Preparing to Die
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*Practical Advice and Spiritual Wisdom from the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition*

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This book is dedicated to the Venerable Thrangu Rinpoche
and Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso Rinpoche,
who showed me that death is an illusion.
And to my parents, whose deaths showed me
the heartbreak of illusion.
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Life is a revolving wheel of existence—a chain of endless birth, life, death, and rebirth. If we can train our minds to be peaceful and loving, then whatever we say and do will naturally turn into healthy and beneficial words and deeds for ourselves and others. And then when we die, the experiences that we will have in the bardo and in our next life will, according to Buddhism, also be the same. This is because our experiences are the fruits of the habitual seeds we have sown in our mental soil of the past.

Therefore, while we are alive, we must train our mind with prayers, meditations, and caring for others. Visualize, feel, and believe that we are in front of the Buddha of Loving-Kindness, with his all-knowing wisdom and unconditional love, in a heavenly world of light, peace, and joy. Then sing prayers with devotion—with the energy of joy and trust—to the Buddha. Sing with loving-kindness—wishing joy for all sentient beings. The result will be that after death, and in our next life, the world that will appear to us will be a pure land of peace and joy. It will be the manifestation of the positive habits that we implanted in our mind stream during our meditations. For after death, no physical objects follow us. It’s only our minds—our mental habits—that follow us.

According to Buddhist esoteric teachings, if we are highly accomplished meditators, at death and in the bardo we will see and realize the intrinsic awareness, the true enlightened nature of our own mind, nakedly, as it is. This intrinsic awareness is the primordial wisdom with its fivefold aspects and five Buddha Families with their pure lands. All these are the natural radiance and innate power of the intrinsic awareness itself, appearing nondually, dwelling indivisibly, functioning effortlessly, and remaining boundlessly. If we can realize and maintain it, we will attain buddhahood. Although all of us will see the intrinsic awareness during death, the true nature of our mind,
the experience is so brief that most of us will not even notice it, let alone maintain it.

Many important Buddhist texts on death, such as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, put a premium on realizing the luminous bardo of dharmata. However, most of us are not serious meditators, let alone highly accomplished adepts. So most of us, rather than expecting to realize the wisdom of intrinsic awareness during the most turbulent times of death and the bardo, should focus on training our familiar dualistic thoughts, emotional flames, and sensational experiences into positive qualities through prayers and meditations on devotion, light, and loving-kindness. Such training will be highly beneficial—and easier to do.

*Preparing to Die* is such a timely gift for all of us, as we are all zooming toward the crucial moment of death. There are no exceptions. Everyone will die. The book is filled with nectar-like religious and practical wisdom on how to make the best of the most profitable time of our lives. It is packed with clear and practical details and adorned with great love and care. This handbook is for anyone who will die, and who wishes to journey with the joyful blessing light of Dharma.

*Tulku Thondup*

*January 2013*
If we are duly prepared, I can promise that the moment of death will be an experience of rejoicing. If we are not prepared, it will surely be a time of fear and regret.

—Anyen Rinpoche

Be still prepared for death—and death or life shall thereby be the sweeter.

—William Shakespeare

Death is one of the most precious experiences in life. It is literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The karma that brought us into this life is exhausted, leaving a temporarily clean slate, and the karma that will propel us into our next life has not yet crystallized. This leaves us in a unique “no man’s land,” a netherworld the Tibetans call “bardo,” where all kinds of miraculous possibilities can materialize. At this special time, with the help of skillful friends, we can make rapid spiritual progress and directly influence where we will take rebirth. We can even attain enlightenment.

Buddhist masters proclaim that because of this karmic gap, there are more opportunities for enlightenment in death than in life. Robert Thurman, who translated The Tibetan Book of the Dead, says, “The time of the between [bardo] . . . is the best time to attempt consciously to affect the causal process of evolution for the better. Our evolutionary momentum is temporarily fluid during the between, so we can gain or lose a lot of ground during its crises.”

But even for spiritual practitioners, death remains a dreaded event. We dread it because we don’t know about it. We do not look forward to death because we don’t know what to look forward to. For most of us, it’s still the great unknown. Death is the ultimate blackout, something to be avoided at
all costs. So we have a choice. We can either curse the darkness, or turn on the light.

Death is not the time for hesitation or confusion. It is the time for confident and compassionate action. Lama Zopa Rinpoche says, “This is when people MUST do something for the person who has died; this is the most crucial time for the person.”

The Tibetan Book of the Dead says, “This is the dividing-line where buddhas and sentient beings are separated. It is said of this moment: In an instant, they are separated; in an instant, complete enlightenment.”

