

Death, Bardo and Rebirth

Teaching materials compiled by Lama Tilmann

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In the various Buddhist books there are contradictory statements concerning the exact sequence in the transition from one life to the next. The reason for this seems to be that the attitude, experience with practice, wish prayers, mental tendencies, religious convictions, cultural imprints and karmic tendencies (attachments, aversions...) of the dying person influence what is happening after death. It is not possible to predict for anyone, how long the different phases will last. I have made an effort to depict the vast spectrum of experiences, to make clear that after death the things do not just run in stereotypes, quasi automatically, though generalizations may hold for many beings and men.

I have made an effort to present the topic clearly and to drop unnecessary information. You can find further impulses in the readable book: Jean-Pierre Schnetzler "De la mort à la vie" Editions Dervy. It seems that it never has been translated into German. This book presents very illuminating explorations on Bardo and rebirth from Prof. Stephenson, who entrusted students with this topic. I did not include the book here because I only wanted to take material from Dharma sources into consideration. Best wishes, Tilmann

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1 Death as an opportunity

We cannot escape death. Why should we? Death is a chance to make a step in spiritual development. We can benefit from this chance if we are well prepared. Actually there is nothing real in the process of dying. The mental processes continue after the separation of body and mind, but there is a huge variety of experiences in the death and rebirth processes. This starts with ordinary beings who are totally caught in their projections and the processes which run automatically, and continues to the great masters, like Guru Rinpoche, Naropa, Karmapa and others, who have transcended those processes and who to some extent pass into pure realms without leaving a body behind or who can indicate exactly where they will manifest. How we experience death and Bardo depends on the state of our mind.

Death offers many opportunities likewise for ordinary mortals. For example, we can joyfully merge with the enlightened mind. In this way, the process will take a different direction than that if we struggle. The great possibilities in death result from the mind not being bound to the body any longer, so insights, prayers as well as all the karmic forces have enormously strong immediate effects.

- First of all death involves the opportunity to merge into ultimate truth (Dharmakaya), meaning complete liberation and enlightenment.
- Directly after that there is the possibility to obtain liberation in a Light Body of Joy (Sambhogakaya).
- Finally it is possible to attain a free conscious rebirth in an Emanation Body (Nirmanakaya) as a result of performing Yidam practice.
- In addition, forthcoming death is a great stimulation for practice during one's whole life.

Gendün Rinpoche in *Heart Advice*:

“All of us will come sooner or later face to face with death. This is inevitable. However, he who is practicing the teachings of the Buddha in the course of his life will be able to face death full of confidence and without anguish. He will have gained certainty about what to do and what not to do and in which attitude he should die, so that death can be used as a special opportunity to liberate himself out of the cycle of rebirths. The true meaning of our daily practice is in this preparation for death.”

2 How can we prepare ourselves for death?

The biggest obstacles for a harmonious death, which can bring spiritual development for us, are attachment and aversion, and of course anguish based on limited awareness. Actually all kinds of Dharma practice are a preparation for death, although the best preparation is certainly the practice of the Six Yogas. For “normal” practitioners some important suggestions can be highlighted:

- Consider always and intensively the impermanence and the illusory nature of all persons, things and of oneself.
- Think always of death as possible at any time, so that we encourage ourselves to the wholesome.
- Contemplate the disadvantages of being reborn into regions without Dharma practice.
- Do not perform harmful acts, but rather bring about Karma which is as positive as possible through our deeds.
- Be generous with our possessions, especially close to death.
- Regularly practice awareness training and other forms of mental training.
- Establish great positive force by practicing the liberating qualities (Paramitas).

- Free ourselves from clinging to relatives.
- Cleanse existing resentment, hostility and unresolved history.
- Set up a last will and a living will.
- Cleanse vows.
- Repeatedly make clear wishes, where and as what we want to be born again (Dewachen prayers, Amitabha, etc.).
- Build up a strong bond of confidence with a great Bodhisattva, which can help us in death.
- Practice Bodhicitta (Tonglen, the four immeasurables...).
- Study the process of death and rebirth until we are well acquainted with it.
- Become familiar with the mind: Mahamudra, Dream Yoga, Clear Light Yoga, practice of the Illusory Body, insights into the nature of mind...
- Every evening, as a last act before falling asleep, take heartfelt refuge and recite wish prayers, Vajrasattva mantras and the like, falling asleep as if we were to die. This prepares us for the last breaths before death.
- Every morning, as a first act when waking up, also take deep refuge, think of the awakened ones and make wish prayers. This prepares us for the first moment in the Bardo.

Gendün Rinpoche in *Heart Advice*:

The ancient masters of the Kadampa lineage meditated on impermanence every day. When they drank their tea, they said to themselves: “It is very fortunate that I am able to drink my bowl of tea today. Who knows if I can enjoy it tomorrow as well?” And every evening before falling asleep, as a sign of their potential death at night they turned the tea bowl upside down. Waking up the next morning, they put their bowl back and said to themselves: “What luck for me to have a new day! Others have died this night. I have to seize the opportunity and to act only positively today.” So they trained themselves in the awareness of impermanence.

And further in *Heart Advice*:

“Unlike the Buddha, we ordinary beings have not yet recognized the shortcomings of the cycle of existence and we are still striving for mundane luck, for some more joy and well-being in ordinary life. Of course, everyone is looking for happiness, and there is nothing wrong with that. Yet we should recognize that worldly happiness is superficial and transitory and that, because of our self-centeredness, it already carries the seeds of suffering in itself, with the patterns of hope and fear. The cycle of existence is fundamentally characterized by change and suffering. Wherever there is attachment to the impermanent and self-centeredness, there is suffering as well. To recognize this and to focus oneself on a reliable refuge is the first step on the way to liberation of conditional existence, the dissolution of our attachments.

If we continue to run after ephemeral pleasures and let ourselves be cheated on the painful nature of existence, we will endlessly circulate in Samsara.

We are generally quite persistent in denying this truth described by the Buddha, but as uncomfortable it is, it is true: As long as the mind is clinging to worldly interests, it is not possible to realize the nature of mind and to gain freedom. We typically want to avoid this insight into the illusory nature of our worldly activity, and we shirk the confrontation with impermanence and death, withdrawing ourselves from the present moment, living in the hope for a better future.

Meanwhile, with every day, our time is trickling away. With each breath we move closer to death. In fact we know this intellectually, but our attachment to worldly concerns shows that we are not really aware of the unstoppable transitoriness. We suppress that death can surprise us anytime and would rather think that there is enough time left for this or that. We are constantly

projecting our hopes for tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and we dream of a better life. We believe in an upward trend. But we are wrong, because if we do not undertake decisive actions, the future will by no means be better.

In death, we have to leave everything behind, our property, our reputation, in short, everything, what was important to us and what we were striving for. Only the noble Dharma will then be of help to us. We will need the protection of an authentic refuge and we need much positive spiritual power to go through the dying process in a bearable way.

Therefore, the practice of the Dharma is the only really meaningful thing in this life. At the moment of death the uselessness of worldly activities will become clear. The only thing that will help us then is the power of our wholesome actions and to what extent we really have developed confidence and have learned to take refuge from the depths of our hearts. Because then there will be no more time to train in it.

As long as we are not aware of impermanence, our mind is constantly agitated by thoughts revolving around worldly concerns, to become happy and to avoid suffering, all of this arising from our clinging to alleged permanence of this life. That is why we should look carefully and recognize how futile our attachment to the world is. We should thoroughly investigate our priorities: “Why is this or that important to me? Where do these wishes come from? What benefit does it really make for me to achieve them? Where are they going to lead me?” If we carefully analyze this way, we will see that in the end the pursuit of worldly concerns brings nothing else but suffering.

If by contemplating Karma, impermanence and death we understand our real situation, a sense of urgency will occur.

Our fear of being delivered to death unprepared and then possibly being reborn in painful realms, combined with our compassion for all beings, these will become a strong stimulation to change our lives and to carry out only positive actions. We wonder what we can do to meet such favorable conditions for Dharma practice in the future as we have now, and how we can purify our Karma so that it will be possible to gain deep insight. Since our concern will then be only the Dharma, our mind will become calm and clear. It will no longer be disturbed by worldly concerns and meditating becomes easy. If we apply the Buddha’s teachings in this way, then step by step we find the way out of the cycle of suffering. We no longer commit harmful acts that could become the cause of further suffering, and we learn to act wholesomely, which will mature to favorable circumstances. In the Dharma we must not restrict ourselves to an intellectual understanding. Serious practice is indispensable. In order to make progress, we have to start practicing genuinely.

The great practitioners of the past have quickly realized enlightenment, because they completely turned away from worldly concerns. Dharma practice was the only important thing in their lives, and they were convinced of the total uselessness of worldly concerns. Therefore, some of them realized Buddhahood even within a single lifetime. They never practiced in order to attain peaceful states of mind and to feel better in this life. They were concerned with something much more fundamental. They were looking for the final liberation from the cycle of existence. After careful consideration of the true nature of all experiences in this conditioned world, they were deeply convinced that conditioned existence is always characterized by suffering, and they abandoned once for all the striving for worldly happiness. What lies beyond this life became more important for them than the concerns of the actual life. Recognizing conditionality and impermanence of worldly happiness, they resolved themselves irreversibly to be focused on what is beyond change: the immutable nature of mind, the source of true happiness.

For example, when they saw a bone, they contemplated as follows: “This bone comes from an impermanent body with which a being was identified, a being who was born into this life out of ignorance and clinging. And those who remain ignorant will again grasp at a body, will be born and die and thus again and again will come back into the cycle of suffering.” By deep reflection, they were able to let go of clinging and desire and to achieve true change through their meditation. They did not just sit in order to be peaceful and to have a good time, rather they really saw that they were caught in the trap of Samsara, in ignorance and permanent clinging, and they developed a deep yearning for enlightenment. Because they understood the nature of suffering, they developed natural relaxation, profound renunciation, and in this way they gained liberation from Samsara.

However, we are less thorough, and our approach to the Dharma often shows great ignorance. We rush upon the highest teachings about the nature of mind, Mahamudra, and eventually we may realize that we initially should practice the preliminaries. In this regard, we are a bit like little children who want to get a beautiful object as soon as they see it. If we really want to realize Mahamudra, first of all we have to become aware of the rare opportunity we have now. We were born human, we have encountered the Dharma, and we rejoice to have all the necessary conditions to reach enlightenment. We should not waste this opportunity, but rather be clear in our minds that to remain further in the cycle of existence is a mere waste of time. All forms of existence in Samsara have countless disadvantages, and they are characterized by suffering. We should ceaselessly be aware of impermanence and death. That will stimulate us and it will let a sense of urgency for wholehearted practice to arise. Furthermore, we have to become clear about the unfailing, direct relationship between actions and their results, again and again, and we must direct our focus solely on wholesome, beneficial conduct.”

2.1 Contemplation about death

Excerpts from the *Precious Ornament of the Liberation* by Gampopa (mostly Chapter 4):

“Although the human body is so difficult to obtain and of such great value, it is very easy to destroy it, and nobody can add anything to the life span or renew the life force. Many conditions can bring about death, and the flow of time does not stop for a single moment.”

In *Entrance into the practice of a Bodhisattva* we can read the following thoughts:

“It is unreasonable for me to say, ‘I am not going to die today,’ and then to make myself comfortable, because the day when I become nothing will come inevitably!”

Generally speaking, everything that is assembled will dissolve. This is what the Buddha said:

“Monks, everything aggregate is transient.”

How does impermanence manifest? Everything we accumulate will someday be scattered once again. Whatever we build up will finally decay. All encounters will end in separation, and every life will find its end in death. In *The Essence of Dharma in Verses* the Buddha says:

“Accumulation ends in decomposition, construction ends in diversion, coming together ends in separation, life ends in death.”

While contemplating death consider:

“I will not stay in this world for long, rather I will have to go on soon.”

“My life force will come to an end, the breath will cease. Then that body will be a corpse, and the mind will have to move somewhere else.”

“One year has passed since last year, and my life has become now just that much shorter. One month has passed since last month, and my life span has been reduced that much. One day has passed since yesterday, and again my life has become one day shorter. In no time, this moment will be gone and my life is already a moment shorter.”

In *Entry into the practice of a Bodhisattva* it is described:

“Day and night, without ever stopping, this life ceaselessly loses itself. It never will become just a little bit longer, how should someone like me not die? ”

While contemplating separation consider:

“My present friends, my possessions, my body, and everything else I appreciate so much will not accompany me forever. Soon we will be separated.”

