

# The Handbook *for* Life's Journey

Books by  
Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö

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*The Handbook for Life's Journey*

*Are You Ready for Happiness?*

*The Right View*

*Daily Inspirations from Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö*

T H E  
H A N D  
B O O K  
F O R  
L I F E ' S  
J O U R N E Y

**KHENPO TSULTRIM LODRÖ RINPOCHE**

*Translated by DEKYI DROLMA*

*With Forewords by  
Sogyal Rinpoche  
Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche*

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Sogyal Rinpoche

Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö is one of the most important Tibetan Buddhist masters alive today. As demonstrated by his many writings, he is not only exceptionally learned in the traditional Buddhist teachings, but is also deeply familiar with science, western philosophy and the modern world. Here in this short text, drawn from a series of lectures, he encourages us to remember the Buddha's fundamental message on the real meaning and purpose of life: the cultivation of genuine wisdom and compassion. I am a deep admirer of Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö and supporter of his work.



## FOREWORD

I would like to thank the directors not only for creating this opportunity to honour Khen Rinpoche, but also for giving me the chance to write a few introductory words for this auspicious occasion.

Actually I am not the right person to do this. First, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö Rinpoche needs no introduction. He speaks for himself by his example. Even if you need someone to give an introduction, it should not be done by someone shady like me who eats betel nut and is found wearing very colorful clothes, and hanging around with colorful people in colorful places.

Nevertheless, I have requested to do this, because I do have something I want to say. In this degenerate time, the glory of the Buddha is dim. The weight of the Dharma is not felt. I know that the Buddha said one should not depend on the person but on the truth. But the actual realization of the Dharma is extremely rare for most of us. The words of the Dharma are too vast and deep, and most of us are too lazy to pursue them, let alone to comprehend them. So even though we know we should not rely on a person, we human beings have the habit of looking up to something tangible in human form as a role model.

So teachers, masters, and spiritual leaders are very important. And we have no shortage of such teachers, masters, and lamas today. In fact we have far more of them than used T-shirts. This is an age when even teenagers have the name His Holiness. But

genuine upholders of the Dharma are as rare as stars in the daylight, and the few that we have are hardly shining.

As the Buddha said, only an enlightened being can judge whether another person is enlightened or not. So I cannot really say who is a perfect being and who is not. But at least, even in this age, we do still have interest in Dharma practice, and so naturally the expounder of the Dharma becomes important.

Even though, as I said, my lifestyle is colorful and I cannot make judgements on others, there is probably one good thing about which I can boast —that at least I do know that I should worry about the survival of the Dharma. And there is good reason to be concerned, good reason to be worried. In fact we should be panicked.

That I have this deep concern, of course, is solely the blessing of my own masters, who themselves spent so much time and energy worrying about the survival of the Dharma. Through their blessing and guidance, I have learned not to just worry about the Dharma in my own backyard – Tibetan Buddhism – but I have learned to worry about Shingon Buddhism in Japan, Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and more. My worry may not be constant, but at least at times, I do worry.

I also worry that there are not many who worry. Even the aging lamas with gray hair and wrinkled skin don't seem to worry. Well, they may worry somewhat, but generally only in relation to their

own temples, or at best, to their own lineage.

So this is why I want to express that it gives me so much hope just knowing that Khen Rinpoche exists on this earth, because his actions have spoken louder than his words. And please make a really big note about this because, even though I have no pure perception, and am very critical and arrogant, I want to say that I have been observing Khen Rinpoche closely.

I have not received any teaching from Khen Rinpoche. I did try to listen to some recordings, though I gave up because his dialect is too strong for me, and I have flipped through some of his books. But these are not the real reasons for my respect. I feel that Khen Rinpoche is not just a teacher, but he is actually a model. As we know, every teacher needs a teacher for himself. And Khen Rinpoche was groomed for many years by one of the greatest beings, Jigme Phunstok Rinpoche, and he manifests that extraordinary tutelage today in his work and in his life.

As many of you know, Khen Rinpoche is also the administrative Khenpo of one of the most important seats, Serthar Larung. And here my impression of Serthar Larung has nothing to do with there being so many monks and nuns. Rather, I have observed what they do and what they have achieved. I have also observed how they spend their money and where they spend their money. And I have observed whether this institute is only producing empty-headed scholars or whether it has genuinely practising practitioners. In all these dimensions, Serthar Larung excels.

I also want to note that the Khenpo in front of us is not the son of some rich, high, prestigious family. He is not the cousin or brother of some very important lama, and he doesn't have HH in front of his name. Who he is and what he has accomplished is through his own merit and genuine dedication and practice, and this is inspiring for so many practitioners.

I especially want to single out how precious it is for the Chinese-speaking world, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, that Khen Rinpoche speaks your language. Even though Buddhism is growing in the West, in my lifetime I don't see the Buddhadharma being adopted and practised by a sizeable percentage of Americans and Europeans. And we know that the Buddhadharma is far from flourishing in the very birthplace of Buddhism, in India. By contrast, Buddhism has contributed so much to Chinese civilization in the past and has a major resurgent role to play in Chinese society today. So for the Chinese-speaking world, it is such a priceless opportunity for you to have a direct link with Rinpoche.

For all these reasons and more, I want to request Rinpoche to take care of himself and to live long and to eat less butter.

*Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche*

This is the transcription of Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche's introductory speech at the public talk given by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro in Taipei, Taiwan on January 22, 2015.

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Death is a reality that no one wants to face or think about but eventually must deal with. Near the end of life, all the success and glory in one's lifetime lose their luster. Just as Steve Jobs said, "Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life." "Almost everything -- all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure -- these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important."

Most people view death as life's end at which point all endeavors and accomplishments in life are completely destroyed. Thus, many bemoan the quick passing of life or its lack of purpose; some become eager for quick success and instant reward; still some just idle the time away, doing nothing with their lives.

Can life really be so passive and despondent? Absolutely not! We have a misconception of what life truly is.

In fact, the greatest power in the world is the power of life. Life goes on forever, just in different forms.

Every life is an undeveloped mine that is worth extracting. Like mining for minerals from the rocks, our lives also can be tempered, purified, distilled and upgraded; capable of transcending all obstacles and unleashing unlimited energy.

That which can give us hope is not money and power but life. So, all the more reasons to cherish our lives!

This book aims to reveal to you the truth of life and death, and perhaps you can even find more satisfactory answers to your questions on life and death. This is also what I hope to accomplish with this book.

May you have no fear facing life or death, and be happy!

*Tsultrim Lodrö*

*October, 2014*

## A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö was born in 1962 in Drango (Luhuo) County in Sichuan Province's Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. In 1984, he received monastic ordination at the world-renowned Larung Five Sciences Buddhist Institute (Larung Gar) in Serthar, becoming a disciple of the preeminent spiritual master, H.H. Chogyel Yeshe Norbu Jigme Phunstok. After many years dedicated to the study of the five main sutric treatises and tantric scripture, he was awarded the title of Khenpo in recognition of his scholarship.

For more than twenty years, Khenpo has overseen monastic education at Larung Gar, producing successive generations of accomplished students. During the 1990s, he gave a series of dharma teachings in Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Over the past decade, Khenpo has concentrated efforts in Tibetan areas, promoting environmental awareness, education, vegetarianism, and the importance of protecting living beings and abstaining from taking life. At the same time, he has sought to deepen the broader Tibetan community's understanding of basic dharma, and to this end has traveled widely giving teachings to lay audiences. Placing great importance on the promotion of Tibetan culture, Khenpo has founded libraries and schools. Notably, he has also coordinated a team of language specialists and scholars representing all Tibetan regions to collaborate on the compilation of a tri-lingual (Tibetan-Chinese-English) dictionary of new vocabulary terms.

Two volumes have been published in the past five years:

*Chinese-Tibetan-English Illustrated Dictionary of New Daily Vocabulary*

*Chinese-Tibetan-English Dictionary of New Daily Vocabulary*

Over the last ten years, Khenpo has been committed to deepening his understanding of western science and philosophy, and is utilizing contemporary methods to disseminate Buddhist culture. Khenpo has published extensively on Buddhism in Tibetan, Chinese and English languages. His Tibetan publications include four volumes of collected writings; his Chinese monographs include the *Wisdom Light Series*, *Stories of Transmigration*, *Buddhism: Superstition or Wisdom?*, *The Heart Sutra and Quantum Physics*, *The Secret Code for Unlocking Tibetan Buddhism*, *Tibetan Buddhism: Lifting the Veil of Mystery and Comprehending the Book Called Life*; translated English publications include *Daily Inspiration from Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö*, *The Right View* and *Are You Ready for Happiness?*

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

This book is the translation of part of Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö's lecture series *Wisdom Light* Vol. 10. In view of the two main topics, one on the three poisons, the other on death and rebirth, they seem unrelated. As lectures, they were given on different occasions but during the same time frame, so perhaps they were intended as paired teachings on living—how to deal with the three root kleshas in life, and on dying—how to view, face and transcend death.

A quote from Confucius 'while not knowing life, how can one know about death?' doesn't say much about his view on death, but his focus was clearly on how to live. Whereas in Buddhism, how to live, to die and to come back to life again are equally important; nothing is omitted. They constitute the cycle of life.

There are many precious texts and reference books on the same subjects, but rarely do you find such detailed explanations presented in a condensed format like this book does. You'll be surprised how handy these teachings are when you need to apply them in real life situations. I hope you find the English edition easy to read and you derive benefit from reading it.

Finally, I would like to thank Lorraine Wu for her brilliant, tireless editing, Gar Thupten Norbu Rinpoche for clarification on Tibetan terminology, Thinley Chödrön for her dedicatio to

bring the book to publication and the assistance of fellow dharma friends.

*Dekyi Drolma,  
Hong Kong, June 2016*

THE PRINCIPLE of  
**Attaining  
 Liberation**

## I. Do not separate the Three Wisdoms

For every practitioner who seeks liberation, it is important not to disjoin hearing, contemplation and meditation of the Dharma nor overemphasize or neglect any one of the three. The first is to learn by hearing and contemplation of the Dharma. Beginners are apt to deviate from the right track for lack of experience and knowledge; without taking the steps to first hear and contemplate the teachings or knowing how to apply the teachings subsequently, they are unlikely to attain true liberation by way of burning incense, prostration, or recitation alone. At the outset of the learning process, actual practice of the teachings can be put on hold temporarily. But as one progresses in learning, then it is time to begin meditation practice. The Theravada precepts also stipulate that those without the pith

instructions should not practice meditation because it will not bring any result. When time is limited, choose to hear the teaching that you need the most at present based on your own situation; take other courses if you have extra time on hand. Of course, time permitting, the more you learn the better.

However, only hearing the Dharma is not enough. It is more important to learn how to apply the theories so as to guide the practice to the next level. Unlike other religions, Buddhism does not demand unquestioning obedience or blind faith but conviction derived from insight instead. Many parts of the sutras have been tested and proven true, which can be pondered, reasoned and eventually realized by adherents as well. Through pondering and reasoning, conviction becomes stronger. And firm conviction can not only help others but also one's own practice. Therefore, the Buddha advised us to contemplate, the deeper the better. Of course, if one has total faith in the Buddha's words, one can just learn without judgment or discrimination; no further thinking is required. But to most people, it is still best to establish the right view through contemplation and discussion.

## II. What is Dharma practice?

There are two ways to practice the Dharma. One is to meditate in seclusion. It doesn't have to be a month or a week, just a simple retreat of two or three hours every day is quite good already. Strictly

speaking, without the benefit of seclusion while the mind is scattered and easily distracted, it would be impossible to practice any kind of Dharma. So, it is necessary to practice solitarily for at least one or two hours a day. Dharma practice cannot be accomplished with money. Although the practice of life release and other positive actions can help accumulate merit, training the mind is a different matter that has nothing to do with money. Ascetic practice, prostration and so forth are also part of Dharma practice, but not the most important aspect. Genuine practice must be a practice of mind.

The other way is to apply the thought and realization gained in seclusion to everyday life. The multitude of negative emotions in life cannot be resolved if one does not practice regularly. Although hearing and contemplation of the Dharma do help to a certain extent, as the truth about the world and life is revealed to us through the teachings of the Buddha so that we can be more open-minded and carefree, it does not extinguish negative emotions completely. This is why meditation practice is the most important of the Three Wisdoms.

### III. The purpose of practicing the Dharma

The purpose of Dharma practice is twofold: first, to pursue happiness and second, to be freed from samsara and suffering. The Vehicle of Celestial Beings and Humans focuses on worldly happiness in this life and all future lives, the Lesser Vehicle seeks personal happiness

while the Greater Vehicle aims to achieve absolute, permanent happiness—the wisdom of the Buddha—for all sentient beings. It is stated very clearly in *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*<sup>1</sup>:

To those in privileged (positions comes) mental suffering,  
While to common folks physical (suffering) arises.  
By these two sufferings  
This world is tormented, day after day, every day.

People at the bottom of the social hierarchy are more likely to experience physical suffering because they have trouble meeting the basic needs. The elite of the society, on the other hand, face even more severe mental pressure or suffering. These two kinds of suffering torment and destroy all sentient beings every day.

### IV. The root of samsara

When going to a regular hospital, the first thing is not to receive medication or injection right away but to go through a series of physical examinations and find out what the cause of the illness is. Likewise, in order to end samsara and eliminate suffering, one needs to find the cause of suffering and take the right remedial steps.

There are three reasons as to why we cannot gain liberation: first, desire for material possessions, the world and samsara itself; second, attachment to self, namely, self-grasping, self-cherishing or selfishness;

third, clinging to the notion of inherent existence of all phenomena.

Many poor people believe that they suffer because they don't have enough money, and that if one day they become rich, suffering will go away. But, if one day they do become rich, they will discover that not only does suffering not stop, but even more suffering ensues. Therefore, hardship in life is not the root of suffering, as many people living in difficult conditions may actually be happier than the well-to-do.

The Buddha told us that the real source of suffering is attachment—attachment to money, to people and things. There are many kinds of attachment: attachment to oneself is self-grasping; attachment to external things like money or fame is grasping at the self-nature of phenomena. Where there is no attachment, there is no suffering. The opposite of attachment is letting-go, the kind often mentioned in the sutras.

How do we prove that attachment is the root of suffering? For example, if there is a watch we love, we will often worry about losing it. If one day this watch is really lost, we are likely to feel very depressed. On the other hand, no pain will be felt if we don't care at all about this watch. Another example, if one is very much attached to somebody, one's moods will change with every move and expression the other person makes. Most of the time, one will suffer from constant fear of losing that person. If the relationship does not last, the breakup can be devastating. However, suffering may not ensue if one can moderate his or her emotions and learn to be friends with the other party. Although essentially nothing has changed on

the part of one's love interest, the mere fact of having attachment or not and its relative intensity dictates one's feelings of happiness, pain, or indifference. Hence, suffering and happiness are not due to God's will or coincidence but to attachment.

It is said in the sutras that because arhats have eradicated desire, anger and delusion, they no longer harbor any attachment to accepting or rejecting anything. So, the action of washing the left side of an arhat's body with sandalwood water while cutting his right side with a knife makes no difference to him. An arhat's body is just the same as that of a normal human being, is composed of blood, flesh, bones, nerves, etc., not diamond or hard rock; neither is it a rainbow body. But we have desire and attachment; we feel suffering. We prefer a bath of sandalwood water to being cut by a knife. Arhats don't. It is because we have not let go of desire, anger and delusion that joy and aversion still arise accordingly. Thus, it can be seen that all suffering comes from attachment which is born of ignorance.

From common people to the so-called celebrities and great men who are so admired and envied, there isn't anyone who does not aim for happiness and hope to avoid suffering. However, many non-Buddhists, not knowing the cause of happiness, end up doing exactly the opposite—they kill enemies to survive, slaughter animals to please the stomach, steal and cheat to get rich and so forth. After toiling their whole lives, they are left with nothing on hand to face death in the end; none of them can be freed from cyclic existence, and most will end up in the lower realms.

It is stated very clearly in *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*<sup>1</sup>,

But not causes for suffering themselves  
Simultaneously (producing) the reverse.”

All suffering arises from causes and conditions. If the root of suffering is not found, freedom from suffering is not possible. Despite all the efforts put in, it only solves the problem temporarily. For example, although celestial beings in the desire realm, form realm and formless realm have a very long life-span and formidable meditative power, having not found the root of suffering and the way to end suffering, they are not able to free themselves from samsara either.

Sentient beings have unlimited desire; the more desire there is, the greater the suffering. Now add ignorance on top of desire, we end up with all the suffering we have today.

Why are moths hopelessly drawn to flames? One, it is due to craving for the flames, and two, ignorance of being burned to death in the flames. If, before flying into flames, moths know the sad consequence of doing that, or extinguish their desire for flames, they will not bring destruction upon themselves.

It is stated in Buddhist scriptures, particularly *Abhidharma-kosa-shastra* and the shastras of Madhyamaka, that ignorance is the root of samsara. Buddhist logic claims that desire is the source of samsara. Actually, they both are. Why don't trees and flowers experience samsara? It is because they do not have desire or ignorance. Ignorance gives rise to desire—not knowing the true reality of things

results in the arising of desire for them. All suffering is caused by these two. It can also be said that desire is the root of samsara because where there is desire, there is ignorance. If one aims to attain enlightenment in this lifetime, one must eradicate ignorance and desire. When that's done, cyclic existence will end. If one word is to be used to sum up ignorance and desire, it would be “attachment.”

## V. The principle of liberation

### a) *Finding the right remedy*

Just like medicine that treats illness, it must be able to destroy virus or bacteria in order to be effective. Otherwise, it would be totally useless, no matter how much one takes. Likewise, if one has no desire to be a Buddha or an arhat but to remain in the realm of celestial beings or humans to enjoy the good life there, all the wholesome deeds done for this purpose such as keeping pure vows, practicing patience, meditation, reciting sutras, prostration and so forth cannot counteract desire and are therefore ineffectual on the path of liberation. All they can do is to help us remain in cyclic existence even better and enjoy temporary comfort and pleasure therein.

When Bodhidharma, the first patriarch of Chan Buddhism, propagated the Dharma in China, Emperor Wu of Liang Dynasty asked him, “I live like a monk reciting sutras, taking no meat and performing many virtuous deeds. How great is the merit thereof?”

He did not expect Bodhidharma to reply, “There is no merit at all.” This is because the Emperor’s good deeds accorded essentially with worldly or samsaric activities that were not meaningful from the standpoint of liberation.

How do we engage in conflict with the root of samsara or that of suffering? To start the conflict, generate renunciation; to escalate the conflict, arouse bodhicitta. Once we attain realization of emptiness, the conflict will gradually reach its climax and come to a perfect end.

How to let go? Letting go is different from giving up. Being pessimistic, world-weary, cynical and unable to cope with life are all the reasons that may temporarily force you to give up. But when tempted, you will still fall back to your old self. This is giving up, not the Buddhist idea of letting go. For example, if one day I have a better watch, more often than not, I will take no more interest in my old watch; this is not letting go but merely shifting attachment to the new watch. The Buddhist idea of letting go is having no selfish desire for anything. But it is impossible to forego all worldly things. Lay practitioners in particular need to make a living for themselves and raise a family, so it is not advisable to abandon work and family as soon as one begins to practice the Dharma.

### ***b) The way to be free***

There are two specific steps to learn how to let go:

First of all, when desire for an object arises, ask yourself if the object’s appeal is truly its own or just an imputation of your mind.

In pursuit of happiness, ordinary people are sure to commit many unwholesome deeds such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, etc. Consequently, even if they have accumulated some positive karma in the worldly sense, they cannot escape the cause of cyclic rebirth. As a result, they keep drifting in the ocean of samsara, even fall into the lower realms.

In general, from heaven to hell, suffering is present in all six realms. Even if temporary and relative happiness is available in samsara, genuine and absolute happiness is not and never will be. After going through deep contemplation and examination, the Buddha finally reached the conclusion that “happy” is not the right word to describe this world, and this is the truth of life. In fact, anyone who can reflect on life and the world deeply and comprehensively will reach the same conclusion as the Buddha.

When we understand that there is really no such thing as happiness in this world, our desire then gets disrupted. If we maintain this view over time, desire will gradually weaken until it disappears altogether. As to when this will happen, it all depends on the strength of our practice and the degree of diligence.

According to the four common preliminaries or the view of Theravada Buddhism, all phenomena are impermanent, unsatisfactory and tainted. To be tainted (with defilement) means capable of producing all kinds of negative emotions. By way of the Madhyamaka methodology, we learn to examine this and future life

and all things of the external world. There are twenty seven chapters in Nagarjuna's *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* (*Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*), most of which deal with examination of physical matter instead of mental phenomena. From this we realize that the nature of all phenomena is emptiness and that the world is in fact just an illusion that does not truly exist.

Thus, our desire and delusion are irreversibly broken and cannot develop further. It says in *Four Hundred Verses on the Middle Way*<sup>1</sup>:

Those with little positive force  
 Won't even entertain doubts about this teaching (on voidness).  
 But merely by entertaining doubts (about it),  
 Your compulsive existence will become threadbare.

People with few blessings will not raise doubts about emptiness. Those who entertain such doubts in a somewhat positive way – if only to say “it is possible all phenomena are empty!” – can still damage the root of cyclic existence; even without attaining realization, they will not remain in samsara for long.

Another way is to reflect inwardly: The reason that I am so attached to or crave for this world is because I see its beauty, but what is it exactly that has this attachment or craving? Of course it cannot be my body as the body itself has no thought, so it can only be my mind or consciousness.

But does consciousness really exist? What does it look like? One way to check is to combine the practices of Madhyamaka and Chittamatra

(Mind-Only)—the conventional view of Chittamatra and the ultimate view of Madhyamaka—to examine one's consciousness. Otherwise, tantric practices like Mahamudra or Dzogchen do not observe the external phenomena but go directly into the self to find the perpetrator of greed and delusion. Through these methods, clear light awareness, never being tainted by desire and delusion, is manifested at the end. The so-called desire is nothing but an illusion coming out of nowhere.

We can alternate the two methods above. First, examine outwardly and recognize that the world is unsatisfactory, impermanent and tainted so as to engender renunciation.

When arousing bodhicitta, we must try to overwhelm our biggest attachment, self-cherishing. From beginningless time, self-cherishing has been the lord over our minds, the victor; it will continue to command us until such time we start to generate bodhicitta. Self-cherishing thoroughly destroys bodhicitta and all altruistic aspirations; it is also called egoism. In the sphere of our consciousness, “I” plays a decisive role. If we follow the guide of bodhicitta, there will come a time when bodhicitta can vanquish self-cherishing or selfish desire and be the ultimate winner. Of course, for beginners, desire or greed can easily return at any time when not staying on guard because self-cherishing still wields immense power over us. Nonetheless, it will recede gradually. The last remaining attachment can then be annihilated by the view of emptiness.

