

Practices for the Time of Death

[adapted excerpts from the Tibetan Book of the Dead]

I. When death is near (excerpts from pp. 228-230)

Sit near the dying person's head (if you are the main death dula) or wherever appropriate, if you are a supporting presence. Being in the room is not necessary to engage in these practices.

Above the crown of the dying person's head, visualize their benefactor(s) (Buddha, Tara, Jesus, etc).

Whisper into their ear:

O dear one, _____[name]_____, the time has come for you to find the path.

As soon as your breath ceases, the inner radiance will arise. All things will become empty and utterly naked like space. At the same time, a naked emptiness will arise within: radiant, empty and without horizon or center. At that moment, recognize this intrinsic nature and rest in the state of that experience. I will be here to rest in this with you.

If the person dying is a dharma practitioner, the following can be whispered into his or her ear:

O dear one, the time of death is now upon you. Adopt an open, loving attitude and reflect as follows:

‘I have arrived at the time of death, so now, accepting this process of death, I cultivate an open, loving attitude. I meditate on generating loving kindness, compassion and the altruistic intention for enlightenment. For the benefit of beings, as limitless as space, I aspire to awaken.’

‘At the very moment of my death, for the sake of all beings, I will recognize death as the arising of the inner radiance. At that time, I will recognize the nature of my mind, and thereby act for the welfare of all beings.

‘Even if I do not recognize the nature of my mind, I will coalesce as a celestial body in the bardo, empowered to shape my own destiny and able to guide others in accordance with his or her needs, acting for the benefit of limitless beings.’

Without giving up the focus on an open, loving attitude, recollect the meditative experiences you developed during your lifetime, on the basis of the teachings you received.

II. When the breath has ceased

Recite the following while pressing the carotid arteries, if possible.

If the person dying is an experienced spiritual teacher:

[Address the person by name]: The inner radiance of the ground is now arising before you. Recognize it, and concentrate directly on this experience. Merge with the radiance.

If the person dying is anyone else:

O dear one, _____[name]_____, listen! Pure inner radiance, reality itself, is now arising before you. Recognize it! O dear one, this radiant expanse is simply your present awareness. It is a brilliant emptiness, beyond substance, beyond characteristics, beyond color, completely empty of inherent existence. Your conscious awareness is manifesting the essential nature of reality, emptiness, spaciousness, openness, the mother primordial Buddha.

Yet this emptiness is not nothingness. Your conscious awareness is endlessly radiant, brilliant and vibrant, the father primordial Buddha.

The union of these two—the emptiness of your own awareness, and its vibrant radiance—is the *dharmakaya*, the Body of Ultimate Reality. This intrinsic awareness manifests as a great field of light, in which radiance and emptiness are indivisible. This itself is the buddhanature of unchanging light, beyond birth and death.

Just to recognize this is enough! Recognize this brilliant clear light as your own innate primordial purity. Gaze directly into this intrinsic awareness! To do so is to abide in the enlightened intention of all Buddhas.

After this recitation, rest in meditation, blending your mind with present wakefulness, the non-dual radiant spacious expanse of primordial awareness. While meditating in this way, invite the awareness of the dying person to join you in the space of your own practice. Invite their mind to blend with yours.

III. After Death, on the same day

An hour or more after death, on the day of the deceased's passing, if the person has had a practice of deity yoga, invite the deceased to remember his/her personal meditation deity (vidam), in order to assist him/her to arise as the radiant light-body of that deity. To assist the heart-mind of the deceased, meditate on their form as the deity and remind them:

O dear one! Meditate that your body is the body of your meditational deity. Do not be distracted! Concentrate intently on this. Your body appears as the deity, yet is without inherent existence, like the reflection of the moon in water. Do not meditate on the deity's body as a solid.

In this form, you are safe, you are fearless, you are joyful, you are free. You are ready to meet the appearances of the bardo as the arisings of your own pristine consciousness.

If you are trained to do so, on the evening of the day of the death, practice the sadhana of your own meditational deity, as a support for the consciousness of your dharma friend.

III. The seven (or up to 49) days after the deceased's passing

(condensed version)

Each day, beginning the day of the death, encourage the deceased to recognize the arisings in the bardo as projections of his/her consciousness, as one recognizes the images in a dream. When these are recognized, the clear light of death can again be encountered directly, and awakening is facilitated.