I. The certainty of dying because no one ever escaped death

Master Āśvaghosa poses the question to us:

“Have you ever seen, ever heard, or even ever wondered if anyone on Earth or in the higher realms was born without dying?”

Even the great sages with their miraculous powers and limitless supernatural perceptions are not able to find a place for escaping death. They all have to die. What else should we expect then? This is how it continues:

“The great sages with their five supernatural perceptions can go far by traveling in space, but they cannot get to a place where there is no dying.”

But that is not all. Also, realized beings like the “Alleinverwirklicher” (solitary realizers) and the great listeners, the Arhats, had to leave their sublime bodies behind in the end. What should we expect then? In *The Essence of Dharma in Verses* we read:

“If even the solitary realizers and the great listeners had to leave their sublime bodies, do you still need to mention ordinary people?”

Consider the following as well. Even the completely purified, perfect Buddha left behind his Emanation Body adorned with all the special characteristics and signs of perfection of Vajra like nature. What else should we expect? The great teacher Asvaghosa writes:

“If even the Vajra Bodies, adorned with all the characteristics and signs of the Buddhas, are transitory, what then can one expect from ordinary beings, whose Banana tree body does not have a solid core? ”

II. The certainty of dying, because the body is composed

Everything compound is transient. Everything conditioned is subject to decay. This is what we read in *The Essence of Dharma in Verses*:

“Everything compound is transient, subject to arising and fading away.”

Since this body is actually something composite, made up of conditions, it is certain that it is transient and that we will die.

III. The certainty of dying, because the life span decreases every moment

With every moment, again some life has passed and death has come closer. Maybe we are not aware of its coming, but it approaches as fast as the arrow shot down by an accurate bowman, or like water rushing down the rocks, and it is as certain as a condemned man who is led to the execution site.

The example with the arrow describes how quickly life approaches death, without ever stopping for a moment. It is similar to the arrow shot down by a good shooter, which quickly reaches its goal without pausing for a moment. This is found in *The Essence of Dharma in Verses*:

“Just as the arrow of taut tendon shot down by a skilled shooter quickly reaches its goal without ever pausing, so it is with the lifespan of humans.”

The example with the waterfall describes the obvious fact that it is impossible to stop life. Life elapses without ever being idle, like rushing water meeting the edge of a rock cliff. We read in *The Top of the Precious Assembly*:

“Friends, this life passes by as fast as a mountain torrent rushing down the cliff. Childish people however do not notice this and arrogantly indulge in foolish pleasures.”

And in *The Essence of Dharma in Verses* it is written:

“Like the flow of a huge river, life goes on without ever turning back.”

The third example describes how our life resembles a sentenced person being brought to the place of execution. With every step we approach death. That is exactly what the *Sutra of the Wish-Fulfilling Tree* says:

“Like a sentenced one led to the execution site, we approach death with every step.”

And in *The Essence of Dharma in Verses* it says:

“Just as a condemned man approaches execution with each of his steps, it is the same with people’s lives.”

IV. Uncertain time of death, because the lifespan is indefinite

For beings in other realms or on other planets, the lifespan is certain, but for us on planet Earth it is not. So it is written in *The Abhidharma Treasury*:

“The lifespan here is indefinite. At the end (of a world age) it is ten years, and at the beginning it is immeasurable.”

In *The Essence of Dharma in Verses* it is described how uncertain our life is:

“Some die in the womb and some die at birth. Some die before they are able to run, some at full strength, some young and some old, and some die in the bloom of their life. Sooner or later everyone has to go.”

V. Uncertain time of death, because the body is not permanent

In this body there is not a single component of really durable and firm composition, only its (impermanent) thirty-six impure substances. On this we read in *Entry into the practice of a Bodhisattva*:

“First, layer by layer, open the skin with your intellect. Then take the scalpel of discriminating awareness and separate the meat from the bone skeleton. Then also segregate the bones and inspect their innermost parts. Take a close look and examine. Is there any permanently lasting thing? ”

VI. Uncertain time of death, because there are many causes of death

There is nothing that could not be the cause of death for yourself or others. We read in *Letter to a Friend*:

“Shaken by the wind of many dangers, this life is as fleeting as bubbles of air on the water, and so it is truly amazing that exhaling is followed by inhaling and that one awakens alive again after sleep.”

VII. Food and possessions will not accompany us in death

On this it is written in *Entry into the practice of a Bodhisattva*:

“Even if I have acquired great possessions and live happily for a long time, I will yet, as if robbed by thieves, depart naked and empty-handed.”

Not only will our property not be of any use to us in death, but it is moreover now as well in the future a source of suffering. In this life it becomes the cause of suffering because we are fighting for it. We have to guard it from thieves, and we become its slave. The fully ripened result of this in future lives will be that (due to struggles for property out of greed and the like) we will be reborn in lower realms.

VIII. Friends and relatives will not accompany us in death

On this it is written in *Entry into the practice of a Bodhisattva*:

“When the hour of death has struck, your children will be no refuge for you. Neither will be your father or mother, nor any of your friends. No one can be your refuge.”

Not only will friends and relatives be useless in death, they are also, as now, a source of suffering for the future. In this life they will become the cause of suffering because we embroil ourselves in great concern for their lives and welfare, as well as fear that they might experience defeat and failure. The fully ripened result in future lives will be that we (due to the harmful actions we committed for them) will be reborn in the lower realms.

IX. Our body will not accompany us in death

Our body too will not be useful for us in death, for it impossible that it accompany us (a) despite all its abilities and as well (b) because of its consistency.

(a) No matter how strong and powerful we may be, we cannot avert death. No matter how fast and agile we may walk, we cannot escape death. No matter how learned and clever we may be, we cannot stop death by skillfully negotiating. It is just as impossible that one hang on to the sun to prevent it from setting behind the mountain.

(b) As well, due to its consistency, the body cannot be taken with us. On this we read in *Entry into the practice of a Bodhisattva*:

“This body, formed with great difficulties, which you nourish and dress to protect, will not accompany you. It will be eaten up by birds and dogs, or it will be burned with flaming fire. It will decay in the water, or it will be buried in a hole in the ground.”

Not only will this body be useless in death, it is now and for the future a source of suffering. In this life it causes many kinds of adversity, because it does not endure illness, heat, cold, hunger and thirst. Furthermore, there arises great suffering due to fears of being chained, maltreated, beaten and killed. In future lives, the outcome of Karma originating from the body (that is, because of actions due to our attachment to it), will be that we are reborn in the lower realms.

Conclusions from the observation of the death of others

Every time we see others die or we hear about it or remember it, we should relate this to ourselves and reflect on it:

For example, a relative who had good strength, looked healthy and radiant, felt well and had no thought about death, suddenly is affected by a deadly disease. His powers are decreasing, he can no longer sit upright, his face loses all freshness, the blood leaves the cheeks and he becomes pale. He has pains, a fever takes a lot out of him and nothing helps. Nothing can relieve his agony. Medicines and medical arts fail. Performing rituals and wish prayers remain ineffective.

He knows death is coming and nothing can be done against it. The relatives gather around him for the last time. He eats for the last time and speaks his last words. Then we should consider, “He and I, we are of the same nature and consistency. Our bodies have the same characteristics, and just like him, I am not at all beyond the nature of things.”

As soon as he has taken his last breath, those for whom he was important and who loved him do not want to keep him any longer in the house. He is not welcome even one more day. Tied to a stretcher, the load is covered with a cloth, and he is carried out by the pall bearers. At this moment, some of the relatives reach for the corpse as if they would want to hang on to him. Others cry as if they were very close to him. Some fall to the ground as if to faint. Then others admonish, “Do not be so childish! This body is only Earth. It is nothing more than stone.”

When you see the corpse being carried over the threshold, and it is clear that he will not return, think then, “It will be the same for me.” When you see the corpse brought to the cemetery, decomposing, being eaten up by dogs, jackals, etc., its bones being scattered, think then, “It will be the same for me.”

If you hear, “This or that person has died,” or, “There is a dead man,” then think in the same way, “It will be the same for me.”

If you remember who already has died among your friends in this country, at this place or in this house, whether old or young, the different people, with whom you lived together, then realize again and again that the same will happen to you soon. So it is written in a Sutra:

“We do not know what will arrive sooner, the day tomorrow or the next life. That is why is it wiser to care for the next life than to deal with the affairs of tomorrow.”

If we understand that everything composite is transient, it dispels our strong attachment to this life. It also strengthens our confidence (in Dharma practice), and we gain a friend in joyful perseverance. Since we quickly liberate ourselves from attachment and aversion, the necessity to understand the original sameness of all phenomena is created.

2.2 Giving up indifferent laziness

Gampopa, Jewel ornament of Liberation, Chapter 14: Indifferent laziness is made up of conveniences like lounging, comfort, sleeping and other forms of cozy idleness. Such idleness must be abandoned. Why? Because life is not waiting for us. Thus the Buddha teaches us in a Sutra:

“Monks, it is inevitable that the intellect will decline, the life force will decrease, the life factors will drain and also the instructions of your teacher will get lost. Why do you not then practice with joyful perseverance and persistent strength?”

And it is written in *Entry into the practice of a Bodhisattva*:

“As death approaches so quickly, acquire the accumulations while there is still time...”

Maybe you think it will be sufficient to acquire the accumulations (of positive power and awareness) shortly before death. Yet when your hour has struck, there is no time left for that. So it continues:

“...because even if I then give up laziness, there is no time left to do anything.” Maybe you think you would not die before you have come to wholesome action, but to think like that is foolish. It says:

“The unpredictable Lord of Death does not wait to see if something is finished or not. Whether you are sick or at your fittest, you cannot count on life, because it will be over in no time.”

How to give up this lazy indifference? Get rid of it like you would toss away a snake which crawls into your lap, or as you extinguish fire when your hair is in flames. So it says in the same place:

“Just as you jump right up when a snake crawls into your lap, you should quickly dispel drowsiness and indifference as soon as they come.”

And in *Letter to a Friend* we read:

“If suddenly your hair or your clothes are on fire, you do everything to extinguish it and to prevent a renewed flare-up. Nothing is more important and urgent than that.”

2.3 The application of the Lodjong teachings in this life

Verse No. 17: Apply the five forces, which summarize the essence of the oral instructions

Connecting all the various profound instructions on the practice of the noble Dharma into one instruction that definitely summarizes the key points of the practice, these are the five forces.

– The purpose to talk about “five forces” is to memorize the essence of the subject in a simple way: Bodhicitta in five aspects.

First is the force of drive. This means to set a strong impulse in the mind by saying: “From now until enlightenment, at least until I die and under all circumstances this year and this month, but especially from today until tomorrow, I will never separate myself from the two aspects of the enlightened mind.”

– This is the drive for mindfulness, to always remember Bodhicitta and not to fall into ordinary views, not to fall asleep or to let the time until death be expired unused.

The second is the power of habituation. Whatever actions you perform, whether they are wholesome, unwholesome, or neutral, keep a very careful mindfulness and thus practice again and again, without ever separating yourself from the two aspects of the enlightened mind. In short, train yourself in the enlightened mind, the most important of all wholesome practices.

– We apply the drive just mentioned to all actions, until it becomes quite natural. This is a long path needing a lot of perseverance. Yet with training, our ability to help others increases.

– To act out of Bodhicitta as well means to take risks, not to hesitate unnecessarily, to get involved in situations, to show ourselves nakedly, as well with our fears, to let go of our cloaks...

– The more we follow Bodhicitta, the more we will understand it in its whole profoundness.

The third force is the force of wholesome seed. In order to generate and enhance the enlightened mind, constantly strive for wholesome conduct with body, speech and mind, without ever being self-satisfied that you already have performed enough wholesome deeds.

– To go ahead, on and on, step by step, even if it becomes embarrassing, no self-satisfaction.

– What we do is not the point, but rather in what state of consciousness we do it. To act positively and being proud of it will probably be less wholesome than to commit mistakes and learn from them.

– We need mindfulness, carefulness and awareness before, during and after each action. We must constantly be aware of our thoughts and motivation in order to be able to correct eventually.

– Precisely that means to question oneself at each action: “Why am I doing this? What will be the outcome? Will it really be of help? What is my motivation? Will harm occur out of it? How will others experience it? What would be the wisest?” We avoid a wrong spontaneity, develop a bigger clarity, a pure motivation and a more compromising view. Then we give our best without hesitating.

