

Sogyal, The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying

SEVEN

Bardos and Other Realities

BARDO IS A TIBETAN WORD that simply means a "transition" or a gap between the completion of one situation and the onset of another. *Bar* means "in between," and *do* means "suspended" or "thrown." Bardo is a word made famous by the popularity of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Since its first translation into English in 1927, this book has aroused enormous interest among psychologists, writers, and philosophers in the West, and has sold millions of copies.

The title *Tibetan Book of the Dead* was coined by its translator, the American scholar W. Y. Evans-Wentz, in imitation of the famous (and equally mistitled) *Egyptian Book of the Dead*.¹ The actual name of the book is *Bardo Tödrol Chenmo*, which means "the Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo." Bardo teachings are extremely ancient, and found in what are called the Dzogchen Tantras.² These teachings have a lineage stretching back beyond human masters to the Primordial Buddha (called in Sanskrit Samantabhadra, and in Tibetan Kuntuzangpo), who represents the absolute, naked, sky-like primordial purity of the nature of our mind. But the *Bardo Tödrol Chenmo* itself is part of one large cycle of teachings handed down by the master Padmasambhava and revealed in the fourteenth century by the Tibetan visionary Karma Lingpa.

The *Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, is a unique book of knowledge. It is a kind of guidebook or a travelogue of the after-death states, which is designed to be read by a master or spiritual friend to a person as the person dies, and after death. In Tibet there are said to be "Five Methods for Attaining Enlightenment without Meditation": on seeing a great master or sacred object; on wearing specially blessed drawings of mandalas with sacred mantras; on tasting sacred nectars, consecrated by the masters through

special intensive practice; on remembering the transference of consciousness, the *phowa*, at the moment of death; and on hearing certain profound teachings, such as the *Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*.

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is destined for a practitioner or someone who is familiar with its teachings. For a modern reader it is extremely difficult to penetrate, and raises a lot of questions that simply cannot be answered without some knowledge of the tradition that gave birth to it. This is especially the case since the book cannot be fully understood and used without knowing the unwritten oral instructions that a master transmits to a disciple, and which are the key to its practice.

In this book, then, I am setting the teachings, which the West has become familiar with through the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, in a very much larger and more comprehensive context.

BARDOS

Because of the popularity of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, people usually associate the word bardo with death. It is true that "bardo" is used in everyday speech among Tibetans for the intermediate state between death and rebirth, but it has a much wider and deeper meaning. It is in the bardo teachings, perhaps more than anywhere else, that we can see just how profound and all-encompassing the buddhas' knowledge of life and death is, and how inseparable what we have called "life" and what we have called "death" truly are, when seen and understood clearly from the perspective of enlightenment.

We can divide the whole of our existence into four realities: life, dying and death, after-death, and rebirth. These are the Four Bardos:

- the "natural" bardo of this life
- the "painful" bardo of dying
- the "luminous" bardo of dharmata
- the "karmic" bardo of becoming

1. The natural bardo of this life spans the entire period between birth and death. In our present state of knowledge, this may seem more than just a bardo, a transition. But if we think about it, it will become clear that, compared to the enormous length and duration of our karmic history, the time we spend in this life is in fact relatively short. The teachings tell us emphatically that the bardo of this life is the only, and

therefore the best time to prepare for death: by becoming familiar with the teaching and stabilizing the practice.

2. The painful bardo of dying lasts from the beginning of the process of dying right up until the end of what is known as the "inner respiration"; this, in turn, culminates in the dawning of the nature of mind, what we call the "Ground Luminosity," at the moment of death.

3. The luminous bardo of dharmata encompasses the after-death experience of the radiance of the nature of mind, the luminosity or "Clear Light," which manifests as sound, color, and light.

4. The karmic bardo of becoming is what we generally call the Bardo or intermediate state, which lasts right up until the moment we take on a new birth.

What distinguishes and defines each of the bardos is that they are all gaps or periods in which the possibility of awakening is particularly present. Opportunities for liberation are occurring continuously and uninterruptedly throughout life and death, and the bardo teachings are the key or tool that enables us to discover and recognize them, and to make the fullest possible use of them.

UNCERTAINTY AND OPPORTUNITY

One of the central characteristics of the bardos is that they are periods of deep uncertainty. Take this life as a prime example. As the world around us becomes more turbulent, so our lives become more fragmented. Out of touch and disconnected from ourselves, we are anxious, restless, and often paranoid. A tiny crisis pricks the balloon of the strategies we hide behind. A single moment of panic shows us how precarious and unstable everything is. To live in the modern world is to live in what is clearly a bardo realm; you don't have to die to experience one.

This uncertainty, which already pervades everything now, becomes even more intense, even more accentuated after we die, when our clarity or confusion, the masters tell us, will be "multiplied by seven."

Anyone looking honestly at life will see that we live in a constant state of suspense and ambiguity. Our minds are perpetually shifting in and out of confusion and clarity. If only we were confused all the time, that would at least make for some kind of clarity. What is really baffling about life is that

sometimes, despite all our confusion, we can also be really wise! This shows us what the bardo is: a continuous, unnerving oscillation between clarity and confusion, bewilderment and insight, certainty and uncertainty, sanity and insanity. In our minds, as we are now, wisdom and confusion arise simultaneously, or, as we say, are "co-emergent." This means that we face a continuous state of choice between the two, and that everything depends on which we will choose.

This constant uncertainty may make everything seem bleak and almost hopeless; but if you look more deeply at it, you will see that its very nature creates gaps, spaces in which profound chances and opportunities for transformation are continuously flowering—if, that is, they can be seen and seized.

Because life is nothing but a perpetual fluctuation of birth, death, and transition, so bardo experiences are happening to us all the time and are a basic part of our psychological makeup. Normally, however, we are oblivious to the bardos and their gaps, as our mind passes from one so-called "solid" situation to the next, habitually ignoring the transitions that are always occurring. In fact, as the teachings can help us to understand, every moment of our experience is a bardo, as each thought and each emotion arises out of, and dies back into, the essence of mind. It is in moments of strong change and transition especially, the teachings make us aware, that the true sky-like, primordial nature of our mind will have a chance to manifest.

Let me give you an example. Imagine that you come home one day after work to find your door smashed open, hanging on its hinges. You have been robbed. You go inside and find that everything you own has vanished. For a moment you are paralyzed with shock, and in despair you frantically go through the mental process of trying to recreate what is gone. It hits you: You've lost everything. Your restless, agitated mind is then stunned, and thoughts subside. And there's a sudden, deep stillness, almost an experience of bliss. No more struggle, no more effort, because both are hopeless. Now you just have to give up; you have no choice.

So one moment you have lost something precious, and then, in the very next moment, you find your mind is resting in a deep state of peace. When this kind of experience occurs, do not immediately rush to find solutions. Remain for a while in that state of peace. Allow it to be a gap. And if you really rest in that gap, looking into the mind, you will catch a glimpse of the deathless nature of the enlightened mind.

The deeper our sensitivity and the more acute our alertness to the amazing opportunities for radical insight offered by gaps and transitions like these in life, the more inwardly prepared we will be for when they occur in an immensely more powerful and uncontrolled way at death.

This is extremely important, because the bardo teachings tell us that there are moments when the mind is far freer than usual, moments far more powerful than others, which carry a far stronger karmic charge and implication. The supreme one of these is the moment of death. For at that moment the body is left behind, and we are offered the greatest possible opportunity for liberation.

However consummate our spiritual mastery may be, we are limited by the body and its karma. But with the physical release of death comes the most marvelous opportunity to fulfill everything we have been striving for in our practice and our life. Even in the case of a supreme master who has reached the highest realization, the ultimate release, called *parinirvana*, dawns only at death. That is why in the Tibetan tradition we do not celebrate the birthdays of masters; we celebrate their death, their moment of final illumination.

In my childhood in Tibet, and years afterward, I have heard account after account of great practitioners, and even of seemingly ordinary yogins and laypeople, who died in an amazing and dramatic way. Not until that very last moment did they finally display the depth of their realization and the power of the teaching that they had come to embody.³

The Dzogchen Tantras, the ancient teachings from which the bardo instructions come, speak of a mythical bird, the *garuda*, which is born fully grown. This image symbolizes our primordial nature, which is already completely perfect. The *garuda* chick has all its wing feathers fully developed inside the egg, but it cannot fly before it hatches. Only at the moment when the shell cracks open can it burst out and soar up into the sky. Similarly, the masters tell us, the qualities of buddhahood are veiled by the body, and as soon as the body is discarded, they will be radiantly displayed.

The reason why the moment of death is so potent with opportunity is because it is then that the fundamental nature of mind, the Ground Luminosity or Clear Light, will naturally manifest, and in a vast and splendid way. If at this crucial moment we can recognize the Ground Luminosity, the teachings tell us, we will attain liberation.

This is not, however, possible unless you have become acquainted and really familiar with the nature of mind in your lifetime through spiritual practice. And this is why, rather surprisingly, it is said in our tradition that a person who is liberated at the moment of death is considered to be liberated in *this* lifetime, and *not* in one of the bardo states after death; for it is within this lifetime that the essential recognition of the Clear Light has taken place and been established. This is a crucial point to understand.

OTHER REALITIES

I have said that the bardos are opportunities, but what is it exactly about the bardos that makes it possible for us to seize the opportunities they offer? The answer is simple: They are all different states, and different realities, of mind.

In the Buddhist training we prepare, through meditation, to discover precisely the various interrelated aspects of mind, and skillfully enter different levels of consciousness. There is a distinct and exact relation between the bardo states and the levels of consciousness we experience throughout the cycle of life and death. So as we move from one bardo to another, both in life and death, there is a corresponding change in consciousness which, through spiritual practice, we can intimately acquaint ourselves with, and come, in the end, completely to comprehend.

Since the process that unfolds in the bardos of death is embedded in the depths of our mind, it manifests in life also at many levels. There is, for example, a vivid correspondence between the degrees in subtlety of consciousness we move through in sleep and dream, and the three bardos associated with death:

- Going to sleep is similar to the bardo of dying, where the elements and thought processes dissolve, opening into the experience of the Ground Luminosity.
- Dreaming is akin to the bardo of becoming, the intermediate state where you have a clairvoyant and highly mobile "mental body" that goes through all kinds of experiences. In the dream state too we have a similar kind of body, the dream body, in which we undergo all the experiences of dream life.
- In between the bardo of dying and the bardo of becoming is a very special state of luminosity or Clear Light called,

as I have said, the "bardo of dharmata." This is an experience that occurs to everyone, but there are very few who can even notice it, let alone experience it completely, as it can only be recognized by a trained practitioner. This bardo of dharmata corresponds to the period after falling asleep and before dreams begin.

Of course the bardos of death are much deeper states of consciousness than the sleep and dream states, and far more powerful moments, but their relative levels of subtlety correspond and show the kind of links and parallels that exist between all the different levels of consciousness. Masters often use this particular comparison to show just how difficult it is to maintain awareness during the bardo states. How many of us are aware of the change in consciousness when we fall asleep? Or of the moment of sleep before dreams begin? How many of us are aware even when we dream that we are dreaming? Imagine, then, how difficult it will be to remain aware during the turmoil of the bardos of death.

How your mind is in the sleep and dream state indicates how your mind will be in the corresponding bardo states; for example, the way in which you react to dreams, nightmares, and difficulties now shows how you might react after you die.

This is why the yoga of sleep and dream plays such an important part in the preparation for death. What a real practitioner seeks to do is to keep, unfailing and unbroken, his or her awareness of the nature of mind throughout day and night, and so use directly the different phases of sleep and dream to recognize and become familiar with what will happen in the bardos during and after death.

So we find two other bardos often included *within* the natural bardo of this life: the bardo of sleep and dream, and the bardo of meditation. Meditation is the practice of the daytime, and sleep and dream yoga the practices of the night. In the tradition to which the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* belongs, these two are added to the Four Bardos to make a series of Six Bardos.

LIFE AND DEATH IN THE PALM OF THEIR HAND

Each of the bardos has its own unique set of instructions and meditation practices, which are directed precisely to those realities and their particular states of mind. This is how the spiritual practices and training designed for each of the bardo states can enable us to make the fullest possible use of them

FIFTEEN

The Process of Dying

IN THE WORDS OF PADMASAMBHAVA,

Human beings face two causes of death: untimely death and death due to the exhaustion of their natural lifespan. Untimely death can be averted through the methods taught for prolonging life. However, when the cause of death is the exhaustion of the natural lifespan, you are like a lamp which has run out of oil. There is no way of averting death by cheating it; you have to get ready to go.

Let us look now at the two causes of death: the exhaustion of our natural lifespan, and an obstacle or accident that brings our life to an untimely end.

THE EXHAUSTION OF OUR LIFESPAN

Because of our karma, we all have a certain lifespan; and when it is exhausted, it is extremely difficult to prolong our lives. However, a person who has perfected the advanced practices of yoga can overcome even this limit, and actually lengthen his or her life. There is a tradition that sometimes masters will be told by their teachers the length of their lifespan. Yet they know that through the strength of their own practice, the purity of their link with their students and their practice, and the benefit of their work, they can live longer. My master told Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche he would live to the age of eighty, but beyond that depended on his own practice; he lived into his eighty-second year. Dudjom Rinpoche was told he had a lifespan of seventy-three, but he lived until the age of eighty-two.

UNTIMELY DEATH

It is said, on the other hand, that if it is only an obstacle of some kind that threatens us with untimely death, it can be

more easily averted—provided, of course, that we have foreknowledge. In the bardo teachings and Tibetan medical texts, we can find descriptions of signs warning of impending death, some foretelling death within years or months, and others in terms of weeks or days. They include physical signs, certain specific kinds of dreams, and special investigations using shadow images.¹ Unfortunately only someone with expert knowledge will be able to interpret these signs. Their purpose is to forewarn a person that his or her life is in danger, and to alert the person to the need for using practices that lengthen life, before these obstacles occur.

Any spiritual practice we do, since it accumulates "merit," will help prolong our lives and bring good health. A good practitioner, through the inspiration and power of his or her practice, comes to feel psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually whole, and this is both the greatest source of healing and the strongest protection against illness.

There are also special "long-life practices," which summon the life-energy from the elements and the universe through the power of meditation and visualization. When our energy is weak and unbalanced, these longevity practices strengthen and coordinate it, and this has the effect of extending our lifespan. There are also many other practices for enhancing life. One is to save the lives of animals that are due to be slaughtered, by buying them and setting them free. This practice is popular in Tibet and the Himalayan regions, where, for example, people often go to the fish market to buy fish and then release them. It is based on the natural karmic logic that taking the life of others or harming them will shorten your life, and giving life will lengthen it.

THE "PAINFUL" BARDO OF DYING

The bardo of dying falls between the moment we contract a terminal illness or condition that will end in death, and the ceasing of the "inner respiration." It is called "painful" because if we are not prepared for what will happen to us at death, it can be an experience of tremendous suffering.

Even for a practitioner the whole process of dying can still be a painful one, as losing the body and this life may be a very difficult experience. But if we have had instructions on the meaning of death, we will know what enormous hope there is when the Ground Luminosity dawns at the moment of death. However, there still remains the uncertainty of

*from: Sogyal Rinpoche
Tibetan Book of
Living and Dying*

whether we will recognize it or not, and this is why it is so important to stabilize the recognition of the nature of mind through practice while we are still alive.