The above mentioned is the principle of attaining liberation through Dharma practice. It is like learning mechanics, the first thing

is to learn its operating principle. Once we know the principle of attaining liberation, we can now set out to work—uphold renunciation, bodhicitta and the view of emptiness; reject attachment, selfishness and the notion that all things have inherent existence. By way of meditation, the very basis of practice, plus the help of recitation, incense offering and prostration, we will succeed at last.

If liberation is what you wish for, do not rush into the profound practices of Dzogchen, Kalachakra and the like because it is futile to practice them before establishing a proper foundation. The Buddha once said that those who seek freedom from samsara or aim to practice Mahayana Buddhism do not need a lot of practices except one -- that of great compassion. However, he did not mean that great compassion is the antidote for all the problems. Nor is it right to practice only great compassion and nothing else. But, absent great compassion, all other practices are deemed unnecessary; even if being practiced, they will not be effective because they are not considered Mahayana practices. When renunciation and bodhicitta are lacking, the motivation for practicing the Dharma would most certainly be for worldly happiness and positive reward in the human and celestial realms. Any practice, however profound, undertaken with this kind of motivation can only be considered worldly practice.

Those seeking liberation from samsara do not need many practices, just renunciation and bodhicitta will suffice. To put it another way, only one practice is needed, that is, cultivating bodhicitta, because bodhicitta also contains renunciation. If genuine

relative bodhicitta can be truly aroused, all doors are open to any practice one desires in the future.

What direction one takes in Dharma practice is extremely important. If the direction is wrong, it leads farther and farther away from liberation; if it is right, every step taken is one step closer to liberation.

1 Translated by Alexander Berzin, 1978

P A R T 1

ON THE  
THREE  
POINSONS

How to Handle Desire

How to Confront Anger

How to Refute Ignorance

# How to Handle Desire

Although our living conditions today are much better than in the past, mentally we tend to feel empty, restless, anxious and inadequate, now more than ever. Distress from being destitute can end a life while mental suffering can be equally deadly.

According to a report from the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, there are currently more than 100 million people in China with mental illness, 287,000 suicides and two million attempted suicides annually, plus anxiety disorders, manic depression and various other types of mental disorder. We can attribute this alarming situation to the high pressure from work and everyday life, but the fundamental cause, in Buddha's words, is the three poisons—desire, aversion and delusion.

Money may have something to do with certain negative mental states, but money is no solution to those mental problems. Although medication is effective to a certain degree in alleviating the

symptoms, its side effect should not be underestimated. Then, the safest and the most effective way to overcome difficulties of the mind is spiritual practice.

The focus here is on how to handle desire, one of the three poisons.

## I. The harm of desire

There are many kinds of desire – money, fame, love, etc. When desire is not under control and allowed to grow freely, it becomes insatiable, making us all slaves to its command. This short lifetime will then be spent in pursuit of illusive targets and wasted in striving to satisfy desires. Looking back when life nears its end, one painfully discovers that happiness is a real scarcity with unhappy moments scattered throughout one's lifetime. Uncontrolled desire can destroy not only this life but also next life, not only oneself but also other beings. Robbery, for example, is basically caused by desire—desire to take what one lacks and others have; in so doing, one not only destroys this and future life but also disrupts the life of others.

Everyone wishes to have a happy life, including animals. But many are unhappy, and their unhappiness comes mainly from a causal relation of the mind. When we wish to own more material things, such desire will drive us to give more time and energy to fulfill that wish, resulting in bigger pressure, busier pace, less free time in life and eventually depriving us of any sense of happiness. Although the

original intention of desire is to gain happiness for ourselves, it ends up destroying our happiness. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to properly manage our desire.

The Buddha said that the nature of samsara is suffering, but he did not repudiate totally the idea that there is relative happiness in samsara either. The Buddha often said that one can enjoy the karmic reward of celestial beings and humans if one refrains from killing, stealing, cheating, etc. and engages in virtuous actions as much as possible. The blessed reward of celestial beings and humans signify relative happiness, not suffering, in samsara. However, such happiness is only on the surface, temporary and relative; it's neither lasting nor ultimate happiness. This is why the Buddha exhorted us on many occasions to be mentally prepared so that we can garner enough courage to face every phase of life.

People think that desire motivates growth and development of mankind, a point that is not rejected by Buddhism either. It is said in the Mahayana scriptures that there must be self-grasping as great as Mount Sumeru in order to attain Buddhahood. Normally, self-grasping is condemned in Buddhism because it can cause greed, anger and delusion to arise. But here, it becomes the impetus to seek liberation; to certain extent, this is also a kind of desire. When desire to attain Buddhahood is absent, aspiration to learn Buddhadharma, to achieve enlightenment and to benefit sentient beings will not happen either. Genuine Dharma practice is a big, demanding and time consuming project that needs sufficient courage and drive to

achieve its goal, and the source of this courage is the desire to attain Buddhahood. Arhats, lacking such desire, do not have the motivation to reach Buddhahood and hence seek only liberation for themselves.

Desire can be good or bad. Good desire is a driving force for Dharma practice and gaining enlightenment. Worldly desire, if unrestrained, can ruin a person.

Naturally, we cannot hope to give up all desires right from the outset, which is impractical and also unnecessary. Mahayana Buddhism is a system of ideas very much in tune with human nature. It does not demand all practitioners to become ascetics; rather, it advocates a middle way approach in the way of living, meaning not overly extreme. For example, due to a mistaken belief that hardship can lead to liberation, one deliberately endures hunger and wears shabby clothing when in fact one can easily afford a comfortable life. Rather than being helpful, such behavior may even become an obstacle to one's practice sometimes. Conversely, choosing to live extravagantly and be unappreciative of anything in hand is another extreme. The right way, that is, the middle way, is to keep our desire properly under control.

Desire also means greed which can be defined in a broad or narrow sense. Broadly speaking, it encompasses desire for money, fame, love and even liberation; while in a narrow sense, it only points to desire for money, fame, status and the likes. Desire needs to be properly managed lest it should cost us much suffering, especially when directed toward a person of one's desire, the suffering can be even more damaging. For example, if a husband or a wife has

an extramarital affair, his or her other half will usually suffer a tremendous blow mentally as it is most difficult to accept the fact and let go. The ensuing effect ranges from experiencing depression to taking one's own life. In such case, it is even more crucial to control the desire to grasp—what is the point of hanging on to a person who no longer feels enamored with you? Therefore, the Buddha said 2500 years ago that breaking up other people's family is a very serious misdeed, with sexual misconduct being one of the ten non-virtues. Although marital problems were not as notable or serious then, they have become a very common and critical social issue today.

Of course, it has never been easy for worldly people to just let go, but it may not be that difficult if one can adopt the Buddhist way to handle it. Many people choose the extreme method to end their suffering because they don't know any other way. However, letting go is not so hard if one knows how to do it. When a relationship comes to an end, just let it end naturally, like all other conditioned phenomena. The important thing is to control one's desire or attachment and face the change rationally. To be able to keep desire, aversion and delusion under control is not only very helpful in real life but can also guide us to liberation.

Many people used to think there is really no need to learn Buddhaharm or uphold traditional culture since living conditions have improved and material goods are plentiful.. But we realize now we need help to maintain our spiritual health and soothe the soul more than ever before. Humans are different from animals.

A pig after being fed will happily go take a nap, with nothing else on its mind. Humans have additional and higher aspirations after their basic needs are met. When these aspirations are not fulfilled, suffering ensues. Neither money nor superstitious beliefs can end this suffering. Only through practice can we hope to find the solution; the method we use must also be wise and reasonable.

## II. The cause of desire

For a seed to germinate, the right temperature, humidity and space must all be in place. These are the internal causes. The arising of desire also has three causes.

1. Everyone has the seed of desire, except bodhisattvas of the first bhumi and arhats who have destroyed the seed. For ordinary people, the seed of desire is always stored in the mind even when there is no thought of wanting anything or in deep sleep, just not that obvious. This is the primary cause.

2. External cause. For example, upon seeing your neighbor with a nice car, a thought comes up: I must buy a car better than that one. The thought wouldn't have come up if you did not see the neighbor's car in the first place. So, seeing the neighbor's car is the external cause for this desire to arise.

Psychologists have reported that if we watch an hour of television

every day, our weekly expense will go up by US\$4. This is because the advertisements on television can induce us to buy things we don't need. Also, shopping with a credit card often results in spending more than what we would with cash. As a credit card is not real cash, one tends to pretend that no money has actually been paid out. It is however a different matter when we feel our wallet get lighter and lighter. This is all just psychological.

Once there is an external cause and condition, all kinds of defilement may arise.

3. Irrational idea. Defilement or negative emotions generated due to external cause is termed irrational or illogical idea, a Buddhist terminology. This is also the most crucial cause.

If one is in control of one's own mind and able to rein in one's desire, even watching television all day long should not be a cause for concern.

### III. Ways to avoid negative emotions

Once the above three causes are in place, negative emotions will manifest. What can we do then?

1) Uproot the seed of negative emotions from the source, which we are incapable of at the moment.

2) Avoid the external cause and condition.

For example, avoid exposure to various advertisements or setting sight on the neighbor's new car or new gadgets. This can help reduce the arising of desire and avoid certain suffering that comes with excessive desire. It is therefore advised by the Buddha that the monastics or real practitioners stay at remote and quiet places to do their practice, as there are fewer material goods there to stir up one's desire and cause defilement to manifest. But this is not the best way.

3) Banish irrational ideas.

For example, when there is a new electronic product on the market, one may either feel upset if one can't afford to buy or conceited if others can't buy the same, thinking "only I have this bag, this luxury watch, the latest version of...; no one else in the office does." This mindset breeds arrogance so that one is blind to others' strengths and one's own weaknesses.

Although some products can really make life easier and are indispensable in some cases, whether they are name brand products is very often a matter of face or vanity, not necessity. When dealing with the issue of not losing face, it is important to keep a close watch on irrational ideas.

Attachment to a person can be handled the same way. For instance, when one is going through the painful situation of falling out of love, one can visualize the other person in the front and reflect calmly: Is he or she really as lovable as I imagined? Why do I like

him or her so much? Is it his or her looks, talent, money, power, fame that I like or something else?

#### IV. The practice to handle desire

To confront desire, there are two practices: 1. of the relative truth; 2. of the ultimate truth.

##### *Practice of the relative truth*

There are two methods: contemplation on the impurity of the body and contemplation on impermanence.

##### **1) Contemplation on the impurity of the body**

There is quite a selection of teachings on this method in the Theravada tradition, which offer ways to restrain desire. Here is a simple explanation of this practice.

First, calm your mind and then contemplate: The root of all the pain that I feel from a failed relationship is nothing but desire. My desire for the other person makes me suffer; without this desire, I won't be so heartbroken. It is actually my mind that's making me suffer. I am the one who hurts me the most, not somebody else.

What we usually like to do is to dump all the responsibilities on the

other person—my depression or despair is due to his or her infidelity, when in fact it is our own stubborn attachment that should take the blame.

When people fall in love, they are basically in love with the other person's appearance. It has always been like this since time immemorial that as long as the first impression is good and we like what we see, we won't examine much further, just trust our eyes. But please think more deeply what appearance represents.

What the eyes can see is just the skin. It is also said in the Buddhist texts that everyone will be grossed out if the eyes can see directly what's wrapped inside the skin. Nobody likes to see raw flesh, bones, blood, etc. and the skin is just a very thin layer that covers all of these. Is this so-called body something you really want to give your love to? Having observed this way, one really can find no love interest at all in the end.

##### **2) Contemplation on impermanence**

On our greed for money, one can contemplate this way: This person may be rich now, but who knows how the money was made? It's also possible that this person may become poor by next month or even go to jail, which are not exaggerations at all as such stories get reported quite regularly in the news media.

On attachment to a person, one can contemplate: This person may look great now, but his or her looks will also fade in time.

The Buddha's approach is always logical rather than dogmatic. The Buddha told us that underneath the skin, there are thirty six kinds of impure elements such as bacteria, microbes and parasites, among others, operating in an environment that's both chaotic and unclean. Moreover, the notion of being beautiful or ugly is just a matter of meeting the expectations of most people. In the eyes of an extraterrestrial or a person of different race, a woman we consider beautiful may perhaps be deemed ugly. Even a real beauty will lose her appeal from overexposure or with age.

Through these observations, we come to realize that there is neither a thing nor a person that has genuine and absolute beauty. At this point, our minds can relax a little bit, no longer being so obsessed and anxious. Then with further observation and contemplation, we can slowly abandon our old attachment.

It is of course not necessary to practice this on our family. After all, we are still living in the secular world and need not give up all our relations in this life. However, if lay people can practice this properly, it will not lead to divorce or disharmony in the family; instead, their desire and tendency for grasping can be kept seemly under control.

The master of happiness and suffering is not god but our mind. Once you think this through, you can be happy all the time. By then, a broken love affair or divorce won't matter so much anymore; some may even feel more carefree and relaxed as a result.

The specifics on how to meditate on impermanence according to

Miphom Rinpoche's teaching can be found in the discourse on the Four Dharma Seals in the book series *Wisdom Light*. There is also a clear explanation in the Theravada teachings on how to meditate on the impurity of the body. At the beginning, you may be unwilling and tend to resist these practices. But you must convince yourself to undertake these practices in order to take control of your own mind.

To meditate regularly on the impurity of the body and impermanence can be very helpful. At the least these practices are effective in preventing desperate measures being taken in times of distress, as even Buddhists who are not trained in meditation practice may likely hurt themselves when in despair; burning incense and making offering to the deities alone won't help very much in this kind of situation. In fact, there are some who know the importance of doing meditation practice but just cannot muster sufficient resolve to go ahead. It is a sign that their overall effort in Dharma practice is still somewhat lacking.

### *Practice of the ultimate truth*

This practice uses the notion of emptiness to overcome defilement.

1. The first method -- Visualize in front of you the person that you are attached to and contemplate: 'What do I like about this person? Although my eyes see this person, he or she does not actually exist. Just like a car which is assembled with all its parts, absent the parts, there is no real car. The so-called car is only one's illusion. Likewise, humans are composed of skin, muscles and bones.

When every component is broken down, including even every cell and neuron, what I see will be the same as that in the charnel ground. If these broken down parts can represent a person, so can those in the charnel ground. Obviously, the body itself is not the person I like. Then, do I like that person's mind? No, I never know what that person is thinking, so what's there to like. Apparently, what I like, or what I'm attached to, is only an illusion.'

Going through this analysis may not help one gain realization of emptiness, but it does serve to greatly reduce attachment.

Furthermore, contemplate this: 'What I need to do now is to cool my attachment. Otherwise, I can't live or work normally; worse, I may even hurt myself. It is ironic to waste my life for someone who doesn't like or care about me, a useless exercise that only proves how silly I am.'

To continue analyzing along this line can slowly but surely see some good results, making it easier to let go and allowing a new life to begin.

Psychotherapy can only help us take control of moods and feelings temporarily; it does not solve our problems. It is like taking a pain killer to temporarily chase away a headache. The Buddhist way, however, is to rely on theories that are both logical and convincing to cut to the root of the problems. Once the theories have been thought through and fully understood, the agony will never come back again.

The Theravadins have succeeded in controlling desire by way of this method, which proves the method is right and effective.

2. The second method is also the most important. In the midst of highly painful time, calm down and ask yourself, "I feel such unbearable pain, but what is pain anyway?" Of course we will all say, "It's my heart, my mind, in pain." What is mind then? At this point, we will discover that mind and pain are inseparable, that mind has become pain. If we look further at the nature of mind itself, we may suddenly realize that it's like looking at empty space. At that moment, all of mind's suffering instantly disappears; the so-called mind and suffering do not exist at all.

Now, the one who is heartbroken may thank, not hate, the ex-lover because the separation affords one the opportunity to learn more about oneself or to take up spiritual practice that probably would not happen otherwise. There is one other good thing about suffering, and that is, it makes one more sympathetic and understanding of others' suffering and more willing to share one's own lesson to help others out of their difficulties as well.

Before making the afore-mentioned observations, one may experience all sorts of suffering, not unlike experiences in a nightmare. After going through the examinations, everything ceases to exist; all vanish into thin air, like waking up from a big dream.

There is of course a pre-condition for reaching such state, that is, to do the preliminary practice which may seem very boring to some people. But if you like the fruit of the practice, you must go through the process to get it. This is what causality means. To reap the fruit without sowing the cause is only a fantasy at best. It is the same as

farmers work hard in the field in order to have a bumper crop. The hard work is the necessary process to get to the aim. So, if the aim is to be awakened one day, don't ignore the process of getting there. Be diligent, do not omit any part of the practice and satisfy the respective requirement for each practice. Then enlightenment can be possible.

It is not uncommon for the same circumstance to be a positive condition for some but negative for others, such as divorce, falling out of love, being sick, among others. In the book series *Wisdom Light*, there are several discourses, for example, *How to Face Happiness and Suffering, Transforming Illness into the Path*, that tell us specifically how to deal with such circumstances. Whether one gains enlightenment or descends to the hell realm depends on how the few decades of this life is lived. Only with the help of the Buddha's wisdom can one maintain equanimity in both good and bad times.

The notion that all phenomena are without self nature and illusory like dreams has been extensively elucidated in the Chan Buddhist scripture *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* and various Vajrayana tantras, particularly in Dzogchen. There is a chapter in *Ratnakuta Sutra* on the discussion between Kasyapa and Sakyamuni Buddha, which is missing in the Chinese translation of the Sutra but available in the Tibetan version. Kasyapa asked the Buddha what mind is like. The Buddha told him that mind of the past has gone, that of the future not yet born; neither exists. And mind of the present is emptiness, not existent either. Even though this is a Mahayana sutra, the explanation is incisive and crystal clear. It is also

said in the *Diamond Sutra*, "Mind of the past is unobtainable; mind of the present is unobtainable; mind of the future is unobtainable." When the fifth patriarch of Chan Buddhism said this, Huineng, the sixth patriarch, instantly realized that mind does not exist. If one can suddenly come to this realization, all the heartbreaks from falling out of love and divorce are worth it.

It doesn't mean that one must have the experience of breaking up in order to attain realization. Start with the preliminary practice, learn the theory of Madhyamaka and then proceed further to train in meditation. Even not having to sustain any emotional blow, one can still gain realization of emptiness following these steps. Wouldn't it be even better this way?

In real life, we often try to escape from difficult and painful situations. The Buddha taught us to confront not escape from difficulties and suffering. The best way to train our mind is to attain realization of emptiness. Mind will become super strong once realization of emptiness is attained; it will not be moved by any external factors. Afterwards we should also consider this: Although I have made myself strong, so many others are still in the dark without knowledge or training. I want to help them. This is how we can actually practice, not just proclaim, the maxim of "deliver sentient beings from samsara."

We are living in illusions. When we believe these illusions, they can give us temporary happiness as well as pain, fear and some more. But the root of all these is the mind, nothing else. Once we know all phenomena are just illusions, we will not so fixate on our attachment

and be able to slowly let go. At the least, we won't worry so much about gains and losses as to make our life miserable.

There is a story in *Introduction to the Middle Way (Madhyamakavatara)*: Once in a kingdom there was a very good fortune teller. He told the king it would rain seven days later and the rain water would be toxic. Whoever drank the water would become insane. After hearing this, the king covered his well but didn't let others know. Seven days later, it rained as prophesized. Everyone in the kingdom drank the rain water and lost their minds except the king and a few people around him. As only these few were not affected, all the others turned around to accuse them of being mad. The situation became so unbearable that the king finally gave in, drank the rain water and became crazy like all the others.

This is what our world is like today. The seven billion people in the world all follow more or less the same worldview and outlook on life. If anyone were to have a different point of view, many would rush to tag him or her as being abnormal or mental. But in fact we are the ones who are afflicted. When all the people have the same affliction, this mental condition becomes a standard by which others are judged. This is the case with all the rules in the human world since time immemorial. Because Sakyamuni Buddha broke the rule, many people cannot comprehend and thus accuse Buddhism of being misinformed, passive and pessimistic. How and why it comes to this, the story is an indication.

The Buddha understood us and knew early on that we would

oppose him. That's why he said in the scripture, "Whatever people uphold to be true, I do too. I won't argue with them, but they will argue with me." It means we ordinary people indulge ourselves in illusions and hence mistake illusion for reality. We suffer tremendously as a result but stubbornly hold on to our mistakes, thinking instead that Buddhism is wrong and not proactive. This is why we remain far from liberation.

Please don't always blame others for your suffering. There is no suffering in the world that is purely caused by other people and that has nothing to do with our own doing. We are also responsible to a certain extent. Even if it is not due to the mistakes made in this life, those committed in previous lives may also be the culprit. So learn to accept one's own responsibility, practice Dharma diligently, transform suffering and help sentient beings to liberation from samsara. This should be the best route for us.

How to

# Confront Anger

## I. The urgent need to extinguish anger

Greed, anger and delusion are prevalent in our daily life and in the work environment. We the beginners of Mahayana Buddhism oftentimes act like some of the uninitiated who cannot keep emotions contained. This not only makes the motto of delivering all sentient beings something tenuous but may also discredit Buddhism as a whole. Among the so-called three poisons, anger is the most harmful. It not only destroys one's own virtuous roots but also invites negative opinions on Buddhists or even Buddhism in general.

It is clearly stated in *The Way of the Bodhisattva* that a moment of fury or hate is capable of destroying completely most of the virtuous roots accumulated over innumerable ages, just as a moment of compassion or bodhicitta can accumulate inconceivable merit.

Mahayana Buddhism holds that the worst among all defilement is great anger because it is the direct opposite of loving-kindness and compassion, the foundation and the aspiration of Mahayana. The

bodhisattva vows rule that when loving-kindness and compassion for anyone are totally abandoned and replaced with strong anger, the root precept will be broken and no bodhicitta can ever be developed. We should not underestimate the negative effect of anger.

