

BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH

DEATH IS A NATURAL,
INEVITABLE PART OF LIFE

People sometimes think of death as a punishment for bad things they have done, or as a failure or mistake, but it is none of these. It is a natural part of life. The sun rises and sets; the seasons come and go; beautiful flowers become withered and brown; people and other beings are born, live for some time, then die.

One of the principal things the Buddha discovered and pointed out to us is the truth of impermanence: that things change and pass away. There are two aspects of impermanence: gross and subtle. Gross impermanence refers to the fact that all produced things—which includes humans and other living beings, all the phenomena in nature, and all human-made things—will not last forever, but will go out of existence at some point. As the Buddha himself said:

*What is born will die
What has been gathered will be dispersed,
What has been accumulated will be exhausted,
What has been built up will collapse,
And what has been high will be brought low.*

And:

*This existence of ours is as transient as autumn
clouds.
To watch the birth and death of beings is like look-
ing at the movements of a dance.
A lifetime is like a flash of lightning in the sky,
Rushing by, like a torrent down a steep mountain.*

Subtle impermanence refers to the changes that take place every moment in all animate and inanimate things. The Buddha said that things do not remain the same from one moment to the next, but are constantly changing. This is confirmed by modern physics, as Gary Zukav points out in *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*:

Every subatomic interaction consists of the annihilation of the original particles and the creation of

new subatomic particles. The subatomic world is a continual dance of creation and annihilation, of mass changing into energy and energy changing to mass. Transient forms sparkle in and out of existence, creating a never-ending, forever newly created reality.¹

The Buddha imparted the teaching on the inevitability of death in a very skilful way to one of his disciples, Kisa Gotami. Kisa Gotami was married and had a child who was very dear to her heart. When the child was about one year old, he became ill and died. Overcome with grief and unable to accept the death of her child, Kisa Gotami took him in her arms and went in search of someone who could bring him back to life. Finally she met the Buddha, and begged Him to help her. The Buddha agreed, and asked her to bring Him four or five mustard seeds, but they had to be obtained from a house where no one had ever died.

Kisa Gotami went from house to house in the village, and although everyone was willing to give her some mustard seeds, she was unable to find a house where death had not occurred. Gradually she realized that death happened to everyone, so she re-

turned to the Buddha, buried her child and become one of His followers. Under His guidance, she was able to attain Nirvana, complete freedom from the cycle of birth and death.

People may fear that accepting and thinking about death will make them morbid, or spoil their enjoyment of life's pleasures. But surprisingly, the opposite is true. Denying death makes us tense; accepting it brings peace. And it helps us become aware of what is really important in life—for example, being kind and loving to others, being honest and unselfish—so that we will put our energy into those things and avoid doing what would cause us to feel fear and regret in the face of death.

IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO ACCEPT AND BE AWARE OF DEATH

In the *Great Nirvana Sutra*, the Buddha said:

Of all ploughing, ploughing in the autumn is supreme.

Of all footprints, the elephant's is supreme.

Of all perceptions, remembering death and impermanence is supreme.

Awareness and remembrance of death are extremely important in Buddhism for two main reasons:

- 1) By realising that our life is transitory, we will be more likely to spend our time wisely, doing positive, beneficial, virtuous actions, and refraining from negative, non-virtuous actions. The result of this is that we will be able to die without regret, and will be born in fortunate circumstances in our next life.
- 2) Remembering death will induce a sense of the great need to prepare ourselves for death. There are various methods (e.g. prayer, meditation, working on our mind) that will enable us to overcome fear, attachment and other emotions that could arise at the time of death and cause our mind to be disturbed, unpeaceful, and even negative. Preparing for death will enable us to die peacefully, with a clear, positive state of mind.

The benefits of being aware of death can be corroborated by the results of the near-death experience. The near-death experience occurs when people *seem* to

die, for example, on an operating table or in a car accident, but later they come back to life and describe the experiences they had. As Sogyal Rinpoche points out in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (p.29):

Perhaps one of its most startling revelations is how it [the near-death experience] transforms the lives of those who have been through it. Researchers have noted a startling range of after effects and changes: a reduced fear and deeper acceptance of death; an increased concern for helping others; an enhanced vision of the importance of love; less interest in materialistic pursuits; a growing belief in a spiritual dimension and the spiritual meaning of life; and, of course, a greater openness to belief in the afterlife.