Many of us, however, have not had the good fortune to encounter the teachings, and we have no idea of what death really is. When we suddenly realize that our whole life, our whole reality, is disappearing, it is terrifying: We don't know what is happening to us, or where we are going. Nothing in our previous experience has prepared us for this. As anyone who has cared for the dying will know, our anxiety will even heighten the experience of physical pain. If we have not taken care of our lives, or our actions have been harmful and negative, we will feel regret, guilt, and fear. So just to have a measure of familiarity with these teachings on the bardos will bring us some reassurance, inspiration, and hope, even though we may never have practiced and realized them.

For good practitioners who know exactly what is happening, not only is death less painful and fearful but it is the very moment they have been looking forward to; they face it with equanimity, and even with joy. I remember how Dudjom Rinpoche used to tell the story of the death of one realized yogin. He had been ill for a few days, and his doctor came to read his pulse. The doctor detected that he was going to die, but he was not sure whether to tell him or not; his face fell, and he stood by the bedside looking solemn and serious. But the yogin insisted, with an almost childlike enthusiasm, that he tell him the worst. Finally the doctor gave in, but tried to speak as if to console him. He said gravely: "Be careful, the time has come." To the doctor's amazement the yogin was delighted, and as thrilled as a little child looking at a Christmas present that he is about to open. "Is it really true?" he asked. "What sweet words, what joyful news!" He gazed into the sky and passed away directly in a state of deep meditation.

In Tibet everyone knew that to die a spectacular death was the way to really make a name for yourself if you had not managed to do so already in life. One man I heard of was determined to die miraculously and in a grand style. He knew that often masters will indicate when they are going to die, and summon their disciples together to be present at their death. So this particular man gathered all his friends for a great feast around his deathbed. He sat there in meditation posture waiting for death, but nothing happened. After several hours his guests began to get tired of waiting and said to

each other: "Let's start eating." They filled their plates, and then looked up at the prospective corpse and said: "He's dying, he doesn't need to eat." As time went by and still there was not a sign of death, the "dying" man became famished himself, and worried that there would soon be nothing left to eat. He got down from his deathbed and joined in the feast. His great deathbed scene had turned into a humiliating fiasco.

Good practitioners can take care of themselves when they die, but ordinary ones will need to have their teacher at their bedside, if possible, or otherwise a spiritual friend who can remind them of the essence of their practice and inspire them to the View.

Whoever we are, it can be a great help to be familiar with the process of dying. If we understand the stages of dying, we will know that all the strange and unfamiliar experiences we are passing through are part of a natural process. As this process begins, it signals the coming of death, and reminds us to alert ourselves. And for a practitioner each stage of dying will be a signpost, reminding us of what is happening to us, and of the practice to do at each point.

THE PROCESS OF DYING

The process of dying is explained in considerable detail in the different Tibetan teachings. Essentially it consists of two phases of dissolution: an outer dissolution, when the senses and elements dissolve, and an inner dissolution of the gross and subtle thought states and emotions. But first we need to understand the components of our body and mind, which disintegrate at death.

Our whole existence is determined by the elements: earth, water, fire, air, and space. Through them our body is formed and sustained, and when they dissolve, we die. We are familiar with the outer elements, which condition the way in which we live, but what is interesting is how these outer elements interact with the inner elements within our own physical body. And the potential and quality of these five elements also exist within our mind. Mind's ability to serve as the ground for all experience is the quality of earth; its continuity and adaptability is water; its clarity and capacity to perceive is fire; its continuous movement is air; and its unlimited emptiness is space.

The following explains how our physical body is formed. An ancient Tibetan medical text states:

The sense consciousnesses arise from one's mind. The flesh, bones, organ of smelling and odors are formed from the earth element. The blood, organ of taste, tastes and liquids in the body arise from the water element. The warmth, clear coloration, the organ of sight and form are formed from the fire element. The breath, organ of touch and physical sensations are formed from the air element. The cavities in the body, the organ of hearing and sounds are formed from the space element.²

"In short," writes Kalu Rinpoche, "it is from mind, which embodies the five elemental qualities, that the physical body develops. The physical body itself is imbued with these qualities, and it is because of this mind/body complex that we perceive the outside world—which in turn is composed of the five elemental qualities of earth, water, fire, wind and space."³

The Tantric Buddhist tradition of Tibet offers an explanation of the body that is quite different from the one most of us are used to. This is of a psycho-physical system, which consists of a dynamic network of subtle channels, "winds" or inner air, and essences. These are called respectively: *nadi*, *prana*, and *bindu* in Sanskrit; and *tsa*, *lung*, and *riké* in Tibetan. We are familiar with something similar in the meridians and *ch'i* energy of Chinese medicine and acupuncture.

The human body is compared by the masters to a city, the channels to its roads, the winds to a horse, and the mind to a rider. There are 72,000 subtle channels in the body, but three principal ones: the central channel, running parallel to the spine, and the right and left channels, which run either side of it. The right and left channels coil around the central one at a number of points to form a series of "knots." Along the central channel are situated a number of "channel wheels," the *chakras* or energy-centers, from which channels branch off like the ribs of an umbrella.

Through these channels flow the winds, or inner air. There are five root and five branch winds. Each of the root winds supports an element and is responsible for a function of the human body. The branch winds enable the senses to operate. The winds that flow through all the channels except the central one are said to be impure and activate negative, dualistic thought patterns; the winds in the central channel are called "wisdom winds."⁴

The "essences" are contained within the channels. There are red and white essences. The principal seat of the white

essence is the crown of the head, and of the red essence at the navel.

In advanced yoga practice, this system is visualized very precisely by a yogin. By causing the winds to enter and dissolve in the central channel through the force of meditation, a practitioner can have a direct realization of the luminosity or "Clear Light" of the nature of mind. This is made possible by the fact that the consciousness is mounted on the wind. So by directing his or her mind to any particular point in the body, a practitioner can bring the winds there. In this way the yogin is imitating what happens at death: when the knots in the channels are released, the winds flow into the central channel, and enlightenment is momentarily experienced.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche tells the story of a retreat master at a monastery in Kham, who was close to his elder brothers. This master had perfected the yoga practice of channels, winds, and essences. One day he asked his attendant: "I am going to die now, so would you please look in the calendar for an auspicious date." The attendant was stunned, but did not dare contradict his master. He looked in the calendar and told him that the following Monday was a day when all the stars were auspicious. The master then said: "Monday is three days away. Well, I think I can make it." When his attendant came back into his room a few moments later, he found the master sitting upright in yogic meditation posture, so still that it looked as though he had passed away. There was no breathing, but a faint pulse was perceptible. He decided not to do anything, but to wait. At noon he suddenly heard a deep exhalation, and the master returned to his normal condition, talked with his attendant in a joyful mood, and asked for his lunch, which he ate with relish. He had been holding his breath for the whole of the morning session of meditation. The reason why he did this is that our lifespan is counted as a finite number of breaths, and the master, knowing he was near the end of these, held his breath so that the final number would not be reached till the auspicious day. Just after lunch, the master took a deep breath again, and held it until the evening. He did the same the next day, and the day after. When Monday came, he asked: "Is today the auspicious day?" "Yes" replied the attendant. "Fine, I shall go today," concluded the master. And that day, without any visible illness or difficulty, the master passed away in his meditation.

Once we have a physical body, we also have what are known as the five *skandhas*—the aggregates that compose our

whole mental and physical existence. They are the constituents of our experience, the support for the grasping of ego, and also the basis for the suffering of samsara. They are: form, feeling, perception, intellect, and consciousness, also translated as: form, sensation, recognition, formation, and consciousness. "The five skandhas represent the constant structure of the human psychology as well as its pattern of evolution and the pattern of the evolution of the world. The skandhas are also related to blockages of different types—spiritual ones, material ones, and emotional ones."⁵ They are examined in great depth in Buddhist psychology.

All of these components will dissolve when we die. The process of dying is a complex and interdependent one, in which groups of related aspects of our body and mind disintegrate simultaneously. As the winds disappear, the bodily functions and the senses fail. The energy centers collapse, and without their supporting winds the elements dissolve in sequence from the grossest to the subtlest. The result is that each stage of the dissolution has its physical and psychological effect on the dying person, and is reflected by external, physical signs as well as inner experiences.

Friends sometimes ask me: Can people like us see these external signs in a friend or relative who is dying? My students who care for the dying have told me that some of these physical signs described below are observed in hospices and hospitals. However, the stages of the outer dissolution may take place extremely quickly and not very obviously, and generally people caring for the dying in the modern world are not looking for them. Often nurses in busy hospitals rely on their intuition and many other factors, such as the behavior of doctors or members of the patient's family, or the state of mind of the dying person, to predict when someone might be dying. They also observe, but not at all in a systematic way, some physical signs, such as the change in skin color, a certain smell sometimes remarked on, and a noticeable change in breathing. Modern drugs, however, may well mask the signs that Tibetan teachings indicate, and there is as yet surprisingly little research in the West on this most important topic. Doesn't this show how little the process of dying is understood or respected?

THE POSITION FOR DYING

Traditionally the position generally recommended for dying is to lie down on the right side, taking the position of

"the sleeping lion," which is the posture in which Buddha died. The left hand rests on the left thigh; the right hand is placed under the chin, closing the right nostril. The legs are stretched out and very slightly bent. On the right side of the body are certain subtle channels that encourage the "karmic wind" of delusion. Lying on them in the sleeping lion's posture, and closing the right nostril, blocks these channels and facilitates a person's recognition of the luminosity when it dawns at death. It also helps the consciousness to leave the body through the aperture at the crown of the head, as all the other openings through which it could leave are blocked.

THE OUTER DISSOLUTION: THE SENSES AND THE ELEMENTS

The outer dissolution is when the senses and elements dissolve. How exactly will we experience this when we die?

The first thing we may be aware of is how our senses cease to function. If people around our bed are talking, there will come a point where we can hear the sound of their voices but we cannot make out the words. This means that the ear consciousness has ceased to function. We look at an object in front of us, and we can only see its outline, not its details. This means that the eye consciousness has failed. And the same happens with our faculties of smell, taste, and touch. When the senses are no longer fully experienced, it marks the first phase of the dissolution process.

The next four phases follow the dissolution of the elements:

Earth

Our body begins to lose all its strength. We are drained of any energy. We cannot get up, stay upright, or hold anything. We can no longer support our head. We feel as though we are falling, sinking underground, or being crushed by a great weight. Some traditional texts say that it is as if a huge mountain were being pressed down upon us, and we were being squashed by it. We feel heavy and uncomfortable in any position. We may ask to be pulled up, to have our pillows made higher, or for the bed-covers to be taken off. Our complexion fades and a pallor sets in. Our cheeks sink, and dark stains appear on our teeth. It becomes harder to open and close our eyes. As the aggregate of form is dissolving, we become weak and frail. Our mind is agitated and delirious, but then sinks into drowsiness.

These are signs that the *earth* element is withdrawing into the water element. This means that the wind related to the earth element is becoming less capable of providing a base for consciousness, and the ability of the water element is more manifest. So the "secret sign" that appears in the mind is a vision of a shimmering mirage.

Water

We begin to lose control of our bodily fluids. Our nose begins to run, and we dribble. There can be a discharge from the eyes, and maybe we become incontinent. We cannot move our tongue. Our eyes start to feel dry in their sockets. Our lips are drawn and bloodless, and our mouth and throat sticky and clogged. The nostrils cave in, and we become very thirsty. We tremble and twitch. The smell of death begins to hang over us. As the aggregate of feeling is dissolving, bodily sensations dwindle, alternating between pain and pleasure, heat and cold. Our mind becomes hazy, frustrated, irritable, and nervous. Some sources say that we feel as if we were drowning in an ocean or being swept away by a huge river.

The *water* element is dissolving into fire, which is taking over in its ability to support consciousness. So the "secret sign" is a vision of a haze with swirling wisps of smoke.

Fire

Our mouth and nose dry up completely. All the warmth of our body begins to seep away, usually from the feet and hands toward the heart. Perhaps a steamy heat rises from the crown of our head. Our breath is cold as it passes through our mouth and nose. No longer can we drink or digest anything. The aggregate of perception is dissolving, and our mind swings alternately between clarity and confusion. We cannot remember the names of our family or friends, or even recognize who they are. It becomes more and more difficult to perceive anything outside of us as sound and sight are confused.

Kalu Rinpoche writes: "For the individual dying, the inner experience is of being consumed in a flame, being in the middle of a roaring blaze, or perhaps the whole world being consumed in a holocaust of fire."

The *fire* element is dissolving into air, and becoming less able to function as a base for consciousness, while the ability of the air element to do so is more apparent. So the secret sign is of shimmering red sparks dancing above an open fire, like fireflies.

Air

It becomes harder and harder to breathe. The air seems to be escaping through our throat. We begin to rasp and pant. Our inbreaths become short and labored, and our outbreaths become longer. Our eyes roll upward, and we are totally immobile. As the aggregate of intellect is dissolving, the mind becomes bewildered, unaware of the outside world. Everything becomes a blur. Our last feeling of contact with our physical environment is slipping away.

We begin to hallucinate and have visions: If there has been a lot of negativity in our lives, we may see terrifying forms. Haunting and dreadful moments of our lives are replayed, and we may even try to cry out in terror. If we have led lives of kindness and compassion, we may experience blissful, heavenly visions, and "meet" loving friends or enlightened beings. For those who have led good lives, there is peace in death instead of fear.

Kalu Rinpoche writes: "The internal experience for the dying individual is of a great wind sweeping away the whole world, including the dying person, an incredible maelstrom of wind, consuming the entire universe."⁶

What is happening is that the *air* element is dissolving into consciousness. The winds have all united in the "life supporting wind" in the heart. So the "secret sign" is described as a vision of a flaming torch or lamp, with a red glow.

Our inbreaths continue to be more shallow, and our outbreaths longer. At this point blood gathers and enters the "channel of life" in the center of our heart. Three drops of blood collect, one after the other, causing three long, final outbreaths. Then, suddenly, our breathing ceases.

Just a slight warmth remains at our heart. All vital signs are gone, and this is the point where in a modern clinical situation we would be certified as "dead." But Tibetan masters talk of an internal process that still continues. The time between the end of the breathing and the cessation of the "inner respiration" is said to be approximately "the length of time it takes to eat a meal," roughly twenty minutes. But nothing is certain, and this whole process may take place very quickly.

THE INNER DISSOLUTION

In the inner dissolution, where gross and subtle thought states and emotions dissolve, four increasingly subtle levels of consciousness are to be encountered.

Here the process of death mirrors in reverse the process of conception. When our parents' sperm and ovum unite, our consciousness, impelled by its karma, is drawn in. During the development of the fetus, our father's essence, a nucleus that is described as "white and blissful," rests in the chakra at the crown of our head at the top of the central channel. The mother's essence, a nucleus that is "red and hot," rests in the chakra said to be located four finger-widths below the navel. It is from these two essences that the next phases of the dissolution evolve.

With the disappearance of the wind that holds it there, the white essence inherited from our father descends the central channel toward the heart. As an outer sign, there is an experience of "whiteness," like "a pure sky struck by moonlight." As an inner sign, our awareness becomes extremely clear, and all the thought states resulting from anger, thirty-three of them in all, come to an end. This phase is known as "Appearance."