We have all seen the weapon-like objects such as a sword held by Manjusri and many other bodhisattvas. These weapons are not meant for subduing any beings but destroying desire, anger and delusion. The purpose for learning and practicing Buddhadharma is to enable us to face, control and eliminate all defilement, which are also the mission and the goal of Buddhists. The criterion for measuring the quality of any practice is not the amount of mantra recited, the extent of merit accumulated, or how one fares in money terms, job, health, etc., but whether negative emotions have been reduced. For example, we can check if we feel as angry as before when others insult or bully us now. If anger remains the same, our endeavor to learn the Dharma basically loses its real purpose. Naturally, it is impossible to completely eliminate negative emotions before realization of emptiness is attained. We can only somewhat keep them under proper control.

How to learn Buddhadharma is very important. If Buddhists don't dedicate efforts to hear, contemplate and meditate the teachings, focusing instead on the rituals such as attending pujas, tsok, fire offering and empowerment ceremonies, burning expensive incense and worshipping the deities, among others, the real meaning of learning the Dharma would still be missing even if these are all done with great sincerity. Although a properly conducted empowerment is needed and

useful, absent the practice of hearing, contemplation and meditation, the Buddha's thought and teachings will not be propagated effectively. Holding concerns for personal health, longevity, money, work, family, etc. as their ultimate goal, Buddhist followers can neither benefit from practicing the Dharma nor actualize the path to liberation. And Buddhadharma ends up losing its real core value.

## II. Types of anger

There are three types of anger: 1) anger toward sentient beings; 2) anger toward insentient objects; 3) anger or fear toward non-humans (ghosts or deities).

## III. Ways to control anger

There are two ways: 1) of relative truth; 2) of ultimate truth.

### **1) *The way of relative truth***

#### ***Be understanding***

Oftentimes, resentment, complaint and anger between people are caused by misunderstanding.

To control one's anger when one is on the receiving end of someone's abuse or bullying is difficult. It is normal not to handle the situation well right then and there. But afterwards, one should

calm down and visualize the other person in the dispute, and say to oneself: I really shouldn't have let my temper get the better of me just now. This person is not related to me in this life, but he or she must have been my mother before in previous lives and treated me with great kindness like my mother now. As she lost all her memories when she was reborn, the fact that we once had a mother-child relationship is completely lost to her now. Had this person known, he or she would not have treated me this way. But I know the truth and the reason behind it. How can I blame her and return her kindness with animosity? I should learn to be more understanding instead of being vindictive. It's not her fault, but the fault of negative emotions, that she hurts me today. Due to ignorance, she forgot she was once my mother. Otherwise, she wouldn't have hurt me or hit me back even if I treated her rudely. She never meant to hurt me if not for the anger that took over her mind, making her unreasonable beyond her own control. I would behave the same way if I were to let negative emotions take over me. It is plainly clear that the chief culprit is defilement itself. Blame it, if anyone is to be blamed.

This is not self-deception. If you know the truth of cyclic existence, you know this is the fact. Those who don't believe in causality and cyclic existence will find it almost impossible to treat a total stranger with gratitude, especially when that person is not kind. And it may not be all that sincere even if appreciation is expressed. On the other hand, if one accepts the idea of cyclic existence, and recognizes the person as one's mother in a previous life, it will be much easier to treat that person with kindness.

***Be grateful***

We should ponder this: If I can be forbearing in the face of personal attack or insult, not only other people will see me in a new light but also help train my mind. If everybody is nice to me, how will I have the chance to practice forbearance? Now that this person has given me such a good opportunity and helped me accumulate great merit, how can I feel hostile toward this person and not repay the favor?

When Atisha was getting ready to go to Tibet, he knew he would be held in high regard there and no one would dare to offend him. In order to practice patience, he intentionally brought along an attendant with a quick temper. Even an accomplished master like Atisha would look for ways to practice patience, how can we harbor anger toward the object that affords us such an opportunity? We really ought to be grateful.

We should repeatedly reflect on this, repent, learn the lesson, resolve not to act impetuously again and make sure to handle such situation more calmly and appropriately in the future. Although anger or hate is very hard to control, it is still possible to make progress if one can train in first controlling one's mildest anger.

What is the rationale to work on the mildest anger first? In order to do anything well, it is important to execute the task in proper sequence. Generally, that is to do the easy part first followed by the more difficult. When the mildest anger is overcome, one naturally gains the confidence to go on. As one becomes more stable and stronger in one's practice over time, it will be much easier to deal with more violent afflictions.

Conversely, if one tries to work with rage and fury at the start, one may fail miserably, be utterly disheartened and never want to practice again.

***2) The way of ultimate truth******Anger toward sentient beings***

The first step is to be aware of anger.

When anger just arises, the first thing is to be aware of the anger. Very often, we don't realize we are angry and are unable to monitor our emotions, thinking only that other people have mistreated us. When awareness is lacking, the chance to counter this is also missing. Unfortunately, when we are angry, we are hardly willing to calm down and examine ourselves; we won't be satisfied until we give vent to our anger. Even if we try to make amends later on, the damage is already done.

The second step is to stop anger.

If we know that we are angry, the next step is to calmly look inward: What part of me is being angry? Is it my body, blood, brain, bones or consciousness? What exactly is this thing called anger? As we go through these examinations, the more moderate anger will stop and disappear immediately. Does the disappearance of anger mean we have gained realization of emptiness? No. In fact, any thought that we watch attentively will cease to continue. It has nothing to do with gaining realization or not.

Here, to “watch” attentively should not be taken literally to mean seeing with eyes, as eyes cannot see mind. Only mind itself can perceive its own nature. It is said in the texts of Yogacara and Buddhist Logic that mind is self-aware. Non-sentient species or organisms have no sense of self because they don’t have a mind.

Some hold the view that anger is present when mind is not being examined; now that anger is gone, it becomes emptiness.

This is not emptiness but a nihilistic view. Emptiness has nothing to do with the continuance of a certain condition. For any condition, its inherent nature is always emptiness. That is, even for something as vehement as fury or hatred, its nature is non-existent. This is the meaning of the verses “form is not separate from emptiness; emptiness is not separate from form.”

Another case is that while anger is still continuing, one can sense the absolute non-existence of real anger simultaneously. This is rather difficult for someone who has not yet attained realization of emptiness to understand—how can anger continue and be nothing at the same time? It’s just self-contradictory! But the truth will only be known by those who have gained sublime realization. Although there is the manifestation of anger, the essential nature has no real substance, hence illusory like dreams. To a certain extent, this is realization of emptiness of sorts, just not of very high level. Once the true nature of anger is realized, we can gradually transform consciousness into wisdom of the Buddha and bodhisattvas. This is a very effective way to counter negative emotions.

Atisha once told his chief disciple Dromtonpa Gyalwe Jungne, “My master told me that when a thought arises, observe and realize its nature. While doing this, you will meet the true Self of the Buddha (*dharmakaya*).” Dromtonpa asked, “What should be done when a thought arises again?” Atisha replied, “When the thought arises the second time, go realize the nature of the thought again. You will meet the enlightened truth body of the Buddha for the second time and do likewise the third, the fourth time and so forth. If there are one hundred various thoughts in a day, greedy or hateful ones among others, you will meet *dharmakaya* one hundred times in a day this way. What is *dharmakaya*? It is simply the nature of our mind, also called Buddha nature which is the same essential nature that practitioners of Chan Buddhism seek to realize.

In the *Diamond Sutra*, it is clearly stated, “Seeking to see me in form or hear me in sound is taking the deviant path. The Thatagata cannot be met this way.” The Buddha represented via form or sound is not the real Buddha. Thinking that seeing the Buddha is to see the body of the Buddha and hearing the Buddha is to hear the voice of the Buddha are all wrong views. It is also stated very clearly in *The Sutra of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha’s Fundamental Vows* that only *dharmakaya* represents the real Buddha.

Master Hui-neng condensed all he knew into four verses of which the most crucial is “fundamentally nothing is ever there.” Phenomena have no inherent existence, are neither arising nor ceasing, neither coming nor going. Through anger that is seemingly arising and

ceasing on the surface, there is a chance to enter the non-arising, non-ceasing Buddha nature (*dharmadhātu*), thus meeting *dharmakaya*. Anger at this point does not produce evil karma; instead, it facilitates the practice. But the premise is having attained realization beforehand and the requisite for attaining realization is to have generated renunciation and bodhicitta. Those who have yet satisfied these requisites should then use practices of the relative truth to stop anger.

It is unfortunate that we do not have the merit to see in person the *nirmanakaya* and *sambhogakaya* of, say, Amitabha, Vajrasattva, or other buddhas and bodhisattvas, but we can meet *dharmakaya*, the true Self of the Buddha.

### ***Anger toward insentient objects***

The same method can be applied here. For example, we are usually averse to noise. When that happens, we can also try to see what the nature of aversion is. Or, instead of resisting the noise, focus all the attention on the sound itself. By doing this, we will realize the so-called sound is only a kind of feeling produced in our ears when the external sound waves vibrate the ear drum; it is a mental phenomenon. Once the focus is on the sound itself, its empty and illusory nature will be realized.

Some meditation rooms may be facing the street, which can be quite noisy at times. If one has difficulty finding peace under the circumstances, try this method.

After some time, we may learn to adjust to the noisy environment. By then, the noise not only will not interfere with our practice, it may actually help us gain realization of emptiness.

### ***Anger or fear toward non-humans***

Many people are afraid of ghosts, and Buddhists are no exception—afraid of going to dark places at night or getting nervous when passing the cemeteries. At times like this, if one is brave enough, stop moving and observe: When I was nervous just now, what exactly is that thought of fear? After making this observation, it is likely that one comes to realize that, although the sense of fear is still present, the nature of fear is entirely unreal, empty of any substance, like bubbles. Right away, the fear toward ghosts vanishes without a trace.

Even if we can actually see them, ghosts cannot harm us if we are not afraid of them. However, having fear in mind and thinking that they bring bad luck can, through psychological effect, lead to suffering for oneself or one's family. Therefore, as soon as one suspects one has seen a ghost, stop and look into mind's nature, then fear and confusion will disappear immediately, and one will not be bothered by it again.

Fear toward ghosts can be dealt with this way, but encountering danger in real life such as facing wild animals, floods, or earthquake is another story. Because the disturbance from ghosts or non-humans is not substantive in the minds of ordinary people—the fear is entirely psychological, it is easier to handle by using the method here as the

habitual tendency is not so strong. But to handle calamity like floods or attack by savage beasts is beyond what ordinary human mind can do.

All the schools of Tibetan Buddhism offer *chöd* (cutting through the ego) practice. *Chöd* is a very special practice that has many versions. There is an initial *chöd* practice in the preliminary practice of Dzogchen, called *kusali chöd*. In this practice, one visualizes offering one's own body to the guru and the Three Jewels as well as to the ghosts and non-humans. The real *chöd* practice is, by applying a rather uncommon method, to cut through attachment and defilement with realization of emptiness. The premise of undertaking this practice is to attain realization of emptiness and to grow and strengthen the power of this realization. When one has reached a more mature state in the practice, one then meditates in places where mundane spirits inhabit. There one is likely to encounter real ghosts, hear unusual sounds, or witness some strange phenomena. Most people will get nervous in this situation and have a heightened sense of self. If one concentrates on the void nature of phenomena at that time, self-grasping can be eliminated successfully along with other negative emotions such as fear and anxiety.

The drum used by *chöd* practitioners is made out of human skull, not of wood; human bones are also used to make their wind instrument. The places that they choose to do their practice are often haunted. All these seem impervious to reason for the general public, especially the exoteric Buddhist practitioners. The intent is to infuriate the spirits by deliberately showing contempt and provoke

them into retaliating with thunder, lightning, and other such terrifying signs, because practicing emptiness under great stress is more conducive to eradicating self-grasping. Granted, such practice should only be done after attaining realization. If not, there may be more harm than benefit by just imitating others.

The rationale can be applied to many practices, that is, absent the attainment of realization, some practices are just beyond one's capability, such as the bardo practice. To someone who has gained realization, even normal activities like eating and sleeping can become a form of practice; it is actually much easier to enter *samadhi* during sleep and to advance the practice at a faster pace. But undertaking the more advanced practices before attaining realization is at best a mere formality. It is therefore imperative to strive to attain realization of emptiness as soon as possible.

# How to Refute Ignorance

## I. The harm of ignorance

In both Mahayana *abhidharma* and Sarvāstivāda's *abhidharmakosa*, the term used for our negative emotions is *kleśa* or defilement, and different kinds of defilement have been clearly classified. Even in psychology and medicine, there are not nearly as many terms to describe the various aspects of negative emotions. However, no matter how it is classified, the origin of all defilement is ignorance.

Ignorance also means being deluded. Defilement arises because we don't know the truth of this world and of ourselves. If the truth is known, there will not be defilement—the reason why ignorance is the origin of defilement.

Unlike greed and anger which are quite noticeable, ignorance is a latent defilement. When we are angry or being greedy, it is obvious

to not only ourselves but also others because our behavior is different, whereas ignorance is hidden deep down and not easily detected. None of the wise and knowledgeable people in the world including scientists, philosophers and psychologists has yet to discover ultimate ignorance. Although various fields of study have helped us clear some delusions and revealed to us many truths about life and the world, ignorance, a defilement entrenched at the deepest level, has never been explored by either science, philosophy or religions. Moreover, as the methods provided by these disciplines are not counteractive to ignorance, they are unable to refute and end ignorance.

India at the time of the Buddha had a plethora of religions and myriads of views. Some religions believed the world is controlled and ruled by Brahma, one of the celestial beings. If Brahma is happy, we'll all be saved; if not, we'll go to hell. In order to worship Brahma, people killed all sorts of animals as offering to him. This is ignorance.

Buddhism holds that Brahma does not rule the world; he is but one of the celestial beings in the six realms of samsara. As such, he is still bound by karma, has not gained liberation, may fall and suffer, and is certainly not omnipotent. Even if we make offerings to please him, he cannot help us escape cyclic existence; moreover, the killing of animals keeps us further entrenched in samsara.

In the 1930s and 40s, human sacrifice as offering to the gods was still practiced in some remote areas of the world. Such inhuman act itself is already a huge delusion which can only increase, not overthrow, our ignorance.

Once there is ignorance, there is attachment—attachment to the outer world, to one's own body, reputation, interest, etc. When failing to satisfy one's desire, negative emotions arise and one suffers. In order to satisfy all the desires, one may resort to evil ways. Thus, all evil karma comes from attachment and ignorance.

## II. The way to refute ignorance

To refute ignorance, something contradictory to it must be applied; views and methods more powerful than ignorance are also needed to accomplish the task. Ignorance cannot be overthrown without realization of emptiness, even if all the rituals are properly conducted, pure vows maintained, worldly merit accumulated and virtuous deeds committed. The practices of cultivating renunciation, such as contemplating the preciousness of human birth or impermanence, and bodhicitta are very important, but they do not conflict with ignorance and are thus unable to reject it either. Of the two kinds of bodhicitta, ultimate and relative, ultimate bodhicitta denotes realization of emptiness which can refute ignorance quite effectively, but not relative bodhicitta. This point is clearly explained in Dharmakirti's *Commentary on Valid Cognition (Pramanavarttika)* and the various texts on Buddhist logic.

When Bodhidharma arrived in China, he met Emperor Wu, the founder of Liang Dynasty (502-557). The Emperor reported to Bodhidharma the virtuous deeds he had done, such as not eating

meat, reciting scriptures, offering to the monastics, etc., and asked Bodhidharma proudly, "How much merit are these good deeds worth?" With his short reply "no merit at all", Emperor Wu was instantly made speechless.

Many people cannot understand why Bodhidharma said so. Of course Bodhidharma would not deny, from the viewpoint of karma, that virtuous actions can generate some merit, which no Buddhist would refute either. But in this case, Bodhidharma commented from the point of view of the ultimate truth that, absent realization of emptiness, no amount of merit alone can lead to liberation. This is why Bodhidharma put a damper on Emperor Wu's eager expectation.

Je Tsongkhapa also pointed out in *The Three Principal Aspects of the Path* that as important as the generation of renunciation and bodhicitta is, ignorance cannot be rejected with just renunciation and bodhicitta. Ultimately, we still need to establish the view of emptiness to refute ignorance.

The key for a doctor to be effective in treating a patient lies in whether the doctor knows the cause of the illness so that he or she can prescribe the right treatment. By the same token, the root of our samsaric existence and not being free is not a coincidence or without cause and condition. It is certainly not ruled by the Omnipotent but by attachment.

For example, when we feel strong attachment to a person, his or her every move can make us either happy or sad. During this time, the chances of getting hurt far exceeds that of gaining happiness because once there is attachment, expectation will ensue. If the other

party cannot do as wished, it simply adds more unhappy moments to one's life. This will continue until the relationship is broken and the attachment gone. Conversely, the less we care about certain things, the more likely they can give us a sense of happiness. This is life's unbreakable natural law.

To chase away darkness, there needs to be light. To eliminate the darkness of ignorance, we need the light of wisdom. Here, wisdom is not common cleverness. Cleverness in real life may actually be a kind of delusion—knowing how to make and spend money may seem very clever, but it is likely to ruin one's own and others' chance for liberation and also future life, hence a delusion. The only one who understands the true nature of ignorance and knows how to resolve it is Buddha Sakyamuni. Many people have come to realize the reality of the world through the Buddha's teachings and attained ultimate freedom and liberation.

The kind of wisdom we need to look for is realization of emptiness. There are three kinds of wisdom: wisdom resulting from hearing, from contemplation and from meditation. To correspond to each kind of wisdom, there are also three steps one can take to find the respective wisdom.

Through listening to the Buddha's teachings, we may gain more understanding and awareness. This is wisdom resulting from hearing the teaching. However, it has not been thought through and thus is not very stable, nor powerful enough. We should not stop here but reflect further: Although it is said so in the scriptures, is it truly so in reality?

Some people think that the Buddhist scriptures are wrong in its description of the world, as what is given in *Abhidharmakosa* runs against the observations made by modern cosmology. Actually, *Abhidharmakosa* is not a teaching orally transmitted by the Buddha himself but was composed by many arhats. One cannot find the description of the world in *Abhidharmakosa* in any of the sutras that were personally taught by the Buddha. Why is there such a big difference between the worldview described in the exoteric Buddhist texts and that of *Kalachakra* which was taught by the Buddha in later days? The reason, explained many times before in the book series *Wisdom Light*, is in the differences in cultural background, lifestyle and way of thinking that existed 2500 years ago and now. Given the circumstances at the time, the Buddha had to accommodate the common view then in order to bring certain people onto the path.

The Buddha taught in three different ways:

1. To an audience that had the capacity to comprehend the teachings without problem, the Buddha would expound the true nature of reality without any hesitation.
2. To an audience that could not accept or understand the teachings, the Buddha would adopt an indirect approach to explain the Dharma so as to help them accept gradually.
3. When asked to answer a question with only yes or no, the Buddha would choose to remain silent if "yes" was not an acceptable answer and "no" was not true to the fact. This was how the Buddha responded when the non-Buddhists asked him the 14 indeterminate questions.

The Buddha would always take into consideration the capacity of the audience when giving teachings, and only expound on that which they could apprehend, as the Buddha is omniscient.

Many different worldviews have been presented in the Buddhist scriptures, but the ultimate, the truest version is one based on dependent arising. It is also what we need today—to gain realization of emptiness.

There are three ways to gain realization of emptiness:

1. The easiest, the lowest level is to contemplate via logical inference to finally reject one's every attachment and thus realize the world being unreal, empty and illusory like a dream. Follow this with further practice and realization of emptiness will be attained.

2. This refers to *Tsa lung* (subtle channel and winds) practice in the Vajrayana tradition. *Tsa lung* practice and realization of emptiness have a highly effective and direct relationship. After completing the preliminary practice and receiving proper empowerment, one can undertake *Tsa lung* practice to attain realization of emptiness rather quickly.

3. The fastest but the most demanding method is through mind to mind transmission. Only those with capacity that is both sharp and ripened are suited to use this method, such as the sixth Chan Patriarch Hui-neng, some Vajrayana practitioners and certain accomplished masters of India. Because people like them have practiced extensively in their past lives with their capacity already well prepared, they need only a word or two as pointers to attain realization of emptiness. The Great Perfection is such a method

that requires no reasoning, nor too many theories and complicated practices. It just uses a very simple method to realize emptiness.

These three methods are like three different roads or three kinds of transportation. All of them can eventually reach the final destination of attaining enlightenment or Buddhahood, with only timing difference. Thus, not everyone has to learn Vajrayana. Even the first method which is the simplest and the most basic can help us eliminate attachment and gain realization of emptiness.

### III. How to prove the void nature of all phenomena

#### *i. Summary*

How do we prove that our attachment or our perception of the world is wrong?

When we evaluate something, we first use our sense organs to feel and then transmit the information received to the sixth consciousness. After the information is analyzed by the sixth consciousness, a conclusion will be drawn. This is the process that we go through to make judgment on all things. It applies to scientists as well, except they have more instruments at their disposal.

In order for the conclusion to be right, first, the sense organs must make no mistake. Otherwise, the wrong information will get passed to the consciousness. At the same time, our consciousness should also have sufficient capacity to evaluate, or wrong conclusion will be made as a result.

Before learning the theory of *Madhyamaka* or the views of *prajñāpāramitā*, we used to think what our eyes can see are all real. Now we can prove with what we have learned that all phenomena are without self nature.

There are five great *Madhyamaka* reasonings to prove emptiness, the first being “refuting the arising of something existent or non-existent.” When we understand one type of reasoning, the others can all be understood with the same rationale. Perhaps some may ask, “If one type of reasoning can prove the point, why do we need so many others?” This is skillful means for the sake of sentient beings with different capacity. Some may find the first reasoning to be logical; others may think the second or the third is easier to understand. As a result, there are five types of reasoning. Now we will discuss mainly the first reasoning.

## ***ii. Refuting the arising of something existent or non-existent***

All phenomena are constantly arising and ceasing. If not, everything will remain static and forever immutable. Just like a person is born first, then lives and dies, physical matter also goes through three stages of existence: birth at the beginning, abiding in the middle and destruction at the end. Birth must take place first before the latter stages can follow.

Now let’s examine how exactly matter is born. However, we don’t need to make such examination in the macro universe because the

macro universe is only an illusion of ours. In order to maintain our daily life, we will just let it continue to “exist.” Essentially, real birth can only happen in the micro universe.

When something new is born, we tend to think it is the effect produced from another cause. Cause engenders effect which owes its existence to the power of cause. Few would dispute this. But on further examination, did the new thing exist or not exist before it was born? There can only be two answers: yes (exist) and no (not exist). We cannot say it is neither existent nor non-existent.

Some ancient religions hold that things exist before they are born; it is only because they are hidden in some place that we cannot see. How things are born is just a matter of emerging from the hidden, unseen place. Nothing is newly born in this world. The so-called birth is basically to change from being invisible to visible.

