LIVING IS DYING

How to Prepare for Dying, Death and Beyond

Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse

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Cover Illustration:
Hungry Ghosts Scroll, Kyoto National Museum, Japan

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Contents

Will I Die? 5

Preparation for Death and Beyond 25

Simple Practices to Prepare for Death 45

How Buddhists Prepare for Death 51

Aspiration Practice 59

The Painful Bardo of Dying 73

Questions About Death 97

How to Be with the Dying 105

What to Say to a Dying Person 117

The Bardo Instructions 127

Questions About Caring for the Dying and the Dead 145

What to Do After Death 161

Questions About Practices for the Dead 173

Questions About Other Aspects of Death 177

For Tantrikas 189

Prayers and Practices 195

- How to Practice Tonglen 195
- Chutor: Water Offering 199
- Increasing Life and Prosperity: A Method for Freeing Lives 203
- Tagdrol: 'Liberation Through Wearing' 215
- How to Make Tsatsas 221

Preface

> Death is not the opposite of life, but a part of it.[1]
>
> *Haruki Murakami*

THE INSTRUCTIONS given to Buddhists during the process of dying, at the moment of death and after death are the same whether a person dies peacefully in their sleep at a ripe old age or unexpectedly because the causes and conditions that lead to sudden death have matured.

The information about dying, death and beyond that appears in this book is a very simple presentation of one specific and ancient tradition of Buddhist teachings. Although many other authentic Buddhist traditions offer essentially the same advice, as each has developed its own terminology and language, some details may appear to be different. Please don't misinterpret these variations as contradictions.

These teachings about death and the bardos have been passed down through a long lineage of brilliant Buddhist thinkers, each of whom went to great lengths in order to examine the process in minute detail and from every angle. Their advice may be especially useful for Buddhists or those attracted to the Buddha's teachings, but it is equally relevant for anyone who will eventually die. So even if you are not a Buddhist, if you are open-minded, curious or contemplating your own death or that of a loved one, you may well find something in these pages that will help.

Everything that happens to us in life and death depends entirely on the causes and conditions that we have accumulated. Each person will therefore experience physical death and the

dissolution of the body's elements quite differently. Each of our journeys through the bardos will also be unique. So any and all descriptions of dying, death and the bardos can only ever be generalizations. Nevertheless, when the process of dying begins, having even a rough idea about what is happening not only goes a long way towards allaying our worst fears, but it will also help us face death calmly and with equanimity.

*

To those of you who take notice of such details, I should say a word about the inconsistent use of Sanskrit spelling and diacritics in this book. Usually, when Sanskrit appears in Roman characters instead of the Devanāgarī script, diacritics are used to help the reader pronounce words correctly. These days, as the study of Sanskrit is relatively rare, fewer and fewer of us are able to read diacritics and, for some, the mere sight of all those squiggles and dots adds yet another level of confusion. Diacritics have therefore not been applied to the Sanskrit terms that appear in the main body of the text or to the names of deities and bodhisattvas, etc., but some have been retained in quoted texts. Similarly, where quoted texts have included Tibetan-style spellings of Sanskrit – for example HUNG instead of HUM – those spellings have been retained.

*

Ironically, although these days I am always so busy, at heart I am unusually lazy. Trying to juggle these two extremes is quite a challenge, which is why I ended up writing much of this book on a social networking app. If my English is at least readable it is thanks to Janine Schulz, Sarah K. C. Wilkinson, Chimé Metok, Pema Maya and Sarah A. Wilkinson.

The framework of this book was created in response to a list of nearly one hundred very good questions about death that were gathered by various friends of mine. I would particularly like to

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Will I Die?

FOR THE FIRST THREE DECADES of his life, Prince Siddhartha lived an idyllic existence behind the walls of his father's vast palace. Universally loved and admired, the handsome prince married a beautiful princess, they had a son, and everyone was happy. But in all that time, the prince never once stepped outside the palace gates.

In his thirtieth year, Siddhartha asked his faithful charioteer, Channa, to drive him through his father's great city and, for the first time ever, the prince saw a dead body. It was a terrible shock.

"Will what happened to that man happen to me?" he asked Channa. "Will I die, too?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," replied Channa, "Everyone dies. Even princes."

"Turn the chariot around, Channa," ordered the Prince. "Take me home."

Back at the palace, Prince Siddhartha thought about what he had just seen. What was the point of being a king if not only his family but everyone on this earth had to live under the terrible shadow of the fear of death? There and then, the prince decided that, for everyone's sake, he would devote his life to discovering how all human beings can go beyond both birth and death.

This very famous story contains a great many teachings. Just the fact that Prince Siddhartha asked, "Will I die?" is not only touchingly innocent, but also remarkably brave. "Will I die? Must mighty Siddhartha, the future King of the Shakyas, whose destiny

Prince Siddhartha being driven out of his father's palace by Channa

is to be the 'Ruler of the Universe', die?" How many of us, from royalty to ordinary people like you and me, would even think about asking such a question?

The question was brave, but the Prince's reaction, "Take me home!" sounds, on the face of it, a little childish. Aren't adults supposed to deal with disconcerting news more maturely? But then, how many adults would bother asking, "Will I die?" And how many would then cut short an interesting outing to examine and contemplate the answer?

We human beings think we are so clever. Look at all the systems and networks we have set up. Most of us have an address where letters and packages can be sent and bank accounts where money can be safely kept. A human being invented the wristwatch so the rest of us can keep track of the time; and another human being invented the iPhone so that we can keep in touch with our network of friends, acquaintances, business partners and family.

Human beings have also developed systems for making sure that society runs smoothly: the police maintain public order, traffic lights control the flow of road traffic, and governments administer social welfare and defence systems.

Yet, even though we human beings have put lifetimes of effort into organizing, designing and structuring every aspect of our world, how many of us have been curious and courageous enough to ask, "Will I die?" Shouldn't we all try to contemplate the inevitability of our own death at least once this lifetime? Particularly as *every single one of us will die* – itself a crucially important piece of information. Doesn't putting a little effort into processing the inescapable fact of our own death make sense?

Once we are dead, what will happen to all our addresses, homes, businesses and holiday retreats? What will happen to our wristwatches, iPhones and all those traffic lights? To our insurance and pension plans? To that roll of dental floss you bought this morning?

Buddhists believe that of all the beings on this planet, human beings are the most likely to ask, "Will I die?" Can you imagine a parrot thinking, "Should I eat my nuts and seeds right now, just in case I die tonight? Or can I risk saving them until tomorrow?" Animals just don't think like that. And they certainly don't think about causes and conditions.

In fact, according to the Buddhadharma, not even the gods and celestial beings ever think of asking, "Will I die?" The gods are far more interested in their meticulously clean, fine porcelain saucers and silver spoons, their exquisitely brewed tea, and their entrancing music. The gods are said to love gazing at vast cloud formations, magically creating swimming pools or fountains in the midst of the largest and fluffiest, then spending hours, sometimes days, contemplating their beauty. This kind of activity dominates the lives of the gods and is far more interesting to them than asking, "Will I die?" I doubt such a thought would enter their heads.

Human beings, on the other hand, have the capacity to wonder, yet the inexorability of our own death rarely occurs to us. When do any of us think about death? While we are experiencing terrible suffering? No. In the midst of ecstatic happiness? Again, no. We are intelligent and aware, and therefore enjoy the conditions that support the formulation of such a question, yet we put all our time and energy into shoring up the self-deception that we will never die. We numb ourselves from the pain of unavoidable realities by keeping our minds busy and entertained, and by making elaborate plans for the future. In a way, this is precisely what makes being human so wonderful, but the catch is that by doing so we create a false sense of security. We forget that both our own death and the deaths of all those we know and love are inescapable.

Think about it: by the time each one of us has been alive for a quarter of a century, we will have lost at least one close friend or family member. One day you are having dinner with your parents, then the next day they are dead and you never see them again. This kind of experience forces us to face up to the truth of death – and for some it is a very bitter and terrifying truth.

Fear of Death

> To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know. [2]
>
> *Socrates*

Why are we all so afraid of death?

There are many reasons, but the main one is that death is totally unknown territory. No one we know has ever come back

from the dead to tell us what death is. And even if they did, would we believe them?

Death is a mystery and, although we have no idea what will happen when we die, we make all kinds of assumptions about it. We assume that once we are dead, we won't be able to go home; that from the moment we die, we will never again sit on our favourite sofa. We think: if I am dead, I won't be able to watch the next Olympics or discover who the mole is in that new spy series. But we are just guessing. The bottom line is, we simply don't know. And it is the not knowing that terrifies us.

As death draws near, many of us find ourselves thinking back over our lives and feeling shame and guilt about what we have and haven't done. Not only do we fear losing everything that we have become attached to in this life and all our references, but we also fear being judged for our shameful actions. Both prospects make the idea of death even more terrible.

There is no turning back from death and there is no escape. It is perhaps the only event in life that we have no choice but to face. We simply cannot avoid it. Even trying to speed up the process by committing suicide doesn't work because, as human beings, however quickly we die, fear doesn't have an 'off' switch. We must still experience the unimaginable fear that accompanies dying because we cannot transform ourselves into inanimate objects, like pebbles, to ensure that we feel nothing.

How, then, do we rid ourselves of our paralysing, numbing fear of death?

> Once I, Zhuang Zhou, dreamed that I was a butterfly and was happy as a butterfly. I was conscious that I was quite pleased with myself, but I did not know that I was Zhou. Suddenly I awoke, and there I was, visibly Zhou. I do not know whether it was Zhou dreaming that he was a butterfly or the butterfly dreaming that it was Zhou.

> Between Zhou and the butterfly there must be some distinction. This is called the transformation of things.[3]

This celebrated Chinese philosopher's question is well worth contemplating. When you look at a butterfly, how do you know that you yourself are not just a small part of that butterfly's dream? What makes you think that you are 'alive' right now? How can you be sure that you are 'living'? You can't. All you can do is make an assumption.

Think about it! How can you prove to yourself that you are alive and that you exist? What can you do? One of the standard methods for making sure you are not dreaming is to pinch yourself. These days, some people try to feel more alive by cutting their flesh, even their wrists. Less dramatically, others go shopping, or get married, or provoke a fight with their spouse. There is nothing to stop you from trying all of these methods. You can fight and cut and pinch to your heart's content, but *nothing* you do will prove, categorically, that you are alive. Yet, along with most other human beings, you continue to fear death.

This is what the Buddha called 'fixation'. You fixate on the methods you use to try to prove to yourself that you exist. Yet everything you imagine yourself to be and everything you feel, see, hear, taste, touch, value, judge and so on, is imputed – meaning it has been conditioned by your environment, culture, family and human values. By conquering these imputations and your conditioning, you can also conquer your fear of death. This is what Buddhists describe as freeing yourself from dualistic distinctions which requires very little effort and absolutely no expenditure.

All you have to do is ask yourself:

How sure am I, right now, that I really am here?

How sure am I that I really am alive?

Merely asking these two questions will start poking holes in all your imputed beliefs. The more holes you poke, the sooner you will

Zhuang Zou Dreaming of a Butterfly

be able to wriggle free from your conditioning; and by doing so, you will have moved a great deal closer to what Buddhists describe as 'understanding shunyata'. Why do you need to understand shunyata? Because by understanding and realising shunyata you will finally conquer not only your numbing fear of death but also the numbing assumption that you are alive.

None of your assumptions about who you are, who you make-believe you are, or the labels you attach to yourself is the real 'you'; it's all guesswork. And it is this very guesswork – assumption, make-believe, labelling and so on – that creates the illusion of samsara. Although the world around you and the beings within it 'appear', none of it 'exists'; it's all a fabricated illusion. Once you fully accept this truth – not just intellectually but practically – you will become fearless. You will see that *just as life is an illusion, so is death*. Even if you cannot fully realize this view, becoming familiar with it will reduce your fear of death exponentially.

This point is worth repeating. Fear is unreasonable and unnecessary, especially fear of death, and a huge chunk will instantly dissolve once you have truly accepted that all that appears and exists is merely a learned and fabricated illusion.

So, how do we come to accept that samsara is an illusion?

Life Is an Illusion

There are a number of methods available to those who are eager to fully realize the illusory nature of life and death. In fact, the sole aim of *all* the Buddha's teachings is to realize that each and every samsaric phenomenon is an illusion.

Start by listening to as much information as you can about the illusions that are 'life' and 'death' – a subject none of us can hear enough about. And don't make the mistake of thinking that *listening* and *hearing* are not authentic Dharma practices because the opposite is true.

Next, *contemplate* what you have heard and learn more by reading books.

Finally, and most importantly, try to *get used to* what you have learned. How? There are many methods for getting used to the idea that life is like a dream. The simplest and most effective is to ask a few questions. Just ask. There's no need to come up with any answers.

Emulate Zhuang Zhou

Like Zhuang Zhou, gaze at a butterfly and ask yourself,
Is this butterfly dreaming me? Am I this butterfly's dream?

Pinch Yourself

Pinch yourself – gently or roughly, it's up to you – and ask yourself,
Who is doing the pinching? Who is feeling the pinch?

Just Know and Watch Your Thoughts

At this very moment, you must be thinking something. As you think it, *just know* you are thinking that thought.

If you are thinking a bad thought, don't let it lead you to think about another thought – good or bad. Whatever the original bad thought, *just watch* it.

If you are thinking a good thought, *just watch* it.

If you are thinking about your car keys, *just know* that you are thinking about your car keys.

As you think about the car keys, if you suddenly fancy a cup of tea, *just know* that you are thinking about a cup of tea. Don't try to finish off the thought about the car keys.

If you feel overwhelmed by your fear of death, *just look* at it. Don't think about what you think you should be doing or how you think you should be doing it.

These few exercises will, at the very least, help you understand that a large part of your outer and inner world is nothing but assumption and projection.

Relax Your Expectations

If you have neither the time nor the inclination to become acquainted with the view that samsara is an illusion, try, while you are still alive and healthy, not to get too attached to your plans, hopes and expectations. At the very least, prepare yourself for the possibility that nothing will work out. Everything good in your life could, in the blink of an eye, become the exact opposite; and everything you value could suddenly become worthless.

Imagine that your best friend moves to the other side of the country. You meet very rarely and over time become emotionally distant from each other. One day he writes something on social media that offends you deeply, and suddenly he is your worst enemy. Life is full of this kind of reality-check.

Becoming aware of how things change is a useful form of mind training, and letting go of all your attachment to planning, scheduling and expectation will reduce your fear of death considerably. If you never experience disappointment or failure while you are alive, when you find yourself at death's door, you will be terrified. Of course, by then it will be too late for you to do anything for yourself. If you are lucky, your friends and family might be willing to take responsibility for gathering the causes and conditions to soothe and encourage you. And if you are very lucky, they won't try to deceive you into believing that you will live forever. The best thing any of us can do for a dying person is not to lie about what is happening to them.

Reduce Your Selfishness

Selfishness and greed cause the most intense kind of fear. We will all be alone once we are dead, but if your habit is constantly

to act out your self-obsession in front of an admiring audience, you will find the solitariness of death unbearable. Having become so used to the admiration of sycophants who indulge your every whim, when you find yourself entirely alone, you will be overwhelmed by unimaginable fear. So, by reducing selfishness you can reduce the intensity of your fear.

Reduce Your Attachment to Worldly Life

Some people are afraid of death because they are afraid of physical pain. But not everyone dies in pain. Whether you do or not will depend on your karma. As each person's karma is quite different, each person's experience of death will be unique. Some people will not realize they are dying. Others may not even realize that they are dead and have been dead for days or weeks. Death can strike suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, or agonizingly slowly. And the vast majority of the pain suffered at death is caused by an emotional attachment to life, possessions, friends, family, property and fretting over unfinished business.

Living Is Dying

> Since I was born
> I have to die,
> and so…[4]
>
> *Kisei*

Will nothing help at the moment of death?

Everything we human beings do, think and feel while we are alive is driven by ignorance, emotion and karma. And it's our ignorance, emotion and karma that conspire to ensure that we all have to face both birth and death entirely alone. We have no choice. Once we have been born, nothing and no one can prevent us from dying. The inevitability of death is initiated at birth and we are powerless to resist it.

If you don't want to experience the helplessness and loneliness of death and rebirth, you must gather the causes and conditions for never being reborn again while you are still alive.

At the moment of death, you may find yourself surrounded by relatives and friends, but it is extremely unlikely that they will be of any use to you – they may even make things worse. What if, as you breathe your last, you realize that, like vultures, your greedy relatives are already fighting over who gets what? That before your corpse is cold they will be stripping your beautiful home of all its treasures, hacking into your email accounts and breaking open your safety deposit boxes. As they stand at your deathbed, they may be squabbling over who gets your priceless Louis Quinze desk and your worthless nephew may be leafing through one of your precious first editions. Conversely, having those you love and who love you at your bedside as you pass away could make the pain of separation unbearable.

The gross human mind tends to think of death as the final separation of body from mind. A more precise description is that *death marks the end of a period of time.* Throughout so-called 'life', we are therefore experiencing a continuous stream of 'deaths'. The death of death is birth; the death of birth is abiding; the death of abiding is the birth of death. Everything you experience is simultaneously a death and a birth and if you are subject to the phenomenon called 'time', you will also be subject to death.

What is generally known as 'life' or 'living' is full of incident, but death, which is perhaps the most significant of all life's events, is quite the opposite. If you were to die tonight you would lose your identity and all your possessions, and not one of your plans would materialize. This is why death is such a big issue. For most of us, birth is far less of a worry and certainly nowhere near as frightening as death. In fact, we love births. Once a baby has been born, we congratulate the parents, then relentlessly commemorate its birthday for the rest of its life. An entire industry is now dedicated to servicing

birthdays: birthday cakes, birthday parties, birthday surprises and, of course, birthday cards are all available at the click of a button. Without having to lift a finger, social media makes it impossible for any of us to forget a single birthday – not even the cat's.

Unlike us, the great Mahayana masters thought of birth as a much greater hurdle to overcome than death. Nagarjuna, the great Indian scholar and mahasiddha, told his friend, the king[5], that for a spiritual person, birth is far more disturbing and a much bigger issue than death could ever be.

So, why do spiritual people value death over birth? Birth is the one event in this life over which we have absolutely no control. We pop out of our mothers' bodies without having been asked a single question. We have no say about where we are born, who our parents are, the day and hour of our birth, or even if we should be born in the first place. Every aspect is out of our hands.

The knowledge that we have been born is of no help whatsoever at any stage in our lives, whereas the knowledge that death is inevitable continually urges us to appreciate what we have right now. Knowing that we must die helps us to make the most of life. Knowing that death is imminent and certain is what makes it possible for us to love and to remain sane. It also prevents us from becoming desensitized and numbed by worldly life. For most of us, life is intoxicating; thinking about death is perhaps the only method available that can truly sober us up.

If you have been born, you will have to die; and if you are about to die, you will have to be reborn. How do we cut this cyclic game of birth and death? By realizing a state of awakening. Once you have been 'awakened' or become 'enlightened', you will no longer gather the causes and conditions that result in death and rebirth. But until then, you will be reborn and you will die, over and over and over again.

As birth and death are inseparable, we should mourn birth just as much as we mourn death. Especially these days. Just think for

one second about what your children will have to go through as adults. One day, your daughter will walk into a department store and become mesmerized by all manner of tantalizing phenomena – just the glossy red lipsticks alone will be utterly thrilling, not to mention the stationery. After that, there will be no avoiding the world of gourmet coffee and Starbucks, or fashion and wellness resorts, or bank balances and the concept of money. Wow! Her life will be tough.

Is There an Upside to Death?

Facing death helps us appreciate what it is to be alive, but hardly anyone thinks like that these days. Most modern people live blindly, completely ignoring the inevitability and unpredictability of death.

Buddha Nature

According to Buddhadharma, death teaches us one extremely positive truth: that the nature of each and every sentient being's mind is the Buddha; that the nature of my mind and the nature of your mind is the Buddha.

Buddha nature isn't some exotic New Age theory or occult phenomenon. Because you have buddha nature, whatever you do, wherever you are, the essence of your mind is the Buddha.

Feel the texture of the book or device you are holding, listen to what is going on around you, feel the softness of the cushion under your buttocks or the weight of your body on the soles of your feet. Think about the words you are reading: *the essence of your mind is the Buddha*.

The mind that does everything I have just mentioned – your own very ordinary mind – is the Buddha. Not only is your mind the Buddha, *the ordinary mind of every sentient being* that is aware, reads, sees, hears, tastes, and so on, *is also the Buddha.*

Think of a glass of muddy water. Even though the water itself is pure and clear, when stirred, it mixes with the mud and what we see is muddy water. In the same way, our basic lack of mindfulness and awareness stirs up all manner of thoughts and emotions that then mingle with and muddy our pure, clear mind.

Watch Your Mind

You can experience how this works right now. Stop reading for three minutes and look at your mind.

Now, ask yourself:

How long was it before a thought popped into your mind?
How long before you started thinking about that thought?
And how long before you were completely lost in that thought?

The process of one thought leading to another is a familiar one. Imagine you are waiting for a friend to pick you up to take you to a party. You start feeling excited the moment you hear the toot of a car horn. Who will be at the party? What will the food be like? Will there be party games? Will it be fun? And before you have even set foot outside your front door, let alone arrived at the party, you are already lost in thought.

Most of us lack any form of mindfulness and so we never see how our minds get entangled in our emotions and our bodies' gross preoccupations about friends, family, values, philosophies, political systems, money, possessions and relationships. For our entire lives, the awareness that is our buddha nature is blinded, diluted, befuddled, blurred and dulled by unfettered thoughts, until we become so swamped with feelings, confusions, expectations and complications that it's as if the nature of the mind didn't exist.

At the moment of death, whether you are a seasoned Buddhist practitioner, the CEO of Google, a Wall Street trader or a materialist

of any kind, the natural process of dying will force your mind to separate from everything you have ever known. Obviously, this means separation from your friends, family, house, the park and the gym, but it also means separation from the one thing that has been with you for your entire life, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, even while you sleep: your body. When you die, your whole body, including its most subtle elements (earth, water, fire, air, space) and senses must be left behind.

While you are alive, everything you think you see, hear, taste, touch, and so on, is filtered through your senses – your eyes, ears, tongue, body, and so on. By the time your mind experiences a perception, not only will it have passed through your sense organs and consciousness, it will also have been conditioned by your education and culture. This filtering process is what makes much of life possible.

Imagine you wake up one morning to find yourself in a strange place. Directly in front of you is a cream-coloured wall on which two black semi-circles and two circles have been painted. Instantly, based on your education and exposure to advertising, your mind interprets what it sees as 'COCO'. (Especially if you are 'nouveau riche' and know nothing about perfume. Not having yet heard of D.S. & Durga, you may still believe that Coco Chanel is the best perfume in the world.)

While we are alive, everything we perceive is interpreted by our conditioning and education – or lack of it. This is how we can name familiar smells, like sandalwood, lavender and the stink of stale urine in a public lavatory. It is also how we identify things. If dead oak leaves were crumbled up to look like tea and packed in a Fortnum and Mason's box labelled with an exotic name, many people would rush to buy it without even considering what it tastes like.

At death, the laws of nature shear away your physical senses and mind is left naked and entirely alone. As you no longer have

Statue of Buddha in Seoraksan National Park, South Korea

eyes made of flesh and blood, everything you perceive is raw and unfiltered. Without eyes to filter your perceptions, 'COCO' on the cream wall will look quite different.

Buddhism tells us that for a spiritual practitioner this moment of complete nakedness – the moment of death – is extremely precious. At death, the forces of nature actually help us to appreciate, recognize and grab hold of the innate nature that has always been within us – the Buddha. The moment of death is especially precious if the practitioner is already acquainted with the nature of mind. This is why Buddhists develop the skills and abilities they will need to make the most of the opportunities that death naturally brings, while they are still alive.

The moment of death is especially crucial for Tantrikas because even though you failed to achieve enlightenment while you were alive, you have developed the skills you will need to succeed at the moment of death.

The Certainty and Uncertainty of Death

For better or for worse, once we have stumbled into life through the process we call 'birth', the only thing we can be certain about is that we will die. But what none of us know for sure is precisely when death will happen, and it is this unsettling juxtaposition that makes death so fascinating to contemplate. The certainty that we will die is bad enough, but the uncertainty about *when* we will die is far worse – like buying an expensive Tiffany necklace but not knowing if you will ever get the chance to wear it.

Paradoxically, uncertainty about the time of death is what forces us to make plans. It is because we are so unsure and uncomfortable that we fill our days with appointments. But however carefully we plan, there is no guarantee that anything will actually happen. Just by agreeing to see a friend in London on Friday doesn't mean the meeting will take place – any number of imponderables could

get in the way. None of your plans are likely to work out exactly as you expect; not your children's future, or your grandparents' retirement, or your new flat, or that perfect business deal, or your dream holiday. They could fail completely, or succeed beyond your wildest dreams – after all, the unexpected isn't necessarily bad. The point is that whatever you do, however much effort you put into planning and scheduling, you can never be sure that any of it will happen. However strong your blind belief that everything always works out for the best, it rarely does. So the suffering you feel when your agenda collapses is entirely self-inflicted.

Making plans and appointments is also a very efficient way of consuming your future. Think about it. Every minute you set aside for a meeting or an activity is used up long before it even arrives. And by making that appointment, you will now have the additional suffering of having to make sure your plan pans out.

One of the main reasons we practise the Dharma is to prepare ourselves for certain death. For some, it is the only reason they practise – but that reason alone will make their Dharma practice worthwhile. These days various aspects of the Dharma, like mindfulness, are becoming more and more popular, but rarely as a preparation for death and definitely not as a preparation for what lies beyond death. Modern people meditate for every reason under the sun except the most important one. How many vipassana students meditate to prepare for death? And how many practise because they want to put an end to the cycle of death and rebirth for good? Most people meditate because they want to become better managers, or find partners, or feel happy, or because they long for a calm, stress-free mind and life. For them, meditation is a way of preparing for life, not death and is therefore no less mundane than their other worldly pursuits, like shopping, eating out, exercising and socializing.

If all you care about is learning how to relax and unwind, meditation is probably not your best option. Smoke a cigar

instead; it's a far easier and more immediately effective way of relaxing yourself than meditation. Pour yourself a good single malt. Or browse through your social media pages. Sitting cross-legged with a straight back as you watch yourself breathe in and out is not only extremely boring but, for many of us, quickly becomes physically painful. Most 'meditators' end up spending more time worrying about whether they really are being mindful than actually practising. And all that worrying can't be good for your blood pressure, can it?

Life is full of surprises. If you are reading this book to prepare yourself for the death of a terminally ill loved one, however young and healthy you are, there is no guarantee that it won't be you who dies first. So, your best bet is to be ready for anything and fully aware of the realities of samsara. But if, instead, you hang on to your blind expectations and assumptions, if you remain oblivious to how things really are, if you are greedy, stupidly laid-back, and if you continue to count on all your worldly plans working out perfectly, when the worst happens, your suffering will be excruciating and you won't be able to do a thing about it.

Preparation for Death and Beyond

The Buddha said that the supreme mindfulness is remembering that life is impermanent and death inevitable.

> Of all footprints
> That of the elephant is supreme;
> Of all mindfulness meditations
> That on death is supreme.[6]

Some people know intuitively that their lives are coming to an end. Even though they are healthy and young and there is no logical reason for them to die, they sense that death is near. Others know they will die because they have been diagnosed with an incurable, terminal disease. Unless they are spiritual pracititioners, this is when most people panic, become depressed and lose hope. But instead of panicking, most spiritual practitioners recognize that death is their big chance to step up, enhance their Dharma practice, and wind down all the meaningless activities that fill their worldly lives.

Whether you know you only have a few months to live or think you have your whole life ahead of you, death is a reality that will have to be faced sooner or later. And as far as the Buddhist teachings are concerned, the sooner you face it, the better.

Face the Fact That You Will Die

> Death destroys a man: the idea of Death saves him.[7]
>
> *E.M. Forster*

The first thing to do is convince yourself that, even though you have no idea when it will happen, *you will die*.

People die every day. We all find ourselves standing at the deathbed of a loved one at some point in our lives. Yet, how many of us really believe that death will happen to us?

A common reaction to receiving the news that we are about to die is to feel cheated and hard done by. Subconsciously we think, "Why is this happening to me? And why now? I'm young, not 99 years old! If I were old, I'd understand because obviously it would be my time to die. But why now? My life has hardly begun!"

So your first preparation for death is to convince yourself that, although you have no idea when it will happen, it is absolutely certain that you will die.

Secondly, you are not the only person who has ever had to face death. We will all have to die, so there is nothing unfair about it.

> … whenever you think, "I am dying!" visualize the Guru, Lord of Sages, on the crown of your head and generate intense faith. Then think: "It is not only me: all sentient beings are subject to the law of death, no-one is exempt. Although we have repeatedly undergone countless births and deaths here in samsara, we have only ever known the suffering of death and all these births have been entirely devoid of meaning. But now I will make sure that this present death of mine is meaningful!"[8]
>
> *Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche*

The process of dying begins the moment we are born. No one expects a baby to slip out of its mother and make a will. But

as you get older – at 50 perhaps, or better still, 40 – you should think carefully about what you want to do and achieve before you die.

Live Life to the Full

Try to enjoy your life. Go to Machu Picchu, or Madagascar, or wherever you have always dreamed of visiting. Be realistic about what you need to buy and own. Ask yourself, do I really need another Ferrari? Do I really need that much money in the bank? Remind yourself that taking care of expensive toys and bank accounts often creates more stress than joy – unless, of course, you take great pleasure in philanthropy and are planning to put your abundant cash to good use.

Start to look at and relate to everything and everyone around you as if you were seeing them for the last time.

Deal with all the outstanding problems or disputes within your family and among friends; now is the time to sort out any misunderstandings and resolve lingering bad feeling.

Above all, the best preparation for death is to live a full life. Enjoy the most delicious tea in the world, made properly and not drunk out of plastic cups. Wear the clothes you have always longed to wear. Read the books you have always wanted to read. Do everything you have always wanted to do, however outrageous or obnoxious. And do it now, because you may never get another chance.

Shop Consciously and Make a Will

We human beings love our creature comforts and every one of us wants to be happy. It's why we put so much effort into stockpiling money and material goods. Isn't it ironic that everything we do for the sake of comfort and ease ends up being the source of endless stress and heartache.

If you own money and property, decide how it should be used once you are dead; settle your material affairs and make a

will. Perhaps you could give your worldly goods and house to your children, or nieces, or cousins? Or to a save-the-leopard foundation? Or to cancer research?

Try to act more consciously. When you shop, be clear-headed. Stop buying and hoarding useless objects – don't be a 'packrat'. If you want to plan and make long-term investments, do it in the full knowledge that you could die before those investments mature.