Then the mother's essence begins to rise through the central channel, with the disappearance of the wind that keeps it in place. The outer sign is an experience of "redness," like a sun shining in a pure sky. As an inner sign, there arises a great experience of bliss, as all the thought states resulting from desire, forty in all, cease to function. This stage is known as "Increase."⁷

When the red and white essences meet at the heart, consciousness is enclosed between them. Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, an outstanding master who lives in Nepal, says: "The experience is like the meeting of the sky and earth." As an outer sign, we experience a "blackness," like an empty sky shrouded in utter darkness. The inner sign is an experience of a state of mind free of thoughts. The seven thought states resulting from ignorance and delusion are brought to an end. This is known as "Full Attainment."⁸

Then, as we become slightly conscious again, the Ground Luminosity dawns, like an immaculate sky, free of clouds, fog, or mist. It is sometimes called "the mind of clear light of death." His Holiness the Dalai Lama says: "This consciousness is the innermost subtle mind. We call it the buddha nature, the real source of all consciousness. The continuum of this mind lasts even through Buddhahood."⁹

THE DEATH OF "THE POISONS"

What then is happening when we die? It is as if we are returning to our original state; everything dissolves, as body

and mind are unraveled. The three "poisons"—anger, desire, and ignorance—all die, which means that all the negative emotions, the root of samsara, actually cease, and then there is a gap.

And where does this process take us? To the primordial ground of the nature of mind, in all its purity and natural simplicity. Now everything that obscured it is removed, and our true nature is revealed.

A similar enfolding can happen, as I explained in chapter 5, Bringing the Mind Home, when we practice meditation and have the experiences of bliss, clarity, and absence of thoughts, which indicate, in turn, that desire, anger, and ignorance have momentarily dissolved.

As anger, desire, and ignorance are dying, we are becoming purer and purer. Some masters explain that for a Dzogchen practitioner, the phases of appearance, increase, and attainment are signs of the gradual manifestation of Rigpa. As everything that obscures the nature of mind is dying, the clarity of Rigpa slowly begins to appear and increase. The whole process becomes a development of the state of luminosity, linked to the practitioner's recognition of the clarity of Rigpa.

In Tantra there is a different approach to practicing during the process of dissolution. In the yoga practice of channels, winds, and essences, the Tantric practitioner prepares in life for the process of dying, by simulating the changes of consciousness of the dissolution process, culminating in the experience of the luminosity or "Clear Light." The practitioner also seeks to maintain awareness of these changes as he or she falls asleep. Because what is important to remember is that this sequence of progressively deepening states of consciousness does not only happen when we die. It also occurs, usually unnoticed, as we fall asleep, or whenever we travel from the grosser to subtlest levels of consciousness. Some masters have even shown that it also happens in the very psychological processes of our everyday waking state.¹⁰

The detailed account of the dissolution process may seem complicated, yet if we become really familiar with this process, it can be of great benefit. For practitioners there is a range of specialized practices to do at each stage of the dissolution. For example, you can transform the process of dying into a practice of guru yoga. With each stage of the outer dissolution, you generate devotion and pray to the master, visualizing him in the different energy centers. When the earth element dissolves and the sign of the mirage appears,

you visualize the master in your heart center. When the water element dissolves and the sign of smoke appears, you visualize the master in your navel center. When the fire element dissolves and the sign of fireflies appears, you visualize the master in the forehead center. And when the air element dissolves and the sign of the torch appears, you focus entirely on transferring your consciousness into the wisdom mind of your master.

There are many descriptions of the stages of dying, differing in small details and in their order. What I have explained here is a description of the general pattern, but it can unfold differently according to the makeup of the individual. I remember when Samten, my master's attendant, was dying, the sequence was most pronounced. But variations can occur owing to the effects of the particular illness of the dying person, and the state of the channels, winds, and essences. The masters say that all living beings, even the smallest insects, go through this process. In the case of a sudden death or an accident, it will still take place, but extremely quickly.

I have found that the easiest way to understand what is happening during the process of dying, with its outer and inner dissolution, is as a gradual development and dawning of ever more subtle levels of consciousness. Each one emerges upon the successive dissolution of the constituents of body and mind, as the process moves gradually toward the revelation of the very subtlest consciousness of all: the Ground Luminosity or Clear Light.

PART THREE

Death and Rebirth

SIXTEEN

The Ground

WE OFTEN HEAR STATEMENTS LIKE: "Death is the moment of truth," or "Death is the point when we finally come face to face with ourselves." And we have seen how those who go through a near-death experience sometimes report that as they witness their lives replayed before them, they are asked questions such as, "What have you done with your life? What have you done for others?" All of this points to one fact: that in death we cannot escape from who or what we really are. Whether we like it or not, our true nature is revealed. But it is important to know that there are two aspects of our being that are revealed at the moment of death: our absolute nature, and our relative nature—how we are, and have been, in this life.

As I have explained, in death all the components of our body and mind are stripped away and disintegrate. As the body dies, the senses and subtle elements dissolve, and this is followed by the death of the ordinary aspect of our mind, with all its negative emotions of anger, desire, and ignorance. Finally nothing remains to obscure our true nature, as everything that in life has clouded the enlightened mind has fallen away. And what is revealed is the primordial ground of our absolute nature, which is like a pure and cloudless sky.

This is called the dawning of the Ground Luminosity, or "Clear Light," where consciousness itself dissolves into the all-encompassing space of truth. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* says of this moment:

*The nature of everything is open, empty and naked like the sky.
Luminous emptiness, without center or circumference: the pure, naked
Rigpa dawns.*

Padmasambhava describes the luminosity:

*This self-originated Clear Light, which from the very beginning was
never born,*

Is the child of Rigpa, which is itself without any parents—how amazing!
This self-originated wisdom has not been created by anyone—how amazing!
It has never experienced birth and has nothing in it that could cause it to die—how amazing!
Although it is evidently visible, yet there is no one there who sees it—how amazing!
Although it has wandered through samsara, no harm has come to it—how amazing!
Although it has seen buddhahood itself, no good has come to it—how amazing!
Although it exists in everyone everywhere, it has gone unrecognized—how amazing!
And yet you go on hoping to attain some other fruit than this elsewhere—how amazing!
Even though it is the thing that is most essentially yours, you seek for it elsewhere—how amazing!

Why is it that this state is called "luminosity" or Clear Light? The masters have different ways of explaining this. Some say that it expresses the radiant clarity of the nature of mind, its total freedom from darkness or obscuration: "free from the darkness of unknowing and endowed with the ability to cognize." Another master describes the luminosity or Clear Light as "a state of minimum distraction," because all the elements, senses, and sense-objects are dissolved. What is important is not to confuse it with the physical light that we know, nor with the experiences of light that will unfold presently in the next bardo; the luminosity that arises at death is the natural radiance of the wisdom of our own Rigpa, "the uncompounded nature present throughout all of samsara and nirvana."

The dawning of the Ground Luminosity, or Clear Light, at the moment of death is the great opportunity for liberation. But it is essential to realize on what terms this opportunity is given. Some modern writers and researchers on death have underestimated the profundity of this moment. Because they have read and interpreted the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* without the benefit of the oral instructions and training that fully explain its sacred meaning, they have oversimplified it and jumped to quick conclusions. One assumption they then make is that the dawning of the Ground Luminosity is enlightenment. We might all like to identify death with heaven

or enlightenment; but more important than mere wishful thinking is to know that only if we have really been introduced to the nature of our mind, our Rigpa, and only if we have established and stabilized it through meditation and integrated it into our life, does the moment of death offer a real opportunity for liberation.

Even though the Ground Luminosity presents itself naturally to us all, most of us are totally unprepared for its sheer immensity, the vast and subtle depth of its naked simplicity. The majority of us will simply have no means of recognizing it, because we have not made ourselves familiar with ways of recognizing it in life. What happens, then, is that we tend to react instinctively with all our past fears, habits, and conditioning, all our old reflexes. Though the negative emotions may have died for the luminosity to appear, the habits of lifetimes still remain, hidden in the background of our ordinary mind. Though all our confusion dies in death, instead of surrendering and opening to the luminosity, in our fear and ignorance we withdraw and instinctively hold onto our grasping.

This is what obstructs us from truly using this powerful moment as an opportunity for liberation. Padmasambhava says: "All beings have lived and died and been reborn countless times. Over and over again they have experienced the indescribable Clear Light. But because they are obscured by the darkness of ignorance, they wander endlessly in a limitless samsara."

THE GROUND OF THE ORDINARY MIND

All these habitual tendencies, the results of our negative karma, which have sprung from the darkness of ignorance, are stored in the ground of the ordinary mind. I have often wondered what would be a good example to help describe the ground of the ordinary mind. You could compare it to a transparent glass bubble, a very thin elastic film, an almost invisible barrier or veil that obscures the whole of our mind; but perhaps the most useful image I can think of is of a glass door. Imagine you are sitting in front of a glass door that leads out into your garden, looking through it, gazing out into space. It seems as though there is nothing between you and the sky, because you cannot see the surface of the glass. You could even bang your nose if you got up and tried to walk through, thinking it wasn't there. But if you touch it you

will see at once there is something there that holds your fingerprints, something that comes between you and the space outside.

In the same manner, the ground of the ordinary mind prevents us from breaking through to the sky-like nature of our mind, even if we can still have glimpses of it. As I have said, the masters explain how there is a danger that meditation practitioners can mistake the experience of the ground of the ordinary mind for the real nature of mind itself. When they rest in a state of great calm and stillness, all they could be doing in fact might be merely resting in the ground of the ordinary mind. It is the difference between looking up at the sky from within a glass dome, and standing outside in the open air. We have to break out of the ground of the ordinary mind altogether, to discover and let in the fresh air of Rigpa.

So the aim of all our spiritual practice, and the real preparation for the moment of death, is to purify this subtle barrier, and gradually weaken it and break it down. When you have broken it down completely, nothing comes between you and the state of omniscience.

The introduction by the master to the nature of mind breaks through the ground of the ordinary mind altogether, as it is through this dissolution of the conceptual mind that the enlightened mind is explicitly revealed. Then, each time we rest in the nature of mind, the ground of the ordinary mind gets weaker. But we will notice that how long we can stay in the state of the nature of mind depends entirely on the stability of our practice. Unfortunately, "Old habits die hard," and the ground of the ordinary mind returns; our mind is like an alcoholic who can kick the habit for a while, but relapses whenever tempted or depressed.

Just as the glass door picks up all the traces of dirt from our hands and fingers, the ground of the ordinary mind gathers and stores all our karma and habits. And just as we have to keep wiping the glass, so we have to keep purifying the ground of the ordinary mind. It is as if the glass slowly wears away as it gets thinner and thinner, little holes appear, and it begins to dissolve.

Through our practice we gradually stabilize the nature of mind more and more, so that it does not simply remain as our absolute nature but becomes our everyday reality. As it does so, the more our habits dissolve, and the less of a difference there is between meditation and everyday life. Gradually you become like someone who can walk straight out into the

garden through the glass door, unobstructed. And the sign that the ground of the ordinary mind is weakening is that we are able to rest more and more effortlessly in the nature of mind.

When the Ground Luminosity dawns, the crucial issue will be how much we have been able to rest in the nature of mind, how much we have been able to unite our absolute nature and our everyday life, and how much we have been able to purify our ordinary condition into the state of primordial purity.

THE MEETING OF MOTHER AND CHILD

There is a way in which we can prepare completely to recognize the dawning of the Ground Luminosity at the moment of death. This is through the very highest level of meditation (as I have explained in chapter 10, The Innermost Essence), the final fruition of the practice of Dzogchen. It is called the "union of two luminosities," which is also known as "the merging of Mother and Child Luminosities."

The Mother Luminosity is the name we give to the Ground Luminosity. This is the fundamental, inherent nature of everything, which underlies our whole experience, and which manifests in its full glory at the moment of death.

The Child Luminosity, also called the Path Luminosity, is the nature of our mind, which, if introduced by the master, and if recognized by us, we can then gradually stabilize through meditation, and more and more completely integrate into our action in life. When the integration is complete, recognition is complete and realization occurs.

Even though the Ground Luminosity is our inherent nature and the nature of everything, we do not recognize it, and it remains as if hidden. I like to think of the Child Luminosity as a key the master gives us to help us open the door to the recognition of the Ground Luminosity, whenever the opportunity arises.

Imagine that you have to meet a woman arriving by plane. If you have no idea what she looks like, you might go to the airport and she could walk right past you and you would miss her. If you have a photo of her that is a good likeness, and you have a good picture of her in your mind, then you will recognize her as soon as she approaches you.

Once the nature of mind has been introduced and you recognize it, you have the key to recognizing it again. But just as you have to keep the photograph with you and keep looking

at it again and again, to be sure of recognizing the person you are going to meet at the airport, so you have to keep deepening and stabilizing your recognition of the nature of mind through regular practice. Then the recognition becomes so ingrained in you, so much a part of you, that you have no further need of the photograph; when you meet the person recognition is spontaneous and immediate. So, after sustained practice of the recognition of the nature of mind, when at the moment of death the Ground Luminosity dawns, you will be able then to recognize it and merge with it—as instinctively, say the masters of the past, as a little child running eagerly into its mother's lap, like old friends meeting, or a river flowing into the sea.

Yet this is extremely difficult. The only way to ensure this recognition is through stabilizing and perfecting the practice of merging the two luminosities now, while we are still alive. This is only possible through a lifetime of training and endeavor. As my master Dudjom Rinpoche said, if we don't practice the merging of the two luminosities now, and from now on, there is no saying that recognition will happen naturally at death.

How exactly do we merge the luminosities? This is a very profound and advanced practice, and this is not the place to elaborate on it. But what we can say is this: When the master introduces us to the nature of mind, it is as if our sight has been restored, for we have been blind to the Ground Luminosity that is in everything. The master's introduction awakens in us a wisdom eye, with which we come to see clearly the true nature of whatever arises, the luminosity—Clear Light—nature of all our thoughts and emotions. Imagine that our recognition of the nature of mind comes, after stabilizing and perfecting the practice, to be like a steadily blazing sun. Thoughts and emotions go on arising; they are like waves of darkness. But each time the waves unfurl and meet the light, they dissolve immediately.

As we develop this ability to recognize more and more, it becomes part of our daily vision. When we are able to bring the realization of our absolute nature into our everyday experience, the more chance there is that we will actually recognize the Ground Luminosity at the moment of death.

The proof of whether we have this key will be how we view our thoughts and emotions as they arise; whether we are able to penetrate them directly with the View and recognize their

inherent luminosity nature, or whether we obscure it with our instinctive habitual reactions.

If the ground of our ordinary mind is completely purified, it is as if we have shattered the storehouse of our karma and so emptied the karmic supply for future rebirths. However, if we have not been able to completely purify our mind, there will still be remnants of past habits and karmic tendencies resting in this storehouse of karma. Whenever suitable conditions materialize, they will manifest, propelling us into new rebirths.

THE DURATION OF THE GROUND LUMINOSITY

The Ground Luminosity dawns; for a practitioner, it lasts as long as he or she can rest, undistracted, in the state of the nature of mind. For most people, however, it lasts no longer than a snap of the fingers, and for some, the masters say, "as long as it takes to eat a meal." The vast majority of people do not recognize the Ground Luminosity at all, and instead they are plunged into a state of unconsciousness, which can last up to three and a half days. It is then that the consciousness finally leaves the body.