Normally, our notion of being is when nothing becomes something. For example, we grow flowers because there are no flowers attached to the flower seeds. If there are flowers already, we do not need to plant seeds anymore.

Such is how reality is and has been perceived since time immemorial. Without examination, we would hold on to this as the norm even if humans evolved another 10,000 or 100,000 years. However, if further observation is made, we will likely find another world, a different world.

First, how can we turn nothing into something? In a so-called

cause and effect relationship, the cause transmits a kind of energy to the soon-to-be born effect (fruit) to make it materialize. However, can cause and effect exist simultaneously? It's not possible. If they do, it means that effect already exists. In that case, what need is there for cause? Cause at this point has lost its *raison d'être*, just like seeds are no longer needed when crops are already available. Two things that exist simultaneously do not have a causal relationship because both have already been formed. For instance, if two Buddha statues, one big and the other small, are shown together, the big one needs no help from the small one for it to be made.

If cause and effect cannot exist simultaneously, does one come before the other? People think that as a matter of course cause comes before effect, which also means that when cause is still extant, effect cannot happen—it cannot be found anywhere in the universe. If effect is not existent, to whom can cause transmit the energy? There is no recipient.

In the case of cause and effect existing simultaneously, it suggests that effect is already existent before its arising from cause. In the case where cause and effect are mutually exclusive, it suggests that effect is not existent before its arising from cause. No matter what the case may be, there is no way to make something either existent or non-existent arise. But effect can only exist or not exist; there is no other option. This is what “refuting the arising of something existent or non-existent” means.

Then why do we see cause and effect at work all the time in real life? It is called dependent arising. Nothing really exists; all are mere illusions.

We should not just take for granted but contemplate the notion more deeply: Of course causality exists. Isn't the father/son relationship the living proof of cause and effect? But to think this way would be too naïve. From the point of view of illusion, of course cause and effect exist. If we are willing to believe and accept this illusion, rejecting other kinds of worldview, there is no need to learn Buddhadharma any further. Just be sure to do good deeds, not hurt anyone and believe in karma and the principle of causality. Thus it could be possible we may end up relatively better in our future life, albeit a fleeting one at that. If however one is not satisfied with the current condition and seeks to escape from this make-believe world, then one must look for answers. What we do is totally up to us.

### *iii. Dependent arising*

Dependent arising means phenomena depend on conditions to arise, to be born; or put in another way, phenomena are born or arise from conditions. Buddhism holds that the arising and ceasing of all phenomena depend on multiple causes and conditions rather than the will of the Creator. If this is not the case, effect will be engendered at will and the laws acknowledged by the world be thrown out of whack—reap what is sown won't be valid any more.

Please note that here dependent arising is not contradictory to the aforementioned non-arising, non-ceasing of phenomena. Dependent arising deals from the point of view of the five sense organs of ordinary

people, which is called relative truth in Madhyamaka. It is a truth because everything looks very real if it is not subject to deeper investigation.

The word arising has two meanings: first, to be born or engendered from cause and condition, such as seeds produce fruits; second, an interdependent relationship which encompasses all dualistic phenomena like left and right, up and down, long and short, fast and slow, etc., while the condition for right to arise is left and that for left is right. There is right because there is left; some are deemed short because others are deemed long. These dualistic and abstract concepts, which are not matter, are referred to as dependent phenomena in Buddhism.

Although dependent phenomena are not physical matter but conceptual elaborations, very often our mental state is intertwined with objects of the outer world. If not, people cannot communicate with one another.

For example, when I say “Buddha statue,” I think I’m saying “Buddha statue” and the listeners also think I’m saying “Buddha statue,” but in fact it is a physical object which cannot be made to appear just by saying the two words. Nevertheless, all those who can understand the language I speak will mix the two words with the real Buddha statue, that is, upon hearing the words “Buddha statue,” the image of the statue will appear in their minds. It is only by giving tacit consent to such illusion that we can communicate with one another. Buddhist Logic deals in depth with this and related subjects.

There is an even deeper meaning of dependent arising, i.e., emptiness. That is to say, all which arise from cause and condition are without self

nature, empty and illusory. Like everything in dreams, no matter how real they appear to be, all will just be emptiness after waking up.

All things that we deem real must have three characteristics: from where it comes, where it stays and where it will go. For example, a Buddha statue comes from a statue manufactory; it exists and remains at the present time as it can be seen and touched; it will end up in another place in the future. A person comes here from another place, stays for two or three days and then goes somewhere else. We think this person really exists because he or she fulfills the three conditions of coming, staying and going.

Dreams may seem real but are not because all phenomena in dreams come from nowhere; they are mere illusions appearing after one falls asleep, instead of coming to one’s dream from somewhere; phenomena in dreams do not exist during the course of dreaming; and everything in dreams vanishes when waking up, but they have not gone to other places. For example, when dreaming of an elephant, this elephant didn’t come into the bedroom from anywhere; as all the doors and windows are closed, it’s not possible to get in. Neither can the elephant stay in the bedroom during the dream, nor run out of the room after one wakes up from the dream. But the elephant does exist in the dream, only it’s an illusion.

Actually, our real life and dreams are the same in that they come from nowhere and go nowhere, hence the present doesn’t exist either. We may think that phenomena are real, not illusive like a dream, because phenomena that defy logic do not appear in the present

whereas the most unlikely things take place in dreams, such as the dead coming to life again or one flying on one's own, etc. These phenomena are impossible only when considered from the point of view of real life. From the standpoint of dreams, all these are possible. In real life, this person is dead. But in my dream, this person is not dead as I can really see him or her clearly. Is being dead real or not being dead real? As everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, it's hard to say for sure.

To give another example, a magician can produce for us many visual illusions, such as making an airplane or a building appear out of nowhere in a matter of a few minutes and disappear right away. Now, we will surely deny the existence of this plane or building because they come from nowhere and go nowhere; only our eyes see that they arise from nothing, so they must be unreal. We have been fooled by the illusions.

We can also deduce from formal logic the same conclusion. For example, we all agree that a wheel-like image made by the fast rotation of a fire is an illusion because it is a false impression produced by high speed movement. Major premise – All the false impressions produced by high speed movement are illusions that do not exist. Minor premise – Buddha statue is a false impression created by countless particles moving at very high speed. Hence, the conclusion must be that Buddha statue is also an illusion that doesn't exist.

To use major and minor premises here for a simple explanation is not ideal but acceptable under the circumstances, although there are still many holes in its reasoning. If possible, you really should try to

learn Buddhist logic, especially young people, as it is highly precise in its approach and analysis. In my opinion, Buddhist logic has gone beyond the realms of Western philosophy and logic. Because Western logic only deals with the perspective of the senses, it is unable to refute the conclusions derived from the senses. If the conclusions of the senses cannot be overturned, our path of seeking the Dharma will just stay at the level of praying to the Buddha for health and long life.

The illusionist David Copperfield performed the walk through the Great Wall of China, but he didn't actually walk through. In ancient India, there were many magicians even more powerful who could turn a pebble into an elephant simply by reciting a mantra, and an elephant into a pebble instantly with another mantra recitation. The elephant produced by magic could also walk and eat like a real elephant. So, even if it is something we can see, it is still an illusion. Apparently, that which our eyes can see is not necessarily true.

Our consciousness is often fooled by the sense organs. Consciousness is categorized as rationality while sense organs are about sensibility. In philosophy, rationality is considered superior to sensibility, but Buddhist logic deems just the opposite. For example, when seeing an object, our visual faculty can directly sense its shape and color without any barrier in between; whereas rationality, lacking the ability to distinguish, must be informed by the senses. Rationality can never see an object, only the visual faculty can. Therefore, it is said in Buddhist logic that sensibility is more direct than rationality, but it cannot think; rationality on the other hand is capable of

thinking. From this point of view, rationality is superior to sensibility.

The Buddhist ideas of dependent arising and emptiness being the nature of all phenomena are inseparable—dependent arising is emptiness and emptiness is dependent arising. The *Heart Sutra* says, “Form is not separate from emptiness; emptiness is not separate from form.” Dependent arising is emptiness, so that “form is not separate from emptiness.” Emptiness is dependent arising, so that “emptiness is not separate from form.” By contemplating this way, we will realize everything in real life is just illusion. If our observation of everything around us were to be made with the divine eye, many people would have a nervous breakdown and not be able to live a normal life. Consequently, for the time being, foolish people like us cannot but continue to stay in this illusory world. By rejecting the truth of the wheel of rotating dots of fire and accepting the existence of pebbles, buildings, etc. as being real, we keep the accuracy of the sense organs at an appropriate level, not too high and not too low, so as not to disrupt our sense of normalcy.

Who designed and made all these? Some believe they are God’s creation. According to Darwin’s argument for the theory of evolution, it is to adapt to the environment they are in that everything evolves slowly to its current state. The Buddhist view maintains that all things are created by the power of desire or karmic force.

#### ***iv. Other evidence***

With regard to establishing the validity of all phenomena being illusions, superstring theory has already given a pretty good answer. The wheel of rotating dots of fire is also a good example given in Buddhism. In a somewhat dark place, a wheel of fire can be seen when a burning incense stick is rotated at high speed. This is called the wheel of rotating fire. Actually, there is no wheel of fire of any sort except a speck of fire from the burning incense. It is an illusion created by visual error. If one hundred people all hold a burning incense stick in their hands and make a very fast circular movement with it, a person at fifty meters away can see a huge fire ball. When one hundred people stop moving their arms, the fire ball disappears instantly as well.

Similarly, our body is also an illusion. If inference can be made based on scientific results, you will discover a shocking truth: If the electrons contained in the molecules of every cell of the human body stop moving, drop to the nucleus and stay still, such that there is no more space between the electrons and the nucleus, the body at this point may only be as big as a sesame seed or even smaller. Given the same scenario, a twenty-story building may become as small as a matchbox or smaller.

There are many philosophical theories in the world such as materialism, idealism and so forth, but Buddhism has never participated in their debates, because all phenomena are neither physical matter nor mental consciousness but only illusions. I have also said before that if we must pick a Western philosophical term

to describe Buddhism, the most suitable should be “illusion-only.” Buddhism is not idealism or materialism; it is illusionism.

Regarding the worldview at the macro level, all the schools of Buddhism hold the same view. Whereas at the micro-level, certain schools of both Mahayana and Theravada traditions do not recognize the idea of “illusion-only,” a view acknowledged only by the *Madhyamaka* and other higher schools in exoteric Buddhism and the Vajrayana tradition.

It is said by the Buddha in *Commentary on Valid Cognition (Pramāṇavārttika)* that all physical phenomena are constantly ceasing and arising moment by moment. It is only because the ceasing and arising take place incredibly fast that we are not able to detect it.

The theory of *Madhyamaka* breaks all matter down to nothing so that all is emptiness. All phenomena, born from nothing, come from our mind. Through mind's operation, a huge world is formed. Once you indulge yourself in this world and become addicted to the worldly pursuits, it will be very difficult to break away, just like being unable to escape from fear and sorrow felt in dreams while still dreaming.

Once you experience and comprehend deeply the illusory, empty nature of all phenomena, you must increase the strength of your realization of emptiness through practice. The more powerful this realization is, the sooner defilement and ignorance will begin to diminish until they are completely destroyed in the end.

We cannot just simply reason with ourselves that all is illusory; there are no karma, no Buddha and no sentient beings, so we don't need to

learn the Dharma either. Although the truth may be thus, our realization has not reached a level to warrant such reaction; just like everyone knows that dreams are unreal and no one likes having nightmares, but there is nothing one can do when the nightmare does come. Therefore, before attaining ultimate realization, we still must respect infallible karma and avoid suffering, notwithstanding their being illusory in reality. One cannot hope to resolve everything by simply telling oneself to let go, to not have attachment. The boat can only be abandoned after crossing the river. In order to cross to the other side of the river of samsara, one cannot give up the ship of practice just yet.

#### IV. The practice to gain realization of emptiness

We should adopt the posture according to the Seven Points of Vairocana and breathe out the impurity within the body. Then pray to Buddha Sakyamuni and generate bodhicitta. Afterwards, sit quietly and begin to contemplate along the lines of what have been discussed above. When the sense of the world being illusory and void is strong and clear, abide in this feeling. Not to have any other thoughts, not to think of any other things, just remain calm and stay in this feeling. This is what meditation means. And to the beginners, this is the way to practice emptiness. With this, the sense of emptiness is gained through contemplation rather than practices of *Tsa lung* or Great Perfection.

At the beginning, the sense of emptiness can only last a minute or two. Soon after, discursive thoughts will arise again. When they do, it is best to detect them right away and then go back to contemplation

again. Initially, one should alternate between contemplation and calm-abiding. The more times contemplation is exercised the better while the time spent on calm-abiding should not be long. If it is too long, the sense of emptiness will disappear and be replaced by various rambling thoughts. After practice has reached a more solid stage, time for calm-abiding can be prolonged gradually and that of contemplation shortened. Thus the power of practice will grow over time with less and less negative emotions rearing their heads.

Although the observation made so far is on physical phenomena, the same can be applied to mental phenomena as well. If consciousness really exists, it should also have the distinctive features of existence—that it arises, abides and ceases. But after examination, it is found that consciousness comes from nowhere, abides nowhere and goes nowhere. Having contemplated this, sit quietly and meditate. The best way to observe consciousness is not by logical reasoning but to practice Guru Yoga. At the end of this practice, visualize the guru dissolving into light and merging with oneself. At this point, mind stays still, thoughtless, just observing itself. Prior to undertaking this practice, however, we must reject our attachment to consciousness by way of contemplation. We will be able to understand, but not realize, emptiness this way. To really attain realization of emptiness, it is necessary to meditate and undertake the specific practice of emptiness.

I hope that all of you can do your best to practice. No matter what kind of difficulty you may encounter in the future, it is important not to wallow in self-pity but use these methods here to overcome negative situations.

## V. Meditation on emptiness, the most meritorious of all

It is said in the scriptures that receiving teachings on emptiness commands great merit. To expound the view of emptiness or, better, to meditate on emptiness even for a minute, a moment, or an instant, myriad evil karma can be purified and the merit thus accumulated far exceeds that of offering all the treasures of a billion-fold universe (trichilocosm) to the buddhas of the three times in the ten directions.

Buddha Sakyamuni turned the wheel of Dharma three times in his whole life. The first turning was to propagate the scriptures of Theravada tradition, mainly the Four Noble Truths – the nature of suffering, the origin of suffering, the path leading to the cessation of suffering and cessation of suffering. The second turning primarily expounded the doctrine of emptiness or *prajñāpāramitā*. The third turning focused on the teaching of *Tathāgatagarbha* or Buddha-nature.

The major texts of the second turning are *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*: 25,000 lines, *Aṣṭadaśasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*: 18,000 lines, among others. The *Heart Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra*, on the other hand, are the abridged versions of the essence of all the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts. While the four lines in the Heart Sutra “form is emptiness, emptiness is form; form is not separate from emptiness, emptiness is not separate from form” encompass all that *prajñāpāramitā* is about. Many people read or can even recite from memory the Heart Sutra, but very few understand its meaning, if only theoretically. Even fewer

people have insight into what the sutra says, let alone any realization.

To those seeking liberation, realization of emptiness is crucial. Even sravakas and pratyekabuddhas who seek only personal liberation must also attain realization of emptiness. Absent this realization, attaining Buddhahood would be completely out of the question.

The ultimate goal of Mahayana is to deliver all sentient beings from samsara. In the process of doing this, there will surely be many internal and external obstacles and negative conditions along the way. But all the difficulties and obstacles can be easily resolved when realization of emptiness is attained.

While arhats suffer no mental pain, they are still prone to physical suffering. That's why arhats can get sick and can also die from illness. There are many stories about Buddha's disciples who had attained arhathood but still died of starvation or from bites of venomous snakes. Because the extent of arhats' realization of emptiness is rather limited, they don't have sufficient courage and ability to help other beings to liberation.

After achieving the first *bhūmi* of the bodhisattvas, even physical suffering no longer exists. As a result, no obstacles or pressure can become hindrances to the bodhisattvas' determination to deliver sentient beings from all suffering. In addition, during the process of delivering sentient beings, one must be completely selfless. In order to do that, attaining realization of emptiness is absolutely necessary. Otherwise, there will always be some remaining selfishness which would somehow limit the aspiration to offer one's service

unconditionally. A bodhisattva who has abandoned all selfishness can thoroughly benefit sentient beings without any concern for personal needs; it is unselfish, unconditional giving in its purest form.

Buddhism has abundant wisdom; it is a faith rooted in wisdom, not a superstition. Only some followers may be a little superstitious. If Dharma practice does not entail hearing, contemplation and meditation of the teachings but only blindly worshiping ghosts, spirits, or some fairies, it is superstition all right.

Many Buddhists like to do nothing but attend all sorts of ritual activities like empowerment, fire offering and what not. Buddhism would in time be no more than a formality if this persisted. Buddhists should focus on learning and practicing Buddhadharma. Doing otherwise would not be learning Buddhism in its true sense. In the end, Buddhism will become totally commercialized, worldly-oriented and ritualistic while its essence of wisdom and compassion will gradually be diluted until it disappears altogether. The Buddha also said that these types of development which cause the deterioration of Buddhism will appear in the Age of Dharma Decline.

We must do all we can to prevent this deterioration from happening. It is imperative that we exert effort on hearing, contemplating and meditating on the teachings. When we have gained certain appreciation or awareness, we should give others some ideas of what we have learned through either casual conversation or more formal discussion, letting others know what learning the Buddha's way truly is.

Compassion and wisdom are the two most important pillars of Mahayana Buddhism. They are all that we need to learn. Any other forms of learning may not necessarily represent the core value of Buddhadharma.

All superstitions are ignorance, which can be overthrown by undertaking to hear, contemplate and meditate on the Dharma. Afterwards, proceed to learn the theories of *Yogācāra* and *Madhyamaka* to eradicate attachment to this world. Finally, practice sitting meditation to attain realization of emptiness and ultimate liberation.

To describe how milk tastes in words is never as good or accurate as actually drinking the milk. Likewise, wisdom obtained from hearing and contemplating the Dharma is just a kind of understanding or knowledge, not indicative of having reached any state. Only through meditation practice to attain realization can one actually experience emptiness. From that point on, one will never again take this world for real.

This insight into the nature of reality was not created by the Buddha; rather it was discovered, applied and propagated by the Buddha. Once the Buddha discovered the reality of the micro universe, he applied that to the practice, which has since been the way to discard attachment and obtain liberation. However, when scientists discovered the reality of electrons, nucleus, etc. in the micro universe, they used that knowledge to make nuclear weapons. It is like the same piece of gold seen by different people would be valued differently—a merchant would calculate the price and profit, a doctor may consider its potential value in medicine, etc.

If we are satisfied with our present condition and do not want to change our ways, there is no need to learn all these ideas. If we are not satisfied, don't want to be fooled by our sense organs anymore and stay deluded, then set out to learn, to think, to be trained, to attain and strengthen realization of emptiness until it is powerful enough to completely destroy attachment, eliminate all negative emotions and lead us to ultimate freedom.

Liberation is not a fairy tale nor is it mysterious. Through proper training, the mind of ordinary people like us, bounded by attachment and ignorance, can absolutely be transformed into the pure state of Buddha nature. This is liberation.

By way of logical reasoning, whatever known based on the sense organs shall be rejected and a new perspective on the world established. This is called the worldview of Madhyamaka. Sensibility and rationality used to be a perfect match, but from this point on, they will go their separate ways. Whatever the sense organs recognize will remain as before. The rational mind having a new perspective shall take the path of liberation.

P A R T 2

O N

# DEATH and REBIRTH

What Life Truly Is

Understanding Death

How to Face Death

How to Take Rebirth

Key Points for Practicing Bodhicitta on Deathbed

What  
**Life**  
**Truly Is**

In recent years, natural disasters such as earthquake, tsunami and hurricane have occurred more frequently while suicides and mental problems have become more widespread. Increasingly, people come to realize how fragile life is and begin to focus more on the subject of life and death, which everyone must face eventually. To the majority, death is a very heavy topic as it signifies great fear and trouble. But there is no escape from death, no matter what. Understanding what death really is can help us not only quash fear toward death but also find the opportunity to be free from death completely. With this in mind, I'd like to explain to you what life really is.

The explanation covers three parts: I. the nature of life, i.e., what life is; II. the preciousness of life; III. the meaning of life.

## I. The nature of life

First, let me introduce an ancient Tibetan text which has been praised by scholars as a must-read for the study of life and death, *Bardo Tödröl* (the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*).

### **1) *Bardo Tödröl* – a guide for the deceased**

A book, titled *Impressions of Heaven – 100 orally recorded stories of near-death experience* (NDE), published by the Foreign Language Press in Beijing, China made the following comment: *Bardo Tödröl* has been around for more than 1000 years, but now it is the oldest reference for modern research on death. In the West, scholars who specialize in the study of death all recognize *Bardo Tödröl* and the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* as the two most important texts in their field. And by coincidence the description of the intermediate state given in *Bardo Tödröl* also agrees with the various phenomena found in the study of NDE. Therefore, it can be said that *Bardo Tödröl* is one of the most valuable contributions from the Tibetan people to the modern world.

*Bardo Tödröl* was first translated from Tibetan into English by the late Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup and edited by American scholar Walter Evans-Wentz. The book has been published and reprinted many times in the U.S. and Europe in English, German and other languages, and is highly regarded by the academia in the West. Dr. C. G. Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist, reviewed the book himself and acknowledged its

unique input and value to his academic research. He said, “For years, ever since it was first published, *Bardo Tödröl* has been my constant companion, and to it I owe not only many stimulating ideas and discoveries, but also many fundamental insights.” W.Y. Evans-Wentz believed that the book would not only improve understanding between East and West but also correct the wrong and indifferent attitude of people, especially those in the West, toward mankind’s fundamental question of life and death. But lack of interest in or plain ignorance of this question is also the case with most people in China today.

Dr. Wentz further pointed out that in the field of NDE research, *Bardo Tödröl* has become a classic widely referred to in the related studies done by scholars all over the world.

*Bardo Tödröl* has also greatly influenced the Tibetan people’s view on life and death. It is said in *Impressions of Heaven*, “Among all the races in the world, it can be said that the Tibetans understand death most profoundly, and are the most relaxed about it.” Also quoted from the same book, it says, “Near-death experience, viewed by people in the West as being the most mysterious phenomenon, is only something right and natural in the eyes of the Tibetans.”