The fourth is the force of rejecting. Whenever thoughts of self-importance arise, reject such thoughts of ego-clinging far away by thinking:

“In the past you have let me stray through the circle of existence without beginning, and I had to experience all kinds of suffering because of you. And you are as well responsible for all the suffering encountered by myself in this life. In your company there is no happiness. Therefore I have to do my utmost to bring you to an end.”

– We shall not be naive. As soon our guts are struck, we are more important for ourselves than are the others. To reject self-centeredness means to constantly reveal and to reverse this mechanism. If we do not do this, our Dharma practice is insincere and half-hearted.

– A short glimpse is sufficient. As soon as we notice the self-mechanism, we immediately turn our mind towards Bodhicitta. There is no reason to remain stuck in self-criticism and the like.

The fifth is the force of wish prayers. At the conclusion of each wholesome action pray, “May I, generally speaking, become able to lead every single being to Buddhahood. In particular, may I myself from now on until attaining Buddhahood not forget, even in the dream, both aspects of the precious enlightened mind, but rather to let them increase more and more. May I be able to use all difficult situations as friends of the enlightened mind! ”

Say this genuinely and dedicate in this way all wholesomeness to this purpose.

– We dedicate and seal all we do in this way. We conclude each action with the Bodhisattva motivation, with which we have started. Dedicating means to completely direct the wholesome forces towards the highest.

– If we are in Bodhicitta, then this will also increase in the dream.

– Wish prayers are an important part of the Bodhisattva practice. One day all wishes will come true.

– The five forces are like the syllable HUNG. It combines in itself the five Kayas and the five aspects of timeless awareness. Since they summarize the practice of Bodhicitta and thus all Dharma, they include perfect enlightenment.

3 What can we ourselves do when we die?

- Adopt a posture that facilitates mental clarity (sitting meditation posture or lying as “sleeping lion” like Buddha Shakyamuni).
- To develop confidence visualize the Lama and the refuge in front of us or above our head.
- Recite refuge prayers or mantras.
- Generate Bodhicitta with the strong willed impulse to continue our practice under all circumstances.
- Be completely directed to the place of our longed rebirth (e.g., Dewachen).
- Meditate mahamudra.
- Phowa.

All of this is probably distinctly more difficult, if we have pain killers which have a dazing effect on the mind.

3.1 The application of the Lodjong teachings in death

To the question of how to practice the instructions of this Dharma tradition at the time of death, the teaching says:

– A Dharma practitioner prepares for his death. He asks for instruction to make the most of this great opportunity, because in death we can take a giant step towards enlightenment.

Verse No. 18: The Mahayana instructions for crossing over are also these five forces. Also important is your behavior.

– These are the essential Mahayana Phowa instructions. The crossing over happens in Bodhicitta.

If someone who is practiced in this Dharma is afflicted with an illness where death is certain, then he should first pass on all possessions. In general, we can offer them to the Lama and to the Jewels and, in particular, we can give them where we ourselves think they will be of great use. Doing so without a trace of clinging, holding on or worrying is the power of the healing seed.

– It is about accumulating as many merits as possible before death, loosening all attachments and freeing yourself from all fears.

– The greatest benefit arises when our generosity contributes to the highest spiritual welfare of beings, but it also needs material support in hunger, disease, etc.

If possible, we should offer seven-part prayers, but if that is not possible, then we should pray with a single-directed mind:

“Through the power of all the roots of wholesomeness that I may have accumulated in the three times, may I in all lives never forget the precious enlightened mind and continue to let it grow through practice. May I meet authentic Lamas who teach these lessons. Lama and you precious Jewels, please bless me that this happens just so.” This is the power of the wish prayer.

– We focus the mind all the way to the time after death, with the single wish to keep growing in Bodhicitta. For that we need authentic spiritual teachers! May the bond with them never be interrupted!

– We make wishes like, “May my body, speech and mind always fulfill the wishes of all living beings!” “May all suffering merge into me through age and death!” “May all my merits serve the good of the beings!” Through these wishes to the last breath, our mind dwells profoundly in wholesomeness, which is the best preparation for death.

– We can also make other wishes that correspond to our abilities: to rise into death in the Dharmakaya, to realize the Sambhogakaya by recognizing the deities in the Bardo, to consciously accept birth as Nirmanakaya, to carry out the transfer of consciousness into the heart of Amitabha (or other Buddhas) or to be directed to the pure realms.

– The more we practice in it, the easier these wishes will be for us in death.

“This attachment to the beloved ‘I’ has made me suffer in countless lives and now I am also experiencing the suffering of dying. Since an ‘I’ or ‘mind’ ultimately does not exist, there is no death either. I will do my best to destroy you, the ego attachment which thinks ‘I am sick’ and ‘I die’ and the like.” These and similar thoughts are the power of rejection.

– Due to the attachment to a supposed ego, we are born again and it is only this ego attachment that is afraid to die. Now is the time to clear this identification away and to let the mind become as wide as the sky.

To think, “Neither in death nor in the intermediate state, nor in all future lives, will I separate myself from the two kinds of precious enlightenment mind,” that is the power of the drive.

– This clear inner alignment will operate so that we actually find Bodhicitta again and again.

To keep the two previously practiced modes of enlightenment clearly present, that is the power of habituation.

– It is as always: We practice what we want immediately and continuously, and the method for doing so is Tonglen. With the last exhale we give our gift of happiness one last time, and then we stay in the awareness of the nature of all things.

The main thing is to practice all this single pointedly, but your behavior is also an important source of help. Take the key posture in seven points, or if that is not possible, lie down on the right side and keep your cheek resting in your right hand while you close the right nostril with your little finger, thus, the breath flows through the left nostril.

Begin with love and compassion and then practice giving and receiving in connection with the coming and going of the breath.

- The seven-point key posture is too difficult for most practitioners in death.
- The other posture is the same as when we sleep. It closes off the energy channels on the right side of the body, in which otherwise there is a lot of emotional, samsaric energy circulating. On the other hand, we allow the wisdom energies of the left half of the body to circulate freely. This helps us to stay in Bodhicitta.

After that, rest in the dimension free from all intellectual attachment, aware that everything, Samsara and Nirvana, birth and death, etc., are manifestations of the mind and that the mind as such has no reality whatsoever. Practice this awareness as long as you can still breathe.

There are many teachings for the moment of death which promise a lot, but it is said that none is more wonderful than this (the Bodhicitta practice).

- In the hours before death, we alternate Tonglen (relative Bodhicitta) with the awareness of the illusory nature of all projections (ultimate Bodhicitta).
- We are very motivated to practice just before death, but often we have little physical strength, certainly little for learning to practice something new. Therefore, we should do the exercise now to carry out this purely spiritual practice. We bring the body into the most helpful position possible.
- We relax in the awareness that there has never been a real problem in life, and much less will there be a problem in death. Nothing of importance happens.

Rub the vertex of the head with an ointment that consists of the ashes of undamaged sea shells and powder of magnetic ore mixed with wild honey. This is an oral instruction for crossing over with the help of substances.

- As a result, the awareness leaves the body through the Brahma opening and finds a favorable rebirth.

4 What can others do for the dying or deceased?

- Stay calm, loving and compassionate.
- Create a peaceful atmosphere (remove stressful influences and people).
- Help the dying person to fully accept himself and his life.
- Resolve all tensions, conflicts, guilt and (self-) reproaches.
- Meditate deeply to show the way.
- Carry out wish prayers.
- Remind again and again of the disadvantages of Samsara and the way to Dewachen.
- Make sacrifices in his name.
- Read helpful Dharma texts (not only the Book of the Dead).
- In the dissolution phase, sit at the head. This facilitates an upward alignment of the subtle energies and, as a result, a transition of the mind into clearer states with the possibility of good rebirth.
- Leave the body untouched for the first hour after death.
- Repeat Phowa.

4.1 Active euthanasia?

There is no clear answer to the question of active euthanasia in the teaching of Buddha. The question did not seem to arise then. But everywhere the Buddha emphasizes the preservation of life. Gendün Rinpoche explained it in such a way that we cannot know at all what awaits someone after death, be they human or animal. Cutting off the torments in this life does not make sense, if for karmic reasons these have to be endured in another existence, where in all likelihood there will not be the same support as in this life. Therefore, he always advised to care for and to support terminally ill people to the natural end, without giving them the “mercy injection”. For him, this was thought to be too short, because the Karma has not yet been exhausted.

5 Which Bardos are there?

Bardo is Tibetan and means “intermediate state” (Antarabhava in Sanskrit). Actually every situation in life and death is such an intermediate state. In most of the enumerations, six Bardos are mentioned in which the six Yogas are practiced:

- **The Bardo of this life** (bskyed-gnas Bardo), to which our whole life belongs from conception to the entry into the dying process. The principal practices here are the Yoga of the Illusory Body in activity and the Yoga of Clear Light in deep sleep, as well as the practices of the following two Yogas, the accumulation of merits and the performance of wish prayers.
- **The Bardo of dreaming** (rmi-lam Bardo), which represents a special state in this life, because in the dream we are less strongly connected to the body and we have access to other worlds of experience. The practice here is the Dream Yoga in light sleep.
- **The Bardo of meditative immersion** (bsam-gtan Bardo), which represents a special state in this life, since we can free ourselves from the conditionality of samsaric existence. The practice here is non-dual awareness or Tummo Yoga.
- **The Bardo of dying** (’chi-kha Bardo) with the outer, inner and subtle dissolution into “death”, where the mind stream can recognize the nature of mind, merge with the final Clear Light and thus find liberation in the Dharmakaya. The practice here is first the Yoga of the Phowa and then the Yoga of the Clear Light.
- **The Bardo of the nature of things** (Skt. dharmata, Tib. chos-nyid Bardo), where the mind stream can recognize the nature of all things and find liberation in Sambhogakaya. The practice here corresponds to the Dream Yoga.
- **The Bardo of becoming** (srid-pa Bardo), where the mind stream can develop the pure perspective and find liberation in the Nirmanakaya within the framework of the next birth. The principal practices here are Bardo Yoga and the Yoga of the Illusory Body.

6 The achievements of extraordinary practitioners

Some examples:

- Guru Rinpoche has realized the immortal Vajrakaya Rainbow Body.
- Pandita Vimamitra among others have realized the perfect unity of Mahamudra and Dzogchen, the Kaya of the Great Transfer, whereby they manifest a middle world age in the Light Body.
- The Mahasiddhas Maitrīyogin, Saraha, Tilopa among others have not left behind any bodies after very long lifetimes, but have “gone into action”, i.e., they continue to work under the Dakas and Dakinis.

- Mahasiddha Nagabodhi among others have realized the Yidam so far that they remain among us and help us, but they are invisible to the normal eye.
- Some Vidyādhara such as Nagarjuna, Āryadeva, Asanga, Padampa Sangye, Yeshe Tsogyal and others have had lifetimes of 200 to 600 years due to longevity practices.
- Garab Shri Sing, Gomchung, and Retschungpa among others have dissolved into a Rainbow Body with the attainment of the highest realization without leaving any remains. They either dwell in no particular “place” or rather in a pure realm, and they manifest themselves to those who call for their help and they give instructions.
- Thangtong Gyalpo among others have realized the Rainbow Body, but they stay among us at sacred sites of practice.
- Some, such as Naropa, Milarepa, and Karmapakshi, externally show death, but internally they are already absorbed in the immortal dimension from which they can continue to teach.
- When Machikma left the body of her previous life as a young Pandita and Yogi in southern India, she used the practice of *tong djug* Phowa to enter the new body in Tibet, while her Samadhi continued to bless the body left behind in Potari. She only “released” it, as it were, when the Indian Pandita had found and accepted this proof of her earlier birth.
- Buddha Shakyamuni and other masters realized the Buddhahood, but left a body with relics for the benefit of living beings.

6.1 The immortal mind

Gendūn Rinpoche in *Heart Advice*: “The mind has no origin, it does not dwell anywhere and it has no end, no death, for it is not an object of definable existence. It is not a phenomenon that arises and goes away due to causes and conditions, but rather the true nature of all phenomena. There is no place or time to say, ‘The mind is born, this is the moment of its birth.’ That is why we say the mind is ‘unborn’. Since it cannot be localized in time and space, we say it does not linger anywhere. And since it is unborn, it is also immortal, because there can be no end to an unborn mind. Although the mind is neither existent nor non-existent, we can say that it is spontaneous, unconditioned, eternal, unchanging, indestructible, originally pure and perfect. Its indestructible aspect is also called the body of ultimate reality, indestructible body or Buddha Nature.”