Family Ties

For many of us, family relationships cause the most problems, especially as we approach death. In places like China, the family continues to be a very powerful social unit. To this day, traditional ideas about family roles perpetuate rigid and often repressive cultural and social expectations. Fathers must always fulfill the obligations that Chinese fathers have always fulfilled, and children must live, as Chinese children always have lived, to please their parents. But how beneficial are these family entanglements?

Parents are expected to provide for their children, no matter what it takes. But is obsessive parental devotion what children really need? Does it do them any good? Having dedicated at least two decades to bringing up their children, many Chinese parents then have to deal with yet another level of family entanglement when grandchildren start appearing. Shouldn't there be some kind of sell-by date on all-consuming family involvements?

Chinese children are under just as much pressure to live up to social expectations as their parents, including taking responsibility for their parents as they get older. But actually, anyone who aspires to be a decent human should willingly do all they can to care for their parents, family and friends.

Of course, there is no reason not to enjoy family life, but in terms of preparing for death, try to participate consciously. Always remember that sooner or later you will die and, in that light, try to watch yourself as you navigate family life. If that 'watcher' is

always conscious of how you behave, think and act, your family obligations and attachments will be less limiting.

Whatever you do, always remember that death, which is unpredictable but certain, is just around the corner, and that when you die, you die alone. So try to use the 'watcher' to help you avoid getting bogged down in too many knotty, emotional family complications.

Chant OM MANI PADME HUM

The ideal preparation for death is to study all Buddha's teachings about refuge, bodhichitta and dependent arising in great detail. Unfortunately, most modern people don't have time to study. So, what can you do? You can chant OM MANI PADME HUM. Those of you who are more familiar with Chinese Buddhist tradition could chant NAMO GUAN SHI YIN PUSA; or if you prefer a Japanese Buddhist tradition, ON ARORIKYA SOWAKA. If you are more drawn to the Thai Theravadin tradition, you could chant BUDDHO[9].

Whether you are a Buddhist or not, the moment of death itself is crucial. This is when you will need to do the simplest and most powerful of practices, which is to chant OM MANI PADME HUM. So, as a preparation for the moment of your own death, why not start chanting OM MANI PADME HUM now. If you wish, you can suggest this method to anyone who also wants to prepare themselves for death. It really helps.

What makes the OM MANI PADME HUM mantra so powerful? The cause of all our pain and suffering in this human existence is not knowing that life and death are illusions; or to put it another way, that the bardos of life and death are mere projections. We imagine that everything we see and experience truly exists, then we misinterpret our perceptions and, as a result, we suffer. The six syllables of OM MANI PADME HUM are directly connected with the 'six doors of projection'. And it is through these six doors that we

create the projections that make up the illusions of life, death and the bardos.

What Is 'Bardo'?

'Bardo' is a Tibetan word that means 'in between' and is sometimes translated as 'intermediate state'. To put it very simply, a bardo is what lies in between two illusory boundaries. For example, this very moment lies between the boundaries of the past and the future; in other words, today lies between yesterday and tomorrow. At the same time, we must always remember that everything is an illusion, including the bardos, so there are no truly existing borders dividing the past from the present or the present from the future. This is important.

One of the most significant and profound of all bardos lies between the beginning of the period during which we are completely unaware of the existence of our inherent buddha nature and the moment we awaken to it, which Buddhists describe as 'enlightenment'. In other words, everything that happens in between 'not recognizing' and 'recognizing' buddha nature is called a 'bardo'. Within this vast bardo are myriad smaller bardos, including the 'bardo of this life'. This bardo is crucially important to ordinary people like us because it is where we have the most opportunity to choose or change our direction.

The six doors of projection create our experience of each of the six realms[10]. Projections and experiences caused by desire and need lead to the human realm; pride leads to the god realm; jealousy leads to the asura realm; confusion and a lack of awareness lead to the animal realm; miserliness and greed lead to the preta realm – the realm of the 'hungry ghosts'; and anger leads to the hell realms. While we are alive, human beings continually experience each one of these projections and therefore don't need to imagine what rebirth in the other realms might be like.

The Buddha Statue in the Mahabodhi Stupa at Bodhgaya, India

Take Refuge

If your spiritual tastes incline towards Buddhism, an extremely effective and important preparation for death is to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – ideally from now until you attain enlightenment.

People sometimes ask if it is necessary for them to go to India or the Himalayas to find a guru so that they can take refuge properly. No, it isn't.

What is taking refuge? The heart of taking refuge is trust. You take refuge by making a conscious decision to trust that the Dharma is the irrefutable truth. You choose to believe in the truth that all compounded things are impermanent, all emotions are pain, and so on[11]. And you choose to surrender to the truth of the

Dharma, to the Buddha (who taught that truth), and to the Sangha (your fellow practitioners who have also surrendered to that truth). Once you have wholeheartedly and unconditionally surrendered to the truth of the Triple Gem, you will have taken refuge.

You don't have to go through the traditional ritual of taking refuge if you don't want to, but many people find that participating in a ceremony helps enhance their appreciation of what taking refuge really is. Ritual also gives you the confidence to believe that you really have surrendered to the truth. But unless you particularly want to, you don't have to take refuge in the presence of a Buddhist master, monk or nun. Your witness can be anyone who has taken refuge themselves – like your next-door neighbour. All they have to do is recite the verses of refuge, which you then repeat out loud. The crucial aspect of this ritual is that as you recite the verse, you must mean what you say. Of course, the presence of a witness or your teacher may help you strengthen your resolve to study and practise, but their involvement is not strictly necessary. If you prefer, you can take refuge alone. All you have to do is recite a refuge verse in the presence of a statue or a painting of the Buddha, or simply imagine that the Buddha is in front of you and mentally take refuge in the Triple Gem.

How to Take Refuge Simply

Start by placing a Buddhist text, such as an Abhidhamma or a Prajnaparamita sutra, on a clean table. If you have a statue of the Buddha, place it next to the sutra.

If you wish, you can kneel in front of the statue and the book, with your hands folded in prayer. This is just a suggestion and entirely optional. If kneeling in this way would be an affront to your cultural upbringing, or you just don't want to do it, then don't.

You can elaborate this ritual, if you wish, by offering a flower or burning incense. But again, such offerings are entirely optional.

Think to yourself or say out loud:

I surrender to the truth that:
All compounded things are impermanent – this body of mine will die;
All emotions are pain – as each of my emotions is stained by hope and fear it is unreliable;
All phenomena have no inherently existent nature – whatever I think I see is my own projection and not how things truly are.

I surrender to this truth, the Dharma;
I surrender to the One who expounded this truth, the Buddha;
And I surrender to the system that abides according to the laws of this truth, the Sangha.

If you need the reassurance of a traditional refuge formula, recite whichever verse you like best, or all of them, it's up to you.

Namo Buddhāya guruve
Namo Dharmāya tāyine
Namo Saṃghāya mahate tribhyopi
Satataṃ namaḥ[12]

Homage to the Buddha, the teacher;
Homage to the Dharma, the protector;
Homage to the great Sangha –
To all three, I continually offer homage.

Buddhaṃ sharaṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dharmaṃ sharaṇaṃ gacchāmi
Samghaṃ sharaṇaṃ gacchāmi[13]

I take refuge in the Buddha.
I take refuge in the Dharma.
I take refuge in the Sangha.

In the Buddha, the Dharma and the Supreme Assembly
I take refuge until I attain enlightenment.
Through the merit of practising generosity, and so on,
May I attain buddhahood for the benefit of all beings.[14]

Until the essence of enlightenment is reached,
I go for refuge to the Buddhas.
Also I take refuge in the Dharma
And in all the host of Bodhisattvas.[15]

For those who prefer a Taiwanese tradition

From now until the end of my life, I [your name],
Take refuge in the Buddha,
Take refuge in the Dharma,
Take refuge in the Sangha. *(3 times)*

I have taken refuge with the Buddha.
I have taken refuge with the Dharma.
I have taken refuge with the Sangha. *(3 times)*

For those who prefer a mainland Chinese tradition

I return to and rely on the Buddha, vowing that all living beings
Profoundly understand the great Way, and bring forth the Bodhi mind.
I return to and rely on the Dharma, vowing that all living beings
Enter deeply into Treasury of Sutra Treasury, and that their wisdom is as vast as the sea.
I return to and rely on the Sangha, vowing that all living beings
Form a great assembly, in harmony with one and all.

I take refuge in the Buddha, so I do not fall into the realm of hell beings.
I take refuge in the Dharma, so I do not to fall into the realm of hungry ghosts.

I take refuge in the Sangha, so I do not to fall into the realm
of animals.

I vow not to seek the bliss of the realms of human or heavenly beings, nor the fruition of the shravaka or pratyekabuddha, nor the fruition of the bodhisattva of an expedient stage, but to seek to attain supreme enlightenment together with all living beings.

I take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, until
I attain enlightenment. By the merit I have accumulated through the practise of generosity and the other perfections, may
I attain enlightenment for the benefit of all migrators.

May the state be at peace while armed revolts are quelled.
May the wind and rain be temperate so that people
enjoy well-being and ease.
May this well-disciplined assembly wish to accomplish an
advantageous advance.
May everyone traverse the ten bodhisattva stages
with no difficulty.

Living beings are boundless, I vow to save them all;
Afflictions are endless, I vow to serve them all;
Dharma doors are limitless, I vow to study them all;
The Buddha Way is unsurpassed, I vow to obtain it.

May this merit and virtue,
Repay the four kindnesses above,
And aid those in the three realms of sufferings below.
May all who see or hear this, bring forth the Bodhi mind.

For those who prefer a Japanese tradition:

ON SARABA TATAGYATA HANNA MANNANO NAU KYAROMI[16]

I pay my homage to the feet of all the Tathagatas.

ON BOCHI SHITTA BODA HADA YAMI[17]

OM
I arouse the bodhicitta 'decision to obtain enlightenment'.

NAMO
Until I and all beings attain enlightenment,
I take refuge in the three roots.
To attain buddhahood for the benefit of others,
I arouse aspiration, action and absolute bodhichitta.

For those who prefer the Pali tradition:

Buddhaṃ sharaṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dharmaṃ sharaṇaṃ gacchāmi
Samghaṃ sharaṇaṃ gacchāmi

Dutiyampi Buddhaṃ sharaṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Dharmaṃ sharaṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Samghaṃ sharaṇaṃ gacchāmi

Tatiyampi Buddhaṃ sharaṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi Dharmaṃ sharaṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi Samghaṃ sharaṇaṃ gacchāmi

I go to the Buddha as my refuge.
I go to the Dhamma, the Teachings, as my refuge.
I go to the Sangha, the Community, as my refuge.

For the second time I go to the Buddha as my refuge.
For the second time I go to the Dhamma, the Teachings,
as my refuge.

Great Wisdom Sutra from the Chū sonji Temple Sutra Collection

For the second time I go to the Sangha, the Community,
as my refuge.

For the third time I go to the Buddha as my refuge.
For the third time I go to the Dhamma, the Teachings,
as my refuge.
For the third time I go to the Sangha, the Community,
as my refuge.

The Bodhisattva Vow

If you decide you want to take refuge, why not make the most of the opportunity and make the bodhisattva's vow at the same time. A bodhisattva is someone who consciously longs to bring all sentient beings to enlightenment and ultimate happiness, then dedicates their lives towards making that long-term goal a reality. All the great bodhisattvas of the past have taken the bodhisattva vow, which is an even more powerful way of preparing for death than just taking refuge. By vowing to guide all sentient beings to enlightenment, you become actively involved in the grandest of all spiritual visions. No matter how long it takes, no matter how many difficulties you must face, you willingly vow to die and be reborn billions of times in order to fulfill your goal.

Making the bodhisattva vow can also help you reassure yourself that you really have stepped onto the path of the bodhisattva. Often, we make this vow ceremonially, in front of witnesses, but you can also make it entirely alone – it's up to you.

If you decide to make the vow formally, sit cross-legged with a straight back. If you would rather do it informally and don't want to sit cross-legged, make it as you walk around or as you sit in your office. Again, it's up to you which method you use.

Start by arousing the two crucial aspects of bodhichitta in your mind: your ultimate goal, which is to awaken all sentient beings from ignorance by bringing them to enlightenment; and the determination never to stop working towards making universal enlightenment a reality.

Promise wholeheartedly never to stop working towards the realization of bodhichitta and declare unequivocally that nothing and no one will get in your way – not death and not rebirth. However enormous the tasks involved, you are absolutely determined to accomplish the enlightenment of all sentient beings, come what may. Your determination is so great that your own death at the end of this life will be little more than a hiccup in the process and will not affect your overall plan one iota.

The Bodhisattva Vow

Just as all the Buddhas of the past
Have brought forth the awakened mind,
And in the precepts of the Bodhisattvas
Step-by-step abode and trained,

Likewise, for the benefit of beings,
I will bring to birth the awakened mind,
And in those precepts, step-by-step,
I will abide and train myself.[18]

In fact, as the vast majority of sentient beings are absolutely terrified of dying, why not turn your own fear of death into a path. Think to yourself:

All sentient beings live under the shadow of the fear of death.
May I take on all their fear myself.

I know this life is nearly over,
I know that I will die soon, and
I know that in the future
I will experience death a million times over.
But whatever happens,
May my wish to enlighten all sentient beings
And my bodhisattva activities never wane.

I am a bodhisattva.
I am a child of the Buddha.
Like all sentient beings
I have buddha nature;
The difference is that I *know* I have buddha nature,
Whereas most other sentient beings do not.

Fully equipped with the Buddha's precious Dharma,
I will joyfully fulfill my duty as a bodhisattva,
And bring all sentient beings to enlightenment.

In the same way that there are many traditional refuge prayers to choose from there are also many bodhicitta practices, like the following practice from Taiwan.

Arousing Bodhichitta

In 'Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom' *(Mahāprajnāpāramitāśāstra), love and compassion are included in the Four Immeasurables.* They *are called 'love immeasurable' and 'compassion immeasurable' respectively. The Four Immeasurables*

Bodhisattvas come in all shapes, sizes and species,
and from all walks of life... and death.

is a very important daily practice in Tibetan Buddhism. Many Tibetan Buddhists recite it for their whole life.

The Four Immeasurables

May all sentient beings have happiness and the causes of happiness.
May all sentient beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.
May all sentient beings never be separated from the happiness that has no suffering.
May all sentient beings live in equanimity, free from attachment and aversion.

The Bodhisattva Vow

The essence of the bodhisattva vow is to prompt the aspiration to supreme bodhichitta. The principle of bodhichitta is:

The Four Vast Vows

Sentient beings are countless; I vow to deliver them all.
Afflictions are endless; I vow to eradicate them all.
Dharma means are immeasurable; I vow to learn them all.
Buddha Bodhi is unsurpassed; I vow to attain it.

Always Walking the Bodhisattva Path

May the three kinds of hindrances and all afflictions be eliminated.
May I gain wisdom and true understanding.
May all hindrances caused by negative thoughts and actions be removed.
May I always walk the Bodhisattva Way, life after life.

Dedication

May the merit and virtue accrued from this work be dedicated to [the name of the deceased],
Requite the fourfold kindness from above,

And relieve the suffering of the three life-paths below.
May all those who see and hear of this
Activate Bodhichitta,
And when this retribution body is over,
Be born together in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Aspiration

I wish to be reborn in the Western Pure Land.
I wish to have the lotus of nine grades as my parents.
When the flower opens, I will see the Buddha
And realize that dharmas have no birth.
The Bodhisattvas who never regress will be my companions.

- An English translation of the *Ritual of the Bodhisattva Vow* according to the tradition of Patrul Rinpoche is available for download at: www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/patrul-rinpoche/bodhisattva-vow

Think Big

From a Buddhist point of view, the best way to prepare for death is to enter into the immense vision of bodhichitta and to think big. By doing so, the power of your practice will escalate exponentially.

One of the main problems most of us have with our view of life and death is that we don't think big. Too many of us – even Buddhists – are small-minded and petty. By arousing and applying bodhichitta, our limited perception of the world and everything in it becomes far more expansive. Small-minded people only think about themselves, this life and their immediate environment. On the few occasions they manage to think beyond themselves, it is rarely further than their own family. Only when death draws near do such people begin to realize just how narrow and selfish their lives have been, how few of their achievements had any real or lasting value, and how many of the projects that took up so much of their time and energy were either entirely insignificant or failed to come to fruition. From this point of view, if there were

just one life, death really would be a 'now or never' situation. So is it any wonder that at death the small-minded are convinced that they are doomed to eternal failure? What they lack is a long-term vision and purpose that ranges over many lifetimes. If they were to develop the determination to bring all sentient beings to enlightenment, however many lifetimes it takes, they would feel quite differently.

So try to think beyond your immediate circle of family and friends. Develop a genuine concern for the welfare of *all* living beings, including strangers and especially your enemies. And bear in mind that, in the context of the ultimate goal of a bodhisattva, taking care of the welfare of others is far more than merely making sure that everyone has enough to eat and a roof over their heads. Caring for others is to fervently wish and pray that every single sentient being attains enlightenment. By making this wish again and again, your view will gradually become more and more expansive. This is how you learn to 'think big'.

Simple Practices to Prepare for Death

Woody Allen is often quoted as having said:

> I'm not afraid of dying – I just don't want to be there when it happens.

Unfortunately for Woody Allen, he is likely to be far more 'there' and aware at the moment of death than he was at any other time in his life. So, what would I say to someone like Woody Allen about how to prepare for death?

If he were open to it, I would mention bodhichitta's big vision of love, compassion and the wish to enlighten all sentient beings. I would also tell him that everything we see, hear, touch and so on – including birth and death – is a projection created by our own minds.

I would then take him step-by-step through a mindfulness practice so that he could get used to the idea that everything is an illusion projected by mind.

Mindfulness Practice

Woody, look at your coffee. Just look at it.

If, as you look at your coffee, you find yourself thinking about your car, just bring your mind back to your coffee. Try doing this a few times.

If you wish, you can now go a step further.

Instead of focusing on your coffee, look at the thought that is passing through your mind at this very moment.

Just stare at that thought. Merely observe it.

Don't allow the thought to become entangled in your next thought. Don't analyse the thought, don't reject it, don't adopt it and don't take it seriously.

A thought doesn't have to be interesting for it to be worth staring at. Even if the thought is the most mundane, banal and boring thought that ever popped into your mind, just stare at it, without trying to adjust or improve it.

This is what I would say to Woody Allen. And I'd say it again and again.

By putting my advice into practice, Woody, you will realize just how powerful mind really is. You will also see for yourself that it is mind that continuously creates projections, and mind that instantly forgets what it has just done. You will see how mind starts believing that everything it perceives outside of itself is real and 'there', then forgets that it created those projections itself.

Once mind is convinced that everything is 'outside' and 'separate', it starts learning how to alienate itself from its own projections. Convinced that it is entirely separate from what it sees, mind projects all kinds of ideas and concepts that it then goes in search of. So it is mind that projects the concept of 'god', and mind that then chases around in circles trying to find that god. Mind is such a masochist! It's as if it *wants* to feel alienated from god, just to have something to pray to.

Once you realize that everything you see is projected by your own mind, you are well on the way to understanding that 'everything' necessarily includes birth, death, living and dying. This information and practice will help loosen your grip on your ideas about what 'living' really is. You will begin to realize that life and living are simply part of yet another illusion.

Having said all that, Woody, I strongly recommend that you now go to your favourite jazz club and listen to the music you love. Don't waste time! Spend all your money doing everything you have always wanted to do. And try to make others happy too, because making others happy will make you happy.

This is what I would say to Woody Allen.

Apply Awareness

As every moment of life also involves a small death, life itself provides us with many opportunities for glimpsing death. Most people these days are so distracted that few manage to make the most of these opportunities. Nevertheless, there is a way of relating to life's small deaths that will help you prepare for the death of your body at the end of this life.

All you have to do is *notice* that there is a death in everything you do and in every moment – in a relationship, a marriage, a way of life, an almost empty cup of coffee.

In many ways, this method sounds too simple to be truly effective. Yet this mere awareness is the key to understanding that death is part of every moment in life.

Learn how to be aware without feeling that you always have to *do* something. Just notice.

Ironically, the changes and deaths we experience in life bring us far more good than bad. Even so, we always make such a big drama about everything, especially the changes we label as 'bad'. So learn to enjoy and appreciate life instead of brooding about the things you have absolutely no control over.

Sleep Practice

Whatever your belief or spiritual practice, always aspire to recognize that your dreams are just dreams. *Know* as you dream

Reclining Buddha

that you are dreaming. The big mistake we all make in every one of our many lives is to imagine that everything we experience is real. Stop making that mistake!

As you fall asleep, simulate the moment of death by forcing yourself to believe that you are about to die. If you wish, try the following method, which is based on the practice of aspiration.

For Non-Buddhists

As you lie down to go to sleep, think to yourself: tonight I may die. This may be it. I may never wake up again.

Forgive those you need to forgive.

Forget everything that should be forgotten.

Bring to mind anything that calms and relaxes you – it could be a falling leaf or a quacking duck.

More importantly, make the wish that you and every other sentient being will have and experience all that is good. In fact, if you can focus on caring for others more than yourself, not only will it bring you great joy, it will simultaneously ensure that you yourself are well looked after.

As you fall asleep, your awareness of your body – what your eyes see, what your nose smells, what your tongue tastes, and so on – will be detached by sleep.

When you next wake up, imagine you have been reborn and that a new life has just begun.

Observe how you reconnect with your senses and sense objects.

Notice the song of the blackbird, smell your stale morning breath, taste your night-time mouth taste.

Think to yourself:

> The world I have awoken into will not last forever.

Look at your new table and that packet of exquisite, unopened Japanese stationery. Use them both and appreciate them *now* – it may be your last chance.

For Buddhists

If you wish, follow an old Buddhist tradition and imagine that all the buddhas and bodhisattvas have gathered on your pillow. Then, just before you lie down, offer them a prostration.

If you would like to emulate the Buddha's famous reclining position, lie on your right side as you go to sleep.

Think:

> I want to make good use of this night's sleep.
> I surrender to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.
> I want this night's sleep to be beneficial and meaningful for both myself and others.

As you fall asleep, think:

> I am dying;
> My consciousness of my senses is dissolving.

As you wake up, think:

I have been reborn.
I long to make good use of this fleeting life
For the benefit of myself and others.

For Tantrikas

Aspire to perceive and experience the luminosity of simple cognisance. As the process of falling asleep offers an excellent opportunity for recognizing this luminosity, make strong aspirations to simply 'cognize'. At death, all your sensory mechanisms will dissolve, which means this 'simple cognisance' will be entirely unbothered by your senses or your reaction to sense objects. All that will be left is your mind.

So, bearing in mind the sleep practice that has already been described, visualize a lotus at the centre of your heart on which sits your guru, who is the embodiment of all the Buddhas. Then, as you fall asleep, just think about your guru.

How Buddhists Prepare for Death

Empty-handed I entered the world
Barefoot I leave it.
My coming, my going —
Two simple happenings
That got entangled.[19]

Kozan Ichikyo

Buddhists view death as a tremendous spiritual opportunity, but why?

Without having to do anything at all, the processes we naturally go through as we die will bring us face-to-face with the ground of liberation. The great Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche famously described this ground as the "basic goodness of a human being". At the moment of death, mind separates from body and, for a split second, every one of us experiences the nakedness of our buddha nature, tathagatagarbha. In that split second, if the ground of liberation is pointed out and we recognize it, we will be liberated.

To put it another way, *if* you die in a conducive environment, *if* a qualified person is present at the moment of death to introduce you to your buddha nature, and *if* you are receptive to that introduction, you may be liberated. So yes, the moment of death offers a huge opportunity.

The act of having the ground of liberation pointed out to you makes a powerful impression on your alaya. So even if you are not liberated at the moment of death, when you hear words like 'buddha nature' in your next life, or 'tathagatagarbha', 'basic goodness of a human being' and 'ground of liberation', they will sound familiar or feel like déjà vu – both of which are signs that you may be a good vessel for Mahasandhi practice.

Right now, your buddha nature is wrapped in the cocoon of your physical body, the labels and names you assign to all phenomena, the distinctions you make, and your habits, culture, values and emotions. The entire purpose and aim of the Buddha's Dharma is to liberate and free us from this cocoon. But in order to fully understand this liberation, we first need to know about the ground of liberation.

What Is the 'Ground of Liberation'?

It's a bit like this. Imagine you are sitting on a sofa in a very small living room. Suddenly, all you want to do is dance, so you move the sofa into the dining room. You can move the sofa because, no matter how heavy and bulky it is, the sofa is movable, and the space you move it into is inherently available.

To put it another way, the ground of liberation – also known as the 'ground of awakening' – is something like a state of awakened dreaming. When we have a nightmare, however terrifying the experience, nothing actually happens because the moment we wake up the nightmare dissolves without trace. The fact that nothing happens is the 'ground of liberation', 'buddha nature'. So if there are no spiders in your bed before you get into it, as you go sleep, while you sleep and when you wake up, however large and hairy the spiders in your nightmare, there is and never was a spider in your bed. In other words, you are not your dream. No one experiences dreams constantly, just occasionally, and because you

are not your dream you can wake up – if you were your dream, you would never be able to wake up.

It is the 'ground of liberation' that makes it possible for us to wake up from the sleep-like illusion of this life. For a dying Buddhist, knowing that we are all given the opportunity to awaken into the ground of liberation when we die is extremely encouraging. It reminds us that the moment of death is our big chance to wake up and be liberated.

But of course, all these examples and arguments are based on specific Buddhist concepts. I have often wondered if someone who is not Buddhist and therefore has no understanding of the Buddhist jargon used to describe these methods, would be able to take advantage of the opportunity death offers. Death may only be an opportunity when looked at from a Buddhist perspective.

Cut All Worldly Entanglements

The great Buddhist yogis of the past, like Milarepa, used to long with all their hearts to die in a solitary place and entirely alone.

> No-one to ask me if I'm sick,
> No-one to mourn me when I die:
> To die here alone in this hermitage
> Is everything a yogi could wish for.[20]

> May men not know of my death,
> And birds not see my rotting corpse.
> If I am able to die in this mountain retreat,
> The wish of this lowly one will be fulfilled.[21]

As a Buddhist practitioner, even though you know only too well that death is imminent and inescapable, it is very likely that your diary will always be full of business meetings and social events. Whatever your beliefs, there will always be a summer

holiday to plan, or a family Christmas, or a Thanksgiving dinner or a birthday party. But, as I have already mentioned, there is no guarantee that any of your plans will actually come to fruition. Hanging on to the belief that everything will work out for the best only stokes the fires of disappointment – remember this, it's an important point. Most of humanity's most serious problems arise from blind hope and unreasonable assumption.

As death draws near, try to give up your worldly concerns. Stop worrying about your family. Stop making plans. Stop thinking about what you haven't managed to accomplish and all the appointments in your diary.

If you are brave and courageous and if your situation allows you to make choices, it is usually best not to tell your wider circle of friends and acquaintances that you are about to die. It is especially important for spiritual people to distance themselves from unnecessary worldly concerns that may cause worry and anxiety at the moment of death. Tantrikas should, of course, tell their guru and close spiritual friends who may be able to offer spiritual help and support during the dying process and beyond. But try to withdraw from your worldly friends and family. Non-Buddhist children, brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers are unlikely to appreciate the spiritual aspect of your death and their grief and sorrow could easily distract and worry you.

The Buddhist teachings recommend that as death draws near, we should follow the example of a wounded deer and retire to a solitary place. However, in today's mundane world, it is very unlikely that we will be able to choose to die alone. Imagine the media-driven public outrage, the conspiracy theories and the lawsuits that would follow the discovery of a decomposing corpse, weeks after death! For most of us, complete solitude at death will be impossible. But what we can control is who knows about our imminent death and who doesn't.

Confess

Bring to mind every one of your shameful, selfish, negative thoughts and actions and confess them all. If you are a Tantrika, also bring to mind and confess all your broken samayas, vows and commitments. If you can, make your confession face-to-face, either to a lama or to a Dharma brother or sister. If neither is possible, make your confession mentally. Then take refuge and renew your bodhisattva vows. Ideally, Tantrikas should ask a vajra brother or sister who follows the same guru to witness their reaffirmation of the bodhisattva and Vajrayana vows.

Remind Yourself About What Is About to Happen

Start reminding yourself about what happens during the 'painful bardo of dying'. The stages of dissolution are described on page 128. Remind yourself that these stages could happen all at once, one after another, or in a different order, depending on your unique situation. So it's vital that you familiarize yourself with all the details before you die. If you know that you will die very soon – for example, if you have just been diagnosed with a fast-moving terminal disease – you should immediately reacquaint yourself with these teachings so that at death you know what is going on.

Take Refuge and Generate Bodhichitta

For Buddhists, the simplest answer to the question, "how should I prepare for death" is to take refuge and arouse bodhichitta.

The foundation of your preparation for death is to take refuge, which will introduce you to much of what you need to know and do. By arousing bodhichitta and 'thinking big', you will find the courage and determination to continue working towards your goal of enlightening all sentient beings, including yourself, come what may. Your willingness to die and be reborn billions of times to

continue helping suffering beings will put death into perspective. When you are then faced with your own death, instead of being a huge obstacle, it will be little more than a minor setback.

As you get closer and closer to death, think about and contemplate bodhichitta as often as possible. Initially, it may feel fake, but only because you don't believe you are capable of arousing genuine bodhichitta. In this frame of mind, it's easy to feel disappointed in yourself – to feel like a fraud. Stop thinking like that! All you need in order to generate bodhichitta is the desire to make others happy, and you have that desire. You are generous and you are kind. You have made other people happy many times throughout your life, and making others happy has made you happy. Remember it all, because it proves that you have the ability and capacity to want to make all sentient beings happy. Trust that ability. Arouse and develop that wish to help.

There will, of course, be times when you long to drive your BMW down a German autobahn one last time. Or, catching sight of a much-loved suitcase, you may long to visit India before you die. Or wish you could live long enough to see your pretty, chubby niece or lanky nephew get married. At such times, it is important to contemplate absolute bodhichitta.

Absolute Bodhichitta

It will be difficult to think about absolute bodhichitta while you are dying and at the moment of death, so think about it while you are still alive.

Think:

> Life is a projection, life is a mirage;
> Death is a projection, death is an illusion;
> Birth is a projection, birth is a dream;
> This very existence is a projection, this existence is a dream.
> Even the taste of coffee is a projection, even coffee is an illusion.

Remind yourself of the illusory nature of samsara, however contrived or fake it feels – ideas often feel fake until you get used to them. Faking it is the best preparation for the moment of death. And at death, you really will have to summon up all your courage.