There is however one problem with the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. That is, they believe the deceased will go back to the previous body and resurrect, hence the mummies. Personally, I don’t think this quite fits the reality.

*Bardo Tödröl* elucidates the whole process of death, the state of

after-death and the process of taking rebirth. The book has received rather strong support in the West mainly because its contents have been validated by many near-death experiences of people who came back to life after a sudden death. The fact that the ancient text of *Bardo Tödröl* happens to match the clinical findings of modern medicine accounts for its great stature and influence. You should read the book if you are interested in knowing more about it.

A part of this book is actually a guide for the deceased, whereof a sadhana is meant to be read by people around to the dead person. The sadhana tells the deceased, “After you die, you will enter certain state, feel this and that, then you should do such-and-such to face them and so on.”

However, the so-called death experience of NDE is not the real thing because consciousness has not left the body completely in this case. The only text that can truly describe the process of death clearly in its entirety is *Bardo Tödröl*.

## **2) Scientific study of life after life**

### **Remembrance of past life**

In 1958, Dr. Ian Stevenson, chair of the department of psychiatry at the University of Virginia, became interested in reincarnation and began his research into the subject. He published his first book, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, in 1966. His major work was *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology*

of *Birthmarks and Birth Defects* (1997). And in 2003, *European Cases of the Reincarnation Type* was published. Dr. Antonia Mills, a Harvard trained anthropologist, helped Dr. Stevenson with his research while conducting her independent investigation.

A prominent psychiatrist, Dr. Harold Lief, once described Dr. Stevenson as being very particular about methodology, scrupulous and stubborn. It is safe to say that Dr. Stevenson was a disciplined scientist and his work on reincarnation was not frivolous at all.

Additionally, Erlendur Haraldsson, a professor of psychology at the University of Iceland, has been doing research on parapsychology since 1970. Dr. Jurgen Keil, professor of psychology at the University of Tasmania, Australia, and Dr. Jim Tucker of the University of Virginia are both principal researchers of reincarnation, who have traveled all around the world to collect thousands of cases of reincarnation and published many books and academic papers on this subject.

## Hypnosis

In the 20th century, psychiatrists and medical professionals in the West unexpectedly discovered when using hypnosis to treat their patients that many patients were able to describe their past lives after being hypnotized. They dared not publicize these findings at the time, but gradually, through many different channels, the information got widely promulgated to the general public. One of the psychiatrists, Dr. Brian L. Weiss, is the author of several books on past life and

reincarnation. In the preface of his book *Through Time into Healing*, he wrote, “For those of you who have not read my book, *Many Lives, Many Masters*, a few words of introduction are necessary.

Until my incredible experiences with Catherine, the patient whose therapy is described in the book, my professional life had been unidirectional and highly academic. I was graduated magna cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, from Columbia University and received my medical degree from the Yale University School of Medicine, where I was also chief resident in psychiatry. I have been a professor at several prestigious university medical schools, and I have published over forty scientific papers in the fields of psychopharmacology, brain chemistry, sleep disorders, depression, anxiety states, substance abuse disorders, and Alzheimer's disease.

I was left-brained, obsessive-compulsive, and completely skeptical of "unscientific" fields such as parapsychology. I knew nothing about the concept of past lives or reincarnation, nor did I want to.

But something very unusual happened. Catherine's symptoms began to improve dramatically, and I knew that fantasy or dreamlike material would not lead to such a fast and complete clinical cure. Week by week, this patient's formerly intractable symptoms disappeared as under hypnosis she remembered more past lives. Within a few months she was totally cured, without the use of any medicines.”

In the preface of *Many Lives, Many Masters*, he wrote, “Years of disciplined study had trained my mind to think as a scientist and

physician, molding me along the narrow paths of conservatism in my profession. I distrusted anything that could not be proved by traditional scientific methods.

Then I met Catherine. For eighteen months I used conventional methods of therapy to help her overcome her symptoms. When nothing seemed to work, I tried hypnosis.

In just a few short months, her symptoms disappeared, and she resumed her life, happier and more at peace than ever before. Nothing in my background had prepared me for this. I was absolutely amazed when these events unfolded. I do not have a scientific explanation for what happened. There is far too much about the human mind that is beyond our comprehension.”

In the twenty years after he published these books, he helped more than 2000 patients by way of past-life regression. Based on these real cases, he wrote three books and his works have been translated into 30 different languages.

Because his focus has been on reincarnation, past-life regression, reunion of soul-mates and so on, he became known as a reincarnation specialist, one that is not officially recognized in the medical circles. But Dr. Weiss firmly believes that in fact we take rebirth repeatedly until we have learned what we need to learn. He continues to point out the many historical and clinical evidences to demonstrate that reincarnation is real.

### **Near-death experience**

In his best-selling book *Life after Life* (1975), Dr. Raymond A. Moody, an American philosopher and psychologist, recorded 150 cases of near-death experience, which completely changed people's idea about death and thus furthered interest in the research on life itself. Thirteen million copies of *Life after Life* have been sold worldwide since its publication in 1975. The similarity between the descriptions of near-death experience in this book and that of *Bardo Tödröl* is astonishing. There can be no explanation of these experiences other than reincarnation does exist or something still remains after a person dies. Since the publication of *Life after Life*, more books on the related subject have been written by Dr. Moody and other authors in the Western world. Some physicians also indicated that they have run into similar situations but dared not speak up for lack of sufficient knowledge.

Dr. Moody also said those in the book didn't lie about their near-death experience because they were very serious, emotional, even with tears when telling their stories. And after they came back to life from near-death situation, their attitude toward life and way of living took a completely different direction. Dr. Moody earned his PhD in philosophy and psychology as well as a MD, so he is not likely to be fooled easily by anything seemingly mythical and unexplainable. In fact, even he was skeptical of those phenomena when he first encountered them.

We should not think that anything that is not discovered by science or proven with logic does not exist, as not everything can be measured

by hard data. Things like rebirth or soul cannot be checked by scientific instruments, at least not for the time being. However, as science continues to break new grounds, it is entirely possible that one day we might be able to do that. For now, logic, as we know it, is rendered helpless in the field of parapsychology because our sense organs are not equipped to provide us with useful data to do this kind of analysis.

Those who have studied logic should know that a logical form must contain a major premise. For example, to prove that seeing smoke from afar indicates fire is burning there, a consensus must be reached first in a very broad terms: where there is smoke, there is fire. This is called the major premise.

Then the minor premise is: smoke is seen over there.

Based on the two premises, a conclusion is drawn: there is fire over there.

Ultimately, we must rely on our eyes to validate the presence of smoke and thus fire. If we cannot get information from our eyesight, neither of the two premises can be established. Actually, what we experience in life and how the sixth consciousness interprets those experiences are all based on the five sense consciousnesses.

This kind of inference is formal logic in the Western tradition. Tibetan Buddhist logic offers a different kind of inference which is more precise and thorough; it has nothing to do with faith.

Logic is something that must be acknowledged by all. Truth is a conclusion that is accepted by anyone with a right and fair mindset, whether one has faith or not. If logic and truth are formed on the

basis of religious belief and debated only among believers, it can hardly be called logic; it would be even further from the truth.

As it stands, we do not yet have a good grip on the process of sleep, let alone that of death. So, on the question of death, as our sense organs are unable to provide any useful information, neither logic nor instruments can help; only through the experience of some extraordinary people or personal practice can we get a sense of it. It is like in order to know what sweetness is, one must personally taste it; it cannot be described or inferred.

Presently, on all the continents except Antarctica, there are children who can remember their past lives. When these children first began to talk, they would say who they were, where they came from; they would give their parents' names and details of their past lives. Their parents in this life would then check and validate the actual existence and subsequent death of the persons mentioned. Often enough these children inherited very strong habitual tendencies from their past lives—one who loved to smoke in past life would steal his father's cigarettes to smoke in this life; one who died of a car accident in past life would be too frightened to go near cars in this life, and so forth. Some of them don't feel close to their parents of this life but take the parents and relatives in the past life as their real parents and family instead. Many parents are unwilling to make this public lest others should think their children are mentally unstable, out of embarrassment, or because it violates their own religious beliefs. Nevertheless, the secret gets out eventually.

This usually happens to kids two or three years old. It is unlikely that someone put them up to this or that they knew how to lie so perfectly. Their memories were brought from their last life to this life. Dr. Stevenson also said that their case studies indicate there is some kind of carrier that brings information, not just memories and emotions, to the next life. In Buddhism, this carrier is called store consciousness.

Other than reincarnation, there is no better explanation for such phenomena.

There is also another actual phenomenon that cannot be explained by science. That is, a person who died of a gunshot wound or car accident in the last life has a scar on the body in this life at the same spot as the previous wound. For example, in a book titled *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects* (1997), there are detailed reports on 250 cases along with many pictures of birthmarks. I also discovered similar cases in my own investigation. Even if we already accept the idea of cyclic existence, how did the scar in one's last life appear on the body in this life when the body that died is in no way related to the body of a brand-new being born in this life?

My answer to that is: when the deceased wakes up from the deep coma after death, a new carrier of consciousness is born, a mental body. Mental body is also considered matter, but we cannot see it. As a carrier, mental body saves and keeps the special body marks of past life, such as a scar, until a new body is born in this life.

I do admire some of the scientists in the West. Once a point is proved to be true, they won't hesitate to embrace it, treat it fairly and study it with an open mind, instead of stubbornly holding onto the old ways of thinking or defending their own ideas.

In my opinion, a view on life that is based on the principle of karma and cycle of rebirth should be a pro-active one. Imagine if we don't believe in reincarnation but in nothingness after death, wouldn't it be very sad, passive and meaningless, with nothing to look forward to at old age? At that point, no amount of money or knowledge matters anymore. It is often the very reason why old people choose to end their lives. Besides, if nothing were to remain after the passing of this life, one would feel free to do whatever one pleases without any concerns for morality or conscience, hence commit more evil karma and cause endless suffering for future life.

Conversely, belief in karma and rebirth serves to remind us that the ending of this life is only a stop on life's very long journey as well as the beginning of the next leg. In different time and space, life exists in different forms. All the success and failure of this life will end as life ends, but spiritual attainment and the seeds of both good and bad habitual tendency will not perish but like data be copied to future life. No matter how old one gets, there will always be hope, as there is always another life to look forward to. This is an idea that evokes positive energy; once accepted, it can only be good for us. Although it is a bit guilty of being practical minded—to give in this life in order to have better return in next life, it is not a serious flaw.

Naturally, to be able to give unconditionally would be much better.

### **Death – the beginning of a new life**

By knowing what death really is, we will surely gain a new understanding toward life, and death in particular. At the least we know that death is neither mysterious nor terrifying as we tend to imagine. It is never the end of life but the beginning of life, only in a new body, not unlike copying from one hard disk to another. However, unwholesome actions done in this life will cause bad karma in next life; and if too much evil has been committed, even to be reborn as human again may be questionable. On this, we ought to be concerned about death, but death itself is not so frightening. Death, after all, is just a cycle of life. This is not only a Buddhist idea but also the personal experience of many people.

Like the Milky Way's cycle, many planets of the solar system have their own cycles as well. Based on the view of *Kalachakra* in Tibetan Buddhism, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Venus and Jupiter have their respective orbital cycle. Not only the external world but also human life goes through cycle. Besides death, there are many other events in life that are just as cyclical. We may all encounter such events, but we just don't pay attention to them.

### **The sign and the process of death**

How thanatology defines death varies, but the more authoritative and

public sanctioned is the one given by Harvard Medical School: death is when a person is declared brain dead which in turn calls for evidence of unawareness of all stimuli, no spontaneous muscular movement or respiration, no reflexes of any kind, corectasis, absence of papillary light reflexes, absence of heartbeat and a flat electrocardiogram.

However, many real cases have shown that even if some people matched the clinical definition of death, they still woke up some ten hours or a few days later. And more than just waking up, they could clearly describe the conversations between doctors and nurses and some other things during the process of rescue. The reason is because at that point the mind had not stopped working; it was not really death, just a kind of unconsciousness or shock. Therefore, there has not been an absolute, conclusive definition of death up to this day.

Thanatology started as a life science in the U.S. in 1912 and has a history of about 100 years, but man has studied death for a much longer time.

I have personally investigated and interviewed people with near-death experience. What they described to me perfectly matched what their doctors saw at the time. More importantly, their experience with near-death has caused tremendous change in their view on life and values.

I knew a teacher who had near-death experience. After he came back to life, he dedicated all his time and effort to promoting one idea: Do not move or do anything to the body immediately after the person appears to be dead because at this moment the person is still alive; the soul is still with him or her.

Except for accidental death, Buddhist texts usually describe the process of a normal death this way: First, the eyes, ears and other organs will gradually stop functioning. When they are about to stop, one can no longer recognize even the most familiar faces; voices from people around become dim, as if coming from afar; body feels like sinking down in the period leading up to death, although it is impossible to sink when lying on bed. All these just indicate that the organs are about to stop working and life will soon end.

I believe many doctors or nurses have seen near-death patients ask people nearby to raise their pillows or pull them up. This is a sign that death is near.

After real death sets in, most people's sense organs will stop functioning one by one: first, eyes can't see anything but darkness in front while ears can still hear; afterwards, ears can't hear either until finally all five sense organs stop functioning altogether with the exception of consciousness which at this point can still think. As different individual feels differently, some may experience pain or other sensations. Nevertheless, after a few minutes or seconds, consciousness will begin to stop as well.

When consciousness stops, it goes through three stages: consciousness related to anger will stop first, then desire and finally delusion. When they stop, no external light is visible but, internally, a white, red light and darkness will appear, respectively. Lastly, one enters into a state of unconsciousness or nothingness. This is the so-called death. This state of unconsciousness is not the same as passing

out in normal times, as this is much deeper, irreversible and impossible to revive. The unconscious state will last from a few hours to a few days. During this time, all sense organs and mental consciousness cease to function while manas and alaya consciousnesses continue. In fact, manas and alaya consciousnesses of all sentient beings, from ordinary people up to the eighth bodhisattva *bhumi*, do not stop. However, real practitioners are not unconscious during this period but abide in the meditative state instead.

According to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, after death, the body of a good practitioner should remain untouched for seven days; no announcement of death should be made nor any death ritual performed; just close the door and leave the dead alone. The practitioner may have all the signs of being dead, such as no breathing, no heartbeat, etc., yet the face looks not as pallid as it should be but rosy pink instead. The better skilled practitioners can maintain the seven-point posture of Vairochana and meditate the whole time because his or her consciousness has not left the body at that time. On the seventh day, the practitioner should be awoken from the meditation according to the previously mentioned text of *Bardo Tödröl*. To those who received this kind of training when alive, just a reminder will suffice. After the ritual is completed, the practitioner's face will immediately turn to the color of the dead, and the body will no longer stay in meditation posture. This is very common for Vajrayana practitioners. Practitioners of supreme faculty can at this point attain liberation or Buddhahood while those of middling faculty can attain the same in the intermediate state. The marks of attaining

Buddhahood are appearance of rainbow, relics, fantastic sounds, etc

The idea of attaining enlightenment in the intermediate state is not unique to Vajrayana. Theravada Buddhism also holds that some who failed to attain arhathood in this life can succeed in the intermediate state.

Ordinary people who have not received any training nor understand what meditation is about will not be able to experience any of these. Once the breathing stops, the deceased is normally sent to the morgue rather quickly, the funeral home next and the crematorium shortly afterward.

In the view of Tibetan Buddhism, such practice is deemed not respectful to life, and is not allowed. At the least, nothing should be done to the body for three days. If the weather is too hot, it can be placed in the freezer at the funeral home to cool down so that it doesn't decay. After three days, it can then be sent to the crematorium.

I think many people have special experiences in their childhood of this kind: one is filled with great suffering as the whole world turns red in color; there is no physical matter in this world, sometimes it feels like a tunnel. It is like looking west from the seashore at dusk when the sky is red with the evening glow. The sea also appears red from the evening glow, the sky and water united as one. Some children may experience a white world, others a black world. Whatever it may be, there is no physical matter in that world. Some children also dream of other kinds of encounter likened to those in the intermediate state – the residual effect of having just gone through

the intermediate state. As they grow up, these memories slowly fade until they disappear altogether.

These are the profound phenomena and secrets of life, which are not mysterious at all and certainly have nothing to do with ghosts or deities.

(Note: Regarding the more detailed explanation of the stages after death, please refer to *Understanding Death* in this book.)

How Buddhism explicates life is truly remarkable. The phenomena of death, such as the deceased seeing his or her own body and other details, were clearly laid out in not only Vajrayana but also the exoteric Buddhist scriptures two thousand five hundred years ago. These descriptions which happen to agree with research conducted in the West today and real experiences from many genuine practitioners further strengthen our faith in the truth of Buddhadharma.

### **Dream—a daily dose of samsara and nirvana**

Every day, the process of going into deep sleep and waking up from deep sleep is a phenomenon of life very similar to death and taking rebirth; it is also a cycle of life. The three stages of entering deep sleep from the time of waking up, then entering the dream state and finally waking up from dream are very much like the three stages of death: the stage of life entering death with all consciousnesses ceasing to function corresponds to that of entering deep sleep from the waking state; the stage of entering dream from deep sleep corresponds to that of mind waking up from unconsciousness some

time after death. At this point, as the physical body looks dead but the mind hasn't stopped, the bardo body is totally capable of knowing everything around, even the actions, thoughts and words of others. Many people don't know at this time that they are already dead until they see the family cry with sorrow. The stage of finding the next carrier and taking rebirth from the bardo state corresponds to waking up from dream and coming back to real life.

Nevertheless, we generally cannot feel, let alone describe, how to enter deep sleep from the waking state. The process does happen even if we don't feel it. At this stage, the five sense organs have stopped working completely, but mind or consciousness still exists and is operating.

In recent years, psychologists in the West have become particularly interested in studying dreams. They used many Tibetan Buddhist methodologies for reference in their work and achieved certain success.

For example, people normally don't know they are dreaming when they dream; even if some do, it's just coincidence. But through training, one will know with complete certainty when one is in dream. To those who have not gone through the training, this may sound ludicrous. But the fact is that many psychologists who are not Buddhists have succeeded in knowing if they are in a dream after training in the Tibetan Buddhist methods.

Now merely knowing one is in dream is not all that helpful. On the other hand, if one can be keenly aware of the process of entering deep sleep from the waking state, that is, the process of how the five sense organs cease functioning, how mind stops thinking, enters into

an unconscious state and wakes up from that unconscious state again, one will understand death much better.

Perhaps some may think this is all nonsense, but the fact is that this is how life moves from one stage to the next and countless people who undertake the specific training have personally attained these experiences. When one's practice is linked to the intermediate state, the result from the practice in normal times will become handy when facing death.

### **Practice of the Six Bardos — gateway to liberation**

The practice of the Six Bardos in Tibetan Buddhism is a specific training on death. The Chinese translation of *bardo* is “zhong yin”: “zhong (中)” means in-between, the transitional period when the body of last life has gone and the body of next life is not yet found; “yin (陰)” is the counterpart or opposite of “yang (陽),” the name for the body in this and future life. The body in this transitional state is also akin to the body in a dream, whose existence can be felt but which has no physical elements—a mental body. This mental body is “yin (陰).” Personally, I think the Chinese translation of *bardo* is very accurate.

The practice of the Six Bardos divides the life cycle into six stages with a different practice for each of the six stages. Those who have been trained and are proficient in the practice know clearly the detailed process of the six bardos.

Through the power of meditative concentration or special training, one can fully simulate death—artificially entering the state of death

from real life and coming back to life from the state of death with ease, the purpose of which is to realize the nature of mind.

What is the relation between death and realization of the nature of mind? Buddhism holds that all sentient beings have Buddha nature but for reason of being obscured by defilement are unable to realize it. During a brief period after death, as all consciousnesses, self-grasping and sense organs cease to function as well as all external disturbances, Buddha nature will thus present itself. It is like seeing the blue sky when clouds are dispersed, or abiding in the absolute quietness on the moon; the nature of mind shall be realized in such state. Realization gained in this state is much purer and clearer than that attained in sitting meditation in real life. Therefore, many Vajrayana practitioners not only do not fear death but also see death as once in a lifetime opportunity to propel the mind to higher level.

The practice of the Six Bardos is unique to Tibetan Vajrayana; it is not found in either Tangmi (Tang Dynasty Esoterica ) of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism or Dōngmì (Eastern Esotericism) of Japan, not to mention exoteric Buddhism, because both Tangmi and Dōngmì are in the division of the Outer Tantras whereas the practice of the Six Bardos is only available in the Inner Tantras.

By learning and practicing the Dharma with devotion and undergoing systematic training, one will be able to personally experience this process and raise the mind to a new ground. However, these practices are usually reserved for serious practitioners and not open to public. Those who are interested may try the internet to learn a bit more about Dream Yoga, its

contents and process. Dream Yoga is used as a preparation for death, also one of the practices to simulate death.

## II. Precious life

We all know our own lives are precious, but what I really want to say here is that we must know all lives, including humans and all other species, are precious.

From man's point of view, the life of an ant is worthless, and insects such as mosquitoes which are deemed harmful to humans are better dead than alive. But from the standpoint of these tiny beings, even a mosquito would value its life more than all the things in the world.

Human beings are used to being selfish. Our values are the only ones that count and to treat all lives equally is not one of them. Animals' lives are not our concern; instead, they are no different from vegetables or plants so that we can just use them, eat them, play with them or kill them at will. Through words and actions, the idea of seeing animals as source of food and tasty food at that is instilled into children from very early on such that whenever they see certain animals, very often the first thought is how one might eat them. As time goes on, this habitual thinking tends to make people less kind and tolerant toward one another; sometimes an insignificant issue can balloon into a deadly conflict.

Curses always come home to roost. When this selfish and harmful attitude is not checked, sooner or later it will turn around to destroy

mankind. In the Buddhist view, this is infallible karma.

We should never think that we are invincible, what with the advanced technology and sophisticated weapons that we have on hand, that it is reasonable and legitimate to harm, torture and kill other living beings however we please. We breed, feed and kill animals excessively just to satisfy our insatiable desire to please the palate. Animals breed for us, live for us and die for us. What we owe them must one day be paid back! It is only fair that we should learn to respect all lives, not to discriminate or harm other beings; at the least, not to violate their right to live.

