

INTRODUCTION TO THE BUDDHIST PATH

“We seek your blessing to cleanse all stains of ordinary appearances and grasping through the first stage yoga of transforming birth, death, and bardo into the three bodies of Buddha, so that whatever may appear arises as the body of a Yiddam.”

By Great Master Panchen Lama Losang Chö Gyen

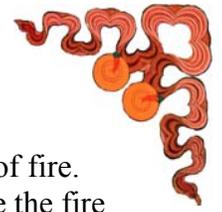
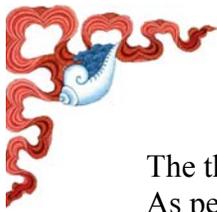
DEATH AND DYING

Normally, an individual achieves enlightenment after many eons, but a human rebirth offers the precious human body with a mind and chakra system that can be used to achieve enlightenment in one human lifetime. The Vajrayana tradition of Tibetan Buddhism has as its goal to achieve enlightenment in one lifetime, and to realize this it is very important to understand the mind, and especially the nature of the mind. Among Tibetan Buddhists, each tradition uses different names to refer to the nature of the mind, including Kundutzangpo, Rikpa, or Clear Light, among others. All of these names, however, refer to the subtlest consciousness and the question is how to bring this subtle consciousness or Rikpa to life and sustain it.

However, there are few occasions in a human life when we can access the nature of the mind and these include: when we sneeze, when we faint (become unconscious), during orgasm, and finally with death and dying. During these times, our subtle consciousness awakens. However, some of these occasions, such as sneezing, are too short for us to take advantage of, while others require significant training to become useful to our practice. In Vajrayana or Tantra, the tantric practitioners strive to awaken the nature of the mind and sustain it in their lives. The best training for this is meditation on death and dying, and for this reason death and dying is a very important subject in Buddhist Tantra. For this reason, I will briefly explain what happens in the death and dying process and its role in realizing the nature of the mind.

During a person’s death, the elements dissolve and their senses grow weaker and their breathing changes. Some physical signs of death can be observed from outside, whereas others are only discernible to the dying person. Among the five aggregates, form is the most coarse level of the aggregates. For this reason, form is the first aggregate to dissolve, which occurs at the same time as the earth element dissolves. In this stage, the body becomes weak and limp (we have no control or strength to move our body). A person becomes less able to lift or move their head, with it becoming increasingly difficult to turn their head to the left or right. Then, the person has the feeling that they are sinking and their vision becomes cloudy. Facial changes also begin to take place, with the person growing pale. These are the signs that form is dissolving and that earth is dissolving into water.

The second aggregate to dissolve is feeling, which dissolves together with the element water. The three types of feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feelings) disappear. For example, if we pinch the dying person at this time, they will not feel any pain. The element water dissolves into fire, and the body fluids (blood, etc.) become very thin. At this time, the sense of hearing begins to disappear. The person will have a very smokey feeling or vision in their mind.



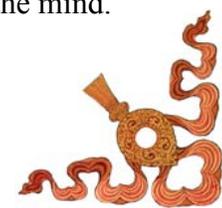
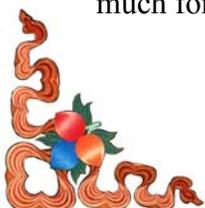
The third aggregate to dissolve is perception, which dissolves together with the element of fire. As perception dissolves, the dying person can no longer identify any object. And because the fire element is dissolving, the person becomes increasingly weak until they are no longer with us. When the fire element is dissolved from the person, the body is no longer warm (all body heat has disappeared) and the body becomes cold to the touch. The dying person loses all sense of smell. Inhalation becomes very weak and shallow while exhalation lasts longer and becomes stronger. Within the mind there will be a feeling or vision resembling a red sunset.

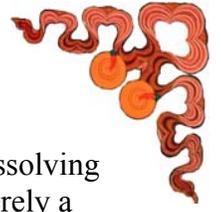
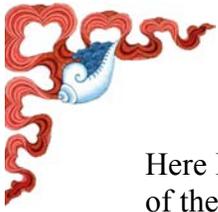
The fourth aggregate to dissolve is formation, which dissolves together with air. There is no longer any movement in the person's body and breath stops completely. There is no longer any breath entering or leaving through the nostrils. Although air no longer flows in or out the nostrils, there is still air flowing in the channels, and at this time air enters the central channel. Without training, there is no conscious awareness that air has entered the central channel. By this time, the sense of taste has completely vanished and we can see that the person's tongue turns blue. The sense of touch also no longer exists. Normally, a doctor or nurse will declare the person to be clinically dead at this time, because the heart has also stopped. However, in the Buddhist tradition, the person is not considered to be dead yet because consciousness is still in the body. There are four stages that the body will continue to experience after this point.

According to the Buddhist tradition, when the heart stops the coarsest level of consciousness (feelings, senses, and convention level of thoughts) completely dissolves. After this coarse level of consciousness dissolves, four levels of subtle consciousness remain and as we go deeper and deeper, consciousness becomes increasingly pure. The most pure level of consciousness is reached at the moment when the consciousness is leaving the body and enters the bardo state (intermediate stage), which comes before rebirth. It is important to note that not all beings have an intermediate stage, for it depends on the nature of the rebirth that the person will achieve.

If the person will be reborn as a human, the intermediate stage will comprise a very subtle form with a body resembling a human being. The sense of time in bardo is very different from human time. Within 49 days (human time) this subtle consciousness will find new parents, and the parents that are selected will depend on the karma and conditions of the previous life. When the consciousness enters the mother's womb, the bardo stage (intermediate stage) stops. Right before entering the womb, if the consciousness of the bardo form feels an attraction to the mother, it will become a male child. If the form feels attraction to the father, will become a girl. If the child is equally attracted to the mother and father, the child will be androgynous, bisexual, or hermaphroditic. After 9 months, the baby will be born. These three states, death and dying, intermediate stage (bardo), and rebirth, are used as a foundation for meditation.

Death and dying meditation is extremely important to gain an understanding of the nature of the mind. After receiving the initiation and full instructions on deity yoga, the three kayas and the death and dying process, the meditator will imagine the air entering the central channel as the clear light awakens. The clear light combines with inner bliss together with the understanding of emptiness, and this is called Dharmakaya. To achieve this, death and dying meditation is very important in the first stages in Tantra. For this reason, there are extensive texts and teachings on the death and dying process in the Vajrayana tradition. The death and dying process is not used as much for understanding the nature of impermanence, as it is to understand the nature of the mind.





Here I have provided a brief explanation of the death and dying process, including the dissolving of the aggregates, the elements, and the accompanying visions and sensations. This is merely a brief summary of the vast information and teachings on death and dying.

Finally, I wish all sentient beings will understand how to achieve clear light and overcome suffering. I wish all living beings achieve inner bliss.

