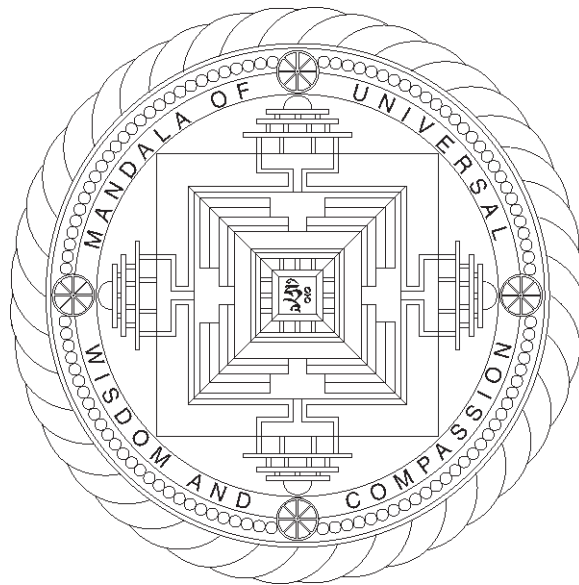


# Discovering BUDDHISM

*Awakening the limitless potential of your mind,  
achieving all peace and happiness*



*Death and Rebirth  
Required Reading*



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*Further required reading includes the following texts:*

*The Wish-Fulfilling Golden Sun*, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche (pp. 50–9)

*Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, , 1997 gold edition (pp. 332–93) or 2006 blue edition (pp. 294–321)

*Advice on Dying and Living a Better Life*, by His Holiness the Dalai Lama

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# Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth

*by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama*

## *Death*

Through the afflictions of desire, hatred and ignorance, contaminated karma (actions) are performed, which establish potencies in the mind in the form of predispositions. When a lifetime finishes, a person who has such predispositions is born again in cyclic existence with a mind and body appropriated through these contaminated causes.

Some persons die upon the full exhaustion of the impetus of that action which, in another lifetime, laid the foundation for this one. Others die without having used up their allotted time, through the incompleteness of the causes of sustaining life, such as lack of necessities. This is called untimely death, or death upon the consumption of merit; for the impetus of the action that established this life remains, but external concordant circumstances that are achieved through other meritorious actions in previous lives do not.

A person dies within a virtuous, non-virtuous or neutral mind. In the first case, the dying person might take to mind a virtuous object—such as the Three Jewels (Buddha, his Doctrine and the Spiritual Community) or his own lama, thereby generating a mind of faith. Or he or she might cultivate immeasurable equanimity, becoming free from desire and hatred toward any sentient beings, or meditate on emptiness or cultivate compassion. This can be done either through one's own remembering to do such or through others' urging. If such attitudes are cultivated at the point of death, one dies within a virtuous mind, through which one's rebirth is improved. It is good to die in this way.

Sometimes, however, it happens that others, even though not purposely seeking to arouse anger, annoy the dying person with their nervousness, thereby making him or her angry. Sometimes, also, friends and relatives gather around the bed lamenting in such a manner that they arouse manifest desire. Whether it be desire or hatred, if one dies within a sinful attitude to which one is well accustomed, it is very dangerous.

Some die within a neutral attitude, neither taking a virtuous object to mind nor generating desire or hatred.

These three attitudes—virtuous, non-virtuous and neutral—occur until the point of the subtle mind of death. According to the sutra system, this final subtle mind is necessarily neutral; for, unlike Highest Yoga Tantra, sutra does not describe techniques for transforming subtle minds into virtuous states, only for treating coarse ones. A qualified practitioner of tantra, however, can convert the subtle minds associated with death into a virtuous path consciousness. At that point one's practice is very profound.

In any case, the attitude just before death is very important; for, if even a moderately developed practitioner is disturbed at that time, manifest desire or hatred will be generated. This is because we all have predispositions established by former non-virtuous actions, which are ready to be activated upon meeting with disadvantageous circumstances. It is these predispositions that provide the impetus for lifetimes as animals, and so forth. Similarly, we have predispositions established by former virtuous actions, which, upon meeting with advantageous circumstances, will provide the impetus for lifetimes in happy migrations as humans and so forth.

These capacities that are already in our mental continuums are nourished by attachment and grasping, leading to a bad or good rebirth. Thus, if the predisposition left by a bad karma is activated, a life as an animal, hungry ghost or hell-being will result.

Similarly, if a person who usually behaves sinfully dies within a virtuous attitude, he or she will probably be reborn in a good situation. Therefore, it is very important for both the dying person and those around him or her to avoid creating situations of desire or hatred and instead to foster virtuous states of mind. We need to know this.

Those who die within a virtuous attitude have a sense of passing from darkness into light, are free of anxiety and see pleasant appearances. There are many cases of very ill persons who, near the time of death, speak of being in great comfort despite their illness. Others with little illness fall into great fright, with labored breathing. These latter are sunk in non-virtuous thoughts, have a sense of going from light to darkness and see unpleasant forms.

Some whose physical warmth has diminished through illness become desirous of heat, thereby fortifying predispositions for rebirth as a being in a hot hell, whereupon they take rebirth in a place of extreme heat. Others become attached to a feeling of coolness wishing, for instance, for a drink of water, they fortify predispositions to be reborn as a being in a cold hell, thereby making the connection to such a rebirth. Thus it is very important to avoid desirous thoughts at the time of death and direct the mind to salutary objects.

In everyday life, attitudes of desire, hatred, jealousy and so forth, to which we are well accustomed, become manifest with only slight provocation; but those with which we have little familiarity take considerable provocation, such as recourse to reasoning, to manifest themselves. Similarly, at the time of death, attitudes of long familiarity usually take precedence and direct the rebirth. For this same reason, strong attachment is generated for the self, since one fears that one's self is becoming non-existent. This attachment serves as the connecting link to the intermediate state between lives (*bardo*); the liking of a body, in turn, acts as a cause establishing the body of the intermediate being.

For those strongly involved in non-virtuous actions, the warmth of the body withdraws first from the upper part of the body and then from other parts; whereas, for those strongly involved in virtuous actions, the warmth first withdraws from the feet. In both cases, the warmth finally gathers at the heart, from which the consciousness exits. Those particles of matter, of combined semen and blood, into which the consciousness initially entered in the mother's womb at the beginning of the life, become the center of the heart; and from that very same point the consciousness ultimately departs at death.

## *Intermediate state*

Immediately thereupon, the intermediate state begins—except for those reborn in the formless realms of infinite space, infinite consciousness, “nothingness” or peak of cyclic existence, for whom the new life begins immediately upon death. Those born within the realms of desire and form must pass through an intermediate state, during which a being has the form of the person as whom he or she is to be reborn. The intermediate being has all five senses, but also clairvoyance, unobstructiveness and an ability to arrive immediately wherever he or she wants. He or she sees other intermediate beings of his or her own type— hell-being, hungry ghost, animal, human, demigod or god—and can be seen by clairvoyants.

If a place of birth appropriate to one’s predispositions is not found, a small death occurs after seven days, and one is reborn into another intermediate state. This can occur at most six times, with the result that the longest period spent in the intermediate state is forty-nine days.

## *Rebirth*

This means that those beings who, even a year after dying, report that they have not found a birthplace are not in the intermediate state but have taken birth as a spirit.

If taking rebirth as a human, one sees one’s future mother and father as if lying together. If one is to be reborn as a male, this sight generates desire for the mother as well as hatred for the father—and vice versa if one is to be reborn as a female. Being desirous, one rushes there to engage in copulation; but upon arrival, one sees only the sexual organ of the desired partner. This creates anger, which causes cessation of the intermediate state and makes the connection to the new life. One has entered the mother’s womb and begun a human life. When the father’s semen and mother’s blood are conjoined with this life or consciousness, they naturally and gradually develop into the elements of a human.

One is desirously attracted to one’s future birthplace, even if it is to be a hell. For instance, a butcher might see sheep in the distance as in a dream; upon his rushing there to kill them, the appearance would fade, causing him to become angry, whereupon the intermediate state would cease and his new life in hell begin. Also, as said before, those to be reborn in hot hells are attracted to heat; in cold hells, to coolness. The intermediate state of one who is to be reborn in a bad migration is itself very frightful; in the end, one rushes to the place of rebirth and, when one’s wish is not achieved, gets angry, whereupon the intermediate state ceases and the new life begins.

The connection to a life is, therefore, made under the influence of desire, hatred and ignorance. Until these afflictions are overcome, one is as if bound in chains without freedom. Indeed, there are good and bad rebirths; but, while one is still bound, one must bear the burden of mental and physical aggregates that are under the influence of contaminated actions and afflictions. This is not done just once, but again and again without break.

To overcome the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness and death, desire, hatred and confusion must be overcome. Their root, in turn, is ignorance—the conception of an inherent existence of persons and other phenomena. External medicines alleviate superficial suffering but cannot cure the central problem. Internal practices, such as resorting to specific antidotes to desire and hatred, are more helpful,

but their effects are temporary. However, if one can destroy ignorance—their root—then all of these cease of their accord.

If ignorance is eliminated, then the contaminated actions that depend on it are stopped.

Furthermore, without ignorance, the attachment and predispositions established by previous actions cease to operate, whereupon the cycle of uncontrolled rebirth is ended.

*Colophon:*

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# Remembering Death

*by Lama Zopa Rinpoche*

*This teaching appears in the March–April, 1997 issue of MANDALA, the newsmagazine of the FPMT.*

Reflecting on impermanence and death in itself is not really a big deal, but thinking about it because of what follows after the death is important. If there is negative karma, then there are the lower realms of unimaginable sufferings, and this is something that can be stopped immediately.

We cannot be liberated from samsara within this hour, today, this week or even this year, but we can purify negative karma now, this hour, today, and therefore stop being reborn in the lower realms if we die now, this hour, today. This is possible.

By remembering impermanence and death, karma and the lower realms of suffering, the mind is persuaded to use the solution of Dharma practice. Immediately the mind prepares for death. Immediately it purifies the heavy negative karmas that cause one to remain in the lower realms, where there are unimaginable sufferings and no possibility to practice Dharma.

Whenever there are problems in our lives it is always good to remember the lower realms of suffering. We can't stand the problems we have now, but the lower realms of suffering are a zillion, zillion, zillion times greater, like the sky. If we put together all the energy of fire, no matter how hot, it is cool compared to one tiny fire spark of hell. All the energy of this human world's fire put together is cool compared to one tiny fire spark of the hell realm. Like this, it's always good to make a comparison.

Beings possessing a human body who haven't met Dharma, no matter how much wealth they have, no matter how many friends they have, no matter how much they appear to be enjoying their lives, in reality are only living with hallucination; they are living with wrong concepts, so many piles of wrong concepts. They are not aware of what is happening to them, they are not aware of their own life. They are not aware of the powers of their hallucination, the piles of wrong concepts that compel them to create the causes of samsara and the causes of the lower realms. They don't have the opportunity to plant the seed to be free from samsara, to cut the root of samsaric ignorance, because there is no understanding of emptiness, no opportunity to meditate on emptiness.

If a person has a good heart, a sincere mind, and gives some help to others without expecting any results, then maybe they create some pure Dharma—but that's very rare; otherwise not. Usually people live the life only with a worldly mind, particularly attachment, clinging to this life. They use the whole human life, the precious human body and all their education just to create additional causes to go to the lower realms.

This is what is happening in every day life. For the entire life people act like a moth attracted to the flame, completely hallucinated, completely deceived, not knowing the flame will burn, that it is completely other than what it appears. Even though they get burned, while they still have the power to fly, they will continue to go towards the flame.

It is exactly the same with a fish and a baited hook. The fish does not know that there is a hook that cheats, leading to death and unbelievable suffering. Having no idea of the danger, it is constantly being drawn with strong desire toward the hook baited with a piece of meat. The result that the fish experiences is completely other than what it expected. Once caught, there is no way to get away alive.

Following the dissatisfied mind, desire, the worldly mind, brings exactly the same result. Once sunk in the quagmire of the activities of this life, it is difficult to escape the hundreds of different problems, emotional pains of the mind and of the body that come from this one root, the dissatisfied mind, desire, attachment, clinging to this life. All we are doing is making samsara longer by creating karma; we are making a donation, a contribution to samsaric suffering, making it longer and longer. And then, of course, there are the sufferings of the lower realms, which are difficult to get out of.

It's the same with the way in which an elephant can be caught. A female elephant is used as a lure, the male elephant becomes crazy with desire and as a result, becomes trapped inside a cage. What was expected in the beginning was happiness, but what was received in the end was something else, something completely frightening.

All these examples show us the way in which samsara and the samsaric perfections cheat us, that they are not to be trusted. Therefore always remembering impermanence and death becomes so essential. Reflecting on impermanence and death makes life highly meaningful, and so quickly and so powerfully destroys the delusions and seed imprint. It is very easy to meditate on and one can cease the delusions. It leads one to begin to practice Dharma, and to continue and complete the practice.

*Colophon:*

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# Dissolution

*by Lama Thubten Yeshe*

water rushing  
down a steep mountainside,  
a natural force:

there is life  
but the force  
of dying  
is there  
  
driving.

Many people think I am crazy when I talk to them about death.  
They think I don't understand life.

'If you think about death and suffering  
you make yourself miserable.'

They think I'm obsessed.  
'Dying is horrible.  
Why do you dwell on it?'

Ridiculous.  
They do not understand life.

we exist in a dance  
between life and death:  
a masked drama with one actor  
changing character,  
one face then another and another,  
moving  
changing.

From the first instant of life impermanence is with us.  
From the moment of conception decay begins.  
In the second moment of life a change has already occurred  
and the first moment has disappeared. That is impermanence  
and death.

'I exist.'  
'I exist' is a misconception.  
a permanent-conception.

every energy is moving  
changing, coming and going  
coming, then growing  
old, older and dying  
dying, dying.

When we see a dead body we never visualize our own corpse there.

'Ah, it's dead. Horrible.  
I'm leaving now.

We never think, 'That's me.'  
There is fear. Not understanding

that terrible corpse  
is within you now.

all sense-world phenomena  
exist like a cloud.

if there is a meeting  
or beginning  
or contact  
    there is naturally change  
                    separation  
                    and disappearance.

man and woman  
friends mother father family  
atoms  
fire and water  
things.

if there is a meeting  
separation must follow  
automatically. And there will be  
clinging fear and suffering.

every imaginable super samsaric experience  
every contact,  
every enjoyment  
will disappear.  
it's natural.

but we are so insecure;  
we find a friend and worry  
that he will disappear.  
we find pleasure and worry  
that it will end.  
we are afraid to lose our home and money,  
our loved ones  
  
and our body.

we all fear separation  
and disappearance.  
this is universal fear,  
but it is useless,  
creating only confusion.

it is not a solution;  
it is dissolution.

Recently some people went on an expedition to Mount Everest.  
They were successful and reached the summit, but on the way  
down one man died. They tried to revive him, but it was  
impossible.

Why did they go?

Milarepa said, 'When worldly people see me they think  
I am completely crazy. And, when I see worldly people I think they  
are completely crazy.'

to choose coca-cola  
when we could have champagne  
is very stupid  
isn't it.

Our materialistic lives are devoted to temporal pleasures.  
We think this is the best we can do, but when death comes we  
end up with nothing and we die in misery.

‘There is not much difference between our way of life  
and a dog’s life

except the potential

samsara never ends  
because we don’t remember death.

‘Not today. No,  
not today.’

life is only breath  
coming in and going out.  
if the breath goes out  
and does not come in again  
life is finished.  
that is death.

until death we are going to think,  
‘No. Not today.’

life is running:

death is definite  
and we never know  
when it will come.

Life passes like lightning; it is there, then it disappears.  
But something in us believes death will come slowly—  
our permanent-conception; because we do not remember death.

wisdom-memory  
is the atomic energy  
that destroys delusion,  
but we forget.  
we never think,  
'Death is definite  
and we never know  
when it will come.'

Since birth we have been collecting;  
we collect friends,  
we collect possessions, family, lovers, property,  
this one and that one,  
this and that.  
We cling to each one,  
And there is fear.  
And when we die  
Not one of these things helps.  
Instead of helping, our collection destroys us.  
Because we did not remember death.

it will come,  
definitely.

and the time  
is never certain.

'Ah, today I'm alive.  
I'm all right.  
Not today.'

why not?

'Your father died today.'

O.K. It was time for him to die.  
Everybody has to die.  
Now that he is dead, it's my turn.

Do you understand?

I must do something right now.

Like this: if I know that within ten days someone is going  
to cut off my nose, but I don't know who and I don't know when, I'm going to  
be so careful; I'll protect my nose as much as possible and not waste time putting on  
make-up to make it beautiful.

We have this choice:

to die is a natural thing,  
but it is possible to die  
joyfully

like going home

*Colophon:*

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# Reincarnation

*by Geshe Rabten*

Some people have negative tendencies from birth; these are also karma-fruit. Parents may raise their children in the same way, yet they develop differently because of karma. Past lives produce inborn tendencies. The actions of past lives determine all factors such as the place of birth and type of death of future lives. One is born in a dangerous or strife-torn place because of one's past karma. If a person murders another in this life, in the next life the victim may become the murderer and the murderer the victim. Each of our actions is a link in a chain with no beginning, for samsara has no beginning. It can, however, have an end.

To understand this chain, it is necessary to understand the relation of mind to body. Mind is like a river passing through different countries (bodies). A river takes different names (forms) according to the different countries. In this way the mind passes on, carrying the accumulated karma with it. When a being dies, the body decays and the mind passes on, to continue in another bodily form, according to the type of body that it inhabits in that life.

Because they do not distinguish between mind and body, people think that both arise together from the parents and disappear together after death. After death the body does remain in a decaying state, but if the body and mind were the same, the mind should also remain in this state. In a living being, body and mind do have an immediate relationship, but when the being dies, this relationship becomes more and more remote. As the mind becomes further detached from the body, bodily feelings and functions gradually fade out until they finally cease. Some people think that the functions of the mind are dependent on breathing, but advanced yogis are able to live and concentrate for years without breathing. Because the mind and body are absolutely different, their causes must be absolutely different. The cause of the human body is the sperm-ovum union of the parents; thus children are physically similar to their parents. This immediate physical cause cannot produce the mind of the child, and could only do so if there were no difference between mind and body. Each mind-within-a-body causes the next. Bodies have a beginning; mind does not. Karma continues along with the mind. The minds of beings in samsara are always covered with delusion.

If, through the practice of Dharma, delusions can be removed and a high spiritual level reached, the mind can occupy more than one body; incarnate lamas (tulku) can take several bodily forms simultaneously. When a person attains the high spiritual level of arhatship, he or she is then completely out of samsara.

*Colophon:*

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# Life, Death and After Death

*by Lama Thubten Yeshe*

*A weekend seminar given in Geneva Switzerland, September 1983*

## *First Discourse*

Tonight I am going to give a short introduction to the Buddhist view of human reality, death and *bardo*.

Buddhism teaches that human beings have very high qualities, especially the qualities of intuition and intellectual intelligence. According to the Buddhist view, the process of human growth is different from that of a vegetable: each human being has a long history, a long period of development, particularly of the individual human consciousness.

In Buddhism we explain that the fundamental nature of human consciousness is pure and clear. We also say that it is the human consciousness that is the nucleus of the human being, not the human body of blood and bones. Also we have to recognize that whether we have a happy or a miserable life depends on the interpretation of our own consciousness: if you think that your life is miserable it becomes miserable. All human problems are created by the human mind—they are not created by God or Buddha.

Since we are capable of making a mess of our lives we are also capable of solving our problems. It is wrong to think, “My problem is like the universe, embracing the sky, space, everything, so until I destroy the sun and moon I cannot destroy my problem!” That is *wrong*. All of us should recognize that *we* are responsible for solving our own problems. We are responsible for our actions of body, speech and mind. We cannot blame anyone else.

Most human problems are intellectual, because we relate too much through intellect and reasoning. Of course, there are problems that come from intuition but the root of most of the problems in our lives, emotional disturbance and anxiety, is the intellect. We are intellectualizing all the time and that is our big problem.

When you are born, when you are a baby, you don’t have any political problems, do you? Think about it. In your mind there are no political problems. When you are a baby you don’t have any economic problems or problems with society because you are not yet ready, you are not mature enough for ego-conflict, to intellectualize. And when you are a baby you don’t have any religious conflict or racism in the mind.

When you are a baby you don’t have these intellectual problems; it is when you start to grow that you begin to intellectualize, intellectualize, intellectualize: “Who is this?” “Who am I?” “How should I

identify?” “What is my significant archetype?” Your ego wants some way to identify, something to hold on to, to grasp. You cannot be natural. That is why we are completely artificial and therefore confused and dissatisfied.

You can see that most human problems in this modern world come from our conflicting relationships with each other. Men have trouble with women, women have trouble with men—all this comes from your intellectualizing, playing intellectual games, not from the intuition. You build things up with your intellectual concepts, “This is the best object for me to grasp on to, if I can’t have this I’d better kill myself! Those things are not real for me, only this is my reality.”

The problem is that we use the intellect in such an unnatural way, we are so unrealistic, not in touch with reality. Because we are deluded, when we describe an apple we say, “It has this and that quality, it’s fantastic, good color, great, that’s why I like it.” We describe these things in such an exaggerated way that we end up sick, with a sick mind because fundamentally it is all fantasy. You impose your own fantasy projection on this apple and that makes you miserable and dissatisfied with the real object. The reason you become dissatisfied with this object ‘apple’ is because you have been relating to only your fantasy projection of it. You have not been realistic.

According to the Buddhist point of view, we are capable of examining our own minds to see whether we are thinking positively or negatively, making fantasy projections or not. We *are* capable of doing this. As you know, “Buddha” means “totally developed one,” and each of us has this potential to develop fully and to eradicate all polluted thought.

In society we all compete; we take advantage in society, of our country and of each other. These are all problems that come from intellectualizing, being artificial and grasping, thinking “I want,” “I want.” This way we end up miserable. You understand? Many times we become extreme and miserable, out of control. If you build up a huge fantasy to support your own image, then you reach a certain point where you can no longer cope with that fantasy situation. You drown in the ocean of your own fantasy world. You cannot cope; somehow it becomes too difficult.

So, I suggest that before the tremendous confusion comes, you try slowly, slowly to eliminate your confusion and that way your situation will be better and better. You should question whether so much intellectualizing is good or bad. From a Buddhist point of view, instead of just allowing the intellect to rule, we have to use our wisdom, our discrimination, and analyze to see if it’s worthwhile or not.

The reason I say that our problems, the problems of our society, of the world, and of individuals come from our intellectualizing, that they are built up by the ego and not natural, is because, as you can see, when you are born, just a baby, you don’t have these problems and when you die you don’t have these problems.

In Tibetan Buddhism we have meditation, and what meditation does is *see* clean-clear what is going on conventionally, superficially—our ego-conflict. Meditation gives you *access*. The more you meditate, the more access you have to go beyond emotion and ego-conflict and *see* what is actually going on in your mind, as though looking on an object from outside.

In Buddhism we believe that all human beings have problems, every day. We have problems of ego-

conflict, we have emotional problems, we become obsessed. We have all these problems but we also have the ability—*access*—to go beyond them and to *see*. We *do* have this ability, so one should not think, “I am completely confused, my nature is one of total confusion. There is no hope of a release, no way that I can become clear.” That is the wrong attitude. That way you devalue the human quality.

Buddhism is humanist, it is a kind of scientific religion, concerned with human problems and how to solve them—the emphasis is not on Buddha or God. That is why we believe that it is worthwhile for all of us to investigate the reality of our own consciousness, instead of ignoring it and putting all our emphasis on the body. Being concerned only with the body is unhealthy and of no value, it doesn’t bring satisfaction. Satisfaction is in the consciousness, not in the human body of bones and blood. And human consciousness is different from the physical body or brain.

Now, what I am saying concerning the reality of human life is that we are capable of solving our problems, the human problems. You should have a firm understanding that, “My problem is *my* baby, I have to solve it.” That way you develop confidence within yourself. We have to understand that we have the wisdom to solve the human dilemma. Every human being has this wisdom and intelligence. Do not think that human nature is totally ignorant; we *do* have wisdom, we *do* have love, we *do* have compassion. Don’t think, “I am a completely angry person, I am completely full of hatred, I don’t have love, I don’t have wisdom, I don’t have compassion.” That is a totally nihilistic attitude to your reality. But when you trust yourself, when you have some confidence and some experience of your own wisdom and compassion then you start to become more natural; you allow your intuition to develop.

Sometimes too much intellectualizing and egotism damages intuition. Intuition is inborn; it is not influenced by philosophy, or religion, or teachers, or environment. Intuition is *there* and instead of being kept trapped inside, it has to be protected in such a way that it’s allowed to function.

We should recognize that *we* create all human problems ourselves. We should not blame society, we should not blame our friends or our father or mother, we should not blame anyone else. Your problems are of your own creation. *You* are the creator of your own problems and *you* are the creator of your liberation.

At the time of death, during the death process naturally all these concepts—your political concepts, your economic concepts, your concepts of society, racist concepts, capitalist concepts, communist concepts, all these just naturally disappear into space. Think about it: any selfish attitude, any thought you may have had to take advantage of other people, like thinking, “I’m intelligent, I’ll take advantage of African people because they are ignorant. There are many things they don’t know, so I can take advantage of them,” every selfish attitude, every thought to take advantage of other people disappears into space at the time of death.

This does not happen only when you die but also when you go to sleep. As you fall asleep all these concepts absorb in the same process as natural death. Even when we are asleep all this ego-conflict that I mentioned, all these problems dissolve. That is why it is better to sleep than get too involved with intellectualizing, emotion, or anger or hatred, because when you sleep you enter a natural state, a state of fundamental consciousness without the intellect.

In the Buddhist tradition people meditate in the morning because when you get up in the morning all

your polluted concepts have disappeared and you have a little bit of clarity.

When you sleep, all the energies that have been building up disappear for a little while; then when you wake up, slowly, slowly they come back again. If you meditate in the morning you are neutral rather than extreme. Your concentration is much better then than at other times when you are distracted or self-absorbed. Even if you do not meditate, even if you are not a great meditator, if you want to think about something clean-clear, then it is better to think about it in the morning. That is my suggestion. Anyway, in Buddhism meditation does not mean only one-pointed concentration. We also have analytical meditation for checking up on reality.

It is very important that all of us know how our mind works: during the day, when we sleep and at the time of death. It is very important that we educate ourselves to know these things. Then you won't be afraid that death is something horrible, that it's like a black hole and when you reach the black hole you are sucked in and eaten up. Since we were born our death has been definite. We think that dying is such a big deal! As though dying were more of a big deal than losing our job or losing a girlfriend or boyfriend or wife or husband. That is the wrong attitude.

Also we think that dying is always negative—that is just your projection. Dying is actually better than this flower because this flower does not give you tremendous bliss, the tremendous peace that the death experience can give you. That experience is much better than having a wife or husband, or a girlfriend or boyfriend because they give you very little bliss! They cannot solve your fundamental problems; they can only solve some emotional problem momentarily. But at the moment of death all anxiety ends, all emotion ends. Dying naturally is a long, slow process.

When we die naturally, each of our four elements deteriorates—we call it “absorbing”—they deteriorate, and slowly, slowly, lead to internal and external hallucinatory visions. Also the five aggregates—form, feeling, discrimination, compounded phenomena, and consciousness—all sink, or dissolve.

Normally, we think that seeing form is fantastic, a pleasure. We also feel that experiencing sensations is important and we grasp onto them as much as possible. In Buddhism, however, there is the idea of remaining detached from sensory objects. This is called renunciation. Renunciation is a very natural thing. Why? Well, when you were born, as a baby, you did not have any problems of attachment, all this attachment to yourself was built up in society; at that time there were no sensory objects.

When you are in your mother's womb you have already renounced everything. You do not have *anything*, you do not have any grasping, there is not the slightest bit of grasping. When you are in your mother's womb you do not have any external sensory objects, no objects that you are grasping on to. At that time you are already renounced—natural renunciation!

Now, you have one car...that is not good enough. You have two cars...that is not good enough. That is not good enough, you need a boat. One boat is not enough, you need a bigger boat. Do you understand? And so it goes on to infinity. That is dissatisfaction. You have to realize that you are born renounced, naturally renounced. You do not have grasping, you don't have so much to worry about, you come feeling quite pleased. Then you build up so much worry, so much worry, and then die again, naturally renounced.

So, be natural. Do not think that in Eastern philosophy renunciation and detachment is something

polluted—some Eastern idea. Satisfaction is not dependent on material objects. Satisfaction is something that comes from simplicity. I am not saying that you are bad because you come from a society with a rich economy. I am not just being jealous and so telling you that you are bad! We do *all* need simplicity to give us satisfaction inside. I am not jealous of your pleasures, your wealth. The question is, why are you dissatisfied? You always find some external cause of blame—”There is not enough of this...,” “Not enough of that...” That is not true: what is missing is inside, and that is what you have to recognize.

When I say ‘detached’ it means more easy-going. Detached does not mean that you totally renounce everything. Detached means that you don’t hang on to things and be tight, just loosen your grip, be more relaxed; instead of being uptight.

In my opinion, Swiss people, for example, can have very happy lives—being renounced does not necessarily mean that they should give up their money. They can possess money and enjoy it in a reasonable way, feeling some appreciation of their own lives by looking at the simple lives of people in the Third World. Otherwise, looking at your Swiss francs and storing them away just makes you unhappy. You should appreciate Swiss pleasure and Swiss money; appreciate this environment, enjoy it and be satisfied. Otherwise, even if you possess all the money in Switzerland it will make you miserable instead of happy.

According to Buddhist psychology, whether an object makes you satisfied or not depends on the decision made by your consciousness. Your consciousness makes the decision that “this makes me happy, this is nice” before you even see the object, then, when you see it with your eyes you think, “Oh, this is nice.” Your consciousness makes the decision that, “This is a very bad guy.” So when you see him, you see a bad guy.

The reason Tibetan Buddhism educates human beings to understand the death process, describing what happens and how to deal with the crises of illusions and visions that appear, is so that you can deal with them, instead of being confused. Then you can recognize illusion as illusions, projections as projections and fantasies as fantasies.

After the sinking of the four elements, when they have disappeared, we still have the subtle consciousness. Even though there is no breathing the subtle consciousness remains. Swiss doctors believe that when you are not breathing you are dead, so they can put you in an ice-box! From a Buddhist point of view, even though the person is not breathing he is still alive and experiencing four visions: the white vision, the red vision, the black vision and then the clear light vision. These four visions appear after we have completely stopped breathing and then it is possible for meditators to stay in the state of clear light for many, many days or even months. They stay in this clear light, blissful state, in touch with universal reality rather than pollution.

Of course, Western people will think, “Oh this is just the Buddhist faith, this monk is talking about his own faith, it has nothing to do with Swiss men and women.” But this is also human experience, though it may not be your experience.

I heard about one Frenchman who died and came back. He was not a religious man but according to the doctors he was dead for two hours and then woke up again, and wrote down the experiences he had



while he was dead. This is a good example; he didn't believe in any religious faith, he didn't know any Buddhism, but they said he was dead, so he wrote down all his experiences during death.

Whether you believe in the Buddhist explanation of the death process or not, you can understand it easily by being aware of the process of sleep. I think now they have scientific machines to check how the emotional concepts dissolve during the death and sleeping processes. Without having the Buddhist explanation, I believe they can analyze these processes by machine. So you can relate the process of sleep to that of death.

Now, I think our time is up, but I'm sure I've made you more confused, so we had better have some questions and answers.

*Student:* A human being is only able to know by comparing things—how would we know what temperature was if there were no variation of temperature? So it seems necessary to have bad things in order to be able to appreciate good things, and it is probable that imperfection is part of the perfection of the creation to which it permits movement. How do you consider it possible to eliminate the bad and keep only the good?

*Lama:* One should not worry that if there were no bad there would be no good. That is just miserable thinking. Of course, I agree that happiness and misery are an interdependent condition. You can see that to some extent you can eliminate your misery and generate more happiness.

*Student:* Could you talk a little about the possible conflict for someone who is Christian and wants to use Buddhist methods?

*Lama:* There is no problem! The Buddhist/Christian problem is just intellectual again. Why? There are some slight philosophical differences between Buddhism and Christianity, but different philosophies are like different clothes—Swiss people wear suits and Tibetans wear these things, but I'm sure he would like yak butter and I like Swiss cheese and Swiss chocolate!

I have many students in America, elderly ladies who are Christian, but we teach them Buddhism: how to meditate, what life is—we are dealing with life every day and Buddhism is all about that. Buddhism is not against God, Christianity is not against Buddha. These old ladies in Indiana in America are about eighty years old, there are many of them and they told me, “Buddhism gave us a much better understanding of the Bible; before we didn't really understand the Bible; Buddhism has helped us to have a better understanding.”

Let's say we try and make a problem, for example, Buddhism says that your problems are created by your mind, and Christianity says that God is the creator of everything. For me this is not contradictory. The Christian doctrine that everything is created by God is good for the Western mind because the Western ego thinks, “I make everything.” Western individualism is so powerful. Westerners think they are the creation principal, so when you say, “God is creator—not you,” they slow down. Buddhism is also good; it says that your mind creates all your own problems—you cannot blame Buddha! So I definitely agree with this. Of course, I'm not well educated in the Christian Bible but still I study the Bible and I study a little Buddhism. From my point of view, the essence of Christianity and the essence of Buddhism go together without contradiction.