To assist with this recognition, once per day for seven (or 21 or 49) days, sit in meditation, inviting the mental presence of the deceased into the space with you. Visualize the deceased's Benefactors above and around him or her, protecting and guiding him/her.

To support the invitation of the Benefactors, recite:

O refuge of living beings,
Endowed with compassion,
Endowed with wisdom,
Endowed with clear vision,
Endowed with love,
Buddhas and bodhisattvas, abiding in the ten directions,
By the power of your compassion, come to this place!

O compassionate ones,
Fountains of all-seeing pristine wisdom,
Of loving compassion,
Of effective activity,
Those with the power to grant refuge,
Come to this place!

O compassionate ones,
Grant refuge now to _____[name]_____.
Protect him/her--
Be his/her companion!
Without wavering from your ancient vows, swiftly release the power of your love.
O Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, for the benefit of _____[name]_____, be unsparing in your compassion, skillful means and ability!
Do not allow him/her to fall under the sway of past negative karma.
Activate the seeds of his/her positive actions.
Hold him/her in the energy of your loving kindness, and remain a steadfast guide through the narrow passage of the bardo.

Pause to meditate on the benefactors surrounding the mental body of the deceased, protecting, guiding and supporting him/her.

Then addressing the deceased:

O dear one, however frightening the appearances of the bardo might be, do not forget the following words. Go forward remembering their meaning. The crucial point is that through remembering, recognition is possible:

The bardo appearances are arising before me. Renouncing fear, I will recognize these appearances as my own awareness, manifesting naturally. These are the unfolding of my mind's luminous essence. These lights, sounds and images are the mind experiencing itself, like a dream. There is nothing to fear.

Go forward remembering these words, and dwell on their meaning. Do not forget!

O dear one, when your mind and body separate, the pure luminous apparitions of dharmata will arise, subtle and clear, radiant and dazzling, naturally bright and awesome, shimmering like a mirage on a plain in summer.

Do not be afraid! Do not be awestruck! Remember with certainty that whatever frightening experiences may arise, these are the natural manifestations of the ultimate reality, the essence of your innermost heart-mind. These visions are the natural luminosities of your own buddhanature. Recognize them for what they are!

O dear one, from within these lights, the natural sound of reality will resound, clear and thunderous, reverberating like a thousand peals of thunder. This is the natural sound of the ultimate reality.

Do not be afraid! Do not be awestruck! The body that you now have is called a mental body. It is the product of subtle propensities and not a solid corporeal body of flesh and blood. Therefore whatever sounds, lights and rays may arise, they cannot harm you. For you are beyond death now! It is enough to simply recognize the sounds and luminosities to be manifestations of your own innermost heart-mind. Know that this is the bardo!

O dear one, if you have moved on, after being unconscious, you will awaken from unconsciousness and wonder "what has happened to me?" So recognize this to be the bardo! At this time, aspects of samsara are returned to their own true nature and rearise as lights and sacred bodies.

Turning away from the dull lights, follow the path of the clear bright light. Have confidence in it! Be drawn to the light with longing devotion! This is the light of your Benefactor _____, come to escort you on the treacherous path of the bardo. This is the radiance of the Benefactor's compassion!

Recite to yourself:

*As I roam in samsara, driven by my habitual patterns,
May the transcendent male Buddha draw me forward,
Leading me on the path of radiant light,
Which is the pristine awareness of reality's expanse.
May the supreme female Buddha support me from behind.
And thus encircled, may I be protected
From the fears and projections of the bardo*

And be guided to the domain of an awakened one.

By making this prayer, you will dissolve into rainbow light, and then into the heart of the Buddha and his consort. Becoming one with the wisdom of your benefactors, you will be freed in an instant from the confusion of the bardo, and awaken as the Buddha-body of enjoyment.

Settle into meditation on the nature of awareness, inviting the mind of the deceased to join you in this practice.

Just engaging the practice itself is enough, without needed to remain in the dualistic sphere of separation between the deceased, your mind and the intention to merge them. The power of interdependence, your own compassionate motivation, and the quality of your practice will be enough to provide the vessel for benefit.

Repeat this practice every day for seven days. To chant for the deceased for this long is a great blessing. But thereafter, if wished for, this practice can be continued for up to 49 days, especially if you were a close relative or friend of the deceased.