This has led to a custom in Tibet of making sure that the body is not touched or disturbed for three days after death. It is especially important in the case of a practitioner, who may have merged with the Ground Luminosity and be resting in that state of the nature of mind. I remember in Tibet how everyone took great care to maintain a silent and peaceful atmosphere around the body, particularly in the case of a great master or practitioner, to avoid causing the slightest disturbance.

But even the body of an ordinary person is often not moved before three days have elapsed, since you never know if a person is realized or not, and it is uncertain when the consciousness has separated from the body. It is believed that if the body is touched in a certain place—if, for example, an injection is given—it may draw the consciousness to that spot. Then the consciousness of the dead person may leave through the nearest opening instead of through the fontanel, and take on an unfortunate rebirth.

Some masters insist more than others on leaving the body for three days. Chadral Rinpoche, a Zen-like Tibetan master living in India and Nepal, told people who were complaining that a corpse might smell if it was kept in hot weather: "It's not as though you have to eat it, or try to sell it."

Strictly speaking, then, autopsies or cremations are best done after the three days' interval. However, these days, since it may not be at all practical or possible to keep a body this long without moving it, at least the phowa practice should be effected before the body is touched or moved in any way.

THE DEATH OF A MASTER

A realized practitioner continues to abide by the recognition of the nature of mind at the moment of death, and awakens into the Ground Luminosity when it manifests. He or she may even remain in that state for a number of days. Some practitioners and masters die sitting upright in meditation posture, and others in the "posture of the sleeping lion." Besides their perfect poise, there will be other signs that show they are resting in the state of the Ground Luminosity: There is still a certain color and glow in their face, the nose does not sink inward, the skin remains soft and flexible, the body does not become stiff, the eyes are said to keep a soft and compassionate glow, and there is still a warmth at the heart. Great care is taken that the master's body is not touched, and silence is maintained until he or she has arisen from this state of meditation.

Gyalwang Karmapa, a great master and head of one of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism, died in hospital in the United States in 1981. He was an extraordinary inspiration to all those around him because of his constant cheerfulness and compassion. Dr. Ranulfo Sanchez, chief of surgery, said:

I personally felt that His Holiness was not just an ordinary man. When he looked at you, it was like he was searching inside you, as if he could see through you. I was very struck by the way he looked at me and seemed to understand what was going on. His Holiness affected practically everyone in the hospital who came in contact with him. Many times when we felt he was near death, he would smile at us and tell us we were wrong, and then he'd improve . . .

His Holiness never took any pain medication. We the doctors would see him and realize he must be in a lot of pain, so we'd ask him, "Are you having a lot of pain today?" He'd say "No." Towards the end we knew he could sense our anxiety and it became a running joke. We'd ask him, "Are you having any pain?" He'd smile this extremely kind smile and say "No."

All his vital signs were very low. I gave him a shot . . . so that he could communicate in his last minutes. I left the room for a few

minutes while he conversed with the tulkus, whom he assured he was not intending to die that day. When I returned five minutes later, he was sitting straight up, with his eyes wide open, and said clearly, "Hello, how are you?" All his vital signs had reversed and within half an hour he was sitting up in bed, talking and laughing. Medically this is unheard of; the nurses were all white. One of them lifted her sleeve to show me her arm, covered with goose-bumps.

The nursing staff noticed that Karmapa's body did not follow the usual progression of rigor mortis and decay, but seemed to remain just as it had been when he died. After a while they became aware that the area around his heart was still warm. Dr. Sanchez said:

They brought me into the room about thirty-six hours after he died. I felt the area right over his heart, and it was warmer than the surrounding area. It's something for which there is no medical explanation.¹

Some masters pass away sitting in meditation, with the body supporting itself. Kalu Rinpoche died in 1989 in his monastery in the Himalayas, with a number of masters and a doctor and nurse present. His closest disciple wrote:

Rinpoche himself tried to sit up, and had difficulty to do so. Lama Gyaltsen, feeling that this was perhaps the time, and that not to sit up could create an obstacle for Rinpoche, supported Rinpoche's back as he sat up. Rinpoche extended his hand to me, and I also helped him to sit up. Rinpoche wanted to sit absolutely straight, both saying this and indicating with a gesture of his hand. The doctor and nurse were upset by this, and so Rinpoche relaxed his posture slightly. He, nevertheless, assumed meditation posture. . . . Rinpoche placed his hands in meditation posture, his open eyes gazed outwards in meditation gaze, and his lips moved softly. A profound feeling of peace and happiness settled on us all and spread through our minds. All of us present felt that the indescribable happiness that was filling us was the faintest reflection of what was pervading Rinpoche's mind . . . slowly Rinpoche's gaze and his eyelids lowered and the breath stopped.²

I shall always remember the death of my own beloved master, Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö, in the summer of 1959. During the last part of his life, he would try and leave his monastery as little as possible. Masters of all traditions would flock to him for teachings, and holders of all lineages would look to him for instructions, as he was the source of

their transmission. The monastery where he lived, Dzongsar, became one of the most vibrant centers of spiritual activity in Tibet, as all the great Lamas came and went. His word in the region was law; he was such a great master that almost everybody was his disciple, so much so that he had the power to stop civil wars by threatening to withdraw his spiritual protection from the fighters of both sides.

Unfortunately, as the grip of the Chinese invaders tightened, conditions in Kham deteriorated rapidly, and even as a young boy I could sense the impending menace of what was to come. In 1955 my master had certain signs that showed he should leave Tibet. First he went on a pilgrimage to the sacred sites of central and southern Tibet; and then, to fulfill a deep wish of his master, he made a pilgrimage to the holy places of India, and I went with him. We all hoped that the situation in the east might improve while we were away. It turned out, I was to realize later, that my master's decision to leave had been taken as a sign by many other Lamas and ordinary people that Tibet was doomed, and it allowed them to escape in good time.

My master had a longstanding invitation to visit Sikkim, a small country in the Himalayas and one of the sacred lands of Padmasambhava. Jamyang Khyentse was the incarnation of Sikkim's holiest saint, and the King of Sikkim had requested him to teach there and bless the land with his presence. Once they heard he had gone there, many masters came from Tibet to receive his teachings, and brought with them rare texts and scriptures that might not otherwise have survived. Jamyang Khyentse was a master of masters, and the Palace Temple where he lived became once again a great spiritual center. As the conditions in Tibet became more and more disastrous, more and more Lamas gathered around him.

Sometimes great masters who teach a lot, it is said, do not live very long; it is almost as if they attract toward them any obstacles there are to the spiritual teachings. There were prophecies that if my master had put aside teaching and traveled as an unknown hermit to remote corners of the country, he would have lived for many more years. In fact, he tried to do this: When we started on our last journey from Kham, he left all his possessions behind him and went in complete secrecy, not intending to teach but to travel on pilgrimage. Yet once they found out who he was, people everywhere requested him to give teachings and initiations. So vast was

his compassion that, knowing what he was risking, he sacrificed his own life to keep on teaching.

It was in Sikkim, then, that Jamyang Khyentse fell ill; at that very same time, the terrible news came that Tibet had finally fallen. All the seniormost Lamas, the heads of the lineages, arrived one after another to visit him, and prayers and rituals for his long life went on day and night. Everybody took part. We all pleaded with him to continue living, for a master of his greatness has the power to decide when it is time to leave his body. He just lay there in bed, accepted all our offerings and laughed, and said with a knowing smile: "All right, just to be auspicious, I'll say I will live."

The first indication we had that my master was going to die was through Gyalwang Karmapa. He told Karmapa that he had completed the work he had come to do in this life, and he had decided to leave this world. One of Khyentse's close attendants burst into tears as soon as Karmapa revealed this to him, and then we knew. His death was eventually to occur just after we had heard that the three great monasteries of Tibet, Sera, Drepung, and Ganden, had been occupied by the Chinese. It seemed tragically symbolic that as Tibet collapsed, so this great being, the embodiment of Tibetan Buddhism, was passing away.

Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö died at three o'clock in the morning, on the sixth day of the fifth Tibetan month. Ten days before, while we were doing a whole night's practice for his long life, suddenly the ground was shaken by an enormous earthquake. According to the Buddhist Sutras, this is a sign that marks the imminent passing of an enlightened being.³

For three days after he had passed away, complete secrecy was kept, and no one was allowed to know that Khyentse had died. I was told simply that his health had taken a turn for the worse, and instead of sleeping in his room as I usually did, I was asked to sleep in another room. My master's closest assistant and master of ceremonies, Lama Chokden, had been with my master longer than anyone. He was a silent, serious, ascetic man with piercing eyes and sunken cheeks, and a dignified and elegant but humble manner. Chokden was known for his fundamental integrity, his deep, human decency, his courtesy of heart, and his extraordinary memory: He seemed to remember every word my master said, and every story, and he knew the smallest details of all the most intricate rituals

and their significance. He was also an exemplary practitioner and a teacher in his own right. We watched, then, as Lama Chokden continued to carry my master's meals into his room, but the expression on his face was somber. We kept asking how Khyentse was, and Chokden would only say: "He is just the same." In certain traditions, after a master has died, and during the time he remains in meditation after death, it is important to maintain secrecy. It was only three days later, as I have said, that we finally heard that he had died.

The Government of India then sent a telegram to Peking. From there the message went out to my master's own monastery, Dzongsar, in Tibet, where many of the monks were already in tears, because somehow they knew he was dying. Just before we had left, Khyentse had made a mysterious pledge that he would return once before he died. And he did. On New Year's Day that year, about six months before he actually passed away, when a ritual dance was being performed, many of the older monks had a vision of him, just as he used to be, appearing in the sky. At the monastery my master had founded a study college, famous for producing some of the most excellent scholars of recent times. In the main temple stood a huge statue of the future Buddha, Maitreya. Early one morning, soon after the New Years' Day when the vision had appeared in the sky, the caretaker of the temple opened the door: Khyentse was sitting in the Buddha Maitreya's lap.

My master passed away in "the sleeping lion's posture." All the signs were there to show that he was still in a state of meditation, and no one touched the body for three whole days. The moment when he then came out of his meditation will stay with me all my life: His nose suddenly deflated, the color in his face drained away, and then his head fell slightly to one side. Until that moment there had been a certain poise and strength and life about his body.

It was evening when we washed the body, dressed it, and took it from his bedroom up into the main temple of the palace. Crowds of people were there, filing around the temple to show their respect.

Then something extraordinary happened. An incandescent, milky light, looking like a thin and luminous fog, began to appear and gradually spread everywhere. The palace temple

had four large electric lamps outside; normally at that time of the evening they shone brightly, as it was already dark by seven o'clock. Yet they were dimmed by this mysterious light. Apa Pant, who was then Political Officer to Sikkim, was the first to ring and inquire what on earth it could be. Then many others started to call; this strange, unearthly light was seen by hundreds of people. One of the other masters then told us that such manifestations of light are said in the Tantras to be a sign of someone attaining Buddhahood.

It was originally planned that Jamyang Khyentse's body was to be kept in the palace temple for one week, but very soon we started receiving telegrams from his disciples. It was 1959; many of them, including Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, had just arrived in exile, having made the long and dangerous escape from Tibet. They all begged that the body be kept so that they could have a chance to see it. So we kept it for two more weeks. Each day there were four different prayer sessions with hundreds of monks, headed by Lamas of all the different schools, and often with the lineage holders presiding, and thousands upon thousands of butter-lamps were offered. The body did not smell or start to decay, so we kept it for another week. India is fiercely hot in the summer, but even though week after week went by, the body showed no signs of decay. We ended up keeping Jamyang Khyentse's body for six months; a whole environment of teaching and practice evolved in its holy presence: teachings that Jamyang Khyentse had been giving, which were incomplete when he died, were finished by his oldest disciples, and many, many monks were ordained.

Finally we took the body to the place he had chosen for the cremation. Tashiding is one of the most sacred sites in Sikkim, and stands on top of a hill. All the disciples went there, and we constructed the *stupa* for his relics by ourselves, although in India all grueling manual work is usually done by hired laborers. Everybody, young and old, from even a master like Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche to the most ordinary person, carried stones up the hill and built the whole thing with their own bare hands. It was the greatest possible testimony to the devotion he inspired.

No words would ever be able to convey the loss of Jamyang Khyentse's death. In leaving Tibet I and my family lost all

our lands and possessions, but I was too young to have formed any attachment to them. But losing Jamyang Khyentse was a loss so enormous that I still mourn it, so many years later. My entire childhood had been lived in the sunlight of his presence. I had slept in a small bed at the foot of his bed, and woke for many years to the sound of him whispering his morning prayers and clicking his mala, his Buddhist rosary. His words, his teachings, the great peaceful radiance of his presence, his smile, all of these are indelible memories for me. He is the inspiration of my life, and it is his presence as well as Padmasambhava's that I always invoke when I am in difficulties or when I teach. His death was an incalculable loss for the world and an incalculable loss for Tibet. I used to think of him, as I thought also of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, that if Buddhism was destroyed and only he remained, nevertheless Buddhism would still be alive, for he was the complete embodiment of what Buddhism means. With Jamyang Khyentse's passing, a whole epoch, sometimes it seems a whole dimension of spiritual power and knowledge, passed with him.

He died when he was only sixty-seven, and I often wonder how the entire future of Tibetan Buddhism would have been different if Jamyang Khyentse had lived to inspire its growth in exile and in the West with the same authority and infinite respect for all traditions and lineages that had made him so beloved in Tibet. Because he was the master of masters, and since the lineage-holders of all the traditions had received initiations and teachings from him and so revered him as their root-teacher, he was able naturally to draw them together, in a spirit of devoted harmony and cooperation.

And yet, a great master never dies. Jamyang Khyentse is here inspiring me as I write this; he is the force behind this book and whatever I teach; he is the foundation and basis of the spirit behind everything I do; it is he who goes on giving me my inner direction. His blessing and the confidence it gives me have been with me, guiding me through all the difficulties of trying to represent, in whatever way I can, the tradition of which he was so sublime a representative. His noble face is more alive to me now than any of the faces of the living, and in his eyes I always see that light of transcendent wisdom and transcendent compassion that no power in heaven or earth can put out.

May all of you who read this book come to know him a little as I know him, may all of you be as inspired as I have been by the dedication of his life and the splendor of his dying, may all of you draw from his example of total dedication to the welfare of all sentient beings the courage and wisdom you will need to work for the truth in this time!

SEVENTEEN

Intrinsic Radiance

AS THE GROUND LUMINOSITY DAWNS AT DEATH, an experienced practitioner will maintain full awareness and merge with it, thereby attaining liberation. But if we fail to recognize the Ground Luminosity, then we encounter the next bardo, the luminous bardo of dharmata.

The teaching on the bardo of dharmata is a very special instruction, one specific to Dzogchen practice and treasured at the heart of the Dzogchen teachings over the centuries. Initially I felt some hesitation about publicly presenting this most sacred of teachings, and in fact if there had not been any precedent I might not have done so at all. However, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and a number of other books that refer to the bardo of dharmata have already been published, and have led to some naive conclusions. I feel it is extremely important, and timely, to make available a straightforward clarification of this bardo, putting it into its authentic context. I should stress that I have not gone into any detail about the advanced practices involved; none of these practices could, under any circumstances, ever be done effectively except with the instructions and guidance of a qualified master, and when the commitment and connection with that master is kept completely pure.