DEATH IS NOT THE END OF
EVERYTHING, BUT A GATEWAY
INTO ANOTHER LIFE

Each of us is made up of a body and a mind. The body consists of our physical parts—skin, bones, or-

gans, etc.—and the mind consists of our thoughts, perceptions, emotions, etc. The mind is a continuous, ever-changing stream of experiences. It has no beginning and no end. When we die, our mind separates from our body and goes on to take a new life. Being able to accept and integrate this understanding is very helpful in overcoming fear of death and being less attached to the things of this life. In the Tibetan tradition, we are advised to think of our existence in this life as similar to a traveller who stays a night or two in a hotel—he can enjoy his room and the hotel, but does not become overly attached because he doesn't think that it's his place, and knows that he will be moving on.

The type of life we will be born into and the experiences we will have are determined by the way we live our life. Positive, beneficial, ethical actions will lead to a good rebirth and happy experiences, whereas negative, harmful actions will lead to an unfortunate rebirth and miserable experiences.

Another factor that is crucial in determining our next rebirth is the state of our mind at the time of death. We should aim to die with a positive, peaceful state of mind, to ensure a good rebirth. Dying with anger, attachment or other negative attitudes

may lead us to take birth in unfortunate circumstances in our next life. This is another reason why it is so important to prepare ourselves for death, because in order to have a positive state of mind at that time, we need to start *now* to learn how to keep our minds free from negative attitudes, and to familiarize ourselves with positive attitudes, as much as possible.

IT IS POSSIBLE TO BECOME FREE FROM DEATH AND REBIRTH

Dying and taking rebirth are two of the symptoms of ordinary, cyclic existence (samsara), the state of continuously-recurring problems, dissatisfaction, and non-freedom which all of us are caught in. The reason we are in this situation is because of the presence in our mind of delusions—chiefly attachment, anger and ignorance—and the imprints of our actions (karma) performed under the influence of delusions.

The Buddha was once like us, caught in samsara, but He found a way to become free, and achieved the state of perfect, complete Enlightenment. He did

this not just for His own sake, but for the sake of all other beings, because he realized that all beings have the potential to become enlightened—this is called our “Buddha nature,” and it is the true, pure nature of our minds.

Buddha has the most perfect, pure compassion and love for all of us, all living beings, and taught us how we too could become free from suffering and attain enlightenment. That’s what his teachings, the Dharma, are all about. The Dharma shows us how we can free our minds from delusions and karma—the causes of death, rebirth and all the other problems of samsara—and thus to become free from samsara and attain the ultimate state of enlightenment. Remembering death is one of the most powerful sources of the energy we need to practice the Buddha’s teachings and thus attain their blissful results.

Now let’s take a look at some of the ways in which we can begin preparing ourselves for death.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR DEATH

THE FOUR TASKS OF LIVING AND DYING

Christine Longaker, an American woman with over 20 years' experience working with the dying, has formulated four tasks which will help us to prepare for death, as well as to live our lives fully and meaningfully. The four are:

- 1) **Understanding and transforming suffering.** Basically this means coming to an acceptance of the various problems, difficulties and painful experiences which are an inevitable part of life, and learning to cope with them. If we can learn to cope with the smaller sufferings that we encounter as we go through life, we will be better able to cope with the bigger sufferings that we will face when we die.

We can ask ourselves: how do I react when problems, physical or mental, happen to me? Is my way of reacting healthy and satisfying, or could it be im-

proved? What are some ways I can learn to cope better with problems?

Suggested practices from the Tibetan tradition include patience, thinking about karma, compassion, and *tonglen* (“taking and giving”—see Appendix 1). An explanation of these practices can be found in *Transforming Problems into Happiness* by Lama Zopa Rinpoche (1993).

- 2) **Making a connection, healing relationships and letting go.** This task refers to our relationships with others, particularly family and friends. The main points here are to learn to communicate honestly, compassionately and unselfishly, and to resolve any unresolved problems we may have with others.

Think about your relationships with your family, friends, people you work with, etc. Are there any unresolved problems? How can you start working towards resolving these?

Suggestions: Forgiveness meditation (see Appendix 2), resolving problems.