Let us make another example: European people who become Buddhist think, “Buddhism has meditation, I like that. Christianity does not have meditation.” That is wrong conception. Do you understand what I am talking about? Many European Buddhists think, “Ah, I’ve found Buddhism, Buddhism is very good, I can meditate every day. I can do *bardo* meditation, I don’t need to go to church, Christianity doesn’t have any meditation.” They are proud of their own ego because they have found Buddhism. That is wrong. They don’t understand Christianity; Christianity *does* have meditation; so, unfortunately they are ignorant of their own country’s religion.

*Student:* Why does a baby cry when he is hungry if he is completely detached?

*Lama:* Good debate! But the baby is crying because the baby is hungry, the baby is not crying because he does not have a girlfriend, or he’s lost his wife! Okay? And the baby is not asking for chocolate, “Ah...” like this. We are crying for chocolate. And do you think that the baby has a political problem? Or that baby does not have enough wages? Is the baby crying because of unemployment, not getting a job? All right, that’s clear isn’t it?

*Student:* Many people have had a similar experience to death by using drugs. What do you think?

*Lama:* I think that’s a good example. Yes, that is human experience. I think this can help them to understand that a human being is not only this body. Besides this body there is something else, the nucleus, as I said before. The nucleus of the human being is the human consciousness, the human mind—not these bones.

However, taking drugs is also bad because it can make you lose your memory. So it has good and bad. Once you have experienced it, it is better not to take again. Okay? It’s like once you have had an experience with a bad girlfriend—stop!

*Student:* You were talking about four elements and not five. Can you name them?

*Lama:* Earth, water, fire and air.

*Student:* And you talk about five aggregates. Can you name them please?

*Lama:* All right. Form, feeling, discrimination, compounded phenomena, and consciousness.

*Student:* Don’t you take into account three principles?

*Lama:* The three principles are craving/desire, hatred and ignorance.

*Student:* The three principles which form the four elements?

*Lama:* In Buddhist terminology we do not have these three principles.

*Student:* I thought that the consciousness of the dream state was gross. You say that the intellect disappears at the moment of dream. I would like to understand this better.

*Lama:* First you sleep and then when all the four elements have sunk as in the death process, then you reach clear light. *Then*, from there you manifest the dream body. The dream body is like being in a Western night club! The reason that I said it is wrong is that the sleeping stage and the dream stage are different. The dream stage or dream body is manifested from the sleep when the dream mind is functioning. Then when you come back, when you wake up again, the first elements of the dream body absorb and you come back to the sleeping stage and then to the awakening stage. Okay? The sleeping stage and the dream stage are different phenomena.

*Student:* During the dream state do we produce karma?

*Lama:* Oh, yes. In tantra we explain that the death process is like sleeping, and going from the death process into the *bardo* is like entering the dream state because the experience is similar. When you die the elements of the gross body absorb, the same as when you sleep, the gross body and gross concepts absorb, and then from the sleeping stage there is some kind of clear light and a subtle body is manifested which is the dream stage body. This is quite similar to the *bardo* stage body and the activity is similar to that in the *bardo*.

The dream stage body is more subtle than this body and the dream stage mind is more subtle than this waking stage mind. Therefore, in Buddhism meditators have experienced that the dream stage is a much more clean-clear state of mind for linking into the future or things like that, than the waking stage. That is why we explain that whatever is going on in your dream stage mind, whatever expressions or pictures that you get, these all relate totally to your waking state, so we do not make any value judgements - for example, that there is more reality in your touching an object in the waking state than in the dream stage. It is the same thing.

## *Second Discourse*

Each human being has a mind. The mind has three divisions: gross, subtle and extremely subtle. Also we have gross, subtle and extremely subtle bodies. The gross consciousness contains the five sensory consciousnesses. We use this gross consciousness every day. The subtle consciousness can be called the intuition ego or intuition superstition. This is the subtle sense we cannot see or understand clearly. The gross mind is so busy that the subtle mind is obscured. When the gross mind is no longer functioning, the subtle consciousness has a chance to arise. That is why in Tibetan Buddhist tantra the method is to eliminate the gross concepts and make space for the subtle consciousness to function. That is tantra's business.

Even though we may understand, our gross mind has no power or strength; but the subtle consciousness has more power to penetrate and comprehend. Meditation cuts this gross, busy mind in order to allow the subtle consciousness to function. Meditation performs a similar function as the process of death. Of course, for this kind of meditation to lead to the process of death it needs strong, one-pointed concentration.

Buddhism explains universal reality: emptiness, or *shunyata*. When you eliminate the superficial gross mind, that allows the *shunyata* experience to arise. A person who does not have an idea of *shunyata*, or reality but has an understanding of the process of dying, the experience leads, to some extent, to the

experience of emptiness, or *shunyata*. Even though during your life you do not have the conception of *shunyata*, when the busy mind totally dissolves, your consciousness experiences great, great emptiness. So by stopping the gross, crowded concepts, the moment you feel space, something empty, when the crowdedness disappears, you then have the experience.

When you describe *shunyata*, “blah blah blah blah, empty, blah blah blah blah,” it sounds so complicated. Buddhist philosophy can be very, very complicated, very sophisticated. Ordinary people cannot understand how one can possibly realize *shunyata*. Nagarjuna says “blah blah blah,” Chandrakirti says “blah blah blah.” Do you understand? But when the busy, superstitious concepts are cut and eliminated by means of a real, down-to-earth experience, then *shunyata* comes as the death process.

Generally, we are far away from reality, from the reality of ourselves, from the reality of everything. Why? Because we are covered by heavy blankets—one, two, three blankets of superstition. All these gross blankets, the gross mind, are completely built up like Mount Meru, Mount Everest, so that you are not able to shed these blankets.

In Buddhism we use a methodical meditation to take off slowly each layer of blankets. That is our business. Now in order to carry out this business we have to understand the characteristics of our own mind. First of all, mind is not substance, or matter. It is a kind of thought-energy, conscious energy. It does not have its own color or its own form. It is formless, colorless energy. Its nature is clean-clear; it reflects inner phenomena. Even a heavy negative thought has its own essence, its own clarity, in order to perceive reality or reflect projection. Consciousness, or mind, is like space. It is not mixed up with cloudy pollutions. The characteristic of space is different. Communicating? Even though pollution occurs in space, the two are not of the same nature.

I say this because human beings have tendencies and preconceptions. We think, “I am a bad guy, my mind is so bad and negative.” We are always criticizing, “blah blah blah blah my mind,” “bad bad bad my body, blah blah blah blah.” We are always dualistically criticizing ourselves. According to Buddhist thinking, that is a wrong conception. So now, it is my business to think: the characteristic nature of space is not pollution; the characteristic nature of pollution is not space. Similarly, the nature of consciousness is not negative. The Buddha himself said that the buddha-, or tathagata-nature is within all of us; its nature is pure, clean-clear. Maitreya also explained that if you put the pure nature into kaka, its characteristic is different from kaka; kaka characteristic is different from pure nature. Communicating? The same thing. I am sorry, this Tibetan monk has not good things to say—he always says bad things! But this is important. A clean clear mind is existent. A pure nature or consciousness is existent. Its own essence and clarity is existent. But our concepts, all these heavy blankets, are contaminating, covering our senses. Nevertheless, its nature is clean-clear; consciousness’s nature is clean-clear.

First of all—this is very important—you should recognize that your nature, the essence of your consciousness, is not totally negative. You should recognize that you do have clean-clear character, or pure nature, existent, right now.

Our consciousness has two characteristics: relative and absolute. The relative characteristic of our consciousness is not negative or superstitious. For example, according to Christian understanding, the human soul is pure, without ego-conflict or negativities of craving, desire, hatred and jealousy. Similarly, relatively, the human consciousness can go from the first level all the way to the point of enlight-

enment. But the ego-conflict does not go all the way up.

The dissatisfied, emotionally restless mind never goes from first, second, third...to the tenth stage (*bhumi*) and enlightenment. So the essence of human consciousness, the essence of human soul is continuously going up, up, up. The negative superstition blankets never go up. Each time clean-clear; then they just disappear, disappear, disappear. I hope you now understand the relative characteristic of mind.

The characteristic of the absolute human consciousness or soul is that it is non-dual. The non-duality of human consciousness is not emotionally disturbed; it is always of a clean-clear nature.

We should understand that the nucleus of each of us is the consciousness. Consciousness is not mixed up with negativity. It has its own characteristics, relatively and absolutely. The consciousness or soul is like the ocean. Ego-conflict is like the waves. All conflict and concepts are like waves that arise out of consciousness. They are shaking up—whoosh, whoosh!—and then they return to consciousness.

For that reason each of our own consciousness, or soul, is clean-clear nature. Then, like the wave on the surface of the ocean, we have craving-desire, hatred and ignorance. So we have the capacity to not shake our consciousness; we can hold our consciousness like the ocean without shaking. That is the function of meditation.

All the confusion, dissatisfaction, pain and misery come from the motivation in our mind.

Are you scared? Relax. Think you are nobody. It is true—if you think you are somebody you are tense. Okay? Okay. No problem.

All our human problems, the root of human problems, is somewhere wrong inside the mind. It is very worthwhile to investigate directly. One should understand that one's nature is not totally negative, not totally hopeless. We should respect our own nature, our own purity, our own characteristic. Then we can begin to have respect for others. If you interpret yourself as being a hassle, selfish, totally negative and hopeless, then psychologically you will interpret other people in that way as well. That is dangerous.

When you meditate, your sense perception or sense consciousness is not the meditator. Sometimes people think, because they are so accustomed to using the five senses, that the only reality is sensory. Because of the habit of Western mentality, the thing you touch, see, etc. is your reality; the sensory object is your only reality.

Actually, sensory consciousness is like a fool. It does not have the intelligence to discriminate between right and wrong. That is why the minute we open our eyes we are always distracted, following dualistic concepts. When you meditate, this foolish old habit of the sense perceptions stops naturally.

Suppose you are at home and thinking about a pear. “Oh, this beautiful pear.” Even before you go to the market your mind has already imagined the pear and decided that buying a pear would be a good idea. So when you go to the market and see the pear, it becomes very beautiful, attractive—because you already had preconceived ideas about it.

Sensory perception is like the Swiss population; consciousness is like the Swiss government. The Swiss government has already made a decision about the population: who is good and who is bad. That is why consciousness already has preconceived idea. So when the sense perception sees an object, if the mind says “good,” it is good; if the mind says “bad,” it is bad. That is why I say sensory perception is like a fool, it does not have its own strength to discriminate. It only sees the gross reality, there is no way for it to understand the totality of nature. No way. Science tries so hard to understand reality through the use of powerful microscopes, but it is hopeless. Buddhists already know that you cannot understand *sunyata* by that means.

This afternoon we are going to meditate on our own consciousness. One should not be afraid, thinking, “How am I supposed to meditate when I don’t even know what my consciousness is? This monk says I should meditate on my consciousness, but if that is the source of my problem, how can I meditate on it?” Now, for example, we are inside this room. Even though we do not directly see the sun, we do see the sun’s rays. So we know, through perceiving the sun’s rays, the sun really exists. Similarly, we know through our own experience that thought and motivation are related to our consciousness. Now the *view* of your thought, the awareness of the view of your thought, and the awareness of your own thought and motivation is sufficient for meditating on your own consciousness. When you look at your own mind, when you are aware of your own mind’s view, *that* I call meditating on your consciousness.

Another way to meditate on consciousness is by knowing your thought experience. The moment you close your eyes you know some kind of thought is coming; then just be *aware* of the essence of your own thought. One should not worry about bad or good thoughts. Do you understand? The essence of both good and bad thoughts is clear because mind reflects phenomena.

In the West, the word “meditation” brings much misconception. Sometimes people interpret meditation as squeezing oneself; others interpret it as “spacing out”. Both are misconceptions. If you space out, you become completely distracted; if you squeeze, you are completely selfish.

Meditation is very simple. Close your eyes. What is happening? Your awareness radiates like a sensitive machine. It is like radar. If there is any kind of signal or vibration, you notice it. You are sensitive, totally awake, aware of what is going on. Communicating? *That* is what I call meditation on consciousness.

Meditating does not mean “Oh, there is light, there is blah blah blah...”. We are not having a conversation. Suppose you are meditating. You are aware of your surroundings—the sky, trucks passing by—you are aware of everything. Yet you do not make a conversation saying, “All these trucks must be very nice trucks, full of cheese or juice, on their way to market.” That type of conversation you should not do. Although you are aware, you need to be in control and eliminate the uncontrolled mind.

What makes you uncontrolled? Making conversation—“She’s like that; she says this, he says that; I don’t like, I like”—you are constantly reacting. Control means not reacting. If somebody says, “You are a bad guy,” you do not react, you do not say, “He called me a bad guy; my ego is hurt.” This is reacting; it is uncontrolled mind. It is also a mind that is obsessed. My interpretation is that the obsessed mind has two objects: either an object of beauty or an object of hate. Obsessed means you cannot get away from thinking about the object. Do you understand what I mean? Obsessed means you are not free or

peaceful; instead you are always thinking, “this, this, this, this.” That is being obsessed. So the mind of hatred, jealousy, or craving-desire is too obsessive and disturbed. That is why meditation teaches you the habit of not reacting when the obsessed object arises.

What is the benefit of directing your awareness towards your own consciousness instead of onto this flower or your girlfriend or boyfriend? The benefit is that there is some energy taking place when you are aware of your consciousness. Consciousness itself does not have a concrete, self-existent notion as does this flower or your girlfriend or boyfriend. The beauty of watching or being aware of your own consciousness is that it leads you to break down concepts; it directly *leads* you to break down heavy blankets of superstitious concepts and to experience great emptiness. To solve our problems we need some experience with our own mind in order to break down concepts. Then you *know* you are capable and you get encouraged, thinking, “Oh, I can do anything. If I want to solve my problems, I can.” In Buddhism, this is the way for a human being to become liberated.

Normally, we are very intellectual. We are always judging “good/bad, good/bad, good/bad, good/bad” all the time. But when you meditate you *stop* saying good/bad, good/bad. *Stop* the intellectual good/bad thinking. This is dualistic. When your mind is split—good/bad, good/bad, good/bad—stop! Just *be* aware, just *be* conscious. Just like the sun and moon. They do not think, “I make Swiss people warm” or “I give Swiss people much light. How ungrateful they are!” The sun and moon do not make such judgements. Similarly, *be* like the sun and moon. This is very important.

Maitreya Buddha said that books, scriptures, bibles and so forth are like bridges. In order to cross a river you need a reliable bridge. After you cross you can say, “goodbye, bridge.” After crossing the bridge it does not make sense to think, “this bridge is so kind,” or “this bible is so kind.” That only shows that you are attached to that scripture.

Now, it makes sense to discriminate *intelligently* between good and bad—that has value. But always “good/bad, good/bad” does not have much value. So, although you need discriminating wisdom, at a certain point you have to go *beyond* that.

How is it possible that awareness of your own consciousness can *lead* to a non-duality experience? You may argue that there are always two flowers, a sun and a moon, and so many people. So how is it possible to experience non-duality when duality is always there?

Duality is the conventional level of reality. When we have experienced the non-dual it does not mean we are nihilists; but rather, it means we understand the broad view of reality, and the conventional no longer makes vibrations in your mind. That is why you should not debate when you try to experience non-duality.

During meditation you should not debate with yourself, “how am I supposed to do this? Two flowers exist, so how can you say there is no duality?” This kind of debate, conversation, you should immediately stop. You are trying to experience; you are not destroying the flower. Do you understand? You are trying to develop some kind of awareness and understanding of the totality of the flower.

From a Buddhist point of view, when you reach one-pointed concentration of the non-duality of the flower, in that moment of experience the flower disappears; the conventional flower disappears in the



experience. Are you communicating or not? So when you are experiencing the non-duality of yourself, at that moment of experience in your mind there are no hopeless concepts of yourself—they all disappear. There is no sort of sentimental, “Am I beautiful or am I ugly?” Do you understand what I mean? Those kind of relative conversations disappear. At that moment of experience there is no cosmetic business. Therefore there is no worry about not enough beauty, less wrinkles. When you are less worried, there are less wrinkles!

So we are talking about a stage of experience, an experience of consciousness, so you should not worry, “I’m disappearing, everything’s disappearing, maybe I will end up a nihilistic person.” You should not worry about that one. Okay? Just completely knock out the wrong conceptions, the egotistic kingdoms. During this kind of meditation just *be* intense awareness of your own consciousness. Do not even interpret your consciousness as being bad or good—just be and let go. Do you understand? “Let go” does not mean you space-out; it simply means you let go with intense awareness. Intense awareness is like the sun, radiating the consciousness—and then just let go. Just *be*. That is good enough.

When you close your eyes just relax, be aware. Sometimes visions of different colors arise. Just let them come and go. Do not think about the white color, do not make conversation—just *be*. To put it another way, whatever your consciousness is experiencing in the moment, be aware of the continuity of your memory.

I guess the time is over, right? Who is checking my time? Because I am in Switzerland I have to keep my business time-table, you know! Now, what I am trying to explain is that we simply try to experience something this weekend, knocking out your superstition blanket, then this weekend course is worthwhile. Do you understand?

This is *my* feeling, it is my human right to tell you. You do not need to believe anything I say. There is not requirement or obligation to believe what I say. Simply try to experience. This monk says: is there some kind of experience or not? That is all. Without experience in meditation you cannot be liberated; then Buddhism will be of no help.

So it is very simple. You do not need to become a great meditator; just relax and be conscious. Do not judge your sense perceptions as good or bad; just be aware of your own consciousness without any interpretation. Just be. Even if a bad thought arises, do not worry about it, do not reject it. The essence of a bad thought is clean-clear consciousness.

Do not make conversation with the object. This is the worst enemy of meditation. You should be aware of your own consciousness. When a thought suddenly appears, do not reject it, thinking, “Oh, it is very bad, oh no”—you should not become upset like this. Just watch the essence of thought inside; subjectively you are just aware. Do not make conversation, saying, “How nice this is, yellow, so beautiful and this is so and so, fantastic.” Do not make objective conversation. Stop the normal conversation and just be conscious of the particular thought, just be aware of it. Again, the thought *leads* you to the non-duality of it; it leads you beyond distraction.

Now I think the time has run out. When you begin your meditation, the first thing is to check your motivation. If you feel your motivation is bananas, then just breathe naturally. After that, just watch,

being aware of your own thought. All right, I think that is good enough. Maybe I do not need to explain. You are going to do it anyway, aren't you? Thank you so much. See you this afternoon.

### *Third Discourse*

During our lifetime we have built up such hallucinated experience, that at the death-time we produce reactions of even more confusion. This is because when you are old, the four elements absorb internally, creating confused energy. When you get older your sensory organs do not function well; the four elements already begin to absorb. One has trouble seeing, experiences double vision, and the sense organs create confusion.

When we say “the earth element sinks,” these are just words. It means the earth element—the body—deteriorates. The sense organs of old men and women deteriorate, they can no longer see clearly or function properly. The earth element already begins to deteriorate—even at a young age!

Not only do the sense organs deteriorate; the five aggregates also weaken, bringing confusion and hallucinated visions. Even sense enjoyments deteriorate, no longer giving pleasure. When you have a heavy disease or illness, the food, form, color etc. that used to give you pleasure no longer do so. You do not get any pleasure from the sensory objects, no pleasure from the flower. The flower is there, but you do not get any pleasure from it. Maybe the flower makes you angry! “This red flower makes me angry, please take it away.”

Some sick people, because of an internal problem, react like that.

The deterioration of the four elements causes internal experiences, like the mirage experience, and then the smoke and fire. These are all internal experiences; there is no fire outside. Therefore, some sick people say, “Please take away water,” or “Please take away fire.” The confusion is inside. Inside they experience a burning fire passing through them. Those are inner hallucinations. They feel the presence of the true nature of fire and water, so their experience of consciousness is only confused. If you can imagine this, you can see clean-clear.

Normally, your ego grasps certain objects. But at the time of the disintegration of the elements these outer objects disappear. You experience only the confusion and hallucinated vision. You are losing your grasp and you are scared. At the same time you are losing your identity of ego. While you are experiencing the four elements sinking with their corresponding visions, remember that inside the five sense organs are deteriorating. The ideas that you have been holding on to for a lifetime begin to disappear; you lose your identification and are scared, so scared. Normally, my identity is my companion; it makes me feel secure. But when everything deteriorates, both internally and externally, you are so afraid of losing normal security.

By training through meditation, you educate yourself in such a way that at the time of the death experience you recognize the sort of conditions that make you hallucinate. Realizing that the hallucinated visions are not self-existent, and not identifying with the hallucinated object, helps you to understand *shunyata* better.



You should not think that the self-existent I is existent. We try to use educated words like, “there is not dualistic I,” right? We try to push you: there is no self-existent I. We try to push intellectually, but at the time of death intellectual pushing is not necessary because you naturally lose self-existent identification. That is why when they meditate, many people have the experience of losing their identity and become scared. That is *good*; you should be scared.

We Tibetan monks want to make you afraid. Western people do not like to be afraid.

However, we have the skill to put you in a fearful situation. So, many people have this experience. *Why* are you afraid of losing something? Losing yourself means losing the self-existent or concrete preconception about *you*—that is what is shaking. Your own projection about *you* is shaking; it is not the non-duality, or true nature, of yourself that is shaking.

While Lama Je Tsongkhapa was giving a discourse on *sunyata*, one of his close disciples discovered *sunyata* at that moment. While he was listening he suddenly started to shake himself because he felt he was disappearing, losing himself completely. So he grabbed hold of himself and shook himself. The experience of the teaching and the realization came together. It *should* be that way. So the way to discover your true nature is to break the preconceived idea of the fantasy of yourself.

In the West there are many different meanings of the term “to lose the self.” There are hundreds of interpretations for the word “self.” By having a preconceived notion you fix your reality: “I am this.” You make the self a permanent, self-existent entity. Similarly, when Christians describe the soul they create a self, thinking, “I am this way, that way, this is the me.” They have a strong preconceived idea of who I am, what I am.” That “self” is not existent; it is only a projection of your own ego.

For example, when a man identifies himself by saying “I am such and such a lady’s husband,” he is presenting the notion of identifying himself as a self-existent husband. Since he considers himself to be a concrete and self-existent husband, he immediately also projects such an image onto his wife. He presents himself in such a way and in turn believes, “my wife is also a concrete, self-existent wife.” Consequently, this preconception leads to misery. As long as my existence depends on my wife, her existence depends on me; so if she disappears, I disappear too! Understand? So once he identifies himself as concrete husband, he also projects concrete wife. Then he becomes impossible husband because the situation, himself, and his wife, are impermanent, transitory, changing every day. He is exaggerating the reality.

It is good that young Western people also have to go through confusion. They open their eyes, “What can I do in this Swiss society? Become an engineer?...a scientist?” They want to identify themselves with something. They feel, “I want a profession.” Young people are very confused because society says, “you have to be such and such...” In one way they believe this; in another way they do not. Nevertheless, they want some way to identify themselves, but they cannot find an identification, a temporary or transitory identification, so then they become crazy. They take drugs, feeling there is no hope: “I can’t find my identity; it is better that I take off.” This does not mean they do not have ego. They already have ego. However, their ego wants to identify with something extra. They already have a preconception of who they are, but they want an extra identification or flavor to add to this preconception—but they cannot find it.

This image of holding yourself to be self-existent is very easy to experience. It is not difficult. Right now you can watch what kind of self-image you are identifying with or holding on to. Right now you can analyze. Since you have preconceptions about your own self-image, basically you are in trouble. Always criticizing yourself, “I’m not good enough,” is caused by your holding. If you check in this way you can understand how you are deluded and not touching reality—you can understand right now. Because you give such a limited projection of yourself, a limited image of yourself, it becomes the root of limitation of everything: limitation of love, limitation of wisdom, limitation of compassion. On the fundamental level you have already decided you are narrow. So the whole thing—your life, wisdom and love—becomes narrow because you are projecting yourself in a narrow way.

When the four elements absorb at the time of death, all the gross concepts about yourself, your pleasure, your environment, your friends, your security, your love and compassion, all disappear. That is why we say that when the air element absorbs into our consciousness, the eighty superstitious egos disappear. So the result of the eighty superstitious egos is stopped. Internally, your consciousness experiences great emptiness, great empty space, like blue sky; you experience internally complete and totally empty space. Normally we are so crowded with deluded concepts, the eighty superstitions, because there is no space to see reality.

At the time of death all these dualistic concepts disappear, so the result allows us to touch a broader reality. So, that is what you experience. Also, since our physical energy is generally going in the wrong direction, the superstitions, the delusions, explode. But at the time of death, the energies are naturally integrated into the *shushuma* so you experience great peace, great emptiness. That is why tantra emphasizes activating the energies into the *shushuma*. You place your attention on the chakras to draw energy into the central channel. Because you contemplate in your heart chakra, navel, throat, brow or crown chakra, you penetrate into the subtle, the central channel (*shushuma*), drawing all the energy pressure into that spot, stopping the wrong direction energy from functioning any longer. So yogis and yoginis control their energy by meditating into the *shushuma*, having the same experience as at the time of death.

After the four elements absorb, the breathing stops functioning. Then the four visions arise: the white, red, black and clear light visions. The four visions draw into the *shushuma*. The white vision is the reflection of the white, or father-aspect, energy; the consciousness experiences great empty space, like a white radiating light. Similarly, the mother-aspect, or red, energy also draws into the *shushuma*; the consciousness experiences red color in the great empty space. In tantra it is explained that each of us has this energy union of male and female energy always fundamentally existent within us. After the red vision disappears the black vision arises briefly.

Then comes the clear light vision which means experiencing a complete gigantic empty space. Into this empty space is a clean-clear light impression, which is the clear light experience. During that moment of clear light experience your consciousness does not experience sensory objects at all. There are no Geneva ladies and gentlemen and there are no Geneva shops; there is no meeting in the U.N. at that time; no busy Geneva existent. During the clear light experience all objects of your ego are gone—objects of your pride, desire, hatred and jealousy are all gone. All your depressed, black vision is gone; you experience only light vision.

Now this is important to understand. When we are deluded we are not aware. We are inflexible, con-

fused and thus impure. Your sense consciousness is then experiencing darkness. But you are clean-clear, you always experience a light in front of you. I truly believe that you always experience that, but since, due to ignorance, we are so deluded, we do not see that. When you are clean-clear in your mind there occurs some kind of light projection. If you are confused and impure, a polluted projection appears in your mind or in front of you. This is important to know.

When you are feeling depressed and impure inside, your mind has degenerated for a certain period. You even feel that your life is a polluted projection, so that even if you go outside and the sun is shining you have some kind of polluted projection. But when you are internally clean-clear and pure, externally there is also some light or vision. This is all I am talking about. How many people have had that kind of noticeable experience? It is very simple. I am not talking about some sort of higher realization. Just be conscious.

As much as you are confused in your daily life, that much your confused situation will determine an external reflection occurring. Similarly, if internally you are clean-clear, that will determine the appearance of an external reflection. You analyze—it is such a simple thing. It is not some kind of great meditation experience; rather it is a matter of sensitivity. When you are degenerating, extremely negative, you can see in your daily life some kind of vision happening externally. And when you are very pure and clean-clear, externally something different occurs. This is very important. It is not some higher realization; it is being very sensitive. We talk about negative and positive—this is our business, isn't it? Our business is to try to be as positive as possible; so analyze this kind of vibration.

I will explain in another way that is logical. You have read in their biographies that many higher lamas always have pure visions of deities: of the Buddha, Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, etc. They always have some kind of pure vision appearing to them. We always have arising an object of anger, craving, ignorance or jealousy. This is simple and logical, right? Although we are all human beings, some always get pure visions, others get negative visions. This is not complicated to understand.

If you are conscious and aware of how the pattern of your mental visions, or the rhythm, or view, of your consciousness is manifesting, then you can analyze your visions and dreams. It is not difficult when we are seeking some inner experience of what is occurring in our mind. So it is very useful to analyze. It is very important, because in this way we learn to know karma. Although we say “blah, blah karma,” blah blah karma does not make us convinced; but the experience of karma—your *own* understanding, your *own* awareness, your *own* consciousness of what is going on in your life, every month and year—will help you to understand karma.

You have heard of many great meditators remaining in meditation during the death-time. When they reach the point of the clear light experience, the yogis remain meditating in clear light. It is possible to remain in this state for days, weeks or months. So even after the yogi's breathing stops, he can still be alive for many months, weeks, or days. As long as he is meditating, he is still alive, he is not yet dead.

So it is important for Swiss meditators to change the law for their human rights. In other words, they should get permission from Swiss government! “What does Lama mean, ‘to get permission to meditate’? We do not need it, we've been given permission already!” After the death, do not touch the body until the yogi's energy comes out of his nostril, or from any other part of the body. That is the permission you need.

We also have another explanation: some lamas say that clear light experience is the *sunyata* experience; others say that it is an artificial *sunyata* experience, but it is not really the actual experience. They debate on this point. Well, how is it possible for everyone to say that he experiences *sunyata*? Maybe we do not have any business to fight over whether it is a *sunyata* experience or not. Our business is to stop the concrete concepts and superstition. The moment you have the experience of non-duality or non-existent I—*that* is Swiss chocolate—that is good enough. So we do not need to debate.

Intellectually we can talk to each other and I can say, “What is *your* experience of *sunyata*?” And then you reply, “Oh, my experience of *sunyata* at that time is that there is no boyfriend, no girlfriend, no problem of chocolate!” I ask, “Why?” and can debate with you: “‘there is no problem of chocolate’—that is not *sunyata*.” Do you understand? I can debate in this way. “‘There is no problem of politics’—that is your *sunyata* experience. Hmm. That cannot be *sunyata*.” Anyway, I can debate with you. Somehow I can try to convince you that that is not *sunyata* experience.

Now, from a practical point of view we *build up sunyata* experience from nothingness. We have to build up the *sunyata* experience. We have to build up little by little *sunyata* experience—from baby *sunyata* experience, then the teenage *sunyata* experience, middle-aged *sunyata* experience, the elderly *sunyata* experience, to the great *sunyata* experience. We are talking about experience, not about intellectualizing. Many intellectual people think *sunyata* is *this*, so when you have *sunyata* experience it should be *this*! That is just an intellectual trip. That is not *organic* talk about experience. Organic means you start slowly, slowly, slowly. You slowly build up some kind of *sunyata* experience and less and less concrete concepts. So that is why intellectual talk about *sunyata* and actual experience is different.

The moment the clear light experience stops, the signs of visions appear in reverse order. Whereas before we went from the white, to the red, black and then clear light experience, now, when the clear light energy stops, the black or dark vision arises. Then from the darkness the red and then white visions come, and then again all the superstitions arise.

Now we are going to talk about the *bardo*. Do not rush—I want you to understand this clean-clear. At the end of the clear light experience during the death process, for one second you become *bardo* body. You experience black vision and then from there starts the red and then the white vision. So, ego is again built up. If you are aware and sensitive, during these more deluded states you have certain kinds of color visions. For example, when desire and craving and hatred are strongly arising another color is predominant. So you should be aware of this kinds of vision. This experience during the death process is the same as during the time of sleep. This process does not occur only at the death-time, but also when we sleep and when we faint. When we have an orgasm there is also a similar element to the death experience. We need to be aware. Although we have already experienced the death process many times, we are not conscious or sensitive enough to recognize it. We do not comprehend our own experience.

So you see, the death process is not something unusual. You have already gone through it many times; during orgasm you experience the death process. Even though to some extent you experience the elements absorbing and have visions of the white, red, black and clear light, because you are happily ignorant you are not conscious of them. If you are conscious and sensitive, intensely aware of all your actions, you can notice this death process occurring in your life. It has *already* been experienced—even before you meditated!

We all have so many valuable experiences—we all do. I am not saying we are great meditators, but all of us have had valuable experiences. It is important to acknowledge, to be conscious of, and to recall those valuable experiences. Then you will gain confidence and grow spiritually. It will help you. Otherwise we are unconsciously throwing away our valuable experiences, just as the Swiss throw away their garbage. That is not right. We have valuable inner experiences but instead we throw them away and pick up and wear our concrete blankets all the time. What you are, what you experience, you cannot buy with money; they are the most precious part of you. But instead, you try to ignore and throw them away; you pick up and wear what you are not—completely foolish!

Now, we had better get back to business. Visualize OM AH HUM. Try to visualize a white OM in the center of your brain. Recognize that the white OM is the pure energy of the divine speech, or divine sound, and the divine body of the Buddhas or Bodhisattvas or whoever you think is pure.

After making the sound “OM,” from the OM much white radiating light energy enters your body, through your *shushuma*, permeating your body. All conceptions and impure energy of body are cleansed and purified. Your entire body from the feet up to the top of the head is completely filled with white radiating blissful energy. *Feel* that way. Make the sound of “OM” for two or three minutes while you are meditating and purifying the body. At the moment of stopping the OM sound mantra, just be aware, not concerned with good or bad, not reacting, not making conversation—just place all your attention on the light consciousness at the center of your brain. *Be* there. Be intensely aware and let go—without sluggishness, without distraction.