7 The Bardo of dying

With the onset of the dying process, there is a gradual dissolution of the present existence that proceeds from coarse to subtle. It is helpful to know these steps so as not to be frightened when they happen. We know that we are actually going to die and we can put all our brainpower together and focus it on the best.

7.1 The three phases of the dissolution

A. The coarse “external” dissolution of the five sensory faculties: The perception of sight becomes unclear, then the perception of sound, of smells, of tastes and of bodily perceptions. So ends the perception of the outside world.

B. This is followed by the finer, fairly fast “inner” dissolution of the elements, which takes about 5 to 15 minutes. Signs of this can also appear earlier:

1. First, the earth element dissolves into the water element. Thus we lose the physical power, e.g. to raise ourselves up. (Only Yogis can do this, where the body will sit by itself). There may be a feeling of heaviness or being shattered. Yogis can feel lighter, as if they were freed from all clothing.

2. Then the water element dissolves into the fire element. The mouth and nose become dry, and the bodily fluids dry out. A feeling of being cut off from the body or to be independent may come about.
3. Then the fire element dissolves into the wind element. The body becomes cold. The last warm spot is usually the heart. It is said that the disappearance of body heat from the bottom up is a sign of higher rebirth, and vice versa.
4. Then the wind element dissolves into consciousness. The outer breath ceases, the inner breath continues to flow in lesser form. This stops the coarse consciousness and only a very fine consciousness remains. This is the outer death and thus the moment where Phowa should be practiced.

C. This is followed by the “extremely subtle” gradual dissolution of consciousness into its finest layer of Alaya, a process in which - mostly in rapid succession - three experiences (snang-ba) emerge. Because of their meditation, Yogis are already familiar with these in this life. We go through these through falling asleep and awakening (then in reverse order). Untrained practitioners do not consciously experience this phase of dissolution. According to Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, if this phase were consciously experienced, it would be as if for a moment that the curtain of the three great poisons of the mind were pulled away, allowing them to encounter the Clear Light of the next phase. Practitioners can also have a vision of their remaining Karma and rebirth at this stage, as well as visions of deities. Some of these visions are so frightening that the unprepared fall unconscious from the shock. The three experiences are:

1. “Manifestation”: At first, it all seems unclear like a painful experience of fog or smoke, or as if a white light would rise like the moon, sometimes accompanied by painful coldness in the consciousness. This experience is linked with the descending white tingle and corresponds to the cessation of anger or aversion.
2. “Increase”: Then an experience of fireflies or the appearance of red, warm, unpleasant light appears as if the sun were rising, and this experience is linked with the ascending red tingle and corresponds to the cessation of craving or attachment.
3. “Close Achievement”: Then there is an experience of darkness, of completely dark space or the silent light like a butter lamp. Here an intense feeling of happiness can emerge, which one must let go of in order to move on. This experience is linked with the encounter of white and red tingles that dissolve in ordinary people at the level of the heart. (For ordinary people they usually do not occur at the top of the head and do not come out of the nose.) The experience corresponds to the cessation of the failing awareness or ego-identification. Ordinary practitioners cannot deal with this experience and so then they become unconscious.

Tsele Natsok Rangdröl writes that it is difficult to give valid statements about the duration of these processes, as this depends on the energetic and health constitution of the dying person. Usually, however, these phases run through very rapidly, i.e., in a few minutes.

7.2 The rising in illuminating clarity (Clear Light)

After the three experiences just described, there is a fourth experience:

1. “Achievement”: Rising into the Clear Light of the Dharmakaya. The experience resembles becoming bright, like the rising of the sun, and the mind is experienced like a radiant sky, without any clouds or turbidity, without center or borders. This is the end of the dualistic consciousness for the Yogi, who remains fully conscious here, thus finding enlightenment in the Dharmakaya. A “Light” without center and limitations emerges, not conceptual, rather beyond the intellect. It is also referred to as the encounter between the natural Clear Light and the Clear Light of the practice of this life, as if a child were meeting his mother. It is as if the space in a cup were to become one with the all-

encompassing space. This is also called the “Bardo of the Clear Light.” We should stay in it as long as possible.

Rising into the ultimate Clear Light is only possible for practitioners who have already attained the Path of Seeing in their lives, that is, who have realized the nature of mind. For all others one speaks of “indirect” or “impaired” clear light.

An advanced Yogi on the upper level of the One Taste or the lower and middle levels of non-meditation remains conscious and merges with the just mentioned feeling of happiness. He has a few subtle concepts at first, but they all dissolve quickly. One speaks of 80 subtle concepts, which form the basic structure of our thinking process, and they dissolve here. A Yogi who has attained stability in the unity of Kyerim and Dzogrim will for a moment recall the pure form of Yidam, the self-appearing body of the unity of joy and emptiness, and already his consciousness rises into the non-conceptual Clear Light of the Dharmakaya, in complete simplicity. He dwells in it in the best case until complete liberation in the Dharmakaya is attained. They can stay in it for a little longer than their exercise of human life allows. The duration in which they have been able to dwell in deep meditation in their lives is called a “meditation day”, and it is said that in death they can dwell in Clear Light for up to three to five such “days”. This is also called “Thugdam”, but this term is mostly used for the subsequent practice in the Bardo of the nature of things.

Gendün Rinpoche in *Heart Advice*:

“The realization of the empty nature of all things corresponds to the realization of the Truth Body (Dharmakaya). All appearances on the relative plane are recognized as the manifestations of the Dharmakaya’s radiance. They are empty, yet they appear. Through this realization, everything is experienced as the unity of joy (dynamism) and emptiness, because the belief in supposedly concrete existence has dissolved and nothing leads to more clinging and suffering. Since we are no longer subject to deception, suffering is recognized as empty, as without real existence. That is Nirvana, the dimension beyond all suffering, the end of the cycle of death and rebirth. Whether we are subject to the painful circle of existence or experiencing the unimportant dimension, Samsara or Nirvana, depends on the presence or absence of deception. If our perception is distorted through ignorance, i.e., through dualistic deception, we are wandering around in Samsara. When we are aware of the nature of deception, the veils of dualistic attachment dissolve, and we are in the enlightened dimension, the awareness of the empty nature of all phenomena.”

7.3 The phase of unconsciousness

A normal being loses consciousness with the steps of dissolution in the Bardo of dying, at the latest at the end of the third phase of dissolution, and he rises into the Clear Light without realizing it. This ends the previous existence. This is the moment of death. The dualistic consciousness, i.e., the Alaya memory consciousness is inactive. But as there is a lack of awareness, there is no liberation. This process is no longer affected by painkillers as they target a coarse, physiological level that is no longer relevant. For someone who has not practiced, this passage through the Dharmakaya takes only a snap of your finger or a second or two. There are no visions or experiences for inexperienced practitioners.

The seconds long unconscious encounter with the Dharmakaya is followed by unconsciousness for ordinary people. The transition seems to take different amounts of time, from a few minutes or hours to several days. After up to 3.5 “meditation days” (see above) most people are already conscious again.

Khenpo Tschödrak explains: The duration of unconsciousness (like dwelling in Clear Light) is described in the traditional scriptures in meditation days (!) and not in human world days. The 1.5 to 3.5 “days” mentioned correspond usually to just a few minutes of experience, which lasts

longer only for practiced meditators. According to Khenpo, this is an old translation mistake found almost everywhere in the Tibetan scriptures, which has led to many (unnecessary) discussions. The duration of unconsciousness also depends on the cause of death. In the case of sudden death it can last longer. Also when someone has strong attachment (e.g., to his body) or strong anger, the mind can remain in the body longer (up to one or even two days). Then the person can be called by name shortly and loudly in the ear, which will “wake them up”, and the mind immediately leaves the body. If the body is burned, then as long as the mind is still in the body, it will indeed cause great suffering. According to Khenpo Tschödrak the whole process of dying, up to the end of unconsciousness, will last usually not longer than 20 minutes. With the end of the unconsciousness, a normal being is completely dead for the bereaved, but the dynamic flow of his mind continues unhindered. Life does not stop.

7.4 When is someone “dead”?

After entering into unconsciousness the previous existence is finished. With the end of the internal dissolution, the vitality energy (sog-lung, the first lung, which also initiates the beginning of life in the embryo) is extinguished. Sometimes, but by no means regularly, after the end of the inner breathing, blood and lymph escape through the nostrils and through the genital opening. At the same time, for those who do not enter a Thugdam, consciousness leaves the body. It may be that this moment corresponds to the occurrence of the zero line in the ECG, i.e., the brain death, the definitive clinical death. Twenty minutes after the extinction of the external breathing, we can usually speak of someone as “dead”. In bad accidents, where the body is completely destroyed, the sog-lung immediately leaves the body. For experienced practitioners, the sog-lung still remains in the body during the whole next phase of Thugdam. So they are not yet “dead” in the traditional sense.

7.5 Phowa practice

“Phowa” here means the various possibilities of the conscious transfer of the mind stream into a more open, liberated dimension of consciousness. There are different forms of Phowa:

- Phowa into the Clear Light (“Mahamudra Phowa”) as performed by highly skilled practitioners in the first phase of the Bardo of the nature of things,
- Phowa into the Illusory Body of the Yidam as practiced by experienced practitioners in the second phase of the Bardo of the nature of things, and
- the usual Phowa by means of a visualization of the transfer (tingle from our central channel into the heart of a Buddha above us).

A practitioner practices the Phowa he has learned when his last breath came. Outsiders practice Phowa for the deceased only when the pulse is extinguished. A single Phowa at the head of the deceased is often insufficient. It is better to repeat this visualization with Phowa many times. According to Tsele Natsok Rangdröl, if the Phowa is successful, white Bodhicitta (lymph) will escape from the Brahma opening or left nostril. This is also known as a sign of successful merging with the Clear Light.

7.6 Free the body for medical research

There seem to be two conditions under which there is no problem to release the body for post-mortem medical research: firstly, if it is the explicit wish of the dying person, and secondly because medical research (dissecting by anatomy students or in pathology) does not take place immediately in the hours after death. The body is stored in formalin fluid and usually made available to the students only in the winter semester. This can also be a very meritorious action.

7.7 Organ donation?

Khenpo Tschödrak: Obtaining an organ donation is similar to living in a house where something is being rebuilt. The conversions are foreign and you have to get used to it. So there results the feeling that there is something strange in us. Our physical condition results from past Karma, from our current behavior, from the combination of both and from current environmental influences. Depending on the cause of a disease, medical treatment may or may not work. Dharma practice can also cure cancer in the case of karmic causes.

If we want to express our gratitude as a recipient of an organ donation, we can make donations for the sick and, in addition, devote all the resulting positive force to the organ donor.

People who do not practice deep meditation are not bothered by organ donation. Yet for practitioners, the separation of the body and the mind disturbs the Bardo of the nature of things. If someone wants to donate his organs, it is not good to dissuade him. There is usually no danger that the donor will regret the donation, as non-practitioners will have a blackout during the subtle dissolution, that is, when the organs are removed, provided that organ harvesting does not take too long (20- 30 minutes). As far as practitioners are concerned, everything depends on their motivation. If someone decides to do so out of real generosity, it will have a positive effect, but if we only want to be good Bodhisattvas, the disruption of our dying process can be annoying and unfavorable.

The strained face of organ donors on the day after death is linked with the cutting off of the chab chi lung. One “kills” the lungs, so to speak, that are still active in the body, but this is a purely physical process. The mind gets nothing from the destruction of the body. This is why one should not eat the meat of freshly slaughtered animals, but rather should wait one day. This chab chi lung remains in the dead body up to a day, depending on the nature of the death and the vitality of the being.

8 *The Bardo of the nature of things (Dharmata)*

With the completion of the previous phase of the Clear Light, where liberation in the Dharmakaya was possible, or during unconsciousness, the mind has become detached from the body. In the next phase, the Bardo of the nature of things, liberation in Sambhogakaya is possible. Spiritual activity will again be experienced, and this is the beginning of the Bardos of the nature of things. Beings “wake up” as if they were to come out of a deep sleep and they enter into a new dream or waking consciousness. Experienced in reversed order are the three experiences, which were described above at the end of the Bardo of dying (near attainment, increase and manifestation). There emerges the feeling of having a fully intact body with all senses as before, but this is a mental body, and there is no memory of having died.