- 3) **Preparing spiritually for death.** Christine writes:

“Every religious tradition emphasizes that to prepare spiritually for death it is vital that we establish right now a daily spiritual practice, a practice so deeply ingrained that it becomes part of our flesh and bones, our reflexive response to every situation in life, including our experiences of suffering.”² A list of recommended spiritual practices from the Buddhist tradition can be found below.

Check: try to imagine yourself at the time of death—what thoughts and feelings would come up in your mind at that time? Are there any spiritual ideas or practices you have learned or experienced that would give you comfort and peace at that time?

- 4) **Finding meaning in life.** Many of us go through life without a clear idea as to what is the purpose and meaning of our existence. This lack of clarity can become a problem as we become older and closer to death because we become less capable and more dependent upon others. So it is important to explore such questions as “*What is the purpose of my life? Why am I here? What is important and not important?*”

These four tasks are fully explained in *Facing Death and Finding Hope* by Christine Longaker (1997, pp.37-157) .

LIVE ETHICALLY

Painful or frightening experiences that occur at the time of death and afterwards are the result of negative actions, or karma. To prevent such experiences, we need to refrain from negative actions and do as many positive actions as we can. For example, we can do our best to avoid the ten non-virtuous actions (killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, harsh speech, lying, slander, gossip, covetousness, ill-will and wrong views) and to practice the ten virtues (consciously refraining from killing, etc. and doing actions opposite to the ten non-virtues). It's also good to take vows or precepts, and do purification practices on a daily basis.

Another aspect of Buddhist ethics is working on our minds to reduce the very causes of negative actions: delusions, or disturbing emotions, such as anger, greed, pride, and so forth. And awareness of

death itself is one of the most effective antidotes for delusions.

To illustrate this point: I heard the story of a woman who had an argument with her son just before the son left home with his father to go on a fishing trip. The son was killed on the trip. You can imagine the pain the mother must have suffered—not only did she lose her son, but the last words she spoke to him were angry ones.

There is no way of knowing when death will happen, to ourself or to another. Each time we part from someone, even for a short time, there's no certainty that we will meet them again. Realizing this can help us to avoid hanging on to negative feelings, and to resolve our conflicts with others as quickly as possible. That will ensure that we do not die with those burdens on our minds, or that we live with painful regret if the person we had a problem with were to die before we had a chance to apologize and clear up the problem.

Also, as we approach death, it's good to start giving away our possessions, or at least make a will. Doing that will help reduce attachment and worry (*"What will happen to all my things?" "Who will get what?"*) at the time of death.

STUDY SPIRITUAL TEACHINGS

Learning spiritual teachings such as those given by the Buddha will help us to overcome delusions and negative behaviour, and will help us become more wise and compassionate. Also, the more we understand reality or truth—the nature of our life, the universe, karma, our capacity for spiritual development and how to bring it about—the less we will be afraid of death.

CULTIVATE A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

As we are dying, we may find ourselves experiencing physical discomfort and pain. In addition to this, we may also experience disturbing thoughts and emotions, such as regrets about the past, fears about the future, sadness about having to separate from our loved ones and possessions, and anger about the misfortunes that are happening to us. As mentioned above, it is very important to keep our mind free from such negative thoughts, and instead to have positive thoughts at the time of death. Examples of positive thoughts could include:

- keeping in mind an object of our faith such as Buddha or God,
- calm acceptance of our death and the problems associated with it,
- non-attachment to our loved ones and possessions,
- feeling positive about the way we have lived our life, remembering good things we have done,
- feeling loving-kindness and compassion for others.

In order to be able to invoke such thoughts or attitudes at the time of death, we need to be familiar with them. Familiarity with positive states of mind depends upon putting time and effort into spiritual practice while we are alive. And the best time to start is *now*, since we have no way of knowing when death will happen.

Some recommended practices from the Buddhist tradition include:

1) **Taking refuge**

In Buddhism, taking refuge is an attitude of feeling

faith in and relying upon the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, accompanied by a sincere effort to learn and practice the Buddhist teachings in our life. It is said in the Buddhist teachings that taking refuge at the time of death will ensure that we will obtain a fortunate rebirth and avoid an unfortunate one in our next lifetime.³ Faith in one's personal spiritual teachers, or in a specific Buddha or Bodhisattva such as Amitabha or Guan Yin, will also have the same result and will bring great comfort to the mind at the time of death.