Remembering that life is as illusory as a dream will help make life and death seem little more than a nightmare. Life and death are illusions, but that does not mean they do not exist. Coffee tastes of coffee, not orange juice; gold is gold, not brass. To accept that life and death are illusions is to acknowledge that everything we see and feel is a human projection. Coffee is not coffee to a beetle; orange juice is not orange juice to a camel; gold holds no value for a dog. Some projections seem valuable while others appear worthless and you must distinguish between the two based on values you learn through human projections. When, finally, you truly wake up to enlightenment, you will realize that everything you have experienced throughout trillions of lifetimes was just a dream; it's like pouring cold water into boiling water. This kind of contemplation helps.

Focus on Your Spiritual Practice

If you are lucky enough to know that you will almost certainly die within a year, or a month, or a week, then of course you must concentrate on your own practice. Focus on the easiest practices because as you are about to die, you won't have time to learn a new philosophy or get used to a new technique, or anything like that. For you, the most important practice, which also happens to be the easiest and most compatible with all beings, is to surrender to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha by taking refuge and, if you are a Mahayana practitioner, arousing bodhichitta. Engage wholeheartedly in these practices and say prayers of aspiration.

If you happen to be a Tantrika, offer your body in Kusali practice while you are still alive. This is an especially good

practice because Kusali is similar to the practice of transferring the consciousness at the moment of death (phowa).

- An English translation of the short Longchen Nyingtik Ngöndro Kusali practice can be found in the Longchen Nyingtik Ngöndro text, which is available for download from: www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/dodrupchen-I/longchen-nyingtik: *"6. The Accumulation of the Kusulu: Chö"*.
- The longer version, *The Loud Laugh of the Dakini*, translated by Karen Liljenberg, is available for download from: www.zangthal.co.uk/files/Chod%202.1.pdf.

Distribute Your Worldly Goods

Practically speaking, once you know that your own death is imminent and certain, try to ensure that your property and belongings are put to good use. Offer whatever you own to sentient beings and towards the propagation of the Dharma, even things as small as needles and thread. By offering everything to the Dharma, you become fearless. It is also good to make offerings to charities, hospitals, schools, and so on.

Get Used to the Idea that Death Is Imminent

Even if you are fit and healthy enough to beat Michael Phelps in the 200m butterfly, it is never too early to start preparing for death.

As you fall asleep, try doing the sleep practice mentioned on page 47. Convince yourself that you will die during the night and yearn to be reborn instantly in the realm of Amitabha. When you wake up next morning, remember that all of phenomenal existence is temporary.

If you dream, remember that dreaming is a bardo.

Originally, this chapter was written specifically for Buddhists, but actually everyone can practise these methods: seasoned Buddhists, those who have just discovered the Buddha's teachings, agnostics, atheists, those who care for the dying. Everyone.

Aspiration Practice

Friend, hope for the Guest while you are alive.
Jump into experience while you are alive!
Think... and think... while you are alive.
What you call "salvation" belongs to the time before death.
If you don't break your ropes while you are alive,
do you think ghosts will do it after?
The idea that the soul will rejoin with the ecstatic
just because the body is rotten – that is all fantasy.
What is found now is found then.
If you find nothing now, you will simply end up with
an apartment in the City of Death.
If you make love with the divine now, in the next life
you will have the face of satisfied desire.
So plunge into the truth, find out who the Teacher is, Believe in
the Great Sound!
Kabir says this: When the Guest is being searched for,
it is the intensity of the longing for the Guest that
does all the work.
Look at me, and you will see a slave of that intensity. [22]

Kabir

Traditionally, the practice of surrendering to Buddha Amitabha and saying prayers of aspiration to be reborn with him in Sukhavati is said to be one of the best long-term preparations for death. It is particularly recommended for those who are about to die. If

you prefer, you can surrender to Guru Rinpoche and aspire to be reborn with him in Zangdokpalri, or to Arya Tara, whose buddha realm is the Land of Turquoise Leaves, or to whichever buddha and buddha realm you like best.

Amitabha Buddha

> This last night of nights
> bush clover whispers
> "Buddha, Buddha…"[23]
>
> *Ranseki*

Out of compassion for those of us who need something tangible to cling to, visualize, aspire and long for, Buddha gave many teachings about Amitabha Buddha. Amitabha is usually said to be red in colour and to dwell in Sukhavati – but not always. Amitabha Buddha is actually none other than the ground of liberation that we talked about earlier. So, even as you read this book, Amitabha Buddha is with you. Just as retracing a lost cow's hoofprints eventually leads us to the cow, thinking about Amitabha and his realm will lead us to our inherent Amitabha. This is why we practise nurturing the aspiration to be reborn in Sukhavati.

There are many stories about how, in his previous lives as a bodhisattva, the outer symbolic Amitabha made strong aspirations to be of benefit to suffering beings. He prayed that by merely thinking of his form or reciting his name, sentient beings would instantly be reborn in Sukhavati after they die. This is why, while they are alive, Buddhists make such an effort to get used to thinking about Buddha Amitabha and reciting his mantra, and why the path of aspiration is so cherished.

Sukhavati is said to lie in the westerly direction of the setting sun. Although prayers of aspiration to be reborn in Sukhavati can be recited at any time, Buddhists love to think about Buddha

Buddha Daibutsu (Amitabha Buddha)

Amitabha and his buddha realm as they enjoy a glorious sunset. Feel completely confident, as you gaze towards the west, that Sukhavati lies directly beneath the setting sun, and yearn from the bottom of your heart to join Amitabha Buddha there the moment you die.

Glorious descriptions of Sukhavati appear in many of the prayers of aspiration that appear in the sutras and that were compiled by the great Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan Buddhist masters. Try to picture Sukhavati in your mind's eye: lush gardens with fresh green lawns surrounded by majestic snow mountains, turquoise lakes full of blossoming lotuses, elegant white swans, magnificent palaces, delicate parasols, richly-ornamented canopies, jewel-encrusted pavilions, brilliantly-coloured birds and animals of all kinds. Everything about Sukhavati has been designed to attract and enthrall you.

In the midst of all this splendour stands Lord Amitabha's exquisite palace made of lapis lazuli, the finest jade, brilliant diamonds and turquoise, all garlanded with pearls. Picture every detail in your mind's eye.

Lord Amitabha resides at the centre of the palace; glorious, victorious and magnificent. Boundless rays of light stream from his body and he exudes immeasurable, unconditional love and compassion for all beings. He is surrounded by bodhisattvas and offering gods and goddesses, all of whom exude love and compassion as they wait for you to join them.

In front of Lord Amitabha is a lake full of blossoming lotus buds through which beings are reborn every second. Fervently wish to be reborn in this realm and yearn with all your heart to see the lotuses for yourself.

To elaborate on this practice, imagine Avalokiteshvara sitting to the right of Amitabha Buddha and Vajrapani to his left. Avalokiteshvara is always ready to protect and guide you and Vajrapani is always ready to dispel obstacles.

If you wish, you can offer prostrations to the west and make offerings by scattering flowers, wiggling incense sticks, and chanting NAMO AMITABHA, AMITABHA HRIH, or …

Amitabha Name Mantra

OM AMI DHEVA HRI

Amitabha Heart Mantra

OM PADMA DHARI HŪṂ

Amitabha Dharani

TADYATHĀ AMITE AMITOD BHAVE AMITA SAMBHAVE AMITA VIKRĀNTA GĀMINI GAGANA KĪRTI KARI SARVA KLEŚA KṢAYAṂ KARI SVĀHĀ

One of the best prayers of aspiration in the Tibetan language is by Karma Chagme Rinpoche, also known as Raga Asey.

- An English translation of this prayer by Saljay Rinpoche and Jens Hanse, entitled *The Aspiration of Sukhavati, the Pure Realm of Great Bliss* can be downloaded from: www.nic.fi/~laan/sukha.htm
- English translations of many other wonderful prayers of aspiration are available for download from Lotsawa House: www.lotsawahouse.org/topics/amitabha-sukhavati/

The Old Carpenter

The power of the practice of aspiration is often illustrated by a traditional story about an old carpenter.

There was once an old carpenter who was very attached to worldly life and to making money. Even on his deathbed, he was worrying about finding his next job and calculating the money he needed to earn from it. To his loving daughter it was obvious that the old man was about to die, and equally obvious that he was completely unprepared for what was to come. So she told

The Pure Land of the Buddha Amida

Why should I hesitate?
I have a travel permit
from Amida Buddha[24]

Karai

the dying man that a rich lord from a faraway land wanted to commission a building.

"Father, you have been summoned to Sukhavati to build a palace for Lord Amitabha!"

The old man's first reaction was annoyance. What a nuisance that he felt so ill! It would make travelling even more difficult than usual. Nevertheless, as he lay in bed, the old carpenter started planning Lord Amitabha's palace. He died just as he was listing all the tools he would need, and was immediately reborn in Sukhavati.

Extremely fortunate beings who have a great deal of merit are blessed with the invaluable capacity of 'belief'. If you are such a person, the only thing you need to do is yearn to be reborn with Buddha Amitabha in Sukhavati. If you start generating that longing now, by the time death finds you, your longing will have become so strong that it will fill your mind, leaving no room for fear, panic, anguish, or anything else – a bit like the surge of testosterone and adrenalin a football fan feels as he walks onto the terraces for a Champion's League final. If you truly believe, there is nothing else to do. The moment you die, you will immediately be reborn in Sukhavati.

What does this yearning and longing feel like? Imagine you are deeply in love, but that your lover lives on the other side of town. You miss him so much that you climb onto your roof just to gaze in the direction of his house and, as you gaze, you long to be with him. This is the kind of yearning and longing you should develop for Amitabha, and it is an excellent way of preparing for death.

Amitabha Buddha in Pure Land Buddhism

Pure Land Buddhism, sometimes referred to as Amidism, is currently one of the most popular Schools of Buddhism in

East Asia. It is a form of devotional Buddhism that focuses on Amitabha Buddha. Elements of Pure Land Buddhism can be found in several schools of Buddhism in China and Japan. Pure Land Buddhism teaches that you can be reborn in the Pure Land – a perfect heavenly abode in which enlightenment is guaranteed – solely through devotion to Amitabha Buddha. The practice of reciting the mantra and sutra of Amitabha is extremely popular in East Asia.

Chinese Mantra of Amitabha Buddha

NAMO AMITUOFO

In Japan, Amitabha Buddha is known as Amida Butsu and Amida Nyōrai (the Tatagatha Amitabha) and is the main deity of the Japanese Pure Land School of Buddhism (Jōdoshū) and True Pure Land School of Buddhism (Jōdoshinshū).

Amida Butsu is said to come to you as you are about to die to lead you personally to the Pure Land. His exceptional power stems from the great vow he made to continue liberating all sentient beings until the hells are completely empty. By thinking of Amida Butsu at the moment of death, even the most negative, selfish, greedy, violent person can be reborn in his Pure Land.

Mantra of Amida Butsu

NAMU AMIDA BUTSU

Mantra of Amida Nyōrai

OM AMIRITA TEISEI KARA UN[25]

Guru Rinpoche's Palace at Zangdokpalri, the Copper-Coloured Mountain

Guru Rinpoche

If you feel more closely connected to Guru Rinpoche, Padmasambhava, yearn to be reborn in Zangdokpalri, the Copper-Coloured Mountain of Glory.

The Copper-Coloured Mountain, which lies in the south-west, is surrounded by oceans of blood, heaps of skulls, piles of gold, and horned, man-eating demons, their fangs dripping with fresh blood. Crowning the summit of the mountain is a palace of crystal, lapis lazuli, rubies and emeralds. At the centre of the palace on a jewelled moon and sun disc seat sits Guru Rinpoche, Padmasambhava; beautiful, brilliant, majestic, glorious, victorious and magnificent. Boundless rays of rainbow light stream from his body and he exudes immeasurable unconditional love and compassion for all beings. Mandarava, who is none other than Guru Rinpoche in female form, sits to his right; Yeshe Tsogyal sits to his left; and the great Buddhist masters of the past sit all over the mountain like a blanket of snow.

Many prayers of aspiration to be reborn in Zangdokpalri are available in English on various websites. Recite whichever prayer you like best and offer prostrations to the south-west.

- *Secret Path to the Mountain of Glory–A Prayer of Aspiration for the Copper-Coloured Mountain of Glory* by Jigme Lingpa is available for download from Lotsawa House: www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/jigme-lingpa/secret-path-mountain-glory
- Erik Pema Kunsang's translation of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's *Aspiration to be Reborn in Zangdokpalri* is available from: levekunst.com/a-chariot-for-knowledge-holders/
- A Prayer of Aspiration for the Mountain of Glory by Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö is available for download from Lotsawa House: www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/jamyang-khyentse-chokyi-lodro/aspiration-for-mountain-of-glory

Arya Tara

Those who love Arya Tara will look towards the 'Land of Turquoise Leaves', which lies in the north.

In Arya Tara's buddha realm, all the living beings are female – the bodhisattvas, the birds, the tigers, everyone. Arya Tara resides at the centre of a magnificent, transparent lapis lazuli palace. She is swift to act, peaceful and resplendent, and is surrounded by buddhas, bodhisattvas and hundreds and thousands of dakinis whose wisdom minds overflow with great love and compassion.

- An English translation of Sera Khandro's aspiration prayer *Burgeoning Benefit and Happiness: An Aspiration to be Reborn in the Land of Turquoise Leaves* can be downloaded from: www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/sera-khandro/tara-pureland-aspiration

If you give yourself fully to these practices you will approach both life and death in much the same way. Basically, neither living nor dying will be such a big deal.

Whether your own death is hours away, or you are so young and healthy that you barely give death a second thought, teach yourself to think big. However immense and all-consuming the

Green Tara

task of enlightening all sentient beings may appear to be, take it on joyfully. If you do, when eventually you find yourself confronted by death, rather than becoming depressed about being the most useless, doomed creature on the planet and wallowing in self-pity, you will instead look forward to single-handedly completing your task.

If all this sounds too much for you, tell yourself:

I wish with all my heart to participate, assist and contribute towards everything the other great bodhisattvas have ever done and continue to do towards fulfilling the great vision of bringing all sentient beings to enlightenment.

Yearn to become part of the bodhisattva community; long with all your heart to contribute to their tremendous endeavour in any capacity – footman, warrior, caterer, doctor, or whatever. If you wish, make your aspirations in the words of great Shantideva:

May I be a guard for those who are protectorless,
A guide for those who journey on the road.
For those who wish to cross the water,
May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge.

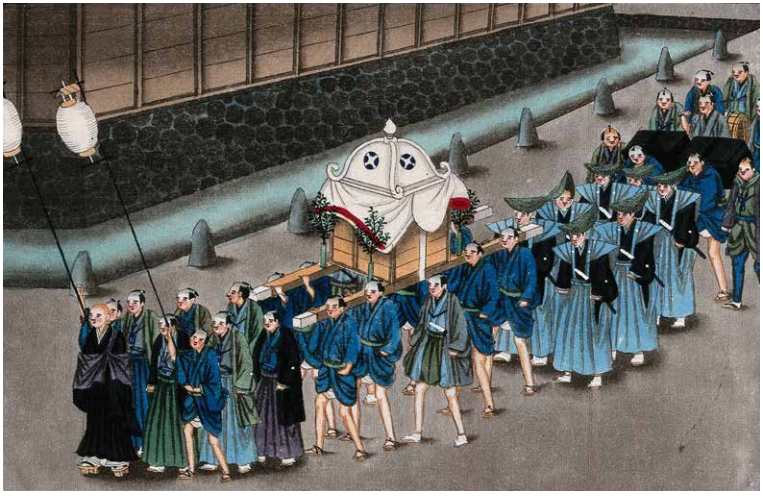
May I be an isle for those who yearn for land,
A lamp for those who long for light;
For all who need a resting place, a bed;
For those who need a servant, may I be their slave.

May l be the wishing jewel, the vase of wealth,
A word of power and the supreme healing,
May l be the tree of miracles,
For every being the abundant cow.

Just like the earth and space itself
And all the other mighty elements,

For boundless multitudes of beings
May I always be the ground of life, the source of
varied sustenance.

Thus for everything that lives,
As far as are the limits of the sky,
May I be constantly their source of livelihood
Until they pass beyond all sorrow.[26]



Japanese funeral customs: the cortège proceeds towards the temple

The Painful Bardo of Dying

The process of dying and death itself are a little like dreaming. Whether a dream is good or bad, once you know you are dreaming, you are no longer shackled to the belief that what is happening is real. Once you are free from ignorance and delusion, you no longer have to suffer emotions like hope and fear, desire and anger, pride and insecurity.

While you are alive, you experience the world through your five senses; you hear a piece of piano music with your ears and see a beautiful view with your eyes. These experiences can be habit forming and, having seen one glorious sunset, you may well continue to enjoy sunsets for the rest of your life.

In order to work properly, our five senses rely on the elements that make up the human body. The shock of sudden death severely disrupts these elements, and a slow, peaceful death simply wears them out. Either way, once the elements have dissolved and you are dead, your five senses no longer function. You will still be able to perceive, but all your perceptions will be naked and unfiltered, instantly changing how you interact with your surroundings. In the same way that we must adapt to the loss of sight or hearing while we are alive, being dead also requires that we make a few adjustments.

After you die, you will find yourself in a completely alien environment. At this point, if you never worked with or trained your mind while you were alive, you will most likely experience great fear mingled with just a little hope. But if you did train

your mind – anything from a simple mindfulness practice to the sophisticated mind-training techniques described in the tantric texts – the perceptions and projections you experience as you die and the way you monitor your mind, will be quite different.

A good Buddhist practitioner will probably be able to control every moment of the process of dying and death. Even a mediocre practitioner will be able to apply a certain amount of mindfulness, which in itself can bring considerable relief. Whether you have trained your mind or not, the most important piece of information to remember is that, *in the bardos, everything you experience is a projection created by your own mind*. Each person's perception of the bardos will therefore be quite different. And in the same way that we sometimes see long-dead friends in our dreams, once we are in the bardos, we may well bump into people we know.

Does Karma Affect the Dying Process?

Karma is so powerful that it influences every moment of life and death. If you have very good karma, no matter how often you move house, you will always end up somewhere lovely; however often you advertise for new domestic help, you will always find someone kind and honest; and whatever you eat will always taste delicious. If you have very negative karma, no matter who you date, you will always end up fighting, and the food other people love will always make you sick. Similarly, how you die will depend on your karma. If your karma is good, you won't resist the process of dying or create any drama and will face death calmly and sensibly.

So, what is 'good' karma and what is 'bad' karma? It depends on your individual outlook. One person may think that dying surrounded by family and friends is good karma, whereas for someone else, good karma would be dying alone in a thick forest, with no tears or fuss. Others may think good karma is having

someone at their bedside as they die to remind them about what they should do in the bardos or to recite the names of the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Karma will influence you all the way through the process of dying, right up to the final dissolution. Crucially, your last thought in the moment before you die will be the thread that takes you into the bardos, permeating your bardo experience with its own flavour and continuity.

Just as the quality of the seeds sown by a gardener affects the quality and quantity of his crops, your good and bad past actions will also determine where you are reborn. If the gardener plants mouldy or crushed seeds, nothing will grow and the outcome will be bad; if fresh, healthy seeds are sown, they will flourish and the outcome will be good.

What Does the Moment of Death Feel Like?

Body and mind are intertwined inseparably throughout your life. At the moment of death they split apart and, for the very first time, your mind experiences what it is like to be separate from your body. The body will then be burnt, buried or allowed to disintegrate naturally, whereas the mind will continue. And how you experience your mind once you are dead will be unlike anything you have known before.

Imagine you were born wearing sunglasses. You wear them constantly until the age of 50, then suddenly you take them off. Instantly, the world around you changes completely. It may be scary, unsettling or confusing, but however it affects you, there is one thing you can be sure of: it will definitely be different. This is what the moment of death is like.

The specifics of what happens when you die will depend on how much experience you have of looking at your mind. As I have already mentioned, if you didn't work with your mind while you

were alive, the moment of death is likely to be terrifying. Your fear will probably cause you to faint.

Whether or not you lose consciousness at death will depend on how good you are at being conscious while you are alive – in other words, on how mindful you are right now. The separation of body and mind is a terrible shock. It's like being hit on the head with a baseball bat and most people faint. But just because you are unconscious does not mean that you are inanimate, like a block of wood. Your elements and sense consciousness dissolve and your eyes, ears, tongue, and so on, cease to function, so you will probably have no conscious memory of your previous life's thoughts or identity. And although you no longer experience *gross* consciousness, you will never lose the consciousness that is self-awareness. This self-awareness – the 'nature of mind' – can not be lost.

Eventually you will regain consciousness. Even though you are dead, you will be able to see, hear, feel, smell and touch, but not with your body's sense organs. In death, you perceive everything directly with your mind: you see with your mind's eye, hear with your mind's ear, feel with your mind's body, and so on. Precisely what you will perceive once you are dead is hard to predict. You may see your relatives and friends, but whether that makes you happy, sad or afraid will depend on your situation. In the same way that mind plays tricks on you while you are alive, it will also play tricks on you when you are dead. So whatever you think you see will have been created by your trickster mind.

Karma will have a big effect on your bardo experience because alive or dead, you are always subject to your accumulated karma.

Devoted pet owners have asked me if this process is similar for animals. An animal's constitution, elements, senses, culture, education and therefore projections are very different from those of human beings. Apart from anything else, unlike human beings,

Das Zeichen des Bundes

animals don't make plans, build companies or oversee business empires. An animal's death and projections during and after death will therefore also be different.

The projections tiny insects experience in life are not that different to their projections after death. Insects and animals are habitually in a state of panic and uncertainty while they are alive, far more so than human beings, so the uncertainties of the bardo state will not be unfamiliar to them.

What Will You See After You Die?

Broadly speaking, Buddhists say that what you see after you die depends on your karma.

It is far too simplistic to stereotype cause and effect by saying that bad actions always bring about bad experiences, but that mistake is often made. Whether an action or situation is 'good' or 'bad' is extremely difficult to judge, because the quality of the karma created depends entirely on the creator's motivation. The karmic consequence of any given action will therefore be different for each individual.

But how can any of us be sure that we have the 'right' motivation? Our true motivation is extremely difficult to pin down. However convinced we are that our intentions are good, it's so easy to kid ourselves about what drives our actions. Too often, so-called 'right' motivation is rooted in selfishness. And without being sure of our motivation, how can we be sure about the effects a karma will bring about? There is no fixed result for each individual karmic cause. For example, we usually imagine that having a lot of money and being beautiful are good things, but one look at popular media shows us that the rich and beautiful are not necessarily happy. So the configurations of 'good' and 'bad' karma cannot be stereotyped, and neither can the effects.

The Six Realms

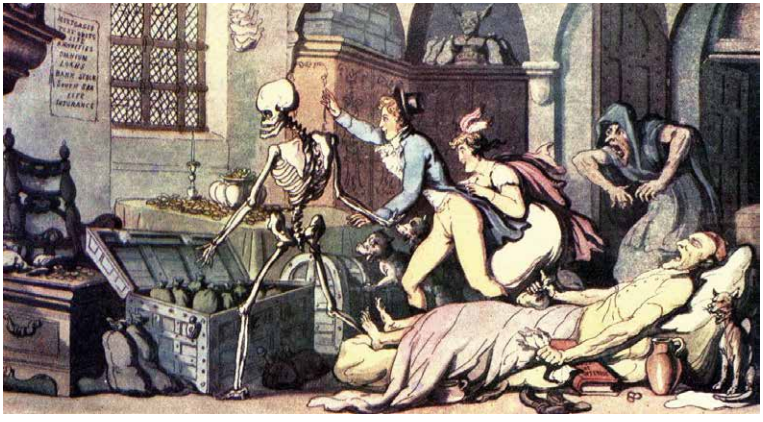
If you were an angry, aggressive person in life and your actions were motivated by your anger, you will continue to be angry in your next life. An angry person is hard to please, so you probably won't like where you live. However clean and white your freshly laundered towels may seem, you will always find a stain. A rose garden will only ever be a patch of thorny bushes. However soft your sofa, you will never sit comfortably. However glorious the weather, you will always be too hot or too cold. In fact, wherever you are, you will never be at ease and there will always be something to complain about. There is also a strong possibility that you will be burnt, or mugged on the street, or stabbed. All of which is what Buddhists describe as the *hell realm*.

Greedy misers, motivated solely by stinginess and avarice, take their penny-pinching habits with them into their next life. As a miser, not only are you miserly with others, but also with yourself. You may own a great deal – three cars, two houses, cupboards full of kitchen appliances, jewelry, and so on – but you never use any of it yourself, or even consider sharing with those who have

Hell

nothing. If you finally did splash out on an expensive jacket, you would probably die before you had the chance to remove the price tag. You are far too stingy to eat in good restaurants yourself, so it wouldn't even occur to you to buy dinner for someone else. However much you have, it is never enough, and when you die, you will be tortured by the knowledge that your good-for-nothing, lay-about relatives will thoughtlessly fritter away your painstakingly accumulated fortune. This is how Buddhists describe those who dwell in the *hungry ghost realm*.

Some people are fundamentally ignorant of what is going on around them. They may even deliberately decide not to notice the sufferings of others. If you are this kind of person, you do your best to avoid feeling sympathy for anyone, actively encourage stupidity, ignorance and lack of empathy in others, and take pride in being entirely unmoved by the suffering of a turtle or lobster as it is plunged into boiled water for your lunch. You educate yourself to form a thick skin so you feel nothing for anyone, and you socialize with people just like you. You celebrate your hardheartedness and teach your children and friends to be as callous and cold as you are. Even if you own millions, you are



The Miser's End

unable to bring yourself to toss a penny to a ragged street urchin who has no hope of an education or of even seeing a toy, let alone playing with one. When this kind of person is reborn, it will be as a far more powerful being's juicy snack. You will no longer have a home or even a postal address, let alone a bank account. If in your previous life you were a hunter, in your next life you will be the hunted. Whenever you are lucky enough to find a handful of food, you will be paranoid about protecting it and live in fear of it being snatched away from you. Buddhists describe this realm as the *animal realm*.

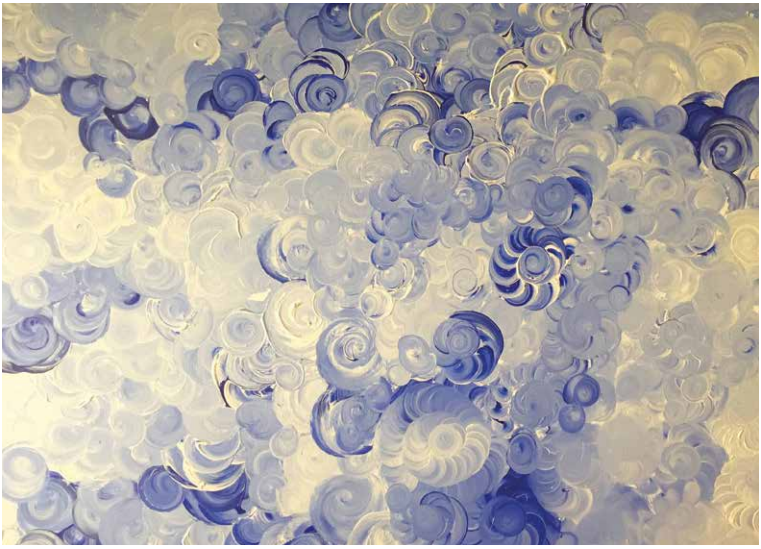
If you are jealous and act on your jealousy in this life, you will also be jealous in your next life. You will be reborn into a world where someone else always has what you long for: the 'look', the handbag, the shoes, the property, the partner. Even if you 'have it all', you will worry that others have more than you, and that everything they have is of better quality. Jealousy and habitual overthinking will fuel your paranoia to such a degree that you will never be able to relax. Your jealous, envious mind will always find fault in those who are glorious, successful, famous, respected and venerated. You will constantly practise

The Animal Realm

Warring Spirits

self-deception by convincing yourself that your jealous criticism is actually objective analysis, free from emotional entanglement. In reality, this kind of 'critical thinking' makes it impossible for you to rejoice at another person's joy or to share in their happiness. Instead, your mind will be consumed by thoughts about how to cut the person you are jealous of down to size. Buddhists call this the *asura realm*.

If you are very proud and your life has been motivated by pride, you will also be proud in your next life. Proud people are always convinced that they inhabit the moral high ground. They are



Cloud Gazing

born into a world where everyone suffers the same classic mix of inferiority and superiority complexes. It is a very parochial world; everyone is small-minded, provincial, insular, narrow, small-town, inward-looking, limited, restricted, conservative, conventional, short-sighted, petty, blinkered, myopic, introverted, illiberal and intolerant. If you are born into this realm, no one will like you and you won't fit in. Yet, you will be proud to be a member of a 'free society'. Convinced that your view is the most objective and the most democratic, you won't hesitate to criticise others for having another point of view or an alternative set of values. Unable to tolerate any form of dissent, you will impose your values and ways of life on those who, in your judgement, are primitive, or inadequate, or 'evil' merely because they disagree with you. And by trying to force them to do as you do, you will make them suffer. This is what Buddhists call the *god realm*.

The last of the six realms is the *human realm*. Although, eventually, we must liberate ourselves from this realm too, if you are not yet ready for enlightenment, it is the best realm to be reborn into – temporarily. If this life was motivated by passion, you will also be passionate in your next life, always busy and always up to something. As a human being, you suffer from poverty mentality, constant uncertainty and, of course, birth, old age, sickness and death. You are surrounded by people and things you desire, but you never get what you really want. And you always end up being separated from your loved ones because you spend all your time trying to make the money you think will need in a future that never comes.

In spite of these disadvantages, the human realm is still the preferred realm for spiritual people. For all our sufferings, human beings enjoy rare moments of sanity, triggered by extreme sadness, depression, misfortune and suffering. We also have the ability to free ourselves from self-inflicted bondage, which is far harder to achieve in the other realms.

By the way, although Buddhism describes *six* realms, samsara is actually made up of countless realms, most of which we cannot begin to imagine.

Judgement Day

Many religions warn that at death, their followers will appear before a judge who will weigh their good actions against their bad actions, then send those who have done more good than bad to heaven and those who have done more bad than good to hell. Buddhism, on the other hand, teaches that the only judge you will stand before is your own mind.

Imagine you steal something from a friend and get away with it. Although you avoid punishment, you still have to live with yourself and for years your bad conscience makes you feel terrible.

The Last Judgement

Similarly, when you die, your guilty conscience will ensure that you remember all the harmful, unkind things you have said and done in your life and those memories will make you suffer. But there will be no separate entity outside of yourself to sit in judgement over you; no powerful, almighty being to weigh your good actions against your bad on a set of scales, or to record everything you have done in an enormous ledger. There will be no external judgement passed on your life's actions.

Buddhists believe the causes and conditions each of us gather that have neither been subject to obstacles nor ripened into a result do not dissipate on their own. Whether or not the intention behind everything you have ever thought, said or done was good, kind and virtuous, or bad, unkind and vindictive, if that karma has not been purified, you will reap the results. This, of course, could be interpreted as a kind of judgement. But it will be *you* who judges your own motivation and actions, not an external entity.

