

DEATH AND DYING

1. Preparations for our own death

We have the opportunity now in this life to prepare for our death and passage through the Bardo.

Any practice, good deeds, accumulation of merit and study is part of this preparation.

So overall the best preparation for death is our current life and practice.

- **Study and reading**

If we have been fortunate enough to attend Tsoknyi Rinpoche's teachings on the Bardo then these are the ideal teachings to revise, listen to if we have the recordings, and study. Additionally there is a brief list of relevant books attached. This is not exhaustive.

- **Practice**

We should strengthen whatever practice we have done and which we have found most beneficial: Mahamudra or Dzogchen or deity practice. If we have received Bardo teachings there are practices included.

- **Practical preparations**

It is important to discuss your wishes for the time leading up to death (if you have such warning or notice) and for your dying with family members so that they are not surprised . These discussions should also include your requests for your funeral.

It may be helpful to discuss these wishes with fellow sangha members if possible.

Some of these wishes require preparation, so it is helpful to collect the practicalities together in a clearly labelled box. A list of suggested possible contents of such a dharma box is attached.

If we are aware that death is approaching, then Rinpoche's advice is to stay in meditative awareness as best we are able, using all the help which we are fortunate to have and facing death with relaxed courage.

2. How can we help others who are dying?

Tsoknyi Rinpoche has given full advice on this in his Bardo retreats. So if we have access to those recordings or transcripts it is worth going back to those.

The writer has attempted to summarise the main points below and apologises for any mistakes or misunderstandings.

The overall advice is to try to seek to facilitate a calm relaxed and hopeful atmosphere.

- **To help dying people who are not Buddhist.**

Rinpoche stresses the need to be skilful, and not to create any negativity. Our speech and help is most beneficial when in accordance with the person's existing beliefs and traditions. It is helpful to give the message that their life is complete, to give hope and try to help them to die with a positive state of mind. It is best to try to talk in the context of their own belief system, e.g. Christianity, Islam, atheism or whatever.

- **To help dying people who are Buddhist practitioners from different traditions.**

Again, it is helpful to relate to the dying person's own tradition and practice, rather than suggesting any different ideas or perspectives. We can assist them to refresh their innermost beliefs and practices. It is usually good to help them to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and to merge their mind with the Buddha, adjusted to their tradition.

- **To help a dying Dharma brother or sister.**

If the dying person is a Dharma brother or sister, meaning somebody who follows the same teachings and practices, then there are many things we can do for her or him. Ideally, he or she should die surrounded by other Dharma practitioners and possibly also with a lama. We can do pujas and meditate and accompany and guide the person through the dying process. Depending upon the teachings and empowerments we have received, we may be able to practice Powa.

We may be able to offer Mendrup (Dharma medicine) or place chakras or mantras on the dying person's body. This is often called liberation through wearing. (See the Bardo package in the Dharma box section for details of these artefacts).

We can sit in meditation. If we have a yidam, then we can visualize ourselves as the deity, merge our minds with the deity's mind and the dying person's mind, and rest in Rigpa. As the person approaches the time of dying we can also say, "Ah Ah Ah. Remember!" We can read a teaching, but not a scary one like the Bardo. Maybe we can give a soft encouragement like "Come on, let go of those things. Recognize the mother luminosity. Rest in Rigpa."

Rinpoche recommends that [The Aspiration Prayer of Samantabhadra](#) is beneficial at this time. (Audio versions are available on YouTube).

It is also helpful, if the dying person has a teacher, to play an audio recording with the teacher's voice so that the person dies hearing the teacher, particularly with a teaching about what to do during the process of dying.

- ***Leaving the dead body peacefully***

The moment the person dies it is important to have a calm environment. It is ideal if we are able to rest in the Nature of Mind for 30-45 minutes (N.B. If the death occurs in hospital this may require careful negotiation with medical and nursing staff, see below).

Traditional texts instruct that it is best to leave the body for three days undisturbed. In the West this may not be possible. However, Rinpoche is clear that this depends upon the circumstances and that we have to act within the laws and regulations of wherever the death occurs.

If the death occurs in a hospital or hospice environment it may well be possible for the body to be left for the 45 minutes described above, or for a few hours. It would be good to try to discuss this in advance with the relevant staff and explain that this is because of Tibetan Buddhist beliefs around death.

A draft suggested letter containing information for staff is attached.