2) Pure Land practice

A popular practice, particularly in the Mahayana tradition, is to pray for rebirth in a Pure Land, such as the Pure Land of Bliss (Sukhavati) of Amitabha Buddha. Pure Lands are manifested by the Buddhas to aid those who wish to continue their spiritual practice in the next life, free of the distractions, hassles and interferences of the ordinary world.

Bokar Rinpoche mentions four essential conditions that need to be cultivated in order to take birth in Amitabha's Pure Land: 1) making ourselves familiar with the image of the Pure Land and meditating upon it, 2) having a sincere wish to be born there,

and making regular prayers for such a rebirth, 3) purifying our negative actions and accumulating positive actions, and dedicating these to be born in the Pure Land, and 4) having the motivation of bodhicitta—the aspiration to attain enlightenment (Buddhahood) to be able to help all beings—as the reason for wishing to be born in the Pure Land.⁴

3) **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is a meditative practice that involves being aware of whatever is happening in our body and mind accompanied by equanimity, free of attachment to what is pleasant and aversion to what is unpleasant. Strong familiarity with this practice gives one the ability to cope with pain and discomfort, keep the mind free from disturbing emotions, and remain peaceful while dying. Several books on mindfulness and meditation are mentioned in the reading list.

4) **Loving-kindness**

This practice involves cultivating feelings of care, concern and kindness towards all other beings. When we face difficulties or pain, our strong attachment to ‘I’ augments our suffering, whereas being less

concerned with ourselves and more concerned for others diminishes our suffering. At the time of death, thinking of other beings and wishing them to be happy and free from suffering would bring great peace to our mind. Lama Zopa Rinpoche says that these are the best thoughts and feelings that we could have in our mind before and during death. Not only do they help us have a more peaceful death, but they also purify our negativities and accumulate positive potential, or merit, which ensures a good rebirth in the next life.

More information on how to cultivate loving-kindness can be found in Sharon Salzberg's book, *LovingKindness—The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (see the recommended reading list).

BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE STAGES OF THE DEATH PROCESS

One reason why people tend to be afraid of death is because they do not know what will happen to them. In the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism, there is a clear and detailed explanation of the process of dying, which involves eight stages. The **eight stages**

correspond to the gradual dissolution of various factors, such as the four elements: earth, water, fire and air. As one passes through the eight stages, there are various internal and external signs.

The four elements dissolve over the first four stages. In the **first stage**, where the earth element dissolves, the external signs are that one's body becomes thinner and weaker, and internally one has a vision of a mirage. The **second stage** involves the dissolution of the water element; the external sign is that one's bodily fluids dry up, and internally one has a vision of smoke. The fire element dissolves in the **third stage**; the external sign is that the heat and digestive power of the body decline, and internally one has a vision of sparks. In the **fourth stage**, where the wind or air element dissolves, the external sign is that breathing ceases, and internally one has a vision of a flame about to go out. This is the point at which one would normally be declared clinically dead. The gross physical elements have all dissolved, the breath has stopped, and there is no longer any movement in the brain or circulatory system. However, according to Buddhism death has not yet taken place because the mind or consciousness is still present in the body.

There are various levels of the mind: gross, subtle and very subtle. The gross mind or consciousness includes our six consciousnesses (seeing, hearing, smell, taste, touch and mental consciousness) and eighty instinctive conceptions. The six consciousnesses dissolve over the first four stages of the death process, and the eighty conceptions dissolve in the **fifth stage**, following which one experiences a white vision. In the **sixth stage**, the white vision dissolves and a red vision appears. In the **seventh stage**, the red vision dissolves and a vision of darkness appears. The white, red and dark visions constitute the subtle level of consciousness.

Finally, in the **eighth stage**, the dark vision dissolves and the very subtle mind of clear light becomes manifest. This is the most subtle and pure level of our mind, or consciousness. Experienced meditators are able to use this clear light mind to meditate and gain a realization of absolute truth, and even attain enlightenment. That is why such meditators are not afraid of death, and even look forward to death as if they were going on a holiday!

This is just a brief explanation of the eight stages. More detailed explanations can be found in a number of books (see the recommended reading list),

such as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, translated by Robert Thurman, p.23-50. Since we are naturally more frightened of what is not known to us, becoming familiar with the stages of the death process would help ease some of our fear of death. And if we are able to practice the meditations on simulating the death process and awakening the clear light mind that are found in the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition, we might even be able to attain realizations as we die.