There is the possibility that, thanks to their familiarity with the meditations of the formation phase (Kyerim), experienced practitioners perceive their true nature as being the Illusory Body of a Sambhogakaya Yidam, just as we appear again as Yidams in the Sadhanas of the dissolution phase. This is called “well-practiced oneness” (lob-pa’i-tong-jug). For less experienced practitioners this happens not so immediately and automatically, but rather in the first few moments where full awareness arises with the three experiences. It requires a mental impulse, a voluntary focus on Kyerim practice, to appear as Yidam. This is called “less-experienced unity” (mi-lob-pa’i zung-jug). As a result, they attain liberation and can continue practicing in the pure Sambhogakaya realms as realized Bodhisattvas until fully enlightened. This phase is apparently referred to in the Book of the Dead as the “second glory”, with the “first glory” being the Clear Light of the Dharmakaya. The practice taking place in this transition is called Thugdam.

8.1 Thugdam

We can translate “Thugdam” here as “deep meditation in death”. We speak of Thugdam when there is still a meditation with a reference point (Yidam practice, Kye-rim), which then transforms into a practice without a reference point, an ascent into non-conceptual simplicity. In Thugdam practice the seeds are dissolved or further weakened by attachment, aversion and lack of awareness. These three basic dualistic patterns form the basis of samsaric functioning and they are the essence of the 80 different “concepts” that must be left behind to attain total liberation. So is the basic dual mind (namshe, alayavijnana) cleansed into non-dual timeless awareness (Yeshe, Jnana).

The non-conceptual, neutral Alaya- or store-consciousness, the eighth, the deepest level of our mind usually works even with the erroneous, non-conceptual, basic assumption of an “I”, a center. It operates with a pre-conceptual assumption that there is such a center, although it is not concerned with formulated thoughts. If Alaya works free of this assumption, it is Timeless Awareness, and if this erroneous assumption persists, it is the basis of samsaric rebirth.

As long as Yogis are in Thugdam, there is still a subtle connection with their body. This is why their body, which is usually still warm in the heart area and/or remains flexible and fresh, is touched as little as possible, so as not to interfere with the process, and this even though they have no body-related sensory perceptions anymore. It is advised to keep quiet in the presence of the body, not to speak loudly, not to spread strong smells and not to turn on bright lights.

Signs for Thugdam: The face is smooth and has a bright, beautiful color and charisma. The skin remains elastic, and when you, e.g., pull or shift something on the hand, it returns immediately to its normal position. This elasticity is lost for those who are not in Thugdam. Also, one can meditate in the presence of the dead and draw conclusions about the meditation of the deceased from the depth of one’s own meditation. If he is in Thugdam, our meditation is easy, we have little in the way of concepts and so on. In Bhutan, there was someone who had been sitting in Thugdam for 12 years, with an upright, non-decaying body. At the end of the Thugdam, the red and white spheres of light (tingles) emerged from the crown of the head and from the nostrils as signs of final death. The red tingle is often of a rather pale color and the white tingle a bit yellowish. For monks and nuns with strong practice and really pure vows, the reddish color is all the stronger as their practice had been stronger.

- Yogis at the highest level of non-meditation will be totally spontaneously absorbed in Dharmakaya or Clear Light. They do not dwell in Thugdam because there is nothing left for them to meditate on.
- Yogis on the upper level of the One Taste and on the lower and middle levels of non-meditation will perform the Thugdam meditation in Clear Light before their mind is cleansed of the remaining subtle veils, and they can rise into the full realization of the Dharmakaya. They spend up to three days in Thugdam. A Bardo will not show up for them anymore. They will become one with the mind of all Buddhas.
- Yogis at the lower and middle levels of the One Taste may stay in Thugdam for one to two weeks and gain access to the lower or middle levels of non-meditation. They will then experience a Bardo, and they can decide freely where they want to be born again.
- Yogis on the lower, middle, and upper levels of simplicity can control their Thugdam. They spend at least a week in the Clear Light of the Dharmakaya and then they perform all Kyerim practices of their Yidam until they become completely one with it. They stay in it one or more weeks and they can progress to the lower or middle level of the One Taste. After that, as an Emanation Body (Tulkus), they will assume conscious birth in the world or in pure realms.
- Yogis at the middle or high level of one-directedness may also dwell in Thugdam, but they easily lapse into clinging to pleasurable Samadhi experiences such as joy, clarity, and

non-conceptuality. So that this does not lead to a rebirth in the divine realms, they must be constantly encouraged with instructions to give up all attachments. Then they can find the way to simplicity.

- Yogis on the lower level of one-directedness cannot usually dwell in Thugdam. But if they succeed in stabilizing the Kyerim phase of Yidam practice, they are in danger of being reborn as gods or demons because of too much belief in reality.
- Ordinary people do not dwell in Thugdam. It does not do them much to receive instruction on the nature of mind in this first phase. Afterwards this is helpful, especially if they already have established a relationship to it. It is helpful to recite mantras and the names of the Buddhas (for example, Amitabha). Also, the explanatory teachings on the Bardo experience in the Book of the Dead are of great help.

It can also happen that someone dwells in a dense, dark state of mind without clarity or consciousness of the illusory nature of things, but this is not counted among the Thugdam. There help must be given with specific instructions for meditation.

There is also a “wrong” or bad Thugdam, where demonic beings take possession of the deceased and turn the process in the wrong direction. Then the deceased’s face has a red or dark, black color. This can also be checked through one’s own meditation.

8.2 Visions of deities

Immediately before and after unconsciousness, visions of light forms of different impressions can occur. They are called the peaceful and wrathful deities of the Bardo. Sometimes these visions are only very brief and go by almost unnoticed. In other cases, they are very strong and can trigger intense feelings of happiness and anxiety. They are all manifestations in one’s own mind. Who recognizes them as such, can gain liberation or access to the pure realms. The appearance of these visions marks the transition into the Bardo of becoming.

To prepare for these apparitions and not perceive them as enemies, traditional explanations and dedications are given to the 48 peaceful and 52 wrathful Bardo deities. The peaceful deities are associated with the heart center, the wrathful with the head center, and the half-wrathful Vidyādhara with the throat center. Gendün Rinpoche also gave this dedication more often in Dhagpo at the beginning. Later, he neglected to do so on the grounds that ordinary Westerners would have different visions of their cultural background than would Tibetans or the few Western practitioners who are familiar with these deities. This is the perspective of the New (Sarma) tradition (Kagyü, etc.). Yet it has been explained that the Nyingma tradition insists that all people experience the same visions. Apparently, these visions of encounters with the Light Forms are not necessarily encounters with Buddhas manifesting to help us, but rather vivid projections of our own minds under the influence of movements of subtle energies (prana, lung) in the three centers. The goal of practice is to recognize these phenomena in their essence as Lama and Yidam in one’s own mind, to take refuge and fearlessly to merge with these. This requires practice in the Dream Yoga.

8.3 The duration of the Bardo of the nature of things

The Bardo of the nature of things, where liberation can be attained in the Sambhogakaya, flows smoothly into the Bardo of becoming, where liberation in Nirmanakaya is possible. It seems that one speaks of the Bardo of becoming from where karmic projections predominate, and the mind stream aligns itself toward a new existence.

Concerning the duration of the Bardo of the nature of things the views diverge. Sometimes one speaks of two “weeks”, one week for the peaceful and one week for the wrathful deities. Yet for some beings it seems this Bardo lasts only hours or less. The rule seems to be that with waking up from unconsciousness, a phase comes first in which the mind is still working slowly

and is more peaceful. The Light Body is formed and the subtle energies in the Chakras begin to circulate, which are accompanied by an increasing mental activity, where the fixation is not yet strong. Then impressions of violent and emotional reactions increase. If there is a panic reaction and there begins a search for a way out and thus for a new existence, then this is already the Bardo of becoming.

Ordinary Sequence of the Death Process of Non-Practitioners

1. The internal dissolution after extinction of the external breath lasts about 5, 10 or 15 minutes.
2. Then comes the Chönyi Bardo of the nature of things, which is usually just a very short passage, 1-2 seconds. This corresponds to the Dharmakaya Light for practitioners, and for non-practitioners it is a short period of unconsciousness without visions.
3. Then mind and body are completely separated, and one “wakes up” in the Bardo of becoming.

According to Khenpo Tschödrak (July 6, 2003 in Laussedat), the entire process so far usually takes no longer than 20 minutes. That is the time we can use for organ donation.

8.4 Duration of unconsciousness before the Bardo of becoming

This duration is described in the traditional scriptures in terms of meditation days and not in human world days! The 1.5 to 3.5 “days” usually correspond to a lightning fast experience that only takes longer for meditators. This is an age-old translation error found everywhere. The duration of unconsciousness also depends on the cause of death. It can take longer in the case of sudden death. If someone has strong attachments (e.g., to his body) or intense anger, the mind can stay longer in the body (up to one or even two days). Then one can call the person briefly and loudly by name, which will “wake them up”, whereupon the mind immediately leaves the body. If the body is burned while the mind is still in the body, it will indeed cause great suffering.

9 *The Bardo of becoming*

The Bardo beings enter into a state of fluctuating awareness, in which there is a rapidly changing experience due to the lack of anchoring by a solid body. This is the “Bardo of becoming” when these experiences are concerned with their own karmic projections. Some of the following descriptions also apply to the Bardo of the nature of things, but the projections are more an expression of subtle wisdom energies.

The subtle Bardo Light Body takes shape as the four elements manifest in reverse order. This body possesses all sensory functions (except for the sense of touch), and it can go anywhere through mental impulses alone. Also beings who were previously disabled now have an intact body again. The blind can see, children are like adults, dementia is clear again. The mind body is indestructible, a mental body which nothing can harm.

Because sentient beings do not remember dying, they simply want to continue with what was important to them in their last lives. They want to hug their relatives, talk to them, sit down at their table, etc., but no one perceives them. When they are in front of a mirror, nothing is visible in the mirror. This complete withdrawal of contact causes great suffering, sometimes not only grief, but also anger and resentment, all kinds of strong emotions. Gradually, they realize that they are dead for the others. They hear the conversations of the others about their own death. In this phase, those who have just died are still very much connected to their last lives. They get to know how the relatives argue over the inheritance, they can read their thoughts and they are hurt by sanctimonious behavior, e.g., at the funeral.

The experiences are very intense and fast, comparable to dreams or psychotic crises in human life. Guru Rinpoche said that the mind is about seven times as fast as in the human body. The

content of these “dreams” is determined by the Karma of the Bardo being. There is not only an effect from the Karma of the life just completed, but also from the Karma of all previous existences. The intensity of these experiences, which often take the character of nightmares, scares and unsettles the Bardo being, which is why they long for an anchoring in a new stable form of existence.

It is important to know that all appearances, regardless of their form, happen in one’s own mind stream. Anyone in the Bardo who remembers the illusory nature of all phenomena will instantly gain insight into the nature of mind and will continue to practice in pure realms. Anyone who in human life has repeatedly recognized the illusory nature of dreams during their dreams will also find access to this knowledge in the Bardo.

In principle, it is possible at any time to remember Yidam practice, make prayers, call the Buddhas, recognize the illusory nature of the apparitions, etc. All this opens the door to another dimension where spiritual advancement is possible. It is especially important to build a deep refuge practice in the previous life. As a result, there will be a reflex in the Bardo to take refuge, through which the light beings will manifest, who can show us the way of liberation. Specifically, we should aim in the Bardo for awakened ones like Amitabha, Tschenresi and the pure realm Dewachen (Sukhavati) as soon as possible, i.e., before the power of projection draws us elsewhere.

In the initial phase, the Bardos are even more connected to the previous life. They feel and think like they did before, and they have an interest in what is happening in their former home. This phase lasts about three human days (Gampopa) or up to three Bardo weeks (Guru Rinpoche). Here the intensity of the experiences is probably meant, as if one had lived three weeks. Then the impressions of the past fade away, and other Karma begins to predominate, which will lead to the next birth. This phase is about the same length as the previous one. There are projections which already correspond to the area of a future birth. One feels attracted to this area, more than to others.

