness) the external sign of drops of red or white liquid emerging from the nose and sexual organ occur, indicating the departure of consciousness.

Other signs of the consciousness leaving the body are: (1) when all heat has left the area of the heart centre (in the centre of the chest); (2) the body starts to smell or decompose; (3) a subtle awareness that the consciousness has left and the body has become like ‘an empty shell’; and (4) a slumping of the body in a practitioner who has been sitting in meditation after the stopping of the breath. Buddhists generally prefer that the body not be removed for disposal before one or more of these signs occur, because until then the consciousness is still in the body and any violent handling of it may disturb the end processes of death. A Buddhist monk, nun, or friend should ideally be called in before the body is moved in order for the appropriate prayers and procedures to be carried out.



When the clear light vision ceases, the consciousness leaves the body and passes through the other seven stages of dissolution (black near-attainment, red increase etc.) in reverse order. As soon as this reverse process begins the person is reborn into an intermediate state between lives, with a subtle body that can go instantly wherever it likes, move through solid objects, etc., in its journey to the next place of rebirth.

The intermediate state can last from a moment to seven days, depending on whether or not a suitable birthplace is found. If such a birthplace is not found, the being undergoes a “small death,” experiencing the eight signs of death as previously described (but very briefly). He/she then again experiences the eight signs of the reverse process and is reborn into a second intermediate state. This can happen for a total of seven births in the intermediate state (making a total of 49 days) during which time a place of rebirth must be and will be found.

The “small death” that occurs between intermediate states or just prior to taking rebirth is compared to experiencing the eight signs (from the mirage-like vision to the clear light) when going into deep sleep or when coming out of a dream. Similarly also, when entering a dream or when awakening from sleep, the eight signs of the reverse process are experienced.

These states of increasing subtlety during death and of increasing grossness during rebirth are also experienced in fainting and orgasm as well as before and after sleeping and dreaming, although not in their complete form. It is this great subtlety and clarity of the mind during the death process that makes it so valuable to use for advanced meditation practices, and why such emphasis is put on it in Tibetan Buddhism. Advanced practitioners will often stay in the clear light meditation for several days after the breathing has stopped, engaging in these advanced meditations, and can achieve liberation at this time.

The Buddhist view is that each living being has a continuity or stream of consciousness that moves from one life to the next. Each being has had countless previous lives and will continue to be reborn again and again without control unless he/she develops his/her mind to the point where, like the yogis mentioned above, he/she gains control over this process. When the stream of consciousness or mind moves from one life to the next, it brings with it the karmic imprints or potentialities from previous lives. Karma literally means “action,” and all of our actions of body, speech, and mind leave an imprint on the mindstream. These karmas can be negative, positive, or neutral, depending on the action. They can ripen at any time in the future, whenever conditions are suitable. These karmic



seeds, or imprints, are never lost, unless they are purified.

At the time of death (clear light stage), the consciousness (very subtle mind) leaves the body, and the person takes the body of an intermediate state being. They take a form similar to the form they will take in their next life (some texts say from the previous life), but in a subtle rather than a gross form. As mentioned previously, it can take up to forty-nine days to find a suitable place of rebirth. This rebirth is propelled by karma and is uncontrolled. In effect, the karma of the intermediate state being matches that of its future parents. The intermediate state being has the illusory appearance of its future parents copulating. It is drawn to this place by the force of attraction to the parent of the opposite sex, and it is this desire that causes the consciousness of the intermediate state being to enter the fertilized ovum. This happens at or near the time of conception; thus, the new life has begun.

One will not necessarily be reborn as a human being. Buddhists describe six realms of existence into which one can be reborn: the hell realms, the *preta* (hungry ghost) realm, the animal realm, the human realm, the jealous god (*asura*) realm, and the god (*sura* or *deva*) realms. One's experience in these situations can range from intense suffering in the hell realms to unimaginable pleasures in the god realms. But all of these levels of existence are regarded as unsatisfactory by the spiritual practitioner because no matter how high one goes within this cyclic existence, one may fall down again one day to the lower realms of existence. So the aim of the spiritual practitioner is to develop his/her mind to the extent where a stop is put to this uncontrolled rebirth, as mentioned previously. The practitioner realizes that all six levels of existence are ultimately in the nature of suffering, and thus wishes to be free of them forever.

The state of mind at the time of death is regarded as extremely important, because this plays a vital part in the situation one is reborn into. This is one reason why suicide is regarded in Buddhism as very unfortunate, because the state of mind of the person who commits suicide is usually depressed and negative and is likely to throw them into a lower rebirth. Also, suicide does not end one's suffering, it just postpones it to another life, very possibly a life of greater suffering than the previous.

When considering the spiritual care of the dying, it can be helpful to divide people into several different categories, because the category they are in will determine the most useful approach to use. These categories are: (1) whether the person is conscious or unconscious; and (2) whether they have a religious belief or not.