Perhaps not too many people know what chicken farms or pig farms are like or how these animals are slaughtered. I can tell you those places are just hellish! In order to produce bigger and fatter animals in the shortest possible time, the way the farms feed is really sick, cruel and disgusting. Animals suffer tremendously while alive and die horribly! Paul McCartney once said, “If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be a vegetarian.” I totally agree, as I have made a point of visiting several slaughterhouses myself and I truly felt this way. It is precisely because people have not witnessed the cruelty of slaughtering live animals and the extreme horror and agony animals suffer before being killed that they can enjoy eating animal flesh with a clear conscience. Let us not consider having sympathy or compassion for the moment. Even to evaluate purely on the basis of self-interest, can we not wonder if eating the toxin-filled meat of animals who have been given harmful feed, killed in a horrible way and died with

incredible hatred can really provide sustenance for us?

The Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer said in his book *Enemies: A Love Story*, “As often as Herman had witnessed the slaughter of animals and fish, he always had the same thought: in their behavior towards creatures, all men were Nazis.” We all hate Nazis, but we don’t know we have become Nazis ourselves. Let us be no more!

Whether having faith or no faith, being Buddhist or non-Buddhist, understand equality and have empathy and respect for all lives should be the basic quality of man. Only when all lives on this planet achieve equality through understanding of one another can we hope for a better future.

### III. The meaning of life

The meaning of life is none other than giving love and elevating the mind. The true value of life is not measured by wealth and achievement but selfless service and wisdom.

People often think that giving means there is nothing left for oneself. This is actually a wrong view. Mahayana Buddhism holds that one gains more from the process of giving.

It is terrible when people feel no love for others. Such people tend to value money and personal interest more than anything else, and lack discipline. It is hard to say what will become of them in the end.

Although we are all born with the ability to love, this love is generally very limited in scope. How do we foster unlimited, immeasurable love? There are ways in Mahayana Buddhism.

Buddhism defines love as loving-kindness and compassion, and furthermore adds immeasurable to the two words to make it complete, that is, immeasurable loving-kindness and immeasurable compassion. This is to point out that in Mahayana Buddhism loving-kindness and compassion are to be offered to infinite living beings, not just to the ones we like. To those we don't like, we Buddhists should do even more to show them loving-kindness and compassion. Thus is the intent of attaching the descriptive word "immeasurable."

Regardless of social status or profession, all of us should cultivate love and elevate our minds as this is the most important objective in life. It is absolutely possible to train and elevate human mind. In terms of specific methods, the most extensive and the most effective are in the Buddhist teachings. When our mind actualizes its fundamental state of wisdom and compassion, then all will be just fine.

I think Dr. Brian Weiss was correct in saying that for hundreds of years, man has mistakenly believed in the power of technological development to resolve myriad human problems as well as in science as a path to lead humans out of wilderness and away from disease, poverty, miseries and suffering. Now we know that science and technology alone do not have answers for our problems. Science can be good science and bad science. The only way that science can really help us is to apply science with a wisdom oriented, civilized

and balanced mind. We must find the correctly balanced mind.

By elevating the mind and doing our best to help others do the same, we can give meaning to this life and all future lives until such time liberation is attained. This is the way to create more value in life and truly benefit all mankind.

Through our own effort, however insignificant, the society eventually will become more peaceful, every individual kinder and happier, and our own field of interest more successful. This is not empty talk because compassion and wisdom have the power to help accomplish all these.

## Understanding Death

Death is an important issue to everyone as it is a reality that everyone is reluctant but has to face. To ordinary people, death represents a dark unknown filled with despair, mysteries, pain and sorrow. In the face of death, almost all of us are panic-stricken and terrified. It is really due to a misunderstanding of death itself. To know correctly what death is can thus eliminate fear of death and help us better prepared for it.

### I. Wrong interpretation of death causes two extremes

There are multiple explanations of death. Some people think that everything ends after a person is dead, that all goes to dust at last; others think that a person becomes a ghost after death; still others believe a person either goes to heaven or to hell after life ends. These are just a few examples but none of them gives a clear explanation of what life truly is, nor any help in solving the question of life and death.

Based on these misconceptions on life and death, people are easily led astray by the two extreme views.

The first is fear of death, having only total despair but doing nothing about it beforehand, just waiting for it to come. At the same time, there is always great fear so much so that one does not want to hear or talk about it at all; even hearing the word “death” causes consternation.

Many scientists had no religious training in their youth or simply rejected it; nonetheless they slowly warm up to religion as they get older, even becoming very devoted believers. This is because the older one gets, the closer to death and the more lost one is, and the more urgent the need to rely on something to overcome fear of death and find a home for the mind. However, it is not easy to come upon a religion other than Buddhism that can truly explain death.

The view that everything ends after a person dies is a very simple, naïve and pessimistic take on life, drawing conclusion carelessly without knowing life at the deeper level. Think about this: We should all agree that it is impossible for the body to come from another place. But if we were to deny the existence of past and future life, we would have to first eliminate the possibility that consciousness or soul comes from another place. Since our sense organs do not see the coming and going of a soul, nor can any instrument make such observation, what evidence is there to prove that soul and consciousness also end when life ends?

Buddhists should be realistic and rational, not just echo the views of most people. Life and death are of course the most important

events in life. As we are normally concerned even with minor ailments, there is no reason not to be serious when facing the lessons of life and death. There are many real examples from all over the world, both old and new, pointing to the existence of soul and rebirth. When solid proof for refutation is still lacking, acknowledging rather than rejecting their existence would be a sounder choice.

The other extreme is to believe everything ends when one is dead. At the time of birth, one is born with the body; there is no past life to speak of. When the body stops functioning, life ends, leaving no sense of joy or pain any more. As such, those holding this view have little inhibition to do unwholesome things when alive. Although not knowing what death is about, they pretend not to care nor to fear death, making no preparation at all for the imminent end of life. This is simply ignorance.

They are not afraid because deep down they think death is still too far away. Thus, their dismissal of fear is only temporary and unreal. Surely they will be very scared when actually facing natural disasters or their own illness, not to mention real death. So why are they not afraid of death? They are not afraid because they don't know what death really is. That's the only explanation.

As a Chinese saying goes, newborn calves are not intimidated by tigers. Similarly, children are not afraid of fire. It is not because calves and children are particularly brave but they are ignorant. It is a matter of not knowing what to be afraid of. Those who claim not to have fear of death are mostly in this category.

As Buddhists, we should avoid either of these two extremes. If we can understand death correctly and be well prepared for it, not only is death not frightening, but it can also be an opportunity for us to make progress.

## II. Practitioners' attitude toward death

There are three kinds of attitude:

Superior practitioners welcome death. As Milarepa sang, "Death is not death; yogi becomes a junior Buddha." To such practitioners, death does not signify despair or termination of existence, which is the perception of ordinary people. As they go through death each time, they may not be able to attain Buddhahood right away, but they can gain higher realization every time. Accomplishment like this is akin to that of a junior Buddha.

Average practitioners do not reject or fear death because they know they have already achieved certain stability and have control over their practice that will enable them to face death when the time comes.

Inferior practitioners have no regrets when they die. Although they are not accomplished in their practice, they have not committed too much evil karma in their lifetime and have done their best to practice virtue. So they have no complaints or regrets, and are full of confidence at the end of their lives.

### III. The nature of death

The term “thanatology” was first penned by an American surgeon, Dr. Roswell Park, in an essay published in 1912, which eventually became a field for interdisciplinary studies. The history of this field is only a little over one hundred years. The Tibetan Buddhist text of death, *Bardo Tödröl* or *Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, is over a thousand years old. And Buddhist texts that deal with the subject of death have been around for 2500 years. The process of dying is clearly laid out particularly in the *Kālacakra Tantra* which was expounded by Buddha Sakyamuni in the year before his parinirvana when he was 80 years old.

In regard to matter, many exciting breakthroughs have been achieved by science in the West. However, with respect to life itself, Western science has hardly broken any new grounds and thus failed to provide satisfactory answers to questions about life and death. Actually, the brain is analogous to the hardware and consciousness the software. Just like data in the software can be copied to different hardware, consciousness can be transplanted to another brain. That is to say, when a person's physical body stops functioning, life still exists and can be transferred to another body, as the body is only a vehicle for the mind. This is the Buddhist view as well as that of Charles Scott Sherrington and John Carew Eccles, the two neurophysiologists and Nobel Laureates.

As a matter of fact, if there can be more tolerance and open-mindedness, we would not need to bother with expensive research

because such views are common knowledge in Buddhism and free for all to use. Unfortunately, people tend to be quite arrogant some times, unwilling to accept unconventional views and rejecting all that is not seen or heard personally, or at variance with the conclusion derived directly from their own research. They will only accept a standpoint when others' reasoning and their own are in agreement. Such obstinate and rigid attitude greatly restrains the intellectual progress of mankind.

Among all the books in the world, the one that offers the best explanation of death and method to face death is *Bardo Tödröl*. The book has since received recognition from scholars in the West. Having obtained the relevant empowerment, one can proceed to study the text, but not before then, as the proper order for learning the Secret Mantra still needs to be observed. Nonetheless, a part of the section on the method of facing death does not require prior empowerment so that it is available for everyone to read or learn more seriously.

Simply put, death is a kind of cyclic phenomenon of life. The cyclicity is represented by the fact that rebirth will come after death and birth will eventually end in death again. Our consciousness is like an engine which can turn life on and turn it off, but people in general don't know how this is done. Be that as it may, life can never end, even at the time of attaining Buddhahood. Granted, that's an unsurpassed state of existence. As our practice continues to improve, we can also advance to a higher level of existence. Naturally, the phenomena of life are not the inherent nature of life. The nature of life never changes; the phenomena of life, however, undergo an endless cycle of change.

In short, there are three cycles of life:

**The first cycle** – It starts before a life is formed. At this point, no sentient being of the six realms, no life exists at all. It is like the moment the Big Bang occurred, neither matter nor the concept of time and space existed. This period of absolute emptiness is the nature of our mind, also the Buddha nature, *Tathāgatagarbha* or the state of luminous clarity.

Then after the Big Bang, the fundamental particles were formed, and the agglomeration of these particles into electrons, atoms and molecules eventually formed the universe. Likewise, from *Tathāgatagarbha* and luminous clarity comes energy of life which subsequently forms life itself. More detailed descriptions of this process have been elucidated in the Vajrayana texts.

The moment a human egg and sperm unite, the consciousness of a bardo body enters the zygote. Although it is already a life at this point, there is no physical body. As the embryo continues to grow and becomes more mature, a full body will be formed at last. During the course of growing up, an attachment to this being will be developed, which immediately becomes the alaya consciousness, the base of consciousness. The fact that we still have breath, heartbeat, blood circulation and so forth when in deep sleep while other senses stop functioning indicates the existence of certain energy. This energy is the alaya consciousness.

The alaya consciousness, like the water deep down in the ocean,

remains still at all times, no matter how violent the ocean swells. The water closer to the surface, however, will move depending on the force of the gale and its depth. The waves, the water that moves, refer to the five sense consciousnesses and the sixth consciousness.

On the basis of the alaya consciousness, *manas*, the seventh consciousness is formed. In Sanskrit, *manas* means attachment or self-grasping. Once there is self-grasping, a real being begins to take shape along with the development of the five sense organs.

In *Refuting Signs Treatise*, Bodhidharma referred to all eight consciousnesses as defiled mind and luminous clarity of *tathāgatagarbha* as pure mind. Pure mind exists at all times even before life begins.

The Big Bang spells the end of a universe. Similarly, after going through countless life and death to finally reach Buddhahood, returning to the state of primordial luminosity, it is back to Mother Nature in its truest sense, that is, back to the innate luminosity of mind.

We refer to mountains, rivers and land as nature, but they all change according to sets of cause and condition, hence not real nature. Bona fide nature is the Buddha nature in our minds, which is uncontrived and unchanging. We were born from Mother Nature and will be reborn innumerable times before going back eventually to the very origin when Buddhahood is attained. This is the longest life cycle. In this cycle, we complete a full samsaric journey—up to heaven, down to hell, travel through the six realms and finally back home to the luminous Buddha nature.

In this sense, attaining Buddhahood is also a kind of death—death of samsara.

**The second cycle** – It starts from the time of death, through the intermediate state, rebirth, to a whole lifetime until death. It is not countless cyclic existences but just one lifetime lasting a few decades or one hundred years at the most. This is the mid-length life cycle. As one cycle ends, the next one begins immediately.

**The third cycle** – This cycle completes in 24 hours. Those who are not stressed and have good quality of sleep can usually go into deep sleep soon after sleeping. Deep sleep means one loses all senses and has no dreams during this period. Although we still have our life, soul, attachment to self and alaya consciousness, because all senses are shut down— no seeing, no hearing, no thinking, no idea of the surroundings, it is also deemed a sort of death.

These three cycles are very similar in rationale and process. The only difference is how people feel about and how they refer to each cycle. Conventionally, only that of the mid-length cycle is called death. The one of the shortest cycle is called sleep and that of the longest cycle is liberation.

The difference between sleep and death is that during sleep, self-grasping and alaya consciousness still exist; whereas when entering the unconscious period in the intermediate state, all eight consciousnesses would stop at a certain point for a very brief instant, even the alaya consciousness would disappear at this moment.

If you want to get a whole picture of the cycles of life, other than the three mentioned here, you should know there is a cycle lasting just a second or even shorter. It happens at every moment of life.

The *tsa lung* practitioners of Vajrayana know how to make use of this cycle, allowing them to grasp the best time for their practice so that they are able to attain realization of emptiness speedily. You can learn about these specific methods after you begin the formal training in Secret Mantra.

#### IV. The mystery of death

In the West, death is generally determined either by brain death or irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory functions. But there are many cases of people coming back to life after showing these symptoms for some ten, twenty hours. Such is not a complete death.

In fact, at the highest level of concentrated meditation, the fourth *jhāna*, a practitioner, though still alive, may stop breathing temporarily. Therefore, cessation of breath cannot be the criterion of death.

In the Buddhist tradition, these symptoms only represent superficial death, not real death yet, as a person's consciousness has not left the body at this point. At the time of superficial death, most people will enter into a coma-like condition, having no pain or any other sensation, like in a deep sleep, except those who have had the special Vajrayana training.

On further analysis, death is really not just a simple process. The process of dying whereby a person's sense organs and consciousness gradually cease to function is both complex and specific.

When the coma-like period is over, that is, after real death has set in, one enters into the intermediate state. At this point, the deceased wakes up from the coma. Beings in the intermediate state can see their own dead body and the family members gathering around; they even have a little bit of supernatural power to know what these people are thinking, but most don't know they themselves are already dead. Just like a dreamer, not knowing he or she is dreaming, who takes everything in the dream for real, an intermediate being upon seeing family and friends cry will go to them and console them by saying, "Don't cry. Everything is fine with me. It's all right." But family and friends seem not to see or hear the deceased. Now the intermediate being starts to wonder, "Why can't they hear me?" Slowly, it dawns on this being that he or she is already dead.

Why can't the intermediate being know he or she is already dead even having some clairvoyance? Ordinary clairvoyance is somewhat limited and unable to discern everything. For example, some non-Buddhist practitioners who have gained powerful clairvoyance are able to foretell future events of the world, but they don't know what self is. They think that self exists when in fact there is no self.

Most lives will stay in the intermediate state for forty nine days and then be reborn as animals, humans, or other sentient beings depending on their past causes and conditions. Hence, death itself is not to be

feared the most. In death, all the pain and fear felt while alive are all gone, like being asleep or unconscious, so it is not worth worrying about. The most terrifying is, however, if evil karma is committed in this life, then rebirth in the three lower realms of animals, hungry ghosts and hell may be likely for the next life. Therefore, even for the sake of future life, one should make an effort now to hear, contemplate and meditate on the Dharma and accumulate merit.

## V. The significance of death

During a very brief interval after death when all eight consciousnesses cease to function temporarily, anyone can grab this rare moment to recognize the innate Buddha nature whose presence is not obstructed or covered at this time. However, if one has not been trained in such practice, this brief period will just slip away. Only those who have had the requisite training over long period of time would know how to use this opportunity to realize the nature of mind and enter the state of luminosity. As mentioned before, to the superior practitioners, death is not death, as the word normally suggests, but a phase in the long journey of samsara wherein one shall attain junior Buddhahood, or perhaps even ultimate Buddhahood.

Why does Vajrayana place great emphasis on the practice of dream yoga? The reason is that, unlike the absolute quietness of death, when we are in deep sleep, even though alaya consciousness and self-grasping are still operating, all other consciousnesses

have stopped. It is much easier to realize the nature of mind when undertaking practice during this period.

However, it is very hard for us to return to this state in real life as we have been conditioned to live in a world constructed by sense organs and consciousness, which makes it very difficult for us not to be dictated by our consciousness. For example, when we see something, the information of the object will be transmitted to the mind consciousness to be processed and analyzed, resulting in a conclusion of either good, bad, yes, or no, which will then determine our acceptance or rejection of this object. We hardly ever touch consciousness at the deepest level.

Science has proved that we use only five to ten percent of our brain capabilities with the remainder basically staying inactive. The main reason is due to the fact that very little of these capabilities are required in real life and hence the wisdom hidden deep within is not fully developed. To ordinary people, death is not so useful. But to Vajrayana practitioners, death presents them with a great opportunity to develop those latent and idled capabilities.

At death, all consciousnesses cease to function, even the alaya consciousness stops temporarily. What remains is just Buddha nature, the fundamental ground of reality. In the absolute stillness where all mental activities completely stop, Buddha nature will naturally reveal itself, making realization of the nature of mind much easier to attain. It's like the blue sky can be seen once dark clouds are blown away by the wind.

The principle of hypnotism is similar. Through hypnosis, a person's mental activities are reduced such that he or she enters into a half-awake, half-asleep state. Subsequently, the hypnotized subject's memory of past life or the childhood of this life is recalled by way of hypnotic suggestion and subconscious communications. Things like what the teacher said, what parents said, what clothes one wore the first day in kindergarten and so on, those latent memories which are normally forgotten, will be uncovered with the help of hypnosis.

Actually, Buddhism offers a better way to reduce mental activities and develop inner potential, that is, concentrated meditation practice. In the stillness of samadhi meditation, body structure can be changed, memories of past life recalled and many inner capabilities such as divine eye developed. The so-called divine eye refers to the ability to see faraway people and objects or super fine substance that normally cannot be seen. This is also the method used to attain realization by the exoteric school of Buddhism. First, practice *śamatha* to slowly reduce discursive thoughts and then, abiding in this state, strive to attain realization of emptiness. Only when mind stays very still is realization of emptiness possible to attain.

The *Tsa lung* practice of subtle channels and wind in Vajrayana also uses the same rationale as the practice can produce the same effect as death. The practice of samadhi meditation is taking a very mild approach to gradually calm the mind, whereas *Tsa lung* practice aims to eliminate discursive thoughts by force. Either way, their purpose and effect are the same, that is, by removing rambling and

negative thoughts, luminous clarity naturally reveals itself.

In short, deep sleep, death, *Tsa lung* practice and attaining the fourth dhyāna of meditation all have the same effect of calming the mind.

## VI. The development stage of Vajrayana practice and the cycle of life

In Vajrayana, there is a yidam practice in the development stage that is based on the course of life. As not everyone has received the proper empowerment, I will only do a simple introduction.

First, visualize the seed syllable HRI ( ཧྲི། ) of Chenrezig becoming a lotus, a mala, or a dharma vessel which is held in the hand of Chenrezig. Then the object held in the hand dissolves into light and transforms into Chenrezig. From here on, the steps are omitted. After the completion of visualization, Chenrezig becoming light dissolves into the practitioner's mind or space, and finally disappears completely.

When practicing the development stage, one must go through three phases: first, before visualizing the yidam, one must practice emptiness for a while and enter into the state of luminosity; second, after practicing loving-kindness and compassion to all sentient beings while in the state of emptiness, proceed to visualize the yidam, recite mantra and so on; third, the yidam dissolves into emptiness again.

All these practices must start with the practice of emptiness

because, at death, the deceased will first go into a thoughtless state, like in a deep sleep, feeling nothing at all. Abiding in the total concentration of emptiness can purify the thoughtless state.

Once waking up from the thoughtless state, the intermediate state sets in. To practice loving-kindness and compassion can purify the intermediate state.

After the intermediate state comes rebirth. When being reborn, other than a few types of being that can form a fully developed body right at the moment of being born, such as birth from an egg or from moisture, most mammals are born from a womb wherein their bodies develop gradually over a period of time. In order to purify this period of body forming, visualization of the seed syllable, the dharma vessel and sometimes even a bindu (dot) should be done step by step. Only at the very end should the body of Chenrezig be visualized in full.

To visualize Chenrezig in full can purify all the life stages from birth to death, removing all that are impure like erasing wrong words or pictures with an eraser. The state of luminosity is like a piece of white paper while samsara the word or picture wrongly written or drawn.

Finally, visualize Chenrezig dissolving into light and vanishing in space, which can purify the process of gradually losing all senses at the time of death.

In order to purify the unconscious state after death, all practices in the development stage end with visualization of dissolving into *dharmadhātu*, the realm of absolute reality.

Although there is no difference between the final results attained by the exoteric or the esoteric school of Buddhism, esoteric Buddhism is a faster route because it offers a variety of practices that correspond to every stage of life. Generally speaking, the exoteric school offers no particular practice on death. Both the Great and the Lesser Vehicle of exoteric Buddhism start with practices of the four foundations of mindfulness; they have yet to incorporate the pure view of *tathāgatagarbha*. With the exoteric practice, it takes a very long time to reach the eighth bhumi of bodhisattva when pure phenomena arise naturally. Hence, achieving accomplishment via the exoteric Buddhist practice tends to come very slowly.

Vajrayana on the other hand offers many practices on death, but one must complete the preliminary practices and receive the requisite empowerment before setting out to practice them. Those wishing to learn further should do it in an orderly fashion, starting from the foundational practice to the more advanced step by step.

## How to Face Death

Life and death are critically important to everyone because they are destiny. No one can reject or avoid suffering associated with birth, aging, sickness, death and real life. Mustering up enough courage to face it is the only way.

When facing death, all the worldly wealth, knowledge, experience and so forth are rendered useless. Without prior training in preparation for one's mortality, every person, however prominent his or her status in life is, will panic in the face of death. Many people become extremely pessimistic and despaired, turning gray-faced and gaunt in no time, after being diagnosed with advanced cancer and given the verdict of death by the doctors. Very often their fear is more detrimental to their condition than cancer itself.

Most people just feel helpless about how to face death. If the whole process of death can be transformed into a joyful and meaningful journey of liberation, then there is no need to feel anxious and doomed.