So just before closing, let us meditate for a short time. It is not necessary to squeeze yourself—just be natural, be comfortable. Let the natural energy flow, being as you are. Let the breath energy flow naturally. Do not think you are a meditator. Do not think you are a humble person. Do not think you are egotistic. Do not think anything—just *be*.

Place your hands in whatever position is comfortable for you; close your eyes. Visualize at the center of your brain a white OM. Make the sound “OM” continuously for three minutes.

At the same time, from the OM, much blissful kundalini energy fills your entire body, purifying the impure energy. It is important to visualize your entire body being filled with light. Everything is white radiating light energy. This helps to break down the criticizing concepts of the body.

*(Repetition of OM)*

Okay. Now stay at the stage of intense awareness—and let go—without any expectation.

*(Period of meditation)*

Intense awareness leads to the experience of zero, or egolessness. Empty. Nothing. Comprehend this intense awareness and let go.

*(Period of meditation)*

All right. Better stop now—or else we might lose ourselves. Thank you so much.



## *Fourth Discourse*

Yesterday we discussed the many confusions that occur during the process of dying.

According to the Buddhist point of view, all confusion, delusion and disease come from the three poisons of desire, jealousy and hatred, and ignorance.

All hallucinated visions come from the three poisons. If you do not have the three poisons, you will then have no problem during the dying process. Dying then is blissful. This is very important. Sometimes we describe death as the four elements sinking, or absorbing, and confusion arising. Only the person who has the condition of the three poisons has created the cause to make the elements unbalanced. The four elements absorbing means that the four elements are unbalanced. Tibetan texts use terminology such as the earth, water or fire “sinking,” but actually there is no sinking into each other. Only in scientific terms do the four elements deteriorate or become unbalanced. So if one element disappears, one confusion arises; if another disappears, another confusion comes.

So the deterioration of unbalanced energy in the body is the cause of the three poisons. Tibetan medical terminology explains that desire produces *lung*. This means that the air is unbalanced. When desire arises the air is not smooth and breathing becomes heavy.

Hatred and jealousy produce bile. Ignorance produces TB. Craving-desire produces strong air, which affects the nervous system. Hatred produces too much bile, affecting the fire element. Ignorance produces the water element. If a person’s energy is overactive, it will also over-activate the four elements causing confusion to arise. A predominance of one of the elements creates imbalance, which can kill us. Our own air element is for preserving life, isn’t it? But when it is unbalanced it can be fatal. Also, our heart, or heat, energy is life-preserving; but when the energy explodes it too can be fatal.

It is necessary to have water, isn’t it? But then too much water can also kill us. So when there is a balance of the four elements in the body it becomes the cause for health. But when one of these elements is out of balance, it can be fatal for us. That is the reality of our situation.

Many Western people have read books on the *bardo* that describe horrible visions, like somebody coming at you with a knife, or many horrible things coming to kill you. In one way it appears exaggerated. You might wonder how desire could produce such terrifying visions. But I think this can be true, because we have collected so much negativity, untruths and false blankets since birth until now, and also over countless previous lives. Our lives are like a publication of confused situations.

Once I was told that a popular singer had sold so many records throughout the world that if you stacked them on top of each other they would be twice as high as Mount Everest. Similarly, our publication of heavy blankets of confusion is two or three times bigger than Mount Everest. Therefore, because of the confusion imprints, you experience all kinds of things during the death process.

A good example in the West is when we hear of someone having cancer. “Cancer disease—go to the hospital.” You can see how cancer patients can go completely bananas after many months of illness. For me this is hell. I do not need to hear any explanations of the hell realms. Although we have detailed explanation of hell, for me it is just enough to see how unbelievably cancer patients are suffering. It is

an unusual type of suffering. It is worse than an animal's suffering. You can see for yourself; it is unbelievable. Sometimes they are conscious and then they again go into the unconscious, through the death process again.

For me this is incredible; it is a hell experience. It is the same as the *bardo*. A vision occurs like HUM. Yamas (lords of death) coming HUM like this, trying to eat you at this time! These are our horrible hungry ghosts.

In 1978 I went to San Francisco to see cancer patients. When I saw these people I could not sleep all night, it was simply too much for me. It was like seeing hell. I just could not sleep.

It is important to keep as clean-clear as possible. Every day be as clean-clear as possible. Keep yourself clean-clear and do not create confused situations through body, speech or mind. Then there is no problem. Inside you are balanced, physically more balanced, and there is less danger of getting disease.

When confusion arises during the meditation process, recognize the confusion as illusion, as untruth. You can then recognize non-self-existence and non-duality during the death process; you will have a more stable comprehension. It depends on how much you can cope with the situation. If there is too much shaking, then you have no control. But if an illusion comes and you have the conscious strength to deal with it, then you can control.

For example, people who have a heavy illness, a tremendous disease or confusion cannot cope. They cannot keep themselves at a clean-clear stage because of the tremendous power of confusion. But if you are dying naturally, without a tremendous heavy illness or heavy confusion, then you can cope and keep your conclusions clean-clear. You can see how they are reflected outwardly. In other words, the degree of control and awareness we have during the death process depends greatly on the weight of the three poisons.

You might ask how it is possible to have craving-desire at the time of death. Craving-desire comes from fantasy. Even during the waking state, our life is driven by craving-desire fantasies. During the death process your body closes down, but still the fantasy comes, the grasping at a future life. It is just like in a dream. Craving-desire is just like that. It is so strong that even when the body is cold and there is no more circulation, the three poisons are still functioning inside.

Lucky people die naturally without heavy disease or confusion; they die very smoothly. The advantage is that they are in control of the situation, they are clean-clear. So when the elements absorb, even though some confusion arises, they recognize it as hallucination. They do not have a conception of a self-existent water or fire etc., so they are in control. And then slowly, slowly, the elements absorb, sink, and then they become naturally more clear, more unified with non-self-existence and non-duality. Then they are slowly led completely to clean-clear-light stage. The situation helps instead of causing confusion. It helps by touching more of the reality. So, there are advantages and disadvantages.

One should not worry that dying must be difficult and that one will take rebirth as a tiger, donkey, monkey or in one of the three lower realms. I say that one should not worry because to some extent we have loving kindness. Anyone who has loving kindness at the time of death should never worry about having a bad rebirth. With loving kindness there is no way to the three lower realms.

Now we are going to meditate again. Last time we purified the body. Now we will purify our speech. Think of a red AH at your throat chakra. Radiate red light energy from the AH. Recognize that the red AH is the pure speech of the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Purification means that the uncontrolled mind and speech are interdependently operating with each other. Negativities of speech mean harming and giving pain to others through lying and slander. Having a clean-clear mind and controlled speech is the way to purify impure and uncontrolled speech.

So visualize a red AH. This red AH is similar to the sun at sunset. Visualize the red AH radiating from your throat chakra. Your entire body is embraced by the blissful radiating light energy. At the same time repeat the sound and again, as before, just *be* in the state of intense awareness on your own consciousness. Stay there without any expectation or interpretation. Just be in a state of intense awareness.

*(Repetition of AH)*

Comprehend your experience of the non-dual, non-self-existent I, nothingness, zero, empty space as truth, as reality. This strengthens your energy for comprehending.

Strong comprehension. This experience is much more real than your waking fantasy sensory world. If an uncontrollable distracted thought comes, recognize the control in the *bardo*, seeing that not only you, but also all other sentient beings are in this situation. Cultivate equilibrium and much loving kindness for all others. So contemplate loving kindness for others.

The uncontrolled, distracted mind is the resource to energize loving kindness. When loving kindness arises again, direct intense awareness of loving kindness energy towards your consciousness.

So, two things: either place intense awareness on your own consciousness or, when distractions arise, direct intense awareness of loving kindness on your own consciousness.

Alternate these two.

Next, your loving kindness energy manifests in your *shushuma* at your heart like a full moon.

Visualize at your heart, on a moon disc, a blue radiating HUM. Recognize the non-duality wisdom of the buddhas' and bodhisattvas' energy. Your heart is pure, cool, calm, opened by the radiating light of the moon and HUM. Infinite blue radiating light emanates from the HUM. All narrow thoughts are disappearing. All indecisive minds are disappearing. All obsessed minds are disappearing.

From the blue HUM and the moon much radiating blue light fills your entire body. Your entire body feels blissful. Being embraced by the infinite blue light leaves no room for fanatical, dualistic concepts. At the same time make the sound HUM for two minutes. After two minutes feel infinite blue light, like your consciousness, embracing the entire universal reality. Your intense awareness is embracing the entire universal reality. *Feel* and *be*, without any expectation or superstition.

*(Repetition of HUM)*

So, we need two experiences: wisdom and method. Wisdom experience is intense awareness of your own conscious reality. This is the way of wisdom. Method is when you again become out of control, distracted: that distracted experience is a big resource to generate again loving kindness; and when



there is no distraction, stay in the wisdom. So two things: when there is no problem place your attention on the wisdom aspect; when you are distracted, switch to method, which is loving kindness. So, you have two businesses beside your daily job.

*(Repetition of meditation)*

Reciting the OM AH HUM mantra is very useful. Since you people are so busy you cannot recite a long mantra, just recite the OM AH HUM mantra. It represents all mantras. Especially when you say “OM,” something awakens; intense awareness energizes and awakens the consciousness.

I have heard that scientists have experimented with sound to restore the brain. Even scientists do not understand how this operates. They have analyzed sound to be effective for restoring the human brain. They have discovered that mantra activates the wakening aspect of the brain, rather than its sleepy state. When you say “OMmmmm,” you can see that the entire nervous system has been somewhat energized. So the purpose of the meditation is to awaken rather than to sleep—wakening in the sense of a broad or universal reality, not in the sense of wakening a fanatic reality. Mantra touches a wider reality. That is why mantra is useful.

I think I have finished my subject for the weekend. It is important that in some way you convince yourself clean-clear, not only intellectually, but with your own experience in meditation, that to *some* extent you can place intense awareness on your consciousness without distraction or sluggishness. That is good enough. Placing intense awareness on your own consciousness is the Buddhist way of setting up a nuclear missile. Directing intense awareness on your consciousness is setting up a nuclear missile to enter the non-duality of space. When you “set up,” there is no this way or that way. By placing your attention on the awareness or your own consciousness, this internal nuclear missile is designated, or fixed, to go into the non-duality space.

In other words, if you are determined to meditate in this way, I will bet, even make signature for you, that you will experience non-duality to some extent. To give a third explanation: when you experience non-duality, or emptiness, at that time, build up the strength of intense awareness and comprehension. That is the reality. Do not make conversation, “that, this,” but inside develop *strength*. I do not know if language can explain. But somehow *inside*, the inner *strength* to comprehend the awareness of consciousness is the reality.

Why is it necessary to emphasize having the strength to comprehend? Normally we think that our fantasies are real and grasp on to them. But when we experience the non-dual we understand that it is only our *habit* that makes us believe our fantasies to be concrete. So the inner experience is something not real; it is reverse thinking. Are you communicating? So that is why *strength* is important.

So I think that this is enough. I did not explain about the *bardo* process—too much intellectualizing and it is difficult to show how one goes into the next reincarnation; it takes much detail and time. However, the most important thing is experience. Then you can see the possibility of going into the intermediate state *through* the experience without my saying, “blah, blah, *bardo*, blah, blah reincarnation.” Through your experience you can discover.

Now we will have three quick questions. I am sure I have irritated some of you. So if what I have been talking about does not make sense or has made you more confused, please ask me questions.

*Student:* How can we help the dying?

*Lama:* It depends on the dying person's background, knowledge, religious training and philosophy. But whatever the person's background, you need to use something that will energize or wake the person up. The important thing is not to irritate the dying. When they are ready to go, leave them alone. Do not keep saying, "take medicine" or "sign here." It also makes it difficult for the dying if you cry, "Oh, you are going to die."

For example, suppose I am your dying father and you come and start crying, "Oh, Father, if you die, how can I live?" Then I would be so disturbed, and be unable to cope with the situation. So just let go, okay? Do not make tremendous anxiety and emotionally disturb him; just leave him in peace. I think this is very important. As much as possible give him confidence. Try to help him by saying, "When you die you will be happy, no worries, everything will be all right. It is a perfect time to go now." Anything that increases his attachment and hatred is not good. A quiet, peaceful environment is also important.

If he is a Christian tell him, "Okay, God will take care of you. You're lucky—you will go to heaven." It is good to be positive because during that moment even if he is not too much of a Christian, inside his unconscious is still looking for something to hang on to, for an opportunity to take refuge. So when we say "Jesus" or "God," unconsciously he is touched.

That is very good; I believe this is possible.

Many Westerners say they will have nothing to do with their own country's religion. Nevertheless, I can see their own country's religion has much effect on their lives and their mentality. Unconsciously they are Christian, although consciously they say, "I don't want to be Christian." Therefore, when they are in a disastrous situation, having nothing to hang on to, if you say, "God" or "Jesus," something touches them. Of course, If he is a Buddhist, you can say, "Buddha"!

*Student:* What can one do for those who are on their death-bed saying, "I am going to hell"?

*Lama:* Yes, this is true. Sometimes they can see they are already on their way to hell, so they say "I can see I am going to hell." I think those people are very difficult to help, intellectually; at that moment it is a hopeless situation. It might be possible to help medically, to slow the dying person down instead of increasing confusion because of too much energy. In that way one may be of help. Otherwise, I have to say it is very difficult.

*Student:* In Zen Buddhism we have koans to help us realize non-inherent existence. For example, there is this saying, this koan of, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" So how can such a saying help us to realize *sunyata*? The sound of one hand clapping—how does it relate to *shunyata*?

*Lama:* Do you remember I told you about the man who holds his wife as self-existent and the woman who holds her boy-friend as self-existent? Those examples are like this. Try to make it real without one or the other. Are you communicating? Actually it is just a concrete concept, a fantasy. The Swiss government holds self-existent Swiss francs and believes these self-existent Swiss francs make a self-existent perfect Swiss society. It is like that. All this fantasy, what we hold as real, as self-existent, is not touching reality. You have to touch here in order to make sound (clapping sound). So you try to touch reality and discover that your concepts, fantasies and preconceptions are trying to touch reality, trying

to make sound—but they do not make sound. Thus the zero of the self-existent fantasy disappears. This is the way to experience *shunyata*.

The sound of OM is an interdependent phenomenon, affecting my entire nervous system. There is no self-existent OM sound; there is no self-existent (clap) sound. The clapping sound is dependent on the hands, space, energy and then... (clap)...like this. Every sound is interdependent, completely interdependently arising. Then this... (clapping hands together) ...makes a sound. The sound itself shows non-self-existence.

In Buddhism we often talk about non-duality, non-self-existence. For example, when you go into a cave and make the sound “Ahhhh,” the cave also echoes “Ahhhh.” Are you familiar with this?

Sound is a perfectly good example of things existing interdependently. Understanding the interdependent character shows that there is no concrete self-existent I or self-existent notion. If you hold this sound (clap) to be self-existent, then the sound is not dependent on certain conditions. Try to understand the rational scientific Buddhist explanation. If this sound (clap) were self-existent, then it would not be dependent on these two hands coming together; then it would not be an interdependent phenomenon.

I think we now have a good understanding of interdependent phenomena. This gathering, also, is a non-self-existent gathering. Thank you so much. And I thank also those people who invited me to Switzerland to do this job. They have put so much effort into organizing everything. I dedicate all your hard work—at least a little bit of benefit for others I will dedicate, okay? Thank you so much. If my talk has produced a lot of confusion, since I am still on this earth you can write me and I will answer. To some extent I am responsible for what I am talking about, so you can write me. I am not going to disappear immediately. I have to clean my own mess myself! Thank you so much.

*[Five months later, Lama Yeshe passed away.]*

*Colophon:*

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# Transference of Consciousness at the Time of Death

*by Lama Thubten Yeshe*

*A course given at Tushita Retreat Centre, Dharamsala, India in March 1981.*

## *First Discourse*

*2 March 1981*

Tonight we shall have a short introduction to the transference of consciousness, known in Tibetan as *po-wa*. For the practice at this time we shall use Amitabha Buddha as our refuge object. In fact, *po-wa* meditation can be performed with many different meditational deities, such as Vajrayogini, Yamantaka and so forth, and all such meditations derive not from Tibetan lamas but from the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha himself. To be precise, *po-wa* instructions derive from the Guhyasamaja tantra, which contains a description of this technical method even though it does not spell out the instructions in the exact form in which they are practiced. Although this subject matter belongs to the highest level of tantra, many skillful Tibetan lamas have extracted it from this context and have presented it in terms of the deities of the lower levels of tantra. I myself received these instructions in terms of Vajra Yogini, but I feel that it will be good for Westerners, and myself as well, to have them explained here in terms of Amitabha Buddha. My reasoning is that Amitabha Buddha is less complex than other deities. Even more important than this is the fact that most Westerners easily relate to and understand Avalokiteshvara, and many of our students have received his initiation. As you have great devotion to this Lord of Compassion and as there is a close connection, or agreement, between him and Amitabha, I thought it would be beneficial to take advantage of these close connections and present a practice that might prove useful to many interested Westerners.

Although different *po-wa* instructions are given in terms of different deities, the actual technical methods explained in all of them are the same. There is really not much difference between the actual method of *po-wa* as explained in terms of Vajra Yogini and the method to be explained here in terms of Amitabha. What is essential, however, is that we practice with the right attitude. This is extremely important. For example, some people may have heard that with *po-wa* instructions it makes no difference if you commit heavy negativities, such as killing your parents and so forth; you will still be able to achieve a fortunate rebirth. But this is a mistaken attitude; it does not work this way. Without depending on the creation of virtuous karma and establishing the proper connection with Amitabha Buddha, it is very difficult to achieve his pure land. It is not some place you can fly to by jet. So we must create the appropriate karma. This matter of karma is actually quite simple. We do have devotion to Avalokiteshvara; we do have confidence in the essence of Avalokiteshvara and Amitabha Buddha, and

to some extent we have a fairly good intellectual notion of what Amitabha's pure land is. What we need, however, is devotion. We need to maintain the correct attitude towards these practices.

We know that our present situation—where we are now—is dependent on karmic causation, and in our everyday life we are constantly dealing with cause and effect. At the moment we have enough good fortune not to have been born in one of the three lower realms. We have certain powers and abilities of mind, a certain strength of intellect and a certain freedom of movement. Everything we are able to engage in comes from the mind; this is karma as well.

However, even though we now have the human freedom to move about as we like, to avoid unpleasant situations, and to pursue our desires and so forth, no matter where we go we end up with miserable disappointment. It does not matter where we go; unexpectedly we end up with problems. All of us experience this. We are always experiencing dissatisfaction and confusion, not to mention sickness, old age, death and other worries. Thus, although we may have a great wish to benefit others greatly as did Shakyamuni Buddha, Padmasambhava, Je Tsongkhapa, Milarepa, and many other great teachers, our present circumstances makes this difficult, if not impossible. Life in this desire realm is so difficult that even our altruistic wishes remain unfulfilled. Therefore it is extremely worthwhile to gain rebirth in Amitabha's pure land.

Furthermore, by checking up on our own experience we discover how slow we are. For instance, think of the time we have wasted today. We have spent a great deal of our day in sleep and other fruitless activities. The circumstances of our life-style are overwhelming; it is not easy to transcend the non-sense of our existence. This is also due to our karma. The paradise of Amitabha's pure land, however, does not contain such difficulties and hindrances. Even the name of mundane suffering does not exist there. There is no illness, dying or suffering of birth. Everyone reborn into this pure realm just appears there instantly and receives teachings directly from Amitabha Buddha himself. Merely by being in this pure realm one possesses the five telepathic powers. All of these conducive conditions have come about because of the prayers Amitabha Buddha sent forth during the five hundred great aeons he travelled the bodhisattva path. Therefore, anyone who is born in Amitabha's actual pure land possesses extrasensory powers and experiences no confusion of mind whatsoever. Furthermore, unlike the experience of being in other higher realms, beings born into Amitabha's pure land never fall down to a lower state.

Therefore, concerning the right attitude we mentioned earlier, we should be interested in discovering the quickest method to benefit all mother sentient beings: you should be motivated to be born in Amitabha's pure land solely because you feel that this is the quickest way of accomplishing this aim. In such a realm we can become enlightened in but one lifetime and therefore benefit all beings. Thus you should adopt the great enlightened attitude of bodhicitta. With this attitude our meditation will be worthwhile. Otherwise, if we are interested only in enhancing our reputation or building our ego, our attitude is incorrect.

Although we should have such a strong bodhicitta attitude, we should also be relaxed. This is very important. True bodhicitta itself *is* a relaxed attitude. This is practical; if we are uptight and someone comes to us with a problem, we *will* become so nervous that we cannot offer help. But with a properly relaxed bodhicitta attitude, we have the space to handle any problem we may encounter. This is an essential point.

So all of us should approach these *po-wa* instructions with the proper attitude. Yet it is important to realize that anyone who has achieved enlightenment in this lifetime already has no need whatsoever for these instructions on the transference of consciousness. These teachings are not necessary for everyone. For someone who has achieved enlightenment in *this* lifetime with *this* body, these present teachings are useless. *Po-wa* teachings are only for those people who feel that it is impossible for them to gain enlightenment in this lifetime. They are for someone who thinks, “I have received teachings on the three principal paths; I have meditated on them; I have received Vajrayana instructions and tried to practice the generation stage, but I have discovered that it is not possible for me to attain enlightenment in this lifetime. I can see that according to my circumstances this would be impossible.

Therefore, I cannot stand to wait and have to go through the suffering of confusion again; instead I must go to Amitabha’s pure land.” (Therefore, I cannot believe that so many people have come to attend these teachings; does that mean that none of you think that you can achieve enlightenment in this lifetime?)

Also, you should recall the line in the guru puja: “Lam-na ma-zin chi-way du-je-na,” which means, “Should we not have completed the points of the path at the time of death.” This means that if you have practiced the bodhisattva path but still have not attained the destination (enlightenment), *then* you should practice *po-wa*. So it is only if you cannot achieve your destination in this lifetime that the practice of *po-wa* becomes necessary. In other words, if you feel that it is utterly impossible for you to attain enlightenment without going through the experience of yet another lifetime—and you can be almost certain about this—then you need to follow these *po-wa* practices. This matter completely depends upon one’s individual experience. Philosophically, however, it is said that these practices are for those who will not attain enlightenment in this lifetime and definitely need another life to reach their goal. Such people need to practice *po-wa*. We all know that the samsaric realms are full of obstacles to the completion of our practices. This is the logic to explain why one would want to transfer one’s consciousness to a pure land.

Yet for the Western mind these *po-wa* instructions can present a problem. We Tibetans generally have no difficulty believing that it is possible to be reborn from a lotus, without depending on a father and mother. Can the Western mind accept this? Do you believe that it is possible to be reborn in a pure land with either a human or a psychic body without a father or a mother? According to the *po-wa* instructions this is what happens—one is reborn instantly from a lotus flower. With Amitabha’s activity as a co-operative cause, your consciousness is thrown like a seed into a lotus and it is from such a situation that you are born immediately in his pure land. Furthermore, once we are reborn in such a land we have no need to work for a living, prepare food or engage in any other mundane tasks. Everything that we might desire or need comes to us intuitively and instantly.

I think it is very helpful to visualize these excellent qualities of Amitabha’s pure land; it is very helpful for eliminating the lower, baser concepts we have about our environment. We do in fact have such low conceptions. We always feel that our environment is complicated. It does not matter where we go; every environment we meet is complicated. For example, when I go to America, everything seems to be polluted; when I go to Italy, everything seems to be dirty; when I go to Spain, neurotic energy seems to be coming in my ears; when I go to England, the English uptight mind seems to come at me; and when I go to France, their samsaric technology seems to come after me. Thus we do need to develop a pure vision.



You know from the practice of tantra that it is important to visualize yourself as a buddha and your surroundings as a mandala; this is the pure land visualization. Thus it is very good to bring to mind these excellent qualities of a pure land.

The importance of this can be explained by example. When I come to the Tushita Retreat Center in Dharamsala, I automatically feel relaxed. Whenever I return from a tour to the West, I always stop at Tushita, where I feel so comfortable. In my small, quiet room there I experience release from the problems people bombard me with. For me it is such a conducive environment. This example demonstrates the possibility that Amitabha's pure land, created by his prayers over five hundred great aeons, is a place where the mind can experience total and unceasing awakening. It is a place where the mind never falls asleep from this awakening, where there is no hatred, no aggression, and so forth. This is definitely possible.

As I said before, those who have no possibility of attaining enlightenment in this lifetime and definitely need another one should follow these *po-wa* instructions. What about ourselves? In this case there is no certainty: maybe we shall become enlightened in this lifetime, maybe not. This depends on many cooperative circumstances. Thus it is very hard to say with complete assurance that one either will or will not become enlightened in this very lifetime. So the best thing to do in either case is to make preparations now. It is never too late to make such preparations. I heard that some monks at Sera, when they heard that the Chinese were coming in 1959, decided that it was no longer worthwhile to stay around, so they practiced *po-wa* and left. In fact, many monks and geshe have been successful in this practice.

It is very good to be able to have this ability and gaining it is totally a matter of the human will. Bodhicitta, for example, is a very powerful mind, both subjectively and objectively. In the same way, when one has the proper will and the necessary technical skill, it is definitely possible to transfer one's consciousness to a pure land. Therefore, it is good to master these technical methods, even if we do not feel we actually need them. At the moment we may be healthy and think that death won't come for a long time, but we cannot be sure about this; we are never certain what will actually happen to us. Therefore, it is wise to master these techniques now, so that even if death comes sooner than we expect, we shall be prepared. If we do not prepare ourselves beforehand, then it will be impossible to practice the transference of consciousness when death actually comes. There's a Tibetan proverb that says that without training, a horse won't run correctly. Similarly, if we are to perform *po-wa* successfully at the time of death, we must train ourselves beforehand. Furthermore, even if we don't need to practice *po-wa* ourselves, we can use it to help others to transfer their consciousness.

Furthermore, if we possess such a technique, we can live our lives without fear: we shall know that even if a disastrous situation arises, there is something we can do. If we find ourselves in a bad situation, we have the confidence of knowing that we can go to a better place whenever we want. This allows us to be relaxed instead of uptight.

It should also be understood that practicing *po-wa* and achieving the pure land is not easy. Why? Because we are tied to the desire realm by the iron chain of our grasping. As long as we don't break this chain of attachment it will be impossible for us to achieve Amitabha's pure land. Therefore, the necessary preparation for this practice is developing the mind that is unattached to possessions, friends and so forth. This is the real preparation for this practice. The true obstacle that prevents us from reaching Amitabha's pure land is our grasping attitude. That is *why* in Tibet, when a monk knew he was going to



die, he would completely dispose of all his material possessions, indicating precisely how they should be distributed. Therefore, at the time of death there would be nothing left for him to hold on to. In the West there is the system of making one's will.

The point is that to be able to go to Amitabha's pure land, you cannot be hung up with objects of temporal pleasure. This is our usual problem, so of course it also interferes with achieving Amitabha's pure land. In this regard there is the story of the dying monk who had great difficulty transferring his consciousness to the pure land of Tushita because he was so attached to the butter in his butter tea. His guru realized that his hangup was his attachment to the butter tea so he told him, "There's better butter tea in Tushita." This put the monk's mind at ease and he was then able to transfer his consciousness easily.

Now let us turn from philosophical considerations to practical ones. To accomplish *po-wa* we need a certain amount of concentration. We also have a special need for preparing our central channel (*shushuma*). We have to be able to visualize this channel clearly, seeing it smaller on its lower end than it is on its upper. This channel begins four finger widths below the navel and goes straight up until it ends at the crown of our head, eight finger widths behind our hairline. It is of a clear crystal-like nature, not in any way heavy or solid. It is very smooth and soft. It is necessary to visualize this well, but that does not mean we should squeeze our mind.

According to tantra there are gross, subtle and very subtle levels of the mind. While practicing the *po-wa* visualizations in preparation for death we utilize the gross levels of mind; however, when the time comes for us actually to transfer our consciousness, it is the very subtle level of mind that is activated. At the time of our conception, when the germ cells of our mother and father came together, they contained certain delicate, clear, essential drops of energy. That subtle, essential energy, present at the time of conception, still exists at our heart center sitting within the central channel. This very subtle drop of energy at our heart is known in Tibetan as *tig-le* (Skt: *bindu*) and it is within this *tig-le* that our very subtle mind is located. When the time comes to transfer our consciousness it is this very subtle energy together with our very subtle mind that is propelled up our central channel, out of the crown of our head and into Amitabha's pure land.

Tonight's practice will be to visualize the central channel, which should be seen as closer to our back, a little bit in front of our spine, closed at the bottom for the time being and open at the crown of our head. Then see the fundamental energy of the *tig-le*, or seed-syllable, as sitting like a small pea within this channel at the level of the heart. After focusing your attention on this seed syllable, if you can you should try to bring it up to the throat level and then to the crown. From this vantage point look down the central channel and try to see its interior as clearly as possible. Then have the seed syllable descend until it reaches the throat center, the heart center and then all the way down to the navel. This way of exploring the central channel is an excellent preparation for the actual practice of *po-wa*.

Before doing the meditation thus described it is helpful to visualize Amitabha Buddha seated in space in front of you at the level of your forehead. He is ruby red in color and his entire body is made out of transparent, radiant light. In the actual *po-wa* practices he will be visualized above the crown of your head, but now at the preliminary stage it is permissible to see him in front of yourself facing you. You should begin your practice by taking Refuge in Amitabha and then visualize that radiant light energy comes from him down into your central channel and completely purifies you of all hindrances to the

practice. This light especially purifies your indecisive mind and the grasping attitude with which you are attached to objects of the desire realm. Such purification is very useful and should be done extensively. By means of such purification visualization you slowly transform your gross physical body into one of radiant light. Once you have accomplished this transformation in your meditation it is much easier to visualize the central channel within your body.

Meditating on the body as being transparent makes it easier to visualize the central channel and the blissful seed-syllable at your heart. This seed-syllable, or *tig-le*, should be seen as white in color, clear as crystal and with a slight reddish tint. This seed-syllable is a small radiant point of light, like a tiny star vibrating with a white radiance and having a reddish glow. Focus your concentration on this seed-syllable and then move it to the various centers as described above. As you move the seed-syllable up and down the central channel you should pause for a while in each of the centers. For example, when you reach the throat center you should stop there and send forth radiant light. Visualize that this light removes whatever blockages might be obstructing the throat center, thereby allowing energy to flow smoothly through the many minor channels that make up the throat chakra. This same type of purification visualization should be done at the other chakras as well.

In order to strengthen your visualization of the central channel and the seed-syllable, you can do this visualization in conjunction with holding the vase breath. This technique will be discussed and practiced in more detail later. In brief, it entails bringing a long, slow breath down into the abdomen and then tightening the lower muscles of the pelvic floor (those involved in retaining urine, faeces, etc.), and then, while holding this breath, focusing your attention on the seed-syllable at your heart. At the point where it is just becoming difficult to hold your breath any longer, you can breath out a long, slow exhalation through either your nostrils or your mouth. Holding the vase breath in this way helps your mind experience bliss and enhances your concentration. Breathing in deeply and tightening your lower muscles slightly causes the upper and lower energies to meet, and this meeting in turn produces a blissful feeling. If and when this experience arises you should let go of it; you need to learn to give up grasping at pleasure and not pay emotional attention to it. This is the true training of the mind and something we all need.

Concerning the visualization of the central channel, you should choose a dimension that is comfortable for you. At this point in the practice, whether you visualize it as narrow as a pencil or as wide as your arm does not matter, but you should see it as wider at the top than the bottom. This practice of *po-na* is not easy; it is not something completely unrelated to your individual karma. On the contrary, it has a lot to do with your karma. Therefore you should do the practice in a way that is most comfortable for you as an individual.

In addition to the technical methods mentioned so far, there are other things you can do to enhance your practice. For instance, when you go to sleep tonight, feel that you are going to Amitabha's pure land. When you lie in your bed, think that your head is resting in Amitabha Buddha's lap. When you wake up in the morning you should feel that you are being roused from sleep by the sound of Amitabha's wisdom bell telling you it is time to arise. Then visualize that Amitabha himself sinks into you, and when you come to the next meditation session feel that you are again on your way to Amitabha's pure land. This way of thinking and practicing is very good—much better than our ordinary confused and nonsensical way of thinking and acting.

So that is enough for this lecture. As always, we should finish with an attitude of dedication, dedicating all our energy to rebirth in the pure land of Amitabha's buddha field in order to benefit all mother sentient beings most quickly. Thank you.

## *Second Discourse*

*3 March 1981*

Yesterday we said that in order to transfer our consciousness to Amitabha's pure land we have to create the proper causes, or karma. What is the actual cause for such a rebirth? It is strong Refuge in Amitabha, actualizing bodhichitta and dedicating all virtuous activities to rebirth in Amitabha's pure land, while continuously remembering the good qualities of his pure land. If we accumulate all these causes, it is definite that we shall attain the desired pure land rebirth.