This book will help you prepare. It is based on the richness of Tibetan thanatology (the study of death and dying) and includes many references for those who want to study the complexities of the bardos in more detail. But it is meant as a practical guide, a hands-on manual culled primarily from the abundant resources of Tibetan Buddhism.

The moment of death, like that of birth, is our time of greatest need. The beginning and the end of life are characterized by vulnerability, bewilderment, and rich opportunity. In both cases we are stepping into new territory—the world of the living or the world of the dead. The person who is dying, and his or her caretakers, have an opportunity to create the conditions that will make the best of this priceless event. We will explore what these opportunities are, what it means to make the best use of this time, and learn how to approach death with confidence. We will learn what to do and when to do it.

While all these guidelines are helpful, they are not meant to restrict the sacred experience of death. The map is never the territory. Even though death and rebirth are described in extraordinary detail by the Tibetans, dying is never as tidy as the written word. It is important for the dying, and their caregivers, to study and prepare. But preparation only goes so far. Fixating on the idea of a “good death” can paradoxically prevent one. If we think that our death will follow a prescribed order, and that perfect preparation leads to a perfect death, we will constrict the wonder of a mysterious process.

Surrender is more important than control. A good death is defined by a complete openness to whatever arises. So don’t measure your death against any other, and don’t feel you have to die a certain way. Let your life, and your death, be your own. There are certain things in life that we just do our own way.

The vast literature about conscious dying is therefore a blessing and a curse. At a certain point we have to leap into death with a beginner’s mind
and a spirit of adventure. Visions of the perfect death create expectations, a model that we feel we have to match. If experience doesn’t match expectation, we might panic. “This isn’t how it’s supposed to be,” “I didn’t plan on it ending this way.” Death is about letting go. That includes letting go of any expectations. The danger in learning too much about death is that we end up prepackaging the experience, forcing reality into the straightjacket of our concepts.

The best approach is that of the middle way. Learn as much as you can. Study, practice, and prepare. Then drop everything and let this natural process occur naturally. Throw away the map and fearlessly enter the territory. It’s like preparing for a big trip. We want to pack properly, review our checklists, and ensure we have enough money and gas. But when the trip starts we just enjoy it. We don’t worry about doing it perfectly. Some of our greatest travel adventures happen when we take a wrong turn or get lost. Having thoroughly prepared, we relax in knowing we have everything we need.

Getting out of the way and letting death take its natural course is often the best thing to do. Death will always take care of itself. As a friend once told me, “Dying is no big deal. Living is the trick.” But there are times when it helps to step in and act with confidence. Death is an emotional time, and confusion is a common companion. Appropriate guidance can be of great benefit. It is the aspiration of this book to help provide that guidance. Refer to it; then, as with death itself, let it go.

**Overview**

This book presents the process of dying, death, and rebirth from the Tibetan Buddhist perspective. It assumes the immutable laws of karma. Understanding karma, which is one of the most complex topics in Buddhism, leads to an understanding of reincarnation. It is beyond our scope to thoroughly explore karma and reincarnation. We simply take them as givens. It’s up to the reader to choose how to view these teachings.

Tibetan Buddhism is not the only Buddhist tradition that teaches the bardos, but it is the most complete. Other faith traditions have different views of what happens after death. Even within Buddhism, the views differ from one school to the next. While this book is directed to students of Tibetan Buddhism, it can benefit anyone interested in penetrating the mysteries of death from the Buddhist perspective.

The central orienting view in the Tibetan world, and a doctrine that
provides the template for this book, is that of the three death bardos: the painful bardo of dying, the luminous bardo of *dharmata*, and the karmic bardo of becoming. They relate respectively to the “before, during, and after” structure of this book. As a brief overview: the painful bardo of dying begins with the onset of a disease or condition that ends in death. In the case of sudden death, this bardo occurs in a flash. It is called “painful” because it hurts to let go. The luminous bardo of dharmata begins at the end of the bardo of dying. For most of us it passes by unrecognized. “Dharmata” means “suchness,” and refers to the nature of reality, the enlightened state. It is fantastically brilliant, hence “luminous.” It is so bright that it blinds us and we faint. We then wake up dazed in the karmic bardo of becoming. Suchness is gone, and confusion re-arises as karma returns to blow us into our next life. The entire process takes about forty-nine days, and will be described in detail below.

Not everyone goes through the bardos the same way. Only a few teachers assert that the journey is universal and that everyone will, for example, experience the deities of the bardo of dharmata in a similar way. Most teachers say that cultural differences and personal idiosyncrasies generate a variety of experiences. Why would a Christian or Muslim, with very different beliefs, experience death the same way as a Buddhist?