Here, we will discuss the part about how to face death in the Tibetan text *Bardo Tödröl* or *Liberation through Hearing during the Intermediate State*. Due to the fact that *Bardo Tödröl* is a Dzogchen text, one must receive Dzogchen empowerment and complete the five preliminary practices beforehand in order to make in-depth study of the text. Otherwise, it is considered a violation of the sequence of learning the esoteric teachings of Vajrayana when giving the teachings to someone unqualified. Not only that this is a fault, but also the teachings cannot benefit anyone not meeting the requirement. Therefore, the special practices of Vajrayana in this text will not be discussed here.

It is presented in *Bardo Tödröl* two types of method to face death: one is how to face death personally; the other is how to help others face death, such as reciting scriptures or mantras at the time of death or practicing the transference of consciousness, a post-mortem ritual, which, like the hospice care service in the West, are particularly helpful for the terminally ill patients. The instructions given in *Bardo Tödröl* are not available anywhere in the regular studies except in Tibetan medicine where they are somewhat mentioned.

## I. To face death right

To know death correctly can help us overcome fear, anxiety and evasion when death is mentioned because we already know that death is only a part of the cyclic process of life, not the end. There is no need to feel disheartened and pessimistic when facing death. On the

contrary, we may even be able to elevate our life to a different level when in death if we know how to make use of the opportunity.

From death to rebirth, there are at least more than a few chances for a person to obtain liberation, attain Buddhahood or be reborn in *Sukhāvatī* (pure land of Amitabha) if one has grasped the pith instructions on death. Short of attaining Buddhahood or being reborn in Amitabha's pure land, by applying the pith instructions on death, one can also freely choose to be reborn in the human realm, having a life endowed with freedom and leisure to practice the Dharma and ultimately gain liberation. Having grasped the pith instructions, one is no longer just at the mercy of past karmic force when taking rebirth. Absent this knowledge, one will miss all the opportunities to be free from the control of karmic force time and time again. It is therefore crucial to learn the pith instructions on death.

### ***i. Premonitory symptoms of death***

First of all, how does one know he or she is dying? Premonitory symptoms of death have been mentioned in many Dzogchen texts. Among them, a lucid explanation is presented in Longchenpa's *The Seminal Quintessence of the Spiritual Master*.

Premonitory symptoms come in many types: psychological, physical, dreaming, distant, near, very near, etc. When a distant symptom appears, a person will die in two to three years time. Some symptoms indicate a person may die in one year, six months or a few months while some

others within a few days. However, we normally don't pay any attention to these premonitions because we don't know they are signs of death.

The nearest symptoms indicate a person will die in a couple of hours or less than 20 hours after such signs appear. For example, when eyes can still see but the vision is blurring; ears can hear but the sound is faint, as if it comes from very far away. When these happen, one should know that death is already very near.

But when a distant symptom is recognized, one cannot just use Phowa practice to reach death directly as it would amount to killing a life. What should be done is to engage in Amitayus long life practice to turn away death temporarily. If this fails to avert death after repeated attempts, one should take the following measures.

It is said in *Bardo Tödröl* that a good practitioner would know the time of his or her own death. Naturally, those who don't practice have no way of knowing this. Being students of Buddhadharma, we ought to tell the doctor this, "Please tell me truthfully if I can't be cured. I will not be afraid as I am a practitioner and I need to prepare myself for dying in advance." If the doctor still withholds the truth, then observe the attitude of people around.

## ***ii. The key points for facing death in exoteric Mahayana Buddhism***

### ***1. Let go of attachment to the worldly wealth of this life***

Give away all your properties and belongings to do good deeds,

either donate to charity schools, social welfare organizations, or make offering to the buddhas and sanghas, release live beings, etc. It is also fine to leave a portion to your offspring. Albeit not the best kind, it is still considered a type of giving after all. Just don't get attached or be reluctant to give up anything or anybody. Even just a tiny bit of attachment can become a hindrance to rebirth.

### ***2. Do not fear death and generate virtuous aspirations***

Be sure to tell yourself, "Being separated from beloved family members forever is indeed a huge blow, but living and dying, joy and sorrow, separation and gathering of sentient beings are nothing but the natural law of life. All seven billion people in the world will face death at some point. I'm not the only one." By thinking this way, you will not feel too distraught with your own death.

Normally, one ought to strive to repent past unwholesome deeds, but when nearing death, one should not take one's evil karma too seriously, worrying and regretting so much that one loses focus on the crucial practice at hand. This would be a big problem otherwise. Instead, one should think to oneself this way: although I have committed serious misdeeds, I have also done many good things so that most of the faults should have been cleansed already; it can't be too bad. It is important to treat one's evil karma rather lightly at this point in order to quiet the mind and face death calmly.

Additionally, one should make a vow according to the teaching of

*Seven Points of Mind Training:* May I come upon Mahayana Buddhism, meet a good spiritual friend who can explain to me the teachings of the Great Vehicle and arouse bodhicitta in all the lives to come.

Any thought held on deathbed can exert a crucial effect on death. Any aspiration made before death commands great power as well. Thus, do your best to generate virtuous aspirations when death is near. Make sure not to harbor any hatred or complaint toward anyone, anything, or the society as a whole. Lay down all your bags of desire, anger and delusion, and go on a brand new journey of life with total ease. It will be hard to say, however, whether one can encounter Mahayana teachings again in the next life if such aspiration is not generated near the end of this life.

### ***3. Break down self-grasping and self-cherishing***

At the same time, one should also ponder the reason why having gone through countless times of life and death since time immemorial, one fails to gain liberation every single time. One toils hard over the few decades of living in this world, only realizing at the end of life that none of life's work is helpful toward a person's liberation and rebirth. And the reason for the countless failures is none other than self-grasping. Due to self-grasping and self-cherishing, one only loves oneself, is interested in serving just oneself and disregards the needs and feelings of other beings. This time, with the pith instructions on death finally in hand, one must resolve to destroy self-grasping and self-cherishing.

### ***4. The power of induction***

There are quite a few cases using the power of induction in daily life. For example, if you must get up at five o'clock in the morning the next day, when you're about to fall asleep, you resolve to do that by repeatedly telling yourself, "I must wake up at five tomorrow morning." This way you can be sure to get up on time the next day.

Arhats also do the same before entering into deep concentration. If they prepare to remain in deep concentration for seven days, they will make a vow right before that: I must emerge from the meditation on the seventh day. Doing this will ensure that they can end the meditation naturally on that day. This is the power of induction.

It can also be used when facing death. Upon knowing that you are about to leave this world and enter into death, you must remind yourself: In a while, I will enter into a deep coma and then wake up from it. When I wake up and see the surroundings, I must tell myself that I am already dead. At this point, I must not be frightened but try to look for a better place to be reborn. I must also resolve not to forget compassion and bodhicitta when taking rebirth and to bring compassion and bodhicitta with me to the next life.

Our mind already has such capability. So we should do all we can to develop this capability. This is the power of induction to be used at time of dying.

### ***5. Need to visualize the deities in the course of dying***

### ***iii. The key points for facing death in Vajrayana Buddhism***

In Vajrayana, there are two methods that are the best for facing death: one is the Phowa practice, the other is the special pith instructions of Secret Mantra.

If possible, it would be ideal to invite one's own master to come over and explain what may happen when going through death and the important points to keep in mind. This is common practice in Tibet. Upon hearing that someone is going to die soon, the master will set out immediately to go to that person. It is best to reach that person before death to give all the crucial instructions in time for the dying person to use soon after. The result may not be as good if the person dies before the master's arrival. If the master is not able to come, ask an experienced Vajrayana practitioner who is close to the dying person to do the same; if this is not possible, it is just as good to ask a Vajrayana practitioner who keeps relatively pure samaya to give reminders to the dying person.

## II. The specifics to be done for the dying:

### ***1. Transmit precepts and give empowerment***

If the dying person has never received any precepts before, either precept for taking refuge or that of lay practitioners, transmit whichever is needed. If the precepts received before have somehow been broken, now

is the time to restore them. In Tibet, when a person is about to die and if time permits, the dying person must be given the chance to receive empowerment. If empowerment is received at time of dying, there will be no chance of breaking the Vajrayana vows. Hence the precept will be kept pure when the person is leaving this world, which can favorably influence the direction of rebirth to the next life. It is therefore critically important to be able to receive precepts and empowerment at time of dying.

### ***2. Repent***

Now is also the time to have the master or dharma friends guide the dying person to repent the unwholesome deeds committed. Even if the person is no longer able to speak or kowtow to show regrets, just holding a sense of remorse in mind is enough to purify past misdeeds.

### ***3. Let go***

Make sure to remind the dying: do not miss, complain or hate this world. Everything is finished. All will be left behind and all relationships ended. You should focus all your attention on the big questions of how to face death, how to take rebirth and how to meet the next life. Let go of all entanglements of this life and go without any burden!

There is a specific sadhana for the intermediate state, of which the content is just what we have discussed here. If this sadhana is available, all one needs to do is to read it to the dying person.

#### 4. Posture

The posture that one takes at time of death is quite important. When dying, one should keep the same lying position as that of Sakyamuni Buddha when he went into parinirvana—head to the north, feet south, lying on the right side of the body, placing right hand under the head, pressing the right nostril with the right little finger and breathing through the left nostril. It is said in the scriptures that when lying on the right side of the body, breathing will naturally go through the left nostril. Nevertheless, it is still important to block the right nostril. Whether being Buddhist or not, by taking the right posture when dying, one can be sure not to take rebirth in the three lower realms for the next one or two lives, even without the help of any other transference ritual.

It is rather rare to see the lying Buddha being worshipped in either Tibetan or Chinese Buddhism. However, Theravada Buddhism holds that parinirvana of the Buddha represents the ultimate state that can possibly be attained. Hence, the statue of the lying Buddha, which signifies the Buddha's parinirvana, is commonly seen in the temples of Southern Buddhism such as those in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries. This interpretation is not incorrect as the Buddha never really dies.

If no one is available to give reminders and one has to rely on oneself to navigate the passage of rebirth, the first thing one should do is to be penitent and give up all desires and animosity toward this world. While one is still capable of speech, be sure to tell family members to lay one on one's right side when dying. To all people

alike, death is more critical than birth so that the wishes of the dying really should be honored by all concerned.

#### 5. Phowa practice

The practice includes the phowa of the *dharmakāya*, *sambhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya*. As the ones related to *dharmakāya* and *sambhogakāya* are the same as that presented in *A Guide to the Dzogchen Preliminary Practices*, they won't be discussed here. The phowa of the *nirmāṇakāya* is common for both the exoteric and the esoteric schools of Buddhism.

After lying down on the right side, one should place in the front an image of Sakyamuni Buddha, Chenrezig, Padmasambhava or one's own root guru. Practitioners of Pure Land should place that of Amitabha while those who have done yidam practice should use the image of the yidam. At the same time, family members should help prepare offerings to the deities. If no image of the deity can be found, visualization by the dying person is also acceptable.

Then generate aspiration: In order to deliver all sentient beings, may I with this death attain the *nirmāṇakāya*, be the heir to the Buddhas of the three times and continue the activities of benefitting sentient beings forever.

Subsequently, visualize one's own consciousness as a white dot (a point of light) touched with a tinge of red below the navel. As one pulls air up from the abdomen with some force, the dot also

moves up along the central channel. When it reaches the left nostril, one exclaims, “Ho!” and immediately pushes out the consciousness from the left nostril, which dissolves into the heart of the yidam or one’s root guru who is placed in the front; the dot is not retrieved. It is also practicable to visualize the guru or the deities flying higher and higher to the Pure Land of the West, taking along one’s consciousness. To visualize this just once cannot ensure the chance of being reborn in the Pure Land of the West. But one can be sure to succeed if the visualization is practiced enough times.

The method of visualizing consciousness getting out from the left nostril is primarily for those who have cultivated certain virtuous root but whose practice is still somewhat lagging. It is not a method for attaining liberation but only for being reborn in the human realm so as to continue Dharma practice until finally obtaining liberation.

For the deceased, it is critically important where consciousness leaves the body at the end. The principle of Phowa practice is such that consciousness must go through the central channel and out from the center of the vertex in order to gain liberation and be reborn in a pure Buddha field.

The mark of a successful Phowa is that after death, there is visible hair loss, a bump or some yellow liquid seeping around the vertex. These marks serve as proof of successful rebirth. If these symptoms are present, the subsequent guide for the practice of the intermediate state will no longer be needed. If not, the guru or dharma friends will need to provide guide for the practice of the intermediate state.

## ***6. Guide for the practice of the intermediate state***

First of all, next to the ear of the dying person, call out his or her name three times. Then say, “so-and-so, you must pay full attention to what I’m saying. You are dying, but don’t be afraid because death is only a periodic phenomenon of life. You should face each juncture of death based on what I tell you.”

When assisting in recitation for the dying, one should speak loudly and repeatedly to the ear of the dying person about the process of the intermediate state and the way to practice it. The voice should be as loud as possible because all the sense organs of the dying person are about to stop functioning. If the voice is too low or too far, it may not be heard. We can also imitate some masters in the past who spoke through a pipe attached to the dying person’s ear. The purpose of doing this is perhaps on the one hand to make sure the instructions can be heard and, on the other hand, to prevent casual spectators from hearing these instructions and safeguard the secrecy of Dzogchen practices.

In the old days, the transmission of Dzogchen was strictly controlled. It was always done on a one-on-one basis and never more than seven or eight people at a time. The transmission was also conducted by whispering through a pipe into the ears of the receiver – hence called whispered-ear transmission.

It is as if a king or a person with authority orders someone to hand-deliver a message. The messenger will do everything he or she can to deliver the message to the right place or the right person

without fail. In the case of Phowa, the dying person at the juncture of life and death will surely listen carefully and follow the instructions on the passage of the intermediate state and how to face it.

### ***7. The way to take rebirth in emergency***

When encountering sudden situations like earthquake, tsunami, or car accident, one should use a short cut to ensure rebirth in pure land: Visualize the Buddha, bodhisattvas and one's guru sitting atop one's head, and concentrate all attention on the vertex. This simple method, also the easiest, can help you achieve a good rebirth.

It is common knowledge for students of Vajrayana or ordinary Tibetan people to call out to Padmasambhava, Buddha Sakyamuni, or their own guru whenever they are scared, even when they are unconscious. This is a very simple habit that can also engender much benefit, so we should do likewise. For example, one can make it a habit to call and to pray to Amitabha whenever convenient so that when a critical moment comes, the mind will go to Amitabha instinctively.

On the other hand, a better way for practitioners to continue to the next new life is through training in meditation.

We should neither be scared of nor ignore death. Abandon these two extremes but face death with a calm and peaceful mindset instead, and strive to elevate our own life to a different level in the course of death.

## III. Key points about chanting for the dead

Buddhists should have team spirit, helping and caring for one another. To offer prayer chanting at the time of death is the last and the best help of its kind.

Nowadays, some Buddhist groups are also promoting this idea and have teams set up to do the chanting specifically. It is a useful and needed service for everyone. We should all respond positively to this activity.

### ***1. Criteria for the chanters***

There are three criteria for people doing the chanting:

1. The chanting should be done out of loving-kindness and compassion instead of flaunting one's own ability to communicate with Amitabha, to assist the deceased to be reborn in pure land, or any such intention to prove one's superiority. It is simply wrong to perform chanting with arrogance or the intent to show off. Moreover, during the course of the death rites, one must repeatedly remind oneself to generate loving-kindness and compassion, even contrived generation is acceptable because absent loving-kindness and compassion, there is no way to help the deceased take an auspicious rebirth. This is a very important point to note.

2. One must firmly believe that both the sadhana and the rites performed have the power to guide the deceased to an auspicious

rebirth. Otherwise, how can the deceased benefit from these actions when even the performer has doubts?

3. In the course of chanting for the dead, one must pray with pure faith to Amitabha, the Medicine Buddha, Buddha Sakyamuni, or other buddhas to come take the deceased to Amitabha's pure land. Visualize the consciousness of the deceased leaving his or her body and entering into the heart of Amitabha. Be sure to concentrate fully on the visualization from beginning to end.

It is stated very clearly in the scriptures that beings in the intermediate state are endowed with paranormal power which enables them to read the minds of those performing the death rites. If those people are scatter-brained, lethargic, or worse, filled with greed, anger and delusion, the intermediate beings will form an aversion toward them as a result. And such aversion will cause the intermediate beings to be reborn in the hell realm. It is therefore so critical to have loving-kindness and compassion when performing chanting for the dead. Moreover, it should be done with keen attention, not superficially or inattentively.

The point is that being unmindful while in sitting meditation affects just one's own practice, but it will cast a negative effect on other people when chanting for the dead.

As long as these three criteria are satisfied, people are qualified to be members of the chanting group even if they don't have any other merit from Dharma practice. However, if someone has

violated root samaya and refused to repent for more than three years, it would be better not to join the chanting group as the negative force associated with breaking root vows does affect others to a certain degree.

## ***2. How to handle the body and the possessions of the dead***

If the family agrees, go to the home of the deceased to do chanting; if not, take the body to a temple and do chanting there. If neither works, it would be best to go out of town where other people won't be disturbed, find a suitable house or room and prepare a simple shrine inside. After completion of chanting, remove the body for cremation.

It is better not to cremate the body in the first three days. If possible, members of the chanting group can take turns to chant the names of the buddhas and their mantras non-stop for three whole days or as much as possible. Cover the body with dharani blanket and drawings of various radial patterns that represent the mandala of the buddhas, which can all be cremated along with the body.

If the deceased wears a locket containing a text of a tantra (*takdrol* given as liberation through wearing), place this on top of his or her heart center and cremate together with the body. Be sure not to take this for personal use as it is deemed a serious wrongdoing. It is clearly stated in the Dzogchen texts that all the protective objects carried by the deceased must be cremated with the body.

### ***3. The best time to perform chanting for the dead***

When a person is about to stop breathing, he or she will exhale deeply but not inhale. This indicates that the person will soon pass away and it would be best to give him or her some blessed nectar pills at this point. If the person can still inhale and exhale, it means death is not imminent, at least not right away. It is said in the tantric texts that as a person stops breathing, blood in the arteries and veins will go to the life vein. When three drops of blood enter the heart successively, the person will exhale deeply once after each drop. Afterwards, breathing will stop completely.

The face of ordinary people who have not done any practice when alive will turn to a bluish color of death right after breathing stops. From the time when vision and hearing cease functioning to the point before breathing stops is the best time to chant and perform Phowa.

### ***4. The way to perform chanting for the dead***

When chanting, do not stand by the feet of the deceased because it will lead the person's focus downward which tends to affect rebirth negatively. As a person is about to stop breathing, one must stand at the crown of the person's head, which is the north, pulling constantly the hair at the vertex, patting the head lightly and say to the deceased loudly, "Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of great compassion, is on top of your head. Please pray to him wholeheartedly. You are leaving soon. Focus all your attention on the vertex wherefrom you will be leaving."

If a person has been dead for a long time, all these would be useless.

When chanting is done for non-believers, one can recite the name of Buddha Ratnasikhi "Namo Buddha Ratnasikhi" or the various titles of Buddha "Namo Sugata, Sambuddha, the one worthy of offering,... Tathagata Ratnasikhi" because the aspiration of Buddha Ratnasikhi is different from other buddhas. His vow is this: May all beings who have heard my name or titles be freed from the three lowest realms. Therefore, reciting his name garners exceptional meaning.

Besides, chanting the names of Buddha Sakyamuni, Amitabha, the Medicine Buddha and other buddhas as well as the Great Compassion Mantra, the heart mantra of Buddha Akshobhya and others is extremely important for those who are nearing death. These recitations are sure to bless the deceased to take an auspicious rebirth.

If the deceased is a Vajrayana practitioner, he or she should be reminded this way, "so-and-so, in a little while, you will see the mandalas of many buddhas and bodhisattvas as well as many horrific scenes, but they are not external devils but projections, manifestations and the nature of our mind, just like dreams. Don't be afraid. Don't miss this world. You should visualize all these angry and terrible faces as Chenrezig or Amitabha; in fact, they are Chenrezig and Amitabha. Then, you should just follow Chenrezig and Amitabha to the Western Pure Land."

If the dying person is somewhat familiar with the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, read the three kinds of *Aspiration Prayers for Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State* which are available in *Wisdom Light*, Vol.7. This is the most useful and powerful text to

be used for this occasion. Subsequently, recite three or seven times Karma Chagme's *Aspiration Prayer of Sukhavati*, and lastly *The Aspiration of Samantabhadra*.

In everyday life, when we see in the market or some other places the animals who are about to be killed, we should try to chant the name of Buddha Ratnasikhi to their ears, and make the animals lie on their right side, face to the west, head to the north. This will bring unexpected benefit to the animals. Although non-Buddhists may not understand such actions, they at least would not deem these actions harmful and put a stop to them.

Neither should we think of all these as nonsense, as these were practiced by masters in the past, so there must be reasons for doing so.

We should know that traditional custom of offering flower, bathing and putting on new clothes for the dead only shows our emotional attachment to the deceased. It is not meaningful at all in a real sense because at this point the body of the dead, like a stone or mud, can no longer feel anything. If we want to give the deceased one last meaningful gift for his or her final journey, it is the chanting which is simple and easy to do and of great benefit. If the deceased received some form of training in life and has the help of dharma friends at this critical juncture, he or she will surely be able to take an auspicious rebirth. Do keep this in mind.

## How to Take Rebirth

Death is not the end of life, as there is still rebirth after death. We have experienced death countless times, but cannot recall any of them today. To people who seek ultimate liberation, it is highly important to face up to the matter of life and death. Not only do we need to know how to face death, but also how to take rebirth.

In some of the exoteric Buddhist texts, there are descriptions of the after-death states and the course of rebirth, but not how to turn death into a way of practice nor how to take rebirth. Whereas in *Bardo Tödröl*, the whole process from death to rebirth and the way to guide the deceased to liberation from the intermediate state are all elucidated in details; even when liberation is beyond reach, instructions on how to choose a better rebirth are offered as well. It can be said that *Bardo Tödröl* completely fills a gap left in the exoteric scriptures.

However, *Bardo Tödröl* is a Vajrayana text, and particular attention is placed on adhering to the proper order of learning and practicing

Vajrayana. The designated order of first completing the preliminary practice, receiving empowerment, then learning and practicing tantric teachings is not to be overlooked or violated. If one disregards this sequence of learning the teachings, no benefit can be gained; instead, it is considered an act of stealing the Dharma. Therefore, it is better not to learn the whole content of *Bardo Tödröl* before receiving proper empowerment. To those who have not received empowerment, the discussion here will present some of the contingency measures prescribed in the book when death is near, which are available for common use.