These are just a few recommended spiritual practices that we can learn and train ourselves in during the course of our life which will help us be more prepared for death. However, there are many other methods, which are suited to people of different temperaments. When it comes to choosing the method that is right for us, we can use our own intuition and wisdom, or consult reliable spiritual teachers with whom we have an affinity.

Now let's look at what we can do to help other people who are dying.

HELPING OTHERS WHO ARE DYING

It is said in the Buddhist teachings that helping another person to die with a peaceful, positive state of mind is one of the greatest acts of kindness we can offer. The reason for this is that the moment of death is so crucial for determining the rebirth to come, which in turn will affect subsequent rebirths.

However, helping a dying person is no easy task. When people die, they experience numerous difficulties and changes, and this would naturally give rise to confusion as well as painful emotions. They have physical needs—relief from pain and discomfort, assistance in performing the most basic tasks such as drinking, eating, relieving themselves, bathing and so forth. They have emotional needs—to be treated with respect, kindness and love; to talk and be listened to; or, at certain times, to be left alone and in silence. They have spiritual needs—to make sense of their life, their suffering, their death; to have hope for what lies beyond death; to feel that they will be cared for and guided by someone or something wiser and more powerful than themselves.

Thus one of the most important skills in helping a dying person is to try to understand what their needs are, and do what we can to take care of these. We can best do this by putting aside our own needs and wishes whenever we visit them, and make up our mind to simply be there for them, ready to do whatever has to be done, whatever will help them to be more comfortable, happy and at peace.

There are many excellent books available on how to care for a dying person in terms of their physical and emotional needs (see the recommended reading list). Here we will focus on the spiritual needs and how to provide for these.

WORKING ON OUR OWN EMOTIONS

As mentioned above, when people approach death they will at times experience disturbing emotions such as fear, regret, sadness, clinging to the people and things of this life, and even anger. They may have difficulty coping with these emotions, and may find themselves overwhelmed, as if drowning in them. What is helpful to them during these difficult times is to sit with them, listen compassionately

and offer comforting words to calm their minds.

But to be able to do this effectively, we need to know how to cope with our own emotions. Being in the presence of death will most probably bring up the same disturbing emotions in our mind as in the dying person's mind—fear, sadness, attachment, a sense of helplessness, and so forth. Some of these emotions we may never have experienced before, and we may feel surprised and even confused to find them in our mind. Thus we need to know how to deal with them in ourselves before we can really help someone else to deal with them.

One of the best methods for dealing with emotions is mindfulness meditation (see above). Another is reminding ourselves of impermanence: the fact that we ourselves, other people, our bodies and minds, and just about everything in the world around us, is constantly changing, never the same from one moment to the next. Awareness and acceptance of impermanence is one of the most powerful antidotes to clinging and attachment, as well as to fear, which is often a sense of resistance to change. Also, cultivating firm faith in the Three Jewels of Refuge (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) is extremely useful in providing the strength and courage we need to face

and deal with turbulent emotions.

If the dying person is a family member or friend, we will have the additional challenge of having to deal with our attachments and expectations in relation to him or her. Although it is difficult, the best thing we can do is learn to let go of the person. Clinging to them is unrealistic, and will only cause more suffering for both of us. Again, remembering impermanence is the most effective remedy to attachment.

GIVING HOPE AND FINDING FORGIVENESS

Sogyal Rinpoche, in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (1992, pp.212-213), says that two things that are very important in helping a dying person are giving hope and finding forgiveness. When dying, many people experience guilt, regret, depression or a sense of hopelessness. You can help them by allowing them to express their feelings, and by listening compassionately and non-judgementally. But encourage them to remember the good things they have done in their life, and to feel positive about the way they

have lived. Focus on their successes and virtues, not on their failings and wrongdoings. If they are open to the idea, remind them that their nature is basically pure and good (in Buddhism we call this “Buddha nature”) and that their faults and mistakes are transitory and removable, like dirt on a window.