If the death occurs at home, then it should be possible to let the body rest at least for a few hours.

- **Prayers and pujas after the death of a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner.**

During three days after death Rinpoche recommends that we do virtuous, positive actions such as pujas for the benefit of the dead person. Then at each seventh day during the seven weeks after death we can do a special ceremony or virtuous action for his/her benefit.

Traditional Tibetan families invite monks, nuns and lamas to the home of the deceased person to do the puja there, or they send offerings for the puja to be done at the monastery with the name and now also with a photo of the deceased.

Rinpoche's nuns are able to offer a full day of prayer (Shitro), or the traditional prayers over seven weeks including a final fire offering – (Duntsik). See <http://www.tsoknyinepalnuns.org/shitro-prayer-for-the-deceased>.

Note that an offering and a photo is required for these services

- **Care of the body until the funeral.**

Should you want the body to rest at home for three days or until the funeral, it is now possible to hire specialist refrigeration equipment to enable this to happen. However, not all funeral directors in the UK are able to offer this service so you may like to discuss this with local funeral firms in advance.

A draft suggested letter to undertakers is attached.

- **Funeral arrangements**

Rinpoche says that burial and cremation are both acceptable. For burials then the body is interred with all the yantras and the different things that you put on it. Similarly for cremations the special artefacts are placed around the body in the coffin.

The Dharma friends can recite the aspiration prayers or sit in meditation during the actual cremation process. All these actions are beneficial.

Tsoknyi Rinpoche's teaching on the question of organ donation

At his last retreat in the UK – in Bruton – Rinpoche was asked if would say something about the question of organ donation.

Firstly Rinpoche said that to offer your organs as donations to save others' lives is a most compassionate decision. A compassionate offering.

Rinpoche went on to explain that for practitioners, however, this decision should be prepared for in their ongoing practice. The decision to donate one's organs is firstly a cognitive one. But it is important that the decision does not just stay at the cognitive level, but is prepared for at the level of the subtle body. In this way when the time comes the practitioner's whole being, including the subtle body, will be able to make the offering of organs. Otherwise the process of organ donation would be a shock to the subtle body. Rinpoche suggested that any practice of giving, of offering one's body as a blessing for others, would be appropriate as preparation throughout our lives if we have decided to donate our organs. We should pray 'May this offering be a blessing for others'. If we are able to do Mandala practice then this is especially beneficial in this preparation. When we are close to death – if we are in a situation where we know death is imminent – then again we should pray, 'may this offering of my organs be a blessing'.

Similarly Rinpoche advised that sangha members and those offering dedications for practitioners who are dying and who are organ donors should similarly pray 'may this offering be a blessing'.

Death and Dying – reading suggestions

There is now a wealth of literature about death and dying. These suggestions focus on a Tibetan Buddhist perspective.

- **'Preparing to Die: Practical advice and spiritual wisdom from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition' by Andrew Holecek**
- **'Being with Dying: Cultivating compassion & fearlessness in the presence of death' By Joan Halifax**
- ***Also audio cd by Joan Halifax Being with Dying: Contemplative Practices and Teachings***
- **'Advice on Dying and Living a Better Life' [CD] By HH Dalai Lama**
- **'Peaceful Death, Joyful Rebirth: A Tibetan Buddhist Guidebook' by Tulku Thondup (Paperback - 2 Mar 2007)**
- **'Mind Beyond Death' by Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche (2008)**
- **'From Milk to Yoghurt: A Recipe for Living and Dying' by Ringu Tulku (2009)**
- **Lessons from the Dying. By Rodney Smith (2015)**
- **'Illuminating Sunshine: Buddhist funeral rituals of Avalokiteshvara' By Martin J. Boord**

- 'Tibetan Book of the Dead' by *Chogyan Trungpa and Francesca Freemantle (2000)*
- Tibetan Book of the Dead (new edition) Gyurme Dorje ED Graham Coleman with Thubten Jinpa (2008)
- Birth, Life and Death according to Tibetan Medicine and Dzogchen Teaching Namkai Norbu (2008)
- Tibetan Book of the Dead Chogyan Trungpa and Francesca Freemantle (Audio CDs). Read By Richard Gere (2008)
- Death, Dying and Bardo [5 CD Set] Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche

Dharma Box

The Dharma box is a box which is clearly labelled and contains what you think may be useful for the end period of your life. Of course some of us will die suddenly, some at home and some in hospital or hospice, so the lists will have to be adapted to fit the circumstances.