In terms of the first category, if a person is conscious, they can per-



form the practices themselves or someone can assist them. However, if they are unconscious, someone will need to do the practices for them.

For the second category, if a person has specific religious beliefs, these can be utilised to help them. If they do not, they still need to be encouraged to have positive/virtuous thoughts at the time of death, such as reminding them of positive things they have done during their life.

For a spiritual practitioner, it is helpful to encourage them to have thoughts such as love, compassion, and remembering their spiritual teacher. It is beneficial also to have an image in the room of Jesus, Mary, Buddha, or some other spiritual figure that has meaning for the dying person. It may be helpful for those who are with the dying person to say some prayers, recite mantras, etc. These can be silent or aloud, whichever seems most appropriate.

However, one needs to be very sensitive to the needs of the dying person. The most important thing is to keep the mind of the person happy and calm. Nothing should be done (including certain spiritual practices) if this causes the person to be annoyed or irritated. There is a common conception that it is good to read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to the dying person, but if he/she is not familiar with the particular deities and practices contained in it, then this is not likely to prove very beneficial.

Because the death process is so important, it is best not to disturb the dying person with noise or displays of emotion. Expressing attachment and clinging to the dying person can disturb the mind and, therefore, the death process, so it is more helpful to mentally let the person go, to encourage them to move on to the next life without fear. It is important not to deny death or to push it away, but rather just to be with the dying person as fully and openly as possible, trying to have an open and deep sharing of the person's fear, pain, joy, love, etc.

As mentioned previously, when a person is dying, their mind becomes much more subtle, and they are more open to receiving mental messages from those people close to them. So silent communication and prayer can be very helpful. It is not necessary to talk much. The dying person can be encouraged to let go into the light, into God's love, etc. Again, this can be verbal or mental.

It can be very helpful to encourage the dying person to use breathing meditation – to let go of thoughts and concentrate on the movement of the breath. This can be helpful for developing calmness, for pain control, for acceptance, for removing fear. It can help the dying person to get in touch with their inner stillness and peace and come to terms with their death. This breathing technique can be especially useful when combined



with a mantra, prayer, or affirmation (i.e., half on the in-breath, half on the out-breath).

One Tibetan lama, Sogyal Rinpoche, says that for up to about twenty-one days after a person dies they are more connected to the previous life than to the next one. So for this period in particular, loved ones can be encouraged to continue their (silent) communication with the deceased – to say their goodbyes, finish any unfinished business, reassure the dead person, encourage them to let go of their old life and to move on to the next one. It can be reassuring even just to talk to the dead person and at some level to know that they are probably receiving your message. The mind of a deceased person at this stage can still be subtle and receptive.

For the more adept practitioners, there is also the method of transference of consciousness at the time of death (Tib: *pho-wa*). With training, at the time of death, the practitioner can project his mind upwards from his heart centre through his crown directly to one of the buddha pure realms, or at least to a higher rebirth. Someone who has perfected this training can also assist others at the time of death to project their mind to a good rebirth.

It is believed that if the consciousness leaves the body of the dead person through the crown or from a higher part of the body, it is likely to result in a good type of rebirth. Conversely, if the consciousness leaves from a lower part of the body this is likely to result in rebirth in one of the lower realms. For this reason, when a person dies, it is thought that the first part of the body that should be touched is the crown. The crown is located about eight fingerwidths (of the person being measured) back from the (original) hairline. To rub or tap this area or gently pull the crown hair after a person dies is regarded as very beneficial and may well help the person to obtain a higher rebirth. There are special blessed pills (*pho-wa* pills) that can be placed on the crown after death that will also facilitate this process.

Once the consciousness has left the body (which, as mentioned earlier, can take up to three days), it doesn't matter how the body is disposed of or handled (including the carrying out of a post-mortem examination) because in effect it has just become an empty shell. However, if the body is disposed of before the consciousness has left, this will obviously be very disturbing for the person who is going through the final stages of psychological dissolution.

This raises the question of whether or not it is advisable to donate one's organs after dying. The usual answer given by the Tibetan lamas to this question is that if the wish to donate one's organs is done with the



motivation of compassion, then any disturbance to the death process that this causes is far outweighed by the positive karma that one is creating by this act of giving. It is another way in which one can die with a positive and compassionate mind.

A Tibetan tradition that is becoming more popular in the West is to have part of the remains of the deceased (e.g., ashes, hair, nails) blessed and then put into statues, *tsa-tsas* (buddha images made of clay or plaster), or *stupas* (reliquary monuments representing the enlightened body, speech, and mind). These *stupas*, for instance, can be kept in the person's home, or larger ones can be erected in a memorial garden. Making offerings to these or circumambulating them and so on is regarded as highly meritorious, both for the person who has died and for the loved ones.

There are also rituals for caring for the dead, for guiding the dead person through the intermediate state into a good rebirth. Such a ritual is *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, more correctly titled *Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo*.

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