Basically, your death, after-death experience and future rebirth are determined by the causes, conditions, intentions and actions that you have gathered during many lifetimes.

Do Heaven and Hell Exist?

Buddhism tells us that both heaven and hell are states of mind. So, depending on how much control you have over your mind – basically, whether or not you prepared for death during life – at death you may imagine you are experiencing one or the other. What you see will depend on what your mind projects. You may not see the ox-headed hell guardians described in sacred Buddhist texts; the creatures your imagination conjures could be even more hideous. And by the way, creatures like the ox-headed hell guardians are all symbolic.

With the right preparation and motivation you may experience a projection of Amitabha's realm, which is a Buddhist version of heaven. But if your habits are driven by negative emotions, your mind could just as easily project a hideous, terrifying and violently volatile landscape – a hell realm. Either way, both experiences are created and projected by mind. Neither exists outside your mind and therefore neither heaven nor hell exists externally.

What Continues After Death?

Does a 'me' or a 'self' or a 'soul' continue after death? Yes. Just as there has been a 'me' throughout your life, there is a 'me' that continues after death. The 'me' I was yesterday continues to be the 'me' I am today; the 'me' I was last year continues to be the 'me' I am this year. And the 'me' I am today will continue to be 'me' after I die.

This 'me' is not like the religious concept of a soul that is spoken of in the Abrahamic religions, it is merely an imputed idea. In other words, 'me' is an illusion. But don't despise 'me' just because it is an illusion. All our illusions are very powerful and the 'me' illusion is the strongest of all.

The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that the Abrahamic religions think of the soul as "the spiritual or immaterial part of a human being or animal, regarded as immortal". These religions also believe that animals and other living beings have a different kind of soul to human beings. Buddhists, on the other hand, believe in continuity. We believe that our idea of a 'me' or a 'self' will continue after death and into a new life. But, of course, we must also remember that the concept of 'continuity' is a relative truth, and like all relative truths, was arrived at by a deceptive mind.

If I strike a match to light a white candle, then use that candle to light a blue candle, is the same flame burning on both the white and the blue candle? Yes and no. And 'yes and no' can be applied to all relative truths. If you were to ask, is today's 'you' the same as tomorrow's 'you', the answer would be yes and no, because there is a continuation but only on the relative level.

The only time a 'me' or 'self' will not continue into a new life is when we get enlightened. Once we are enlightened, the idea of a 'self' is no longer perpetuated and neither is the idea of 'time'. For the enlightened, there is, therefore, no such thing as continuity or reincarnation.

Basically, the mind continues after the body dies and in Buddhism, mind is more important than body. Without mind, the body means nothing and, like clothes, can be changed and replaced.

Frost on grass:
a fleeting form
That is, and is not![27]

Zaishiki

Do We All Become Ghosts After Death?

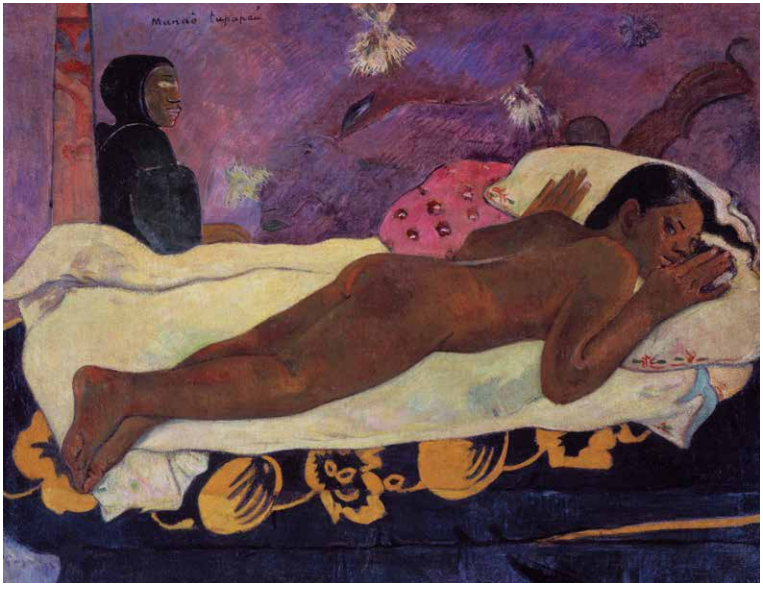
There is no easy answer to this question.

Buddhists believe that while the relationship between mind and body is extremely strong, they are fundamentally separate – if you cut off your hand, your mind won't get smaller. Buddhists believe that ghosts are beings that lack corporeal substance and therefore do not have a fully intact physical body of flesh and blood, although some manifest parts of a body.

According to the Buddhist teachings, we become ghosts the moment we die – not the kind of ghost described in western cultures, but what Buddhists call a 'bardo being'. A bardo being is cognisant and, like a western ghost, lacks a solid body. This means that neither western ghosts nor bardo beings need to use a door to get from one room to another.

In most of the western cultures that believe in a soul, a ghost is generally thought to be the visible but incorporeal expression of the soul of a dead person. Buddhists, as I've already said, do not believe in a soul as a truly existing phenomenon. So the ghosts spoken of by those who believe in a truly existing soul are necessarily different to the bardo beings that Buddhists believe in.

Like human beings, some ghosts are vicious and nasty, and many are insecure. But a ghost's first thought is not willfully to



The Spirit of the Dead Keeps Watch

harm others, it is how to survive. So obviously, if you threaten a ghost's survival, it won't be happy. But as living beings have physical bodies and ghosts don't, there isn't much a ghost can do. Most of the living can't see ghosts, but most ghosts can see the living, which is a big disadvantage. People sit on ghosts' seats all the time because they can't see the ghost that is already sitting there. You could be sitting on a ghost's seat right now.

Buddhists consider many of the spirits worshiped by shamans to be ghosts, but such spirits only give very mediocre attainments, like success in business, a good harvest, and so on.

Do We All Assume New Identities After Death?

Yes. But remember, 'identity' is an illusion. Are you sure you know who you are right now, as you read this text? And how likely is

it that you will continue to be described as the mother of your present daughter in your next life? Think about it! Based on the laws of karma, if you are reborn as a chicken, your present daughter might end up roasting you and serving you up for a family meal.

You will almost certainly meet your family and friends in your next life – probably millions and millions of times. What is far less certain is whether or not you will recognize or even like each other. You might even take an instant dislike to your previous life's best friend and totally ignore them. Or, as I have just said, you could find yourself being roasted by this lifetime's daughter for Sunday lunch.

If you are reborn into the same family, however much you may have loved your parents and relatives this time round, in your next life, you could end up despising them and everything they hold dear. If you live in the same house, you may hate your old-fashioned room. And what if you were reborn as a fly? The fact that the house is its old 'home' would mean nothing to a fly. What if you were to take rebirth in your present daughter's womb? That would make you your own grandchild. And by the time you become an adult, you may have made a career out of fighting against everything your grandparents stood for.

Fundamentally, human beings are chronically insecure about who we really are. Our sense of identity is defined by our nationality, religion and citizenship, then further shaped by the groups we support. We may decide to become ardent supporters of the NRA, or an animal conservation society to save the turtle or protect the tiger, or join the 'right' clubs, pray with the most 'righteous' religious faction, or endeavour to live in what we believe to be a 'free' country. And we do all this simply to reaffirm, again and again, the kind of people we think we are.

So it's worth bearing in mind that when we are dead and roaming around in the bardos, not only will these insecurities be a thousand times more intense, but our longing for a sense

of true identity will be ten thousand times more powerful. Our unresolved sense of instability and uncertainty could then become so inflamed and aggravated that we end up suffering from unprecedented existential angst.

Can the Dead Talk to the Living?

You will probably be able to see the living for a few days after you die and may even try to make contact with them. In practice, the dead rarely interact successfully with the living and eventually are unable to see the living at all.

One of the most painful experiences suffered by bardo beings is the sudden loss of the kind of social interaction they were used to while they were alive. They feel lost, abandoned and very lonely. This is one of the reasons why the motivation and actions of the living are so important, especially when it comes to the distribution of the dead person's money, resources and belongings. The dead probably only react strongly to the living when they are provoked. But extreme emotions are very dangerous for dead people and if the bardo being were to get angry because a loathed cousin had taken possession of a much-loved leather attaché case, that flash of emotion could have the power to block the dead person's progress through the karmic bardo of becoming and may even cause them to get stuck as a negative spirit. If that were to happen, their bardo experience would not be limited to forty-nine days, it could last for aeons.

How Long Before Rebirth?

The rule of thumb for how long it takes a dead person to pass through the bardos into a new life is forty-nine days, but this is another generalization. How long you spend in the bardos depends on the force of your personal karma; it could be forty-nine years, forty-nine aeons or forty-nine seconds.

The second after a person dies, if their karma is excellent, they could attain enlightenment in the bardo of dharmata, but if their karma is particularly bad, they might find themselves in the deepest hell. If the dead person lacks the karma to secure a seat on the plane to rebirth, they may have to wait in the bardos for aeons and aeons. Basically, what happens at the moment of death and how long each stage of the process of dying and rebirth lasts varies from person to person.

Why Do We Lose Our Memories When We Die?

People lose their memories for many reasons. While we are alive, our memories come and go all the time and the same is true once we are dead.

Human beings tend to have one very strong habit that not only overrules all our other habits, but actually destroys them. This very common habitual tendency is what makes a spiritual path work. On a spiritual path, we destroy our bad old habits by applying better new ones, until eventually we transcend the path of habit altogether.

The shock we experience when mind and body separate usually causes us to lose our memories. If your propensity for anger and aggression is strong while you are alive, and particularly if you are angry and aggressive while you are dying, the impact of that powerful emotion will not be easy to wipe out. The memory of your habitual anger may well continue into your next life where, once again, you will be an angry and aggressive person. If while you were alive, you trained your mind in mindfulness, love and compassion or made strong aspirations based on bodhichitta, it is equally possible that the positive memory of your compassionate, spiritual altruism will remain intact and you will be a compassionate, spiritual person in your new life. Basically, what you retain is connected with how good you are at controlling your mind.

One of the possible by-products of a certain kind of character and physical constitution is to be reborn with a photographic memory. Another cause that leads to an excellent memory is to have trained yourself to concentrate and not get carried away by distractions. A good memory is strongly associated with spiritual power, which may be how some memories survive the shock of death and are carried through the bardos into the next life. Vivid or traumatic memories sometimes survive death subconsciously and this may be why the mere thought of a spider makes some people cringe.

Alaya

Memory is not the only aspect of ourselves that could, potentially, be carried into the bardos and the next rebirth.

Buddhists believe that the effects of karma are stored in what we call the 'alaya', and that after death this alaya is carried into the next life. Alaya isn't like the Christian concept of soul. I am told that Christians believe the soul you have now is exactly the same soul that will go to heaven – or hell. If I have understood correctly, Christians believe in a permanent, truly existing, unique soul. Buddhists don't; Buddhists believe in a continuum. We might have been able to accept the idea of a soul if it were synonymous with alaya, but it isn't. This moment's alaya is not the same as tomorrow's alaya, but neither are they totally separate entities. Buddhists believe in the continuity of alaya in the same way Tom, Dick and Harry believe they are the same men today that they were yesterday. At the same time, as Mahayana Buddhism teaches that everything carried forward in this continuum is illusory, alaya is nothing more than an illusion.

You may think this sounds illogical, but for Buddhists *all* concepts are illogical. The concepts of 'direction', 'all', 'general' and particularly of 'continuity' and 'time' are entirely arbitrary.

But just because an idea is arbitrary doesn't mean it isn't powerful. And all these concepts are extremely powerful.

What is 'time'? It depends. Are you asking as a philosopher, a scientist, or a doctor's receptionist? A doctor's receptionist is most interested in time as measured by a clock because he wants to know that the doctor's patients are 'on time'. For a scientist, "time is what the time variable *t* is denoting in the best theories of fundamental science"[28]. Whereas philosophers don't care much about a precise definition of the word 'time', but are very interested in its characteristics.

The power of the arbitrariness of concepts is how illusion works. A scarecrow creates the illusion of a human being, and that illusion often does a good job of keeping crows at bay. Taking a medicinal placebo can be such a potent illusion for some patients that their illness is cured. And the illusion of democracy leads many people to believe that freedom and fairness exist in this world. This is how fundamentally illogical human beings function.

Although alaya is illusory, when memories fade – and they tend to fade quickly both in life and death – alaya does not disappear. The illusion of alaya continues until the consequences and effects of the karma accumulated over many lifetimes are purified or destroyed. You may not be able to remember your past actions, but that doesn't mean the effects of that karma have been purged. They haven't. The effects of your karma will continue to create more delusions, more hope and more fear, and will also induce more actions. This is why the wheel of cyclic existence continues to turn. Until the seed of alaya is burnt, destroyed, uprooted or sterilized, the projection of the six realms will not cease and you will continue to suffer, feel pain and so on.

Rebirth

There is a great deal of skepticism these days about reincarnation, or rebirth. So much so that new Buddhists often wonder if they really will be reborn after they die.

Every day, we take for granted that there will be a tomorrow, but in reality, we are making a gross assumption – the kind of assumption that philosophers describe as an 'imputed projection'. However, just because tomorrow is an assumption doesn't mean that tomorrow doesn't exist. The same goes for everything in the relative world. Everything exists because we make assumptions, yet every single element in the relative world is an illusion, a dream. Although sentient beings like you and me believe these illusions to be real, we are, in fact, completely deluded! And while we continue to take these illusions seriously, we are not only subject to the delusion of rebirth, but also to the delusions of death and of this very moment.

Do you believe that right now you are reading a book? If you do, you are delusional.

Do you believe that the 'you' who was reading this book yesterday is the same 'you' who is reading it today? If you do, you are delusional.

As everything is a delusion, the belief in rebirth and the belief that there is no such thing as rebirth after death must both be delusions. But as I mentioned earlier, just because something is a delusion doesn't mean that it isn't powerful; all delusions are extremely powerful.

Can Rebirth Be Proved?

Dr. Ian Stevenson at the University of Virginia dedicated much of his 40-year career to documenting thousands of cases of children who claimed to remember their previous lives. Does his work

prove that rebirth really exists? In a way, yes it does. But from a Buddhist perspective, a concept like rebirth is a relative truth, never the absolute truth. Buddhists can only accept the kind of research Dr. Stevenson came up with on a relative level because at no point did Buddha say that rebirth exists as an absolute truth.

For myself, my belief in continuity is neither reinforced nor weakened just because researchers at a university have finally discovered its power. Rebirth is simply an imputed relative phenomenon, albeit a very powerful one. So for me, rebirth just is.

Frankly speaking, whether we remember who we were in our past lives or not isn't important – most of the time there is not much worth remembering anyway.

One of the reasons Buddhists prepare for death and the bardos while they are still alive is to secure a better life next time around. In this context, 'better' does not mean richer, healthier, or more beautiful. 'Better' means that you are not greedy and that you are sane, loving, kind, honest and susceptible to the truth. In other words, 'better' means having the opportunity in your next life to become better acquainted with the Dharma.

Questions About Death

What signs indicate that death is about to happen?

I suspect that people these days don't have time to look for or notice the signs that foretell imminent death. Some signs are obvious: your joints stiffen, your skin wrinkles and your health deteriorates. This is your body's way of telling you that you are approaching death. But as modern people put so much effort into covering up such signs, I doubt that many will want to seek them out, let alone actually talk about death. How many 5-star hotels offer weekend courses about what happens as you die?

In addition to the signs that we constantly miss, there are many other feelings and sensations that presage death, including premonitions in dreams – I suspect most modern people would laugh at the idea of contemplating such things. The signs that Tibetans and Bhutanese rely on, most of which are deeply rooted in Himalayan folklore rather than Buddhadharma, include the following.

Rest your forehead in your right palm and look at the inside of your wrist. Is there is an empty strip between your hand and your arm? If there is, you will die in seven days.

If you dream of riding a donkey facing backwards, you will die in seven days.

When you stand with your back to the sun in front of a wall, if no steam rises from your shadow's head, death is imminent.

The particular caw of a crow is also listed as a sign in the tantric texts. Although all these signs are relative truths, it isn't easy to write them off as mere cultural belief because many are unique and mystical in ways that are difficult either to fully accept or utterly reject.

Is there a method for pinpointing the time of my death before it happens?

In the Himalayas there are still great masters who have the ability to pinpoint the moment you will die. But if you are aged 50 years or more, I suggest you consider that all the signs of imminent death are already present and start your preparations – you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Actually, the moment we are born we should all write a will, but for most modern people that would be too much, too soon.

Thinking about my own death seems morbid and discouraging. I feel afraid and get depressed.

Life and death are the same. So if thinking about death depresses you, contemplate life instead.

Should I buy a burial plot for my dying relative? Or would it be inauspicious?

This kind of preparation is not considered to be inauspicious by Buddhism, but some cultures may disagree. The Buddha himself made no recommendations about acquiring burial plots.

Could a non-Buddhist be reborn in a 'pure land' after death?

If the non-Buddhist's friends and family do good deeds in their name and enlist the help of a sublime being to wholeheartedly dedicate practices, meditation and prayers on their behalf, even the least virtuous person will have the opportunity to be reborn in a pure land – but only if they rejoice at everything their

family and friends do for them. Once we are dead, we will probably panic and may become so emotional and angry that the chances of us actually rejoicing at the good deeds done on our behalf are very slim. So, generally speaking, it is not wise to rely wholly on the efficacy of last-minute good deeds and practices. Apart from anything else, it is increasingly difficult to find sublime beings who are able to help.

Can you explain the phenomenon known as the 'last radiance of the setting sun', when the dying person feels well and pain-free just before they pass away?

I'm not exactly sure what you mean, but it is said that those who have gathered many favourable causes and conditions sometimes feel better just before they pass away. If such a person were read the instructions that appear on page 128, they would probably be able to remain calm as they die, understand what is being said to them, and then follow the advice.

Is it possible for the soul or spirit to return to a corpse after it has been separated by death?

In rare cases, yes. Even though a bardo being's greatest wish is to return to life and reclaim their bodies, almost none can accomplish it. One of their problems is that, after just a few days or at most a few weeks, they cannot recognize their old body. Nevertheless, they have one-track minds and are desperate to find a body in which to rest, hide and function as a human being. Their longing to live and to communicate is therefore very strong.

Stories about resurrection are told all over the world, so it must still happen, even today. Perhaps the most famous of all Tibetan resurrection stories is about a woman called Nangsa Obum.

Nangsa Obum was a very beautiful, kind young girl whose only wish was to practise the Dharma. One day, a wealthy man, enchanted by her beauty, tricked her into marrying his son. Not

long after the marriage, Nangsa Obum was given the keys of the family storehouse and put in charge of running the household. Her sister-in-law was furious! Her jealousy and anger led her not only to beat Nangsa Obum savagely but also to accuse her of having an affair. Infuriated, Nangsa Obum's husband battered his wife to death.

Once she was dead, Nangsa Obum saw the blissful realms where the virtuous are reborn and the eighteen hells that are reserved for the non-virtuous. Suddenly, she found herself standing before the Lord of Death – she was very nervous. But it was clear to the Lord of Death that Nangsa Obum was a great dakini and that she was entirely pure and blameless. Knowing that she would be of great benefit to the living, he sent her back to her body which, on the advice of a local astrologer, had been laid in a cave on a mountainside.

Before long, Nangsa Obum was found by her husband's servants and returned to her family home. Everyone was delighted and sincerely apologized for their treatment of her. She stayed with them for a while, but as none of the family was genuinely interested in the Dharma she begged to be allowed to return to her parents' home. Reluctantly, her husband and his family let her go.

At home, Nangsa Obum told her parents about everything that had happened to her. They welcomed her back and all seemed well until her mother realized that Nangsa would never listen to her advice about family life and children. In a fit of anger, she threw her daughter out of the house.

Far from being upset, Nangsa saw it as the opportunity she had been waiting for to devote all her time to the Dharma. She made her way to the nearest monastery and insisted on being admitted. At first, the lama refused, but when Nangsa threatened to kill herself if she was turned away, the lama allowed her join the monastery and she was initiated into the Tantric path. After three months of retreat she attained realization.

By this time, Nangsa's husband's family had discovered that she was living at Sera Yalung Monastery and set off with an army to kill all the monks, destroy the monastery and reclaim Nangsa. A terrible battle ensued. Many monks were slaughtered and even more were wounded. Just as the family was about to murder the lama, he flew into the air, magically revived the dead, healed the wounded and began berating the great lords and their army for their treatment of Nangsa and for not practising the Dharma. He then asked Nangsa to reveal her realization for everyone to see, which she did. The entire family were utterly ashamed of themselves, lay down their arms and instantly vowed to follow the Dharma.

This mass conversion was the talk of the region. Soon Nangsa's parents heard about all that had happened and they too dedicated the rest of their lives to practising the Dharma.

I have done many bad and shameful things and I have never followed a spiritual path. How can I avoid hell or a bad rebirth?

Buddhists say we should prepare for death while we are still alive, so I think it would be best if you were to start preparing right now. In spite of your negative actions, if you have the merit to have met and made a good karmic link with someone who is able to give you the pith instructions about what to do after you die, it is possible for you to avoid a bad rebirth and hell. Whether you do or not will depend on how fully you trust your instructor and the instructions.

What is a 'pith instruction'? Imagine you have invited your boss to your home for dinner. At the last moment, she phones to say her partner is vegan and currently eating only salad. This throws you into a panic because, although you have plenty of salad, you have never once made a successful salad dressing. You phone your best friend, who is an excellent cook, and beg his advice. "Just mix some good olive oil with a spoonful of lemon juice or balsamic

vinegar and a pinch of salt. It'll be delicious." His instructions, based on his own experience, are simple and clear – just like the pith instructions.

At the moment of death, the instructions needed to overcome the nightmare of dying must be extremely simple and crystal clear. Pith instructions are designed to explain exactly what is happening as it happens, and to tell the dying person what they must do once they are dead.

According to the Tantrayana, even though a person's actions during life were negative and they made no spiritual connections, if they have the merit to encounter a method like 'liberation through wearing' (tagdrol), there is a good chance that they will be liberated at the moment of death – see page 215.

Like all tantric methods, the success of the tagdrol method relies entirely on devotion and unconditional trust. So, if the dead person or the person who places the tagdrol on the corpse really trust this method, the tagdrol will have the power to make a very positive impact on the bardo being, even if those close to the dead person consider tagdrol to be a meaningless superstition.

When does my consciousness enter its next life? The moment the foetus is formed? When the sperm enters the egg? Just before the baby is born? Or when?

It depends. The question suggests that we will all be reborn as human beings, but that is not necessarily the case. Not all those who were human in one life will be reborn human in the next life – they could be reborn as a cicada or a butterfly, neither of which reproduce using a sperm and an egg. Or they could be reborn in the god realm as a celestial being, where again, no sperm or eggs are involved in reproduction.

Exactly when the consciousness enters its next body depends on the karmic forces that are pushing or pulling that consciousness towards its next rebirth.

For example, if you are about to be reborn as a human being, you will experience hazy visions of your parents copulating. If you then feel desire for your mother and anger at your father, you will be reborn as a boy, a son; if you feel desire for your father and anger at your mother, you will be reborn as a girl, a daughter. The emotions that trigger our entrance into the human realm are therefore usually dominated by anger and desire.

The trigger for being reborn into the asura realm is an attraction to and enjoyment of disputes, fist fights or any kind of quarrel.

If you hear beautiful music or get the impression that you are in a luxurious mansion, you will be reborn into a god realm.

If you hear the screams and cries of loved ones and try to help them, you risk being led into the hell realms.

But remember, all these examples are generalizations.

How to Be with the Dying

WHAT CAN WE DO for our dying loved ones, especially if they are or were not spiritually-minded, let alone Buddhist? Will encouraging the dying and the dead to take refuge and arouse bodhichitta really help? And could a non-Buddhist really understand the bardo teachings? These are very good questions.

Confidence and Motivation

First of all, the fact that *you* want to help the dying person – that you are even thinking about them – indicates that there is a spiritual or karmic link between you.

How many people, animals or insects are dying at this very moment? Are we thinking about all of them? No. Even though, as good bodhisattvas, we are supposed to care for *all* sentient beings, in practice we rarely do. We tend only to think about those close to us.

Whether they realize it or not, everyone you have a relationship with must have a connection with the Dharma. Why? Because they have a connection with you and you have a connection with the Dharma. The fact that you want to help them means they must have some merit. So your dying non-Buddhist friend must have an indirect connection with the Dharma through you – a connection that will really help them. This is how connections work.

You may be poor and powerless from a worldly point of view, but at the moment of death, a rich, famous, powerful person who is clueless about anything spiritual will be of no use to your friend whatsoever. Your concern for your dying friend's well-being and willingness to support and care for them is the best news they could possibly have. You may be the only person they know who has a connection with the Dharma and is able to give them the information they need to navigate the process of death and beyond, and to do the relevant practices. So your good aspirations, guidance and dedication are the only truly useful help they will be offered. They are incredibly fortunate to know you.

With the right motivation, you can be confident that whatever you do will help. Even if you lose your temper because you are overtired or frustrated, it won't be a big deal. After all, who knows what truly helps and what doesn't? Everyone is different, so it's impossible to say. All you can do is offer the help you believe will work best.

Create a Calm and Peaceful Atmosphere

If the dying person is in pain and terrified but unwilling to tolerate spiritual discussion or practices, don't try to impose any of your Buddhist ideas or methods on them. Simply create a harmonious and peaceful environment, and always be honest and direct.

The calmer a person is at death the better. This means that the attitude, bearing and body language of the friends, family and those caring for the dying person are important, because it is up to them to create a calm and loving atmosphere. Most important of all is your motivation. Bear this in mind when you find yourself overwhelmed by emotion; instead of breaking down, try to focus on calmly and gently embodying kindness and compassion.

Surprisingly, perhaps, non-Buddhists often end up facing death in a calmer frame of mind than many Buddhists; just because a person is a Buddhist doesn't automatically mean they are calm.

Someone who is twitchy and agitated, nervous and fidgety, obsessive and unable to let go in life won't suddenly become calm and still just because they are about to die.

Also bear in mind that physical nervousness and agitation don't necessarily mean that the dying person is not focussed or that they don't know what they should be doing. So don't try to foist your interpretation of their frame of mind on them.

If the dying person is a Shravakayana practitioner, they will try to dwell in egolessness or think about the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

If the person is a Mahayana Buddhist, they will try to dwell in the view of shunyata.

A Tantrika will think about their guru as they die, or the names and forms of Amitabha Buddha, Shakyamuni Buddha, Akshobhya Buddha, Avalokiteshvara, Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava, Manjushri, Arya Tara, and so on. And at the moment of death, they will think of their personal deity – their 'yidam'.

Always Tell the Truth

Till now
I thought that only
others die—
that such happiness
should fall to me! [29]

Ryoto

However difficult the truth may be to hear, it is always best to be honest with a dying person. Most of us would rather avoid telling a person we love that they are dying, even when it is blatantly obvious. Often we lie because we don't want to admit to ourselves that someone we love is about to leave us. Hope makes us hide the facts from both ourselves and our loved one.

People who never had a spiritual life sometimes imagine that they are the only ones ever to have experienced the suffering of death. Obviously this is not true, so remind them that no one on this earth has a choice about dying: everyone must die, including them. It is also worth pointing out that there is no telling which of you will die first. Your loved one may be in the midst of the process of dying, but accidents happen and as none of us knows when and how we will die, there is no guarantee that you won't die before they do.

Can I Really Help?

Without being enlightened it is impossible to be certain whether anything you do will really help a dying person or, for that matter, a living person. With the best of intentions, you may encourage a sick friend to take a particular medicine, but you will never know if it helped or made things worse. Your friend's health may appear to improve dramatically, but in the long-run the side-effects could be devastating – or vice versa.

But as I have already said, the most important thing about the help you offer is your motivation. If you have a kind heart and a pleasant smile, if you are warm, polite and humble, and if you genuinely wish to improve another person's life or death, whether they are agnostic, atheist, or a complete stranger, they will appreciate everything you do for them. In fact, they will probably appreciate your help more than the help that's offered by someone who is closer to them but who only acts out of duty, not love.

Should We Talk About Death?

Buddha said that of all mindfulness meditations, the mindfulness of death is the most important, and so discussions about death are never inauspicious. In fact, we should all talk about it far more

"Your life is ticking away"

than we do. We will all have to die, so death isn't just a subject for the dying or the very old. I think we should encourage people to think and talk about death far more than they do. Perhaps we should sponsor giant billboards in big cities and subway stations that say things like, 'Your life is ticking away' and 'Every second brings you closer to death'. And shouldn't birthday celebrations include the reminder that death is now one year closer?

If you live among materialists who dismiss anything spiritual as mere superstition, you will need to be quite skilful about how you introduce death into a conversation. In this human realm, difficult-to-handle subjects tend to be ignored or denied, so by bringing up the subject of death too directly you risk alienating those you are trying to help.

Concentrate instead on gently introducing a little general information about impermanence. Point out that impermanence and change aren't necessarily negative. In fact, impermanence is what makes improvement and change possible. Tell them that it's because everything is impermanent that we can change our lives for the better. But before any improvements can be made, we must first understand and accept the impermanent nature of phenomena. After that, you can gradually introduce the fact that life itself is impermanent.

Of course, how you approach the subject of death will depend on the person you are trying to help. Materialistic people tend only to care about their own money, their worldly power and position, and how their networks and connections can bring them more money and power. Such people don't bother visiting museums because for them, it's a waste of time and time is money. They would never consider getting up early to enjoy a sunrise, or change their plans to see the sun set – not unless they wanted to impress another rich person by using it as a backdrop for a selfie. So starting a conversation about death or anything spiritual with such a person is far from easy. If you can't talk about poetry or philosophy with someone because there is no money to be made from either, how can you talk about death? All you can do for materialistic people is pray for them.

Having said that, many people who appear to be committed materialists can be surprisingly spiritual, they just don't realize it. Having experienced so much of the world in the pursuit of material satisfaction – they have been everywhere, done everything, eaten at all the best restaurants in the world, and so on – when an apparent materialist becomes weary of the high life, they have a much better chance of becoming genuinely spiritual than many self-professed Buddhists, Christians or Hindus. Often people who claim to be 'spiritual' are little more than spiritual materialists who spend their lives deceiving both

themselves and others. And they are the most difficult to deal with when it comes to discussing death or any form of genuine spiritual practice.

Although your friends and family tell you that they are not spiritual, if they take pleasure in magical and mystical pursuits like poetry or philosophy, and if they are sentimental and romantic enough to gaze at a sunset imagining it will be the last they ever see, they may well have the capacity to hear the truth. So try offering them a little information about the Dharma, but don't drown them in it! The most precious gift you can give your friends, children and family is the Dharma. Try pouring just a little into their ears, but don't overdo it. And don't ever use a Dharma argument to correct their behaviour. It's far better to wait until someone does something admirable, motivated by altruism, before introducing a compatible aspect of the Dharma as a way of agreeing with and encouraging them. Never impose your beliefs on others – it won't help.