As we will see, the journey through the bardos is a journey through the mind. In the Buddhist view, the essence of mind is the same for all sentient beings. But the surface structures that cover that essence are different. Hence the journey through the surface structures (bardo of dying), into the essence of mind (bardo of dharmata), and then out of it (bardo of becoming) is not the same. But the general pattern of this three-stage process is universal, at least according to the Buddhist view.

While the Tibetans have breathtaking resources that easily translate from their tradition into our own, modern masters admit to instances of cultural insularity and peculiarity. For example, the ancient texts state that it’s best not to cry out in distress when someone is nearing death, as this can adversely affect the mind of the dying person. Tibetan teachers familiar with our Western ways realize this instruction doesn’t apply as readily to us. Tibetans are emotionally reserved. They don’t express themselves like we do. For us, not only is emotion permissible, it’s expected. So while it’s not so good to grasp frantically after the dying person, as we will discuss, it’s also not healthy to completely repress our feelings.
The issue of universal truth vs. cultural vicissitude is present any time teachings migrate from an ancient culture into a modern one. This is something each reader has to wrestle with when entering the bardo literature. Even the Tibetans didn’t categorically accept Indian Buddhism without adapting it to their culture. For example, the “hot hells” of Indian Buddhism (where it gets hot as hell) were supplemented with the “cold hells” of Tibetan Buddhism (where it gets cold as hell). Buddhist scholar Carl Becker writes: “The important point here is that the Tibetans, like the Chinese before them, did not adopt Buddhism in its entirety merely out of political or aesthetic considerations. They accepted Buddhism insofar as it clarified processes that they already knew and as it illustrated new truths that they had not yet verbalized.”

On a personal note, my conviction about the importance of presenting these remarkable teachings is born from glimpses of experience. I have been meditating for thirty-five years and have completed the traditional three-year retreat. I have engaged in most of the practices presented below, under the guidance of some of the greatest masters in Tibetan Buddhism. I’m still a beginner, but spending so much time penetrating the mysteries of my own mind has shown me the truth of these mind-bending bardo teachings. Most of what follows can be proven by each of us—if we’re willing to make these discoveries for ourselves.

My conviction is also reinforced by twenty years of experience with many masters in India, Tibet, and Nepal. These extraordinary individuals display a fearlessness around death that is as contagious as it is awe-inspiring. They are absolutely unshakable. I marvel at the confidence, almost playfulness, they bring to the formidable topic of death. They know something we don’t. In the following pages I hope to convey some of what they know, through the lens of my own understanding. I will share what this gentle but fearless tradition has offered as a cherished gift to humanity.

**Why I Wrote This Book**

Fifteen years ago the director at my meditation center asked me to teach a class on death. I knew enough to realize the complexity of the bardos, so I asked him for time to prepare. I began reading every book in print on the topic, attending every seminar, and doing the meditations associated with death.
Six months into my study I received a phone call that would change my life. A woman from rural Colorado, Susan, got my number from the meditation center and called me in a state of panic. Her beloved husband of forty years was dying. The doctors said he had only a few days left. Susan had no idea what to do and was beside herself. She told me that while neither she nor her husband had much faith in religion, they shared an interest in Buddhism. Susan heard that I was an expert on the Buddhist view of death. I had read some books, but was far from an authority. The problem was there were no experts in the area—no one but me.

I listened to her heartbreaking story. She spoke of their beautiful years together, and her desperation at not knowing how to help him in his greatest hour of need. Over the next few days we spent many hours on the phone. Between calls I crammed information from my books, then tried to convey it with confidence. I don’t know how much I helped, but she kept calling because there was no one else. As we spoke she would often whisper something that struck me like a thunderbolt: “I should have prepared earlier. If only I had prepared earlier.”

Susan’s husband died within a few days, and we lost contact. But I have not forgotten her heartache and her remorse in not being prepared. Before talking to Susan I had an intellectual interest in death. After her call I began to pull these teachings off the page and into my heart. I was so moved by her regret that I resolved to do whatever I could to prevent others from experiencing it, and to prepare for my own death. This book is the product of that resolve.

The Renaissance statesman Montaigne wrote:

Men come and they go and they trot and they dance, and never a word about death. All well and good. Yet when death does come—to them, their wives, their children, their friends—catching them unawares and unprepared, then what storms of passion overwhelm them, what cries, what fury, what despair! . . .

To begin depriving death of its greatest advantage over us, let us adopt a way clean contrary to that common one; let us deprive death of its strangeness, let us frequent it, let us get used to it; let us have nothing more often in mind than death. . . . We do not know where death awaits us: so let us wait for it everywhere.