I have gathered insights from many different sources in order to make this chapter, which I feel is one of the most important in this book, as lucid as possible. I hope that through it some of you will make a connection with this extraordinary teaching, and be inspired to investigate further and to begin to practice yourselves.

THE FOUR PHASES OF DHARMATA

The Sanskrit word *dharmata*, *chö nyi* in Tibetan, means the intrinsic nature of everything, the essence of things as they

are. Dharmata is the naked, unconditioned truth, the nature of reality, or the true nature of phenomenal existence. What we are discussing here is something fundamental to the whole understanding of the nature of mind and the nature of everything.

The end of the dissolution process and dawning of the Ground Luminosity has opened up an entirely new dimension, which now begins to unfold. One helpful way I have found to explain it is to compare it with the way night turns into day. The final phase of the dissolution process of dying is the black experience of the stage of "full attainment." It is described as "like a sky shrouded in darkness." The arising of the Ground Luminosity is like the clarity in the empty sky just before dawn. Now gradually the sun of dharmata begins to rise in all its splendor, illuminating the contours of the land in all directions. The natural radiance of Rigpa manifests spontaneously and blazes out as energy and light.

Just as the sun rises in that clear and empty sky, the luminous appearances of the bardo of dharmata will all arise from the all-pervading space of the Ground Luminosity. The name we give to this display of sound, light, and color is "spontaneous presence," for it is always and inherently present within the expanse of "primordial purity," which is its ground.

What is actually taking place here is a process of unfoldment, in which mind and its fundamental nature are gradually becoming more and more manifest. The bardo of dharmata is one stage in that process. For it is through this dimension of light and energy that mind unfolds from its purest state, the Ground Luminosity, toward its manifestation as form in the next bardo, the bardo of becoming.

I find it extremely suggestive that modern physics has shown that when matter is investigated, it is revealed as an ocean of energy and light. "Matter, as it were, is condensed or frozen light . . . all matter is a condensation of light into patterns moving back and forth at average speeds which are less than the speed of light," remarks David Bohm. Modern physics also understands light in a many-sided way: "It's energy and it's also information—content, form and structure. It's the potential for everything."¹

The bardo of dharmata has four phases, each one of which presents another opportunity for liberation. If the opportunity is not taken, then the next phase will unfold. The explanation I am giving here of this bardo originates in the Dzogchen

Tantras, where it is taught that only through the special advanced practice of luminosity, Tögal, can the true significance of the bardo of dharmata be in any real sense understood. The bardo of dharmata, then, figures with far less prominence in other cycles of teachings on death in the Tibetan tradition. Even in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which also belongs to the Dzogchen teachings, the sequence of these four phases is only implicit, as if slightly hidden, and does not appear there in such a clear and ordered structure.

I must stress, however, that all words could possibly do is give some conceptual picture of what might happen in the bardo of dharmata. The appearances of this bardo will remain just conceptual images until the practitioner has perfected the Tögal practice, when each detail of the description I am about to give becomes an undeniable personal experience. What I am trying to give you here is some sense that such a marvelous and amazing dimension could exist, and to complete my description of the whole of the bardos. I also profoundly hope that this complete description could act perhaps as some kind of reminder when you go through the process of death.

1. Luminosity—the Landscape of Light

In the bardo of dharmata, you take on a body of light. The first phase of this bardo is when "space dissolves into luminosity":

Suddenly you become aware of a flowing vibrant world of sound, light, and color. All the ordinary features of our familiar environment have melted into an all-pervasive landscape of light. This is brilliantly clear and radiant, transparent and multicolored, unlimited by any kind of dimension or direction, shimmering and constantly in motion. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* calls it "like a mirage on a plain in the heat of summer." Its colors are the natural expression of the intrinsic elemental qualities of the mind: space is perceived as blue light, water as white, earth as yellow, fire as red, and wind as green.

How stable these dazzling appearances of light are in the bardo of dharmata depends entirely upon what stability you have managed to attain in Tögal practice. Only a real mastery of this practice will enable you to stabilize the experience and so use it to gain liberation. Otherwise the bardo of dharmata will simply flash by like a bolt of lightning; you will not even know that it has occurred. Let me stress again that only a practitioner of Tögal will be able to make the all-important

recognition: that these radiant manifestations of light have no separate existence from the nature of mind.

2. Union—the Deities

If you are unable to recognize this as the spontaneous display of Rigpa, the simple rays and colors then begin to integrate and coalesce into points or balls of light of different sizes, called tiklé. Within them the "mandalas of the peaceful and wrathful deities" appear, as enormous spherical concentrations of light seeming to occupy the whole of space.

This is the second phase, known as "luminosity dissolving into union," where the luminosity manifests in the form of buddhas or deities of various size, color, and form, holding different attributes. The brilliant light they emanate is blinding and dazzling, the sound is tremendous, like the roaring of a thousand thunderclaps, and the rays and beams of light are like lasers, piercing everything.

These are the "forty-two peaceful and fifty-eight wrathful deities" depicted in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. They unfold over a certain period of "days," taking on their own characteristic mandala pattern of five-fold clusters. This is a vision that fills the whole of your perception with such intensity that if you are unable to recognize it for what it is, it appears terrifying and threatening. Sheer fear and blind panic can consume you, and you faint.

From yourself and from the deities, very fine shafts of light stream out, joining your heart with theirs. Countless luminous spheres appear in their rays, which increase and then "roll up," as the deities all dissolve into you.

3. Wisdom

If again you fail to recognize and gain stability, the next phase unfolds, called "union dissolving into wisdom."

Another fine shaft of light springs out from your heart and an enormous vision unfolds from it; however, every detail remains distinct and precise. This is the display of the various aspects of wisdom, which appear together in a show of unfurled carpets of light and resplendent spherical luminous tiklés:

First, on a carpet of deep blue light appear shimmering tiklés of sapphire blue, in patterns of five. Above that, on a carpet of white light, appear radiant tiklés, white like crystal. Above, on a carpet of yellow light, appear golden tiklés, and upon that a carpet of red light supports ruby red tiklés. They

are crowned by a radiant sphere like an outspread canopy made of peacock feathers.

This brilliant display of light is the manifestation of the five wisdoms: wisdom of all-encompassing space, mirror-like wisdom, equalizing wisdom, wisdom of discernment, and all-accomplishing wisdom. But since the all-accomplishing wisdom is only perfected at the time of enlightenment, it does not appear yet. Therefore there is no green carpet of light and tiklés, yet it is inherent within all the other colors. What is being manifested here is our potential of enlightenment, and the all-accomplishing wisdom will only appear when we become a buddha.

If you do not attain liberation here through resting undistracted in the nature of mind, the carpets of light and their tiklés, along with your Rigpa, all dissolve into the radiant sphere of light, which is like the canopy of peacock feathers.

4. Spontaneous Presence

This heralds the final phase of the bardo of dharmata, "wisdom dissolving into spontaneous presence." Now the whole of reality presents itself in one tremendous display. First the state of primordial purity dawns like an open, cloudless sky. Then the peaceful and wrathful deities appear, followed by the pure realms of the buddhas, and below them the six realms of samsaric existence.

The limitlessness of this vision is utterly beyond our ordinary imagination. Every possibility is presented: from wisdom and liberation, to confusion and rebirth. At this point you will find yourself endowed with powers of clairvoyant perception and recollection. For example, with total clairvoyance and your senses unobstructed, you will know your past and future lives, see into others' minds, and have knowledge of all six realms of existence. In an instant you will vividly recall whatever teachings you have heard, and even teachings you have never heard will awaken in your mind.

The entire vision then dissolves back into its original essence, like a tent collapsing once its ropes are cut.

If you have the stability to recognize these manifestations as the "self-radiance" of your own Rigpa, you will be liberated. But without the experience of Tögal practice, you will be unable to look at the visions of the deities, which are "as

bright as the sun." Instead, as a result of the habitual tendencies of your previous lives, your gaze will be drawn downward to the six realms. It is those that you will recognize and which will lure you again into delusion.

In the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, periods of days are allotted to the experiences of the bardo of dharmata. These are not solar days of twenty-four hours, because in the sphere of dharmata we have gone completely beyond all limits such as time and space. These days are "meditation days," and refer to the length of time we have been able to rest undistracted in the nature of mind, or in one single state of mind. With no stability in meditation practice, these days could be minutely short, and the appearance of the peaceful and wrathful deities so fleeting that we cannot even register they have arisen.

UNDERSTANDING DHARMATA

*Now when the bardo of dharmata dawns upon me,
I will abandon all fear and terror,
I will recognize whatever appears as the display of my own Rigpa,
And know it to be the natural appearance of this bardo;
Now that I have reached this crucial point,
I will not fear the peaceful and wrathful deities, that arise from the
nature of my very own mind.*

The key to understanding this bardo is that all the experiences that take place in it are the natural radiance of the nature of our mind. What is happening is that different aspects of its enlightened energy are being released. Just as the dancing rainbows of light scattered by a crystal are its natural display, so too the dazzling appearances of dharmata cannot be separated from the nature of mind. *They are its spontaneous expression.* So however terrifying the appearances may be, says the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, they have no more claim on your fear than a stuffed lion.

Strictly speaking, however, it would be wrong to call these appearances "visions" or even "experiences," because vision and experience depend upon a dualistic relationship between a perceiver and something perceived. If we can recognize the appearances of the bardo of dharmata as the wisdom energy of our very own mind, there is no difference between perceiver and perceived, and this is an experience of non-duality. To enter into that experience completely is to attain liberation. For, as Kalu Rinpoche says, "Liberation arises at that moment

in the after-death state when consciousness can realize its experiences to be nothing other than mind itself."²

However, now that we are no longer grounded or shielded by a physical body or world, the energies of the nature of mind released in the bardo state can look overwhelmingly real, and appear to take on an objective existence. They seem to inhabit the world outside of us. And without the stability of practice, we have no knowledge of anything that is non-dual, that is not dependent on our own perception. Once we mistake the appearances as separate from us, as "external visions," we respond with fear or hope, which leads us into delusion.

Just as in the dawning of the Ground Luminosity recognition was the key to liberation, so here in the bardo of dharmata it is also. Only here it is the recognition of the self-radiance of *Rigpa*, the manifesting energy of the nature of mind, that makes the difference between liberation or continuing in an uncontrolled cycle of rebirth. Take, for example, the appearances of the hundred peaceful and wrathful deities, which occur in the second phase of this bardo. These consist of the buddhas of the five buddha families, their female counterparts, male and female bodhisattvas, the buddhas of the six realms, and a number of wrathful and protective deities. All emerge amidst the brilliant light of the five wisdoms.

How are we to understand these buddhas or deities? "Each one of these pure forms expresses an enlightened perspective of a part of our impure experience."³ The five masculine buddhas are the pure aspect of the five aggregates of ego. Their five wisdoms are the pure aspect of the five negative emotions. The five female buddhas are the pure elemental qualities of mind, which we experience as the impure elements of our physical body and environment. The eight bodhisattvas are the pure aspect of the different types of consciousness, and their female counterparts are the objects of these consciousnesses.

Whether the pure vision of the buddha families and their wisdoms manifests, or the impure vision of the aggregates and negative emotions arises, they are intrinsically the same in their fundamental nature. The difference lies in how we recognize them, and whether we recognize that they emerge from the ground of the nature of mind as its enlightened energy.

Take, for example, what manifests in our ordinary mind as a thought of desire; if its true nature is recognized, it arises, free of grasping, as the "wisdom of discernment." Hatred and anger, when truly recognized, arise as diamond-like clarity, free of grasping; this is the "mirror-like wisdom." When ignorance

is recognized, it arises as vast and natural clarity without concepts: the "wisdom of all-encompassing space." Pride, when recognized, is realized as non-duality and equality: the "equalizing wisdom." Jealousy, when recognized, is freed from partiality and grasping, and arises as the "all-accomplishing wisdom." So the five negative emotions arise as the direct result of our not recognizing their true nature. When truly recognized, they are purified and liberated, and arise themselves as none other than the display of the five wisdoms.

In the bardo of dharmata, when you fail to recognize the brilliant lights of these wisdoms, then self-grasping enters your "perception," just as, one master says, a person who is seriously ill with a high fever will begin to hallucinate and see all kinds of delusions. So, for example, if you fail to recognize the red, ruby light of the wisdom of discernment, it arises as fire, for it is the pure essence of the fire element; if you fail to recognize the true nature of the golden radiance of the equalizing wisdom, then it arises as the element earth, because it is the pure essence of the earth element; and so on.

This is how, when self-grasping enters into the "perception" of the appearances of the bardo of dharmata, they are transformed, you could almost say solidified, through that into the various bases of delusion of samsara.

One Dzogchen master uses the example of ice and water to show how this lack of recognition and self-grasping unfold: Water is usually liquid, an element with wonderful qualities, that purifies and quenches thirst. But when it freezes, it solidifies into ice. In a similar way, whenever self-grasping arises it solidifies both our inner experience and the way we perceive the world around us. Yet just as in the heat of the sun ice will melt into water, so in the light of recognition, our unbound wisdom nature is revealed.

Now we can see exactly how, after the dawning of the Ground Luminosity and the bardo of dharmata, samsara actually arises as a result of two successive failures to recognize the essential nature of mind. In the first the Ground Luminosity, the ground of the nature of mind, is not recognized; if it had been, liberation would have been attained. In the second the energy nature of the nature of mind manifests, and a second chance for liberation presents itself; if that is not recognized, arising negative emotions start to solidify into different false perceptions, which together go on to create the illusory realms we call samsara, and which imprison us in

the cycle of birth and death. The whole of spiritual practice, then, is dedicated to directly reversing what I would call this progress of ignorance, and so of de-creating, de-solidifying those interlinked and interdependent false perceptions that have led to our entrapment in the illusory reality of our own invention.

Just as when the Ground Luminosity dawned at the moment of death, here too in the bardo of dharmata, liberation cannot be taken for granted. For when the brilliant light of wisdom shines out, it is accompanied by a display of simple, comforting, cozy sounds and lights, less challenging and overwhelming than the light of wisdom. These dim lights—smoky, yellow, green, blue, red, and white—are our habitual, unconscious tendencies accumulated by anger, greed, ignorance, desire, jealousy, and pride. These are the emotions that create the six realms of samsara: hell, hungry ghost, animal, human, demigod, and god realms respectively.

If we have not recognized and stabilized the dharmata nature of mind in life, we are instinctively drawn toward the dim lights of the six realms, as the basic tendency toward grasping, which we have built up during life, begins to stir and awaken. Threatened by the dynamic brilliance of wisdom, the mind retreats. The cozy lights, the invitation of our habitual tendencies, lure us toward a rebirth, determined by the particular negative emotion that dominates our karma and our mindstream.

Let us take an example of the appearance of one of the peaceful buddhas from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which will illustrate this whole process. The master or spiritual friend addresses the consciousness of the dead person:

O son/daughter of an enlightened family, listen without distraction!

On the third day, a yellow light will arise which is the pure essence of the element earth. Simultaneously, from the yellow southern buddha-field known as "The Glorious," the Buddha Ratnasambhava will appear before you, his body yellow in color, and holding a wish-fulfilling jewel in his hand. He presides upon a throne borne up by horses and is embraced by the supreme female consort, Mamaki. Around him are the two male bodhisattvas, Akashagarbha and Samantabhadra,⁴ and the two female bodhisattvas, Mala and Dhupa, so that six buddha bodies appear from within the expanse of rainbow light.