Tibetan prayers often emphasize the request to be saved from rebirth in one of the three lower realms. But there is no way for anyone who has realized the three principal paths (renunciation, bodhichitta and the correct view of emptiness) to be reborn in these unfortunate states of existence. Even if during your lifetime you are responsible for the death of millions of people, you can be saved from lower rebirth by developing the compassionate thought of bodhichitta for all others. Thus bodhichitta is the real *po-wa*. If you have bodhichitta there is absolutely no way that you will find yourself born in a lower realm. Therefore, although it is a very good idea to learn the technical method of transference of consciousness, it is enough to have generated the mind of bodhichitta; with such a mind at death, you will definitely obtain an upper state of rebirth. For those of us who find it difficult to generate the three principal paths to enlightenment, there are the technical methods of *po-wa* being explained here.

It is stated in the *Abhidharma* texts that once the third section of the second path—the patience section of the path of preparation—has been reached, it is impossible to fall to any of the lower realms ever again. What this means is that at such a state a bodhisattva gains a special, complete confidence that he or she will never fall again. If, however, even before this stage is reached, the three principal paths have been developed, the door to the three lower realms is closed.

One technical method being presented here is referred to in the text as “The forceful method for evil beings to escape from lower rebirth.” It is possible that beings like us are worse than Hitler; we don't know what we have done in our past lives. But it makes no difference what even the cruellest person in the world has done. If, when the signs of death appear, such a person develops a greatly compassionate mind, invokes the four remedies that oppose the power of negative karma, and practices the forceful technique of *po-wa*, he or she will definitely escape from rebirth in one of the lower realms. Therefore, you should never let yourself become obsessed with your negativities, but realize that they are interdependent phenomena and can be altered through the practice of appropriate methods. Knowing these techniques of *po-wa* can release your mind from its obsessive vision and allow you to use the pure land vision instead.

The various commentarial texts list the good qualities found in Amitabha's pure land. First of all, as already indicated, if you are reborn in this pure land there is no longer any danger of falling to a lower rebirth. Furthermore, rebirth in this pure land frees one from the eight states of no leisure, which

usually prevent beings from practicing Dharma. In other words, all the situations encountered in Amitabha's pure land are conducive for the practice of the spiritual path. There is also complete freedom from the indecisive mind; once you have achieved this pure land it is *definite* that you follow the Mahayana path to full enlightenment.

There will be no longer any danger that you will give up the Mahayana aspiration and work only for the self-liberation that is the goal of the Hinayana path. Also, beings reborn in this pure land always do so intuitively via a lotus and, once reborn there, never experience untimely death. All enjoyments come effortlessly and instantly; merely thinking of something pleasurable brings the experience. One's body has the thirty-two characteristic marks of a buddha and one's mind automatically possesses the five types of telepathic power. These include (1) being able to travel to countless buddha fields within one second of time, (2) being able to remember all of one's own and others' previous lives, (3) having unobstructed vision of the pure lands and the environments of sentient beings, (4) being able to hear the teachings of countless buddhas and (5) being able to know the mind and attitude of other beings.

It is not only extremely worthwhile for a disciple to have these extraordinary qualities of mind, it is essential that a teacher possesses them as well. When Shakyamuni Buddha was on this earth, by merely saying a few words he was able to lead thousands of disciples to states of realization. This was the result of his ability to know the minds of his disciples directly and intuitively.

In summary, when you gain Amitabha's pure land you have the uninterrupted ability of meeting with fully-enlightened beings and receiving teachings from them. Thus it is obvious how powerful such a pure land mind is. Think how powerful your mind would be if it remained focused on bodhicitta twenty-four hours a day. For such a mind, enlightenment is certainly not far away. At present, however, our minds are occupied with mundane thoughts, and thus we waste most of our time. In Amitabha's pure land the mind is uninterruptedly focused upon method and wisdom. It is for this reason that enlightenment is attained very quickly. Through understanding all of these outstanding qualities of Amitabha's pure land we should develop the strong wish to be born there.

To some extent we all understand our present situation in life and have some faith in our ability to improve our mind. Such sincere faith in the Mahayana path is necessary if we are to avoid the negative results of misusing these transference techniques. Therefore, at this time visualize that Amitabha Buddha is purifying you of all obscurations and hindrances, thereby ensuring that your practice of *po-wa* will indeed lead to rebirth in his pure land, and meditate with great compassion on the technical methods for transferring your consciousness to Amitabha's pure land.

*(Recitation of the prayer for the development of refuge, bodhicitta, and the four boundless thoughts.)*

As we visualize Amitabha Buddha upon the crown of our heads, light descends from his heart, enters our crown and becomes one with our central channel. Thus there is one uninterrupted passageway connecting Amitabha Buddha's heart with our own. This passageway is completely sealed and has no cracks or flaws. As the great mahasiddha Naropa said, "There are nine doors to our body and eight of them are samsaric. It is the ninth, the entrance at the crown of our head, that is the door to mahamudra, the great liberation." The other doors lead to rebirth in the various samsaric realms, and are therefore not appropriate gateways through which our consciousness should depart. It is for this reason that Amitabha sends down the tube of white light through our crown and into our central channel forming

an indestructible passageway through which our consciousness can travel. Thus, from four finger widths below our navel straight up to Amitabha Buddha's heart there is one indestructible, uninterrupted tube of radiant white light.

In our own heart center, within our central channel, resides the essential seed-syllable of our mind, the size and shape of a tiny pea. It is white in color and vibrates with a reddish glow. This white drop is extremely light, so light that it is almost ready to fly upwards by itself. It is extremely delicate, clean, clear and radiant: it is as if there were a small star in our heart, shining with a rainbow light.

This radiant drop signifies our very subtle consciousness. Normally this subtle consciousness only functions at the time of death. At the appropriate place in the technical method you should focus your mind single-pointedly on this drop with the strong wish of becoming one with the mind of Amitabha Buddha. It is very important to develop this strong desire, to overcome the dualistic gap between your mind and that of Amitabha. You should try to become one with this Buddha as much as possible. At the same time your mind, in the form of this tiny seed-syllable, or drop, should look upwards through the central channel and directly into the heart of Amitabha. Then listen, as Amitabha's voice comes down the central channel from his heart and invites you to go up and join him. Then Amitabha Buddha sends down from his heart, a shaft of radiant red light which, like a hook, attaches itself to our mind, which is in the aspect of the seed-syllable. This red, radiant hook of light comes down through the white tube of light and hooks our mind, exerting an upward force upon it.

*(Recitation of prayers.)*

Then breathe in through your nostrils and press down at the area of your navel. Then tighten your lower pelvic muscles, thereby bringing the lower energies upwards. Feel that the seed-syllable, full of devotion towards Amitabha Buddha, is ready to fly upwards. At the same time that the lower energies are pushing the seed-syllable upwards from below, the red hook of light from above is also drawing the mind upwards. Empowered in this way, the very subtle mind travels up through the throat and crown chakras, passes through the lotus and moon bed and finally reaches the center of Amitabha Buddha's heart. There it becomes one with Amitabha's omnipresent wisdom of non-duality, seen as a blissful radiance in his heart.

With the utterance of the first sound—the mantra *HIC*—your subtle consciousness in the form of the seed-syllable flies upwards into Amitabha Buddha's heart. Recognize his heart as the main destination for your mind. Recognize the white radiant tube of light as the path to your destination. Finally, recognize your very subtle consciousness in the form of the seed-syllable as the traveller following this path to its destination. It is very important to keep these three recognitions clear while doing this practice. Then, with the recitation of *KAAH*, see your mind as returning back down the tube of light into your own heart.

To repeat, while reciting the first sound you should feel that your mind is going upwards until it becomes inseparable from Amitabha Buddha's omnipresent and blissful wisdom. Then, when the second syllable is recited, you should feel that your mind is descending from this state back into your own heart. This entire process is divided into the following steps:

(1) contemplate your very subtle consciousness in your heart, radiant and very light;



- (2) with this mind develop the wish to become united with Amitabha Buddha's mind;
- (3) take a long and deep inhalation without letting your concentration degenerate;
- (4) hold the breath at your navel and tighten your lower muscles, bringing the lower energies upwards;
- (5) as this energy pushes from below and the red hook pulls from above, recite *HIC*;
- (6) contemplate the unity of your very subtle consciousness and Amitabha Buddha's mind;
- (7) then send your consciousness downward while reciting *KAAH*.

After practicing these steps a number of times, focus your attention on Amitabha Buddha's begging bowl. The nectar within this bowl overflows and flows down your central channel, thereby filling your entire nervous system with white, blissful, light-nectar energy. This renews all the energy you may have lost through this practice. Then, as explained in the practice, Guru Amitabha Buddha melts into light, descends the central channel and also becomes one with your heart. In this way he becomes unified with your very subtle consciousness. Then perform the dedication.

### *Third Discourse*

*3 March 1981*

When you practice, it is most important to have strong concentration. Transference is accomplished mainly through concentration and is helped by the breathing technique already explained. As most people know through other meditation practices, the breath comes in through the right and left channels, which hook into the central channel, or *shushuma*, below the level of the navel. Then it is time to tighten the lower muscles, specifically the muscles governing the anus and the sex organ, but it can also be helpful to tighten the muscles of your feet and hands. You can *feel* how this tightening forces energy into the central channel from below—it is not merely imagination.

It is very important to practice these techniques now. If we do not, even though we know what to do, we won't be able to employ them at the time of death. This is like our ordinary Dharma practices: we may feel that we have learned everything there is to know about a particular antidote, but when a delusion actually arises in our mind we are completely helpless. We miss being able to apply this antidote correctly. Therefore, we should put a lot of effort into practicing these techniques of *po-wa* right now.

In actuality, these techniques are very easy; they are simple, scientific and very practical. There is no reason why you should not be successful in such a practice. The spiritual masters claim that our concentration on the practice should be so strong that even the attack of seven vicious dogs would not disturb us. It is important to practice now, because at the time of death, when these teachings are actually going to be put in use, many hindrances and interferences are likely to arise. Thus we should prepare ourselves now, while we are free from such problems.

In some teachings it is explained that in order to prevent our consciousness from leaving through one of the eight samsaric doors, each one should be sealed with a HUM. However, it is not strictly necessary to visualize these letters. Why not? Because we have already visualized that our central channel has

only one opening—that is the crown of our head. Therefore, if we visualize our central channel well, there is no danger of our consciousness leaving through any of the other doors. However, if you are uncomfortable because you have so many holes in your body, you can seal these samsaric doors as described. Even if you don't need to do this now, you might find it helpful at the time of death, when your concentration is much weaker than at present.

It is important to recognize that the clear light drop in our heart is our very subtle consciousness. We should realize that this is both the consciousness that came from our previous lives and the one that will go into our future lives. Feel it to be as light as a feather, very delicate and clear. All it needs is one small cause and it is ready to fly upwards. From Amitabha Buddha's heart, radiant red light flashes down as quick as lightning and hooks this very subtle consciousness at your heart. Therefore, when we recite *HIC*, this red light energy from Amitabha's heart is pulling our mind upwards at the same time that the lower air energy is pushing it from below. The movement of the mind upwards, therefore, does not need a great deal of effort; it is simple and automatic because according to the visualization, there is only one path it can take.

There are certain signs that come with success in this practice, and these will be discussed in greater detail later, but one thing that happens is an itching sensation at the top of the head. Some people may even gain telepathic powers and the ability to see another reality. This is possible. In ancient times the gurus tested their disciples' proficiency in this meditation by sticking a flower stem in the hole at their crown. If their meditations were successful and this hole grew wider, the flower would actually stand up. At the end of this course I'm going to test you like that!

As mentioned before, while Amitabha is generally a deity of the lowest class of tantra, this particular technical method has been taken from the highest level of tantra. This practice is extremely worthwhile for Westerners because it demonstrates, within a short period of time, a completely different aspect of reality. This is very helpful in breaking down our strong preconceptions concerning reality.

There are many different ways of doing this practice. The method explained here uses one long *HIC* to propel the consciousness upward. There is another method whereby three *HICs* are used: the first brings the mind up to the throat level, the second up to the crown and the third propels it into Amitabha's heart. These methods are equally effective and it is up to you to choose the one that suits you best. Furthermore, the use of prayers should be adopted to your individual needs. They are helpful because they aid in the generation of the necessary feeling. However, if you find them too long you may shorten them to your liking.

One last word before we practice these techniques once again. It is a very good idea to practice *po-wa* meditation in a group rather than doing it completely alone. In this way we keep an eye on one another and thereby prevent anything dangerous from happening. If a person practices alone there is a chance, though not a very big one, of getting into trouble.

## *Fourth Discourse*

*4 March 1981*

### *Question and answer session*

*Student:* When I clench my hands and feet during this practice I develop *rlung*. Is it alright to practice without clenching these muscles?

*Lama:* Yes, you do not have to clench them if it is uncomfortable. In fact, if your concentration is good enough, you can do away with even the breathing techniques. But people who find it helpful should hold their breath and tighten their lower muscles as described. As mentioned before, it is very possible that our concentration will not be good when death actually arrives; if that happens, the forceful breathing and muscle-clenching techniques can prove very helpful.

*Student:* You have said that yogis in the past have used *po-wa* to escape from difficult situations. How can we tell when it is appropriate to use these techniques in such a way?

*Lama:* Well, take the example of the monk who knew the Chinese were coming. He was over fifty years old and knew that there was very little that he could do if he stayed around. Knowing this clearly, he decided to leave. Similarly, if you know with certainty that you're in the same situation and that it would be completely useless for you to retain your present form, then it is possible for you to use these techniques as well. However, you need to use wisdom.

*Student:* I asked this question because in West many people believe that life is given to us by God and therefore should not be given it up before He takes it back.

*Lama:* Having your consciousness enter Amitabha's heart and having it taken back by God are the same thing. For me there is no difference between God and Amitabha. Therefore, if your consciousness is taken by Amitabha it is alright. What is important is to break the iron chain that binds us to worldly pleasure. If this is not broken there is no way to be successful. There is the story of the rich businessman who at death was extremely attached to his many possessions. He was reborn as a snake who lived in the same house and would attack anyone who even touched his belongings. There is also the story of the monk who was so attached to his begging bowl that after he died he was reborn as a preta who followed that begging bowl around from owner to owner. Therefore, even if we are familiar with these techniques at the time of death, if our mind is too involved with concrete ego-grasping it will be impossible to transfer our consciousness successfully. This is why we need forceful techniques.

*Student:* Please comment upon the absorption into Amitabha Buddha's heart. Should one visualize his pure land at that time?

*Lama:* At that time it is not necessary to visualize Amitabha's pure land. Merely feel that when you reach Amitabha's heart you have become unified with the omnipresent, non-dualistic wisdom. It is better to place more emphasis upon becoming one with this wisdom than it is on visualizing the pure land itself.



*Student:* If we gain the ability to transfer our consciousness, why should we not do it right away?

*Lama:* It is considered a mistake for one who has received an empowerment into the highest class of tantra to give up his or her body and life before the correct time. This would be similar to taking the life of a tathagata or committing suicide.

*Student:* But isn't it true that by reaching Amitabha's pure land you will be able to become enlightened very quickly and thereby be able to help others even sooner?

*Lama:* Yes, because in the pure land we do not have the hassles of looking for a job, raising children and so forth; your practice of the path is nonstop.

*Student:* If you had the motivation of benefitting others, therefore, leaving your body would not be suicide.

*Lama:* If the time is right and you decide to go, then this is okay.

*Student:* Isn't it true that if our karma to remain alive does not run out, the quickest way to achieve enlightenment is with our present human form?

*Lama:* This is definitely possible, but it depends on how you put your life together. What frightens me is the way so many Westerners live their life. In America, for example, from the moment they wake up most people are running, running, and it is very hard to live there without being sucked into that way of life. If you are, it is virtually impossible to make the best use of your human life.

*Student:* If we have the appropriate empowerment, is it permissible or advisable to visualize ourselves as a meditational deity while performing the *po-wa* practices?

*Lama:* Yes, this is alright. In fact, some people find it easier to see themselves as Chenrezig, for instance, and thereby remove the concrete conceptions of themselves in general and their physical bodies in particular. This can be very beneficial.

*Student:* I have heard that there are animals in the pure land. Is this true?

*Lama:* Yes, in the pure land you find birds, deer and many other types of animals. However, they all serve to energize and enhance one's own practice; they never give negative vibrations, they serve only to help one's practice.

*Student:* So are these animals in reality bodhisattvas, or are they unfortunate beings who somehow made a mistake during their practice of *po-wa*?

*Lama:* They are bodhisattvas. (Laughter)

*Student:* While in the pure land is it possible to perceive the suffering of sentient beings?

*Lama:* In the pure lands themselves there are no suffering beings.

*Student:* How then does one develop compassion?

*Lama:* There are many other states of existence, many other solar systems. Though there is no suffering in the pure lands themselves, a bodhisattva can easily see beings residing in other realms and develop compassion for them.

*Student:* Is it possible to enter in the states of absorption through this practice?

*Lama:* Yes. If you have strong concentration on the clear drop in your heart, all the winds will dissolve into your central channel. Whenever this happens you experience the signs of absorption. All that is required is perfect concentration. In fact, if you are aware enough, you can observe these same absorptions during the bliss of sexual orgasm.

*Student:* Are there certain signs that tell us we are going to die soon so that we can prepare for the practice of *po-wa*?

*Lama:* Yes, there are many such signs. We can detect them in our dreams, in changes in our breathing pattern, in our bodily aura and so forth. Many old people know they are about to die. Detailed explanations of these signs of death will be given later.

*Student:* Is it possible to reach Amitabha's pure land solely through devotion?

*Lama:* Yes, that is definitely possible. The texts say that rebirth in a pure land is not the result of creating a specific karmic action. Rather, it comes about through the force of strong prayer and concentration.

*Student:* If after reciting *HIC* you completely dissolve into Amitabha Buddha's heart, who is it that recites *KAAH* to bring your consciousness back down again?

*Lama:* It is the subtle level of mind that goes up and down; the gross level of mind is the one that recites *HIC* and *KAAH*. During the actual practice, however, you should not concern yourself with such questions as who is doing the reciting. Merely recite these sounds and take them as the signal to send your mind up and bring it back down again.

*Student:* Is there a way for us to use this practice to assist Christian friends who are dying?

*Lama:* Yes. For example, you can help that person visualize going into Christ's heart, or remind him of a pure and holy environment.

*Student:* Is it necessary to sit up when you are dying?

*Lama:* No. Many practitioners die while lying down in the posture of Buddha's passing away, and *po-wa* can be practiced this way too.

*Student:* Some of us may be faced with the situation of seeing people die in very disturbing circumstances: there are no highly realized beings around, the dying person's body will be moved before the

consciousness has had a chance to leave the body, and so forth. In such cases, should we stimulate the person's crown center before someone else disturbs them?

*Lama:* That's a good idea: you should do that if you can. Also, if you are skilled you can even perform the transference of consciousness for that person. Concentration is the main point: if yours is strong, you can visualize the person's mind in his heart and then visualize it being sent up his central channel, out the crown of his head and into Amitabha Buddha's pure land.

*Student:* You said that it is dangerous to practice these techniques alone. If we are practicing together with someone else, what can we do to help if trouble arises?

*Lama:* First of all, if someone does not have good concentration there is very little danger in the practice. However, it can happen that someone begins to space out; his or her consciousness may be accidentally departing through the force of the practice. If you see someone spacing out like this, you can help by striking him sharply in the area around their knees: this helps bring his consciousness back down into his body. You can also shout *KAAH* very loudly.

*Student:* At the time of death, how can you decide whether to practice *po-wa* or to follow instead other tantric techniques and take the clear light of death as the path to the dharmakaya?

*Lama:* If you are confident that you can catch the clear light experience and unify it with emptiness, then definitely this is what you should do: in this case there is no need to practice *po-wa*. However, if you have not developed complete confidence in that practice, you should do *po-wa* instead. A real practitioner will be able to judge correctly which technique he or she is best prepared to use. Also, you should remember the great protective power of the three principal paths. For example, if you have developed the actual mind of bodhichitta, it doesn't matter what you do at the time of death: you no longer have anything to worry about.

Merely pray, "May I be reborn in whatever place is most beneficial for other sentient beings. Oh, buddhas and bodhisattvas, please take me to wherever I can be most useful. Should that be even the hell realms, I do not mind."

*Student:* How should we practice once this retreat is over?

*Lama:* You should practice every day until you receive the signs that your practice has been successful. Then it is necessary to review the practice only occasionally, say once a month, just to remind yourself of it.

*Student:* It is said in the practice that the seed syllable in the heart should be seen as very radiant. I can visualize the syllable but it does not radiate light. Is this a mistake?

*Lama:* No, as long as with good concentration you can visualize your very subtle mind as a drop in your heart, it does not matter whether it radiates light or not. The purpose of the meditation is served if you can visualize and concentrate on this drop well; it is not essential for it to emit light. What is really important is to make contact with the object of meditation, which can be seen even as a tiny drop of blood or a clear drop of dew. If you can concentrate on such a drop in your heart you needn't worry

whether it is shining or not.

*Student:* You have said that it is dangerous to practice alone because it is possible to leave the body accidentally. Why is this dangerous?

*Lama:* It is one thing to leave your body after making a strong decision to do so, but quite another to do so accidentally. In the latter case, you do not intend to go, but the force of your meditation accidentally sends your mind out of your body; because you are not prepared for this you may still be bound by the chains of your attachment to samsaric pleasures, and as a result be reborn as a hungry ghost instead of in a pure land.

*Student:* Does that mean it is possible for the consciousness to leave through the crown chakra and still be reborn in a lower realm?

*Lama:* Yes, this can happen simply because your consciousness leaves accidentally as a result of the force of your meditation. Therefore, to avoid mishaps like this, it is good to meditate with someone else when you are experimenting.

*Student:* Why did you say that it is better to catch the experience of clear light at the time of death than to practice *po-wa*?

*Lama:* If through training in tantric practices you can use the experience of the clear light of death to gain an intuitive realization of emptiness, you will be able to attain the first bodhisattva *bhumi*. This is much better than simply being reborn in a pure land. Once you have attained this first *bhumi* you are not only more advanced than an ordinary bodhisattva in a pure land, who still has to practice from the beginning of the path, but you also have the ability to visit pure lands at will. Thus at the time of death, using such tantric techniques is better than practicing *po-wa*. However, if you are not fully confident that you can use these techniques, then the practice of *po-wa* is better. The technical methods of *po-wa* meditation are very beneficial even if they are not combined with the special breathing techniques. In general, our problems arise because our energy is flowing in the wrong direction and in the wrong places; this is the source of both our mental and our physical diseases. However, if we concentrate upon our central channel and the seed syllable in our heart, we can help improve the energy flow within our body and thereby cure many of our problems. Keeping our concentration focused inside the central channel removes the distractions that cause our difficulties. Focusing upon a meditation object inside the central channel is much more powerful than focusing upon one that is outside. Merely contemplating upon the central channel at the level of the heart is a very easy, powerful and beneficial meditation.

*Student:* Could you explain more about the hook of red light that comes from Amitabha's heart?

*Lama:* It is not absolutely necessary to visualize this red light. It is included simply as an extra aid in moving your consciousness up through the central channel - you can leave it out if you are not comfortable with it. Also, it need not be visualized as a hook. Rather, you can think that red light shoots down from Amitabha's heart like lightning and that this light exerts a magnetic attraction upon your mind. This is another way of visualizing and you might find it more comfortable.

*Student:* You have advised us to visualize the very subtle mind at the level of the heart. Is this the best place to visualize it?

*Lama:* Yes, there are many advantages of concentrating upon the heart center. The heart chakra is a very special place and opening it up through meditation is very helpful. Also, if you are worried about the possible dangers of *po-wa* meditation, when you recite *HIC* you need bring the seed syllable up from the heart chakra only as far as the crown itself, and not have it fly out of your body. Here there is no danger, and the practice is still very beneficial.

*Student:* In the practice we send our mind into Amitabha Buddha's heart in the form of a seed syllable. Does that mean that we will be reborn in Amitabha's pure land as a seed syllable?

*Lama:* No. From Amitabha's heart our mind is sent into the center of a lotus, whence we emerge with a completely purified body of light. But you do not have to visualize this: it happens automatically once you reach Amitabha's heart. Many practitioners like to face west when they are about to die. This is probably a sign that they are going to practice the transference of consciousness to Amitabha's pure land. When meditating, I myself find it more comfortable facing either west or east than north or south—perhaps this is just my own superstition. In any event, many people have trained their mind through these *po-wa* teachings and have died successfully, and there is no reason why we should not succeed in this practice as well. All we have to do is train ourselves properly.

## *Fifth Discourse*

*5 March 1981*

In order to transfer your consciousness into a particular deity's pure land it is generally necessary to receive an initiation, or empowerment, into that particular deity. But what does receiving an initiation actually mean? Receiving the realization of the four great initiations is a rather special matter. For instance, Naropa practiced under Tilopa's guidance for many years until he was eventually able to be initiated by him. Because he was so well prepared and qualified he received the realizations of those initiations immediately, in an instant. This was the traditional way that disciples were lead on the path to enlightenment. But nowadays the situation is much different. Initiations are given publicly and it is very doubtful whether more than a handful of us are actually receiving them.

The point is that *actually* receiving an initiation is a rare and special event. When asked if we have a certain initiation, most of us will reply, "Yes. This lama gave that initiation and I was there." But just because we attended a particular the ceremony does not mean that we received anything. After all, there were also many insects, spiders, dogs, cats and so forth at that ceremony. Did they receive the initiation as well?

However, while I believe that merely by attending an initiation ceremony we do receive something, I don't think this is the same as receiving the realizations of the four great initiations. For most of us, the best we can say is that we manufactured an artificial imitation of the actual experience. But this is good enough! We have still received great inspiration and blessings and should not be discouraged. Even if

we are not highly qualified, something beneficial can still happen to us.

One of my teachers once said that if we take an initiation and are later born as an animal there still is some benefit; we shall be born as a very powerful animal! But, of course, the greatest benefit of an initiation is that we receive a seed that under the appropriate conditions can ripen instantly into the experience of enlightenment. The point I want to make is that receiving an initiation is not a simple matter; there is absolutely no reason to become arrogant or think we have done something outstanding simply because we were at an initiation ceremony. Most of the time it is doubtful that we received the initiation at all, but this is not to deny that we have received something worthwhile.

In terms of benefitting others, we ourselves should have had some small experience before attempting to teach these methods. This does not mean that we should have had complete success but that we should have received some level of realization from the practice. If we then teach it to others they will be benefitted—it is doubtful that there is any benefit to be gained if one teaches from the basis of knowing only the words, not having had any real experience.

It has already been mentioned that one of the hindrances preventing our being reborn in Amitabha Buddha's pure land comes from breaking the pledges (*samaya*) between guru and disciple. Grasping at pleasures, relatives and companions is also a great hindrance to the successful transference of consciousness. All relationships are transitory, even the rather special relationships between Dharma brothers and sisters, and grasping at such relationships is obviously a great hindrance to our practice. We must understand that as soon as we have met someone, the cause for our eventually splitting up has been created. Meeting always leads to separation; if we investigate our own experiences we shall see that this is true. No matter how much pleasure we receive from someone or from something, the time will come when our connection with that person or thing will be no more. It does not require too much reflection to see that this is true. Everything is momentary, and when the actual time of death comes none of the people or things we have met with can help us at all. Worse than that, not only do they fail to help us but, because of our attachment to them, also create great problems for us.

If we think about it we can see how our closest companions can easily become our worst enemies. Take the example of a couple who have lived together for forty or fifty years. When one of them dies, the other is often so heartbroken that he or she cannot go on living. In some places in India, when the husband has died, his wife throws herself on his funeral pyre. This is nothing but ignorance and, to some extent, we all behave in similar manner. That is why it is important to prepare ourselves now. By practicing *po-wa* we should *at least* realize that there is no reason for hanging on to things the way we do. At the very least, we should gain this realization. By training in *po-wa* and preparing ourselves for death we become more easy-going. We can learn to accept the impermanent nature of our lives, our relationships and so forth. Therefore I am not really concerned whether or not you become experts in *po-wa* but rather that your attitude towards life and death becomes more easy-going and realistic. If you can learn to accept the death of your loved ones as something natural, then these teachings will have been successful, whether you have mastered the actual *po-wa* techniques or not.

Many people in the world worry a lot about death. The Lam-rim specifies the particular human sufferings of worrying about birth, sickness, old age and eventually death itself. These *po-wa* teachings are extremely beneficial because they present a way of overcoming this fear of death. Furthermore, they give us an alternative to other Dharma practices whose difficulties, together with our own shortcom-



ings, may have been the cause for our creating the negative karma of breaking vows and so forth. For all these reasons, then, these *po-wa* teachings are very valuable.

A certain scriptural quotation uses the analogy of a lotus to explain our present situation. Although a lotus grows in a muddy environment, the lotus flower itself is always immaculately clean. Similarly, although our present very subtle consciousness finds itself inside our contaminated body, by practicing *po-wa* we can be completely released from this contaminated situation. Even if we have committed one of the very heavy negative actions, such as killing our mother or father, it is still possible to achieve the transference of consciousness and send our very subtle mind to Amitabha's pure land. Even if you were to kill a buddha for breakfast, a bodhisattva for lunch and an arhat for dinner every day for many years, if you are skillful enough you can still transfer your consciousness to a pure land. Everything can be purified with skill. One of the Panchen Lamas, whom we consider to be Amitabha Buddha himself, once wrote, "The method for becoming enlightened without meditation is *po-wa*." Therefore it is completely wrong to be hung up about your negativities or to think that you are the worst person in the world. Instead, you should feel fortunate that having been born human you have the possibility of both living your life and dying successfully.

You should not choose the wrong time to practice *po-wa*. Merely getting sick, for example, does not mean you are about to die; instead of practicing *po-wa*, there are many other things you can do, such as long-life pujas to counteract the exhaustion of life energy, or engaging in charity and so forth to counteract exhaustion of your fortune. As a way of increasing their life-span, some people in Tibet would buy animals that were marked for slaughter and set them free. There are many other things you can do to extend your life too.

As I mentioned in the question and answer session, there are many signs that occur before one is actually going to die: changes can be observed in your dreams, your personal vibrations or your pattern of breathing. Of these, the most accurate indication that death is approaching is a change in your breathing pattern. If you are observant, you can notice such signs up to six months before you are going to die. This gives you time to prepare for the practice of *po-wa*. It is said that the best time to practice is seven days before your life energy is exhausted. Note again: do not engage in the actual practice of *po-wa*, sending your consciousness into the next life, until you have received the definite signs of approaching death.

Practicing the transference of consciousness on behalf of someone else is another subject. According to Jetsun Milarepa, you should not attempt to transfer someone else's consciousness until you have achieved the path of seeing. He also said that to lead another person's consciousness it is necessary to have telepathic powers and other realizations. Without such realizations it is difficult to be truly effective. If the person summoned to perform *po-wa* for someone else does not have a controlled mind and good motivation, it will be very hard for the dying person to receive any benefit. For example, if someone has already died and become a *bardo* being, he will naturally attain certain powers of clairvoyance. When this *bardo* being sees that the mind of the person called to transfer his consciousness is filled with greed or other delusions, disgust will arise in him and he will turn off to the other's influence. As a result the *bardo* being will receive no benefit from the other's practice of *po-wa* on his behalf. Because the negative mind cannot be hidden from the clairvoyance of a *bardo* being, it is important that the person summoned to practice *po-wa* for his sake be free from such negativities.

The way that dying people are usually handled in the West presents great hindrances to the successful practice of *po-wa*. Ideally, until a dying person's very subtle consciousness has left his or her body, you should never touch them anywhere, but certainly not the lower parts of their body. The only place you should ever touch a dying person is on the crown of the head. There is also a tradition of putting Je Tsongkhapa's *Lam-rim Chen-mo* at the head of a dying person. This can be very beneficial. It can also be helpful to stimulate the top of the head by pulling on the hairs growing above the crown chakra. But to repeat, you should definitely avoid touching the lower parts of the body. Sometimes well-meaning people rearrange the body of a person they think is dead so that it looks nicer to others. This is okay and makes no difference if the very subtle consciousness has already left the body, but if the consciousness has *not* yet left the body, then rearranging the dying person's limbs will actually be destroying his or her chance to die successfully. Therefore, if you ever need to touch the body of a dead person you should always touch the crown of the head first.

If you want to help a dying person by reminding him of his past meditational practices, you should do so at the proper time. During the process of a natural death a dying person's exhalation gets longer and longer while his inhalation gets shorter and more labored. While he is breathing like this there is no danger in touching the various parts of his body. In fact, you can touch his legs to see how they are growing colder as his heat energy recedes upwards into his heart. The time to remind him of whatever practice he did during his lifetime is while his heart center is still warm. For instance, if his main training was in *po-wa*, you would remind him that Amitabha Buddha is sitting above the crown of his head and so forth. This is also a good time to play whatever religious instruments the dying person might have been familiar with. For example, if he is a Christian and you have a bell that would remind him of church services, you can ring it at this time, thereby helping him enter a prayerful state of mind. Since even normally irreligious people often look for refuge at the time of death, it is possible to benefit even them, by skillfully reminding them of spiritual matters.

According to the scriptural texts, you can also help a dying person by placing a piece of magnetized iron above the crown of his head. This helps to draw his consciousness up and out through the mahamudra door. How is this possible? Remember that even the very subtle energy that supports the mind of clear light contains within it the vibration of the various elements. Thus it does have some small quality of iron energy, and it is upon this that the magnet can exert its power of attraction. Once the subtle consciousness has been induced to leave through the crown center in this way, there is little danger of the person falling to a lower realm.