It is said that in this phase lights of different intensity are encountered. Most beings seem to recoil from the very powerful and radiant light of the pure and higher realms, preferring the soft and dull lights of the lower realms. To prepare for these strong lights and then turn to the brightest and clearest, it is helpful to develop radiant and vivid visualizations of deities and pure realms during our present lifetime. Then it will be possible to immerse oneself in the brightest lights and to find access to the pure realms. Yet those who are attracted by soft and weak lights will accept birth in the six realms of being. *Gampopa writes:*

“All beings in the intermediate state have certain wondrous abilities. They can cross the sky and, as with the eyes of gods themselves, they can see their future birthplace from a great distance. Because of their past actions, however, they have four experiences that confuse their perception: a strong storm rises, heavy rain falls, the sky darkens, and they hear terrible noise, as if many people were screaming in confusion. According to their healing and harmful actions, ten unclean perceptions emerge. They think, ‘I enter a palace’ or ‘I climb onto the roof of a multi-story house’ or ‘I ascend a throne,’ ‘come into a straw hut,’ ‘enter a tabernacle,’ ‘slip between blades of grass,’ ‘enter a forest,’ ‘slip into a walled table’ or ‘I am crawling among straws.’ With one of these notions in mind, beings then see their future parents from a distance in sexual union and go there.

Those who have accumulated much positive merit and accept higher rebirth will see and rush to a palace, multi-story buildings or the like. Those of middle merit and middle reincarnation will see straw huts and the like and rush there. Those without merits, who accept lower rebirth, will see walls and the like, and so go there.

Once there, in those born of the male sex, affection for the mother and aversion to the father arise. On the other hand, in those who are born of the female sex, affection for the father and

aversion to the mother arise. With these feelings of desire and aversion, the consciousness merges with the sperm and egg of the future parents.”

For beings with a Karma for rebirth in the hells, there appear in their panic itself, lakes of glowing, liquid metal and the like, as a refuge from the supposed dangers of Bardo. For those with animal Karma, walls and the like will appear auspiciously. Those with godly Karma will see wonderful palaces. Those with demigod Karma will be attracted to the battlefields of the Asuras. For human Karma, the sexual union will attract us, and the uterus will seem like a great gift to us etc. Everyone has the feeling that this is the only right place to find protection. Actually there is no choice which takes place, but everyone follows the jugglery of his own Karma.

9.1 Conscious rebirth

If the Dharmakaya or Sambhogakaya liberation or transition to the pure realm is not successful, the practitioner who is experienced in the Yoga of the Illusory Body can direct his mind to reincarnate in the human realm to gain liberation as Nirmanakaya. This would mean that the next birth will be the last samsaric birth.

A conscious rebirth as an Emanation Body (Tulku) is about dissolving desires and attachments, so as not to be caught in the wake of ordinary karmic tendencies. If one succeeds in releasing attachment and aversion, the practitioner can even choose their parents, because they will not compulsively jump into the first union. They can see if the Dharma is practiced in the region, if this family provides suitable conditions for Dharma practice, if suitable masters will be around, etc. At conception they will meditate on the future parents as the Lama in the form of Yidam in union (YabYum), and they will visualize themselves as a seed syllable (the symbol of Bodhicitta and the future activity of Nirmanakaya) that enters the mother's body as well as the deity's palace. They practice the process of the four dedications. This is only possible when the mind is free of emotional reactions such as attachment and desire towards one parent, as well as aversion and jealousy towards the other parent.

However, in Bardo as well as in human life, this must be preceded by strong prayers to accept a birth in which we can continue to practice the Dharma and to help other people. If all of this is not possible for us, we should at least call all our merits and spiritually collect them and dedicate them to a rebirth as a Dharma practitioner. Without merit, i.e., without positive Karma, our mind will be so veiled that we have no freedom in this process. Wish prayers have a strong collecting power on our consciousness and they will allow all Karma to align with our strongest desires.

Khenpo Tschödrak explains that the Bardo being is waiting for semen and egg to come together. It is conceivable that the consciousness connects to either the sperm or the egg. In twins, triplets, etc., there are probably several streams of mind that connect with one or more oocytes or sperm. In the union of the subtle energies of father and mother when the sperm and egg come together, one day after the sexual union, the Bardo being usually loses consciousness for a while. This is the entry into the Bardo of the next birth. Only beings like Karmapa and Guru Rinpoche do not lose consciousness, normal Tulkus become unconscious like others. Only few can recite mantras in the womb...

9.2 How long does the Bardo of becoming take?

Many teachers and texts in the Vajrayana, especially the Nyingma tradition, say the Bardo of becoming would last seven weeks (49 days). This view is widespread because of the Tibetan Book of the Dead. But in the Theravada tradition there is talk of only one week (7 days). This is also confirmed by Gampopa, who says that the first three days are still related to past life, that this connection is extinguished on the 4th day and the next three days are focused on the next existence. In the Bardo Sutra (presumably a Mahayana Sutra) Buddha Shakyamuni speaks

of a maximum duration of three weeks of the Bardo of becoming. Gendün Rinpoche also said (in line with the explanations of the Six Yogas) that the vast majority of people would have found a new existence after two, three or four weeks. Nevertheless, one should continue with the prayers until the expiration of seven weeks. The mental impressions in the Bardo are evidently more strongly related to the past during the first half and almost exclusively to the future in the second half. Some teachers say they are related to the future right from the start. Gendün Rinpoche explained it as a gradual fading of impressions from the past life and a concomitant increase in the karmic tendencies that will determine the next life.

The Bardo is much shorter for those who have a very strong, clear Karma. It is said that people who have killed their father or mother (or have committed another of the “five acts of immediate consequence”) accept birth in the areas of appalling anguish immediately, i.e., without any other Bardo experience. This means that a rebirth in the Samadhis of form and formlessness is hardly preceded by a Bardo of becoming. Gendün Rinpoche said about deceased animals that they are reborn almost immediately (within minutes or hours) without experiencing a Bardo of days, certainly not weeks. The same is true of hell beings who enter another life immediately after the end of hell existence, without Bardo.

But there are also beings who stay much longer (months and years) as a ghost or a mind in the Bardo. They are counted among the “olfactory eaters” who either suffer like hungry ghosts or experience temporary pleasures among the demigods and gods of the desire realm. In the special case of suicide, Khenpo Tschödrak Rinpoche says that the traumatized mind may go back hundreds of years with the body left behind or the connected memory of such. In that case we should visualize this being plastically or somehow make direct contact and speak with him to help resolve this trauma.

9.3 The Nelung practice

The Nelung helps in the Bardo of becoming and shows how to use the manifestations in the Bardo. It has the power of supportive wishes. When a strong bond can be made with the deceased, it is possible to guide their mind in the Bardo and to align them with liberation or with pure realms of existence such as Dewachen, or to make Phowa for them. Gendün Rinpoche said that it would be quite possible to practice Nelung already a short time after death or the day after death, because most people would then have left the unconsciousness. Generally (for Pujas groups), however, he recommended that one begin with the Nelung practice only 3 or 4 days after death. It is important, according to Khenpo Tschödrak, to burn the name of the deceased at the earliest on the second day or later, not immediately.

Khenpo Tschödrak tells the following story: When Karma Tschagme performed the Nelung practice for his mother, a vision of a beautiful woman who looked like his mother first emerged. He recognized this as the deceptive manifestation of another being and practiced “Gegsel”, clearing the obstacles. Then he saw his mother as a Shadow Being who was worried about her former favorite cow, and then he could show her the way out of the Bardo.

10 The Bardo of being born and staying

From the loss of consciousness in the dying process to the birth in the new body one can usually not remember anything (only the Karmapas and a few “highest tulkus” master this process with full consciousness and can remember completely). From a sensitive human being, who perceives its environment, it takes about ten weeks after conception. But all memory is usually wiped out with the birth or the overwhelming impressions of early childhood.

The processes of embryonic and fetal development described in the texts correspond to the current findings of medical science and therefore need not be further described here.

10.1 Abortion?

Khenpo Tschödrak: According to a Sutra, starting three months after conception, the human body is so well developed that one can speak of a “person”, i.e., a full-fledged person with all the facilities. So abortion is not to be equated with killing before that time, and it is karmically less severe. Yet Khenpo has never heard of a great master like Karmapa advocating abortion.

But what to do if a child has been caused by rape? It is always about finding the best possible solution.

11 *The preparation for death (Gendün Rinpoche)*

Dharma practice finds its true purpose in preparation for death, for then it will be fully beneficial. Since we practiced during our lifetime, we will not be afraid when the dying process begins. Trust will come to us and we will know which attitude is helpful and which is a hindrance. We will reap the fruits of a life dedicated to Dharma practice. However, if we start the practice at the last minute, its positive effects will not be ready in time. The consequences of our non-wholesome actions will follow us in the process of death like shadows and lead to experiences of great suffering. Therefore, we should immediately apply the instructions and resolve the burden of our harmful actions while there is still time.

We may say that we should not think too much about death, because we cannot turn it away anyway, and the thought of it would only frighten and depress us. But it is not very wise to suppress the idea of a death. As we face the reality of death today, its inevitability and unpredictability, we can prepare for it and then look straight ahead and face it with a clear mind.

Death can happen at any time, be it an accident, a sudden illness, spoiled food, in fact, almost anything can become a cause of death. We cannot know when it will happen. And whatever we do, we cannot prevent the coming of death, just as we cannot stop the sun’s course. All wealth and all power will not help us in the face of death. We will have to leave everything behind. If we have spent our whole lives accumulating goods, making friends, building power, and gaining prestige, all that really means is that we have fully followed our self-centered tendencies and have become emotionally more and more deeply involved. In death, we will no longer have the opportunity to free ourselves from such conditioning. All the efforts we have made to bring happiness out of this life for ourselves will only have led to a great mountain of negative Karma, since all our actions were motivated by ego attachments. In death, the power of these non-wholesome actions will throw us into one of the three distressing realms of existence: the realm of hell, the hungry ghosts, or the life of an animal. There is great suffering in these areas, much more intense than in the human realm.

Lack of motivation for spiritual practice shows that we do not think enough about death and transience. We do not want to think about the consequences of having a life wasted on mindless activities, and we simply pretend that it is unnecessary to prepare for death and the time after it. We cling to worldly life and its joys, and we consider our current well-being as most important. But we will inevitably face the consequences of our actions, and then it will be too late to change anything.

When we face the reality of death, many things become clear to us, which as yet have been hidden from view. We see that death is not just coming in any case, but that it is totally unpredictable. It can come at any moment. We have no time to lose. Immediately we should begin with the preparation and refrain from all actions that lead to painful rebirths. Contemplating the all-determining power of Karma, which decides at the moment of our death how it proceeds further, is a powerful impulse to perform wholesome actions, to dedicate ourselves to the Dharma, and to lose no further time on the path to enlightenment.

The greatest danger in death are the effects of the many unwholesome actions that we have performed. We must therefore immediately learn how we can dissolve these seeds of suffering with the help of the Dharma and at the same time how we can sow seeds of happiness. Only the Dharma, the way of dissolving all selfishness, has this power, and we should therefore immediately use the Dharma methods. If we are desperately seeking protection in the process of dying, then the only effective help will come from Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. We are wrong if we think it is enough just to open up for the Three Jewels at the last moment. We must practice our whole lives in making wish prayers and finding faithful refuge with the Three Jewels and the Lama, so that this attitude is deeply rooted and completely natural in death. Dying is a painful process, and we will not respond as prudently as we wish, for it is not easy to let go and go into the unknown. It will be too late then to learn new things. At that point, our previous good habits must carry us.

Those who use their lives to practice can learn to transform difficult circumstances into the path of enlightenment, cleanse their Karma, and free themselves from the burden of the past. Dharma practice also liberates from the deep rooted tendencies to commit the same mistakes over and over again and to constantly create new suffering. It is gradually empowering for us to help others in their suffering and to help them to resolve their Karma. Through the power of our practice, commitment and the purity of our motivation, we are able to inspire more and more beings for the path of liberation. So our practice actually works for the good of all living beings. If we are well prepared through Dharma practice, death is an extraordinary opportunity to deepen our understanding.

Highly advanced practitioners can achieve Buddhahood in death by realizing that their mind is the Truth Body. Somewhat less advanced, who are experienced in Yidam practice to see all manifestations as the diverse expressions of the Buddha Mind, can attain liberation in the realization of the Joy Body in death.

If we are not such skilled practitioners, but have developed an open and relaxed mind with deep faith in the Lama, we will not feel threatened by the illusory manifestations of the after-death state, but we will again recognize in them the true nature of all appearances, the emptiness. As we are practiced in developing devotion and openness to the Lama and in performing the wish prayers, we will be able to merge our minds with the mind of the Lama. As a result, all phenomena of the after-death phase, which are nothing more than the manifestations of our karmic tendencies, are purified immediately through their appearance. They dissolve in the knowledge of their true nature and we find complete liberation.