How to Comfort the Dying

Encourage the dying person to let go of all their attachment to and worry about unfinished business, tasks, plans, and so on, and not to dwell on thoughts of their loved ones, houses, jobs or anything that ties them to this life. I have mentioned this before and it is very important.

Advise the dying person to calm their minds and prepare for the next phase by making good aspirations. What kind of good aspirations could a non-Buddhist make? They could, for example, wish for:

- a genuinely good person to run for president of the United States in the next elections
- environmental problems associated with global warming to be resolved

– more trees to be planted and nurtured
– inexpensive solutions to debilitating, chronic diseases to be discovered, with no nasty side-effects
– a car to be invented that runs on free, clean energy, leaves no carbon footprint and emits positive energy into the environment

If you know the dying person personally, you will have some idea about what they believe in. Even the worst person in the world must believe in something that isn't harmful, so capitalize on that belief. Perhaps they could aspire for a two-day working week?

You could also try suggesting that the dying person does something to bring themselves fame once they are dead. Perhaps they could donate all their money to erecting the kind of billboard I mentioned earlier, that reminds the rest of us about the reality of death – a reality that we all have to face. Or something like that.

Ask the dying person if there is anything they want you to do for them. Ask them what should be done with their money, investments, property and belongings, and promise you will do your best to ensure that their wishes are carried out to the letter. Some people spend their whole lives worrying about their material goods and that won't suddenly change just because they are dying. But knowing that you will do everything in your power to carry out their wishes may help calm their anxieties. This is another reason why it's a good idea to tell those you care about that they are dying.

If the dying person is a Shravakayana or Mahayana Buddhist, remind them of the importance of aspiration. Encourage them to aspire to become enlightened, to be reborn with the ability to be of benefit to others and to encounter the right path – Buddha Shakyamuni's path of loving compassion and non-duality. Continue repeating this same message either verbally or mentally, even after the person has died.

If the dying person is a Tantrika, read the simplified instructions that appear on page 191. If you prefer, you could read from *Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*[30], or choose any of the authentic bardo instructions, elaborate or simple, that you are familiar with, or one of the many others texts that are available for download, for example:

- *The Excellent Path to Perfect Liberation: A Guidance Practice (Nedren) for the Dukngal Rangdrol (Natural Liberation of Suffering) Practice of the Great Compassionate One from the Longchen Nyingtik* by Dodrupchen Jigme Trinle Ozer: www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/dodrupchen-I/excellent-path-to-perfect-liberation
- *Root Verses of the Six Bardos* by Karma Lingpa: www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/karma-lingpa/root-verses-six-bardos
- *Crucial Advice: A Complete Set of Instructions for the Bardos* by Longchen Rabjam www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/longchen-rabjam/complete-set-instructions

Read the instructions out loud to the Tantrika as a reminder about what is happening and what they should do.

If the dying person's relatives are Buddhists, they could read an Amitabha Sutra out loud or chant the mantra or dharani they like best.

- The shorter Amitabha sutra is available for download from the 84000 website: read.84000.co/translation/UT22084-051-003.html

Tell the dying person's relatives and friends that, according to the bardo teachings, their loved one's awareness and perception will continue to function for anything from a few hours to several days after death. This means that the dead person's mind will be able to see and hear what goes on among the family after their body has been pronounced dead. This is why, traditionally, Tibetans always advise a dying person's family to avoid talking about the will and fighting over the person's belongings. The family is also advised not to give away the dead person's property, or break up their collections for as long as possible.

Feelings of Guilt

Dying people are sometimes wracked with guilt about having done terrible things during their lives. If you are with a dying Buddhist who has a bad conscience about their past behaviour, suggest they free themselves from that guilt by taking the guilt of all sentient beings upon themselves through Tonglen practice (see page 195): "May the guilt of all sentient beings come to me." By doing so, not only will they be able to shed their own bad conscience, they will also feel good about having performed a tremendously heroic act that will have accumulated a huge amount of merit. That merit can then be dedicated towards the enlightenment of all sentient beings, making yet more merit that can be dedicated towards a better rebirth for everyone, including themselves.

If you think it will help, tell the dying person that, according to the Buddha, the guilt they feel was created by their own minds and so it is just another self-created projection that they should definitely not allow themselves to become obsessed by.

You could also suggest that the dying person visualize all the buddhas and bodhisattvas in the sky in front of them and, from the bottom of their heart, confess everything they feel guilty about.

To a dying Tantrika, you could suggest that they chant the Akshobhya mantra or Vajrasattva's one hundred-syllable mantra.

Buddha Akshobya

Akshobhya Dharani

NAMO RATNA TRAYAYA OM KAMKANI KAMKANI ROCANI ROCANI TROTANI TROTANI TRASANI TRASANI PRATIHANA PRATIHANA SARVA KARMA PARAMPARANI ME SARVA SATTVANANCA SVAHA

Vajrasattva

One Hundred-Syllable Mantra of Vajrasattva

OM VAJRASATTVA SAMAYA MANUPALAYA
VAJRASATTVA TENOPA TISHTHA DRIDHO ME BHAWA
SUTOKHAYO ME BHAWA SUPOKHAYO ME BHAWA ANURAKTO
ME BHAWA
SARWA SIDDHI ME PRAYACCHA SARWA KARMA SU TSA ME
TSITTAM SHREYANG KURU HUNG HA HA HA HA HO BHAGAWAN
SARWA TATHAGATA VAJRA MA ME MUNCA VAJRI BHAWA MAHA
SAMAYA SATTVA AH

Six-Syllable Mantra of Vajrasattva

OM VAJRA SATTVA HUM

What to Say to a Dying Person

THE TEACHINGS of the Shravakayana and the Mahayana say very little about the bardos and the Vajrayana teachings say a great deal. While all Buddhists encourage everyone to prepare for death while they are still alive, it's the Vajrayana that points to the moment of death as a unique juncture in a human being's life. It's a moment of extraordinary spiritual opportunities that should not be wasted. The message here is: it's never too late. At the moment a person dies, their mind is the clearest it has ever been and becomes clearer still once the body is dead. So if you can win that person's attention moments before they die – make them look at you and listen to what you have to say – the chances of them grasping what is happening and what is about to happen are very good indeed.

As I mentioned earlier, while we are alive, we understand, communicate and interact using our own set of unique filters. Each person's individual filters determine what they see, so while we are alive, none of us sees anything nakedly. Our eyes are not cameras that merely capture images of whatever stands directly in front of us because our eyes are driven by our minds. Mind chooses which images it registers and how to interpret those images, based on cultural conditioning, hang-ups, the books we read, the coffee we drink, the people we hang out with, and so on. So it is *in the mind* that the spectator, the act of spectating and all our personal influences are

filtered, and it is in the mind that our interpretations come together to create the phenomena of hope, fear, misunderstanding, and so on.

Whether you are a Buddhist or not, the mind separates from the body in exactly the same way. Our senses and sense objects also disintegrate in exactly the same way. Without those filters, your eyes cannot see, your ears cannot hear, your tongue cannot taste, and so on. Imagine a spring morning starts out cold, but as high temperatures are predicted for later on, you wear six layers of clothing. The disintegration of the senses is like peeling away those six layers as the temperature rises. Gradually your senses slip away until, for the first time ever, your mind is completely naked. For most of us, the effect is overwhelming.

In life, when you look at a wall, influences from your culture and habit make you see that wall as a house. As your habits wear out, the wall will start to look less like a wall and more like a pile of bricks. And once the habit has worn away completely, however hard you stare at the wall, you simply won't know what you are looking at. Once the body is dead, everything the naked mind experiences will be entirely unfiltered, and all the subtle phenomena – the sounds, tastes, smells, and so on – will be strange and terrifying. Yet, if you are given the right information at the right time, the mind's very nakedness will allow you to see and understand what is going on far more quickly than when you were alive. Buddhists describe this naked mind as 'buddha mind'.

The Power of 'Buddha'

Don't worry about whether or not the dead person knows anything about the Buddha or Buddhism. Since their perceptions are no longer filtered, bardo beings are one hundred times more aware than when they were alive. And it is precisely because the dead are more aware that it is so important for the living to encourage them to take refuge and introduce them to the bardo teachings.

The idea of 'buddha' is extremely profound. When you tell a bardo being about 'buddha', you are introducing them to the idea that the Buddha is the nature of their mind. In many ways, it's perfect timing, because bardo beings are perhaps closer to the nature of mind than any other sentient being.

What to Say to a Dying Person

If the dying person is agnostic or atheist or even a complete stranger, and if they are not upset by you talking to them, say:

You are now dying.
Death comes to everyone.
We all die!
You are not the only person who has ever had to face death.

None of us knows precisely when we will die.
Today, it is you who are dying,
But anything could happen,
And I could still die before you.

Don't worry about your life,
Don't worry about your friends and family,
Don't worry about your work.
Instead, seize the opportunity to be peaceful and present.

In the same spirit, say whatever you feel needs to be said, but say it gently and kindly. Then chant:

NAMO BUDDHĀYA
NAMO DHARMĀYA
NAMO SAṂGHĀYA

Homage to the Buddha,
Homage to the Dharma,
Homage to the Sangha.

OM YE DHARMA HETU PRABHAWA
HETUN TESHAN TATHAGATO HYAVADAT TESHAN TSA YO NIRODHA
EWAM VADE MAHASHRAMANAH SOHA

All phenomena arise from causes;
Those causes have been taught by the Tathagata,
And their cessation too has been proclaimed by the
Great Shramana.

If the dying person is willing to listen, tell them about the bardos as simply as you can. Tell them Buddhists believe that after we die, our essence passes through what we call a 'bardo' and that it's like going on a journey. This is the one journey that everyone eventually has to make and only ends once we are reborn into our next life. Tell them that although Buddhists prefer to prepare for the experiences they will encounter in the bardos while they are alive, it's never too late.

These days, most people feel that while a person is still alive they must never be forced to do anything against their will. But once they are dead and just a consciousness – a bardo being – everything changes. Apart from anything else, the bardo being will probably be terrified because they have no idea about what is happening to them and may be desperate for your help.

Ideally, a dying person's mind should be calm and at ease as they die. For most of us, though, our biggest problem at death will be the same as our biggest problem in life: selfishness and a relentless fixation on ourselves. To counter this kind of selfishness, Buddhists try to think of others. So, as you sit with a dying person, try to encourage them to think beyond themselves by making a heartfelt wish that all sentient beings are well and happy. By doing so, they will face death feeling braver and more courageous. You could also read the following verse out loud, as a reminder, or ask a member of the dying person's family or a close friend to read it for them.

May all sentient beings enjoy happiness and the causes
of happiness,
Be free from suffering and the causes of suffering,
May they never be separated from the great happiness
devoid of suffering,
May they dwell in the great equanimity that is free from
attachment and aversion.

Depending on the situation, you could try introducing the dying person to the power of aspiration and Tonglen practice. Tell them how they can help both themselves and others by aspiring, at the moment of death, to take on all the fear, pain, guilt and paranoia experienced by sentient beings: "May the fear, pain, guilt and paranoia of all sentient beings come to me." Pema Chödrön, one of the great Trungpa Rinpoche's most well-known students, explains how this practice works on page 195.

The Moment of Death

Be sure you tell the dying person what is happening to them, lovingly and compassionately.

Now that your senses no longer function,
Your mind is independent, naked, clear and present;
Never before will you have experienced
What you are experiencing right now.
This is the Buddha.

Speak clearly, gently and confidently, but don't mince your words. Your intentions are good, so there is no need to worry about being too pushy. In fact, at this point, by all means *be pushy*! It will take less than a split second for the dead person's consciousness to experience their mind nakedly and, although that experience may only last for another split second, it's so important that they 'get

it'. This is why the best thing you can do is to keep repeating these instructions, again and again.

A dead person cannot nod or say thank you and they certainly cannot give you a reward. So you will never know if you have been heard or if what you say helps. This makes guiding someone through the process of dying and death an act of utterly selfless giving. And as you have nothing to gain from helping in this way, it may be the one time this life that your actions are entirely altruistic.

If you cannot guide someone because, for example, members of their family are present at their bedside and easily upset by anything spiritual, always remember that you can tell the dying person all this information once they are dead. And who knows, after death may be the perfect time for them to take refuge. Even if it isn't, nothing you say can hurt them in any way. However prejudiced or anti-religion the dying or dead person may be, it is your practice of compassion and bodhichitta that really matters; don't underestimate its effect! If you tell someone who is clinically dead and already in the bardos that they should take refuge, I am certain they will do as they are told – they may be so terrified that they are willing to try anything.

Resting in the nature of your mind is the supreme practice for the moment of death. If you have received the relevant instructions and are a practitioner of the nature of mind, this is all you need to do.

Immediately After the Moment of Death

Read the verses of taking refuge out loud once again, confidently, but gently.

NAMO BUDDHĀYA GURUVE
NAMO DHARMĀYA TĀYINE
NAMO SAṂGHĀYA MAHATE TRIBHYOPI
SATATAṂ NAMAḤ[31]

Homage to the Buddha, the teacher;
Homage to the Dharma, the protector;
Homage to the great Sangha –
To all three, I continually offer homage.

BUDDHAṂ SHARAṆAṂ GACCHĀMI
DHARMAṂ SHARAṆAṂ GACCHĀMI
SAMGHAṂ SHARAṆAṂ GACCHĀMI[32]

I take refuge in the Buddha.
I take refuge in the Dharma.
I take refuge in the Sangha.

In the Buddha, the Dharma and the Supreme Assembly
I take refuge until I attain enlightenment.
Through the merit of practising generosity, and so on,
May I attain buddhahood for the benefit of all beings.[33]

Until the essence of enlightenment is reached,
I go for refuge to the Buddhas.
Also I take refuge in the Dharma
And in all the host of Bodhisattvas.[34]

Always address the dying or dead person by name.

O Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of dead person]
You are now dead.
Even if you are not religious,
The best thing you can do now is take refuge.

Listen to what I am about to say, then repeat after me:
I take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

O Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of dead person]
Now that you are dead, your mind is extremely powerful,

Far more powerful than the minds of the living.
Make good use of this power.
Use it to help others.
Think:
I want to continue to help all living beings on this planet –
All human beings, all living creatures and the
natural environment.
I want to eradicate poverty, disease, inequality and injustice.
I want everyone to see and recognize the truth.
I want to wake everyone up from the delusion that life will
last forever.
I want everyone to see through the illusion that
Money, power and relationships are real, permanent
and everlasting.

May all sentient beings enjoy happiness and the causes
of happiness,
Be free from suffering and the causes of suffering,
May they never be separate from the great happiness devoid
of suffering,
And may they dwell in the great equanimity that is free from
attachment and aversion.

If there is anything else you want to say to the dead person – the bardo being – say it now, kindly and gently.

NAMO BUDDHĀYA
NAMO DHARMĀYA
NAMO SAṂGHĀYA

Homage to the Buddha,
Homage to the Dharma,
Homage to the Sangha.

OM YE DHARMA HETU PRABHAWA HETUN TESHAN
TATHAGATO HYAVADAT TESHAN TSA YO NIRODHA EWAM VADE
MAHASHRAMANAH SOHA

All phenomena arise from causes;
Those causes have been taught by the Tathagata,
And their cessation too has been proclaimed by the
Great Shramana.

Tell the dead person that they have nothing to lose by listening to what you have to say. Introduce them to the concept of 'bardo' and tell them about the bardo of dying, and so on.

You can now offer the dead person the same instructions you would give a Buddhist. Bardo beings can follow mental recitation, so if for any reason it isn't possible for you to say the instructions out loud, read the following pages silently. If your dead friend belongs to one of the more dogmatic religions that only allows family to approach a dead body, you may not be allowed to see them once they are dead. In this case, introduce your friend to the teachings from your own home. Don't worry, the moment you address them by name they will recognize your voice.

No matter who you are helping, always repeat the teachings and instructions as many times as you can. Actually, there is an argument for continuing to repeat everything for several weeks because, unless you are omniscient, you will have no way of knowing whether or not the dead person has heard and understood what you have told them.

Of course, if the dead person were to discover that there is no such thing as a 'next life', nothing you say will make any difference to them. But if they do wake up to find that everything the bardo teachings describe is true, the information you give them may be the most invaluable advice they have ever received.

The Bardo Instructions

TRADITIONALLY, Tibetans rely on the bardo instructions that appear in Karma Lingpa's *Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, the *Bardo Tödrol Chenmo*. The instructions you will find in the following pages are a simplified version of that text. Although *Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo* was originally written for Buddhists, just because a person is neither a Buddhist nor spiritual doesn't mean they are not qualified to hear the bardo instructions. Giving an atheist or agnostic refuge and bodhichitta when they are dead and in the bardo of becoming will plant the seed for them to become Dharma practitioners in their future lives.

When you die yourself, ask someone else to read these instructions for you, as a reminder.

1. The Painful Bardo of Dying

Dharmakaya

Be brave, direct and honest with the dying person about what is happening and always tell the truth.

Speak clearly but kindly and in a soothing, melodic tone of voice. Don't cough or sound bored or read in a dull monotone. And say OM MANI PADME HUM after each verse to make this activity worthwhile – or the Chinese NAMO GUAN SHI YIN PUSA; or the Japanese, ON ARORIKYA SOWAKA; or the Thai, BUDDHO.

In the classic Buddhist texts, the phrase 'Son of Noble Family' or 'Daughter of Noble Family' is used to indicate that each one of us belongs to the family of the Buddha and that we have buddha nature. The dying person is therefore a child of the Buddha, whether they practise Buddhism or not.

Always make sure you say the dying person's name out loud – for example, John Smith – before you start reciting the instructions, because identity is very important to us human beings.

O Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of the dying person],
You are dying.
The projection called 'this life' is about to end,
And the projection called 'the next life' is about to begin.
You will soon discard the shell of your old body,
And acquire a new one.

OM MANI PADME HUM

O Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of the dying person]
Whatever you are currently thinking will pass,
It may already be fading.
Soon you will think a new thought.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Your **air** element, your vital energy, is now dissolving.
Your digestion is deteriorating.
Your mind is becoming vague and confused.
You are losing control of your bowels, and
Saliva is dripping from your lips.
You are having difficulty swallowing.
Your limbs feel weak and don't function.

OM MANI PADME HUM

The dissolution of the air element
Causes the **earth** element to fall apart.
Your head is too heavy for your neck to support;
Every movement is a struggle,
You are too weak to hold a spoon.
You feel dull, as if you are being suffocated;
You push and kick at something that seems to be
smothering you.
You may see a flickering, mirage-like light.

OM MANI PADME HUM

The degeneration of the earth element leads to
The **water** element dissolving into the **fire** element.
You feel dry;
Your tongue rolls up.

OM MANI PADME HUM

The following lines are a gentle way of telling the person they are dying.

Is your body feeling heavy?
The **earth element** in your body
Is dissolving into the **water element**.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Are you feeling dry and dehydrated?
The **water element** is dissolving into the **fire element**.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Are you shivering? Do you feel cold? The **fire element** is
dissolving into the **air element**.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Your breathing will soon become laboured;
As the weight of a mountain lands on your chest,
It will be harder to breathe in
But you will still be able to breathe out.
Do not panic,
There is nothing pressing down on you.
That heavy weight is the disintegration of your body's elements.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Next, it's as if you are wrapped in darkness.
Everything is pitch black.
Do not panic.
Your outer sense consciousness –
Your eyes, ears, nose, and so on – is dissolving.

OM MANI PADME HUM

You feel you are falling from a great height.
Do not panic,
You are not falling through space.
Your body and your mind are gradually separating.
Now, for the first time ever,
Your mind will experience independence from your body.
This is what your mind feels like
When it is not confined by your body.

OM MANI PADME HUM

O Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of dying person],
Do not dwell on what you have failed to achieve this lifetime,
Or what you wish you had done;
There is no end to worldly endeavour.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Do not worry about relatives and friends, they will be fine.
And anyway, there is nothing you can do for them.

Do not think about your possessions;
Do not think about how much you will miss your life
Your houses, cars, phone chargers, USB sticks, and so on.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Soon you will experience rainbow-coloured lights.
These lights will appear suddenly, so remember:
They are nothing more than the hue,
The display,
The expression of your mind.

OM MANI PADME HUM

What you say at this point will depend on which teachings the dying person has received. If the dying person has been introduced to the three kayas of the Mahasandhi tradition, rather than saying 'the expression of your mind', say, 'the expression of the three kayas'. If they haven't been introduced to the three kayas, don't confuse them by using terms they will not understand. Instead, just say, 'your mind'.

The infinite rainbow-like colours and shapes that now
surround you
Are unlike anything you have ever seen before.
The blueness of the blue,
The greenness of the green,
The redness of the red
Are unimaginably intense and alive.
Because you are no longer limited by the filter of your eyes
You are able to perceive all the unnamed colours
That were invisible to you while you were alive.

OM MANI PADME HUM

You can see some familiar shapes,
Like squares, triangles and semi-circles,
But most are completely unfamiliar to you;
You never imagined that such shapes exist.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Everything feels intense and raw
Because you no longer perceive
Using the filters of your body's sense organs,
Or your imagination.
There is nothing between you and the object you
are experiencing.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Do not be afraid of the colours and shapes,
Or of how intensely you perceive them.
They are nothing more than the expression of your mind
(the three kayas).
Nothing you see and experience is 'out there',
It is all the radiant display of mind.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Do not be afraid.
There is no need to panic.

You will now faint.

O, Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of dying person],
This is the Buddha!
O, Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of dying person],

This is the Buddha!
O, Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of dying person],
This is the Buddha!

OM MANI PADME HUM

Do not be afraid!
Do not contrive!

This is the Buddha;
This is the real you!
You are not [name of dying person].
You are Buddha,
Face it!
Dwell in your true nature!

You are Buddha,
Do not shy away from your buddha nature!

This is it!
Do not try to run away from this state!
Relax and dwell right here.

OM MANI PADME HUM

For those of us who are still living – so-called 'living beings' – this state is labelled 'the moment of death'. In the human realm, the dying person is now considered to be dead.

As you read these instructions to your dying friend or loved one, they may not look as you expect them to look. But as it is unlikely that you will be able to tell which stage of death they are going through – their lips may not be dry, their skin may not be pale, and so on – don't try to analyze or predict where they are in the process; unless you are omniscient, you won't be able to.

The best thing you can do is follow these instructions, which will definitely help.

Repeat this text for one, two or three hours, the whole night, or twenty-four hours. If there is a group of you, take turns, so that there is always someone with the dying or dead person throughout a 24-hour period. Alternate between chanting OM MANI PADME HUM (100 or 1,000 mantras at a time) and reading the instructions.

Remember always to speak lovingly, from a compassionate heart overflowing with bodhichitta.

If you know the practice of considering yourself as a deity, feel confident as you read these instructions that you *are* Vajrasattva or Samantabhadra or Guru Rinpoche, Padmasambhava, or Amitabha.

2. The Luminous Bardo of Dharmata

Sambhogakaya

Having repeated the dharmakaya instructions for a full day, you now give the dead person some new information. Again, these instructions should be repeated as many times as possible.

You may find that in your country, the law stipulates that a corpse must be cremated immediately after death – this is true for many places in the modern world. Don't worry, a good alternative to sitting next to the corpse is to sit in the dead person's favourite place – their bedroom, sitting room, studio, garden or wherever. If that is not possible, sit next to one of the dead person's favourite things. And if none of this is possible, just call them by name.

For Buddhists, the body is just a vessel for the mind – like a cup – so if you can, continue to recite these instructions even after the person's body has been cremated.

Yesterday, Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
    [name of dead person],
You were unable to dwell in the pure, uncontrived Buddha state,
And you missed your chance for liberation.

The uncontrived Buddha state was so unfamiliar and
so unbearable that you fainted.

OM MANI PADME HUM

You have now recovered from your faint.
Everything you are experiencing terrifies you.
Violent fury rages,
As sharp, angular shapes and symbols surround you, and
Wrathful figures and tumultuous sounds fill your perception.
Never before have you seen or heard anything like it.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Grotesque figures with many heads and flaming faces
Fill all of space.
A strange and thunderous cacophony deafens you;
Like a mighty hail storm,
Sharp needles of light pierce the space around you.

OM MANI PADME HUM

O Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of dead person],
Do not be afraid!
This is the radiance, the display, the dance,
The ebb and flow of the same Buddha
That your mind experienced at the moment of death.
You are afraid because the experience is so alien.
This has never happened to you before,
So of course you are afraid.
Try to remember: this is the nature of your mind.
This is the Buddha.

OM MANI PADME HUM

At this stage, the bardo being will most likely faint.

O Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of dead person],
Once again, you have missed your chance for liberation.
Not recognizing the wrathful forms
As the display of your own buddha nature,
You fainted.

OM MANI PADME HUM

You have now recovered,
And the infinite rainbow-like colours, sounds and shapes
You are experiencing are peaceful and soothing,
Like the calm after a storm.
The light is dazzlingly bright.
And you think you have a form, a 'body'.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Rainbow-coloured spheres of light fill all of space.
A buddha sits in each light-sphere surrounded by bodhisattvas.
From the hearts of these sublime beings,
Threads of light shoot into your heart.

OM MANI PADME HUM

All the new shapes you see seem familiar.
Remember,
Everything you experience
Is the display of your own mind.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Do not feel shy of these figures;
They are just your mind.
Do not be afraid of these figures;
Trust that your mind is creating what you see.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Some figures are neither bright nor spectacular.
Their soft, subdued tones attract you,
And you are drawn to their mellow calm.
They are more welcoming than the wrathful, sharp brilliance.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Do not allow these gentler images to deceive you!
Do not cosy up to them!
If you do, they will quickly mature
Into all your familiar negative emotions,
Like anger, jealousy and greed.
You are attracted to these softer images
Simply because you know the emotions so well.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Most of us prefer to stick to what we are used to. Although the emotions we habitually experience can be agonizingly painful, they are also comfortingly familiar. More often than not, we would rather experience the pain we know than nothing at all – mind is so masochistic. This is why the 'referencelessness' we experience once our bodies are dead is so unbearable.

Our emotions make us *feel*; we feel alive, we feel we exist, and we feel that we are feel-able. The remedy we apply to tame our emotions is meditation, the practice of referencelessness and of not getting caught up or entangled in our thoughts and emotions. Words like 'entangled' or 'engrossed' are used because they have the effect of killing the pain of referencelessness – which sounds strange, doesn't it? But the reality is that when we are entangled in our thoughts, we suffer pain. Yet we like that pain because it makes us feel alive, and we would rather suffer the pain we know than risk the painlessness of a new experience.

Basically, we are all, in one way or another, masochists. This is why we feel far more comfortable with the less intimidating, not-too-bright and not-too-extraordinary colours, figures and shapes that we now see, and why we long to cosy up to them.

O Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
    [name of dead person],
Do not be drawn towards the subtle images!
Focus on the most dazzling colours and vibrant figures.
A light will shoot out from one of the blazing figures
And pierce your eyes.
Be joyful!
Surrender to the light!
Pray to the light!
And always remember:
Everything you see is nothing but your own mind.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Continue to surrender to the brilliant light.
Surrender to it again and again.
Gradually, all the bright, gleaming figures and dazzling lights
Will dissolve into those that are feeble and inviting,
And you will be liberated.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Repeat the instructions in one hour, or in two or three hours – it's up to you how often. If you can, repeat them again tomorrow and the next day, three, five or seven times a day.

Always begin by saying,

O Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
    [name of dead person],
Once again, you have missed your chance for liberation...

If you can, invoke the millions of beings who must be dying at this very moment. As bardo beings wherever they are, they will be able to hear you because their consciousness is no longer blocked by their bodies. If you are physically in London, a body-less bardo being in New York will be able to hear you as clearly as if they were standing right next to you.

Always remember, everything is mind. Therefore the bardo being has no need to be afraid of the shapes, colours and figures they see, but neither should they get attached to them.

For some, the stages of the bardo happen all at once; for others, the stages unfold gradually. But as you are not omniscient, you cannot know which stage the bardo being has reached. The best you can do is give the bardo being all the information you can as quickly and as many times as possible in the hope that at least some of what you say will help. Continual repetition is a kind of insurance policy: the more often you repeat the instructions, the more likely the bardo being is to hear them at least once.

3. The Karmic Bardo of Becoming

After three days, say:

O Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of dead person]
Do not be distracted.

You have gone astray.
You did not recognize
The wrathful and peaceful displays of sound, shapes and lights
That are the direct, inner display of the nature of mind.
As you shied away from that naked state,
Your awareness is no longer pristinely pure,
And your projections and perceptions are crude and gross.

OM MANI PADME HUM

You know now that you are dead.
Although you long to live again,
The causes and conditions for your new life have not
yet ripened.
Instead, you are entangled in your perception of death.
Multitudes of booming sounds and transfixing lights
Continue to terrify you.
You may feel as if you are falling into an abyss.
Everything you perceive is erratic and strange.
It all shifts and changes so quickly,
You never have time to get used to any of it.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Everything you experience strikes terror in your mind.
You have no point of reference,
Nowhere to rest,
No peace,
Nowhere to be silent,
No opportunity to contemplate.

OM MANI PADME HUM

O Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of dead person],
Throughout all this,
Try to remember:
Everything is a manifestation of your mind.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Mind is like the sky,
It has no colour, no shape, no boundary,
Yet 'cognition' and 'awareness' are always present.

Be confident in the nature of your mind.

OM MANI PADME HUM

The two previous bardo states are referenceless and so concepts like food and hunger do not exist. Now that the dead person has arisen as a bardo being, their prana and mind will strengthen and become more concrete, and the habit and concept of sustenance – food and drink – will quickly reestablish itself. Without a body, the bardo being can only eat smells. This is why we burn 'sur' and dedicate its smoke to the dead person.

Sur Offering

'Sur' is a traditional ritual for the dead. Approximately three days after death, the relatives and friends of the person who died burn vegetarian food as a sur offering. Tibetans burn roasted barley, but you can burn any kind of vegetarian food you like – a biscuit will do.

Visualize the smoke of the sur offering as an infinite abundance of wealth, food, drink, shelter, transport, and so on. Multiply and bless the offerings, then dedicate the merit towards the well-being of the dead person and all sentient beings.

Ideally, visualize yourself as Avalokiteshvara, or whichever peaceful deity you prefer. The bardo being will be shaky, nervous and afraid, so visualize yourself as a peaceful and very compassionate deity to help create a calming atmosphere. Recite OM AH HUM a few times and sprinkle water to bless the offerings.

When you practice, if for any reason you are unable to read the text out loud, read it silently instead.

O Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of the dead person]
Eat this food until you are full!
Enjoy everything that is offered to your heart's content.