Now we should practice some meditation. As long as your minds develop some concentration through these techniques, it is not so important whether or not you actually master the methods of *po-wa*. It is very beneficial simply to develop concentration.

## *Sixth Discourse*

*6 March 1981*

As we recite the preliminary prayers of this *po-wa* practice we should try to be very mindful of their meaning. For example, you should think deeply about what is meant by the prayer of refuge and



bodhichitta. Taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is completely different from the worldly kind of refuge we take in our regular daily lives. Looking for satisfaction in hamburgers and pizza and taking ultimate refuge in them is an obvious source of great disappointment, yet people who are not fortunate enough to find true objects of refuge act like this all the time. Therefore, it is very important to remember the characteristics of the Three Jewels of refuge and generate strong devotion towards them.

We already have a certain degree of confidence in the Three Jewels and some understanding of how they can truly lead us to liberation, and thus we are very fortunate.

The verses for the generation of bodhichitta tell us to dedicate all our merits to the attainment of enlightenment for the sake of others. This includes the merit of *any* virtuous action we perform—speaking soothingly to others, listening sympathetically in silence while they tell us their troubles, or meditating together with Dharma brothers and sisters in order to give them clear, compassionate energy—and the merit we generate can be dedicated towards the enlightenment of all sentient beings. Thus there are many different ways in which merit can be created, and an essential aspect of all Mahayana practice is to dedicate whatever positive activity we have done to the ultimate benefit of others. To be totally dedicated to others in this way is not easy, but despite its being difficult it is the most meaningful way to live your life. The more you become familiar with this altruistic attitude, the deeper it becomes. Thus it is extremely worthwhile. You should feel very happy that you have had the extreme fortune of meeting with such a comfortable and practical path as the Mahayana—deep, profound and limitless.

Anything you do with a big mind to benefit others is itself a solution to the problems of your narrow mind. In addition it is important to generate the Mahayana prayer, ‘For the rest of my life I shall dedicate the energy of my body, speech and mind to benefit other beings as much as possible. It makes no difference to me where or in what circumstances I shall live; may I benefit others as much as possible wherever I am; and may I especially use my energies to show the three principal paths to others.’

One of Je Tsongkhapa’s disciples praised him by saying that even the movement of his breath was beneficial to others, not to mention the obvious benefit of his teachings and so forth. In the same way, we can pray that any movement of our own mental and physical energy may also prove ultimately beneficial to others. It is by praying in this way that the actual ability to help others comes about. By putting our minds in this direction through dedication, we come to experience the desired result naturally. All the beneficial deeds of Shakyamuni Buddha—coming to this Earth, giving teachings, leading his disciples to arhatship and enlightenment and so forth—were done completely effortlessly and spontaneously as the result of his previous dedication.

For all of these reasons, then, we should send forth sincere prayers constantly. Some people, however, have the wrong idea about praying. They think prayers must be made in a very formal manner with great seriousness and heaviness. But this is not true. Prayer can be and should be done in a completely relaxed state of mind. The thought that is prepared to go anywhere or do anything, as long as it is of benefit to others, is the true mind of prayer. Repeating such thoughts in your mind over and over again under all circumstances is extremely powerful. Therefore, you should always ask yourself, “What does it matter what time it is or where I am, what is the best way I can help as many beings as possible?”

Some people may have doubts about these *po-wa* practices. They may wonder, “I don’t know who Amitabha Buddha is; I don’t know whether his pure land really exists or not; and I don’t understand how these practices are beneficial.” In fact, these practices are highly beneficial. Even if you are not successful in transferring your consciousness, at least you have developed a strongly positive attitude. This attitude itself counteracts the power of negativity. At the time of death, whatever karma is the strongest—either positive or negative—propels us into our next rebirth. Therefore, if we can reduce our negativity, die with a calm mind and induce our consciousness to leave through the mahamudra door, at the very least we can avoid rebirth in one of the three lower, miserable realms. That is good enough.

We have briefly mentioned that there are certain signs indicating the approach of death and others indicating that the *po-wa* practices have been successful. The explanations that follow have been extracted from a text written by the great mahasiddha Pabongkha Rinpoche, in which these signs are discussed in detail.

First, what are the signs that your *po-wa* training has been successful? The first is that your body becomes light, because your mind, which controls your body, has been gathered together through the force of concentration. The greater the control you have over your mind the more you can do with your body anything you want. Ordinarily, the heaviness of body we experience is the direct result of having a heavy mind. Therefore, it is obvious that when we train our mind through these *po-wa* practices that our body will also feel lighter and more manageable.

The next sign is that your digestion improves. There is an obvious connection between your mind and your stomach—even Western psychologists say that when your mind is upset your stomach also feels tight and cramped. Ulcers, cancer and the like are all the result of a stressed mind. Merely sitting in the proper meditation posture and relaxing can help cure you of many of the diseases that trouble your body.

Other signs include an increase of heat energy in the body, moisture coming from the head, the appearance of an aperture at the crown, increased headaches and dizziness, itching or swelling at the top of the head and so forth. These are some of the signs indicating successful practice.

As for the signs of approaching death, there are many, and they are observed in various ways, such as checking your shadow by the light of the sun or the moon, noting signs in your dreams and spotting changes in your pattern of breathing. To employ the first method, stand with the sun or moon at your back and look at the heart region of your shadow. After contemplating this for a *while*, look up into space and see what kind of after-image you see. If your body image is complete, you are in no danger of dying soon. However, if your head is missing it means that you will die in a month. Also, your right hand missing indicates that your son will die, and your left missing means that perhaps your wife will die. If it looks as though a dagger is stuck into your body, it also means that you will die in a month’s time.

If the discharge from your sexual organ is blackish or reversed that is, if blood comes from a man and sperm from a woman—it also means that death will come in one month. If you press against your eye and do not see light, cup your hand over your ear and do not hear a whirring sound, or put your arm vertically in front of your face and it seems to disappear, these are all further signs that you will die in

a month. If your feet and eyes hurt simultaneously, you may die in three months. If you cannot see the tip of your tongue when you stick it out as far as you can, death will come in half a month. If the sound in your nostrils disappears, death will come in three months. If there is pain coming from your feet up to your navel, death will come in six months. If your nostrils flatten, you will die in a week. If black spots appear on your tongue, you will die that night. If your nails lose their pink color, or your teeth dry, death will come in six months. Death will come after three days if your feet and heart area remain dry after bathing. If your stream of urine turns to the left, death will come in six months. If your navel suddenly protrudes, death will come after five days. If you can no longer see the tip of your nose, death will come after five months. If someone looks into your eyes and fails to see a reflection, you will die within two weeks.

Some of the signs just mentioned deal with rather long periods of time. In such cases death can be averted or postponed through meditation. Therefore, the signs just given are not certain, and changes in your pattern of breathing give a much more accurate indication of when you will die. Depending upon the month and the day, if your breath leaves your body mainly through one nostril it is a sign that death will come in a specific number of years.

It is also said that if a piece of dirt suddenly comes out of the center of your eye, death will come in six months. Other dangerous signs include seeing a rainbow at night, seeing shooting stars in the daytime, seeing lightning in the south when there are no clouds in the sky, seeing water-fowl and crows and peacocks uncharacteristically sharing the same space, seeing two moons or two suns, and seeing houses appear miraculously at the tops of trees or mountains. Other such signs include suddenly encountering creatures with terrifying forms, experiencing sudden shivers, repeatedly falling down, vomiting, seeing your faeces as gold or silver-colored, inexplicably being unable to see stars at night or the light of the sun or the moon, seeing your body a different color, feeling moonlight to be hot and sunlight to be cold, involuntarily shaking and so forth.

There are other signs of death that are quite commonly seen. Sometimes a person who has been sick for a very long time suddenly appears to be vibrant and even youthful. Though we may say to him, “Now it looks as though you’ll live forever,” in fact the sudden change in his appearance probably means it is time for him to go. This happens to many people. It is also said that if your uvula remains insensitive for five days, the signs of death will come in fifteen nights, and if your shadow moves but your body doesn’t, you will die in four months’ time.

Signs of death may appear in your dreams as well. In general, dreams can be intuitive, in response to momentary influences or some other cause, and we should realize that they cannot be trusted. It is often hard to figure out just what, if anything, they mean. Just as our everyday moods fluctuate uncontrollably, so do our dreams, and in meditation retreat this can be especially true. For all these reasons, then, it is not easy to give an accurate interpretation of the signs of death as they appear in dreams, but here are a couple, just to give you an idea of the many signs that are listed in the scriptural texts: it is said that seeing red flowers in your dreams or riding a donkey while facing backwards are both inauspicious signs.

So although dreams are generally untrustworthy, I still think it is possible for us to interpret them skillfully. If, for instance, you have a particular question to ask, it is possible to receive the answer in a dream: before going to sleep, make strong requests to your guru or the meditational deity to whom you

feel closest, praying for them to answer your question that night. If you do this sincerely and with great devotion, you may be surprised by what you find; I think you will definitely receive a sign in your dreams, but you need very strong dedication and determination. If you have faith in Chenrezig, for example, you should meditate upon him very strongly, remembering his characteristic quality of enlightened compassion. Then pose the question and pray for an answer in your dreams. If your sincerity is clear and powerful the answer will come, but unfortunately our faith is often too weak for the necessary connection to be made.

I am very happy to have met all you people, all you Dharma brothers and sisters. Although I am not a qualified teacher or a great practitioner, at least I have some devotion.

Furthermore, I am not expecting that you will be able to go to Amitabha's pure land as a result of this short course; my only wish is that you Westerners become convinced of the value of the Buddhadharma. If you become convinced that through the power of your mind and meditation you can achieve anything, then I will be satisfied; I am not a buddha, so I certainly do not expect you to become buddhas after only a few days' practice. Or, if before coming to this course you felt inadequate but now believe that you can do something positive with your life, then I think this course will have been successful. If these *po-wa* teachings have lessened your fear of dying or the guilt you had from committing negative actions, that is good enough. At least there you have some control over going to the three lower realms. Then you can enjoy your life.

My whole point is that you should enjoy your life. If you do, then your Dharma practices are better; but if you don't, there is no way to practice anything worthwhile. Shakymuni Buddha's method of teaching the path to enlightenment leads from one state of happiness to another. Thus the point is to become happier, gain more control and become more liberated day by day.

As for the future, you can continue this practice by doing an occasional retreat and you can also practice every day. If you are doing *po-wa* as part of your daily practice, it is not always necessary to recite the mantras *HIC* and *KAAH*; you can do this meditation silently, simply employing the power of concentration and visualization.

My conclusion is that we should all be very happy. We are so fortunate; there is no reason to worry. Just keep in mind, "My main practice is the three principal paths to enlightenment. In particular, I should develop renunciation and not remain stuck to any sense object or to any idea." Be blissful and enjoy your life; do not let yourself become obsessed with anything. Determine to use the rest of your life to benefit others as much as possible. It is not necessary to subject yourself to suffering, but you should have the attitude that you will happily bear any experience, as long as it benefits others. As for meditation on emptiness, just keep an eye on your everyday life and observe how you surround yourself with incredible projections. Also remember that whether you do *po-wa* or not, if you have compassion in general and the three principal paths in particular, you already have the best method of transferring your consciousness. The best way to lead your life and to be happy is by giving the best possible vibrations to others. Instead of being angry, uptight, guilty or upset with yourself you should try to be happy with both yourself and others.

So now let us practice a little bit and then do the dedication. Thank you.

*Colophon:*

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*N.B. The Po-wa meditation requires initiation and should only be done under the guidance of a qualified lama.*



# Impermanence and Death

*by Lama Zopa Rinpoche*

## *How long is the life span?*

*Life is so fragile, its nature is transitory. It is easy to see how it changes in only one year, a month, a week, a day, an hour, a minute, and second by second. There are sixty-five of the shortest instants in the time it takes to snap my fingers, and even in those short split seconds life is changing.*

*“Why should I be surprised that life changes so much? That’s natural; let it happen!” To think in this way is very foolish and ignorant because as life is changing so quickly in those very short instants I am becoming older.*

Some may say, “That’s natural, I become older; let it happen!” This is another wrong attitude, not caring about becoming old. Others want to deny the impermanent nature of their lives; they do not want to see the true nature of it at all. They try to disguise their appearance in the eyes of others, who also play the same game. This is an absolutely vain attempt, such actions are not of the potential knowledge level of the human mind, and their creation is certainly not the purpose of the human rebirth from the Dharma point of view. No artificial effort can change eighty years into sixteen. Age can never decrease in the view of the truly enlightened mind, which fully realises the samsaric body’s suffering because of its impermanent nature.

These people’s minds have a double illusion: belief in artificial creation (scientific discoveries used to preserve matter and life from ruin and decay) and the wrong conception that a permanent subject-object exists. The first wrong belief causes problems to arise continually. The second wrong idea causes one to become more ignorant, lazy and careless.

*There are two levels of impermanence:*

- 1. Gross-changes of matter happening in long periods of time.*
- 2. Subtle-inner changes of mind and invisible changes of matter happening in the shortest part of a second.*

*Our mind can’t perceive subtle changes of matter; it can see only the gross changes from day to day, hour to hour, such as ruin, death, etc. Gampopa said,*

*This vessel-like world that existed at an earlier moment does not do so at a later one. That it seems to continue in the same way is because something else similar arises, like the stream of a waterfall.*

*I should worry about the changes of becoming old. Why should I worry? Because as years, months, days, split seconds are passing and I’m getting older, the perfect chance of attaining enlightenment given by my human rebirth is becoming exhausted and I’m getting closer to death. I have the right equipment, a pilot, a spaceship and enough fuel to make a trip around the universe and visit*



*all the planets. But here I sit, engine running, burning up fuel while my mind is distracted by other things. The longer my mind remains distracted the more I miss the chance of seeing the planets; as the fuel burns, time gets shorter. However, even this analogy does not adequately show the tragedy of wasting this precious human rebirth.*

*Even if the duration of my life were 100,000 years death would approach like this. With each second that passes, the minutes shorten; with each minute, the hours; with each hour, the days; with each day, the months; with each month, the years. Each passing year shortens my life and the time of my death draws nigh. Although well taken care of, a life of even this great length must end, so why not mine? By comparison my life is extremely short, perhaps lasting forty to fifty, certainly not more than eighty to one hundred, years.*

*With each second, minute, hour, day, month, year, it shortens, nearing death. This human life is really short; this body of mine has not much longer to live.*

During meditation time, it is good to remember the fundamental meditations that you should use. These are important topics because they help you to see impermanence, to receive realizations of the impermanence of your life. These are the fundamental things that are helpful, useful, for you to realize how life is impermanent.

As the sun rises, quickly passes across the sky and sets, so quickly - like, this morning we were doing something, now it's evening and the time has gone so fast - like that, as the sun passes so quickly, as it changes that much, as it's impermanent, in the same way, our life changes that quickly; from the time we are born until we die, life passes quickly by.

It's the same with incense or candles burning - just as they are impermanent and quickly finish, so too, life also changes quickly and finishes soon. As they are not permanent and change quickly, so too does the human life.

Since you were born until now, until you die, just as the sun has been rising and setting every day, so has your life been approaching death in the same way. Day appears, finishes; night appears, finishes; they are impermanent, they do not always continue. Day doesn't always exist as day; it's not permanent. Just as day changes into night, everything else, all causative phenomena, change just as quickly. As day goes, as night goes, as the sun goes, everything changes in the same way.

All plants are impermanent, so, as they grow, they get older and older. From the time a shoot bursts from its seed, it gets older and older, decays and dies; it's impermanent.

In summer, everything is beautiful; in winter, everything decays; nothing is permanent, nothing is definite. As the leaves change color in fall, similarly, the whole country changes, the whole Earth changes; nothing is definite - definite, here, means something always retaining the same form, color, aspect, always existing in the same way. Nothing is definite.

It has been like this since you were born, since your mind was conceived in your mother's womb. From that time, however, you have had a certain karmically determined length of life, the result of your previous karma: forty years, twenty-five - however many years you have from the time your mind was conceived in your mother's womb until your death, their number has been determined by your karma.



Your projected lifespan is karmically determined.

It's certain that you're not going to live much over one hundred years if that; you probably won't get past ninety. But even if you're going to live a million years, your life starts to finish at the time of your conception. As soon as your mind enters your mother's womb, your years start running out, the impermanence of your life begins. Even if you're going to live a hundred thousand years, as soon as it begins, your life starts getting shorter. It changes in the shortest fraction of a second-thousandths, millionths; as even the nanoseconds pass, nothing remains the same; nothing lasts.

Then, as the seconds pass, so do the minutes that are made up by them. As the minutes pass, so do the hours that are made up by them. As the seconds, minutes and hours pass, life changes. As twenty-four hours pass, so does a day; as thirty days pass, so does a month. As the months pass, so do the years. No matter whether your lifespan is a thousand years or a hundred thousand, they're constantly changing and you're getting older, decaying - from the time your mind entered your mother's womb.

From the moment life begins it starts to finish. As each second passes, that much life has finished and you draw closer to death. Similarly, as each minute, hour, day and month passes, that much of your life is over and you are that much closer to death. Eventually, when a hundred thousand years have passed, the person whose life was that long has reached the time of death.

So, even if your life could be that long, it would still constantly be getting shorter, finishing, getting closer to death, therefore, what need to mention our lives, which are that much shorter - six, fifteen, twenty, fifty...whatever it is, according to the individual? Comparing our lives to one of a hundred thousand years' duration, there's nothing to compare. Our lives are so short, so short. Even if they're of average span, say sixty or seventy years, from the moment of conception, they get shorter and shorter, they start to finish. As our lives change, decay, in the shortest part of a second, that much life has finished and we are that much closer to death.

As many years as you have lived so far-twenty-five, twenty-eight, thirty, thirty-two-whatever it is, that much of your life has gone; you are that much closer to death and your time to live is that much less. No matter whether you think you are young or old, whatever your age, that much of your life has finished, gone forever, irretrievable. And what life you have left is certainly shorter than that which has passed; more years of your life have passed than you have left.

To summarize the way to meditate on the impermanence of this life, it's useful to think like this:

- When you look at a river, think that just as the river flows, life finishes just as quickly.
- As the sun rises and sets, think that life passes just as quickly.
- While you see external things clearly changing-like incense or candles burning down-you don't see your life finishing in parallel, but if you pay attention to what's happening around you, you'll easily be able to understand that your life is finishing without a moment's delay. Just as the oil in a burning lamp is steadily consumed, so too is your life.
- As the seasons pass, so does your life; as summer, autumn, winter and spring pass quickly by, so does your life, getting shorter and shorter, finishing more and more quickly.

Relating what you see outside of you to yourself is extremely useful; it's a type of analytical meditation. It is useful because it prevents your mind from becoming deluded; it makes your mind aware of change, of life getting shorter, of the brevity of human life, your life.

We see external things going by quickly but never reflect on our own life. We're always planning on having a long life; we completely believe that we'll continue to exist for a long time. We're totally unaware of the way in which our life is actually evolving: finishing quickly every moment. The same evolutionary changes we see outside of ourselves are happening within; this is the actual evolution, but we don't recognize it.

Not realizing how quickly and relentlessly life is finishing, then, becomes the greatest hindrance to making our whole life pure, to living in a positive way, to spending our entire life in the Dharma. Because of the wrong conception that we're not going to die soon and are going to live a long time, we don't remember death, don't think of Dharma and don't make any arrangements for our next life. Since we don't think about death and how short life is, we have no fear. Because we have no fear of the brevity of life, death and the suffering that follows, we don't change our life. Even though we might know all about meditation or be great Dharma scholars, if because of our wrong conceptions we remain unaware of the actual evolution of life, if we have no wisdom, we won't change our lives; we won't make them pure.

Being worried and afraid at the time of death doesn't help because at that point there's nothing we can do. No matter how great our suffering, fear and worry knowing we're now going to die, there's nothing we can do. Whatever negative karma we've created, whatever the huge amount of garbage in our mind, we have to carry it all. Since we've created the cause, we have to suffer each result. Then, no matter how much incredible fear and worry we have, it doesn't help at all because there's no time to practice. Our time is up, finished, gone. There's nothing we can do to solve this problem.

If your house is susceptible to damage by flood, it's wise to check beforehand how great the danger is. If you find the danger is real, you feel afraid; because of that fear you dam the river or make other arrangements to protect your house, family and property from being washed away or ruined by floodwaters. When you then know you are safe, your life becomes peaceful; you have no worries. In the same way, it is necessary to make arrangements to protect your peace of mind before the flood of death arrives. Before death arrives, research the danger and act accordingly.

If you don't fear danger, you'll never make the necessary arrangements to protect yourself. Therefore, you have to meditate on impermanence and death in order to realize the danger, feel afraid and do what's necessary to protect yourself.

### *The advantages of remembering death*

Thus, these teachings on death and impermanence are very useful. They're useful for those who don't practice Dharma because it makes them seek the Dharma out, and also useful for those who do practice Dharma, who meditate. We should always remember death. If we do, our mind will remain aware of the changes constantly happening within us, of how short the human life is, of how life is getting shorter every moment. This has great benefit.

Many great yogis got their start by meditating on the shortness of the human life, impermanence and death; their enlightenment, their realizations and their Dharma practice itself all came from this. Their strength and ability to live an ascetic life in extremely isolated places; to practice the vast and profound subjects no matter how long it took to receive realizations and attain the higher paths, how difficult it was; to generate the incredible energy required to persevere in their practice - all these things came from thinking about the shortness of the human life, impermanence and death; their receiving enlightenment in their lifetime was also due to this remembrance.

It takes a great deal of energy to reach enlightenment; the quicker you want to receive it, the more energy you have to expend. If, for example, you want to cover a long distance quickly by car, you need a good machine, good fuel and the energy to drive. Similarly, it's not easy to attain enlightenment in your lifetime: you need great energy in order to overcome the difficulties of practicing Dharma and following the path. Where does such energy come from? It comes from remembering the impermanence of life and death. Therefore, this meditation is extremely useful. Even the enlightened being's continually benefiting sentient beings can be traced back to this meditation.

Remembering impermanence and death is also important if you just want to be reborn in the upper realms or free yourself from samsara.

Remembering impermanence and death is powerful, too, because it helps you put an end to all 84,000 delusions. All the different negative minds - the great root of ignorance, hatred, all the other wrong conceptions, all the obscurations that prevent liberation from samsara and enlightenment - can be terminated by the energy generated through remembering impermanence and death; this is the original cause of the cessation of all these delusions. Therefore, it is very powerful.

If you remember impermanence and death, you can also prevent the arising of temporal negative minds such as greed, ignorance, hatred, pride, jealousy and so forth - minds that cause you discomfort, suffering and confusion - even if they arise strongly. You prevent them from arising because remembering impermanence and death makes you fear death and the shortness of the human life. Therefore, it is very useful in making your mind peaceful, even at present.

Not only is remembering impermanence and death useful at the *beginning* of the practice - where it persuades, or obliges, you to seek out the Dharma, to begin to practice, to meditate, instead of following your negative mind and acting opposite to the Dharma - it is also beneficial *during* the practice, once you are on the path, where it is very useful in making you continue to practice. Even though you are in the middle of your practice, following the path, by remembering death you keep from losing your realizations and continue on to the higher reaches of the path.

And then, it's useful at the end of your practice, as I mentioned before.

Finally, at the time of death, this remembrance is greatly useful in that it allows you to die peacefully, with happiness, a relaxed mind, no worries at all. Even though your relatives, your husband or wife, might be crying, the people around you suffering, you yourself can die with great joy, like going on holiday or a picnic. Definitely. The person who has spent his or her life meditating, remembering death every day, continuously making purification, creating merit, trying to stop creating negative karma, creating as little negative karma as possible, has no trouble at the time of death.

*Question:* Is it really possible to be happy at the time of death?

*Rinpoche:* Those who have created great, extensive merit are happy at the time of death. This is definitely possible.

For the purest Dharma practitioners, death is like returning home or going on a picnic. The intermediate practitioners' minds at death are happy, worry-free. The lowest Dharma practitioners, at least those who created much merit during their life, aren't upset at the time of death; they're not worried - because they have done much purification and collected much merit, they're not afraid at the time of death, which ordinary people usually are.

Therefore, since you derive so many benefits from remembering and meditating on death, instead of getting shocked by all this talk about it, forgetting it, stopping yourself from remembering it, this is what you should do; you should always remember and meditate on the impermanence of life and death. Why does this topic shock people? Why do people get shocked when they're asked their age and the person replies, "Oh, you're so old!"? Because it's opposite to the way they feel, opposite to their wrong conceptions, to what they believe.

People always want to look young, not to age, not to change, but no matter how strong their desire, they have no choice. So, they get a shock when they're told they're old.

As time passes, the human life finishes. From the moment of conception in your mother's womb, you're constantly getting older. No matter how much you don't want it to happen, you can't stop change, you can't stop the natural evolution of the impermanent life. Trying to forget it, not think about it, disguise it, cannot affect the actual evolution.

Artificial change-make up, plastic surgery and so forth-cannot make you younger, cannot arrest the aging process, cannot prevent decay, cannot stop death. No matter if you spend your whole life trying to look young on the outside, you still age and die. You can't stop death by forgetting about it, by never thinking about it, by closing your ears and not listening if somebody else is talking about it-nothing can stop death no matter how you try.

Whatever your age, however young-looking you try to remain through external means, the actual evolution is that you're getting older, decaying; you're like a piece of rotten fruit painted on the outside to look nice. A painted piece of fruit might look beautiful and fresh, but inside, as time passes, it decays, loses its taste, shrivels up and sours. No matter how much it's painted on the outside, nothing stops the actual evolution of decay.

Since we have to go through the natural evolution of life without choice, all these external manipulations don't help. No matter how much we try to disguise what's happening and pretend that it's not, we still have to experience the worries of old age and the suffering of death. Trying to forget these things is not the solution. If someone is coming to kill you, how does it help to pretend that it's not happening? Ignoring the fact doesn't avert the danger of the person coming to kill you. You have to do something else.

Therefore, instead of getting shocked and trying to escape from the natural way things are, do the

opposite and constantly bring impermanence and death to mind. This is much more useful than trying to stop the fear that normally arises from remembering death by ignoring it, and it has all those advantages that I mentioned before.

As the great yogi Milarepa said, “I fled to the mountains through fear of death where I realized the absolute true nature of mind. Now, even if death comes to me, I won’t be afraid.”

This is very tasty; very effective. The great yogi Milarepa-his body was something else. If he showed up in the West today, he’d be arrested; everybody would hate the way he looked. He’d be hidden away out of sight. Because he’d spent a long time naked, doing austere practices, leading an ascetic life in the mountains, his body was blue, scrawny and ugly.

An austere life is one where you forgo possessions and temporal needs no matter how difficult it is, bearing whatever hardships arise in order to practice Dharma. So, remembering death, Milarepa felt afraid and his fear drove him to the mountains, where he realized the absolute true nature, the reality of the mind, and thus overcame his fear of death. This great achievement originally came from his remembering and fearing the shortness of the human life and death. We should learn from his example and practice in the same way-remember death and overcome fear of it before it comes. This is the wise approach, wise work, the skillful method; it is much better than what people normally do, which is avoid fear of death by not thinking about it until it’s time to die.

Another Tibetan yogi, who wrote many texts and was in constant communication with the female buddha Tara [Longd I Lama Rinpoche], also practiced remembering impermanence and death, created much merit, received many realizations and eventually overcame his fear of death. He said, “When the impermanence of life manifests to me, I won’t be afraid. I can be a monk in the morning and take the body of a deity the same afternoon.” Not only was he unafraid of death but he also had the power to take a pure body when he left his ordinary one.

All these benefits that I’ve mentioned, then, are advantages of remembering impermanence and death, so this practice is very useful. By remembering death, you stop following your negative mind and therefore create less negative karma. The more you remember death, the better the results you experience. It’s very helpful.

### *The disadvantages of not remembering death*

1. If you don’t remember death, you don’t remember Dharma, the only method that can fully eliminate fear of death. How does this work? If you don’t remember death, you’re not afraid of it, and if you’re not afraid of death, you get strongly attached to the comfort of this life and spend most of your time seeking only that-the comfort of this life. You have one idea after another, to do business, to do this, to do that, all to gain only the comfort of this life. You do one thing, then another, then something else, and this is how your entire life goes, working for attachment, the evil thought that’s attached to the comfort of this life. You don’t remember death and because you then spend all your time working for this life, you cannot practice Dharma. Then you finish up with great suffering at the time of death-not only have you used your whole life to create the cause of suffering, you also have no happiness or peace of mind when you die.

2. The next thing is that because you don't remember death, you're again controlled by attachment and follow your negative mind, saying, "Oh, I can practice Dharma in a couple of years; there's no hurry. Maybe I'll get to it in a year, in a few months' time." You put it off. Then when the time comes, you again say, "Maybe next month, next year." This is a big danger. Even though you remember Dharma, you postpone your practice in this way. This comes from not remembering impermanence and death strongly or frequently enough.

3. Another problem is that you might try to practice Dharma, to meditate, but whatever you do doesn't become pure. It's very difficult for your practice to be pure if you don't remember death. This is another shortcoming.

This wrong conception, this intuitive feeling - thinking all the time, every day, every morning when you get up - "I'm going to live for a long time; I'm not going to die; I'm not going to die today" - is the worst hindrance to making your Dharma practice pure. Whatever you're doing-walking, sitting, whatever-the intuitive feeling "I'm not going to die today" is always in your mind.

Of course, anybody can say, "Eventually I'm going to die; after a long time." This is not difficult to think, but it's not enough. Even people who don't meditate think this. But the problem for the meditator and non-meditator alike, especially the meditator, especially for those of us who are trying to practice Dharma, is that the thought, the wrong conception, "I'm not going to die today," not remembering death, is that even though we try to practice Dharma, our practice becomes impure.

How does the thought, "I'm not going to die today" prevent our practice from becoming pure? Because when we think this, we have no fear of death, and because we do not fear death, we always follow, fall under the control of, attachment; attachment to the comfort of this life. This is the way it works; this is how not remembering death prevents whatever practice we try to do from becoming pure. Because of the continual feeling "I'm not going to die today" we have no fear of death, are controlled by attachment to the comfort of this life and therefore work only for this life. In this way, everything we do becomes the cause of suffering.

Because you aren't afraid of death, even though you try to do something positive, try to meditate, your motivation is not pure; you don't have the strong thought that what you are doing is only for the benefit of future lives and complete disregard for this life; you don't have the feeling that the comfort of this life is like used toilet paper, something only to be cast aside. You don't have strong motivation like this. Even if you do have some idea of future lives, however, your desire to benefit this life is much stronger, so even when you try to practice Dharma, the motivation behind it is to gain the comfort of this life. Therefore, what you do doesn't become pure Dharma. If you don't have the strong motivation of wanting to achieve the supreme happiness of enlightenment, the cessation of samsara or the happiness of future lives and complete detachment from the comfort of this life-throwing the happiness of this life away like garbage-if you have the intuitive thought "I'm not going to die today" constantly arising, your practice becomes impure because the pure motivation to do the practice only for those higher goals is prevented from arising.

*Question:* If you discover that practicing Dharma solves your temporal problems, can't that be a good kind of motivation for continuing your practice? You're suffering before you hear about Dharma, and you start to practice. Then, after you've been practicing for a while you find that you're suffering less



and that your temporal problems are going away. Is that a motivation that's concerned with this life?

*Rinpoche:* Do you mean thinking that through your pure Dharma practice you can release your temporal problems? Having this idea, then practicing Dharma?

*Question:* I mean you discover through experience that Dharma practice makes you happy and your temporal needs are met. Can that motivation still lead to pure practice?

*Rinpoche:* The Dharma practice that we are talking about here - following the remedies that are the opponents to the negative mind, practicing the antidotes to the delusions - even though you know from theory that it will make your present life happy or from experience that it *does* make your present life happy, as long as you are practicing the remedy to the delusions, it is always pure Dharma and therefore, there's no danger. If you have the experience that renouncing this life also solves your daily problems, also brings much happiness into this life, and also know that you can receive the most supreme happiness of enlightenment, cessation of suffering and better future lives, and then with this knowledge practice Dharma, practice renouncing the evil thought of attachment to the comfort of this life, the remedy to the negative mind, what you do always becomes pure Dharma and is never an interruption to your path to enlightenment. Since you are never attached to the comfort of this life, even though you know the benefits of your practice for this and future lives, your practice becomes pure Dharma.

The purpose of my talking about the disadvantages and advantages is because they're important to know and remember. Otherwise, you'll have no interest in, won't see the value of, meditating on death and impermanence; and if you don't see the value, you'll have no energy for the meditation. Then, if you don't do the meditation, you won't gain all the perfections that come from remembering and meditating on impermanence and death. Therefore, it's very useful to think of the shortcomings and the benefits - what happens if you don't remember these things and what happens if you do. This then gives energy to meditate on impermanence and death instead of getting shocked by the subject. You are interested in and willing to experience these meditations.