For these reasons, it is so important that we turn to the study of the Dharma now while we are still alive, and that we develop trust and openness toward the Master and to the Teaching. Material goods and friends are no help in death. Only the power developed in practice and our ability to open confidently to the blessings of the Three Jewels and of the Lama can then protect us. Therefore, from now on, we should use all situations, especially those that are difficult and painful, to develop trust and devotion to the Three Jewels and especially to the Lama. Situations in which we suffer, are attacked, or encounter problems are the best practice ground, not to resort to secular means, but to open ourselves to blessings.

The more familiar we become with taking refuge, the more the refuge will help us in our sleep in difficult dreams and in death. Through the prayers that we send to the refuge in the waking state, we create habits that cause us to take refuge naturally in a dream. As a result, all fears dissolve instantly and the dream takes a different turn. Taking refuge spontaneously in the dream also shows that the refuge becomes a reliable, almost automatic reaction, which will also be a support in the dying process. Through the power of habit that we have developed throughout our lives, we will remember the refuge and thus the Dharma in death, and then we can find the way out of all fears and entanglements.

In turning to the refuge, we will recognize the experiences of death as projections of our minds and not as forces acting on us from the outside.

To be sure that we attain liberation in death, we must develop, in addition to trust and devotion, a direct understanding of the true nature of the phenomena. Therefore, we should constantly meditate on the realization that the whole world, all beings and phenomena, are as a dream without reality, the illusory play of the mind. If we truly understand the illusory nature of all experiences of happiness and suffering, we will no longer attach any concrete reality to our experience, and we will also recognize the projections of the death phase as illusory. We will understand that, as frightening as they may be, they are merely images in the mirror of our mind. This understanding develops as we open ourselves to the blessings of the Lama and of the Three Jewels. Time and again we come back to these key points of practice: trust, openness and blessing.

If, during our lifetime, we are unable to live our experiences like a dream and recognize the dream state as an illusion, it will be difficult to find liberation in death or after death. For as the manifestations and our tendencies after death manifest in the same way as now, we will then consider our experiences to be as real as they are now without practice. Therefore, in order to be well prepared for death, we should now practice learning to recognize the unreality of all appearances.

Often the Tibetan word Bardo is used to denote the after-death phase, but actually Bardo means only generally “intermediate state”. Also now we are in such a Bardo, the intermediate state between birth and death. The difference with the after-death Bardo is that our experiences after death will be more intense than they are now. Whatever we have experienced in previous lives, what we experience in the present Bardo, and what we will experience in the after-death Bardo, is the result of the maturing of the karmic seeds that we have sown in countless lives. All these different Bardo experiences follow the same laws. They arise because of karmic causes and conditions. Learning to live in the Bardo of the present moment with the help of Dharma practice is therefore the best preparation for the after-death Bardo. From the perspective of the Dharma, death is simply a change of what we perceive. The phenomena of our current world cease and give way to other perceptions. There is no real interruption. The mind continues to be what it is by its nature and it perceives with the same tendencies. The frame of reference of perception changes, but basically it is the same process, and the mind’s responses remain the same as before. In truth, death, like life, is an illusion, a temporary intermediate state, a Bardo. Here it is not so that everything simply stops, as we might assume. Death is the continuation of life, a change of scene in the continuous process of change.

The perceptions after death are the ongoing manifestation of the maturing karmic potential. This Karma continues to be experienced by the mind and its senses. The sensory perceptions continue, even if we initially have no material, but only a mind body. And just as in our present life, we react with attachment or aversion and all the other emotions, depending on whether our Karma brings about peaceful or frightening experiences.

Death can be compared to resettling. We live in a house where we have developed certain habits, and one day the conditions for living there further have lapsed. Analogously we die, necessarily taking our “karmic suitcases” and moving elsewhere to live in a different situation and environment, further accompanied by our old habits. We find ourselves in a new, unknown world again. Dharma teachings help us navigate this new situation, as we are already developing habits in this life that will help us in unknown lands.

In death, our present frame of reference dissolves. It is the end of the world we are familiar with. If we believed in the reality of this conditioned world during our life, death would throw us into total confusion. We will not find our way anymore, because all the familiar references, all the mirrors that used to make us feel that we exist, are missing. We will discover that we are all

alone. The illusion of being surrounded by others, being someone, and doing important things collapses in death. And if we have not used our lives to develop deep faith in the refuge and thus in our mind, we will feel uprooted and lost. What remains in death is our mind, our way of looking at things, and what has arisen out of trust, experience, and realization in our stream of being.

In death, everything depends on whether we have learned to really take refuge, refuge in the Lama, which is also the true dimension of our mind. When our environment dissolves in the process of dying, and the outer Lama becomes unreachable, we should be able, free of doubt, to take refuge in the true nature of the Lama. By taking refuge in this way, the real Lama is present in us.

In death, the mind separates from everything material, the body as well as the world. It is then completely “naked”, no longer involved in this body, which restricts it, but which also protects against the excessively rapid conversion of impulses. The empty, dynamic consciousness, which is no longer anchored in a physical body, then shows its amazing power. Every thought has immediate consequences in this purely spiritual dimension. When an emotion emerges, we immediately find ourselves in an environment that reflects that emotion. Although the basic spiritual process is identical now and later, at the moment it may be difficult for us to imagine the state of mind after death, as in ordinary life we never experience this naked consciousness unanchored in material. In the ordinary state, we are constantly creating conceptual veils that mask the true nature of our mind as well as the world. We are never really in conscious contact with our deeper nature, unless we practice meditation. In the time after death, the mind is very agile and has many powers that it has not learned to control. In addition, it encounters completely unexpected and unknown situations. Unprepared as it is, it can hardly adequately respond to these challenges. It is very unstable, anything can happen, and it easily loses its balance. Depending on which direction the thoughts take, we can find ourselves in states of greatest happiness or greatest suffering.

The Dharma teaches methods that make it possible to bring about the realization of the nature of the mind. These profound teachings, such as the teachings of the Great Seal (Mahamudra), the Great Perfection (Maha-Ati), the Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita) and the Path of the Center (Madhyamaka), wield with their impressive names a great fascination for spiritual seekers. Yet to understand these lessons from personal experience requires regular, persevering practice. Only then will we penetrate into the heart of these methods and not stop at a mere intellectual understanding. To consider oneself a practitioner of these teachings without really understanding their purpose is an expression of spiritual arrogance and pride. In death, we need a method that we master well, and overconfidence will not help us then.

It is wise to practice modesty and to rely on a simple and safe practice that is truly within our reach, and that will guide us even in our ignorance safely to liberation. Particularly suitable for this is the performance of wish prayers for rebirth in the pure realm of Amitabha, the Buddha of Limitless Light. This practice enables us, through faith alone in Buddha Amitabha, to find access in death to the pure realms of the realization of the nature of the mind. When we accept rebirth in a pure realm, as in the pure realm Dewachen of Amitabha, we are freed from the cycle of existences, encounter no obstacles, and can quickly advance to enlightenment.

Of course, it is possible to realize Mahamudra, the insight into the true nature of the mind, within this life, but this requires total commitment. We must spend all our life focusing and practicing it untiringly until we have mastered the stages of development and completion¹ of meditation.

¹In the developmental stage of meditation (Kye-rim), also called the creative phase, one works with the creative side of the mind, for example by performing visualizations and becoming aware of the illusory nature of all phenomena. In the completion phase (Dsog-rim) one lets go of all ideas and merges with

Many of us are currently lacking the time and energy to do so, and the karmic conditions do not come together. Maybe we are a bit lazy too! For those who are either too lazy or too busy to practice intensively, but have a deep yearning for liberation from the sufferings of the cycle of existence, there is the practice of the wish prayer for rebirth in Amitabha's "Pure Realm of Joy" (Dewachen). This practice is simple, takes little time, but brings great results.

11.1 The pure realm Dewachen

Of all the pure realms, the enlightened regions of consciousness, Dewachen, the realm of Amitabha, is the easiest to reach, for Amitabha has performed wish prayers throughout his journey to Buddhahood, so the entrance into a realm of realization would be possible for ordinary living beings who have not yet understood the nature of mind in their lifetimes. Each Bodhisattva makes wish prayers for his future activity during his spiritual development. Amitabha saw that the other pure realms are hard to access for ordinary beings, because they require that one has achieved some realization of the nature of mind during their lifetime. He wished that by attaining Buddhahood, a spiritual environment would be created that was attainable for everyone, solely through trust in him and the sincere desire to be born again in this pure realm. When he became a fully enlightened Buddha, his wish prayers came true through the power of his realization. The "Pure Realm of Joy" manifested, open to all who have the confidence. To get to Dewachen, we need a strong faith in Buddha Amitabha, and we must have no doubt that we are able to be born there again.

For this it is of great use to make daily wish prayers, to go to this pure realm immediately after death, without having to take birth once again in the cycle of existence. With these wish prayers we practice throughout our lives to entrust Amitabha with total dedication. Especially helpful for this is the meditation on Tschenresi, the Buddha of Great Compassion, for it is he who will open the door to this pure awareness dimension and guide us to his Lama, Buddha Amitabha. Through the combination of Tschenresi practice and wish prayers, a deep longing will develop in us to reach Dewachen. Of course, the practice also implies that we strive to avoid all non-wholesome actions and to do as much useful work as possible. By focusing our lives entirely on liberation and enlightenment, we are beginning to separate from the concerns of this world and to be prepared in the moment of death to leave the world of clinging behind us. If we have dissolved all desires to be reborn in the cycle of existence, we will go directly to Dewachen after death. We can be sure that this is really within the reach of each one of us.

To accomplish this great transition with confidence, we must develop an understanding of how we should practice in the process of dying. When the moment of death approaches, we offer up our body, our speech and our mind, and all the positive actions that we have carried out in the course of our lives, all these for the welfare of all living beings. As completely as possible we dedicate to them all the best and wish them the fulfillment of all their wishes. May they be happy, may their minds be opened and may their open and happy minds lead them to Buddhahood!

Then we awaken in us the strong and pure wish to be reborn with Buddha Amitabha right after death. To reinforce this inner alignment, we can imagine Amitabha as a luminous form in front of us in the room or above our head. We think that he is inseparable from our root Lama, who has accompanied us all our lives and to whom we have developed a strong bond. We have already approached him in many difficult situations and we can now build on the openness, trust and deep devotion that has come from it. We clearly envision the Lama as Buddha Amitabha and develop faith in his presence until we feel with certainty that he is actually present.

the nondual dimension that underlies all appearances. In the Kagyü Tradition, these two phases are not practiced one after another but rather as a unit.

Full of surrender and joy, we then spiritually offer up to him all that we have felt in our lives as belonging to us, our possessions, our dwelling place, the individual members of our family, all friends, our homeland, in short everything we may still hang onto, right down to our body. Everything is entrusted to Amitabha and no longer belongs to us. We do it without any restraint or calculation, without expecting anything in return. We sacrifice all that we have to leave behind anyway. In this way we can free ourselves from the final attachment that we still have to this world. Any little remaining attachment to this ending life will be an obstacle to liberation at the moment of death.

Attachments and the many resulting emotions are the biggest obstacle to rebirth in Dewachen. For that reason we should inwardly separate ourselves from everything and sacrifice it to Lama Amitabha and thus to the good of all living beings. At the same time, we are developing a strong positive force that will help us along the way. Free from all worries and attachments, we can really turn to the Buddhas Amitabha and Tschenresi. In this deep letting go, our mind opens and it is already permeated with the joy of the realm of Dewachen. When the mind then leaves the body, the transition will naturally take place in a single moment. We will leave our ordinary level of existence behind and accept a spiritual birth in the Pure Realm of Joy. However, as we continue to depend on our possessions and the pleasures of this life, we will encounter many obstacles, for we will be plagued with the fear of losing the objects of our attachment before and after death. This is a source of great suffering.

After death, we are still aware of our bodies and our environment for a while, and it could be very disturbing for us to see that the things we depend on now belong to others, perhaps even to those who harm us the most or we hated the most. We may have to watch our loved ones greedily plunge into our possessions and argue. This could trigger great disappointment and anger in us, which would catapult us directly into distressed realms of existence. Therefore, it is so important to detach ourselves from all relatives, friends, and all possessions, and also to sacrifice our bodies to the Buddha, so that our minds are not affected by what happens to and around our corpse after death.

When we have completely let go of this life and this world, we focus on Amitabha and the desire to be born again in his pure realm. This awareness is maintained until our last breath. If we are focused on this goal, our consciousness will go naturally in death to Dewachen, the Buddha Amitabha. For this, it is not even necessary to know the practice of Phowa, a meditation method for deliberately switching consciousness to other areas. Deep faith in the power of the wish prayers of Amitabha and the yearning of our fully aligned mind are sufficient.