Do not crave life.
Do not yearn for those you have left behind.

Think instead of your guru.
Think of the deity.
Think of the pure realms of the buddhas.
Think of the buddha realm where the Lord of Limitless Light,
Buddha Amitabha, dwells,
And repeat Buddha Amitabha's name, again and again.

- If you prefer a slightly more elaborate practice, Chokling Tersar sur practice is very easy to do. An English translation is freely available for download from: https://lhaseylotsawa.org/texts/karsur-and-marsur

Buddha Amitabha

Buddha Amitabha made some extremely strong aspirations in his previous lives as a bodhisattva. It is his wish and aspiration that just by thinking of him or reciting his name, we can all take rebirth in his realm the instant we die. So keep reminding the bardo being of Buddha Amitabha's name.

O Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of the dead person]
To invoke Buddha Amitabha, recite:

NAMO AMITABHA

or

OM AMI DHEVA HRI

Pray wholeheartedly to Buddha Amitabha,
Pray to Avalokiteshvara and Guru Rinpoche, Pema Jungne.
Arouse intense devotion for them,
Without the shadow of a doubt.
Long, again and again,
For the same state of buddhahood that they have attained;
Yearn for rebirth into perfect buddhahood.

By making sincere and heartfelt prayers,
You will be reborn into the realm of Buddha Amitabha;
Be joyful.
Do not panic.
Relax.
Be confident,
And intensify unwavering devotion.

Next:

O Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of the dead person]
You did not focus,
You did not push yourself into the realm of Buddha Amitabha,
So you will now be swept towards a womb.

OM MANI PADME HUM

O Son or Daughter of Noble Family,
[name of the dead person]
Listen wholeheartedly and attentively.

OM MANI PADME HUM

If you see piles of wood,
Or caves, or damp, murky, shadowy places,
Be very careful!

If you imagine you are in a pleasant forest, or a mansion,
Be very careful!

OM MANI PADME HUM

Do not covet such places;
Do not rush towards them.
Do not make hasty decisions.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Instead, wish to be reborn on earth as a human being.
Aspire to connect with the Words of the Buddha, the Dharma,
And yearn to be born in a land
Where the Buddha's teachings are freely given.
Generate this motivation and aspiration, again and again
and again.

OM MANI PADME HUM

Try to remain calm;
If you are overexcited, compose yourself.

OM MANI PADME HUM

As I mentioned earlier, you will be reborn as a girl if you feel jealous of your mother and desire for your father, and as a boy if you feel jealous of your father and desire for your mother.

Tantrikas, you should visualize your father as Guru Rinpoche or the deity you practice and are most familiar with, and your mother as Yeshe Tsogyal or the consort of your personal deity. Avoid feeling desire or jealous resentment for either or both of your parents, and instead, joyfully and with devotion for Guru Rinpoche and Yeshe Tsogyal, enter the womb.

Questions About Caring for the Dying and the Dead

"Hold on!"—
and in the pause,
"Buddha have mercy!" [35]

Shayo

What is the most skillful way of dealing with an old person who isn't a Dharma practitioner and expresses a wish to die on a daily basis?

It is probably better not to contradict or argue with them. Try to chant or sing OM MANI PADME HUM whenever you can, but casually, in the same way you would hum or whistle a tune. Don't sing directly at the old person. Make it look as though they overhear you by accident. In the long run, it really doesn't matter whether your singing annoys them or not. The fact that they have heard the sound of mantra will mean they have made a connection with the Dharma and, ultimately, that connection will help. If they like your singing, that's also good. Either way, both reactions of 'liking' and 'not liking' are symptoms of having made a connection.

Tell the person that in their situation, longing for death is completely understandable. But also suggest that as they long for death, they also make a strong aspiration to be reborn with the

ability to help others – people, animals, the natural environment, and so on.

What should I say to a Christian who believes they are bad and will end up in hell?
You should suggest that they pray to their god and ask for forgiveness. You could also chant OM MANI PADME HUM casually (as above).

What should I do if a dying person starts having frightening visions of demons, and so on?
Tell them that their mind is playing tricks on them, then chant OM MANI PADME HUM and other dharanis.

What should I do if the dying person won't acknowledge what is happening and instead wants to engage in small talk?
You should engage in small talk. By doing so, you may be able to win the dying person's heart, which would give you the opportunity to insert some useful information about bodhichitta into the conversation. You may also be able to introduce them to OM MANI PADME HUM.

What should I do if the dying person has a very strong will to live and won't let go at the moment of death?
No matter how strong a person's will to live, nothing can avert death. Longing to live or a 'strong will to live' is a sign that the person has not accepted death, which could intensify their suffering. On the other hand, if causes and conditions have conspired to force a person close to death even though their life force is intact and undamaged, a strong will to live could help bring them back to life. In other words, it is possible that their life force has not been damaged. This is why it is always good to perform strengthening and life-lengthening rituals that, in the right circumstances, have the power to bring a person back to life.

If you are not a Vajrayana practitioner you could read a sutra out loud, such as *The Sutra of Boundless Life and Wisdom*.

- *The Sutra of Boundless Life and Wisdom* www.lotsawahouse.org/words-of-the-buddha/sutra-boundless-life

Tantrikas who have received the relevant empowerments could chant the mantra of the three long-life deities, or perform an Amitayus or an Arya Tara ritual, like the *Chimé Phagmé Nyingtik*.

- If you have received the Chimé Phagmé Nyingtik empowerment, follow the text of the practice that your Vajrayana Guru has given you.

Doing good deeds in the name of the dying person also helps.

You could practise life release – for example Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's text *Increasing Life and Prosperity: A Method for Freeing Lives,* which appears on page 203.

You could vow to be vegetarian, ideally for the rest of your life, but at least for a set period of time, like a day, or a week, or a month, or a year.

You could commission, buy or construct statues or paintings of Buddha Amitayus or Arya Tara.

You could even build a temple.

How can I support a dying person who is in shock because death is happening unexpectedly and very quickly?

If the dying person is Buddhist, remind them of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and read all the bardo instructions out loud to them, especially if they are Tantrikas.

If they are not Buddhist, just be loving and caring and give them your full attention. You will have plenty of time to read the bardo instructions to them after they die, which is when you could also make merit by doing good deeds in their name.

Do you think that having a religious belief about what happens after death brings a dying person comfort or fear?
It depends on the nature of the religious belief. Hearing about the ground of liberation (page 51) is extremely encouraging for a dying Buddhist, because it reminds us that the moment of death is our big chance to wake up and be liberated.

Should a dying Catholic be encouraged to pray to the Virgin Mary?
A sublime and holy being is usually a reflection of your own goodness, and the desire to pray to a holy being is a form of surrender and humility. When we pray, we put our trust in someone or something that is more divine and sublime than we are. This kind of trust is a very good human quality, but not all human beings can trust in this way. When we pray, our genuine humility, devotion and belief in the sublime is reflected back to us in the form of the buddhas, bodhisattvas and holy beings – beings like the Virgin Mary.

For Catholics, Mary expresses serenity and gentle compassion, both of which are very good qualities to have in your mind as you die. So I would never suggest that to pray to the Virgin Mary is anything other than a very good idea.

It's difficult to know when a dying Buddhist practitioner needs to be reminded of their practice or whether silence would be better. Sometimes I feel shy about doing anything because I don't want to disturb or distract the dying person. Do you have any advice?
Yes, it is difficult. Generally, though, what you say doesn't matter nearly as much as your motivation. So try to arouse a good and pure motivation, then do your best to offer encouragement and instruction. And try to be sensitive – it is best not to annoy someone while they are dying.

Carers who are empathetic and have good intuition will be able to read the dying person's responses and adjust what they do accordingly. But even if the dying person gets annoyed or doesn't

The Virgin Mary

want to hear or accept that they really are dying, you shouldn't pussyfoot around – this isn't the time to worry about political correctness. If you know without a shadow of doubt that the person is dying, you should tell them. However annoyed they get, your advice about what they should do as they die and in the bardos will help them more than anything they have ever heard before. But it takes courage to deliver this kind of information, which is why your pure motivation, body language, demeanor, and even the tone of your voice are so important. It will all help.

How do I deal with my own ambiguous feelings (grief, animosity, sadness, desire for material gain from a loved one) and emotional stress (intense trauma) as I try to help a dying person through my practice?

This is why tuning into your motivation is so important. You may not feel clear about anything else, but if you are motivated by love, compassion and especially bodhichitta – however shallow it may feel – whatever you do will help.

If you are a Buddhist, I suggest you contemplate the Four Immeasurable Thoughts: love, compassion, joy and equanimity. You could even recite them to yourself as a reminder.

I have seen three people die and in each case the moment of death was very distressing. I saw no surrender, just a flailing body, fear and resistance. The doctor told me that even though the process of the body shutting down looks distressing, the minds of the dying don't register it. I didn't believe him.

That is what the dissolution of the elements looks like. If you notice this happening as someone is dying, seize the opportunity to read the instructions on page 128 out loud.

The process of dying isn't always calm, romantic and peaceful. As a caregiver I am sometimes frightened and, to my shame,

disgusted because weak bodies excrete, smell, and so on. Do you have any advice about how to cope?

Always encourage yourself. You are doing perhaps the greatest service one human being can do for another. Far too many people are abandoned at death because so few of us are willing to take responsibility for caring for the dying. And there is nothing more painful or terrifying to a human being than the process of dying.

If you are a Buddhist, pray to the buddhas and bodhisattvas and ask them to give you the strength, the wisdom and the compassion to make everything you do turn out to be exactly what the dying person needs and longs for. Also pray that somehow your help will result in the seed of bodhichitta being sown in their minds.

But don't try to do too much, too quickly. To willingly offer to care for the dying is an incredibly brave thing to do, but it will take time for you to get used to everything that the job entails. Take it step-by-step, starting with very small steps. Gradually, you will gain more and more experience and if your motivation is rooted in love, compassion and bodhichitta, whatever you do will definitely help.

How can I help a dying person who is strongly medicated, on morphine, for example?

Read the bardo instructions in this book, especially after the person is dead. Morphine only really affects the body, so once the body is dead, it will have far less effect on their mind.

My job is to care for the dying. Often, relatives and friends of a dying person insist on remaining at their deathbed. Although they don't mean to be disruptive, they can make it difficult for a dying Buddhist to recite mantras or receive teachings. How should I deal with this kind of person?

Always be skillful and never try to impose anything on anyone. The moment of death is a crucial point in everyone's life. If just one of the

relatives or friends is willing to listen to you, try telling them about the bardos. But if no one will listen, sit somewhere private and read the instructions in this book and say some prayers, or read *Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo* or the bardo instructions you like best. Nothing and no one can stop you from doing that.

Practically speaking, during the process of dying Tibetan tradition recommends that we avoid moving or touching a person's body, especially from the waist down. So, if possible, try to encourage relatives and friends to gather by the dying person's head, not their feet.

What are the physical signs of the end of the inner dissolution? Are they similar to the signs that doctors see after death, like the onset of rigor mortis? How can I tell when a person's consciousness has left their body?

The signs doctors see may well be the same as the signs that signal the end of the inner dissolution. But the process of dying isn't uniform. And if there are perceivable signs, they will vary from person to person. A great practitioner who is sensitive to the process of dying, and so on, will be able to tell when the consciousness leaves the body. But for the rest of us, it's almost impossible to be sure. In most cases, we must rely on the general instructions.

You will know that the person is close to being completely dead once they stop breathing, their bodies are cold, and they don't respond in any way.

After death, if there is warmth around the heart of the corpse that lasts for up to a day, is it always a sign that the dead person has entered the 'tukdam' state? Even when it happens to the corpse of someone who wasn't a practitioner? Or could there be another explanation for this warmth?

'Tukdam' means that a spiritual practitioner is dwelling in the state of samadhi or 'one-pointedness'. So any warmth around the

heart of someone who was not a practitioner is unlikely to be a sign of samadhi. They may just be distracted.

Should a picture of the Buddha or guru be left by a corpse, and should the chanting continue after death and for how long?
Yes, of course. But the picture doesn't necessarily have to be left in the room where the person died – these days that can be difficult if the person died in hospital. Instead, you could put the picture in their bedroom at home and leave it there for as long as possible.

I have been told that our state of mind at the moment of death is vital and that we should try to be as calm as possible. My father died in pain and appeared to be very distressed. I am now worried about what happened to him.
There are many practices you can do to help a loved one who appeared to die in distress, for example, a *chang chok* ritual purification of the dead.

The dead person's family could, if they wish, commemorate the life of their loved one in all kinds of ways. Some people do voluntary work for a charity, or give money to charities, or give food and clothing to the poor, or offer shelter to the homeless, or even donate money to campaigns for saving the earth or cleaning up the environment, then dedicate it all to the memory of their loved one. These are the kinds of 'good deeds' or 'virtuous actions' that will really help. It's important to remember that in Buddhism, 'virtue' is always measured by how much closer an activity will bring you to understanding the truth.

Alternatively, or in addition, if this kind of commemoration appeals to you, commission a buddha statue. If you can't afford to have a statue made, you could simply download a beautiful photograph of a Buddha statue, print it and hang it in your home. Or you could print several copies of the photo and give them away. Or you could read some of the Buddha's teachings, the sutras. Or

Shakyamuni Buddha

you could publish and distribute free copies of the sutras you like best. Or you could make offerings to the lay and ordained sanghas by, for example, contributing towards the upkeep of a monastery.

If you prefer, you could follow one of the many traditional methods for accumulating merit for the dead. You could make light, incense and flower offerings at Bodhgaya or Mount Wu Tai Shan, or whichever holy place you like best. Or you could offer two hours, or two days, or two weeks of your time to tidying up all the rubbish scattered in and around holy shrines and temples. Or you could facilitate the study and practice of the Dharma through sponsorship, so that Dharma students can dedicate themselves to their spiritual path full-time. These are just examples of the kinds of good deed you can do and there are many other options.

On top of everything I have just mentioned, if you are a Tantrika, there are countless rituals that could help your loved one. You could, for example, do the *chang chok* ritual purification that I have already mentioned, through which the consciousness of the dead person is guided to a better rebirth – Chokgyur Lingpa's *Khorwa Dongtruk* is very easy to do. *Chang chok* can be done no matter how many thousands of years ago a person died.

What is *Chang Chok*?

The Buddha's teachings offer comprehensive instructions about how to put the awareness of cause, condition and effect into practise. Fundamentally, cause, condition and effect never stray from the essence of shunyata. As Buddha said, everything is cause and condition, and the most powerful of all causes and conditions is your intention, your mind.

A skeptical modern mind that is ambivalent about the vast and infinite manifestations of cause and condition, will very likely harbour quite a few doubts about *chang chok* rituals.

Those of you whose mind is as innocent and naïve as a child's will be able to enjoy and admire a sandcastle as if it were 'real'. A

sophisticated, mature, calculating, adult mind is more likely to dismiss the sandcastle out of hand, because what an adult mind wants is the 'real' thing.

If your mind is flexible enough to be fully satisfied by a sandcastle, so-called 'death' could be as simple as walking out of one room and into another. It will therefore be easy for someone like you to simply call out to a dead person and ask them to come back so you can tell them what they need to know. This is how Tantric practitioners think. As they trust shunyata and understand the laws of cause, condition and effect, they are able to make use of a very simple method – one of the Vajrayana's infinite methods – for summoning the dead person's mind consciousness to where the *chang chok* ritual is taking place.

What we do in a *chang chok* ritual is summon the dead person's mind consciousness to an effigy that has been drawn on a piece of paper, with the seed syllable NRI at its centre. The name of the dead person is written on the same piece of paper, along with as many other names of the dead as you wish. From the space of bodhichitta, the Tantrika who is performing the ritual arises in the form of the deity of the specific practice they are doing – for example, Avalokiteshvara or Amitabha. The Tantrika summons the spirit of the dead person (or people) and performs the rituals of taking refuge and the bodhisattva vow, then gives them the appropriate teachings and most important of all, an abhisheka. After making a final offering of sensory pleasure objects, the consciousness of the dead person is transferred into the heart of the principal deity of the mandala – Avalokiteshvara or Amitabha.

This is the structure of the *Khorwa Dongtruk,* Chokgyur Lingpa's *chang chok*. There are many other good, short *chang chok* purifications to choose from, but you must first receive the appropriate empowerment before practising them. Ask the person who gives you the empowerment for the teachings about how to do the practice and for a copy of the practice text.

If you have yet to receive the empowerment, or you are not a tantric practitioner, you could ask a qualified lama, monk, nun or friend to perform the practice for your dead friend or loved one. And as I mentioned earlier, the fact that you want to help someone by requesting such rituals indicates that through you, the dead person has an indirect link with the Dharma. So use that link as the foundation from which to request rituals to be performed for their benefit, and for engaging in all forms of virtuous action.

My grandmother was smiling when she died and looked very peaceful. My family has always believed that this means she had a 'good death'. But my grandfather's death was quite different and very distressing for the whole family – it didn't look anything like a 'good death'. Rinpoche, how would you describe a 'good death'?
For the dead person's lips to be twisted into a grin is definitely not a necessary characteristic of a 'good death'.

A good death is to die listening to the recitation of the names of the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

A good death is having someone with you to remind you to think about the well-being of all sentient beings and for you to make the wish that all sentient beings are happy and don't suffer.

A good death is having someone with you to remind you not to be greedy, or to hold onto any part of this life, or to be angry, and so on.

A good death, according to Buddhism, is to die in the atmosphere of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

And an extremely good death is to be introduced to the nature of mind – the Buddha – by a qualified practitioner at the moment you die.

But don't be too quick to judge whether one death is 'good' and another 'bad'. After all, what a person's death looks like to you will be based on your own perceptions and therefore coloured by your experiences, education and prejudices.

Does emergency treatment, like CPR or electric shock treatment to restart the heart, cause a dying person unnecessary suffering?
There is no way of knowing. In the case of critical medical emergencies, it is probably best to rely on a doctor's advice. Each one of us is extremely attached to life. Our will to live is usually so strong that if there was the slightest chance that our lives could be prolonged, most of us wouldn't hesitate to undergo invasive emergency treatments, like CPR. But it is very difficult to judge what is genuinely good and helpful for someone else.

Having said that, as Dharma practitioners value practice above all else, a seasoned Dharma practitioner would probably consider it worth enduring the discomfort and suffering of invasive procedures if doing so would buy them a little more time to practise. If such a procedure could give a practitioner the extra few moments they need to look at picture of the Buddha, or their guru, or to hear the sound of Dharma, most would gladly endure it.

My husband is dying and says that, in a crisis situation, he doesn't want to be given any form of emergency treatment to prolong his life. Should I respect his wishes?
If the sick or dying person is conscious and in their 'right mind' – meaning if they are sane, rational, thinking clearly and not suffering from any form of mental illness – yes, you should respect their wishes.

The doctors say that invasive measures might make my husband more comfortable, but he is adamant he doesn't want to go through that kind of ordeal. Should I intervene if the doctors try to insist?
If the dying person is of sound mind and not intent on ending their life, their wishes should be respected. But bear in mind that there is a fine line between wanting an 'assisted death', which isn't an option for Buddhists, and not wanting to be kept alive

by artificial methods, which should be respected. In some cases, a practitioner may refuse a treatment because it would interfere with their spiritual practice. So we should be particularly respectful of a practitioner's wishes.

How important is it to find an appropriate balance between giving a dying person drugs like morphine to make sure they aren't in too much pain, and maintaining clarity of mind so they can be as aware as possible at the moment of death?

It depends. From a spiritual point of view, if the dying person is not a practitioner and has strong negative habits, whether they take morphine or not, they have about as much chance of liberation at the moment of death as an animal.

If at all possible, it is best not to give a person who is very close to death drugs that will either make them groggy or knock them out. Ideally, practitioners prefer not to be befuddled by drugs and to know what is happening as they die. By remaining conscious and aware, they will be able to hear their friends chant the names of the Buddha or recite the instructions for the moment of death, and they may even be able to look at a picture of the Buddha or their guru.

How important is prayer?

When someone close to death becomes so afraid that they panic, hospital doctors usually sedate them – they don't have much choice. If you are religious and are taking care of a sedated dying person, simply remain at their bedside and say prayers for them. Prayer always helps enormously, no matter which tradition you follow. Often there is nothing else you can do.

The English often say, "it is the thought that counts". It's so true! And prayer is a great deal more powerful and effective than a fleeting thought. So prayers from any tradition will be very beneficial.

If the dying person is Jewish, Christian, Hindu, atheist etc., and you are a Buddhist, there is no reason why you shouldn't

say Buddhist prayers for them. If the dying person is open to discussing their beliefs with you, ask them directly if they would like you to say a prayer for them from their own tradition.

What to Do After Death

Handling the Corpse

You should probably follow your own culture's guidelines for handling the corpse. As I have already mentioned, the Tibetan tradition recommends that a corpse is left untouched for as long as possible after death and that it is not moved. If you can, try to leave the corpse where it is for three days, or at least for a few hours. But as this is quite difficult to organize in the modern world you may only be able to leave it alone for an hour or two. If this happens, don't panic. Just do your best to leave the body untouched for as long as is practical.

People often ask why a body shouldn't be touched. While you are alive, your mind is more attached to your body than to anything else in this world. When you are bumped into on the street, you can react by saying something to person who bumped into you because you are alive. But once a person is dead, the living have no way of knowing how strongly the dead person's mind might react to their body being touched. And for the dead, the handling of their old body can be extremely unsettling.

According to Tantra, your projections at death and after death will be more positive if your consciousness leaves through the upper part of the body – ideally the top of the head, the crown chakra. This is why Tibetan tradition recommends that the lower half of a corpse is not touched and that people do not sit or stand

near it. Relatives and friends should stand near the head of the corpse and to one side, not directly in front of it. This is also why Tibetan teachers advise you to touch the top of a dead person's head before anyone else touches the body.

If the dead person's family are open to the idea, you could suggest placing a tagdrol on the corpse – but this is just a suggestion not a 'must'.

Tagdrol

'Tagdrol' is the method of 'liberation through touch'[36]. It is often practised by the living – many people keep a tagdrol with them for protection while they are alive – but it can also be applied to dead bodies. You don't have to be dead to wear a tagdrol.

If you are interested in applying this method, you will find all the information you need on page 215. An image of a tagdrol chakra for you to photocopy and consecrate is on page 214.

Placing a tagdrol on a corpse works well if you have devotion for and genuine belief in the method. But even if the dead person didn't believe in it or was aggressively anti-spiritual, as long as the person who places the tagdrol on the corpse is motivated by love, compassion and bodhichitta, it will have a beneficial effect.

Read the Bardo Instructions Out Loud

Traditionally, Tibetans guide the dead by reading the instructions from *Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo* and other similar texts. But what if the dead person did not believe in life after death, or heaven and hell, or a bardo state? Would reading the traditional bardo instructions out loud still make a difference?

While we are alive, none of us can prove scientifically or conclusively that we will experience the bardos after we die. But neither can we prove that we won't. Imagine what would happen if a person who had been convinced that there was no such thing

as life after death were to wake up after death, surrounded by the terrifying visions described in this book. Wouldn't even the smallest hint about where they are and what they should be doing be welcome? No matter what they did or didn't believe in life, the dying person has nothing to lose and everything to gain from hearing these instructions.

However you die (violently or peacefully), wherever you die (in a hospital, at home or on the street) and whenever you die (at the age of 90 or 19), something in these instructions for dying, death and beyond will be useful to you – if one part doesn't help, another will. This is why we read the instructions over and over again. The dying person may not get it the first or second time around, but eventually they will. And unless you are a realised being who knows exactly what to do and when to do it, we ordinary beings have only this general advice to guide us.

Rituals and Practices for the Dead

Tibetan tradition suggests that the best time to offer the dead person help and to perform practices on their behalf is during the first forty-nine days after their death.

If the dead person was a relative, or a good friend, and particularly if they were a Dharma friend, it is important that you:

– make offerings to the buddhas and bodhisattvas
– sponsor rituals on their behalf
– chant mantras, and
– perform rituals for them yourself.

If you are a Tantrika and have received the appropriate empowerments, it is especially important that you perform whichever of the tantric rituals you are familiar with that was designed for dead or dying people – for instance, Red Avalokiteshvara and Akshobhya.

You could also make light offerings in the name of the dead person at holy places like Bodhgaya. If you prefer, you could make incense or flower offerings, and so on.

You could also:

– practise life release (see page 203)
– make light offerings of butterlamps or candles
– vow to be vegetarian, ideally for a lifetime, but at least for a specific period
– commission, buy or construct statues or paintings of Buddha Amitayus or Arya Tara, or
– build a temple.

If you wish, as you read the instructions, include the names of other dead people who might benefit from this information.

Phowa

Tibetans usually ask a lama or a monk or a nun to do phowa for someone who has just died. But would a phowa ritual help if the person who died wasn't spiritual?

The Vajrayana teachings state that the tantric method of phowa helps whether the dead person was spiritual or not, but that the ritual will have more power if the person who organises it has a strong conviction and trust in the practice. If you are a Buddhist, the fact that you are showing concern for the spiritual well-being of the dead person and are willing to organize rituals and practices for their benefit shows that they had a connection with this path – so use that connection.

There is no reason why such rituals should not be performed anonymously. Anonymous help is often the best kind. These days, money is given to charities and trusts that pass it on to the needy, who rarely even know the names of their benefactors, let alone meet them.

Sur Offering

Traditionally, sur practice is performed every day for three days after death, or for a week, or at best, every day for forty-nine days (see page 141).

The Practice of Life Release

Buddhists practise two kinds of accumulation: the accumulation of merit and the accumulation of wisdom. Merit is accumulated through practices like generosity, diligence, discipline and so on; and wisdom is accumulated through the practice of meditation and activities like hearing and contemplation. This means that of the six paramitas, three accumulate merit, two accumulate wisdom, and both accumulations require the paramita of patience.

The accumulations of wisdom and merit are interdependent and indispensable on the Buddhist path. For instance, at the most mundane level, without merit we lack the means to hear, study and contemplate the Dharma; and without wisdom it is only possible to accumulate small-time merit. If you lack wisdom, you will never be able to transform a rather ordinary offering – such as a single lotus petal – into the kind of offering that accumulates inexhaustible merit. Therefore, merit and wisdom go hand-in-hand.

Merit is often categorized either as 'stained' merit or 'stainless' merit. Stained merit is the merit you accumulate within the boundaries of your dualistic mind and emotions. Stainless merit is accumulated when your merit-making activities are accompanied by an understanding of shunyata.

Life release is one of the many activities that accumulates stained or 'ordinary' merit. We practise it when we rescue living beings from certain death. You could, for example, buy live fish that have just been caught and return them to a river or the sea; or buy up all the turkeys that are about to be slaughtered for Thanksgiving. Saving the lives of such beings is said to accumulate the supreme kind of stained merit.

Life release is practised all over Asia and various rituals have been developed to accompany the process, for example Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's *Increasing Life and Prosperity: A Method for Freeing Lives* (see page 203).

However, you don't necessarily have to perform the ritual itself or read a text. It is enough simply to save the lives of beings that are about to be put to death and dedicate the merit towards the enlightenment of all sentient beings.

Make Tsatsas

Tsatsas are small clay images of buddhas and stupas that are usually stamped from a mould and can often be found scattered around ancient stupas. In fact, stupas are large-scale versions of tsatsas and are also often filled with, among other things, many much smaller tsatsas. In ancient India and Tibet, the practice of making tsatsas from the ashes of a cremated body was strongly encouraged. Like tagdrol, this practice works best if the person making the tsatsas has devotion for the method. And again, this method is a suggestion, not a 'must'.

A tsatsa is a representation of the Buddha's mind or ushnisha, and the practice of making tsatsas – the process of kneading the clay, pressing it into the moulds, firing the clay in an oven, painting it, and so on – accumulates merit. Basically, although it isn't at the top of most modern practitioners' to-do lists, the effort you put into making tsatsas is a bona fide spiritual practice. These days, if practitioners do make tsatsas, they tend to make use of labour-saving technology rather than press the clay into moulds by hand – which, I suppose, is better than not making any at all.

One of the many reasons making tsatsas is such a good practice is that it isn't easy to brag about. Another is that tsatsas can't be used to increase your own comfort and pleasure or for gain. You are far less likely to fall prey to spiritual materialism by making tsatsas than by building a temple. Sadly, temples have too many

practical uses. Temples provide shelter from the rain or fierce sunlight, and are often used as hotels or tourist destinations – which may well be the highest form of spiritual materialism. But there isn't much you can do with tsatsas once they have been created. You can't profit from them, live in them, eat them, show them off, they have no practical use, and making them doesn't elicit pride, jealousy, or competitiveness in others. The same goes for water offerings. No one gets jealous when you offer a bowl of water, whereas they might feel jealous if you were to offer a purse full of gold or silver. Advice about how to make tsatsas appears on page 221.

Modern people rarely rejoice at other people's offerings. More often than not, generous offerings are subject to all kinds of judgements. The people who make such offerings are often condemned and even sneered at because it's so easy for the rich, who have so much, to give a lot. And competitive people always want their offerings to outshine everyone else's. Human beings can be so petty and narrow-minded.

Commemoration

Most western cultures have developed their own traditions for commemorating and memorializing the dead. In much of Europe, for example, the dead are laid to rest in beautiful graveyards under ornately carved tombstones, which family and friends can then visit when they want to think about loved ones and offer flowers. I am told that some people keep their dead loved one's ashes at home in an urn. One of the most famous of all commemorations is the Taj Mahal in India, built by a Mughal Emperor for his belovéd first wife.

Whether you commemorate your loved one according to your own cultural traditions or not is up to you. But if you would like to follow a Buddhist tradition, you could commission statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas in the name of the dead person, or

The Taj Mahal

print and frame a photo of a buddha, or commission a painting – whichever option you can afford. Buddhists tend to commission paintings of Buddha Amitabha's realm (Sukhavati), or Guru Rinpoche's Copper-Coloured Mountain, or Akshobhya Buddha. Commissioning sacred art serves two purposes: it is a wonderful memorial for the dead and it also accumulates merit.

Offer the Dead Person's Belongings

After a Buddhist has died, try to leave their belongings untouched for three days. If the relatives agree, everything should then be offered to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, to philanthropic endeavours, to charities that work to protect the environment, to organizations trying to eradicate child prostitution and child

labour, or whichever cause was close to the dead person's heart. Buddhists traditionally make offerings to two fields of merit: the buddhas, bodhisattvas and sublime beings; and sentient beings – humans, animals, and so on. Ideally, try to make offerings to both fields of merit.

Although the practice has begun to die out, in some parts of East Bhutan, the corpse is informed by a family member or friend before any of their belongings are given away: "Today, I will give your cup to the local monastery" or "I will give your pen to the local school". It's a good idea. This practice is well worth considering.