Some people may be concerned that their wrongdoings are so numerous and great that they could never be forgiven. If they believe in God or Buddha, assure them that the nature of God and Buddha is pure, unconditional love and compassion, so they always forgive whatever mistakes we make. If the person has no such belief, then what they need is to forgive themselves. You can help them to do this by encouraging them to express their heartfelt regret for their mistakes and ask for forgiveness. That is all they need to do. Remind them that whatever actions were done in the past are over and cannot be changed, so it’s best to let go of them. However, we can change from this moment on. If the person truly regrets her mistakes and wishes to transform herself, there is no reason she cannot find forgiveness. If there are specific people the person has harmed and who are still alive, encourage the person to express his regret and request forgiveness.

Sogyal Rinpoche says (1992, p.213):

All religions stress the power of forgiveness, and this power is never more necessary, nor more deeply felt, than when someone is dying. Through forgiving and being forgiven, we purify ourselves of the darkness of what we have done, and prepare ourselves more completely for the journey through death.

HOW TO HELP SOMEONE WHO IS A BUDDHIST

If the dying person is a Buddhist, ask questions to find out how much they know and understand, and their answers should give you a better idea about what to do to help them spiritually. For example, if the person has strong faith in Guan Yin (Tib: Chenrezig, Skt: Avalokitesvara), then you should encourage them to keep that faith in their mind and pray to Guan Yin as much as possible. Or if the person were a practitioner of mindfulness meditation, encourage them to do that practice as often as they can. In short, whatever teachings and practices they are familiar and comfortable with, remind them

of these and do whatever you can to provide them with confidence and inspiration to do these practices. If they have difficulty practicing on their own, due to pain or tiredness or a confused state of mind, do the practice with them.

If possible, place images of Buddha, Guan Yin, Amitabha, and so forth within sight of the person. If he or she has any Spiritual Teachers, you can put their pictures as well. It's also very beneficial to recite the names of Buddhas to the person, because the Buddhas have promised to help living beings avoid being reborn in states of suffering.

Speak to the person, or read passages from books, about impermanence and other Buddhist teachings—but do this only if they are receptive, do not force it on them. Also, be cautious about teaching them something that would cause their mind to be confused or upset (for example, if the subject is too difficult for them to understand, or if it is new and unfamiliar). Remember that the most important thing is to help the person have a peaceful and positive state of mind before and during their death.

It may be that the dying person does not know how to meditate or pray. In that case you can meditate or do other prayers or practices in their pres-

ence, dedicating the merit of these that they have a peaceful mind at the time of death and a good rebirth. You can also teach them how to pray, using standard Buddhist prayers, or by praying in their own words, in their own hearts. For example, they can pray to Buddha, Guan Yin or whichever Buddha-figure they are familiar with, to be with them during this difficult time, to help them find the strength and courage to deal with their suffering, to keep their mind peaceful, and to guide them to a good rebirth in the next life.

Here is a simple meditation you could teach the dying person to do: ask them to visualize in front of them whatever Buddha-figure they have faith in, seeing it as the embodiment of all positive, pure qualities such as compassion, loving-kindness, forgiveness and wisdom. Light flows from this figure, filling their body and mind, purifying them of all the negative things they have ever done or thought, and blessing them to have only pure, positive thoughts in their mind. The person's mind becomes oneness with the Buddha's mind, completely pure and good. If the dying person is not able to do this meditation (e.g. if they are too ill, or unconscious) then you can do it for them, imagining the Buddha-figure above the

person's head.

Also, to help their minds be free of worry and anxiety, encourage them to not worry about their loved ones and their possessions—assure them that everything will be taken care of—and to not be afraid of what lies ahead but to have faith in the Three Jewels. Do what you can to help them cultivate positive thoughts, such as faith, loving-kindness and compassion, and to avoid negative thoughts such as anger and attachment.

HOW TO HELP SOMEONE WHO IS NOT A BUDDHIST

If the dying person belongs to another religion, make an effort to understand what they know and believe, and speak to them accordingly. For example, if they believe in God and heaven, encourage them to have faith in and pray to God, and to feel confident that they will be with God in heaven after they leave this life. And have a respectful attitude towards the person and their beliefs and practices. Remember, the most important thing is to help the person to have positive thoughts in their mind, in accordance with

their religious beliefs and practices. DO NOT attempt to impose your own beliefs or try to convert them. To do that would be disrespectful and unethical, and could cause them to become confused and disturbed.