With such confidence and the power of inner alignment, consciousness will naturally leave our body through the vertex of the head, and we will instantly, in a single moment, take rebirth in a lotus flower in the Pure Realm of Joy. If we have really developed deep trust, the lotus will open immediately and we can enter this pure realm of awakened awareness. The lotus flower in which we are born symbolizes our trusting mind. With great confidence, the lotus is wide open, but with fluctuating confidence and lack of devotion, the petals around us initially remain closed. This is not unpleasant because we have everything we need. We have the opportunity to hear all the teachings of Buddha Amitabha, but we cannot see him or the surroundings of Dewachen. Only when complete trust has emerged will the lotus open. The rebirth in Dewachen through simple appearance in a single moment may sound like a miracle to us, but it is nothing else but the result of our wish prayer in conjunction with the blessing and compassion of the Buddha's "Boundless Light". Such a rebirth in Dewachen is really within our reach, provided that we wish it earnestly.

The description of this pure realm and all its qualities comes from Buddha Shakyamuni himself. The living beings there have no body of flesh and blood, but possess a Light Body of spiritual nature which is an expression of their Buddha nature. There is no development from infant to adult. Our Light Body is instantaneously as perfect as that of a Buddha. There is no distinction

in man or woman, because the polarity of the sexes is then dissolved. Since there is no birth in the usual sense, we are also not exposed to the process of old age, illness and death. We live together with Amitabha and many Bodhisattvas in this beautiful realm. There are no worries and no work. All wishes are fulfilled spontaneously, nothing is missing. Everything has light nature, including the trees and plants. The nourishment, if we ever want to take any, is pure wisdom nectar. We do not have to protect ourselves from dangers or the effects of the weather, and houses are therefore superfluous. We have no fixed place of residence, we can stay anywhere and we are free from attachment to material goods. It is a place of great happiness and deep peace.

In Dewachen everything is an expression of the activity of Buddha Amitabha. Ceaselessly, countless of his radiations spontaneously bring about the well-being of all living things. They manifest in the forms of Guru Rinpoche², Tschenresi, Tara³ and countless other helpers who penetrate all worlds. In the heart of Amitabha there is a Light Sphere, where Guru Rinpoche dwells and from which innumerable forms of Guru Rinpoche radiate into all worlds and realms of being. From a Light Sphere in the right hand of Amitabha, an uninterrupted stream of emanations of Tschenresi emerges, protecting and guiding all beings with enlightened compassion. Innumerable forms of the female Buddha Green Tara stream from a Light Sphere in his left hand, protecting the beings from fear and danger and freeing them from all suffering. Thus is the incessant effect of Amitabha and his radiations for the welfare and enlightenment of all living beings.

In Dewachen everyone becomes aware of what enlightened activity is. The Dharma is everywhere. Whenever we want to hear it, the teachings of Amitabha come naturally to our ears. We understand everything he explains and can remember it completely later. So we quickly develop into Bodhisattvas and finally Buddhas, without having to follow a long, painful path with many obstacles. Nothing distracts us and our mind easily finds deep meditation. We can perform any desired meditation and achieve its realization.

The beings in Dewachen are no longer born again due to Karma in the cycle of existence, and they experience no more suffering themselves. Yet, they perceive the suffering of the ordinary beings in the other realms of existence, and they can send emanations to help them. For example, they are aware of the confusion and terror of the beings who are wandering around in the after-death state, and they have the ability to lead them to the pure realm.

At the level of consciousness of Dewachen one moves on with the mind. Through a single thought, we are instantly where we want to go. With our Mind Body, we can also visit a variety of other Buddha regions in which we can receive the teachings of other Buddhas. The conditions for the inner development are ideal and so we should cultivate the deep desire to reach Dewachen at the end of this life.

These teachings open the door for us to Dewachen. Now it is up to us whether we use them. Yet we should not believe that we will just be born there through the mere thought, “I should try Dewachen, and the description does not sound bad.” Such a rebirth is the fruit of a life that, with many wish prayers and regular Tschenresi practice, is focused on this goal. Only then will there be enough confidence in Amitabha, Tschenresi and Dewachen, so that this rebirth can happen spontaneously and without obstacles.

²Guru Rinpoche (“Jewel-Equal Master”) is meant here as the compassionate, enlightened activity of Buddha Amitabha. This also refers to the radiation of Amitabhas, who as Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) in the 8th century AD brought the Dharma from North India to Tibet and is revered as a great pioneer of Buddhist teachings, especially the Vajrayana.

³Tara is a female Buddha. She manifests in a variety of forms, the best known of which is the Green Tara, to help sentient beings out of their distress. She is said to have originated from the tears of Tschenresi, who was despairing over sentient beings always falling back into their self-centered patterns and unending suffering.

As we learn to face each situation openly and use it for the path, the qualities of the Dharma will quickly reveal themselves to us. We will learn how to free ourselves from suffering and turn it into happiness. Especially helpful for us, as for all other beings, is the meditation on Tschenresi, the Buddha of the Great Compassion, and the recitation of his mantra OM MANI PEME HUNG.

Tschenresi is the symbolic manifestation of enlightened compassion that includes all beings equally. Enlightened compassion is inseparable from wisdom, the awareness of emptiness. Tschenresi is this enlightened awareness that is inherent in all beings and whose nature is the unity of compassion and emptiness. He is not a god, but the mirror of our own true nature and as such not separate from us. When we recite his mantra, love and compassion develop naturally, and the experience of emptiness will gradually unfold. Loving kindness and compassion lead to the realization of the Truth Body, of the empty nature of mind and all appearances. Therefore, it is very useful to carry out this practice regularly. It is important to practice with joy and confidence. We always finish the Tschenresi practice with wish prayers for rebirth in Dewachen. Consistent practice here will make our death much easier.

If we have not achieved realization and all concepts collapse in the face of death, we still have the connection with the Buddha of the Great Compassion. Our faith in him and the power of all the mantras of enlightened compassion that we have recited will then help us. If we are overcome by fear in the last few moments before death, we will turn to Tschenresi as a matter of course, calling him for help and taking refuge. It will be natural to call upon the compassion and blessings of all Buddhas, as we have cultivated this trust through constant practice.

The call for Tschenresi will come not from the intellect, but from the depths of our heart. We will feel his presence, our mind will open, the compassion of Tschenresi will fill us, and we will notice that our mind has become inseparably one with Tschenresi. As we recite his mantra, our speech becomes his speech, and our body becomes inseparable from his body. We will experience that our body, our speech and our mind are equal to the enlightened body, the enlightened speech and the enlightened mind of Tschenresi. We can then let the last breath out without fear, full of security and confidence. But we have to practice a lot for that beforehand. If we familiarize ourselves now with the practice of Tschenresi, and we practice letting our minds rest in originality and compassion, it becomes a habit that will help us at the moment of death.

When death approaches, we should free ourselves from all fear and not think that we are awaiting painful experiences. As already described, we dedicate with a joyful mind all of our good actions and spiritual merits to the welfare of all beings, and we imagine that they find happiness in enlightenment. So is our mind filled with love and joy. If we are already well acquainted with and experienced in the practice of exchange between ourselves and others (Tonglen), then we can continue to perform these practices now. We can also reinforce them by reciting the Tschenresi mantra and imagining that we become Tschenresi. Finally, for a while, we stay in perfect naturalness, beyond all ideas of 'I' and others. We conclude this wholesome action with the wish that after death our body, our speech and our mind become the source of all that is helpful and useful to all beings:

Whatever the beings strive for or need in all the realms of existence, may I spontaneously assume all forms which serve. May all beings enjoy themselves in complete freedom, without any limitations or dangers, and may all their wishes come true. May I be able always to bring about the good of all living beings.

If our ability to devote ourselves to the welfare of beings is still limited, we can make wish prayers that this mindset and activity may continue to expand, so that in the future we will be of ever greater benefit and we can actually lead others to liberation. If we practice like this, we will feel great joy at the moment of death. To die with such wishes will lead to a rebirth, which

is helpful for the path to enlightenment. Because of our spontaneous inclination to love and compassion for all beings, we will naturally find in the future life the conditions necessary to attain Buddhahood. We will be endowed with many qualities and abilities to help others. The power of wish prayers at the moment of death is truly extraordinary.

The state of mind at the moment of death is of such crucial importance because the ultimate impulses of this life instantaneously lead to the experience of a spiritual world that is the mirror of these impulses. The moment consciousness leaves the body, it is very unstable and easily influenced. When the last moments of life are filled with anger or terror, these emotional forces shape consciousness with their corresponding energy, and there is a danger of rebirth in the lower realms of being. Yet if the mind is calm, full of confidence, and free from attachments to this life, it is possible to direct it toward Dewachen and liberation. At least then there are great opportunities to be reborn in one of the higher realms of existence. Therefore, we must pay close attention to the atmosphere surrounding a dying person and try to give him as much peace and security as possible. Even more important, however, than external calm is the production of a pure, altruistic motivation. It is extremely helpful if we can arouse such a motivation in ourselves and in the dying.

Often dying is associated with suffering, anxiety and even panic. Many people experience confusion, agonizing thoughts and strong emotions, such as anger, disappointment and hatred. We need to learn in time to deal with these states of mind so they cannot carry us off in death. Because to die in a negative state of mind has a strong negative impact on the next life. It is usually reborn under unfavorable conditions, in a body unfit for Dharma practice, which in turn affects the mind and all other actions. The tendency to perform non-wholesome actions will continue to increase, and the karmic burden will increase. To avoid this, it is really important to learn today to master our emotions in order to relax in death. Otherwise, we die like animals which follow their instincts and emotions impulsively without understanding what is happening. As humans, we have the opportunity to die in full awareness of what is going on, knowing what we can do to use the situation for liberation.

At the moment of death it is very important to be calm, balanced and free of attachment. This applies first of all to the dying person himself, but also to those who assist him. We should use all means available with sensitivity and wisdom so that the dying person can leave this world in a peaceful environment with a calm mind. We try to assist him in developing a positive attitude, even if he is not familiar with the teachings of Buddha and does not perform the same prayers. The most important thing in dying is the mental attitude.

The dying person goes through intense emotional states. He is in pain, nervous and weak, and that worries him very much. In order not to agitate him any further, we should be soft and gentle in our movements and words, and we should help him where we can. We should avoid anything that could fill him with regret or leave him angry, proud, envious or jealous, all the emotions that lead to a difficult death and painful rebirth. Triggering such emotions with the dying, even if only out of ignorance or awkwardness, not only has strong consequences for him, but also leaves us with negative karmic traces. Therefore, we should not act or speak carelessly, but rather be very attentive with conciliatory and compassionate behavior. If we learn by regular practice to relax our mind in all situations and not to be carried away by emotions, this will also be of great help in terminal care.

After their death, we can facilitate the deceased's path if we do not cling to them, but rather develop compassion and perform many positive actions with body, speech and mind, which we dedicate to their enlightenment. It is especially helpful for them and their relatives to carry out the Tschenresi practice, and if possible together with other practitioners. We can also offer lights, flowers and the like on behalf of the deceased. It does not matter whether the deceased had a closer connection to the Dharma or not - the Tschenresi practice is universal and reaches all beings equally.

Finding inner freedom is all about not reacting automatically to any experience of attachment and aversion. For this we have to cultivate mindfulness and goodness. Otherwise we will not succeed in getting out of these reaction patterns. Only when we are aware of what is happening in our mind can we take the time to figure out which answer to a particular situation is most meaningful. Without mindfulness, we will be carried away by our self-centered impulses, and we will inevitably further amplify the spiral of negative Karma. The only solution to getting out of this vicious cycle and avoiding painful rebirths is to develop a pure, altruistic mindset and attentive awareness from moment to moment. If we have worked properly in our lives, there is nothing to fear in death.

If we have confidence in the Three Jewels, in the qualities of enlightenment, if we have collected and cleansed our negative tendencies as much as possible, then we will see death no longer as the terrible end of a life full of joys, but as a way of making more experiences that will bring us closer to liberation and help us to liberate other living beings as well. Dying is no longer a cause for panic, but rather an occasion for real joy. Whether we experience death as awful or liberating depends on ourselves, our actions, and our inner work. If we have not consciously worked on ourselves, we will be like a fish being thrown to the beach and writhing in agony. What remains in death is what has shaped our mind for a long time. It is not difficult to die worthily if we are well prepared by a life of practice.

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