The items below are just suggestions to help you think through what might be appropriate for you.

- 1. Who you would like to be notified that you seem to be dying? Contact details of sangha friends who would come and practice with you. It would be good to discuss with them in advance what practices would be best for you.***
- 2. If there is a local lama or teacher with whom you have a connection- then give contact details. Would you like prayers to be requested, or a visit or presence at or soon after your death or involvement in you funeral? It is usual to make an offering for such services, you may want to specify or arrange for money to be available.***
- 3. Request for prayers from Tsoknyi Rinpoche's nuns. Prayers can be requested during illness, and special prayers after death. This can be arranged through Rinpoche's website.
<http://www.tsoknyinepalnuns.org/request-prayer/>
Note the offering requested, which helps to support the nuns. You may like to ensure that the money is available. A photo of the deceased is also needed.***
- 4. Recordings of teachings. Which are the teachings with which you have the deepest heart connection? If you are Tsoknyi Rinpoche's student you will fortunately have recordings of retreats to choose from. Put them in the box, or clear instructions as to where they are to be found.***

5. Recordings of pujas, chanting or sacred music. Again put them in the box or notes as to where they are to be found. These can be found at the retreat shop if attending the UK retreat.

There are also chants to download from Rinpoche's website:

<http://www.tsoknyirinpoche.org/teaching-areas/chants/>

6. Pictures of Rinpoche, other teachers, and deities. Again you can find these at the UK retreat shop.

Pictures of others who are or have been very important to you.

7. Bardo package. If you have had the Bardo teachings and would like the traditional objects to be placed on your body you will need to order them in advance or leave instructions.

As far as we know at the moment these can be ordered from

<https://www.namsebangdzo.com/Bardo-Package-p/15493.htm>

The Bardo package includes a CD, amrita pill, liberation sand, Bardo blanket, small mandala and full instructions.

It is shipped from the USA so it is probably wise to order it in advance of your needing it.

8. Your requests re your funeral.

You may like to request particular chants, rituals, practices or pujas to be part of your funeral service.

9. Suggested letter for staff involved in your care over your final days – see attached template.

10. Suggested letter for undertakers who are arranging your funeral – see attached template.

Suggested letter of information for staff caring for a Buddhist in the Tibetan tradition at the end of life

The following is based on the Buddhist belief that consciousness continues after the body dies. The first three days following death are considered to be particularly important, whereby the subtle process of the mind disengaging from the body is taking place.

We would be most grateful if you could bear the following points in mind:

- If at all possible, please leave the body undisturbed for four hours.
- We understand that a doctor has to touch the body to certify death, but request that the nurses delay laying out the body until prayers have been said. Once prayers are said, the body can be laid out and moved. Please only do the minimum and touch the crown of the head first.
- If paper mandalas or a blanket have been placed on the body , please replace them in the same positions.
- Buddhists believe that it is possible to help the person who has just died be maintain a tranquil and compassionate environment around them whenever possible. Friends and family may want to sit by the body to pray, so facilitating this would be very much appreciated.
- If a post-mortem is required, please ask for it to be postponed for three and a half days.

Thank you.

Suggested letter of information for undertakers who are arranging the funeral of a Buddhist in the Tibetan tradition

The following is based on the Buddhist belief that consciousness continues after the body dies. The first three days following death are considered to be particularly important, whereby the subtle process of the mind disengaging from the body is taking place.

We would be most grateful if you could bear the following points in mind:

- Where the body has been washed and dressed by the nurses please just lift the body into the coffin and avoid unnecessary contact or movement. If the body needs to be washed, please just do the absolute minimum.
- If paper mandalas or a blanket have been placed on the body, please replace them in the same positions after putting the deceased in the coffin. There may be additional pieces to be placed on or in the coffin.
- Please refrigerate the body rather than embalm it
- Because Buddhists would prefer not to be embalmed, requesting the speedy completion of cremation forms would be very much appreciated
- Buddhists believe that it is possible to help the person who has just died by trying to maintain a tranquil and compassionate environment around them whenever possible. Friends and family may want to sit by the body to pray, so facilitating this would be very much appreciated.
- Cremation or burial should not take place until three and a half days have elapsed.

Thank you.