The inherent purity of the skandha of feeling—which is the "equalizing wisdom"—a yellow light, dazzling and adorned with tinctures of light, large and small, radiant and clear, and unbearable to the eyes, will stream toward you from the heart of Ratnasambhava and his consort, and pierce your heart so that your eyes cannot stand to gaze at it.

At exactly the same time, together with the light of wisdom, a dull blue light representing the human realm will come toward you and pierce your heart. Then, driven by pride, you will flee in terror from the intensity of the yellow light, but delight in the dim blue light of the human realm, and so become attached to it.

At this moment do not be afraid of the piercing yellow light, in all its dazzling radiance, but recognize it as wisdom. Let your Rigpa rest in it, relaxed, at ease, in a state free of any activity. And have confidence in it; have devotion and longing towards it. If you recognize it as the natural radiance of your own Rigpa, even though you do not have devotion and have not said the necessary prayer of inspiration, all the buddha bodies and rays of light will merge inseparably with you, and you will attain buddhahood.

If you do not recognize it as the natural radiance of your own Rigpa, then pray to it with devotion, thinking, "This is the light of the compassionate energy of Buddha Ratnasambhava. I take refuge in it." Since it is in fact the Buddha Ratnasambhava coming to guide you amid the terrors of the bardo, and it is the light-ray hook of his compassionate energy, so fill your heart with devotion to it.

Do not delight in the dim blue light of the human realm. This is the seductive path of habitual tendencies which you have accumulated through intense pride. If you are attached to it you will fall into the human realm, where you will experience the suffering of birth, old age, sickness, and death, and you will miss the chance to emerge from the swamp of samsara. This (dull blue light) is an obstacle blocking the path to liberation, so do not look at it, but abandon pride! Abandon its habitual tendencies! Do not be attached (to the dull blue light)! Do not yearn for it! Feel devotion and longing for the dazzling, radiant yellow light, focus with total attention on the Buddha Ratnasambhava, and say this prayer:

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Alas!
When through intense pride I wander in samsara,
May the Buddha Ratnasambhava lead the way
On the radiant path of light which is the "equalizing wisdom,"
May the supreme female consort Mamaki walk behind me;
May they help me through the dangerous pathway of the bardo,
And bring me to the perfect buddha state.

By saying this prayer of inspiration with deep devotion, you will dissolve into rainbow light in the heart of the Buddha Ratnasambhava and his consort and become a Sambhogakaya Buddha⁵ in the southern buddha-field known as "The Glorious."

This description of the appearance of the Buddha Ratnasambhava concludes by explaining that through this "showing" by the master or spiritual friend, liberation is certain, however weak the dead person's capacities may be. Yet, even after being "shown" many times, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* says, there are those who, because of negative karma, will not recognize and gain liberation. Disturbed by desire and obscurations, and terrified by the different sounds and lights, they will flee. So, on the following "day," the next buddha, Amitabha, the Buddha of Limitless Light, with his mandala of deities, will appear in all the splendor of his dazzling red light, manifesting together with the dim, seductive, yellow light-path of the hungry ghosts, which is created out of desire and meanness. And so the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* introduces the appearance of each of the peaceful and wrathful deities in turn in a similar way.

I am often asked: "Will the deities appear to a Western person? And if so, will it be in familiar, Western forms?"

The manifestations of the bardo of dharmata are called "spontaneously present." This means that they are inherent and unconditioned, and exist in us all. Their arising is not dependent on any spiritual realization we may have; only the recognition of them is. They are not unique to Tibetans; they are a universal and fundamental experience, but the way they are perceived depends on our conditioning. Since they are by nature limitless, they have the freedom then to manifest in any form.

Therefore the deities can take on forms we are most familiar with in our lives. For example, for Christian practitioners, the deities might take the form of Christ or the Virgin Mary. Generally, the whole purpose of the enlightened manifestation of the buddhas is to help us, so they may take on whatever form is most appropriate and beneficial for us. But in whatever form the deities appear, it is important to recognize that there is definitely no difference whatsoever in their fundamental nature.

RECOGNITION

In Dzogchen it is explained that just as a person will not recognize the Ground Luminosity without a true realization of the nature of mind and a stable experience of Trekchö practice, so without the stability of Tögal hardly anyone can recognize the bardo of dharmata. An accomplished Tögal practitioner who has perfected and stabilized the luminosity of the nature of mind has already come to a direct knowledge in his or her life of the very same manifestations that will emerge in the bardo of dharmata. This energy and light, then, lie within us, although at the moment they are hidden. Yet when the body and grosser levels of mind die, they are naturally freed, and the sound, color, and light of our true nature blaze out.

However, it is not only through Tögal that this bardo can be used as an opportunity for liberation. Practitioners of Tantra in Buddhism will relate the appearances of the bardo of dharmata to their own practice. In Tantra the principle of deities is a way of communicating. It is difficult to relate to the presence of enlightened energies if they have no form or ground for personal communication. The deities are understood as metaphors, which personalize and capture the infinite energies and qualities of the wisdom mind of the buddhas. Personifying them in the form of deities enables the practitioner to recognize them and relate to them. Through training in creating and reabsorbing the deities in the practice of visualization, he or she realizes that the mind that perceives the deity and the deity itself are not separate.

In Tibetan Buddhism practitioners will have a *yidam*, that is, a practice of a particular buddha or deity with which they have a strong karmic connection, which for them is an embodiment of the truth, and which they invoke as the heart of their practice. Instead of perceiving the appearances of the dharmata as external phenomena, the Tantric practitioners will relate them to their *yidam* practice, and unite and merge with the appearances. Since in their practice they have recognized the *yidam* as the natural radiance of the enlightened mind, they are able to view the appearances with this recognition, and let them arise as the deity. With this pure perception, a practitioner recognizes whatever appears in the bardo as none other than the display of the *yidam*. Then, through the power of his practice and the blessing of the deity, he or she will gain liberation in the bardo of dharmata.

This is why in the Tibetan tradition the advice given to lay people and ordinary practitioners unfamiliar with the yidam practice is that whatever appearances arise, they should consider them, and recognize them immediately and essentially as Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Compassion, or Padmasambhava, or Amitabha—whichever they have been most familiar with. To put it briefly, whichever way you have practiced in life will be the very same way by which you try to recognize the appearances of the bardo of dharmata.

Another revealing way of looking at the bardo of dharmata is to see it as duality being expressed in its ultimately purest form. We are presented with the means to liberation, yet we are simultaneously seduced by the call of our habits and instincts. We experience the pure energy of mind, and its confusion at one and the same time. It is almost as if we were being prompted to make up our mind—to choose between one or the other. It goes without saying, however, that whether we even have this choice at all is determined by the degree and perfection of our spiritual practice in life.

EIGHTEEN

The Bardo of Becoming

THE EXPERIENCE OF DEATH, for most people, will simply mean passing into a state of oblivion at the end of the process of dying. The three stages of the inner dissolution can be as quick, it is sometimes said, as three snaps of a finger. The white and red essences of father and mother meet at the heart, and the black experience called "full attainment" arises. The Ground Luminosity dawns, but we fail to recognize it and we faint into unconsciousness.

As I have said, this is the first failure to recognize, or stage of ignorance, called *Ma Rigpa* in Tibetan, the opposite of Rigpa. This marks the beginning in us of another cycle of samsara, which was interrupted for an instant at the moment of death. The bardo of dharmata then occurs, and it simply flashes past, unrecognized. This is the second failure of recognition, a second stage of ignorance, *Ma Rigpa*.

The first thing that we are aware of is "as if the sky and earth were separating again": We suddenly awaken into the intermediate state that lies between death and a new rebirth. This is called the bardo of becoming, the *sipa bardo*, and is the third bardo of death.

With our failure to recognize the Ground Luminosity and our failure to recognize the bardo of dharmata, the seeds of all our habitual tendencies are activated and reawakened. The bardo of becoming spans the time between their reawakening and our entering the womb of the next life.

The word *sipa* in *sipa bardo*, which is translated as "becoming," also means "possibility" and "existence." In the *sipa* bardo, as the mind is no longer limited and obstructed by the physical body of this world, the "possibilities" are infinite for "becoming" reborn in different realms. And this bardo has the outer "existence" of the mental body and the inner "existence" of the mind.

The outstanding feature of the bardo of becoming is that mind takes on the predominant role, whereas the bardo of dharmata unfolded within the realm of Rigpa. So, in the bardo of dharmata we have a body of light, and in the bardo of becoming we have a mental body.

In the bardo of becoming the mind is endowed with immense clarity and unlimited mobility, yet the direction in which it moves is determined solely by the habitual tendencies of our past karma. So it is called the "karmic" bardo of becoming, because as Kalu Rinpoche says: "It is an entirely automatic or blind result of our previous actions or karma, and nothing that occurs here is a conscious decision on the part of the being; we are simply buffeted around by the force of karma."¹

At this point the mind has arrived at the next stage in its process of gradual unfolding: out of its purest state—the Ground Luminosity—through its light and energy—the appearances of the bardo of dharmata—and so into the yet grosser manifestation of a mental form in the bardo of becoming. What takes place now at this stage is a reverse process of dissolution: the winds reappear, and along with them come the thought states connected with ignorance, desire, and anger. Then, because the memory of our past karmic body is still fresh in our mind, we take on a "mental body."

THE MENTAL BODY

Our mental body in the bardo of becoming has a number of special characteristics. It possesses all its senses. It is extremely light, lucid, and mobile, and its awareness is said to be seven times clearer than in life. It is also endowed with a rudimentary kind of clairvoyance, which is not under conscious control, but gives the mental body the ability to read others' minds.

At first this mental body will have a form similar to the body of the life just lived, yet it is without any defects and in the prime of life. Even if you were handicapped or sick in this life, you will have a perfect mental body in the bardo of becoming.

One of the ancient teachings of Dzogchen tells us that the mental body is about the size of a child of eight to ten years old.

Because of the force of conceptual thinking, also known as "the karmic wind," the mental body is unable to remain still, even for an instant. It is ceaselessly on the move. It can go

wherever it wishes unobstructedly, just by thinking. Because the mental body has no physical basis, it can pass through solid barriers such as walls or mountains.²

The mental body can see through three-dimensional objects. Yet since we lack the father and mother essences of the physical body, we no longer have the light of sun or moon, but only a dim glow illuminating the space immediately in front of us. We can see other bardo beings, but we cannot be seen by living beings, except those who have the kind of clairvoyance developed through deep experience of meditation.³ So we can meet and converse for fleeting moments with many other travelers in the bardo world, those who have died before us.

Because of the presence of the five elements in its makeup, the mental body seems to us to be solid, and we still feel pangs of hunger. The bardo teachings say that the mental body lives off odors and derives nourishment from burnt offerings, but it can only benefit from offerings dedicated specifically in its name.

In this state mental activity is very rapid: thoughts come in quick succession, and we can do many things at once. The mind continues to perpetuate set patterns and habits, especially its clinging to experiences, and its belief that they are ultimately real.

THE EXPERIENCES OF THE BARDO

During the first weeks of the bardo, we have the impression that we are a man or woman, just as in our previous life. We do not realize that we are dead. We return home to meet our family and loved ones. We try to talk to them, to touch them on the shoulder. But they do not reply, or even show they are aware we are there. As hard as we try, nothing can make them notice us. We watch, powerless, as they weep or sit stunned and heartbroken over our death. Fruitlessly we try to make use of our belongings. Our place is no longer laid at table, and arrangements are being made to dispose of our possessions. We feel angry, hurt, and frustrated, "like a fish," says the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, "writhing in hot sand."

If we are very attached to our body, we may even try, in vain, to reenter or hover around it. In extreme cases the mental body can linger near its possessions or body for weeks or even years. And still it may not dawn on us we are dead. It is only when we see that we cast no shadow, make no reflection

in the mirror, no footprints on the ground, that finally we realize. And the sheer shock of recognizing we have died can be enough to make us faint away.

In the bardo of becoming we relive all the experiences of our past life, reviewing minute details long lost to memory, and revisiting places, the masters say, "where we did no more than spit on the ground." Every seven days we are compelled to go through the experience of death once again, with all its suffering. If our death was peaceful, that peaceful state of mind is repeated; if it was tormented, however, that torment is repeated too. And remember that this is with a consciousness seven times more intense than that of life, and that in the fleeting period of the bardo of becoming, all the negative karma of previous lives is returning, in a fiercely concentrated and deranging way.

Our restless, solitary wandering through the bardo world is as frantic as a nightmare, and just as in a dream, we believe we have a physical body and that we really exist. Yet all the experiences of this bardo arise only from our mind, created by our karma and habits returning.

The winds of the elements return, and as Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche says, "One hears loud sounds caused by the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind. There is the sound of an avalanche continuously falling behind one, the sound of a great rushing river, the sound of a huge blazing mass of fire like a volcano, and the sound of a great storm."⁴ Trying to escape them in the terrifying darkness, it is said that three different abysses, white, red, and black, "deep and dreadful," open up in front of us. These, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* tells us, are our own anger, desire, and ignorance. We are assailed by freezing downpours, hailstorms of pus and blood; haunted by the sound of disembodied, menacing cries; hounded by flesh-eating demons and carnivorous beasts.

We are swept along relentlessly by the wind of karma, unable to hold onto any ground. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* says: "At this time, the great tornado of karma, terrifying, unbearable, whirling fiercely, will drive you from behind." Consumed by fear, blown to and fro like dandelion seeds in the wind, we roam, helpless, through the gloom of the bardo. Tormented by hunger and thirst, we seek refuge here and there. Our mind's perceptions change every moment, projecting us, "like out of a catapult," says the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, into alternate states of sorrow or joy. Into our minds

comes the longing for a physical body, and yet we fail to find one, which plunges us into further suffering.

The whole landscape and environment is molded by our karma, just as the bardo world can be peopled by the nightmarish images of our own delusions. If our habitual conduct in life was positive, our perception and experience in the bardo will be mixed with bliss and happiness; and if our lives were harmful or hurtful to others, our experiences in the bardo will be ones of pain, grief, and fear. So, it was said in Tibet, fishermen, butchers, and hunters are attacked by monstrous versions of their former victims.

Some who have studied the near-death experience in detail, and especially the "life-review" that is one of its common features, have asked themselves: How could we possibly imagine the horror of the bardo experiences of a drug baron, a dictator, or a Nazi torturer? The "life-review" seems to suggest that, after death, we can experience *all* the suffering for which we were both directly and indirectly responsible.

THE DURATION OF THE BARDO OF BECOMING

The whole of the bardo of becoming has an average duration of forty-nine days, and a minimum length of one week. But it varies, just as now some people live to be a hundred years old, and others die in their youth. Some can even get stuck in the bardo, to become spirits or ghosts. Dudjom Rinpoche used to explain that during the first twenty-one days of the bardo, you still have a strong impression of your previous life, and this is therefore the most important period for the living to be able to help a dead person. After that, your future life slowly takes shape and becomes the dominant influence.