*[A meditation on how life is finishing quickly, led by Lama Zopa Rinpoche]*

*First think how quickly a life of 100,000 years' duration finishes, by seconds, months and years. Every second, month and year, a life of 100,000 years' duration gets shorter and shorter. 100,000 years is the collection of a certain number of seconds, a certain number of fractions of a second, which start running out from the moment of conception in the mothers' womb. As soon as life begins, as each split second passes, the whole collection of split seconds starts to finish; the entire collection of split seconds that together number 100,000 years diminishes split second by split second, and each moment, the life of 100,000 years gets shorter. In this way, by subtracting each split second from the whole, the total number gets less and that quickly, life finishes. Life finishes so quickly.*

*Similarly, think, "Since I was conceived in my mother's womb, since my mind entered the fertilized egg, my karmically determined lifespan-sixty, seventy or however many years it is-has been decreasing. My projected lifespan has a finite number of hours, minutes and seconds, and within that time, there's a finite number of split seconds. As each split second*



*passes, each second gets shorter and finishes; as each second passes, each minute gets shorter and finishes; as each minute passes, each hour gets shorter and finishes; as each hour passes, each day gets shorter and finishes; as each day passes, each week gets shorter and finishes; as each week passes, each month gets shorter and finishes; as each month passes, each year gets shorter and finishes; and as each year passes, I have one year less to live.*

“If I’m going to live to seventy, as each year passes—each year, which is made up of split seconds, seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks and months—my life is finishing. As many split seconds as there are in my karmically projected lifespan, as each one passes, my life is getting closer to its end, continuously finishing. From the time of my conception, from the time my mind entered my mother’s womb, my life has been getting shorter and shorter, without a fraction of a second’s pause; from that moment, my seventy years have been running out. My life is like a pile of rice, from which grains are removed one by one—as each grain is removed, the pile gets closer to depletion. In just this way, as each moment passes, my life is finishing and I’m getting older and closer to death.

“As each second that makes up my seventy years passes, I’m getting closer to death. Day and night, whatever I’m doing—eating, drinking, sleeping, talking, meditating—moment by moment, all the time, I’m getting closer to death. From the time of my conception up until now, a certain number of the total seconds allocated to my life has passed; a certain number of days, months and years have passed. Since that time, I have been running towards death without even a split second’s pause.

*“If I’m going to live seventy years, within that time I have a certain number of breaths; there’s a fixed number, it’s not infinite. So, each time I breathe, my life is finishing. As the total number of breaths that makes up my life decreases, I’m getting closer to death. In one day, I have a certain number of breaths, several thousand, so as each one finishes, I’m getting closer to death...just like an animal being led to slaughter.*

*“As a goat is led from its pen to where it will be butchered, each step it takes brings it closer to being killed, closer to death. The goat, being led by a rope tied round its neck, doesn’t know that with each step, it’s getting closer to death, and I’m just like that pitiful, ignorant animal; with each breath, with the passing of each split second, I, too, remain unaware that I’m getting closer to death.*

“My life is getting closer to death just as a stone thrown into the air continuously gets closer to hitting the ground without a moment’s delay. Just like that my life is constantly getting closer to death. No matter how much I say that I’m alive, the fact is that every moment I’m getting closer to not being alive, to being dead.”



*[A meditation on the circumstances of death, led by Lama Zopa Rinpoche]*

*Now I have received a perfect human rebirth, but does it last for long time? Will this human rebirth exist forever? No, it will not always exist; it will end after some time. Some time soon, the body that I now have will become empty, finish. There will soon be a time when this body will be seen only in old photographs. Such a time will soon be here.*

Just as I now refer to others, “So and so is dead; he died at such and such a time,” soon others will be talking in the same way about me. In a short time, the vision of this life will stop. Just as day finishes and turns into night, so too will the vision of this life soon stop, no matter how long I think I’m going

to live. All of a sudden I'll have the thought, "Now I'm dying," and there'll be nothing to do but worry. I'll be crying; all my family and friends surrounding me will be crying; the whole atmosphere will be one of upset and there'll be nothing in my mind except worry and suffering. Because of this suffering, I won't be able to remember Buddha, Dharma and Sangha; all I'll experience will be great fear because of the illusory vision created by my delusions and the imbalance of my body's elements. Even now, when something suddenly happens, when there's some sudden danger, I never remember to take refuge; my mind is completely dark - and this even now, before death. So what will happen at the time of death, when the sufferings are greater and my mind is even more uncontrolled? How will I remember to take refuge in the enlightened being then?

- *Now, all my family and friends are laughing, smiling and enjoying my company; soon the time will come when they'll be weeping at the news of my death.*
- *Now, I keep my body nicely covered with clothes; soon the time will come when it will be dead, like stone, feeling nothing.*
- *Now, my body can't bear being touched by even a tiny stick of burning incense; soon it will be burnt in a fire.*
- *This body, which has always been well preserved, will soon be ash.*
- *This body, which is always going everywhere, unable to stay still in one place, will soon be nailed into a box and buried under ground.*
- *This body, which cannot bear to be bitten by even a little flea, will soon be full of worms eating it.*
- *This body, which is always talking about everything, will soon be dead, unable to talk about anything.*
- *This body, which at present has the ability to express all its desires, will soon be unable to see properly or even explain my will.*
- *This body, which I have always tried to keep attractive, will soon become a frightening corpse. Even people who are presently attached to my body will soon be terrified, afraid to even look at it let alone touch it.*
- *This body, which has always enjoyed the best of food and drink, will soon be unable to swallow anything at all, even drops of medicine put into my mouth. At that time I'll be completely unable to move my body or open my mouth; all I'll be able to do will be with great difficulty to open an eye. Even if my relatives or friends try to encourage me, all I'll be able to do will be to open an eye. Soon after that I won't even be able to hear anything they say.*
- *Soon this body will be called a corpse. Soon nobody will want to touch me. All they'll want to do will be to drag me away by the farthest corner of my clothes that they can reach.*
- *Soon, this body that I always dressed so well will be completely naked, lying on a slab.*

*It's uncertain when all these things will happen, but it won't be long. It could be tonight; this month; this year. Whenever it is going to happen, I am constantly getting closer to that time, approaching it day by day.*

*So, this is the way to start meditating on death. First do the meditation on how life is finishing quickly and then the meditation on the circumstances of death. Don't just think about the circumstances of death intellectually; meditate as above. Meditate on the changes that your body will undergo in the future, on what is definitely going to happen, but visualize as if it is happening right now, as if you're in that situation right now. This is very useful; it's a special technique for realizing impermanence and death. Meditate on what would be happening to your body if you were dying right now - how your body changes; how it looks.*

*If you do this meditation properly, if you generate a strong feeling that you are dying right now, you'll notice your heartbeat*

*and breathing quicken. This is a sign that you have gained a level of experience of the meditation on impermanence and death. You need to keep practicing this meditation until such signs appear.*

*At present, it's merely words and there's not much feeling. But as you meditate continuously on impermanence and death, you will feel it deeper and deeper. At present, your mind is not well trained, but as you train it through continuous meditation, your feelings will get stronger and stronger and it will feel more and more true, real. Then you will no longer want to engage in meaningless actions; you won't want to do any actions that have only to do with the present body. You will spontaneously work for enlightenment and won't want to spend even a short time working for this life's body. This feeling will get stronger and stronger through meditating on impermanence, the shortness of life and getting closer to death. You won't even want to spend the short time it takes to shave your beard; things like that.*

Yogis who realize impermanence don't even want to waste time removing a splinter. One yogi, the meditator Geshe Karag Gomchung, retreated in a cave in an isolated place and realized impermanence. There was a thorn bush growing at the entrance to his cave, and each time he went in and out, the thorns would catch his clothing. Each time he went out he'd think about cutting it back, but then he'd think that there was certainty that he'd return, so he wouldn't bother. Then, when he went back in, again he'd get caught and think he ought to cut it back, but then he'd think that there was no certainty that he'd ever come out again, so again he wouldn't bother. In that way, he spent his life meditating in solitude without taking the time to prune the bush. This shows that he had realized impermanence. It's important that you try as much as possible to do so yourself.



Why am I talking about death? Perhaps you think, “My country is full of danger; people are always dying, this and that. I’ve heard it all before. What’s the point of hearing it again?”

But this is different. Actually, if we looked the right way at all the examples of impermanence around us, it would be easy to understand by ourselves, but we don’t. No matter how many outer examples of impermanence we see, we don’t realize impermanence on our own.

Take fear of death, for example. Even animals are afraid of death – when they’re threatened, when they fall – but that’s useless. Also, we often feel afraid of death-when we’re in an accident, when we get sick and so forth – but these feelings don’t last. After a day or two, when the danger’s passed, we no longer feel afraid and what happened becomes useless because we didn’t use it to practice Dharma.

Therefore, it’s not enough to bring up a feeling of fear of death for just a couple of minutes; that’s not the point of meditating on impermanence. It’s necessary to make the heavy feeling, the fear of death, last for more than a few minutes, more than an hour, because you can’t complete the practice of Dharma in an hour. You can see how lazy you are, therefore, that’s not enough. You have to make the feeling last until you know you can be reborn according to your choice, or at least until you can be fully confident of having achieved the lowest purpose of this meditation, which is not suffering at the time of death. Anyway, it’s necessary to make this feeling last in order to receive the higher, more difficult realizations; that’s the purpose of meditating on impermanence and death – to make the feeling last.

As I said before, even ordinary people who know nothing about Dharma sometimes think, “Oh, I will

die in a while, after a long time.” That’s nothing. If you have the realization, if you really fear death, if you have had the experience of impermanence through meditation, you can never fall asleep while meditating, for example. Sometimes you might meditate on the actual topic for a couple of minutes and then your mind will go off on a picnic, but if you have understood and realized impermanence, your mind will be so strong that this sort of thing will never happen; your mind will never be easily distracted. Things like falling asleep during meditation, getting easily distracted and finding it difficult to focus on the subject show that you need energy, that you need to work on a better understanding of impermanence and death. If you haven’t experienced impermanence through meditation, if you don’t have this realization, then any little problem will disturb your meditation.

Meditators who have real, true, deep understanding and experience of impermanence and death are never shocked when they hear “renounce this life.” Such words only please their minds. Those who realize impermanence and death are only too happy to practice that which is most powerful and beneficial to stop delusions, no matter how difficult it might be. Anyway, for such people it’s not difficult. Why are we not capable of this? It’s because we haven’t realized the impermanence of life and death. Another thing is that meditating for just a month at a Kopan course doesn’t do much to stop your future problems. Of course, there are benefits, great benefits – I’m not saying there aren’t benefits – but in order to stop future problems you need to keep the meditation going. Also, since meditation is meant to stop your problems, you need to know how to do it, so practicing for just a day or two is not enough to learn; hearing someone explain something once and then just working on that is also not enough.

### ***Is death definite?***

*My death is inevitable because no being has ever existed in the realms of samsara without continuously suffering death and rebirth.*

### ***Is the time of my death definite?***

*Death has many causes and so its time is uncertain:*

1. *When, according to past karma, life’s end is due;*
2. *When factors sustaining life are unavailable, e.g., death by starvation; or*
3. *Through ignorance, e.g., suicide, or carelessness.*

*At this moment, if I really check up within myself, I can find neither evidence nor guarantee that my life will continue for any definite period.*

### ***Death is definite***

Here are some suggestions on how to meditate on this topic. Think from the depths of your mind, “After some time, this whole world will become completely empty; also, I will cease to exist on this Earth.” Feel the complete emptiness of all these things and conclude, “Therefore, death is definite.”

Think, “There is no cooperative cause, or condition, that can stop death; there is no external condition that can stop death. As it has not been possible to prevent death from the time the world began until now, death is definite. Also, the lifespan cannot be made longer and spontaneously decreases, therefore, death is certain to occur.” Bring to mind your own life when thinking these thoughts.

“Also, my death will occur before I’ve had much time to spend practicing Dharma. Nothing external can prevent it and when the time comes for me to die, even the best hospitals and the latest medicines

cannot help. No matter where I go, I can't escape it.

“If I think back to my parents, my parents’ parents, their parents, and on and on back through my ancestors, there are so many, an infinite number, and now, not one of them exists. All those previous generations have gone; not one of them remains.” Think of your parents, your grandparents, your great-grandparents who have died; all of them gone. “Therefore, it is certain that I will also die. Just as they have ceased to exist, so will I. Soon it will be my turn to die. Therefore, my death is definite.”

### *The time of death is uncertain*

Generally speaking, the lifespan of the beings in this world is not definite. It's not fixed at a hundred years or a thousand years as it is in some other realms. In this world, the lifespan varies, and especially in these degenerate times it is shorter and even more indefinite; much shorter and more indefinite than in previous times. Therefore, the time of death is uncertain, not definite.

For example,

- People come to the East from the West but there's no certainty that they'll return; before it's time to return, they die. The time of death is uncertain in this way.
- Even though they might have returned to the West, they die before getting home.
- Many people go to sleep but die before they awaken.
- Many people start a meal but die before they've finished even a plate of food.
- Many people go trekking but die before they can return
- Many people go out by car but die before getting back home.
- Many people are born but die before reaching adulthood.
- Many people are conceived but die before they even get out of their mother's womb.
- Many people go out to play sports but die even before the game's over.
- Many people buy new clothes but die before they've had time to wear them.
- Many people start to read a book but die before they finish.
- Many people plan a project but die before they can complete it.
- Many people go to war but die before they get back home.
- Many people go to work but die before they can collect their salary.
- Many people start to talk but die before completing what they wanted to say.
- Many people breathe out but die before they can breathe in.

These are just a few examples of how the actual time of death is uncertain, indefinite; a few examples for you to use in meditation.

So, just as you see these kinds of thing happening around you, it's necessary for you to put those examples on yourself, to meditate that what is happening to others can happen to you. It's important to think, “One day I will also die somehow, before I've had time to complete what I'm doing.” Just as you see others dying before they've had time to finish what they're doing, you have to see the same thing happening to you. This is a very effective way to meditate. It is certain that you are going to die either

during the day or during the night, in the morning or the afternoon, without having finished something. You breathe out but die before you can breathe back in. It's certain to happen to you, that you'll die somehow or other, according to your karma. Either at home or while you're out.

You also have to think how temporal needs can become the cause of death; how there are more life-endangering cooperative causes than life-supporting ones. Therefore, the time of death is uncertain.

Even life-supporting things can endanger your life; food, for example. People dying while eating meat or fish, when a bone gets stuck in their throat. Others die when a house collapses on them or the roof falls in. Some get killed by others in arguments over money or in drunken brawls. Others overdose on drugs. Even things that are supposed to support life can finish up destroying it. Therefore, the actual time of death is indefinite.

And this body is extremely fragile, like a water bubble. Even a slight movement can cause injury; therefore, it's so easy to endanger this life. For this reason, too, the time of death is indefinite.

The time of death is uncertain because it occurs

1. when life's end is due according to previous karma;
2. when factors sustaining life are unavailable; and
3. through ignorance.

Check in your own mind whether or not you can perceive when you will die. Also check if it's sure to happen only after a long time, after ten years; see if you can be sure of living that long or not. Also check to see if you can be sure of still being alive tomorrow, as you tend to think; as you tend to think that you'll live for a long time, see if it's definite that you'll live until tomorrow. What reasons do you have for thinking that you'll still be alive then? Similarly, check up if you can be sure of being alive tonight; if you'll live long enough to go to bed. What proof do you have that you'll live that long? If you can't find any proof that you'll definitely exist that long, then you can't be sure of being alive tonight, that you'll live long enough to go to bed.

Perhaps you might reason, "I have this intuitive feeling that I'll exist. I don't see anything to indicate that I'll die at such and such a time; I just have this instinctive feeling." You talk a lot about your instincts, but this instinctive feeling that you're going to continue to exist will carry on until you die. This is the worst hindrance to Dharma practice. But this is the reason you give, however, this feeling continues up to the point of death. Even if you were going to die in a minute from now you'd still have that feeling. That instinctive feeling is the greatest hindrance to Dharma practice.

Many people worry, thinking, "What's the method to stop distractions? I can't concentrate; I can't do this, I can't do that." Why do they have these problems? It's because they are distracted by the instinctive thought that feels, "I will not die now; I will exist. I won't die now; I won't die today." This instinctive feeling that we always have causes the hindrances that prevent our concentration from lasting. This should be destroyed; this disturbing conception should be stopped by meditation on impermanence and death.

Imagine a person walking through a tiger-infested forest. He's constantly aware of the danger of being attacked by a tiger, so he's always on the alert, looking around; he doesn't dare spend even a few



minutes gazing at something without maintaining a lookout for tigers. Why does he spontaneously keep a lookout for tigers? It's the same with somebody who realizes that the time of death is indefinite, uncertain; who always feels that it's not sure that death won't come today, in an hour, in a minute; who always thinks the opposite of what we do. We always think, "Not die; not die; not die now," but the person who has realized through meditation the indefinite time of death is the complete opposite. The meditator who has had the experience thinks, "I will definitely die in an hour, at this time, tonight," which is completely opposite to our usual idea. Because the person thinks, "I will die now, in a minute, in an hour," he or she has incredibly great energy to make any action perfect, pure. So, if you meditate with this thought, you won't have any hindrances to meditation; your mind won't get easily distracted. Your concentration will last much longer because this thought and the fear that comes with it does not allow you to fall under the control of hindrances; it protects you from hindrances.



When Guru Shakyamuni Buddha passed away, he took off his robes and lay down, and said to his disciples, "This is the *tathagata*'s last holy body, so you must look at it." A *tathagata* is an *arya* being who has gone beyond all suffering and illusory mind, so when he said "tathagata," he meant himself. Then he gave his last teaching: "All causative phenomena are impermanent. This is the last teaching of the *tathagata*." Then he passed away.

This was his last teaching; this was his bequest to us sentient beings. This was the most important thing he had to leave us—a teaching on impermanence. Then he passed away. When he asked his disciples to look at the last holy body of the *tathagata*, many of them fainted and some *arhats* even passed away themselves; they couldn't bear his passing.

Later on—because the teachings were in danger of getting lost—five hundred arhats who had memorized Guru Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings, got together on three different occasions and recited the teachings by heart, while other arhat pandits wrote them down for the benefit of future sentient beings.

So the very last thing he left, his very last teaching - like a will that ordinary people leave, a will that talks about money or whatever it is that the dying person's most hung up on, the thing most precious thing to the dying person - the most beneficial thing that Guru Shakyamuni Buddha could leave, the most important thing for us to realize, to understand, was impermanence. Therefore, he ended his life with a teaching on impermanence; his entire teaching ended with this. This is what he told us: "You sentient beings should practice Dharma; if you don't, there's impermanence and death." In saying that, he meant suffering. This one word, impermanence, shows the entire range of samsaric suffering: "You sentient beings should practice Dharma because you are living in suffering, living in impermanence, under the control of death."

When you're meditating on death, another useful technique is to remember and count up all your relatives and friends who have died. Earlier, we meditated mainly on the generations of ancestors who had passed away; here I'm talking about those you met in this life.

Many of my own relatives and friends of this life have passed away – lay people, monks, lamas and many other friends. I never knew my grandfather, even as a small child; I remember only my grand-



mother – gray hair, rosary, always sitting by the kitchen fire – but she died while I was in Tibet or India. During the time I was away she was sick for seven years and later went blind, close to the time she died; at that point she couldn't do anything. My uncle looked after her for many years-giving her food, taking her out to the bathroom, bringing her back in; he offered service to his mother for a long time, and in between taking care of her, he did prostrations.

Before this, however, my uncle himself had become sick. He checked with many doctors in Solu Khumbu and Tibet as well, and took all kinds of medicine, but nothing helped. He was in so much pain he couldn't even eat. He, too, was sick for seven years. Then he asked the advice of a lama whose cave was close to Lawudo; that lama was quite a good meditator. I vaguely remember him because when I was little I always thought he was a good monk. He liked me, too; I got a good feeling from him, different from others. He'd always play with me and had a good vibration, from keeping a pure mind or something. My uncle checked with this meditator; asked for an observation. The lama observed that the cause of my uncle's sickness was karmic obscuration, which means the result of negative karma - something that cannot be cured by medicine, only by purification. So then my uncle asked for a meditation on prostrations and refuge - things like that - so the lama gave him some meditations to do.

My uncle was poor, but just above this meditator's cave lived the family of a married lama, and they helped my uncle by taking care of his temporal needs. They also helped him build a little room for prostrations and so forth, where he could also take care of his mother. He made prostrations for about seven years, something like seven times 100,000, and as he continued to make them, gradually his illness got cured and eventually went away altogether. He became completely well. Since that time he hasn't been sick, at least not with any heavy disease. During that time, while he was taking care of his mother, she died at that place.

Then there's my father. I never saw my father in my life. About the time I was due to come out of my mother's womb he'd already left home-gone to his next rebirth. He'd already renounced the home. What I do remember is that when I was very, very small, all of us children would sleep together at night under our father's long-sleeved coat-his *chuba*, as it's called in Tibetan. But it wasn't made of simple cloth; it was made of animal hide with fur inside. So we all slept under our dead father's coat, and sometimes we'd say, "This belonged to Dad."

My mother had several other children, but many of them died before I was born. One of them had two heads; that one didn't survive long and died as a baby. There were stories about that baby. Mother didn't know how to check up, and the baby died. Another sister born before me also died. She had some kind of little tail, like an animal's. So now there are just three or four of us left. Soon all these will also be gone and only their names will remain, with people saying, "Such and such a person did this," where nobody can see their physical body any longer.

Then there's the first Western pen friend I had, when I was in India. Our schoolteacher was a [Buddhist] nun; I think she must have been one of the first Western nuns. She'd been a nun for many years. Originally she was Christian, then later she traveled around Ceylon, where she took precepts from a Theravadin guru, and then she went to India, where and lived and worked. Around this time, the Tibetan uprising of 1959 occurred and many Tibetans escaped to India; this nun was amongst those sent by the relief committee of the Indian government to look after the Tibetan refugees. Where she

was, the refugees were mainly monks from Lhasa.

After that, she had much contact with monks; even her cook was a monk. She gradually became familiar with Tibetans and got more and more interested. Later on, she went to the place where more than a thousand monks lived for several years, continuing their study of Dharma philosophy and tantra. One of the ways in which she helped the monks was by finding them pen friends; people in the West with whom they could correspond. The pen friend she found me was a Jewish lady living in London. Sometimes she would send me photos of herself, some when she was young and some as she was at the time, which was very old. I used to get confused because I was quite young and didn't know which one was her-I didn't realize that they were pictures of the same person; I thought they were two different people.

People recognized her as having a good personality and being wise. I think she also wrote books, although I didn't read any of them. She wrote me letters for seven years; each week, so many letters. My room was full of the garbage of her letters. I replied only occasionally; maybe only three or four times altogether. She was more than eighty-seven, but at that time there wasn't much I could do to help her. She really wanted to understand Dharma, but I couldn't communicate much in English myself, and there weren't any other Tibetans at that place who could write well in English either. We studied a lot of ABCD, but it wasn't enough. And if you asked the Indians for help, that would really get complicated! They'd always write things that you didn't want. So, I had a lot of trouble writing to her. Later on I tried, whether it was correct or not, and despite the mistakes, perhaps she understood, perhaps she didn't.

Then, her flood of letters stopped for a couple of months and I wondered what had happened. I think she thought that if she told me that she was going into hospital for an operation, I'd worry; that's why she didn't write. When she got out of hospital she tried to write but her handwriting was no good; she didn't have the energy to form the letters properly. She couldn't even finish the letter she was writing and had some girl help her complete it. That was the last one I got, where she said she'd just been released from hospital.

After that, I had a dream that I was near my house and someone handed me a white letter. The next day, I received a letter exactly like that from her friend, who was the pen friend of another incarnate lama, explaining that she'd died. Then the more than one thousand monks who lived there made pujas for her; also His Holiness's gurus and other high lamas prayed for her to find a better rebirth. Later on I checked how she died, in which direction she'd been facing-someone explained all these things to me. Around that time I'd sent her a gift but I'm not sure she received it. She was cremated and her ashes were scattered outside in her garden. She gave the paintings I had sent her from India-Guru Shakyamuni Buddha and perhaps others-to a local Tibetan center before her death. Anyway, this is just a little story of impermanence.

So, just as this happens to other people, the same thing will happen to us. A couple of years ago, our first Western student, the nun [Zina], was planning to come to Kathmandu and Dharamsala to receive teachings from our gurus; she made many plans to do all these precious things. However, just before it was time for her to come down [from the mountains where she was in retreat], she suddenly got sick and couldn't get up. Three or four days later, completely unexpectedly, she was dead. While she was ill for those few days, she lay down in bed, but just before she died, she sat up, holding her rosary in her

hand. Her daughter was there, looking her in the face and crying, “Please, mother, don’t die.” The day she died her daughter cried a lot, but a couple of days later she was back to normal, playing in the yard. Even though Zina was sick, she had a little time to prepare for death. She was fully expecting to do all the things she planned, but all of a sudden her life finished, before she’d had time to do them. Still, she was very lucky she could die a nun-luckier than people who die in America in their beautiful, expensive apartments surrounded by all their relatives and possessions. She died in a very simple, tiny room, having spent most of the previous year in retreat. Also, she had the constant wish to help other people, especially Westerners, but always worried that she was incapable of doing so. She wasn’t even able to sign the last letter she sent us.

### ***Why should I be afraid of death?***

*Karmapa dü sum kyenpa (Karmapa Realising Past, Present, and Future) said,*

*Why should I be afraid of death? Because when the Lord of Death comes it is difficult for the mind to be happy.*

*I am greatly ignorant in being unafraid of death. This lack of fear results from not understanding the suffering of the death process itself or the suffering of my future lives. After death my ignorant mind will continuously suffer in the cycle of the twelve dependent links. In one month, one day, even in an hour, I create more negative than virtuous karma and have been doing so since beginningless time, in all my previous lives. Unless I break my chain of bondage to the cycle of the twelve dependent links, I shall eventually be reborn in one of the three lower realms.*

*For these reasons I should start practising Dharma as soon as possible, without being lazy.*

### ***Why should I be afraid of death?***

Karmapa dü sum kyenpa was a highly realized lama who lived in Tibet a long time ago [the First Karmapa, 1110–93].

The so-called “Lord of Death” in the quotation is actually created by our own karma – a being who interrupts our life.

### ***Dying without having time to practice Dharma***

When you meditate on this, it’s useful to think as follows:

“If I live to seventy, I spend half my time, the nighttime, sleeping. Most of the remaining daytime is spent in distraction or creating negative karma, the cause of suffering. And even if I have created a little merit, I have destroyed most of it by not dedicating it and generating the negative minds of heresy, anger and so forth. Therefore, it is more definite that when this life ends, I’ll be reborn in the three lower realms.”

Thinking like this is very effective, because the way it works it is factual evolution; it is true. In this way, you know yourself; you recognize your own life.

*Guru Shakyamuni said:*

*It is unsure whether tomorrow or the next life will come first. Therefore [since tomorrow is very indefinite], it is more worthwhile and wise to be prepared for the future life than for tomorrow.*

Think about what Guru Shakyamuni Buddha said. It's very logical. Even after an hour, you're more likely to dead than alive. Why is it more certain that you'll be dead? Since death is definite, it's certain that you will not exist permanently; therefore, death is more certain than continued existence, even at this time. Think like this; it is very, very useful.

If you check up with your own mind, you'll see that it's not only true because Guru Shakyamuni Buddha said so but because it's the factual evolution. It's true. So because death is more definite than continued existence, even at this time, it is therefore more profitable for you to do something that benefits your future lives than to do something for this body alone. You can never be sure when you'll have to leave this body, when you'll no longer have it. Thinking like this is especially useful when you get angry, for example; at such times it's more helpful to think about death than *shunyata*, which is something that you don't really understand. Of course, generally speaking, thinking about emptiness is profound, but when you are experiencing an immediate problem, thinking about death is more profound. When you have to solve a problem, it's quicker and more profound to think about death than about shunyata or various tantric things.

When you're having a mental problem with somebody-extreme greed, attachment to possessions or a person, anger, pride or any other negative mind-in order to stop creating negative karma and make your mind peaceful, to release confusion, try to remember what Guru Shakyamuni Buddha said and think, "Guru Shakyamuni Buddha said that death is more likely than continued existence, so if I'm going to die right now"-and here think from the depths of your mind that you are going to die-"If my breath is going to stop right away, what's the use of being angry? Why be angry, proud or attached?" There's no use whatsoever. You can't take the person to whom you're attached into your future life, to another realm. It's completely useless, nonsensical. All you're doing is creating the cause of suffering. Therefore, think like this. It's very useful. Whenever attachment to other people arises, think, "It's more definite that I'll leave this body than remain in it. There's no guarantee that I won't leave my body right now, that I can remain in it." Think in the depths of your mind that you are about to leave your body.

If you do this properly, all of a sudden, the uncomfortable feeling, the negative mind that you feel coming up strongly, growing strongly-pride, anger, whatever it is-will loosen, subside, or relax. You'll see no purpose in getting angry; you'll discover by yourself that it's meaningless, nonsensical. In this way you won't cause problems for others and your mind will relax; you'll stop creating negative karma and confusion. This is really practical; this is using meditation in the actual critical time. This is real, practical meditation. Meditation is a force to stop problems, not something that you can only practice very quietly somewhere on a mountain. Meditations like these on death are meant to solve problems; if you don't use them for their intended purpose, what's the point? Anyway, there's not much time to go into detail on this, but it's an important point, so I just wanted to introduce it to you.

*Shantideva, in his Bodhicharyavatara, said:*

*It is not right to enjoy samsaric pleasures thinking, "I am not going to die today," putting off the practice of Dharma and not confessing negative karmas.*

This quotation is also very, very useful to remember. First, ask yourself how you could possibly allow yourself to create any more negative karma on top of what you've already created over your beginningless lifetimes. There's no reason at all to make extra donations to this already huge collection. Then second,

there's also no reason to try to relax by postponing your practice of Dharma. Why can't you relax by giving up the practice of Dharma for even a day? Because even this day-and this is how you must think-death is more certain than continued existence.

You have an incredible collection of negative karma in your consciousness, built up since beginningless time. Knowing this, how can you relax? You have an infinite amount of negative karma in your mind, so how can you postpone your practice of Dharma? As long as this cause of suffering remains, suffering is certain to arise. Since death is more definite than continued existence, how can you give up the practice of Dharma? Since you have so much negative karma in your mind, how can you relax, even for a day? Because the cause is there, suffering arises continuously; you have a huge collection of negative karma in your mind; death is more certain than continued existence-so because of all these reasons, how can you relax by giving up Dharma practice? This is a very tasty teaching. It's useful to remember; it means many things. When you feel too lazy to meditate, to practice Dharma, it's very useful to remember these powerful, blessed words.

### ***Do people or material possessions help to ease or prevent death?***

*At the hour of death even universes containing numberless jewels that could bring all wishes cannot prevent death from occurring. Neither people-relatives, friends, or others-nor any amount of personal strength or fame can prevent death. Instead of helping, these things only contribute to greater suffering.*

### ***How do my attachments cause great suffering at death?***

*At the time of death I realise that I am separating from all my possessions and from my loved ones, and tremendously strong attachment and fear arise. My worry is far greater than usual worry, such as that arising from the separation of a couple or from parents. My physical body now creates much suffering and, although I have cared more for it than for any other being's body, it now becomes my enemy.*

*At the hour of death, the king and the beggar are exactly equal in that no amount of relatives or possessions can affect or prevent death. But who is the richer at the time of death? If the beggar has created more merit, then although he looks materially poor he is really the rich man. From the Dharma point of view, the mind that has prepared itself for the journey into the next life has the real riches.*

*If material possessions and relatives and friends are so meaningless and ineffectual at the time of death and cause suffering, becoming enemies, why do I attach so much importance to them and spend so much time caring for them?*

*For countless lives I have been attached to my physical body, providing it with all life's comforts, yet still this care has not ended, and my body continues to cause me problems. Has this care really any end? Wouldn't it be better to spend my life working for something that can be finished?*

As you read the words above, meditate on their meaning. Why is your body described as an enemy? Because as you feel that you are going to separate from it, you get extremely anxious; you don't want to leave it. Instead of helping you solve your problem at that time, strong attachment to your body only causes you to remain longer in samsara, to always be trapped in the circle of the bondage of suffering, rebirth and death.

And the same trouble and worry you have with your body – attachment, fear of leaving it, not wanting



to do so – you have with your possessions and relatives; you feel very upset at having to leave them.

*Padmasambhava said:*

*The vision of this life is like last night's dream. All meaningless actions are like ripples on a lake.*

The dream you had last night was so short; from beginning to end, it was over so quickly. In a dream you might feel as if you've been on a long journey or spent many years doing something, but actually, a dream's just a few minutes in duration. Whatever good things happen in a dream, it's all over so quickly. This is one reason why Padmasambhava likens life to a dream - they both finish so quickly. Life is over so soon it's like a dream.

Another reason is that no matter what you enjoy in a dream, when you awaken, it's all gone. You might dream that you were successful in business; you made billions of dollars and you feel so happy, but when you wake up, not a single dollar remains; you bring nothing out of your dream. Everything you do in a dream is of no use. In exactly the same way, no matter what you do in this life, how much money you make, how many possessions you accumulate, how successful your business, how happy you are, it's all like last night's dream-not a single atom of it can be carried into your next life. Just as what you do in a dream is meaningless, so too are all the things you do for just this life, everything you receive through great effort.

“All meaningless actions are like ripples on the lake.” Ripples on a lake-one comes, one goes, another comes, another goes; it's always like that. Things done for only this life are like that; such actions are endless. No matter how much you work, it can never finish. This quotation from the great yogi Padmasambhava is also very powerful.