To practice death is to practice freedom. A man who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave.
I have been at the side of many who have died—from my own loved ones, to spiritual friends, to strangers who have become my friends. For the past eight years I have presented a series of seminars on the Tibetan views of death and beyond, and have written numerous articles. The Tibetan teachings and the meditations associated with them have instilled a conviction that enables me to enter end-of-life situations with ease. I am no longer afraid of death nor swayed by the painful events that surround it. The information in the following pages has given me this certitude, my experience in being around death has strengthened it, and the blessings of my teachers have given me the confidence to share it.

How to Use This Book

This book is a comprehensive reference manual, an encyclopedia of death. The subject matter is given in a condensed and direct style, which accords with the concentrated intensity of experience at death. It is a gathering of information you can turn to when you need it the most. This book does not offer many personal stories and anecdotes that, while helpful in making a text more readable, can seem superfluous in times of need. The theoretical aspects of the bardo.ts, which are formidable and extensive, are beyond the scope of the present volume. The aim here is to be simple and practical.

Even though the material is concentrated, I have worked to make it as user-friendly as possible. I realize that few people in this busy age have time to read a tome of this size from cover to cover—just as people today are too busy and don’t really have the time to die mindfully. Death is so inconvenient. But being unprepared is even more inconvenient.

To make this book more accessible, it is divided into two principal parts: spiritual preparation and practical preparation. Each of these is further divided into what to do before, what to do during, and what to do after death. And each of these subdivisions first describes what to do for yourself and then describes what to do for others. This provides a framework that can be easily referenced during any stage of the dying and rebirth process. A final section contains heart-advice from Tibetan masters actively teaching in the West, pearls of wisdom to take refuge in during death. Each section is clearly defined to help you find the information you need. The material is cross-referenced and thoroughly indexed to help you locate other parts of the book that relate to your interests. There are a number of Sanskrit and Tibetan words that are defined on their first occurrence. For any unfamiliar
term, you can check its first entry in the index, which will direct you to its definition.

There are therefore a number of ways to read this book. If you are interested in what to do for yourself, read those sections. If you are interested in what to do for others, then refer to those sections. Some people are interested in spiritual preparation, others in the practical aspects. The beginning of each main section is more general and exoteric, then progresses into increasingly specific and esoteric material. If you bog down in the litany of practices presented in any section, then skim or skip to the next section.

Part 1, on spiritual preparation, and part 3, heart-advice, are specifically directed to Buddhists. Most of part 2, on practical preparations, is directed to anyone interested in death. I have attempted to clarify terms and offer suggestions for further reading in the endnotes; a selected bibliography is also provided.

Familiarity

The key to smoothly negotiating the difficulties of death is familiarity. This book is based on the seminars I have taught, in which we practiced the meditations discussed below as a way to become familiar with death by becoming familiar with our own mind. We visited funeral homes and crematoriums. We took walks in cemeteries, and went to anatomy labs to spend time with corpses. We took the mystery—and therefore much of the misery—out of death by spending time with it.

During these seminars I observed the initial resistance to the meditations and field trips. Participants stepped into the cadaver lab with trepidation, and they stepped into their own minds in meditation with similar apprehension. They were nervous because they didn't know what to expect. But they trusted me because I had been to these external and internal places before. When they walked out of the anatomy lab, or the funeral home, or a long meditation session, I saw how much they had relaxed. Through the process of familiarity, they discovered that while death may not be easy, it's also no big deal. They learned how to smile at death.

If one is unprepared, dealing with the details and intensity of death—the emotional impact, preparing for the funeral, handling friends and loved ones, dealing with medical and legal issues—is like preparing for a big wedding in one day. It’s overwhelming. If you deal with some of the details now
you can relax at the time of death, and relaxation is the best instruction for how to die. Relaxation is born from familiarity.

You may find yourself referring to this guidebook when the crunch of death is upon you, but reading it in advance of this deadline will prepare you for it. Sogyal Rinpoche summarizes the aspiration of this book:

It is crucial now that an enlightened vision of death and dying should be introduced throughout the world at all levels of education. Children should not be “protected” from death, but introduced, while young, to the true nature of death and what they can learn from it.

Why not introduce this vision, in its simplest forms, to all age groups? Knowledge about death, about how to help the dying, and about the spiritual nature of death and dying should be made available to all levels of society; it should be taught, in depth and with real imagination, in schools and colleges and universities of all kinds; and especially and most important, it should be available in teaching hospitals to nurses and doctors who will look after the dying and who have so much responsibility to them.