We have to wait in the bardo until we can make a karmic connection with our future parents. I sometimes think of the bardo as something like a transit lounge, in which you can wait for up to forty-nine days before transferring to the next life. But there are two special cases who don't have to wait in the intermediate state, because the intensity of the power of their karma sweeps them immediately on to their next rebirth. The first are those who have lived extremely beneficial and positive lives, and so trained their minds in spiritual practice that the force of their realization carries them directly into a good rebirth. The second case are those whose lives have been negative and harmful; they travel swiftly down to their next birth, wherever that might be.

JUDGMENT

Some accounts of the bardo describe a judgment scene, a kind of life-review similar to the post-mortem judgment found in many of the world's cultures. Your good conscience, a white guardian angel, acts as your defense counsel, recounting the beneficial things you have done, while your bad conscience, a black demon, submits the case for the prosecution. Good and bad are totalled up as white and black pebbles. The "Lord of Death," who presides, then consults the mirror of karma and makes his judgment.⁵

I feel that in this judgment scene there are some interesting parallels with the life-review of the near-death experience. Ultimately all judgment takes place within our own mind. We are the judge and the judged. "It is interesting to note," said Raymond Moody, "that the judgment in the cases I studied came not from the being of light, who seemed to love and accept these people anyway, but rather from within the individual being judged."⁶

A woman who went through a near-death experience told Kenneth Ring: "You are shown your life—and you do the judging . . . You are judging yourself. You have been forgiven all your sins, but are you able to forgive yourself for not doing the things you should have done, and some little cheating things that maybe you've done in life? Can you forgive yourself? This is the judgment."⁷

The judgment scene also shows that what really counts, in the final analysis, is the motivation behind our every action, and that there is no escaping the effects of our past actions, words, and thoughts, and the imprints and habits they have stamped us with. It means that we are entirely responsible, not only for this life, but for our future lives as well.

THE POWER OF THE MIND

As our mind is so light, mobile, and vulnerable in the bardo, whatever thoughts arise, good or bad, have tremendous power and influence. Without a physical body to ground us, thoughts actually become reality. Imagine the sharp grief and anger we might feel on seeing a funeral service performed carelessly on our behalf, or greedy relatives squabbling over our possessions, or friends we loved deeply, and thought had loved us, talking about us in a sneering or hurtful or simply

condescending way. Such a situation could be very dangerous, because our reaction, in its violence, could drive us directly toward an unfortunate rebirth.

The overwhelming power of thought, then, is the key issue in the bardo of becoming. This crucial moment finds us completely exposed to whatever habits and tendencies we have allowed to grow and dominate our lives. If you don't check those habits and tendencies now in life, and prevent them from seizing hold of your mind, then in the bardo of becoming you will be their helpless victim, buffeted to and fro by their power. The slightest irritation, for example, in the bardo of becoming can have a devastating effect, and that is why traditionally the person reading the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* had to be someone with whom you had a good connection; if not, the very sound of his or her voice could infuriate you, with the most disastrous consequences.

The teachings give us many descriptions of the rawness of the mind in the bardo of becoming; the most striking of these says that our mind in this bardo is like a flaming red-hot iron bar that can be bent in whichever way you want until it cools, when whatever form it finds itself in rapidly solidifies. In just the same way, it is said, a single positive thought in this bardo can lead directly to enlightenment, and a single negative reaction can plunge you into the most prolonged and extreme suffering. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* could not warn us more strongly:

Now is the time which is the borderline between going up and going down; now is the time when by slipping into laziness even for a moment you will endure constant suffering; now is the time when by concentrating for an instant you will enjoy constant happiness. Focus your mind single-mindedly; strive to prolong the results of good karma!

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* tries to awaken any connection with spiritual practice the dead person may have had, and it encourages us: to give up attachment to people and possessions, to abandon yearning for a body, not to give in to desire or anger, to cultivate kindness rather than hostility, and not even to contemplate negative actions. It reminds the dead person there is no need to fear: On the one hand, it tells them that the terrifying bardo figures are nothing more than their own deluded projections and by nature empty; and on the other hand, that they themselves have only "a mental body

of habitual tendencies," and are therefore empty too. "So emptiness cannot harm emptiness."

The shifting and precarious nature of the bardo of becoming can also be the source of many opportunities for liberation, and the susceptibility of mind in this bardo can be turned to our advantage. All we have to do is remember one instruction; all it needs is for one positive thought to spring into our mind. If we can recall any teaching that has inspired us to the nature of mind, if we have even one good inclination toward practice, or a deep connection with a spiritual practice, then that alone can free us.

In the bardo of becoming, the buddha realms do not appear spontaneously as they do in the bardo of dharmata. Just by remembering them, however, you can transfer yourself there directly by the power of your mind, and proceed toward enlightenment. It is said that if you can invoke a buddha, he will immediately appear before you. But remember, even though the possibilities are limitless, we must have at least some, if not total, control over our mind in this bardo; and this is extremely difficult, because the mind here is so vulnerable, fragmented, and restless.

So in this bardo, whenever you can suddenly retrieve your awareness, even for a moment, immediately recall your connection with spiritual practice, remember your master or buddha, and invoke them with all your strength. If in life you have developed the natural reflex of praying whenever things become difficult or critical, or slip beyond your control, then instantly you will be able to invoke or call to mind an enlightened being, such as Buddha or Padmasambhava, Tara or Avalokiteshvara, Christ or the Virgin Mary. If you are able to invoke them fervently with one-pointed devotion, and with all your heart, then through the power of their blessing, your mind will be liberated into the space of their wisdom mind. Prayer in this life may seem sometimes to bring little result, but its effects in the bardo are unprecedentedly powerful.

Yet the description that I have given you of the bardo shows the sheer difficulty of focusing the mind at this juncture, if we have had no previous training. Think how almost impossible it is to remember something like a prayer in a dream or nightmare, how impotent and powerless we feel in them; in the bardo of becoming it is just as hard, if not harder, to collect our thoughts at all. This is why the watchword of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, repeated over and over again, is: "Do not be distracted." As it points out:

This is the dividing line where buddhas and sentient beings are separated . . .

"In an instant they are separated, in an instant complete enlightenment."

REBIRTH

As, in the bardo of becoming, the time for rebirth gets closer, you crave more and more for the support of a material body, and you search for any one that might be available in which to be reborn. Different signs will begin to appear, warning you of the realm in which you are likely to take rebirth. Lights of various colors shine from the six realms of existence, and you will feel drawn toward one or another, depending on the negative emotion that is predominant in your mind. Once you have been drawn into one of these lights, it is very difficult to turn back.

Then images and visions will arise, linked to the different realms. As you become more familiar with the teachings, you will become more alert to what they really mean. The signs vary slightly according to different teachings. Some say that if you are to be reborn as a god, you will have a vision of entering a heavenly palace with many stories. If you are to be reborn as a demigod, you will feel you are amidst spinning circular weapons of fire, or going onto a battlefield. If you are to be reborn as an animal, you find yourself in a cave, a hole in the ground, or a nest made of straw. If you have a vision of a tree stump, a deep forest, or a woven cloth, you are to be reborn as a hungry ghost. And if you are to be reborn in hell, you will feel you are being led, powerless, into a black pit, down a black road, into a somber land with black or red houses, or toward a city of iron.

There are many other signs, such as the way in which your gaze or movement is aligned, which indicate the realm for which you are heading. If you are to be reborn in a god or human realm, your gaze will be directed upward; if in an animal realm, you will look straight ahead, as do birds; and if in a hungry ghost or hell realm, you will look downward, as though you were diving.

If any of these signs appear, you should be on guard not to fall into any of these unfortunate rebirths.

At the same time, you will have an intense desire and longing for certain realms, and you are drawn toward them all too instinctively. The teachings warn us that at this point there is a great danger that out of your avid eagerness to be reborn,

you will rush to any place at all that seems to offer some security. If your desire is frustrated, the anger that arises will of itself bring the bardo abruptly to an end, as you are swept into your next rebirth by the current of that negative emotion. And so, as you can see, your future rebirth is directly determined by desire, anger, and ignorance.

Imagine that you run toward a place of refuge, simply to escape the onslaught of the bardo experiences. Then, terrified to leave, you might become attached and take on a new birth, no matter where, just in order to have one. You might even, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* explains, become confused and mistake a good birthplace for a bad one, or a bad one for a good one. Or hear the voices of your loved ones calling you, or seductive singing, and follow these, only to find yourself being lured down into the lower realms.

You must take great care not to enter blindly into one of these undesirable realms. Yet what is wonderful is that the instant you become aware of what is happening to you, you can actually begin to influence and change your destiny.

Swept along by the wind of karma, you will then arrive at a place where your future parents are making love. Seeing them, you become emotionally drawn in; and because of past karmic connections, you begin spontaneously to feel strong attachment or aversion. Attraction and desire for the mother and aversion or jealousy for the father will result in your being born as a male child, and the reverse a female.⁸ But if you succumb to such strong passions, not only will you be reborn, but that very emotion may draw you into birth in a lower realm.

Is there anything now that we can do to avoid being reborn or to direct our next rebirth? The bardo teachings give two specific kinds of instructions: methods for preventing a rebirth, or failing that, for choosing a good birth. First are the guidelines for *closing the entrance to another birth*:

The best method is to abandon the emotions such as desire, anger, or jealousy, and recognize that none of these bardo experiences have any ultimate reality. If you can realize this and then rest the mind in its true, empty nature, this in itself will prevent rebirth. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* here warns us:

Alas! the father and mother, the great storm, the whirlwind, the thunder, the terrifying projections and all these apparent phenomena are illusory in their real nature. However they appear, they are not real. All substances are false and untrue. They are like a mirage, they are not permanent, they are not changeless. What is the use of desire? What is the use of fear? It is regarding the nonexistent as existent . . .

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* goes on to advise us:

"All substances are my own mind, and this mind is emptiness, unarisen and unobstructed." Thinking this, keep your mind natural and undiluted, self-contained in its own nature like water poured into water, just as it is, loose, open and relaxed. By letting it rest naturally and loosely, you can be sure that the womb-entrance to all the different kinds of birth will certainly be closed.⁹

The next best method to prevent rebirth is to see your potential parents as the buddha, or your master, or yidam deity. And at the very least, you should try to generate a feeling of renunciation against being drawn into feelings of desire, and to think of the pure realms of the buddhas. This will prevent rebirth and may cause you to be reborn in one of the buddha realms.

If you are unable to stabilize the mind enough to do even this kind of practice, then there remain the methods for *choosing a rebirth*, which are linked to the landmarks and signs of the different realms. If you must take rebirth, or you intentionally wish to be reborn in order to pursue your spiritual path and be of benefit to others, you should not enter any but the human realm. It is only there that conditions are favorable for spiritual progress. If you are going to be born in a fortunate situation in the human realm, the teachings tell us, you will feel you are arriving at a sumptuous and beautiful house, or in a city, or among a crowd of people, or you will have a vision of couples making love.

Otherwise, generally we have no choice. We are drawn toward our birthplace "as inexorably as a bird lured into a cage, dry grass catching fire, or an animal sinking into a marsh." The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* says: "O son/daughter of an enlightened family, even though you do not want to go, you have no power of your own; you are helpless and compelled to go."

Yet, as the teachings are always so inspiringly reminding us, there is always hope; now is the time for prayer. By

wishing and concentrating intensely, even at this moment, you can still be reborn in one of the buddha realms, or else you can generate a deep aspiration to be reborn in a human family where you may be able to meet the spiritual path and continue toward liberation. If you have a strong karma that impels you toward a particular realm, you may have no choice; however, your past aspiration and prayers can help you to reshape your destiny, so you may be reborn into a life that will lead one day to liberation.

Even as you enter the womb, you can go on praying for this to happen. Even now, you can visualize yourself as any enlightened being, traditionally the masters say as Vajrasattva,¹⁰ bless the womb you are entering as a sacred environment, "a palace of the gods," and continue to practice.

*Now when the bardo of becoming dawns upon me,
I will concentrate my mind one-pointedly,
And strive to prolong the results of good karma,
Close the entrance to rebirth, and try to keep from being reborn.
This is the time when perseverance and pure perception are needed;
Abandon negative emotions, and meditate on the master.*

Ultimately it is the mind's urge to inhabit a particular realm that impels us toward reincarnation, and its tendency to solidify and to grasp that finds its ultimate expression in physical rebirth. This is the next stage in the process of manifestation that we have seen taking place throughout the bardos.

If you succeed in directing the mind toward a human birth, you have come full circle. You are poised to be born again into the natural bardo of this life. When you see your father and mother in intercourse, your mind is ineluctably drawn in, and enters the womb. This signals the end of the bardo of becoming, as your mind rapidly reexperiences yet again the signs of the phases of dissolution and the dawning of the Ground Luminosity. Then the black experience of full attainment arises again, and at the same moment the connection to the new womb is made.

So life begins, as it ends, with the Ground Luminosity.

NINETEEN

Helping after Death

SO OFTEN IN THE MODERN WORLD when someone dies, one of the deepest sources of anguish for those left behind to mourn is their conviction that there is nothing they can now do to help their loved one who has gone, a conviction that only aggravates and darkens the loneliness of their grief. But this is not true. There are many, many ways we can help the dead, and so help ourselves to survive their absence. One of the unique features of Buddhism, and one of the ways in which the omniscient skill and compassion of the buddhas is most profoundly demonstrated, is in the many special practices that are available to help a dead person, and so also comfort the bereaved. The Tibetan Buddhist vision of life and death is an all-encompassing one, and it shows us clearly that there are ways of helping people in every conceivable situation, since there are no barriers whatever between what we call "life" and what we call "death." The radiant power and warmth of the compassionate heart can reach out to help in all states and all realms.

WHEN WE CAN HELP

The bardo of becoming, as it has already been described, may seem a very disturbed and disturbing time. Yet there is great hope in it. The qualities of the mental body during the bardo of becoming that make it so vulnerable—its clarity, mobility, sensitivity, and clairvoyance—also make it particularly receptive to help from the living. The fact that it has no physical form or basis makes it very easy to guide. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* compares the mental body to a horse, which can be readily controlled by a bridle, or to a huge tree trunk, which may be almost immovable on land, yet once floated in water can be effortlessly directed wherever you wish.

The most powerful time to do spiritual practice for someone who has died is during the forty-nine days of the bardo of becoming, placing special emphasis on the first twenty-one days. It is during these first three weeks that the dead have a stronger link with this life, which makes them more accessible to our help. So it is then that spiritual practice has a far greater possibility of influencing their future, and of affecting their chances for liberation, or at least a better rebirth. We should employ every means possible to help them then, as after the physical form of their next existence begins gradually to be determined—and this is said to happen between the twenty-first and forty-ninth day after death—the chance for real change is very much more limited.

Help for the dead, however, is not confined to the forty-nine days after death. *It is never too late to help someone who has died, no matter how long ago it was.* The person you want to help may have been dead a hundred years, but it will still be of benefit to practice for them. Dudjom Rinpoche used to say that even if someone has gained enlightenment and become a buddha, they will still need all the assistance they can possibly get in their work of helping others.

HOW WE CAN HELP

The best and easiest way to help a dead person is to do the essential practice of phowa I have taught in chapter 13, Spiritual Help for the Dying, as soon as we hear that someone has died.