*By caring only for my physical body I am like a person who will die tomorrow anyway, but goes to the hospital today for much expensive treatment. Any temporal happiness is meaningless and only results in suffering, never helping to end the cycle of death and rebirth. At the time of death numberless relatives, every possession-even numberless universes full of numberless jewels-and my body, which I have cared for more than any other, must all be left. All are of as little use as a single hair, for at death neither can be taken with the mind: in effect, there is no difference between all the world's possessions and one tiny hair.*

This also very helpful to think about when you are meditating on death; very useful. If you reflect on the fact that you are more certain to die now than to keep on living and that neither your body nor any of your possessions can be carried with you, that at the time of death these things are useless as a single hair, they can't help you at all, you will see how meaningless, how trivial they really are. When you see that all your possessions and a single body hair are equal in value, you will come to see your possessions - which you think are so terribly important, for whose sake you endanger your life, which you would die trying to protect - as no longer important.

*As I am not sure to exist even from second to second, why should I be attached to my body or any possession, even at this moment?*

When you practice this meditation regularly, when certain problems arise in relation to your body - perhaps you are fighting or doing something else to take care of it - you'll think, “It's more definite that I'll leave this body than remain in it, so why should I be attached to it? How can I be sure that I'm

definitely going to exist?” In this way you’ll discover that what you’re doing-creating confusion and problems for others-is nonsensical.

When meditating on the above topics, see which parts are more powerful for you, more effective for your mind, and focus on those, but in general, it’s good to remember all of them. If you find certain parts more difficult, focus on the parts that are more effective for you and then amplify them according to your own wisdom and experience in order to see things more clearly.

*Question:* If we have a friend or relative who’s dying, what should we do with the body and how long should we leave it?

*Rinpoche:* Generally it should be kept two or three days. Tibetans often check astrologically if the body should be taken out of the house in the morning or the afternoon. The astrologer checks the state of the person’s mind at the time, what attachments there are, the external cooperative cause of death, what kinds of spirits might have cut off the person’s life and what time the body should be removed. All these things can be determined astrologically.

However, unless the person has a little control and is able to listen, it’s extremely difficult to talk to a dying person. Otherwise, there are many methods of helping. A lot of it depends upon whether the person knows something about Dharma or not; has faith in the enlightened being or not. If the person has no idea of Dharma, the enlightened being, no faith, it’s difficult to say anything useful, especially at the time of death. If it’s difficult to communicate these things during life, it’s even more difficult at the time of death, when the mind is even more uncontrolled.

Nevertheless, generally it’s good if, as the person stops breathing, you can recite some prayers or mantras very loudly. For example, you can recite the Avalokiteshvara or Guru Shakyamuni Buddha mantras or the prayer, “Lama t nba chom den de...” It’s difficult for a dying person to hear, so first blow in the person’s ear or call the person’s name and then recite the mantra very loudly. Before the person stops breathing - and the details of this come in discussion of the actual death process below - the twenty-five gross objects dissolve. After that, the gross mind absorbs and it’s almost impossible to communicate with the dying person from outside. So before that happens, it’s good to say the person’s guru’s name loudly or these other things like prayers and mantras. This is one thing you can do.

Another thing is that during the process of the dissolutions, visions and so forth, the person has a lot of fear and suffering, and unless he or she is a little fortunate, having created much merit during his or her lifetime, it’s difficult for the dying person to hear any of the words. If the person has created much merit and is able to hear at least a little, it’s a great help in reducing the terrible suffering that the person is experiencing.

Also, if the dying person has created much good karma during his [or her] lifetime, has really taken care to observe karma and done much purification, if someone reminds him of his guru’s name, even if his mind is uncontrolled, because of the purification made and the friend’s help, this fortunate person can remember to pray to his guru or manifestation of the Buddha. Because the dying person is in shock and very afraid, normally he can’t remember to do anything, but if someone says, “Do this,” he can remember, and his suffering becomes less.



Thus, by remembering their guru or other manifestations of the Buddha and praying accordingly, those who have created more merit, who are a little more fortunate, who have a little control, can protect themselves from being reborn in the lower suffering realms.

Even when something fearful happens in dreams, you don't remember to take refuge, to pray, to rely on the enlightened being, the perfect guide, so you can see how difficult it will be for you to remember at the time of death.

When people died in Tibet, what others who knew a little bit of Dharma would try to do was to recite some mantras to the best of their ability. If the dying person is surrounded by people who don't know anything and just stand around weeping, creating an environment of upset, his suffering is only made worse and it's difficult to help that person. Even little things, like reciting mantras loudly, reminding the person of his guru's name, telling him to pray and so forth, can help...as much as the dying person's fortune allows.

Reading things [like the *Bardo Th drol*, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*] after the person has died, can be difficult. If the person couldn't understand such texts in life, how can he while he's dying? Of course, it has some power because it's the teaching of the enlightened being, but the degree to which it can help depends mainly on the fortune of the dying person.

Sometimes in Tibet they would also put blessed nectar pills into the dying person's mouth. Anyway, the most practical thing you can do is to recite mantras and blow. Just hearing the holy name of an enlightened being can help a lot.

Another thing that can help is to offer the dead person's possessions to holy beings, asking them to pray, or using the person's possessions for virtuous work and dedicating the merit to the person's welfare. Even if the person has been reborn in the hell or preta realms, this can definitely help. Since holy beings' minds have power, their praying can also be very effective.

Something else that was done in Tibet when somebody died was to get a lama from the monastery to transfer the person's consciousness, but again, the effectiveness of this depends on how much good karma the dead person has created. But doing pujas sponsored by the sale of the dead person's possessions can definitely help.

What you can do yourself is, instead of crying, meditate; do purification with Guru Shakyamuni Buddha, purifying all sentient beings, including the dead person, as we did earlier in this course [for the recently deceased father of one of the students]. This is very good; this is real, practical puja.

A year or two ago, a monk from the monastery below the Lawudo Gompa [Thamo Gompa] passed away. The head lama of the monastery had instructed this monk to stay in retreat and never come out; I think he was retreating on Avalokiteshvara, reciting mantras and so forth. He was a very fortunate person. Before he died he was a little sick, but just before his death, he recovered. Then he didn't want to stay in his room; he wanted to go out. The abbot of that monastery was a very quiet, simple and good monk who took good care of his morality, and this monk asked the abbot to read him the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* just before he died. Asking to have it read *before* death is very wise, as is asking for any other method, because if you can become familiar with these things beforehand, there is a chance that

you'll be able to try them at the actual time of death. The reason the monk asked for it to be read before death was that during the evolution of death, it's extremely difficult to remember the text, and if you don't have enough control yourself, you have to depend on somebody else's reading it to you. So, he asked for it before he died, and he died very peacefully; he had a good death.

There was also a nun at that monastery who died well. Most people had no idea that she would die that well, but at death time she had no sickness or any other problem. She just lay down very peacefully on her right side in the position that Guru Shakyamuni Buddha adopted when he passed into *parinirvana* and asked her nun helper to remind her of her gurus as she died. Then she spent several days of her death process in meditation. She had a very peaceful death. I knew what had happened because some of the other nuns came up and asked me to pray for her and I asked for details of how she led her daily life. It seems she always made much purification, never missed saying her daily prayers and took many *lam-rim* teachings. She did not study much philosophy, she was not a learned scholar, but she simply led a very good daily life.

There are also many other people who died good deaths like this in both India and Tibet, even in modern times. The head lama of that monastery [which is in Nepal] was another of these. He was an ascetic lama, which means he had renounced this life and was living in the pure practice of Dharma. He always wore very old, simple clothes; he himself was very old. I don't know much about him because I met him only later in his life. He had heard that we were building a monastery up the mountain, but we didn't get a chance to go see him at that time. Apparently he would get very sick and vomit pots of blood but on hearing some good Dharma news would get better. Then he'd get sick again, vomiting blood, and so on. So, he invited us [Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche] to come down to see him, and we went.

At first I thought he was a nun. He looked very simple, sitting there with a piece of cloth covering his head. But the vibrations were very good. He was very pleased to hear that we were building the [Lawudo] monastery as a Dharma teaching center, and his advice to me was not to build it small. He said, "Don't have a small mind; don't just worry about expenses and build it small. Have a big, strong mind and make the monastery as big as possible. This will be very beneficial for the teachings." Then he gave me some books-lam-rim and tantric teachings-to take to America; he already had them ready to give. He said, "Either you or someone else who goes to America should take them. It doesn't matter where, the main thing is that they get there." He made observations, prayed over the texts and gave them to us. Then he said he has only a year to live, and some other things, as well.

I asked him to pray for the success of the monastery we were building and he said, "If the mind is noble, everything will be successful." By "noble" he meant pure, like with bodhicitta motivation. This might have been a reference to what Lama Tsong Khapa said: "If the mind is pure, noble, everything, even the place, becomes noble. If the mind is evil, everything, even enjoyments, becomes evil." This teaching of Lama Tsong Khapa is really true.

Anyway, a year later, as he'd predicted, he passed away. Before that, he gave his final advice to all the monks as to what they should do, like collecting together all the money offered by people and using it to do pujas on special days; things like that.

During his time in Tibet, this lama took care of all the monks. When people offered him money to do

prayers and pujas, he would spend it all on his monks; he was the kind of person who always spent whatever he got, saying it was better not to keep it otherwise it would become the cause of fighting and problems.

At the time of his death, he was very well. During his last night, he talked together with everybody and when dawn came, he asked for tea, good tea, closed his door, sent everybody out and passed away sitting up in the meditation posture. He reincarnated in that area and his *tulku* has been recognizing by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and many other high lamas.

Earlier, this lama was the manager of a beautiful monastery in Tibet that was founded by an emanation of Tara, a female aspect of the Buddha. It was way up high on a huge rocky mountain; if you stood at the foot of the mountain you could see a path leading to the monastery on the point of a rocky outcrop. His job was to bring things in from the outside, pay the bills, keep the accounts and make offerings and so forth. Despite working very hard, somehow he failed in his job as manager, got very upset, and left to take teachings from his gurus elsewhere. Then he went into retreat for many years. Slowly, slowly, as his realizations developed, people began to recognize him as a lama. At first he was a very simple, ordinary monk, but gradually his name became well known. Later on, he built two monasteries, one for monks, the other for nuns. When the Chinese occupied Tibet, he fled to Nepal and settled in Thamo, just below Lawudo. At first he lived in a tent, but then a benefactor offered him some land and within six days he'd built a monastery. Because it was built so quickly, it was pretty rough; the walls had no shape. But it had a very good feeling; very relaxed, very quiet.

However, there are many methods you can employ at death. The wisest, most clever thing to do is to, before death, make yourself capable of protecting yourself from the dangers that arise at the time of death. When you die, be your own guide, become capable of helping yourself, like that lama, like that nun; guide yourself without having to depend on others. Be your own guide; protect yourself from suffering at the time of death. This is the cleverest thing to do, the best thing to do. Train yourself in the right meditations during your lifetime; make yourself ready, capable. If you are born to carry heavy things but your body is weak, you have to rely on porters to carry them for you, but if your body is strong, you can carry the things without having to rely on and pay other people. So, just like this, make yourself capable of guiding yourself at the time of death.

The main thing is to meditate continuously on the graduated path to enlightenment; that's very helpful. Also continuously purify your previously created negative karma and avoid creating more, especially with holy objects. Then, on the basis of observing karma, there are many tantric techniques, special methods, very practical techniques in which you can train yourself before death in order to be able to transfer your consciousness by yourself, to be reborn in a pure land through your own guidance, your own Dharma practice.

However, although many such special, powerful techniques exist, if you don't have any idea or experience of the fundamental meditations, those techniques don't become that practical. Such practices have to be done with a deep understanding of the sufferings of samsara and strong bodhicitta motivation; great love and compassion. Those techniques are not easy; they have to be done on the basis of the fundamental meditations, which are very, very important.

There are several special, practical methods of transferring your consciousness at the time of death,

where many gods and goddesses from the pure lands greet you like a king, with prostrations, sweet music, incense and many other offerings. You can be reborn into a pure land like this, but again, to make such practices work, for them to be useful, beneficial, at the time, you have to have a strong understanding of the fundamentals, especially impermanence and death, the nature of suffering and, of course, bodhicitta as well; you need to have understood and practiced the graduated path to enlightenment.

In short, only pure Dharma practice can make the higher techniques practical, bring quick rebirth in a pure land. Without the fundamentals, you'll never make it, just as a car without wheels can't move even a few inches.

One illustration of how important it is to practice the graduated path to enlightenment, how much it helps, especially the pure practice of renouncing this life, is the well known story from Tibet about the old monk who was having trouble transferring his consciousness at the time of death. During his life, he practiced the methods for transferring the consciousness to the pure land at the time of death, but as he was dying, he found that the techniques weren't working. The reason was that he didn't have a deep enough understanding of impermanence - he hadn't thought enough about impermanence and death or lived in pure Dharma practice, detachment from the eight worldly dharmas-and couldn't leave, renounce, the butter tea in the wooden bowl on his table. Even though he tried to practice the technique for transferring his consciousness, he couldn't because he was attached to the butter tea.

However, the guru from whom he'd learned these techniques was able to see through his psychic power that the old monk was having trouble transferring his consciousness to the pure land of Tushita, the pure land of the Buddha Maitreya and Lama Tsongkhapa. So the guru sent the monk a message, "There's better butter tea in Tushita," and as soon as he got the message he was able to transfer his consciousness.

This is an important point and why I emphasize the necessity of *pure* Dharma practice so often. Attachment to material things is one of the eight worldly dharmas, and at that moment, the monk could not cut his attachment, renounce the butter tea. This shows how making advanced techniques practical, beneficial at the crucial time, totally depends on the fundamentals.

However, if you don't train your mind continuously during your lifetime and then suddenly try to practice something at the time of death, it's not going to work. The cleverest, most skillful thing is to train principally in the fundamentals; practice meditation in order to lose the negative mind. This is the most important thing. If you train properly during your lifetime, when the time comes to put the techniques into practice, it will be easy and they will work.

Here's another example of what not to do. There was a family man who believed for a long time that he was ready to go to the pure land of Padmasambhava. He even announced this to his family: "You people are so pitiful. I'm ready way ahead of time!" At the time of his death, the people around him were crying and upset-not for him but for themselves, because they believed, "He has no worries, he can go to the pure land, but we're terrible, we're not ready; we can't go." But then the man said, "Now I think I'd rather pray to stay here and enjoy myself with you rather than go to the pure land." Because he had not lived in the pure practice of Dharma, when the time came, he was unable to renounce.

The people I mentioned who had peaceful deaths were able to die in that way through the power of the enlightened being's Dharma. Otherwise, whether you're on the moon, underneath the earth, anywhere in the solar system, afraid of death, no matter where you are, nothing else can help. Therefore, before the danger comes, meditate on the graduated path to enlightenment; make this meditation the foundation of your life's work and adorn it with the practice of the higher teachings. This is what's necessary to do.

What we ordinary human beings usually try to do is to copy those who are very wealthy or attractive. If someone has excellent possessions, we want the same; if they have beautiful clothes, we want to wear what they wear; if they wear their hair a certain way, we want to do the same. There's so much confusion in our mind; we keep ourselves busy trying to imitate the rich and good looking. But none of this helps; all it does is create more confusion, especially at that most dangerous time of life, death.

There are so many good examples-holy beings and yogis. Why don't we try to copy them? We're also human; we're all scared of death. So it's necessary, wise and skillful to try to find a method to help at that time. What's the method? It's keeping the practice of the graduated path to enlightenment as our life's fundamental work, our daily work, and on top of that, practicing the higher tantric techniques as well. We can study; we can learn; we can practice. And many of these things are not only for monks, nuns and lamas; even lay people can practice and achieve these higher methods.

Many ordinary laypeople in Tibet were able to enjoy a peaceful death; many found themselves in a pure land in their next life. Also in India, I remember how the mother of one of our benefactors died. She was a very simple person but recited the mantra of her special deity all the time and had a very noble personality. She also spent much time circumambulating the monastery where more than a thousand monks lived. One day she came downstairs as usual, no problem, thanked her sons for helping her, and said goodbye. She sat on a chair, asked for some cold water, and before it could be brought to her, left; very peacefully, she left home.

In Tibet, too, many people passed away in meditation. One lady, knowing she was going to die, cleaned and tidied her room, set out many offerings, did puja, asked the other people to leave, closed her door, and passed away in meditation to the pure realm. But this is not something that's restricted to Tibetans; others can also die like this, too. It's most worthwhile.

### *A brief explanation of death as shown by a fully understanding mind*

At the time of death, the elements are absorbed one after the other and the many changes appear gradually as feelings and visions. The final death comes when the subtle mind splits from the body, and this also is accompanied by physical signs.

At death, the person who has created much non-meritorious karma suffers from seeing evil omens that are the result of his past evil action. A very frightening physical situation occurs because of fearsome visions coming at that time. Dying with an indifferent mind, neither meritorious nor non-meritorious, one experiences neither pleasure nor suffering.

When the creator of evil dies the heat leaves the body starting from the head. When the creator of merit dies the heat first leaves from the feet. In each case the final loss of heat is from the heart.

At the time of death the mind is separating from the body, and the evil creator has the vision of going from light into dark.

Here follows an explanation of the process of a natural death, i.e., a death which is not sudden or traumatic:

1.

a. *The skandha of form is absorbed.*

External sign: the physical body becomes thinner and loses power.

b. *The great mirror wisdom is absorbed.* This wisdom clearly sees many objects at the same time, as a mirror reflects many objects together.

c. *The earth element is absorbed.*

External sign: the physical body becomes very thin, the hands and legs are very loose, and we feel very uncontrolled and as if being buried under a great weight of earth.

d. *The eye organ is absorbed.*

External sign: it is impossible to control or move the eyes.

e. *The inner subtle form is absorbed.*

- i. External sign: the colour of the physical body fades and the body loses its strength completely.
- ii. The inner sign is a trembling silver-blue mirage, like water in the heat.

2.

a. *The skandha of feeling is absorbed.*

External sign: the physical body doesn't experience pain, pleasure or indifference.

b. *The wisdom of equality is absorbed.* This wisdom sees all feelings of happiness, suffering and indifference together, as having the same nature.

External sign: we no longer remember these feelings, i.e., the feelings perceived with the sense of mind as distinct from those perceived by the physical body.

c. *The water element is absorbed.*

External sign: all liquids of the body-urine, blood, saliva, sperm, sweat, etc.-dry up.

d. *The ear organ is absorbed.*

External sign: hearing ceases.

e. *The inner sound is absorbed.*

- i. External sign: the buzzing in the ears ceases.
- ii. The inner sign is a vision of smoke.

3.

a. *The skandha of cognition (perception) is absorbed.*

External sign: there is no longer any recognition of our relatives and friends.

b. *The wisdom of discriminating awareness is absorbed.*

This is the wisdom that discriminates and remembers who our relatives and friends are.

External sign: not remembering their names.



c. *The fire element is absorbed.*

External sign: the heat of the physical body disappears, and the capacity to digest food ceases.

d. *The nose organ is absorbed.*

External sign: breathing-in becomes difficult and weaker, and breathing-out becomes stronger and longer.

e. *The inner sense of smell is absorbed.*

- i. External sign: the nose no longer detects smells.
- ii. The inner sign is a vision of sparks of fire, trembling like starlight.

4.

a. *The skandha of volitional formations (compounded phenomena) is absorbed.*

External sign: the physical body can no longer move.

b. *The all-accomplishing wisdom is absorbed.* This is the wisdom of attainment, remembering outer work and success and their necessity.

External sign: losing the idea of the necessity and purpose of outer work.

c. *The air element is absorbed.*

External sign: breathing ceases.

d.

i. *The taste organ is absorbed.*

External sign: the tongue contracts and thickens and its root turns blue.

ii. *The tactile organ is absorbed.*

External sign: neither soft nor rough sensations can be perceived.

e. *The inner taste sense is absorbed.*

- i. External sign: we can no longer detect the six different tastes.
- ii. The inner sign is a vision of a dim red-blue light, like the last flickering of a candle.

5.

*Finally, the skandha of consciousness is absorbed.*

This is the eighty gross superstitions and their foundations, motion (Skt., *prana*; Tib., *lung*). “Superstitions” means the gross illusive mind, the dualistic, wrong-conception mind. At this point we have the following visions:

a. *White vision*

A vision of a very clear sky, like that in autumn, full of the brightness of the moon.

It is caused by the prana going up through the left and right *nadis*, opening up the head chakra, and coming down through the central nadi. It occurs when, as the central nadi opens, the white sperm or seed, received from the father, comes down to the heart chakra, visualised in the form of the letter HAM upside down. This is called “vision and emptiness.”

b. *Red vision*

A vision of a copper-red reflection in the sky.

It is caused by the prana going up the central nadi to the heart, opening up the navel and fifth chakras. It occurs when the red blood—the nature of which is fire-heat received from the mother, comes up to the heart chakra, visualised in the form of the letter AH upside down.



c. *Dark vision*

A vision of empty darkness, like a dark and empty space.

At this point the sperm and the blood are absorbed into a tiny seed: the bottom half is red, the top, white. It occurs when these two come to the heart. After this vision we fall unconscious - into complete darkness. Then the subtle mind arises and momentarily all gross superstitions absorb. Then appears the...

d. *Clear light vision*

This is a vision of complete emptiness, very clear, like the sky of an autumn dawn. This is the clear light, the vision of the final death. At this time, the time of the actual death, the gross mind, that which is holding the gross objects, ceases, but only momentarily. Due to karma, the seed of it is always there. The subtle mind having this vision is enclosed within the seed formed by the united white and red hemispheres. The seed then opens and the subtle mind goes out, leaving the body to take the intermediate form. Then, the white sperm goes down and comes out of the sex organ, while the blood leaves from the nostril. This is the final sign-the consciousness, or spirit, (*nam-she*), has left the body. Now the mind has completely separated from the body. It is possible that ordinary people stay in this stage for some time, but don't then recognise it. Highly realised yogis can stay in this stage, meditating in the void for months, and are able to recognise all the visions of the death evolution.

I don't need to talk much about the changes occurring throughout the evolution of death; they're summarized above. As you study this topic more, your understanding will increase. There's not time to go through it now.

As you can see, different visions come and go: mirage, smoke, sparks, flame. Then the white vision, like an autumn moon rising or snow on the ground; then red; then dark, like the complete darkness of a dark room, like you are suddenly falling into darkness. These visions occur as the white seed descends, the red seed goes up and so forth.

After the dark vision comes the clear light vision, emptiness. But this is not shunyata; not that emptiness. If it were, it would be an effortless realization, achieved without meditation. It is not shunyata but an emptiness like that of the sky at dawn, devoid of the white, red and dark visions.

All I'm trying to do here is to briefly introduce you to these ideas; generally it's not permitted to give the details of these methods openly. However, at this point in the death process, the yogis - the meditators who have spent their lifetime in meditation and followed, or practiced, Vajrayana, tantric methods, who have observed karma well and kept their precepts purely - use the methods they have been practicing all their life. This is the moment they have been waiting for. Then they can remain in meditation [in the clear light] for seven days, twenty days-the duration varies; it depends upon the meditator. During that time, there is no smell of decay; they smell the same as when they were alive. Also, they look very magnificent, totally different from an ordinary person dying. Ordinary people, those who didn't practice Dharma during their life, who didn't observe karma well, who created many negative karmas, appear very afraid when they die. Their eyes get wide, they cry because they have many fearful visions, they thrash their limbs about, move their hands as if they're trying to grab hold of something, become incontinent of urine and feces-many awful things happen like this.

Some lamas have also passed away in meditation since coming to India. Ordinary Indian people never believed that such things as passing away while sitting in meditation were possible because they never

heard about it or saw it happen. Their usual conception was that the moment a person died, he or she should be taken out and burnt, otherwise the body would start to smell. Many Tibetan monks in India had to go to hospital and if they died there, it would be difficult to get permission to leave them alone for a while because the doctors would never listen. They would want the body taken out immediately. Their conception was that as soon as the breathing stops, the person's dead; that's the last step in the death process. So Indians who saw high lamas in meditation after death were very surprised. Far from there being a bad smell in the room, there was a fantastic sweet smell due to the power of their realizations.

These visions, including the clear light vision, also occur between sleeping and dreaming and dreaming and awakening, but they pass very quickly. The great meditators, those who practice tantra, first practice here. Once they can control their dreams, they know for sure that they'll be able to employ the profound methods during their actual death. Thus, you can see from your own inability to do this during sleep how impossible it will be for you to be conscious enough to practice these methods during death, to be conscious enough to recognize the visions as they evolve during the death process.

All these visions down to the clear light vision are ordinary occurrences that all beings experience, unless their death is sudden, as in an accident, murder and so forth, where death comes instantly; even ordinary people experience the gradual absorption of the eighty gross superstitions after the breathing stops, before the white, red and dark visions occur. The dark vision occurs when the very subtle mind is enclosed in the seed at the heart. This seed, like a tiny bean, is composed of joined two hemispheres, like a couple of lids put together. The moment of death comes when this seed opens and the very subtle mind leaves the body. The sign that this has happened is that a trickle of red blood comes out the person's nose and a white fluid exudes from the sex organ. It usually takes up to three days for all this to happen, although with certain diseases, these fluids don't come out. But when the great meditators have completed their meditation, the red and white fluids come out.

### **The intermediate state (*bardo*)**

Until the cognition becomes unclear and powerless, the mind retains its habitual attachment to the "I." Because of this attachment, as the cognition weakens the wrong conception arises that "I" am becoming non-existent, causing fear of losing the "I." These thoughts create attachment to and craving for the body, which in turn leads to birth in the intermediate state.

After the clear light vision, before actually entering the bardo, we experience the other three visions and the formation of the skandhas in the reverse order.

The evolution from death to the intermediate state is like passing from sleep to a dream. The eighty gross superstitions of the mind arise and the being takes the intermediate body. (During this time we can see the world, relatives and past dead body, but karmically do not remember any of it, so there is no desire to get back into it.)

The bardo body is formed by previous karma and delusion. The principal cause of the intermediate state mind is the subtle mind and its co-operative cause is the prana, which comes with the subtle mind. The principal cause of the intermediate state body is the prana, and its co-operative cause is the subtle mind.

The form of the bardo body is that of the next rebirth. Karmically it has no resistance to matter, is

indestructible, and the being has many psychic powers, such as the ability to fly or do anything else it thinks of.

The length of existence in the bardo body is seven days, after which time that intermediate being dies, taking rebirth in the same realm for a further seven days until death occurs or a physical body is found. The longest bardo existence is forty-nine days.

To be born in the formless world, we do not pass through the bardo.

The consciousness leaves the physical body according to the being's karmically-determined realm of rebirth:

Hell: from the anus.

Preta: from the mouth.

Animal: from the sex organ.

Human: from the eyes.

Gods of the senses: from the navel.

Evil spirits and demons: from the nose.

Spirits enjoying one particular sense: from the ears.

World of form: from the forehead chakra.

Formless world: from the highest head chakra.

Pure land: from the highest head chakra.

Then the being enters the intermediate stage. The consciousness leaves the body as shown just above, according to where the person is to be reborn, like through the crown of the head, the anus and so forth.

The heat leaves the body in two different ways, either from the head down to the heart if the person has been cultivating non-virtue and from the feet up to the heart if the person has created much merit. Also, different people have different visions as they enter the intermediate state according to the future rebirth they will take.

The principal cause of the intermediate state being's mind is the person's very subtle mind, which also serves as the cooperative cause of the intermediate state being's body. The principal cause of the intermediate state being's body is the wind that supports the very subtle mind; this wind also serves as the cooperative cause of the intermediate state being's mind.

As the person enters the intermediate state, the visions that occurred during the death process re-occur but in the reverse order: dark, red and white. Then the eighty superstitions arise.

The intermediate state body is indestructible, like a vajra; like diamond. It has no resistance; nothing can resist it. It also has certain karmically derived psychic powers. It can instantly arrive wherever it thinks of being. But it also undergoes much suffering, for example, feeling as if it's buried under ground and being pressed down by huge mountains. It also has illusory visions, but not realizing that these are projected by its own mind, it gets very frightened. It feels as if it's being blown about uncontrollably from place to place by a strong red wind or a fierce storm, or caught in a noisy fire, or drowning in an ocean with huge, wrathful waves. It might see karmically created *yamas* - monsters with

terrifying bodies and fearful heads like those of animals: lions, sheep, scorpions and so forth - chasing it, shouting, trying to beat and destroy it. It has many frightening experiences like this. There is no time to relax in the intermediate state; there is much fear and suffering.

If the intermediate state being could recognize its previous life's body it would be able to re-enter it, but it can't. Once the consciousness leaves, it completely forgets. The life of each intermediate state body is seven days. Sometimes it will find rebirth before the first seven days are up, in which case it dies and goes through the evolutionary death process again, very quickly, and finds itself in its next life's body. If this doesn't happen after seven days, the intermediate state body dies and it takes another similar one. This process can happen up to a maximum of seven times, forty-nine days. The intermediate state cannot last longer than that. Therefore, Tibetans do pujas for the deceased every seven days after death for seven weeks, the last one being on the forty-ninth day.

Describing the death process another way, we can say that when we die, it's like we've fallen asleep; dreaming is like being in the intermediate state; and waking from a dream is like being reborn in the lower realms, all of a sudden waking from a dream to find ourselves born in an incredibly terrifying place. The whole ground is red-hot burning iron and on that foundation many different things, like burning houses without doors or windows, just solid walls made of red-hot iron, in which we suffer without escape; or red-hot double houses [where the only escape from one is into the other].

Such houses have not been built for us by anybody - they're all karmic creations; created by our own karma; we have to suffer in them for eons. Even if we manage to escape from one house due to one particular karma's having finished, we automatically find ourselves in another karmically created red-hot iron house.

Also, in the hell realms, the karmically created bodies of the suffering sentient beings are huge, as if they've been specially made for suffering. The bodies are big and the skin is extremely thin, not like the thick skin on our heels, for example. It's like the new skin that first grows to cover a wound; it's paper-thin. And besides all that, no matter how long we suffer, we don't die easily. In the human realm it's easy to die-from an injection, the prick of a thorn, from many small things. In the hell realms it's not like that. No matter how great or long the suffering, because it's karmically created, the sentient beings there don't die.

I heard that once, somewhere in the West, a man was put in a coffin and taken to the cemetery, but before they could bury him they heard noises coming from inside the coffin. When they opened it they found he was alive. They checked but they couldn't determine exactly how it had happened. He'd been certified dead-his breathing had stopped and so forth - but he was still alive.

*Question:* Is the whole evolution of the bardo karmically determined?

*Rinpoche:* Yes, as I explained.

*Question:* What happens to the person who dies quickly, like in car accident, and does not have time to go through the normal process?

*Rinpoche:* Then consciousness leaves right away. It depends on the individual case, like how badly the

person was injured and so forth. It's possible for the consciousness to leave right away.

*Question:* Is there more suffering for the person if the consciousness has to leave quickly?

*Rinpoche:* You can't be sure, but it's almost certain that the person will be reborn in the suffering realms. But it depends on the individual. If the person who dies has control, it's almost impossible for that person to be reborn in the lower realms, even if it's a sudden death.

*Question:* What is the best way to sleep if you want to train your mind?

*Rinpoche:* There are many things you can do when you go to bed. One thing is to go through the evolution of the death process. Then, when you get to the clear light vision, meditate as you do when practicing the Guru Shakyamuni Buddha meditation: the clear light vision, Guru Shakyamuni Buddha's holy mind and your mind, all three are one. Try to fall asleep with this concentration. Practicing this also prepares your mind for practicing higher tantric methods later on. It's also good because it reminds you of death. And of course, it allows you to train your mind so that when you're in the actual evolution of death you'll be familiar with the process. If you do this practice well enough, you might even be able to meditate in your dreams with continuous concentration.

When you lie down to sleep, lie on your right side, like Guru Shakyamuni Buddha did when he passed into *parinirvana*. Your right hand cradles your head and your ring finger occludes your right nostril. Your left arm rests along your left side and your legs are fully extended. Sleeping in this way has many benefits. Think, "When Guru Shakyamuni Buddha passed away like this he was showing the nature of impermanence and suffering. By remembering this I will follow his teachings." Occluding your right nostril stops the wind on which the delusion of attachment rides.

It's also good if you can visualize yourself in the form of Guru Shakyamuni Buddha. First sit in meditation, visualizing him in front of you, purifying you; then he absorbs into you and you become oneness in the form; then you lie down. Then go through the evolution of the death process and so forth as above. When you wake up, remember the meditation you did when you went to bed, your mind oneness with Guru Shakyamuni Buddha's holy mind and yourself in the form of Guru Shakyamuni Buddha, and then you get up. This very useful and again is a good preparation for your later practice of higher tantric methods.

### ***Conclusion***

So many hospitals and chemical methods are provided to prevent death, yet patients and doctors still die without control. But, since the scientific idea is of lifelessness after death, is it not better to choose death, rather than this complicated life with its many difficulties, much work in trying to solve life's problems and its worries about death—a life without satisfaction or answers to these problems? According to this view, these problems do not exist after death, and such beliefs render the development of external methods meaningless.