## I. The Vagrant Intermediate State

After waking up from the unconscious state (refer to *What Life Truly Is* for details), one enters the intermediate state.

The deceased in the intermediate state can go to many places and also see many of his or her relatives and friends. But at the beginning, the deceased is usually not aware that he or she is already dead. So how would one know that one is already dead after waking up from the unconscious state? It is said in *Bardo Tödröl* that when the deceased cannot see his/her own image in a mirror or in a pool of water nor any footprints left when walking on a beach, or when the deceased feels surrounded, like in a large concert hall, by very loud and strong music coming from all directions, or hears the sound of raging thunder or that of many people talking and singing in a strange way, he/she should immediately come to the realization: 'Now I'm already dead. These

sounds are all that of the intermediate state. I must not be afraid but face the situation as I have been trained to do.'

It is said in the scriptures that because intermediate beings have no physical body, they tend to be very unstable and restless, unable to sit or stand still, just drifting aimlessly, like bodies in a dream. As intermediate beings long for a body of their own, many try to return to their old bodies. However, body and consciousness have separated and the old body is already a past. As the relationship between the body and consciousness has ended, there is no way the intermediate beings can ever go back to their previous bodies. At this point, the deceased who has lost that sense of belonging will feel very sad and distressed. Afterward, the deceased will enter one of the six bardo states, chönyi bardo or the luminous bardo of dharmata.

When entering chönyi bardo, many people will encounter blinding light and frightening thunder-like sound along with numerous Buddha images, mandalas and so forth. Many near-death-experience accounts in the West have also reported similar situations. However, these are mere illusions in the view of scientists. The fact is that these phenomena are not illusions at all but memories beyond the brain.

## II. The process of taking rebirth

In the exoteric scripture *The Sutra of Conception* and the Dzogchen tantras, Buddha Sakyamuni elucidated the process of human conception. After taking rebirth, consciousness enters the zygote and

a life is formed, but not yet with a physical body. First, the cleavage of the zygote begins about one week after the conception and then combine again. A few days after combining, the cell division begins again, and the process repeats itself. The shape of the embryo after each division is clearly described in the scriptures, which completely matches that of modern medicine.

It is said in the scripture that, in the intermediate state, beings don't really know they are going to take rebirth, nor do they know what lies in store for them or how to take rebirth. It goes on to elaborate further: In general, if the intermediate being is going to be reborn in the hell realm, it will feel like going into a dark tunnel or on a dark road; if it is to be reborn in the human realm, it will feel like entering a park or a beautiful palace, so on and so forth. In my book *The Stories of Transmigration*, there is a story about a person recalling the process of his own rebirth:

There was a person named Tian San-niu in Shanxi Province, China. Once, a pouring rain destroyed his cave house and he was crushed to death. When he came around and regained consciousness, he had no idea that he was already dead, thinking only that he struggled to crawl out from a mudslide. He then went home excitedly to his wife and said, "I almost died today, but luckily I didn't." But his wife ignored him. He went to his son but was given a blank look. He got so furious with their indifference and decided to leave home. As he came to town and walked by the gate of a park, he suddenly felt like going into the park and sitting for a while. However, he found the gate was

closed. When he felt the gate was pushed open by him, he was born.

He was completely at a loss as to how he passed the nine months from death to rebirth. It seemed to him that he had only stayed in town for a short while.

He could speak right after he was born. Thinking this is a bad omen, his relatives were ready to throw him into the poop pit, if not for his mother's insistence on keeping him. He recalled many details about his past life; scenes after decades passed were still vividly remembered. This is not hearsay as people in the vicinity all knew about this.

At that time, *Bardo Tödröl* was only available in Tibetan language. There was no way that Tian and his relatives could have read this book, but the process they described was exactly the same as that presented in *Bardo Tödröl*. It just proves that transmigration does exist, and the process of dying as given in the Buddhist scriptures is valid and believable.

### III. Pith instructions on liberation in the intermediate state

If the deceased received empowerment in his or her lifetime and was a serious practitioner, the guru or dharma friends can guide the deceased to liberation now by following the instructions contained in *Bardo Tödröl*. If liberation is not attained at this stage, the deceased will face rebirth next.

When rebirth is about to take place, the bardo being will encounter a man and a woman in sexual intercourse. If the being is to be reborn

as a male, it will feel anger and jealousy toward the man but desire for the woman; if the being is to be born as a female, it will harbor anger and jealousy toward the woman but desire for the man. As long as desire and anger are both present, rebirth will take place immediately. The first few months after taking rebirth, one remains unconscious. Because this period of unconsciousness lasts a long time, one forgets everything that happened in the last life after being born.

Upon seeing sexual union between a male and a female in the intermediate state, do not feel jealous or angry but know right away this is not real, that it just signifies the time for taking rebirth is near. If one wishes to gain liberation at this point, take one of the three following measures:

1. For realized practitioners, abide in emptiness and pure awareness to finally attain enlightenment.
2. Immediately visualize oneself as the yidam, such as Chenrezig, Manjusri, Ksitigarbha, Vajrakilaya, Buddha Sakyamuni, etc. If one does not have a particular yidam, just visualize Chenrezig, because the great compassion of Chenrezig is the most helpful for beings in the intermediate state. Subsequently, visualize Chenrezig slowly dissolving from the edges into a ball of light and finally disappearing into emptiness.

For those who do not normally practice, such visualization would be kind of hard to do. So quickly take up your practice now, starting with the preliminary practices, then the generation stage and yidam practices afterwards. To follow this sequence is very important. Of the five inner preliminary practices, the Vajrasattva and Guru Yoga practices

are of the generation stage practice. If the bardo being was proficient in practice when alive, there is a chance that liberation can be attained directly through pure awareness or yidam in the intermediate state, thus taking no rebirth. Even failing this, one can still use this method to choose one's direction and innate gifts in the next life. However, if this still fails to work and the image of a man and a woman in sexual union continues to appear, and desire and anger cannot be kept under control, the third option should be employed.

3. Not to visualize oneself as the yidam but visualize the couple having intercourse as Guru Rinpoche and his consort Yeshe Tsogyal, i.e., the same visualization as in the practice of Guru Yoga. Then visualize receiving empowerment from Guru Rinpoche and his consort. Based on the teaching of Guru Yoga, when receiving empowerment, visualize the guru dissolving into light and merging with one's own body so that one's obstacles are all removed and one attains the same perfect accomplishment in body, speech and mind as Guru Rinpoche. This is to receive empowerment. Afterwards, pray to Guru Rinpoche with pure faith to take one to *Sukhāvātī* or the Copper-Colored Mountain, or to be reborn as a human with leisure and endowments in order to continue practicing the Dharma. If one can practice sufficiently well at this time, one will not encounter phenomena of the intermediate state anymore and go directly to *Sukhāvātī* or other buddha field.

It is also stated in *Bardo Tödröl* that there are high, medium and low levels of instructions, altogether up to 30 of them, on gaining

liberation in the bardo or taking rebirth. There are corresponding instructions for every stage. If practitioners fail to succeed at any one stage, there will be other opportunities to gain liberation in the subsequent stages. Therefore, if one can concentrate and follow the guidance of the master and dharma friends, liberation can surely be attained within 49 days. However, this is based on the premise that one learned and repeatedly practiced the teachings while still alive. Just like dancing, one must learn the basic steps first and practice diligently over a long period of time before going on the stage to perform. Be sure to remember all the key teachings of this practice.

If not even the third method can effectively control the feeling of desire and jealousy that one has when seeing the sexual act, it means the quality of one's practice is not up to standard. In this case, liberation can no longer be attained in the intermediate state; one has no choice but to take rebirth.

#### IV. Pith instructions on how to take rebirth

Unless grave misdeeds such as the Five Hellish Deeds are committed, which will lead directly to rebirth in Avici, the lowest hell realm, sentient beings who have accumulated countless karma for the realms of animals, hungry ghosts and hell since time immemorial can still eliminate the cause of falling into the evil realms and change the direction of rebirth during the intermediate state.

There are two choices when taking rebirth: 1. to be reborn

in *Sukhāvati* or other buddha fields; 2. to be reborn in human households which are already practicing members of the Buddha family or positively inclined to practice the Dharma.

#### *To be reborn in Sukhāvati*

There is no need to visualize anything when taking rebirth, just pray earnestly to Amitabha, generate strong faith and aspiration to take rebirth in *Sukhāvati* and rely on Amitabha wholeheartedly to take one to the pure land of Amitabha. However, this is a very difficult route.

In my book *The Stories of Transmigration*, there is a story about a great tertan who via certain practice was able to converse with his dead brother in the intermediate state. But we should be careful not to mistake this communication for mediumship in the Western sense—the practice of mediums bringing back the spirit of the dead and communicating with it. According to the Buddhist view, this is impossible as the deceased will normally take rebirth quickly. By the time the mediums try to call the spirit back, the deceased could either be a human or an animal. How can the same person be brought back?

Perhaps some may ask, “How come the mediums can tell the details of the deceased's life?”

A sutra in the Mahayana Tripitaka clearly explains this:

Once, a respectable elder of the Sakya clan died. His family and friends, wishing to bury him with the highest honor accorded to a chief,

prepared the finest clothes and food as offering. Kneeling before the deceased, they cried, “These are our offering to you... Please enjoy.”

A disciple asked Buddha Sakyamuni, “Can the deceased actually eat the food and use the objects so offered?”

The Buddha replied, “A person will take rebirth very quickly after death and may already be in the realm of animals, hungry ghosts or celestial beings, so there is no possibility for the deceased to eat or use whatever is offered. The only time that the dead and the living can possibly meet is in dreams. The deceased cannot come back under any other circumstances except this. Therefore, making offering to the dead is just a superstitious practice; it gives no real benefit to the deceased.”

The disciple asked again, “Then why does it sometimes appear that the deceased is brought back to carry a conversation or tell the details of his or her previous life?”

The Buddha answered, “This is not really the deceased who is talking but a being of the hungry ghost realm possessing some supernatural power, who knows the past life of the dead and pretends to be the deceased in order to partake of the offering.”

According to the Vajrayana teachings, there are ways to bring back the bardo being before rebirth takes place. Bardo being, the deceased who is in the intermediate state, is able to enjoy the offerings only through the blessing of samadhi, one-pointedness of mind or the sadhana of Vajaryana practice. The most important is to guide the

deceased to *Sukhāvatī* by the power of meditative concentration.

The previously mentioned great tertön used just this method to see his dead brother. His brother said to him, “I only had little more than thirty years to live, hardly long enough to enjoy the good times in life. I really don’t want to go to *Sukhāvatī*.” His brother also acknowledged this is karmic obstruction. It shows that when karmic obstructions are so great, even Amitabha’s pure land is made less enticing.

Therefore, it is important to train well while still alive as wrong thoughts may inadvertently turn up at the crucial moment otherwise. Only those who have been trained in these practices over a long period of time can maintain the right view at all times. After death, by praying to Amitabha, they can successfully take rebirth in *Sukhāvatī*.

It is said in the scripture that ten persons cannot move a heavy log on the ground, but one person can easily pull the log if it’s thrown in the water. Similarly, it is very difficult for sentient beings to go to *Sukhāvatī* when alive, but much easier while in the intermediate state. It is because beings in the intermediate state, the bardo beings, have no actual body, only mental body—body created by consciousness. Just like in the outer space where there is zero gravity, a little push can point a body to a different direction; mental body can be led to *Sukhāvatī* with just a little guidance. Of course, one can also choose to be reborn in the pure realms of Maitreya or Padmasambhava, but *Sukhāvatī* is the most ideal and the easiest to go to, and one will never go back to samsara again from *Sukhāvatī*. At the same time, we must also take note that if there is any negative condition at this

point such as the arising of an evil thought, it will be equally easy to fall into the lower realms.

In case of failing to take rebirth in *Sukhāvātī*, one can only resort to the second method.

### ***To be reborn as human with leisure and endowments***

The most important element of being reborn in the human realm is aspiration. One should think this way: Now it looks like I can only take rebirth in the human realm. Even so, I must choose to be born in a Buddhist-friendly family. Throughout this life, I will spread Buddhadharma and help sentient beings to be free from all suffering. It is also mentioned in the sutras that one should take rebirth in a family neither too wealthy nor too poor. A very rich family can make it hard for me to give up the family wealth. And I will likely be forced to form my own family to continue and protect the family heritage; learning the Dharma and leading a monastic life would be out of the question. But being born into a poor family will leave no chance for Dharma practice as most of my time and energy will be spent on making ends meet. Therefore, there is an aspiration prayer in the Theravada precept, which is often recited by followers of other schools as well. The prayer goes, “May I be reborn in a middle-class family, not too rich, not too poor; afterwards, may I have the chance to be a monastic and practice Dharma.” Although this is a Theravada aspiration, Mahayana and Vajrayana practitioners should have the same aspiration.

Such aspiration represents a kind of power of induction which is very effective. After generating the aspiration, one should also pray to the buddhas and bodhisattvas for blessings to make the wish come true. Then one takes rebirth after this prayer is done.

In addition, a Vajrayana method can help one determine one's innate gifts, awareness and temperament after taking rebirth. For example, if one wishes to be very wise, one should visualize mind as the seed syllable  $\text{མྱེ}$  of Manjusri before taking rebirth. If one wishes to have great compassion, mind should be visualized as the seed syllable  $\text{ཨྲ}$  of Chenrezig before taking rebirth. Thus the wish will surely come true.

By using the method mentioned above to take rebirth, one cannot be free from cyclic existence, but there is chance to be a human again with leisure and endowments, to encounter Buddhadharma and be able to attain accomplishment more quickly by undertaking to practice once again. However, this is just a measure of expediency when there is no other option.

It is stated in both the exoteric and esoteric texts that when rebirth is about to take place, one may be chased by many people or animals, or encounter snow, hail or heavy rainstorm. In order to find a shelter, one may go into a dark room or tunnel. Unbeknown to many, this actually signifies taking rebirth. Only bodhisattvas of the first bhumi or higher and arhats really understand the significance of such things.

It is important to note at this time that either the chase or the stormy weather is just a sign of rebirth; no one is really chasing from behind.

In this situation, make sure not to go into any dark tunnel, dark roads, or dirty caves. Instead, choose to enter a palace or a nice room, as this would indicate taking rebirth in the higher realms. To choose any other places would represent taking rebirth in one of the three lower realms.

## V. Help the deceased, help self as well

### ***Do not covet the deceased's money and property***

The family and friends of the deceased must pay attention to the 49-day period after death. Although there have been cases of rebirth taking several months, a couple of years or even decades after a person died, the intermediate state of most people lasts no more than 49 days in general. Therefore, it is particularly effective and beneficial to offer transference ritual and perform virtuous deeds on behalf of the deceased.

It is also clearly stated in the Vajrayana texts as well as in the *Collection of Mahayana Abhidharma* that if parents die, one should use part of their savings to do transference ritual in a monastery and the rest on virtuous deeds such as releasing live beings, building temples or stupas, helping the needed or disaster relief, etc. One should never use the money for one's own purpose. Garments of the deceased can be given away as it would be a waste to just burn them. In case the deceased left no savings, it would also be good that his or her offspring use their own money to do the same.

A special note to those sons and daughters who are Buddhists, it is imperative to keep in mind not to take over the deceased's possessions inappropriately, resulting in bitter family feud. As Buddhists, we should never ignore the principle of cause and effect.

Normally, after taking rebirth, the deceased will not remember his or her previous life, but will know the thoughts of family members and close friends while in the intermediate state. If the deceased happens to understand karma and realizes his/her children are reluctant to use the money to do good deeds on behalf of him/her but divide the money among themselves instead, the deceased may feel sad and angry. Do remember not to do anything that may offend the deceased or arouse the deceased to anger. If anger or hatred is developed in the intermediate state, even the most innocent person can end up in the hell realm.

Similarly, if you realize you are about to die, you should make arrangement for all your possessions in advance—what to donate, what to give to the children, etc. Leave nothing at all behind. It is absolutely necessary to sever all attachment to belongings before dying to avoid any problem in the intermediate state.

In the time of the Buddha, the monastics were allowed to have only one bowl and three sets of clothes; to own more than three sets was deemed violating the precept, the reason being that the Buddha knew attachment impedes liberation.

There was a monk who was so attached to his bowl that he could not even let it go on his deathbed. As a result, he was reborn as a

snake living in this bowl. The Buddha told the disciples that over-attachment to any object, valuable or not, would become a hindrance to liberation. The rich will not be hindered by their wealth to attain liberation if they can properly allocate their assets before death without any reservation and attachment. Conversely, if one cannot forsake attachment to personal belongings, however few and worthless, it will be an obstacle to liberation.

### ***To help guide the deceased to safe passage***

1. To those facing death who know nothing about Buddhism nor have any religious belief, we should say to them, “You are about to leave this world. In a short while, you will encounter many terrifying phenomena. Don’t be scared by the sounds or images appear to you; just face them bravely. At the same time, take refuge, generate bodichitta and rely on the power of the Three Jewels to overcome fear. Keep in mind that you no longer have a physical body at this point. What you have is only an illusory body like the one in a dream. So, nothing can really hurt you except your own fear. You must pray to the Three Jewels and trust their power.”

2. To those who have taken refuge in the Three Jewels but have not learned and practiced the Dharma, when facing death we can only help them pray to the Three Jewels and the guru and ask for help. At the same time, also recite the bardo prayers such as *Prayer for Deliverance from the Perilous Straits of the Bardo*. It would be best to read the prayers everyday and memorize them while still alive. Then, in the

intermediate state, if one can recite the prayers and arouse strong faith in the Three Jewels, one will not be reborn in the three lower realms but be born as a human again with leisure and endowments so as to learn and practice Buddhadharma once more, or be born in the realm of celestial beings. This is officially stated in the sutras.

Thus, we should know just how precious and rare to be humans with leisure and endowments in this life, as human form is not possible without cause and condition but the result of gathering and accumulating merit over many lifetimes in the past. Therefore, we must cherish this life and the opportunity to learn all the precious teachings such as *Bardo Tödröl*, and practice diligently so as to attain liberation in the shortest possible time.

Key Points for

# Practicing Bodhicitta on Deathbed

For those who place sole emphasis on the cultivation of bodhicitta in their lifetimes, the pertinent advice for them when approaching death is to rely on the five powers to navigate their passage to the next life.

## *The power of sowing virtue*

This is to sow the seeds of virtue before the moment of death. To be specific, one must first cut attachment to all possessions and then offer them to the Three Jewels. In doing so, one can also choose to give more to certain virtuous deeds which one considers capable of gathering the most merit. For instance, if one believes liberating living beings to be the most excellent act of virtue, one may offer one-third or a quarter of all properties to the Three Jewels and the rest to freeing lives; or, if one believes offering to the Sangha to be the most meritorious, one can offer most of one's assets to the Sangha, leaving a small portion for other purposes. As exact allocations of assets are not

provided in the sutras, the examples here are for reference only.

## *The power of aspiration*

This is to generate aspiration. If at the time there is still enough strength, one should practice the Seven Branches, including visualization and chanting the prayer. If unable to do so, one should contemplate this way: With all the roots of virtue accumulated over past-present-future lives, may I never forget bodhicitta and be able to cultivate bodhicitta in all future lives. Furthermore, may I have the chance to encounter admirable friends of Mahayana life after life. Then, pray to the guru and the Three Jewels for blessings to have these wishes come true. To wish wholeheartedly in such ways signifies the power of aspiration.

## *The power of refutation*

This is to refute self-grasping. Here it refers not to grasping of the inherent existence of self or phenomena but refuting selfishness arising from such grasping. The key is to abolish this selfishness.

The way is to recognize clearly the cause of one's suffering in countless lifetimes is selfishness. That includes suffering of death in this life as well as innumerable such suffering over previous lifetimes. In the context of relative truth, selfishness is a mistaken concept; in the ultimate truth, there is neither self nor life or death. Therefore, we must resolutely put an end to all those notions born of selfishness, such as "I want", "I hate", "I like", "I" and so forth.

### ***The power of induction***

This is a kind of intention and aspiration as well. For instance, if one wants to get up at five o'clock in the next morning, one must make resolute decision to wake up at that time when going to bed. Once the decision is made, one will naturally wake up on time even without the help of an alarm clock. Similarly, Arhats also rely on the power of induction when getting ready to enter into the state of cessation of feelings and perceptions (*nirodha-samāpatti*). For example, if planning to stay in the state of cessation for five days and emerge on the sixth day, one must make firm this intention before sitting down to meditate. Otherwise, as no thought will arise once entering the state of cessation, it will be impossible to emerge from samadhi on the sixth day without invoking the power of induction in advance. This is a very important point to note.

When death is near, the function of the power of induction is to strengthen the determination to never abandon or forget to practice both aspiration and application bodhicitta from the time of dying, through the bardo state and until all lifetimes to come. To uphold such formidable resolution is the power of induction.

### ***The power of cultivation***

If one is proficient in the practice of aspiration and application bodhicitta when alive and undertakes to practice the same at the time of death, the practice will strengthen in power and guide one through the end of life.

How to conduct the practice at this time is also crucial. If one is able to sit up, adopt the seven-point posture of Vairocana; if not, lie on the right side of the body, hold the cheek with the right hand, then press the right nostril with the right little finger and breathe out through the left nostril. Meanwhile, cultivate loving-kindness and compassion, practice exchanging oneself for others by using the breathing method and so forth. Furthermore, one should know that all internal and external phenomena, either of samsara or nirvana, are manifestations of mind; and that the nature of mind has always been emptiness, devoid of any mental construct, since time immemorial. Once realized, rest the mind in this state of emptiness and wait for the breathing to stop. If breathing continues, repeat this practice once and again until it stops. This is the pith instruction for cultivating bodhicitta at the time of dying.

In *Bardo Tödröl*, such instruction for cultivating bodhicitta is also said to be the best practice, among many others, for the dying. Most of us are already in the process of generating bodhicitta; in case we don't get the chance to practice generation and completion stages before we die, it is good enough to be able to die while cultivating bodhicitta this way. Actually, this is quite a unique instruction for practicing bodhicitta when death is near.

Our revered master H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche chose to go to Amitabha's pure land. Naturally, as followers, we should do likewise. If Pure Land practice has been undertaken on a regular basis, we will know what direction to take when facing death; without any

preparation in advance when alive, we are likely to panic and not know what course to follow at the moment of death. Therefore, we should never underestimate the importance of both the practice and the pith instruction in end-of-life teachings.