In Tibet we say that just as it is the nature of fire to burn and of water to quench thirst, the nature of the buddhas is to be present as soon as anyone invokes them, so infinite is their compassionate desire to help all sentient beings. Don't for one moment imagine that it would be less effective for you to invoke the truth to help your dead friend than if a "holy man" prays for them. Because you are close to the person who has died, the intensity of your love and the depth of your connection will give your invocation an added power. The masters have assured us: Call out to them, and the buddhas will answer you.

Khandro Tsering Chödrön, the spiritual wife of Jamyang Khyentse, often says that if you really have a good heart, and really mean well, and then pray for someone, that prayer will be very effective. So be confident that if someone you love very much has died, and you pray for them with true love and sincerity, your prayer will be exceptionally powerful.

The best and most effective time to do the phowa is before the body is touched or moved in any way. If this is not possible, then try to do the phowa in the place where the person died, or at least picture that place very strongly in your mind. There is a powerful connection between the dead person, the place of death, and also the time of death, especially in the case of a person who died in a traumatic way.

In the bardo of becoming, as I have said, the dead person's consciousness goes through the experience of death every week, on exactly the same day. So you should perform the phowa, or whatever other spiritual practice you have chosen to do, on any day of the forty-nine-day period, but especially on the same day of the week that the person died.

Whenever your dead relative or friend comes into your mind, whenever you hear his or her name being mentioned, send the person your love, and then focus on doing the phowa, and do it for as long and as often as you wish.

Another thing you can do, whenever you think of someone who has died, is to say immediately a mantra such as OM MANI PADME HUM (pronounced by Tibetans: Om Mani Pémé Hung), the mantra of the Buddha of Compassion, which purifies each of the negative emotions that are the cause of rebirth¹; or OM AMI DEWA HRIH, the mantra of Buddha Amitabha, the Buddha of Limitless Light. You can then follow that again with the practice of phowa.

But whether you do any of these practices or not to help your loved one who has died, don't ever forget that the consciousness in the bardo is acutely clairvoyant; simply directing good thoughts toward them will be most beneficial.

When you pray for someone who was close to you, you can, if you wish, extend the embrace of your compassion to include other dead people in your prayers: the victims of atrocities, wars, disasters, and famines, or those who died and are now dying in concentration camps, such as those in China and Tibet. You can even pray for people who died years ago, like your grandparents, long-dead members of your family, or victims of wars, such as those in the World Wars. Imagine your prayers going especially to those who lost their lives in extreme anguish, passion, or anger.

Those who have suffered violent or sudden death have a particularly urgent need for help. Victims of murder, suicide, accident, or war can easily be trapped by their suffering, anguish,

and fear, or may be imprisoned in the actual experience of death and so be unable to move on through the process of rebirth. When you practice the phowa for them, do it more strongly and with more fervor than you have ever done it before:

Imagine tremendous rays of light emanating from the buddhas or divine beings, pouring down all their compassion and blessing. Imagine this light streaming down onto the dead person, purifying them totally and freeing them from the confusion and pain of their death, granting them profound, lasting peace. Imagine then, with all your heart and mind, that the dead person dissolves into light and his or her consciousness, healed now and free of all suffering, soars up to merge indissolubly, and forever, with the wisdom mind of the buddhas.

Some Western people who recently visited Tibet told me about the following incident they had witnessed. One day a Tibetan walking by the side of the road was knocked over and killed instantly by a Chinese truck. A monk, who happened to be passing, quickly went over and sat next to the dead man lying on the ground. They saw the monk lean over him and recite some practice or other close to his ear; suddenly, to their astonishment, the dead man revived. The monk then performed a practice they recognized as the transference of consciousness, and guided him back calmly into death. What had happened? Clearly the monk had recognized that the violent shock of the man's death had left him terribly disturbed, and so the monk had acted swiftly: first to free the dead man's mind from its distress, and then, by means of the phowa, to transfer it to a buddha realm or toward a good rebirth. To the Westerners who were watching, this monk seemed to be just an ordinary person, but this remarkable story shows that he was in fact a practitioner of considerable power.

Meditation practices and prayers are not the only kind of help that we can give to the dead. We can offer charity in their name to help the sick and needy. We can give their possessions to the poor. We can contribute, on their behalf, to humanitarian or spiritual ventures such as hospitals, aid projects, hospices, or monasteries.

We could also sponsor retreats by good spiritual practitioners, or prayer meetings led by great masters in sacred places, like Bodhgaya. We could offer lights for the dead

person, or sponsor works of art related to spiritual practice. Another method of helping the dead, especially favored in Tibet and the Himalayas, is to save the lives of animals due to be slaughtered, and release them again into freedom.

It is important to dedicate all the merit and well-being that spring from any such acts of kindness and generosity to the dead person, and in fact to all those who have died, so that everyone who has died may obtain a better rebirth and favorable circumstances in their next life.

THE CLAIRVOYANCE OF THE DEAD PERSON

Remember, the clairvoyant consciousness of the person in the bardo of becoming is seven times clearer than in life. This can bring them either great suffering or great benefit.

So it is essential that after someone you love has died, you are as aware as possible in all your behavior, so as not to disturb them or hurt them. For when the dead person returns to those left behind, or those invited to practice on their behalf, they are able, in their new state of being, not only to see what is going on but to read minds directly. If relatives are only scheming and quarreling about how to divide up their possessions, only talking and thinking of attachment and aversion, with no real love for the dead person, this can cause them intense anger and hurt or disillusion, and they will then be drawn by these turbulent emotions into an unfortunate rebirth.

For example, imagine if a dead person saw spiritual practitioners supposedly practicing for him but with no sincere thought in their minds for his benefit, and with their minds preoccupied with trivial distractions; the dead person could lose any faith he might ever have had. Imagine too if a dead person had to watch her loved ones distraught and helpless with grief; it could plunge her into deep grief also. And if a dead person were to discover, for example, that relatives only made a show of loving her because of her money, she could become so painfully disillusioned that she returned as a ghost to haunt the inheritor of her wealth. You can see now that what you do and how you think and how you behave after people have died can be of crucial importance, and have a far greater impact on their future than you can possibly imagine.²

You will see now why it is absolutely essential for the peace of mind of the dead person that those who are left behind should be harmonious. This is why, in Tibet, when

all the friends and relatives of the dead person assembled, they were encouraged to practice together and to say, as much as possible, a mantra such as: OM MANI PADME HUM. This is something that everyone in Tibet could do and knew would definitely help the dead person, and which inspired them all to an act of fervent communal prayer.

The clairvoyance of the dead person in the bardo of becoming is also what makes the practice done by a master or experienced spiritual practitioner on his or her behalf of such exceptional benefit.

What a master does is to rest in the primordial state of Rigpa, the nature of mind, and invoke the mental body of the dead person roaming in the bardo of becoming. When the mental body comes into the master's presence, through the power of meditation, he or she can point out the essential nature of Rigpa. Through the power of its clairvoyance, the bardo being then can see directly into the master's wisdom mind, and so there and then be introduced to the nature of mind and be liberated.

Whatever practice an ordinary practitioner can do as well for a close friend who has died can, for the same reason, be of enormous help. You might do the practice, for example, of the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities associated with the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or you might simply rest in a steady state of compassion; especially if you then invoke the dead person and invite him or her into the heart-core of your practice, it can be of immense benefit.

Whenever Buddhist practitioners die we inform their master, all their spiritual teachers, and their spiritual friends, so they can immediately start practicing for them. Usually I collect the names of people who have died, and send them to great masters I know in India and the Himalayas. Every few weeks they will include them in a purification practice, and once a year in a ten-day intensive group practice in the monasteries.³

TIBETAN BUDDHIST PRACTICES FOR THE DEAD

1. The Tibetan Book of the Dead

In Tibet, once the phowa practice has been done for the dying person, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is read repeatedly and the practices associated with it are done. In eastern Tibet

we used to have a tradition of reading the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* for the whole forty-nine days after death. Through the reading, the dead are shown what stage of the process of death they are in, and given whatever inspiration and guidance they need.

Westerners often ask me: How can a person who is dead hear the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*?

The simple reply is that the consciousness of the dead person, when it is invoked by the power of prayer, is able to read our minds and can feel exactly whatever we may be thinking or meditating on. That is why there is no obstacle to the dead person's understanding the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* or practices done on their behalf, even though they may be recited in Tibetan. For the dead person, language is no barrier at all, for the essential meaning of the text can be understood fully and directly by his or her mind.

This makes it all the more vital that the practitioner should be as focused and attentive as possible when doing the practice, and not merely performing it by rote. Also, as the dead person is living the actual experiences, he or she may have a greater capacity to understand the truth of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* than we do!

I am sometimes asked: "But what happens if the consciousness has already fainted into an oblivious state at the moment of death?" Since we do not know how long the dead person will remain in that state of unconsciousness, and at what point he or she will enter the bardo of becoming, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is read and practiced repeatedly, to cover any eventuality.

But what about people who are not familiar with the teachings or the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*? Should we read it to them? The Dalai Lama has given us this clear guidance:

Whether you believe in religion or not it is very important to have a peaceful mind at the time of death. . . From a Buddhist point of view, whether the person who dies believes in rebirth or not, their rebirth exists, and so a peaceful mind, even if it is neutral, is important at the time of death. If the person is a non-believer, reading the Tibetan Book of the Dead could agitate their mind. . . it could arouse aversion and so even harm them instead of helping them. In the case of a person who is open to it, however, the mantras or the names of the buddhas might help them to generate some kind of connection, and so it could be helpful. It is important to take into account, above all, the attitude of the dying person.⁴

2. Né Dren and Chang Chok

Hand in hand with the reading of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* goes the practice of *Né Dren*, the ritual for guiding the dead, or *Chang Chok*, the ritual purification, in which a master will guide the consciousness of the dead person to a better rebirth.

Ideally the *Né Dren* or *Chang Chok* should be done immediately after death, or at least within forty-nine days. If the corpse is not present, the consciousness of the deceased is summoned into an effigy or card bearing their likeness and name, or even a photograph, called a *tsenjang*. The *Né Dren* or *Chang Chok* derive their power from the fact that during the period immediately after death, the dead person will have a strong feeling of possessing the body of its recent life.

Through the power of the master's meditation, the consciousness of the dead person, roaming aimlessly in the bardo, is called into the *tsenjang*, which represents the dead person's identity. The consciousness is then purified; the karmic seeds of the six realms are cleansed; a teaching is given just as in life; and the dead person is introduced to the nature of the mind. Finally the phowa is effected, and the dead person's consciousness is directed toward one of the Buddha realms. Then the *tsenjang*, representing the individual's old—now discarded—identity, is burned, and their karma is purified.

3. The Purification of the Six Realms

My master Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche often used to say that the practice known as "the Purification of the Six Realms" was the best possible purification practice for a practitioner who has died.

The Purification of the Six Realms is a practice used in life that employs visualization and meditation to purify the body of each of the six main negative emotions, along with the realms of existence they create. It can also be used very effectively for the dead, and is particularly powerful because it purifies the root of their karma, and so of their connection with samsara. This is essential; if these negative emotions are not purified, they will dictate which realm of samsara the dead person will be reborn in.

According to the Dzogchen Tantras, the negative emotions accumulate in the psycho-physical system of subtle channels, inner air, and energy, and gather at particular energy centers in the body. So the seed of the hell realm and its cause, anger, are located at the soles of the feet; the hungry ghost

realm and its cause, avarice, rest at the base of the trunk; the animal realm and its cause, ignorance, rest at the navel; the human realm and its cause, doubt, rest at the heart; the demigod realm and its cause, jealousy, rest at the throat; and the god realm and its cause, pride, rest at the crown of the head.

In this practice of the Purification of the Six Realms, when each realm and its negative emotion is purified, the practitioner imagines that all the karma created by that particular emotion is now exhausted, and that specific part of his body associated with the karma of a particular emotion dissolves entirely into light. So when you do this practice for a dead person, imagine with all your heart and mind that, at the end of the practice, all their karma is purified, and their body and entire being dissolve into radiant light.⁵

4. The Practice of the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities

Another means to help the dead is the practice of the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities. (These deities are described in chapter 17, "Intrinsic Radiance.") The practitioner considers his or her entire body as the mandala of the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities; the peaceful deities are visualized in the energy center in the heart, and the wrathful deities in the brain. The practitioner then imagines that the deities send out thousands of rays of light, which stream out to the dead and purify all their negative karma.

The mantra of purification the practitioner recites is the mantra of Vajrasattva, the presiding deity of all the Tantric mandalas, and the central deity of the mandala of the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities, whose power is invoked especially for purification and for healing. This is the "Hundred Syllable Mantra," which includes "seed syllables" of each of the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities.⁶

You can use a short, six-syllable form of the Vajrasattva mantra: OM VAJRA SATTVA HUM (pronounced by Tibetans: Om Benza Satto Hung). The essential meaning of this mantra is, "O Vajrasattva! Through your power may you bring about purification, healing, and transformation." I strongly recommend this mantra for healing and purification.

Another important mantra, which appears in the Dzogchen Tantras and the practices associated with the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, is 'A A HA SHA SA MA. The six syllables of this mantra have the power to "close the gates" to the six realms of samsara.

5. Cremation

Generally in many Eastern traditions, *cremation* is the way of disposing of the corpse. In Tibetan Buddhism, there are also specific practices for cremation. The crematorium or funeral pyre is visualized as the mandala of Vajrasattva, or the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities, and the deities are strongly visualized and their presence is invoked. The dead person's corpse is seen as actually representing all his or her negative karma and obscurations. As the corpse burns, these are consumed by the deities as a great feast and transmuted and transformed by them into their wisdom nature. Rays of light are imagined streaming out from the deities; the corpse is visualized dissolving completely into light, as all the impurities of the dead person are purified in the blazing flames of wisdom. As you visualize this, you can recite the hundred-syllable or six-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva. This simple practice for a cremation was transmitted and inspired by Dudjom Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche.

The ashes of the body, and the tsenjang, can then be mixed with clay to make little images called *tsatsa*. These are blessed and dedicated on behalf of the dead person, so creating auspicious conditions for a future good rebirth.

6. The Weekly Practices

In a Tibetan environment practices and rituals happen regularly every seventh day after death, or if the family can afford it, for each of the forty-nine days. Monks are invited to do practice, especially the Lamas who are close to the family and had a link with the dead person. Lights are offered and prayers said continuously, especially until the time the body is taken out of the house. Offerings are made to masters and to shrines, and alms are given to the poor in the name of the dead person.

These "weekly" practices on behalf of the dead person are considered essential, since the mental body in the bardo of becoming undergoes every week, on the same day, the experience of death. If the dead person has enough merit as a result of positive actions in the past, then the benefit of these practices can give them the impetus to transfer to a pure realm. Strictly speaking, if a person passed away on a Wednesday before noon, the first week's practice day would fall on the following Tuesday. If the person died after noon, it would fall on the following Wednesday.

Tibetans regard the fourth week after death as especially significant, because some say that most ordinary beings do not stay in the bardo longer than four weeks. The seventh week is also considered a critical juncture, as forty-nine days is taught to be generally the longest stay in the bardo. So on these occasions, masters and practitioners will be invited to the house, and the practices, offerings, and donations to the needy are performed on a grander scale.

Another offering ceremony and feast is held one year after the death, to mark the dead person's rebirth. Most Tibetan families would have annual ceremonies on the anniversaries of their teachers, parents, husbands, wives, brothers, and sisters, and on these days they will also give donations to the poor.