Ideas limited by technical knowledge limit the power of the mind to understanding the factual, true nature of the mind's evolution. If scientific minds are really scientific—fully understanding and completely believable—then why are scientists unable to explain clearly and logically the reasons for the Earth's evolution?

Why should there be living things on the Earth? What caused the degeneration of the mind?

With their great knowledge of physics, medicine and psychology, scientists look at all phenomena in terms of their outer material aspects rather than their inner nature. With this limited knowledge they can see no way for the development of inner perfect happiness without being materialistic or greedy. Greed replaced knowledge, and this limited knowledge is the quality or function of ignorance.

Are there any scientists or psychologists who can prove their “scientific” ideas about death? Can they see the evolution of the mind or fully see every existence? Research these questions-meditational practices are the best research: the best, quickest and most logical method of gaining full knowledge of science on every level.

Without the experience to prove their scientific understanding of death and life’s beginnings, how can they prove that there are no future or past lives? This scientific knowledge is exactly like the small mind that sees only today, forgetting yesterday, and not perceiving tomorrow.

I can’t criticise without having knowledge of science, but anyway, this matter is true for the true mind and wrong for the wrong mind.

*Colophon:*

Lama Zopa Rinpoche gave this auto-commentary on the Impermanence and Death section of *The Wish-Fulfilling Golden Sun* at the Sixth Kopan Course in April 1974. The indented sections in 11-point type are from the root text; the sections in italics are topics for analytical meditation in the first person. The rest is Rinpoche’s commentary, edited from the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive for the FPMT’s Discovering BUDDHISM *at Home* program by Nicholas Ribush.



# Death and the Way

*Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey*

*The tradition of death meditation taught here originated with Buddha Shakyamuni and was practiced by such renowned meditators as the bodhisattva Shantideva, the early Kadampa geshe, Milarepa's disciple Gampopa, the incomparable yogi Lama Je Tsongkhapa, the Dalai Lamas and many other renowned masters. Eventually it came down to Pabongkha Rinpoche, one of the greatest teachers alive at the turn of this [20<sup>th</sup>] century. Pabongkha gave it to Kyabje Trijang Dorje Chang, the Junior Tutor of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It was from this perfect guru, Kyabje Trijang Dorje Chang, that I heard it.*

I myself trained under some twenty gurus, each of whom was without a doubt a fully enlightened buddha. However, from the viewpoint of my personal karmic disposition, the kindest of them all was Kyabje Trijang Dorje Chang. The excellence of this master cannot be described. The manner in which he teaches and the subtle skills he adopts to generate a true experience of Dharma in the disciple are so profound that it is almost impossible for even the dullest of listeners to remain unaffected. It is indeed sad that this fully realized being now assumes the form of an old man who can so rarely teach [Kyabje Rinpoche passed away in 1981]. Merely sitting in his presence gives one control over one's mind. Besides caring for his disciples spiritually, he also does so physically. Many times during the course of my training I was without food day after day, my clothes but tattered rags; it was Kyabje Trijang Dorje Chang who saved me.



There are many people who study and talk about Dharma, but never really practice it. Their Dharma is only words. This is because they have not spent sufficient time meditating on death.

## *The disadvantages of not meditating on death*

The disadvantages of not meditating on death are numberless but can be summarized under the following six headings:

1. *If you do not meditate on death you will not be mindful of your Dharma practice.* All of your time will be lost in mundane pursuits. One of the early Kadampa geshe said, "If you do not meditate on death upon waking in the morning, your entire morning will be wasted; if you do not meditate on death at noon, your entire afternoon will be wasted; and if you do not meditate on death in the evening, your entire night will be wasted." In this way most people waste their entire life.

2. *Although you may practice some Dharma your main practice will be procrastination.* Many Tibetans told their



gurus that they would soon do retreat but, having meditated insufficiently on death, put it off year after year and died before managing to do so.

3. *Your practice will become impure.* It will become mixed with worldly ambitions, such as the eight worldly dharmas. Many practitioners fix their eyes more on becoming scholars or celebrities than on attaining spiritual realization. Jowo-je (Atisha) was once asked, “If someone wishes for the happiness of this life alone, what shall he gain?” Jowoje answered, “Just what he wishes for!” “And what shall he gain in future lives?” the disciple asked. “Rebirth in the hell, hungry ghost or animal realms,” was the reply. It is said that in order to practice perfectly, this life must be abandoned. What does that mean? Not that you must abandon your present lifestyle, home, possessions or position, but that you must give up the eight worldly dharmas: wishing to experience wealth, fame, praise or happiness and to avoid poverty, notoriety, slander or discomfort. To differentiate between a true spiritual practitioner and a non-practitioner is simple. A practitioner is one who has abandoned the eight worldly dharmas; a non-practitioner is one who is controlled by them. Geshe Potowa once asked Lama Dromtönpa, “What is the line between Dharma and non-Dharma?” Lama Drom replied, “That which contradicts the beliefs of samsaric people is Dharma; that which does not, is non-Dharma.”

4. *Your practice will lack stamina.* Although you take up a practice, at the first setback you’ll give it up. A small thorn bush grew outside the cave of Kadampa Geshe Karag Gomchung. Every time he entered or went from the cave its thorns would rip his flesh but that bush remained there until he died because this great meditator practiced with such intensity that he never wanted to waste the few moments necessary to cut it down. Geshe Karag Gomchung had realized the fruits of meditating on death.

5. *You will continue to create negative karma.* Without continual awareness of death, attachment to the things of this life persists. Friends and relatives are held as more worthy of love than are strangers and beings who bring you discomfort. This emotional imbalance gives rise to an endless string of mental distortions, which in turn results in the generation of infinite negative karmas. In this way, you lose the happiness of this life and that of all future lives as well.

6. *You will die in a state of regret.* It is certain that death will come. If you do not live in mindfulness of it, it will come as a surprise. At that crucial moment you will realize that all the materialistically oriented attitudes that you have cultivated all your life are of no value and that your wealth, family and power are similarly useless. When death comes, nothing but spiritual realization is of value but, having neglected to practice death awareness, you have neglected to practice Dharma and now stand empty-handed, regret filling your mind. In his *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*, Shantideva writes:

When grasped by death’s agents,  
What value are friends,  
What value are relatives? At that moment, the only protection  
Is the force of goodness,  
But to that I never attended.

Kadampa Geshe Kamaba once remarked that we should fear death now while there’s still time to act and at the time of death be fearless. Worldly beings are the opposite. While strong and healthy they never give death a thought, but when death comes they clutch at their breasts in terror. Most practitioners never really begin to practice but procrastinate day after day. Then, lying on their deathbed, they

pray for just a few more days of life, but it's too late: they are now between the jaws of the Lord of Death and the time for practice is but a memory - like a piece of meat that we held in our hands but did not eat, dropped, and is now in the belly of a dog and cannot be brought back. Although regret is pointless, regret arises.

### *The advantages of meditating on death*

The advantages of meditating on death are also numberless but again can be summarized under six headings.

1. *Your life will become purposeful.* In the *Sutra of Buddha's Passing Away (Mahaparinirvana Sutra)*, it is said: "Of all footprints, that of the elephant is the largest; of all mindfulness meditations, that on death is supreme." If you practice the death meditation properly, your mind will yearn to seek a deeper understanding of life. You can see this in the biographies of the saints. Buddha himself was turned away from attraction to mundane existence by seeing first a sick man, then an old man and lastly a corpse. The yogi Milarepa was inspired to renounce black magic and search for a more purposeful path by witnessing his magic teacher's reaction to the death of a patron.

2. *Mindfulness of death is an extremely powerful opponent to delusion.* The strongest opponent to delusion is realization of emptiness but awareness of death is a close second. If you recollect death whenever attachment or aversion arise in your mind, that delusion is instantly destroyed, just as the blow of an iron hammer crushes a stone. The yogis and mahasiddhas of ancient India ate their food out of bowls made from human skulls and blew trumpets made from human thighbones. Similarly, monks painted human skulls on the doors of their toilets. This was not done to scare people but to maintain awareness of death. Even nowadays almost every temple hangs a painting of the Lord of Death holding the whole of conditioned existence in his mouth beside its main entrance; not as a decoration, but to instill the thought of death in all who visit. In tantric practice, we visualize cemeteries filled with corpses and so forth surrounding the mystic mandala.

3. *Meditation on death is important in the beginning of your practice* because it inspires you to practice and practice well.

4. *Meditation on death is important in the middle of your practice* because it inspires you to exert yourself both intensely and with purity.

5. *Meditation on death is important at the end of your practice* because it causes you to perfect and complete your practice. Thus, meditation on death causes you to begin, continue and accomplish your practice. Some people, soon after contacting Dharma, develop a very heavy sense of renunciation and enter into retreat, but after some months their enthusiasm has waned and they yearn to return home. However, they feel forced to stay and complete their proposed retreat because they fear being ridiculed were they to break their practice. They end up cursing their renunciation, which they consider to have been nothing but a source of trouble for them.

6. *You will die happily and without regret.* By maintaining awareness of death while alive, your life will spontaneously incline towards virtue and Dharma practice. Death will not come as a surprise and will bring neither fear nor regret. It is said that the best practitioner dies in a state of bliss, the mediocre

practitioner dies happily, and even a poor practitioner has neither regret nor dread at the time of death. We should aim at least to be like the most inferior of these. Milarepa declared, “Terrified of death, I fled to the mountains, where I realized the ultimate nature of the mind. Now I’m no longer afraid.” If we practice as intensely as Milarepa did, there’s no reason why we should not attain an equal level of realization. We have the same kind of body and mental capacity as he did, and the various methods that he applied have come down to us in a pure, unbroken stream through the various lineage gurus. In a way, our opportunity to become enlightened is even greater than his, because a number of oral transmissions not available to Milarepa are now available to us.

These, then, are the disadvantages of not meditating on death and the advantages of meditating on it.

## *How to meditate on death*

How should you meditate on death? There are two main ways.

A. The first is **the nine-part death meditation** (the three roots, the nine reasons and the three determinations). This is the method taught in the sutras and is referred to in both Gampopa’s *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* and Lama Tsongkhapa’s *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*.

B. The second is a technique wherein you visualize yourself undergoing **the process of death**. This is a tantric method and is found in every Highest Yoga Tantra system in the phase of mandala meditation known as taking the three *kayas* as the path.

### *A. The nine-part death meditation*

The three roots to be meditated on are:

1. The inevitability of death.
2. The uncertainty of the time of death.
3. At the time of death, nothing but your spiritual realization is of value.

The nine reasons and the three determinations are divided equally between the three roots as follows:

#### *1. The inevitability of death*

Although death plans to attack, most people live pretending that it does not exist. It is not difficult to prove logically that any given person will die. Taking yourself as an example, you will certainly die, because death is inevitable. How do we know that it’s inevitable? By meditating upon these three reasons:

(a) *To date, death has come to all humans.* Without mentioning ordinary beings, even the great, realized beings—the arhats, bodhisattvas and buddhas—have died. So why should we expect to survive? Buddha Shakyamuni himself passed away so as to demonstrate impermanence to his disciples. Who do you know that is even a century old? In the face of these facts, it is hard to believe that we alone shall be immortal.

(b) *Day by day life ebbs, with no chance of increase.* A human’s lifespan can be likened to a pond, the inflowing stream to which has been cut off: moment-by-moment its waters diminish; or to a monk with only 1,000 rupees to his name and no further income: if he spends ten rupees a day, he will eventually be penniless. Shantideva wrote, “Remaining neither day nor night, life is constantly slipping away and

never getting any longer. Why should death not come to me?” The length of your life has been decreasing since the moment of your conception. When 100 sheep are taken to the slaughterhouse to be killed by evening, the killing of each one brings the death of the last sheep closer. It is the same with our lifespan: as the minutes are consumed, the hours pass; as the hours are consumed, the days pass; as the days are consumed, the months pass; and as the months are consumed, the years pass. With the consumption of our years, death rapidly approaches.

(c) *Although alive, we find little time to practice Dharma.* Our lifespan can probably be divided as follows: twenty years are spent sleeping, twenty years working, ten years playing, five years eating and so on. We spend perhaps four or five years in practice. These are the parts that constitute the composite phenomenon that is the life of the average person. As the Buddha pointed out, anything that is composite is doomed to fall apart; that which is a collection of parts exists in dependence on those parts, which sooner or later must disintegrate.

If you meditate intensively upon this first root and its three reasons, you can, within seven days, realize the inevitability of death. From this realization will arise the first of the three determinations: the determination to practice Dharma.

## 2. *The uncertainty of the time of death*

This, the second root, is more difficult to realize fully. Many people live with the understanding that eventually they must die but few truly believe that they could be dead a minute from now. To generate this awareness, meditate on the following three reasons:

(a) *The lifespan of humans on this planet is not fixed.* Thousands of years ago, the lifespan of humans was measured in centuries; now it is less than a hundred years; soon it will last only a decade. Human lifespan is especially unstable in this degenerate phase of the eon. You may think that you have a long time to live because you are still young, but look at the aged carrying their dead children to the cemetery. You may think that you will live long because you have sufficient wealth to buy good food and medicines, but look at the old beggars and the millionaires who died young. You may think that you will live long because you are healthy, but this is also not a sound idea; many people die healthy while many sick ones live on, year after year.

(b) *Many forces oppose life and few support it.* The evil spirits that can terminate a human life number more than 80,000; the 424 diseases hover around us like a fog. These spirits and diseases wait for us like a cat outside a rat hole. Furthermore, the four elements that constitute the physical base of our being—earth, water, fire and air—are like four snakes in a single vessel, the stronger continually trying to overcome the weaker. When these elements are in harmony, we enjoy health, but when they fall into discord, our life is endangered. Moreover, that which we use to sustain life can easily become a cause of death: houses collapse, killing the inhabitants; foods turn to poison; medicines used improperly can cause death; the various means of transportation, intended to aid human existence, often result in death. In his *Precious Garland*, Nagarjuna wrote, “O King, life is like a butter lamp in a windstorm.” Whether the lamp is full, half-full or almost empty is of little consequence; it can be extinguished at any moment. Similarly, your age is no indication of how close you are to death.

(c) *The human body is extremely fragile.* We may say, “Granted, there are many opponents to life but I am

powerful enough to endure them all,” but this is just wishful thinking. The human body is destroyed as easily as a dewdrop is knocked off the tip of a blade of grass. As Nagarjuna said in his *Friendly Letter*, “If the entire world will be destroyed at this eon’s end, what to say of the bodies of humans?” Kunga Rinpoche once said, “If you think you will first complete your worldly duties and then practice Dharma, bear in mind that the death of today may come before the practice of tomorrow.”

By meditating diligently on this second root and its three reasons, there will arise the second of the three determinations: the determination to practice Dharma immediately.

### *3. At the time of death, nothing but your spiritual realization is of value*

To become convinced of this third root, meditate on the following three reasons:

(a) *Wealth, possessions, fame or social power are of no value.* At the time of your death you may have a hundred bricks of gold in your house but not a single one will be of benefit. A beggar must leave behind even his walking stick. A king may have a million subjects and a thousand queens but not one will be able to accompany him to the next life. As Buddha said, “Although you may have enough food and clothing to last a hundred years, when you die you go on alone, naked and unfed.”

(b) *Family, friends and relatives are of no value.* You are born alone and must die alone. When you are dying, all your loved ones may press down on your body trying to prevent death from taking you away but it will be of no avail; nor will a single one accompany you. The mahasiddha Maitripa said, “My friend, dying is like passing alone through a dangerous valley filled with robbers. Not one of your queens, sons, daughters or subjects will come with you then. Therefore, prepare yourself well.” In his *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*, Shantideva wrote, “Leaving all behind, I must depart alone. Alas, not knowing this, I committed all kinds of evil for the sake of family and friends, but who among them will help me face the Lord of Death?”

(c) *Even your body will be of no value.* Though you have had your body since leaving your mother’s womb and have clothed it to save it from the sufferings of heat and cold and fed it to spare it the pangs of hunger, at death it must be abandoned. The stream of consciousness goes on alone.

By meditating intensively on this third root and its three reasons, the third of the three determinations will arise: the determination to practice Dharma purely, unmixed with materialistic tendencies.

Shantideva wrote, “At the time of death, only goodness is of value but to that I did not attend!” If you know that you are moving to a country where the only valid currency is gold, you would be wise to convert all your old currency while you still have the opportunity. At the time of death, the only valid currency is spiritual realization, so you should practice Dharma intensely to gain that currency while you still have the chance.

### *How exactly do you conduct this nine-part death meditation?*

Sitting in the correct posture, begin by glancing over the six disadvantages of not remembering death and the six advantages of remembering it. Having spent five or ten minutes on this, glance through each of the three roots with its corresponding reasons and determinations. Then take your mind back to the first reason of the first root, and hold it there for twenty to thirty minutes, entering into stabiliz-

ing meditation on that point. The first day, do stabilizing meditation on the first of the nine reasons; the second day, on the second reason and so forth, gradually working your way through the entire meditation.

To conclude each session, glance through the remainder of the points, dwell for a short time on the three determinations, and at the very end, recite a short dedication prayer such as the following:

By the power of this practice,  
May I quickly achieve perfect buddhahood,  
And thus may each and every sentient being  
Come to realize wisdom's eternal happiness.

### *B. Visualizing yourself undergoing the death process*

There are both exoteric and esoteric ways of practicing this technique.

#### *The exoteric way*

Visualize yourself lying on your bed, dying. Your parents and friends surround you, lamenting. The radiance of your countenance has faded and your nostrils droop. Your lips dry and slime begins to form on your teeth. All grace has gone from your form and your body looks quite ugly. Your body heat drops, your breathing becomes heavy and you exhale more than you inhale. You remember all the negative karma you created during your life and are filled with regret. You look to all sides for help but there's none to be found. Do this as convincingly as you can and see how you feel. Do attachment or fear arise? By meditating in this way you can discover which delusions will disturb you at death and work on abandoning them even from today.

#### *The esoteric way*

The esoteric technique of meditation on the death process is much more complex. To do it in full detail requires tantric initiation. This method is performed in all Highest Yoga Tantra systems in the phase of the practice known as taking the three kayas as the path. Only a limited portion of this teaching can be imparted openly; the explanations concerning the mandala, the five buddha families and the clear light must be omitted.

This meditation deals with the dissolution of the twenty-five course substances, an important topic in tantric practice. What are the twenty-five coarse substances?

1. The five psychophysical constituents (*skandhas*): form, feeling, recognition, volitional formations and consciousness.
2. The five imperfect wisdoms: the mirror-like wisdom, the wisdom of equality, the discriminating wisdom, the accomplishing wisdom and the wisdom of the nature of phenomena. These wisdoms are called "imperfect" because they are mentioned in reference to someone who has not attained buddhahood.
3. The four elements: earth, water, fire and wind.
4. The six sources: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind senses.
5. The five objects: colors and shapes, sounds, odors, tastes and tangibles.



When death comes naturally, it comes as a process of gradual disintegration. The first stage of this process is the simultaneous disintegration of (i) the psychophysical constituent of form, (ii) the imperfect mirror-like wisdom, (iii) the earth element, (iv) the eye sense and (v) colors and shapes. An outer sign manifests as a result of the disintegration of each of these five attributes, respectively as follows: (i) the body withers and loses vitality, (ii) the eyes blur, (iii) one can no longer move the limbs, (iv) blinking ceases, and (v) the radiance of the body fades. These are outer signs and can therefore be witnessed by others. With the disintegration of these five attributes, the dying person experiences an inner sign, which can be seen by that person alone: a mirage-like vision filling all space.

The second stage is the disintegration of (i) the psychophysical constituent of feeling, (ii) the imperfect wisdom of equality, (iii) the water element, (iv) the ear sense and (v) sounds. Again, there is an outer sign accompanying the disintegration of each of these five attributes. The outer signs are: (i) one loses discrimination as to whether physical sensations are pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent, (ii) one is no longer mindful of the feelings accompanying the mental consciousness, (iii) the lips dry, perspiration stops and blood and semen coagulate, (iv) inner and outer sounds can no longer be heard and (v) even the subtle humming in the ears ceases. The dying person experiences the inner sign of a smoke-like vision filling all space.

The third stage is the disintegration of (i) the psychophysical constituent of recognition, (ii) the imperfect discriminating wisdom, (iii) the fire element, (iv) the nose sense and (v) smells. The outer signs are: (i) one can no longer recognize the purpose of anything said by those who surround one, (ii) memory of even the names of parents, family, friends and so forth is lost, (iii) bodily heat lessens and the powers of digestion and food assimilation cease, (iv) exhalation is strong and inhalation weak and (v) the power to recognize smell fades. The dying person experiences the inner sign of sparks of fire filling space.

The fourth stage is the disintegration of (i) the psychophysical constituent of volitional formations, (ii) the imperfect accomplishing wisdom, (iii) the wind element, (iv) the tongue sense, (v) tastes and (vi) the body sense and tangible objects. The outer signs are: (i) all physical abilities fail, (ii) all external purpose is forgotten, (iii) the major and minor winds dissolve into the heart chakra and inhalation and exhalation cease, (iv) the tongue becomes thick and short and its root turns blue, (v) all powers of taste fade, and (vi) one cannot experience roughness or smoothness. The inner sign is that of a vision of light, like the last flickering of a candle.

At this point in the process, a medical doctor would declare the person dead. However, as consciousness still abides in the body, the person is still alive.

In the fifth stage, with the loss of the wind energy supporting it, a remnant of the original sperm, which came from the father at the time of conception and has since been stored in the crown chakra, flows down into the central channel and comes to the heart. Due to its passing through the knots of the chakras, a vision of snowy whiteness is experienced.

In the sixth stage, with the loss of the wind energy supporting it, a remnant of the original ovum, which came from the mother at the time of conception and has since been stored in the navel chakra, flows up into the central channel and also comes to the heart. Due to its passing through the knots of the chakras, a vision of sunset-like redness is experienced.



In the seventh stage, the remnants of the sperm and ovum now come together and a vision of darkness is experienced, as when the sky is completely overcast with thick clouds. Here, ordinary persons fall into a faint, but for a tantric yogi, this is an excellent condition for special meditation.

In the eighth stage, eventually the heart gives a slight tremble and the consciousness passes out of the body. There is an experience of clear light, as of the coming of dawn on a dark and moonless morning. This is the clear light of death, the appearance of which indicates that the death process is complete. For the majority of beings, these experiences are totally uncontrolled and terrifying, but because of the preparations made while alive, tantric practitioners have mastery of them and use them to their advantage. Many lamas have attained enlightenment at this very moment of death.

Wind and consciousness are the most important topics in tantra. Both have gross and subtle aspects. Gross wind forms the body of this life; gross consciousness gives it sensory awareness. At the time of death, both of these gross qualities dissolve into their subtle aspects, which go on to enlightenment. The real palace of the mind is the heart. Here, mind resides in the non-dissipating drop between the ovum and sperm remnants of mother and father. This is the gross non-dissipating drop; it is called non-dissipating because it endures until death. The subtle non-dissipating drop is the combination of subtle wind and consciousness; it is called non-dissipating because it endures until enlightenment. Meditation on the death process involves meditation on both of these drops.

### *The importance of meditating on death*

Meditation on impermanence is of paramount importance. It was the Buddha's first teaching when he taught the four noble truths at the Deer Park, Sarnath, and it was his final teaching, because he died to impress the idea of impermanence upon the minds of his disciples.

The Buddha once said, "Everything in the three worlds is as impermanent as an autumn clouds. The birth and death of beings is like scenes in a drama. Human life is like a flash of lightning in the sky or like the waters of a mountain stream."

If you meditate properly on death in accordance with either of the two methods - the nine-part death meditation or the technique of visualizing yourself undergoing the death process - there is no doubt that you will benefit.

If a dog rushes out to bite you, there's no value in merely experiencing fear; you have to use the fear you feel to avoid being bitten. Similarly, there is no point in merely fearing death; use your fear of death to develop the wisdom that is beyond the fangs of death.

You should try to practice Dharma, practice it right now and practice it purely. Dharma is the map that shows you the way to realization of the conventional and ultimate modes of existence; it is the food that nourishes pilgrims, the escort that guides you through the hazardous passes on the road to enlightenment.

### *Transference of consciousness*

Practice has many levels, the most basic of which is the keeping of a good heart, a heart of love and compassion. Even if you cannot find the strength or time to engage in higher meditational practices or

philosophical study, you should at least try to maintain a sympathetic attitude towards your fellow beings, an attitude of never harming but only helping others. If you can do this, your negativities will slowly fall away. Then, at the time of death, you will be able to take refuge in the Three Jewels and be confident of obtaining a good rebirth. This is the method of transference of consciousness (*po-wa*) for practitioners of least capability.

More ambitious practitioners try to develop renunciation, the three higher trainings - morality, concentration and wisdom - and the enlightened attitude of bodhicitta, the wish to attain buddhahood in order to benefit all sentient beings. When such practitioners have gained a certain degree of accomplishment of these qualities, they enter the ocean of tantra in order to realize their spiritual aspirations more quickly; only through the practice of tantra is it possible to attain fully completed buddhahood in as short a period as two or three years. Nevertheless, even though it is possible to attain enlightenment this quickly, not all practitioners can do so. Therefore, the various techniques of transference of consciousness for practitioners of highest motivation were taught.

Transference of consciousness literally means “migration.” This is because the last thought you have when dying is the force that determines your next rebirth. Many people have led virtuous lives but, by having a negative thought when dying, have fallen to a lower realm, while others have led evil lives but, by having a positive thought when dying, have gained a higher rebirth. The yoga of transference of consciousness takes advantage of this phenomenon.

The exclusively Mahayana techniques of transference of consciousness may be divided into two categories: those taught in the sutras and those taught in the tantras.

#### *Transference of consciousness in sutra: the five powers*

The sutra method is called application of the five powers, because when you know death is approaching, you apply the powers of intention, the white seed, familiarity, destruction and prayer.

1. *The power of intention.* Generate the firm intention not to let your mind become separated during death, intermediate state or rebirth from the aspiration to attain fully completed buddhahood for the benefit of all beings.
2. *The power of the white seed.* Try to rid your mind of all forms of physical attachment by giving away all your wealth, property and possessions.
3. *The power of destruction.* Try to destroy the stains of all the negative karmas you have collected during your lifetime by applying the four opponent powers: regret; resolve not to create such negative karmas again; taking refuge in the Three Jewels and generating bodhicitta; and purifying the root of the stains by meditating on emptiness, Vajrasattva and so forth. If you have received any tantric initiations, request your lama to reinitiate you or, if this is not possible, perform the self-initiation ritual.
4. *The power of familiarity.* Generate bodhicitta as intensely as possible.
5. *The power of prayer.* Here, prayer refers to the aspiration of the true Mahayana practitioner that all the obscurations, negative karma and sufferings of others may ripen onto oneself and that one will never

be separated from the Mahayana attitude of wanting to achieve complete enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

One day Geshe Potowa was sitting on his throne giving a discourse when suddenly he said, “May I always be a protector for those who are helpless and a guide to those in confusion.” Then he died.

When nearing death, Geshe Chekawa told his disciples that he had long been praying to take rebirth in the lowest hell in order to be able to benefit the sentient beings there but that recently he had had a dream indicating that he would be reborn in a pure land. He requested his disciples to make many offerings to the buddhas and bodhisattvas that this might be avoided and his prayer fulfilled.

This application of these five powers at the time of death guarantees a rebirth with conditions suitable for continued practice of the Mahayana path.

### *Transference of consciousness in tantra*

If you have received a tantric initiation, you should try to practice the tantric method of transference of consciousness. There are many variations of this method depending on the tantric system into which you have been initiated and where you want to be reborn. One of the most popular is that found in the Vajrayogini tantra. It is said that initiation into the practice of Vajrayogini is a ticket to the land of the dakinis.

Transference of consciousness as taught in the tantras is called the “forceful method” because even an extremely deluded person who has performed the most negative actions during life can take rebirth in a pure land by means of it. Its practice during life in order to prepare for death is called the “forceful practice” because merely by saying the syllable *PHAT!* your consciousness is ejected from your body and by saying the syllable *HIC!* it is brought back in. The sign that you have accomplished this practice is that a blister breaks out on the crown of your head and exudes a few drops of blood and pus.

However, we are not permitted to teach tantric methods to non-initiates. Buddha Vajradhara himself said, “One should not pour the milk of a snow lion into a clay pot.” Not only does the milk turn sour but the pot is ruined as well. Some people accuse tantric teachers of being tight-fisted for maintaining secrecy, but this is a stupid accusation, obviously made by those with no understanding of tantra. Teaching tantra to a spiritually immature being is like tying a child to a wild elephant. Therefore, such great practitioners as the Fifth Dalai Lama have stressed the importance of gaining an experience of the fundamentals common to both sutra and tantra before specializing in tantric practice.

*Q.* What can be done to benefit a dying person?

*Gen Rinpoche.* It is helpful to recite mantras in the person’s ear. The mantras of Buddha Shakyamuni, OM MUNE MUNE MAHA MUNAYE SVAHA; Avalokiteshvara, OM MANI PADME HUM; Arya Tara, OM TARE TUTTARE TURE SVAHA; and Manjushri, OM AH RA PA TSA NA DHIH, are easy to say yet very effective in leaving strong karmic imprints on the dying person’s mental continuum. These mantras are tremendously powerful and, without doubt, would be of immeasurable benefit to a dying person. It is also helpful to place an image of a buddha or a bodhisattva where the person will notice it. In particular, if the person is a religious practitioner, you should recite the mantra of the person’s

spiritual teacher and show him or her a photograph of that teacher.

The most important thing is to help the dying person generate and maintain a virtuous attitude. Don't do anything that might agitate or anger the person. Dying with a positive attitude almost certainly guarantees a good rebirth.

After death, the person's possessions should be given away as offerings to such objects of virtue as the Three Jewels or used in tantric offering rituals (*tsok*). The person's spiritual teachers should be asked to make special prayers, because the guru-disciple relationship is especially significant and anything a guru does for a deceased disciple, or a disciple for a deceased guru, has extraordinary effects. Parents and friends should also offer prayers, as they too can greatly affect the person's rebirth. There are many examples of people who died in negative states of mind and were heading for rebirth in the hells but who, because of the prayers and offerings of their loved ones, took a higher rebirth.

In his *Compendium of Metaphysics* (*Abhidharmasamuccaya*), Arya Asanga explains in depth how to handle a dead or dying person.

*Q.* Should one do the above for Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike?

*Gen Rinpoche.* The buddhas and bodhisattvas are universal protectors and do not discriminate, so why should we? However, if the person is a Buddhist, because of the bond between you, anything you do will have greater impact.

*Q.* In the West, we often do not tell a dying person that he or she is, in fact, dying. Do you think that this is wise or unwise?

*Gen Rinpoche.* It depends upon the person. It is better to tell practitioners so that they can then put all their effort into practice. They will not be scared by knowing that they are dying and may be able to practice transference of consciousness. If people are not practitioners, perhaps there's no point in telling them. They don't need to be terrified.

*Q.* How long does consciousness remain in the body after a person is ostensibly dead? How long should the corpse be left untouched?

*Gen Rinpoche.* If the dying person is a great yogi, consciousness may remain in the body for days or even months. For example, one of the previous Panchen Lamas remained in his body, in meditation, for almost a year after he seemed dead. He died in Kham, in eastern Tibet, but his body was brought to central Tibet, a journey of many months, before his consciousness left. Even a non-practitioner's consciousness may remain for up to three days. Therefore, a corpse should never be moved until the signs appear that indicate consciousness has departed. The strongest sign of this is the emission of a drop of blood from the nostrils or fluid from the sexual organ. A less certain sign is that of a foul smell coming from the corpse. If the body is cremated before this time it is tantamount to murder. Actually, it is preferable that the body not even be touched before the consciousness departs. If it is, the consciousness will probably leave from the point where the body was first touched. Since it is more favorable for the consciousness to leave via the upper rather than the lower parts, the crown of the head should be touched first.

*Q.* Why was burial so rare in Tibet?

*Gen Rinpoche.* It was considered preferable to offer the body to the birds as the person's final act of charity. Only when a body was considered unfit for this was it buried. It was customary for great practitioners to do the special tantric rite of *ch d* before dying, offering their body to the birds; those who couldn't do the rite themselves would have a *ch d* practitioner do it for them. In this way, however many birds were invited, that many would come to the feast. If the corpse was small and could feed only ten birds, only ten birds would come; if it was big enough to feed twenty, twenty would come. It is said that birds summoned in this way are manifestations of dakinis and follow a code of ethics in devouring the corpse. Usually the brain would be removed from the corpse and mixed with chickpea flour. When the birds had finished eating the rest of the corpse, this mixture would be fed to them. Only then would they fly away, satisfied.

*Q.* What is the source of tremendous amount of Tibetan literature describing death and the after-death state?

*Gen Rinpoche.* These texts were written by experienced yogis who had attained clairvoyance or extrasensory perception and are not like books written today. These days, as soon as someone learns to write, he or she starts composing books. The yogis of old wrote only from their own experience. Also, the Buddha himself taught a great deal about the intermediate state in both the sutras and the tantras.

*Colophon:*

This teaching was given in Dharamsala in 1976, translated by Losang Gyaltsen and prepared by Michael Hellbach and Glenn H. Mullin. It was first published in 1977 in the long out-of-print *From Tushita*. A slightly edited version of this teaching is included in *Living in the Face of Death*. This version edited by Nicholas Ribush.



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