If for any reason there is no corpse, write the dead person a letter telling them what you intend to do, then leave it on their desk for a day or two, or by their armchair or wherever they liked to sit.

Repay Karmic Debts

Deluded, ignorant beings like you and me are subject to karma and are therefore victims of karmic debt. Everything that happens to us in life and death – our successes, failures, even the manner of our death – happens as a result of our karmic debts. Basically, causes and conditions dictate everything we do. So one of the activities we could initiate on behalf of a dead loved one is a karmic debt-clearing ritual.

What is 'karmic debt'? On paper, you own a flat, a car, wardrobes full of clothes and expensive accessories. Yet, if everything you own was acquired with borrowed money, technically, all your worldly goods belong to the bank. Karmic debt works in pretty much the same way. Everything we are, our situation in life, our health, our wealth and even our appearance is based on countless lifetimes of interaction with others. The Buddhist teachings tell us that we are therefore karmically indebted to absolutely everyone. Every single sentient being has, at one time, been our father, mother, child,

maid, driver, the horse or donkey we have ridden, our best friend and our worst enemy.

As you read this book, you could be sitting on a spot that belongs to a ghost. Did you ask the ghost's permission to sit there? We build houses without giving a second thought to the many animals that will be turned out of their homes as a result. We owe an unrepayable debt to our teachers, nurses, doctors, leaders and countries, and to our police forces for keeping us safe and bringing those who steal from and hurt us to justice. Some people don't pay taxes on principle, yet they benefit from the security their country provides to live comfortably and securely. If you are one of those people, you owe your country's social system far more than those who participate by paying their taxes. All these karmic debts are the reason we experience sickness, family feuds and failure. And because we are all burdened with a colossal amount of karmic debt, we have almost no control over what we do, think, have, and how we live. Today you may be healthy, bright and energetic, but in a split second, a stupid accident could wipe out all your health and energy for good.

Is there an antidote to karmic debt? Yes. A general antidote that is also very effective, is to create good karma. There is no end of ways for creating and accumulating good karma, from donating a penny to a world ecology programme to volunteering to teach maths to child prostitutes in Cambodia. But according to the Buddhist teachings, the best remedy for karmic debt is to practise the Dharma. Take refuge, make the bodhisattva vow and practise bodhichitta. You could also do tonglen practice: as you breathe out, offer everything that is good to others, and as you breathe in, hoover up everything that is bad (page 195). And always dedicate the merit you accumulate towards the enlightenment of others.

If you can, you should also offer sentient beings some practical help. Build stupas and statues of the Buddha; support those who study and practice Dharma; and make the Dharma available to as

many people as possible. These are all very powerful methods for wiping out your karmic debt.

If you are a Tantrika and have received the necessary empowerments and teachings, you could try some of the Vajrayana's excellent karmic-debt clearing techniques, like sur pujas (page 141), sang pujas and water offering pujas (page 199).

- Lhatsün Namkha Jikmé's *Mountain Smoke Offering (Riwö Sangchö)* arranged by Dudjom Rinpoche is available for download from: www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/lhatsun-namkha-jigme/riwo-sangcho

All these virtuous activities are very important.

Questions About Practices for the Dead

If the family doesn't have the resources to make offerings to high lamas or masters, what can they do to help a dying relative who has no spiritual beliefs? Can the family say prayers and aspire to help their relative themselves? Would that be enough?

Yes, absolutely! All the family needs to do is make sure that the name of the dead person is spoken into the ears of a good practitioner. There is no need to make big offerings, or write fat cheques, or light candles or incense. No fees whatsoever are necessary. It is fundamentally wrong to charge a fee for any kind of compassionate activity – to do so would defeat the whole purpose.

At the same time, making offerings to the buddhas, bodhisattvas, monks and nuns generates merit. Making offerings may also help you feel confident that you really are accumulating merit and good deeds on behalf of your loved one. So if you can, by all means, make offerings. And bear in mind that your offering doesn't have to be vast. The offering of a single flower petal in the dead person's name is enough, or a penny, or a pebble. Or you could buy dinner for a beggar.

Traditionally, the Chinese offer joss paper, food and clothing, etc., for the dead. Does this kind of offering help?

Yes, it does. But obviously, whichever tradition you follow, do it properly. Offerings are far more effective when accompanied by

the proper ritual. What makes a ritual 'proper'? Your motivation; motivation is the key. The proper motivation for performing rituals for the dead is the heartfelt and sincere wish to free them from suffering. Without that motivation, burning a million dollars-worth of joss paper won't help.

The Chinese have been burning joss paper for hundreds of years; it's one of the customs that provides the framework for a large part of their lives. Today, we can adapt this tradition and make it part of a sur practice (see page 141).

Traditionally, Tibetans burn barley flour (tsampa) instead of joss paper, but it really doesn't matter what you burn, just as long as your motivation is pure and you believe that the offering has been received. If a burnt offering is made with the right motivation, the bardo being will feel well-nourished and fully sustained by it.

We human beings are creatures of habit. You and I are delighted when we are given money or taken out for dinner. Similarly, a bardo being is delighted when it is offered sur. Whether we are alive or dead, our habits remain the same. And our habits are usually so strong that if, for example, you are given money in a dream, even though the giver, receiver and money are all an illusion, you still feel happy. So whatever you offer to the dead, never worry or even speculate about whether it has been received or not. Just believe that the offering has reached the person for whom it was intended.

You will increase the benefit of burning joss paper by making your offering within the framework of a sur ritual, which includes a specific visualization, motivated by the wish to liberate the dead person from all their suffering.

What you should never do is make an offering because you don't want the ghost of a dead person hanging around and bothering you or your family. The purpose of sur is not merely to shoo away a bardo being.

How important is it to train in Phowa practice?

Phowa practice is important. But always remember that the pillar or spine of phowa is devotion. Ideally, for phowa to work, the dying or dead person should have unwavering trust and belief in the method and, at the very least, be familiar with the practice.

For those who don't have this kind of trust, if the motivation of the person invited to perform the phowa ritual is based on bodhichitta, they obviously have devotion for the path of phowa and their practice will help. Those with an enormous amount of merit will know a great master who can do phowa for them as they die. Best of all is to learn and practise phowa while you are alive and do it for yourself when you die.

Phowa isn't the only practice that helps after death. Any of the methods that appear in this book are of tremendous benefit. Merely showing the dying person a photo of the Buddha, or reciting the names of the Buddha helps enormously, even once the person is dead.

You could also show the dying person an image from their own culture that inspires a sense of love, compassion and serenity, like the Virgin Mary.

I want to help my dead partner but find it hard to decide which of the recommended practices are essential and truly beneficial, and which are cultural and based in superstition.

This is a difficult question to answer because almost all rituals are influenced by national cultures and entangled in superstition. For example, people in Europe and America rarely greet each other by pressing their palms together in the Anjali mudra, whereas in India the gesture is commonplace. However rich the teachings on the origin and purpose of this mudra and however elaborate the philosophical interpretations, it can only ever be classified as an Indian cultural phenomenon.

Once again, your motivation is of paramount importance. Buddhists are never content merely to offer temporary consolation or practical assistance. 'Help' from a Buddhist perspective means helping sentient beings attain enlightenment. As long as you are motivated by bodhichitta and the wish to help the dying person become enlightened, it really doesn't matter what you do.

For a Buddhist, the best of all possible philanthropic activities is to study and practise the Buddhadharma. If, for whatever reason, that's not possible, you could make offerings to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, or offer to do some voluntary work for an organization or charity that aims to spread the Buddhadharma. Or you could make it possible for someone else to work for that organization. Or you could support a practitioner financially so they can study and practice. Or you could print prayer flags or pictures of the buddhas. Again, there are many options to chose from.

Questions About Other Aspects of Death

Grief and Loss

The person I love most in the world has just died. What is the best thing I can do for him?

We always want the best for the people we love. We want to give them everything they ever wished for and we are often willing to sacrifice everything we value for their benefit. But what is 'best'? Would buying your dying father a solid gold bed prevent him from dying? Or a carved turquoise toilet seat, or a ticket from Paris to Hong Kong on the Trans-Siberian Railway, or a night in the White House? For a moment or two, you may both be thrilled by any one of these extraordinary gifts, yet not one of them has any lasting value. So why not do something in your loved one's name that will truly help them – like sponsoring philanthropic activities that will benefit sentient beings and the environment.

Ultimately, the best thing you can do for those you love is to give them the Dharma and help them understand it. The next best thing is to practise the Dharma yourself and dedicate your practice towards the happiness and wellbeing of those you love and all suffering beings.

Remember, you have loved every single sentient being a billion times throughout trillions of lives. Your current love happens to be

the one you know right now, but believe it or not, it won't be long before you start forgetting about him or her, as well as everyone else you love – if not while you are still alive, certainly once you are in the bardos. By the time you are reborn into your next life, you will have forgotten about everyone.

How can I help and support someone whose grief is so intense that they can't move on?

It depends on how serious their condition is. If their grief is making them ill you may need to bring in professional help. Once their condition has stabilized, tell them about the truth of impermanence, the unwavering refuge of the Dharma, Buddha and Sangha, and that, now more than ever, they should work for the benefit of all sentient beings. Suggest that they make a promise to take on that great task.

What should I tell my kids about death? How do I prepare them for the death of their mother?

The advice Buddhists give children about death is pretty much the same as the advice that is given to adults. It is important to be honest with your children about what happens at death, unless that kind of honesty goes against what is culturally acceptable in your society. Young minds are able to accept difficult truths that many adults cannot bear to think about. But always take the child's individual character into consideration and explain what will happen gently and simply.

Think long-term, especially when it comes to children. If you don't tell your children the truth, they may think their mother willingly abandoned them when she died. Of course, once they grow up, they will realize she had no choice. But strong emotions implanted in a young mind are difficult to shake in adulthood, so make it clear to your children that their mother had absolutely no choice about dying.

My young son died of a drug overdose. This is usually considered negative karma for both of us. But if the shock and heartbreak is a catalyst for deepening my faith, practice and insight, could the so-called 'negative karma' become positive? And might his negative karma eventually be exhausted if I were to dedicate my spiritual path to him? Or at least, could that be a way of purifying his karma?

Whether a karma is good or bad is entirely subjective. There is a story told in Tibet about a bandit whose life changed completely the moment he slashed open the belly of a pregnant horse, killing both mother and foal. As the unborn foal slipped from its mother's body, even though the mother herself was in terrible pain and moments from death, her immediate reaction was to lick her foal and comfort it. The bandit was unexpectedly moved by the sight of the dying mother's love and concern for her newborn and he deeply regretted having murdered her. So much so that he instantly broke his sword, turned away from his violent way of life forever, started practising the Dharma and then quickly became realized.

Yes, of course your Dharma practice will exhaust your son's negative karma – in fact, that alone will do it. And I rejoice at your decision to view his death in this way and to use it as your path.

What kind of support should I give to a child who has lost her parents?

It depends on the situation. Many, many children lose their parents. From the Buddhist point of view, children and parents share a very strong karma. Obviously, you should give the child unconditional love, care and guidance. But most important of all is that everything you offer and do for the child springs from the good motivation of bodhichitta.

When you take care of children who have lost their parents, constantly ask the buddhas and bodhisattvas to help you to help them, and pray that everything you offer makes a positive impact on the children's lives. Apart from that, it's not an easy task.

If you have the time and the resources, try to be a good friend to orphaned children. Taking on a formal role of mentor, advisor or carer role in the child's life is good, but even more important is to be a good friend and companion – someone the child can always count on. Try to dedicate as much time to them as you can.

How can I make sure my baby will be a Buddhist? Is there anything I can do to ensure that my baby will be the reincarnation of a person who can benefit all sentient beings?

Asanga and his half-brother Vasubhandu – two of the most famous and celebrated Buddhist authorities in fourth-century India – were said to have been born as a result of the extraordinarily pure aspirations of their mother, Prasannashila.

Although Prasannashila was born into the Brahmin cast, she became so distressed by the rapid decline of Buddhism and lack of qualified teachers that she resolved to remedy the situation by giving birth to sons. After making many pure and powerful aspiration prayers she conceived twice: once with a Brahmin man, who fathered Vasubandhu; and once with a royal prince, who fathered Asanga. When the boys were old enough to ask about their fathers' castes, Prasannashila replied: "You weren't born to follow in your fathers' footsteps! You were born to train your minds as Buddha taught, then spread his Dharma far and wide." So they did, all as a result of their mother's powerful aspirations.

Why not follow Prasannashila's example? Make prayers of aspiration that your children will have the ability to truly help others. You could even aspire to attract and date men who also have the ability and wish to help others. While you are having sex, remember that your motivation is to give birth to a person who can be of real benefit.

To be of benefit, a person doesn't have to be a Rinpoche or a Buddhist guru or monk or nun. Your child may be able to benefit sentient beings most effectively by becoming the scientist who

discovers the cure for Ebola or dengue fever, or a compassionate president with a gift for solving their country's problems, or a very wealthy businessperson who endows many university chairs in subjects that promote methods for countering insatiable greed, selfishness and cruelty.

Abortion

What is the Buddhist view of abortion? How can I help women who have had abortions and the aborted beings?

Aborting a living being is murder. Imagine what it must be like for a baby to be aborted. Bardo beings are desperate to find a new body and to live in the material world. How would you feel if, having struggled for goodness knows how long to enter a body, your own mother consciously kicked you out and had your precious, new body flushed away? It is an exceptionally painful experience.

Having said that, women who have had abortions or who have encouraged others to have abortions and now feel guilt and regret about what they have done must always remember that we ignorant beings are responsible for perpetrating millions of hideous actions over countless lifetimes. Don't allow this single negative action to discourage you or weigh you down so heavily that you end up depressed and helpless. We must all remember *all* our misdeeds and confess them.

At the same time, you now have the opportunity to do some good. Seize that opportunity! Dedicate all your good actions to the enlightenment of the baby you aborted and to all the beings you mistreated, murdered, robbed and raped in the past.

You can help women who have had abortions and the aborted beings through Buddhist practice. Start by taking refuge and arousing bodhichitta.

In Japan and China, Kshitigarbha is an extremely popular bodhisattva. In Japan, Kshitigarbha is known as Jizo Bosatsu,

and in China as 'Dizang' or 'Ti-tsang'. This great bodhisattva famously vowed not to become a buddha himself until all the hell realms were completely empty. One of the forms he takes is guardian and protector of dead babies and fetuses. If you wish, offer lights, incense and prostrations to Jizo Bosatsu, recite his mantra and dedicate the merit to all aborted babies everywhere, and their mothers and fathers.

If you have received the appropriate empowerments, you could also recite sadhanas of Avalokiteshvara, Akshobhya and Kshitigarbha. Otherwise, you could recite the Kshitigarbha Sutra in whichever language you prefer.

- Chinese and English translations of the *Kshitigarbhasutra* can be found at ksitigarbhasutra.com/

One of the tiny Jizo statues in the Ohara nenbutsu-ji, Kyoto

Jizo Bosatsu

Jizo Mantra in Sanskrit

OM HA HA HA VISMAYE SVAHA

Jizo Mantra in Japanese

ON KAKAKA BISANMAEI SOWAKA

Jizo Mantra in Chinese (pinyin)

NÁMÓ DÌZÀNG WÁNG PÚSÀ

Suicide

Physician-assisted death is now legal in a number of western countries. Despite receiving the best care, a few chronically ill Buddhists have indicated that they would like to have this option open to them. How should a Buddhist hospice respond to someone who seeks an assisted death? And how can we best participate in the public conversation about this sensitive topic?

The spiritual opportunities available in the natural bardo of this life make being alive very precious. While you are alive, you can choose to practise being aware, conscious, mindful, loving, compassionate and virtuous. But you will be taking a huge risk if you opt for an assisted death in order to die painlessly.

If your hair caught fire you would immediately try to put it out. Similarly, the moment a Buddhist realizes they are picking up a new bad habit, their immediate response should be to break the habit. Buddhists actively discourage *all habits,* good and bad, because habits are dangerous, especially the bad habits that cause pain and suffering for ourselves and others.

Suicide is a habit we pick up very quickly and is extremely difficult to break. It's a little like being addicted to alcohol and incapable of saying no to a drink. Habit plays a huge role in defining future rebirths. Once you have formed the habit of ending your life when things get tough, you will resort to suicide more and more quickly in your future lives. Buddhists who have studied the teachings on karma and reincarnation should know this.

Of course, this argument will not work if you are not a Buddhist and have no belief in reincarnation. Neither will it work if you think that death is the end of everything.

For Tantrikas, purposefully ending your own life is simply unthinkable. Tantra sees the five aggregates as the five buddha mandalas and to deliberately destroy those mandalas goes directly against Tantric law.

As a Buddhist, even though you are in constant, unremitting pain and have no hope of recovery or relief, it is important that you do everything you can to take advantage of your situation. You could, for example, practice for all sentient beings by doing tonglen. Think to yourself:

By going through this terrible pain,
May the karma that causes pain for all sentient beings
Be exhausted.

Mature practitioners often find that acute pain brings their awareness alive. Many great masters have said that pain is like a broom that sweeps away all your karma.

Suffering also has its worth.
Through sorrow, pride is driven out
And pity felt for those who wander in samsara;
Evil is avoided; goodness seems delightful.[37]

What is the difference between euthanasia, assisted suicide and assisted dying?

From the Buddhist point of view, all these methods fall into the same category. I completely understand the motivation behind wanting to end a person's pain and suffering, but to purposefully end a life is not an option.

Maybe what Buddhist hospices and care centres could do is teach the dying how to offer the remainder of their life force to all sentient beings through dedication. This is a far better long-term solution than letting people end their lives with an overdose of pills.

Advice for Those Suffering Unbearable Pain

What can you do if you suffer from unremitting, incurable, chronic pain but your doctors tell you that you could live for months, or even years?

Try to accumulate as much merit as possible. Pray that the pain you are suffering and the pain of dying will not be prolonged. You could even pray to die as soon as possible and offer the months and years you have left in this life to the great bodhisattvas so that they have more time to help sentient beings. Make strong aspirations to be reborn quickly in a better rebirth, where you can also continue helping and enlightening countless sentient beings.

Buddhas and bodhisattvas, let me die right now!
May the months and years that remain of this life
Be added to the lives of great bodhisattvas
Who can truly help all sentient beings.

Make this prayer joyfully, wholeheartedly and with the right motivation. By praying in this way, you will continue to accumulate merit during your final days and hours.

Motivated by the wish to start afresh and with renewed energy, arouse the strong determination to be reborn as someone who can genuinely help others. Pray that what is left of your present life-force goes with you into your next rebirth.

Buddhas and bodhisattvas, let me die right now!
May the months and years that remain of this life,
Be added to my next life.
May I instantly be reborn
With the energy, determination and ability
To help sentient beings,
Selflessly and lovingly.
May I then continue to work to bring
All sentient beings to the perfect happiness of enlightenment.

If you have received the appropriate empowerment, you could also do an Amitayus long-life puja or sponsor someone else to do it for you.

What is the Buddhist view of modern attempts to live forever – for example, cryopreservation.

If the method maintains the continuation of an individual mind and doesn't require others to suffer, then it is acceptable.

A longing for immortality is nothing new. But none of the attempts human beings make to live forever will ever devalue the Buddha's mind instructions. Why? Because Buddha consistently describes the realms sentient beings inhabit as 'infinite' and 'boundless'. It's a bit like this: from the Buddhist point of view, if you were to faint or fall into a coma, it would make no difference whether you fainted for one second or one thousand years.

No one yet knows if removing your head and freezing it really will preserve your mind. Nevertheless, a surprising number of people are taking that gamble for the sake of a possible new body in the future. But to make the attempt, they have to take their lives this lifetime. Is this suicide?

Does life end during this procedure? If it does, you will have committed suicide. If the head is still alive once it has been separated from the body and remains alive while frozen, then you won't. But if you are not certain whether the head is still alive or not, I cannot answer this question.

According to Buddhism, death is the separation of body and mind. However, I am ready to accept that it is possible to be alive without a whole body. There is nothing in any of the Buddhist sutras and shastras to suggest that you are only alive if your body is whole. If science were able to prove that a mere lock of hair could retain a life force and consciousness, I would have to agree that it is a living being.

From the Buddhist point of view, though, your attempt at achieving immortality could end up creating a hell realm. Do you really want to live forever? Wouldn't you get bored? Is trying to extend your life really worthwhile? For Buddhists, life is only considered valuable because it provides us with a vessel in which to work towards understanding the truth. To live for billions of years while constantly retreating further and further from the truth is what Buddhists would describe as a god realm.

Can I help someone who is already dead but whose ghost or spirit is still around?
Yes, definitely! Do a sur ritual yourself, or sponsor someone else to do it. Sur makes ghosts very happy (see page 141).

Once the consciousness has separated from the body, we no longer filter what we experience through our senses. Yet the bardo texts say we will experience dazzling lights (visual phenomena) and thunderous sounds (audible phenomena). Does a bardo being believe it has these visual and audible experiences because it still has the habit of experiencing energy in this way and therefore projects a mental body?
Or are these experiences described in language we can relate to for the sake of communication, even though the actual experience is impossible for us to imagine while we have bodies?
Both are true.

For Tantrikas
Preparation for Death

For Practitioners with Superior Faculties

Remember the Guru, the View and the Deity

If you follow the Vajrayana path, there are three crucial things to think about and remember as you prepare for death:

> The guru, the person who introduced you to the nature of the mind;
> The view of emptiness, shunyata, where your mind should dwell; and
> The deity with whom you became acquainted in life through practice, who acts as a point of reference and reminds you about the union of emptiness and clarity.

Of these three, the guru is probably the easiest to remember because you will have met your guru during your life and therefore know what the guru looks and sounds like.

As a Tantrika, you will also have trained your mind in Vajrayana visualization and accomplishment practices. These practices help you get used to the appearance of the guru and the deity, and also to become familiar with their names, activities and manifestations. This kind of practice is called 'sadhana'.

Practising a sadhana isn't just about reading a text out loud, you also think about the physical characteristics of the deity

and the guru, and you recite the mantras. As you experience the process of dying, the best thing you can do is hold the images of the deity and the guru in your mind and remember as many of their attributes, colours and activities as you can – for instance the emanation and reconvergence of rainbow-coloured rays of light.

As you invoke the deity, it is extremely important that you feel absolutely confident that *you are the deity*; this is what the Vajrayana calls 'vajra pride'. Most important of all is that you receive the abhishekas (self-empowerment) from the guru and mix your mind with the guru's mind, again and again.

This is what a good Tantrika will do – the kind of practitioner the sacred texts describe as having 'superior faculties'.

If you have prepared yourself for death by practising phowa in life, then by all means, once the process of death has begun, do a phowa practice for yourself. If you know a good lama, yogi, yogini, monk or nun, you could ask them to do phowa for you. And don't worry if the practitioner isn't at your bedside as they do the practice because phowa can be done at a distance.

I must stress, though, that the path of phowa is for practitioners with superior faculties. This has nothing to do with being highly educated or clever. Practitioners are not said to have superior faculties because they have finished the Ngöndro or spent decades studying Buddhism. The only faculty that is absolutely indispensible is devotion. Without devotion and a wholehearted belief in the path of phowa, this practice simply won't work. And these days it is very difficult to find anyone with this kind of devotion.

Practitioners with Middling Faculties

Remember the Guru

The chances of an inexperienced, mediocre practitioner being able to remember the view as they die, or the details of the deity's

appearance and attributes, or even the name of the deity, are slim. Rely instead on the most trustworthy of all paths, which is to pray to your guru. The 'guru', in this case, is the guru or teacher you have met during this lifetime and with whom you have talked and interacted. As you die, pray to your guru, receive the four abhishekas, and mix your mind with the mind of your guru, and so on.

How to Assist a Tantrika through the Process of Dying

Vajra brothers and sisters who have a close relationship with the dying Tantrika can help by reminding them of all the important points of the practice.

Remember that life is an illusion, a dream
Surrender to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha
Arouse bodhichitta
Remember the appearance and activities of the deity and the sound of the mantra
Dwell in whichever view is most familiar, Madhyamika, Mahamudra or Mahasandhi
Remember the view of the union of emptiness and clarity
Remember your guru and intensify your feelings of devotion

For a dying Tantrika, the most important object of practice to remember and think about is the guru, so recite the name of the dying person's guru loudly and clearly. From time to time you could sing the name or even shout it.

Remind the dying Tantrika about the process of dissolution. The detailed description appears on page 128. But if time is short, the following may be more appropriate:

As the **earth element** dissolves
And you experience the secret sign of shimmering **mirages**,
Visualize your **guru in your heart** and generate **devotion**.

As the **water element** dissolves
And you experience the secret sign of **wisps of mist** or smoke,
Visualize your **guru at your navel** and **pray** to him.

As the **fire element** dissolves
And you experience the secret sign of sparks of light like
fireflies,
Visualize your **guru at your forehead**.

As the **air element** dissolves
And you see a **dazzlingly bright light** close up,
Try to **transfer your mind into the mind of your guru**,
Again and again.

Remind the dying Tantrika that everything they see, particularly the secret signs, is a manifestation of mind – also known as the display of their wisdom mind, their rigpa, luminosity, dharmadhatu, dharmata, dharmakaya, or tathagatagarbha, and so on. The term you use will depend on the lineage and tradition the person follows.

During the process of dying and at the moment of death, every one of us will be afraid. We will probably also be in physical pain and experience all the other sufferings that accompany death. But as Dharma practitioners, we must take advantage of everything that happens to us. So try simply to look at and watch any pain you feel, without getting caught up in your hopes and fears. In fact, try to watch everything that happens to you without getting entangled in any of it.

This is what tantric practitioners can do for one another.

Bury me when I die
beneath a wine barrel
in a tavern.
With luck
the cask will leak.

Moriya Sen'an[38]

Prayers and Practices

How to Practice Tonglen

Pema Chödrön

Tonglen practice, also known as "taking and sending," reverses our usual logic of avoiding suffering and seeking pleasure. In tonglen practice, we visualize taking in the pain of others with every in-breath and sending out whatever will benefit them on the out-breath. In the process, we become liberated from age-old patterns of selfishness. We begin to feel love for both ourselves and others; we begin to take care of ourselves and others.

Tonglen awakens our compassion and introduces us to a far bigger view of reality. It introduces us to the unlimited spaciousness of shunyata (emptiness). By doing the practice, we begin to connect with the open dimension of our being.

Tonglen can be done for those who are ill, those who are dying or have died, or those who are in pain of any kind. It can be done as a formal meditation practice or right on the spot at any time. If we are out walking and we see someone in pain, we can breathe in that person's pain and send out relief to them.

Usually, we look away when we see someone suffering. Their pain brings up our fear or anger; it brings up our resistance and

confusion. So we can also do tonglen for all the people just like ourselves—all those who wish to be compassionate but instead are afraid, who wish to be brave but instead are cowardly. Rather than beating ourselves up, we can use our personal stuckness as a stepping stone to understanding what people are up against all over the world. Breathe in for all of us and breathe out for all of us. Use what seems like poison as medicine. We can use our personal suffering as the path to compassion for all beings.

When you do tonglen as a formal meditation practice, it has four stages:

1. Flash on Bodhichitta

Rest your mind for a second or two in a state of openness or stillness. This stage is traditionally called flashing on absolute bodhichitta, awakened heart-mind, or opening to basic spaciousness and clarity.

2. Begin the Visualization

Work with texture. Breathe in feelings of heat, darkness, and heaviness—a sense of claustrophobia—and breathe out feelings of coolness, brightness, and light—a sense of freshness. Breathe in completely, taking in negative energy through all the pores of your body. When you breathe out, radiate positive energy completely, through all the pores of your body. Do this until your visualization is synchronized with your in- and out-breaths.

3. Focus on a Personal Situation

Focus on any painful situation that's real to you. Traditionally you begin by doing tonglen for someone you care about and wish to help. However, if you are stuck, you can do the practice for the pain you are feeling yourself, and simultaneously for all those who

feel the same kind of suffering. For instance, if you are feeling inadequate, breathe that in for yourself and all the others in the same boat and send out confidence, adequacy, and relief in any form you wish.

4. Expand Your Compassion

Finally, make the taking in and sending out bigger. If you are doing tonglen for someone you love, extend it out to all those who are in the same situation. If you are doing tonglen for someone you see on television or on the street, do it for all the others in the same boat. Make it bigger than just that one person. You can do tonglen for people you consider to be your enemies—those who hurt you or hurt others. Do tonglen for them, thinking of them as having the same confusion and stuckness as your friend or yourself. Breathe in their pain and send them relief.

Tonglen can extend infinitely. As you do the practice, your compassion naturally expands over time, and so does your realization that things are not as solid as you thought, which is a glimpse of emptiness. As you do this practice, gradually at your own pace, you will be surprised to find yourself more and more able to be there for others, even in what used to seem like impossible situations.

This teaching appeared on the Lion's Roar website on 9 November 2017 (www.lionsroar.com/how-to-practice-tonglen/). It has been reproduced here with the kind permission of Pema Chödrön and Lion's Roar.

Chutor: Water Offering

Chokgyur Lingpa

Within a fine unbroken vessel of ceramic or precious material,
Which is perfectly clean and untainted by poison,
Pour water and visualize yourself as Avalokiteshvara.
Ring the tingshag bells and imagine that the pretas assemble.

I and all beings equal to the sky
Take refuge in you, Avalokiteshvara,
The protector who embodies all objects of refuge.
Just as you formed the resolve towards enlightenment
For the sake of liberating beings filling all of space,
I will quickly attain buddhahood.

May all beings without exception be happy.
May they be free from all pain
And thus never part from sublime joy.
May they remain impartial and without bias.

OM AH HRIH HUNG

The milky stream of nectar flowing from the hand
Of Avalokiteshvara Khasarpani
Satisfies all hungry ghosts without exception.

Imagining this, recite OM AH HRIH HUNG and imagine that they attain happy existence (in the higher realms).

OM JVALAMIDAN SARVA PRETEBHYA SVAHA

Imagine that the pretas with restricted ingestion depart.
Discard the used water and pour fresh water.

Imagine that all pretas with outer and inner obscurations assemble.
Contemplate compassionate emptiness and recite this mantra:

NAMA SARVA TATHAGATA AVALOKITE OM SAMBHARA
SAMBHARA HUNG

Imagine that they obtain boundless sense pleasures.
Snap your fingers and imagine that they depart elsewhere.
Alternatively, in a wide vessel made of precious material
Arrange clean water with foodstuff.

In the sky before me is Avalokiteshvara,
The noble Vajragarbha,
Encircled by a host of buddhas, bodhisattvas,
Yidam deities, dakinis and Dharma protectors.
Below him are evil forces, obstructors, the six classes of beings,
And especially all guests of karmic debt.

OM AH HUNG

Within emptiness, a vast jewel vessel appears
From the letter DHRUNG,
Within which my body melts into light
And becomes an ocean of tormas and nectar.

Consecrate by

OM AH HUNG

My mind in the form of Khasarpani,
Serves all guests with offerings and alms.

Tingshag Bells

Imagining this, offer with the sambhara mantra.

NAMAH SARVA TATHAGATA AVALOKITE
OM SAMBHARA SAMBHARA HUNG

OM
Noble Vajragarbha,
Who vanquishes all misdeeds and obscurations,
And the ocean-like host of venerable objects of refuge,
Accept this nectar torma of my body.
Grant your blessings, purify misdeeds and obscurations,
Bestow the accomplishments and dispel all obstacles.

Evil forces, obstructors, spirits, the six classes of beings,
And especially all guests of karmic debt,
Enjoy this undefiled nectar
And clear all karmic debts and obligations.
May all your hostility, ill-will and viciousness be pacified,
And may you be endowed with the awakened mind.

At the end no longer behold the guests for offering and alms,
But rest in the continuity of emptiness.
Through this you will perfect the accumulations, cheat death,
And, in general, purify misdeeds and obscurations
And, in particular, clear unwholesome kordrib and karmic debts.
For these reasons exert yourself in this every day.

This was the liberating offering and giving of the noble Vajragarbha.

Following the oral teachings of Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, this was extracted from the Pema Garwang Chöchö, Chokling Tersar, Volume 27, translated by Erik Pema Kunsang and edited by Michael Tweed, Nagi Gompa, 1995
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Increasing Life and Prosperity
A Method for Freeing Lives

Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo

Homage to the Guru and Transcendent Free Conqueror,
Lord Boundless Life (Buddha Amitayus).

The accomplished master Ngagi Wangchuk Drakpa said:

By saving the lives of birds, fish and deer,
Or thieves, snakes and others to be killed,
Your present life will be extended,
Even though it would otherwise be short.

As indicated by the above statement, all the sutras and tantras teach that freeing the lives of sentient beings who are certain to be killed is supreme among all types of longevity practices. For this reason and because freeing lives brings immeasurable benefits, all sensible people should increase their efforts to free lives.

Generally speaking, this means, with noble frame of mind, to primarily free the lives of the animals in your own possession. Additionally, refrain from killing them yourself or selling them to others. Instead nurture them in peace. By merely doing so, while dedicating the roots of virtue and making aspirations for their benefit, you will have fulfilled this present purpose and it is therefore permissible not to perform any other specific ceremony.

If you prefer to perform a slightly more elaborate version in accordance with place, occasion, and degree of detail, then you can do so as found in several instructions from the Early Translations, such as making the [animal] a support for a Dharma protector and so forth. Or, if you wish to perform more detailed versions of the utterance of auspiciousness, dedication and aspirations, it

would be excellent if you combine this with a special time such as the Miracle Month (the 1st month), the eighth day, or the new or full moon.

If the primary purpose is to extend someone's lifespan, then perform this at sunrise at the conducive time of the 'ascending life-planet'.

In any case, place those whose lives are to be freed in front of you and say three times:

In the Buddha, the Dharma and the supreme Assembly,
I take refuge until enlightenment.
By the merit of generosity and so forth,
May I attain buddhahood for the welfare of all beings.

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness.
May they be free of suffering and the cause of suffering.
May they not be apart from the sublime happiness that is free of suffering.
May they remain in the great equanimity free from bias and partiality.

Thus contemplate the four immeasurables. If you like, you can chant the names of the Buddhas and their particular dharani mantras. To repeat these many times will bring immense benefit, such as sowing the seed of liberation in the mind-stream of the animals. If you are unable to do that much, then say:

Transcendent Free Conqueror, Thus Gone, Foe Destroyer, Truly and Perfectly Awakened Buddha Boundless Light, I salute you.

Transcendent Free Conqueror, Thus Gone, Foe Destroyer, Truly and Perfectly Awakened Buddha Unshakeable, I salute you.

Transcendent Free Conqueror, Thus Gone, Foe Destroyer, Truly and Perfectly Awakened Buddha Jewel Crest, I salute you.

Transcendent Free Conqueror, Thus Gone, Foe Destroyer, Truly and Perfectly Awakened Buddha Renowned King of Splendour, I salute you.

Transcendent Free Conqueror, Thus Gone, Foe Destroyer, Truly and Perfectly Awakened Buddha Jewel, Moon and Lotus Adorned King of Knowledge, Brilliance and Eloquence, I salute you.

Transcendent Free Conqueror, Thus Gone, Foe Destroyer, Truly and Perfectly Awakened Buddha Flawless Pure Gold, Jewel Light, Master of Courageous Conduct, I salute you.

Transcendent Free Conqueror, Thus Gone, Foe Destroyer, Truly and Perfectly Awakened Buddha Sorrowless Eminent Splendour, I salute you.

Transcendent Free Conqueror, Thus Gone, Foe Destroyer, Truly and Perfectly Awakened Buddha Dharma Expounding Melodious Ocean, I salute you.

Transcendent Free Conqueror, Thus Gone, Foe Destroyer, Truly and Perfectly Awakened Buddha Dharma Ocean Higher Knowledge Displayed through Eminent Insight, I salute you.

Transcendent Free Conqueror, Thus Gone, Foe Destroyer, Truly and Perfectly Awakened Buddha Supreme Healer King of Lapis Light, I salute you.

Transcendent Free Conqueror, Thus Gone, Foe Destroyer, Truly and Perfectly Awakened Buddha Shakyamuni, I salute you.

OM MANI PEME HUNG HRIH, NAMO RATNA TRAYAYA,
NAMO BHAGAVATE AKSHOYOBHYAYA, TATHĀGATAYA,
ARHATE SAMYAK SAMBUDDHĀYA,
TADYATHA, OM KAMKANI KAMKANI, ROTSANI ROTSANI,

TROTANI TROTANI, TRASANI TRASANI, PRATIHANA PRATIHANA,
SARVE KARMA PARAMPARA, NIME SARVA SATVA NAÑTSA SOHA,

NAMA RATNA TRAYAYA, NAMAH ARYA JNANA SAGARA
BAIROTSANA BHYUHA RAJAYA,

TATHĀGATAYA, ARHATE SAMYAK SAMBHUDDHYA,

NAMAH SARVA TATHAGATEBHYA ARHATABHYA
SAMYAK SAMBUDDHEBHYA,

NAMAH ARYA AVALOKITESHVARAYA BODHISATVAYA
MAHASATVAYA MAHAKARUNIKAYA,

TADYATA OM DHARA DHARA DHIRI DHIRI DHURU DHURU ITTE
BITTE TSALE TSALE PRATSALE PRATSALE KUSUKE KUSUKA BARE
ILIMILI TSITI JVALA MAPANAYA SOHA.

Repeat this with a clear and loud voice.
Then, hold flowers in your hand, and say:

In the sky before me is the Guru indivisible from the Transcendent Free Conqueror Buddha Boundless Light encircled by an ocean-like assembly of the precious objects of refuge, including the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions, and the devas and rishis accomplished in truthful speech.

They are vividly present and their melodious voices utter auspicious wishes. The immense rain of flowers they shower down increases and extends further and further the life-span and merit, splendour and prosperity, wisdom and virtues, of myself and all sentient beings headed by the benefactor. All those who are reborn as animals are presently freed from the fear of untimely death and live peacefully under the protection of the Three Jewels. Ultimately, when the seed of liberation

ripens within their stream of being, they are invested with the fortune of quickly attaining enlightenment.

Then, while imagining this, say:

Like the mighty royal crest of the victory banner,
Sublime deity adorning these practitioners' heads,
Bestowing upon them the supreme accomplishment,
Glorious and eminent guru, may your auspiciousness
be present!

Unexcelled teacher, precious Buddha,
Unexcelled protector, precious sacred Dharma,
Unexcelled guide, precious Sangha;
May the auspiciousness of the refuge objects,
the Three Jewels, be present!

Boundless Life, the primary guide of this world,
Who overcomes all types of untimely death,
Protector of all unprotected and suffering beings,
May the auspiciousness of the Buddha Amitayus be present!

After you have chanted whatever verses of auspiciousness you know, then say:

The strength of giving truly exalts the Buddha.
The Lion of Men has realized the strength of giving.
When entering the city of compassion,
May the life-span of perfect giving also increase!

The strength of ethics truly exalts the Buddha.
The Lion of Men has realized the strength of ethics.
When entering the city of compassion,
May the life-span of perfect ethics also increase!

The strength of patience truly exalts the Buddha.
The Lion of Men has realized the strength of patience.

When entering the city of compassion,
May the life-span of perfect patience also increase!

The strength of perseverance truly exalts the Buddha.
The Lion of Men has realized the strength of perseverance.
When entering the city of compassion,
May the life-span of perfect perseverance also increase!

The strength of concentration truly exalts the Buddha.
The Lion of Men has realized the strength of concentration.
When entering the city of compassion,
May the life-span of perfect concentration also increase!

The strength of insight truly exalts the Buddha.
The Lion of Men has realized the strength of insight.
When entering the city of compassion,
May the life-span of perfect insight also increase!

OM NAMO BHAGAVATE
APARIMITA AYURJNANA SUBINISHCHAI TATEJO RAJAYA
TATHĀGATAYA
ARHATE SAMYAK SAMBUDDHAYA
TADYATA
OM PUNYE PUNYE MAHAPUNYE APARIRMITA PUNYE
APRIMITA PUNYE JÑANA SAMBHARO PACHITE
OM SARVA SAMSKARA PARI SHUDDHA DHARMA TEGAGANA
SAMUDGATE SVABHAVA VISHUDDHE MAHANAYA PARIVARE SVAHA.

Utter this as many times as you can while scattering flowers.

Then say:

As implied by the virtuous roots of doing this, may the virtuous roots gathered throughout the three times make the Buddha's teachings prosper and bring forth immense virtuous goodness in the world.

May all sublime people upholding the Dharma live long and steadfast and may their activities flourish.

May I and all sentient beings, headed by this benefactor, have increased life-span and merit, splendour, prosperity, and wisdom.

May these animals too be freed from the fears of samsara and the lower realms, and soon attain the precious state of enlightenment.

Having formed these thoughts, with one-pointed resolve then say:

By this virtue may all beings
Perfect the accumulations of merit and wisdom,
And may they attain the sacred two kayas
Resulting from this merit and wisdom.

By this virtue may all attain omniscience.
Having defeated the enemy, wrongdoing,
From the stormy waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death,
From the ocean of samsara, may I free all beings.

In all our lives, wherever we take rebirth,
May we never be separate from the Three Jewels.
May we always venerate them,
And receive their blessings.

May the precious mind of enlightenment
Arise in those it has not arisen.
Where it has arisen, may it not wane,
But increase further and further.

As the single source of benefit and well-being,
May the teachings remain for a long time,

And may the life-span of the people who uphold
these teachings,
Be steadfast like the banner of victory!

May the world have peace and delightful years,
May crops be bountiful and cattle increase,
May the source of every peace and goodness be present,
And may all wishes be fulfilled.

In this very life as well
May all types of unfavourable conditions subside,
May we have long life, good health, and prosperity.
And attain enduring happiness.

By the strength of this powerful merit
In this life may the benefactors,
Along with their following accomplish their aims,
Be free of obstacles, have the best of luck,
And fulfill their spiritual wishes.

In this way make dedication and aspirations. Then say:

By the blessings of the supreme Buddha, eminent
and unexcelled,
The victorious sun of truth,
May the harmful foes of maras and obstructors subside
So that the auspiciousness of constant splendour is present
day and night.

By the blessings of the Dharma of the unconditioned nature,
eminent and unexcelled,
The sacred Dharma's nectar of truth,
May the painful foes of the five poisonous emotions subside,
So that the auspiciousness of constant splendour is present
day and night.

By the blessings of the Sangha's qualities blazing in
precious brilliance,
The truly beneficial deeds of the conqueror's offspring,
May the flaws of misdeeds be removed and may
goodness increase,
So that the auspiciousness of constant splendour is present
day and night.

Having uttered these and other suitable verses of auspiciousness, say:

Enjoyment of the splendour of immortal life,
Intelligence and discerning insight,
Whatever splendour and wealth of samsara and nirvana there
may be,
May their auspiciousness be spontaneously present.

May merit increase and flourish like the lofty king of mountains,
May great fame spread throughout the sky,
May there be long life, good health and spontaneous benefit
for others,
And may the auspiciousness of an ocean of eminent qualities
be present.

May this place have peace and happiness morning and night,
May the midday as well be peaceful and happy,
May there be peace and happiness every day and night,
And the auspiciousness of the Three Jewels be present.
OM YE DHARMA HETU PRABHAVA HETUN TEKEN TATHAGATO
HAYA WADET TEKEÑCHAYO NIRODHA EWAM VADI MAHA
SHRAMANA SVAHA

Uttering this, make peace and goodness by strewing flowers.

If you prefer, some other texts for longevity practice mention that one can "make the sun and moon marks on the forehead of those whose lives you have freed so that they will henceforth not be killed." In this way, it is taught that drawing the design of the sun and moon with butter on their foreheads creates the auspicious coincidence for luck and good fortune. Do so accordingly.

Furthermore, if you refrain from using traps, fishing nets or the like, in order to save the lives of birds, fish and deer, do so while including the above-mentioned bodhichitta resolve as well as the dedications and aspirations. By combining this with a smoke offering (lhasang) and so forth, the benefits will be immeasurable, as exemplified by freeing lives.

In particular, in the area where you do this practice many auspicious signs will appear, such as seasonal rainfall, and prosperous crops and cattle. In his *Jewel Garland*, the noble Nagarjuna says:

> Sensible people should always place food, water and plant oil
> Or heaps of grains at the entrance to an ant nest.

Accordingly, giving food to ants, clean food to fish, or medicine to the sick, throwing a feast for children, or giving food and drink to birds and the destitute, all these should be embraced with the skillful means of the bodhichitta resolve and sincere dedications and aspirations. If you do so, it will become a cause for averting death, increasing prosperity and, ultimately, great enlightenment. Since this is easy to do, involves minor hardship and brings immense benefit, all intelligent people should, in various ways, persevere in these skillful means for gathering the accumulations.

In order to benefit both myself and others, this was written by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, someone who is devoted to the Bodhisattva Pitaka, motivated by pure intentions. May this be a cause for the lives of the sublime upholders of the teachings to last for a hundred eons, for all sentient beings to be liberated from the fears of untimely death, and for their imminent attainment of the state of the Buddha of Boundless Life. Sarva Mangalam.

At the command of Chadral Rinpoche, a great bodhisattva who truly embodies the virtues mentioned here, this was translated by Erik Pema Kunsang and edited by Marcia Binder Schmidt and Michael Tweed. Proofread and reprinted by Idan in 2003.

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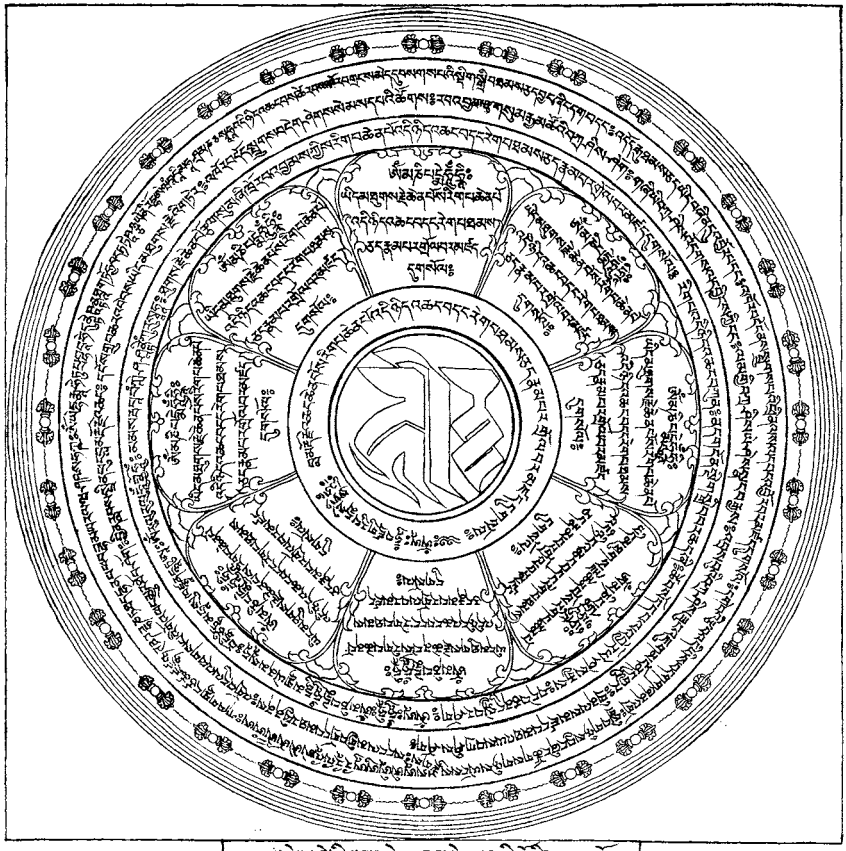


Tagdrol: 'Liberation Through Wearing' Chakra of Padma Shitro –

The Peaceful and Wrathful Deities of the Padma Family

Khenpo Sonam Tashi
translation Khenpo Sonam Phuntsok

The name of the 'liberation through wearing' chakra that appears on page 214 is 'Padma Shitro Tagdrol'. It is a treasure that was originally revealed by Tertön Nyima Senge, then rediscovered by Pema Ösel Dongak Lingpa (Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo).

Whether the dead person was a Buddhist or not, if their family wants to help them by placing a tagdrol on their corpse, they will need a Padma Shitro chakra. You can usually get a consecrated tagdrol from a practising Buddhist or a Buddhist Dharma centre, alternatively you could photocopy the chakra, then consecrate it by following the instructions Khyentse Rinpoche gave in response to the question below.

The chakra should be folded into a square, wrapped in a clean piece of cloth and properly consecrated, then placed over the heart centre of the corpse and fixed in place. It should remain on the corpse for the cremation.

This kind of tagdrol is not just for the dead; while you are alive you can also wear it, either on the crown of your head or around your neck.

The benefits of wearing a tagdrol are that in this life, sickness, negative energies and the defilements of bad actions are pacified, and life-span, merit, prosperity and wisdom are increased. And in the next life, you will be reborn in Sukhavati, the buddhafield of Buddha Amitabha. Anyone who wears this tagdrol will also benefit from 'liberation through touching' by which the seed of enlightenment is planted. There are also many other benefits.

When a person dies, what should be done with the chakra they wore?

If the dead person was a yogi or a yogini, place the chakra at the heart centre and burn it with the body.

The dissolution of the elements will not be completely finished until 84 hours after death, during which time the dead person's consciousness will remain at the heart. This is why it is best not to move or burn the body for at least 84 hours after death, and why it is so important to: do the practices that purify negative actions; introduce the peaceful and wrathful manifestations, sounds and lights in the bardo state as none other than the projections of one's mind; and do phowa practice (transference of consciousness).

How to Make a Tagdrol

If a Dharma centre, a lama or a Dharma practitioner wishes to help others by making a Pema Shitro Tagdrol, they should print or photocopy many thousands of the chakra (page 214) and fully anoint the image on the paper with blessed amrita pills soaked in saffron water. Then fold the chakra correctly, without creasing its centre.

1. Fold the right side of the paper vertically from right to left.
2. Fold the left side vertically from left to right.

3. Fold the bottom part of the paper horizontally upwards.
4. Fold the top of the paper downwards.

All the folds should result in a square, which is then wrapped with cloth or threads of five colours.

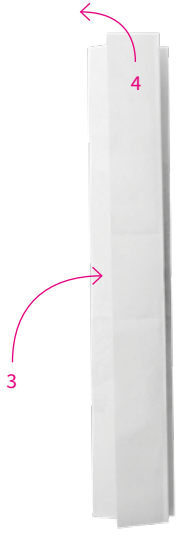
Consecrate the chakras and keep them in a substance box, to be taken out when needed.

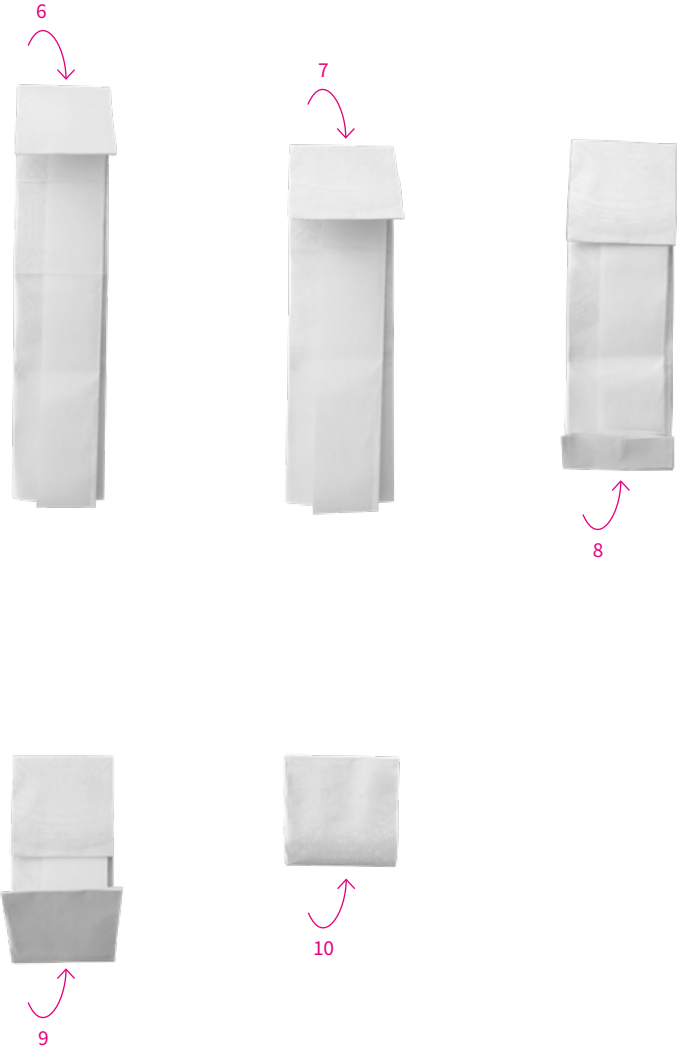
As this book was being made, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche was asked: is it possible to consecrate the chakra without the help of a lama?

Rinpoche replied: "If you can get a tagdrol that has been blessed and consecrated by an accomplished and qualified lama, please do. If not, ask a Tantrika – a Vajrayana practitioner – to bless photocopies of the chakra by practising a complete sadhana – any sadhana will do. Sadhanas usually include a prayer to request that all the deities invoked through the practice remain in the practice supports – for example, buddha statues or paintings. In this case, the Tantrika should request that the deities remain in the photocopied chakras, which you can then use to make tagdrol.

How to Fold a Tagdrol

Folding lines

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Tsatsas

How to Make Tsatsas

Thangtong Tulku

Many traditions and methods for making tsatsas have evolved over the centuries, but the following is one of the simplest and easiest.

1. Buy or Make a Tsatsa Mould

Ready-made silicone tsatsa moulds are easy to buy and a number of options are available online – for example, from the Nalanda Monastery website nalanda-monastery.eu/files/workshop/2016Catalog.pdf.

If you wish to make a specific form of tsatsa you could have a silicone mould custom-made by a professional. The silicone mould-maker will need an example tsatsa from which to create your mould, which traditionally would be commissioned from an experienced sculptor who would work with metal, wood or clay.

Alternatively, if you would like to copy a tsatsa or statue, or make a bigger or smaller version, you could have a 3D print of the image made by a 3D printing company. A 3D printer can scan your tsatsa or statue then 'print' the exact size you require. Just ask the printer to make sure that the printing definition is high enough – 25 or 50 microns resin SLA printing is good. Once you have the 3D print you can ask a professional silicone mould-maker to make your moulds for you. Ask the mould-maker to use high-quality silicone rubber.

2. Make Zung or Mantra Roll

Tsatsas contain a 'zung' or mantra roll. To make these mantra rolls, first print or write the mantras associated with the shape of the tsatsas on a piece or many pieces of paper – the quickest

method is to print many mantras on an A4 sheet which you can then cut into strips. Paint the mantra paper with saffron soaked in warm water then leave it to dry. Make sure that each individual mantra will be small enough to fit into a tsatsa mould.

Roll the mantra paper tightly and mark the end that is the top of the mantra so that you can insert it into the tsatsa the right way up. (Traditionally, red paint is used, but you could use a red felt-tip pen, biro, or pencil.)

If the tsatsa represents a deity, the mantra should be placed at the level of the heart; if the tsatsa is in the shape of a stupa, the mantra should be placed at its centre.

3. Gather the Materials and Tools

Synthetic plaster or dental plaster

It is best to use high quality plaster. The kind of plaster that is used in construction is cheaper but it cracks and breaks very easily and is not recommended.

A weighing machine

A weighing machine will help make sure that the correct quantities of plaster and water are used, which vary depending on the quality of the plaster. The instructions will appear on the plaster packaging or instruction sheet.

Plaster mixing machine

A plaster mixer is a specialist machine for mixing together the dry plaster and water. If you prefer, you could use a power drill if you can get the right attachment.

Bio-ethanol or acetone

Bio-ethanol or acetone is often sprayed onto the mould before it is filled with plaster because it helps release the tension between the plaster and the silicone, thereby avoiding bubbles.

Spray bottle

You will need a spray bottle to spray the bio-ethanol or acetone onto the mould.

Paint brushes

A small, soft paint brush is needed to brush the bubbles out of the mould once the plaster has been poured.

Mendrup (amrita pills)

Soak some mendrup (amrita pills) in warm water, then add a little to the dry plaster before you mix it with water. Take care not to add too much, just a little will do.

Paint

We recommend using acrylic paint for painting the tsatsas because it is water soluble and easy to use.

A dehumidifier

If you have a garden or a terrace, you could put the tsatsas outside to dry in the sun. But if that is not possible, a dehumidifier in the room where you leave the tsatsas to dry will ensure that they dry all the way through.

An air compressor, air gun or paint gun

An air gun is used to make sure the silicone moulds are absolutely clean before you make the next tsatsa. If you use a paint gun, you could also use it to paint the tsatsas once the plaster is dry.

Wood glue (Fevicol in India)

Damaged tsatsas can be mended by mixing a drop or two of this wood glue with a tiny amount of water and plaster.

4. The Tsatsa Making Process

Once the tools and ingredients have been gathered, the tsatsa making process can begin. If you wish, you can recite mantras as

you work – for example Vajrasattva's one hundred-syllable mantra, OM MANI PADME HUM, and/or the mantra of dependent origination.

One Hundred-Syllable Mantra of Vajrasattva

OM VAJRASATTVA SAMAYA MANUPALAYA
VAJRASATTVA TENOPA TISHTHA DRIDHO ME BHAWA
SUTOKHAYO ME BHAWA SUPOKHAYO ME BHAWA ANURAKTO ME BHAWA
SARWA SIDDHI ME PRAYACCHA SARWA KARMA SU TSA ME
TSITTAM SHREYANG KURU HUNG HA HA HA HA HO BHAGAWAN
SARWA TATHAGATA VAJRA MA ME MUNCA VAJRI BHAWA MAHA
SAMAYA SATTVA AH

Mantra of Dependent Origination

OM YE DHARMA HETU PRABHAVA HETUN TESAM
TATHAGATO HYAVADAT TESAM CA YO NIRODHA
EVAM VADI MAHASRAMANAH SOHA

Spray the inside of the mould with bio-ethanol or acetone

Make sure the entire surface is covered with the bio-ethanol or acetone by gently brushing it onto the inside of the mould with a paint brush – the surface should be shiny, but not soaked.

Measure the correct amounts of plaster and water and, if you wish, add a loved one's ashes

Follow the instructions on the dry plaster packet and measure out the correct quantity of dry plaster and water. Make sure that you add a little of the water that soaked the mendrup.

If you wish, as you combine a loved one's ashes with the dry plaster then add the water, recite Vajrasattva's one hundred syllable mantra, OM MANI PADME HUM, or the mantra of dependent origination.

Mix the ingredients thoroughly

Combine the water, dry plaster and ashes and mix thoroughly for about 30 seconds.

Tip: You must now work quickly because it only takes a few minutes for the plaster to set.

Pour the plaster into the tsatsa mould and remove any bubbles

Use a small paintbrush to brush any air bubbles out of the plaster.

Insert zung or mantra roll

Insert the mantra roll into the plaster before it starts to set.

Remember:

If the tsatsa represents a deity, the mantra should be placed at the level of the heart; if the tsatsa is in the shape of a stupa, the mantra should be placed at its centre.

Tip: After the mantra roll has been pressed down into the tsatsa, make sure it doesn't float back up to the surface.

Remove the tsatsa from the mould

You may need to leave the tsatsa in the mould for as long as 40 minutes, but keep an eye on it because it could be ready in as little 10 minutes. How long the plaster takes to dry will depend on the quality you use.

Make sure you remove the tsatsa from the mould gently.

Leave the tsatsa to dry

Let the tsatsa dry for about 30 minutes before you mend any damage.

Mend any bubble damage

If bubbles have spoiled the surface of the tsatsa, mix a drop of wood glue with a tiny amount of water and plaster, and using a small, soft paint brush, repair the damage.

Work fast because the mixture will set quickly. This is why it's best not to mix too much plaster at a time.

Continue to make more tsatsas as the first batch dries

Before you use the silicone mould again, clean the inside of the mould with the air gun and spray it with bio-ethanol or acetone, then repeat the steps above.

Make sure the tsatsas are completely dry

The tsatsas must be absolutely dry before they are painted or placed in a stupa – a damp tsatsa can easily develop mould.

The easiest way to dry tsatsas is to leave them in the sun for a few days. If that isn't possible, leave them in a room with the doors and windows shut and a dehumidifier switched on until they dry. This method also takes a few days.

Paint the tsatsas (optional)

Once the tsatsas are completely dry, you can paint them if you wish. If you only make a few, you could paint them by hand; but if you make many, consider painting them with a paint gun, which is much quicker.

It's difficult to predict how long acrylic paint will take to dry because it depends on the ambient temperature and weather conditions. It will take a lot longer if the weather where you live is wet and cold.

Finally, a Few Tips

The number of moulds you need will depend on how much time you have to make your tsatsas, how many you wish to make, how many people will be involved in the process and how much room you have to store them in, etc.

Silicone does not stick to anything, even to itself, so there is no need to wash a mould after you remove the tsatsa.

The silicone rubber mould will be damaged if it comes into contact with hydrocarbon (petrol, oil, gasoil, etc.) or strong acids or chemicals.

If plaster sticks to the inside of the mould, use the air gun to clean it out.

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Photo courtesy of Sonam Peljore, YANA Travel

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an offering raised to the Lord of Worlds.[39]

Ikkyu (1394-1491), a monk who frequented bars and brothels

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