If the person has no religion, use non-religious terminology to speak to them in ways that will help them to be free of negative thoughts such as anger and attachment, and develop positive thoughts and a peaceful state of mind. If they show interest in knowing what you believe in, you can tell them, but be careful not to preach. It might be more effective to have a discussion in which you openly share ideas with each other. For example, if the person asks you what happens after we die, instead of immediately launching into an explanation of rebirth, you might say something like “I’m not really sure. What do you think?” And take it from there.

If they genuinely wish to know about Buddhist beliefs and practices, it’s perfectly OK to explain these to them. You can talk about the Buddha’s life and teachings, the Four Noble Truths, impermanence, loving-kindness and compassion, and so forth. Just be sensitive to their response—be careful not to be pushy, otherwise the person could become negative.

Remember, the bottom line is to help them remain free from negative thoughts as much as possible, and to have a positive, peaceful state of mind.

If the person is not a Buddhist and would not be comfortable hearing or seeing you do any Buddhist prayers or practices, you can still do these practices silently, without them knowing it. For example, you could sit beside them and meditate on loving-kindness and send the energy of loving kindness from your heart to fill them with peace. Or you could visualize Buddha or Guan Yin above the person's head and silently recite prayers or mantras while visualizing a shower of light flowing from the Buddha into the person, purifying them and helping their mind to become more pure and peaceful. It is quite possible that the person will feel the effects of these practices even though they have no idea that they are being done on their behalf!

THE TIME OF DEATH

You can continue to do meditation or recite prayers, mantras, the names of Buddhas and so forth as the person is dying, and for as long as possible after they

have stopped breathing. Remember that the cessation of the breath is not the sign of death according to Buddhism. That is only the fourth of the eight stages of the death process, and the actual point of death, when the consciousness leaves the body, is after the eighth stage.

How long does it take for the person to get to that stage after they have stopped breathing? That is not certain—it depends on various factors such as the cause of death (for example, if the person was badly injured in a car accident, the consciousness might leave sooner than in the case of a natural death), and the state of the person's mind (an experienced meditator would be able to stay in the eighth stage, the clear light state, longer than someone with little or no meditation experience.)

So how can we know when the person has actually died? According to the Tibetan tradition, there are several signs indicating that the consciousness has left the body: the heat of the heart ceases, a smell begins to emanate from the body, and a small amount of fluid will be emitted either from the nostrils or the sexual organ. So it is best to leave the body undisturbed until these signs occur, which could be several hours or even several days after the

breath has ceased. This is possible if the person has died at home, but would be difficult in a hospital because hospitals have rules regarding how long a body can be kept in a room or ward. You can request the hospital staff to move the body to another room where it could be left for several more hours, while prayers and mantras continue to be recited.

It is best to not touch the body from the time the breath has stopped until the consciousness has departed. However, if it is necessary to touch the body during this time, first pull the hair on the crown of the head (or just touch the crown if there is no hair). This will stimulate the person's mind to leave from the crown, which is the exit-point for a fortunate rebirth—state such as in a Pure Land. After that you can touch other parts of the body.

In the Buddhist tradition it is recommended that we not cry in the presence of someone who is dying or has stopped breathing. It is also not good to talk about the person's possessions and how they should be distributed. Hearing such sounds could disturb their mind. Family members and friends can go to another room to cry, or to discuss practical matters. In the presence of the person who has died, it is best to have only the sounds of prayers, mantras and

spiritual instructions.

Among the practices recommended by Lama Zopa Rinpoche for a person who has passed away are: Medicine Buddha, Amitabha, Chenrezig, *Giving Breath to the Wretched*, and the *King of Prayers*. Copies of these and other practices for the dying and deceased can be obtained by writing to materials@fpmt.org. If there is a lama or ordained person in your area who knows how to do *powa* (transference of consciousness) practice, you can invite them to do that. If there is no such person available, then just do whatever prayers and practices you know, with as much faith, sincerity and compassion as you can generate in your heart.

HELPING AFTER DEATH

After the person has passed away, we can continue to benefit them by doing positive, virtuous actions—such as saying prayers (or asking monks and nuns to say prayers), making offerings, releasing animals who are destined to be slaughtered, doing meditation, etc.—and dedicate the merits of these actions for the person to have a good rebirth, and to quickly

become free from cyclic existence and attain enlightenment. It is perfectly all right to do these practices whether the person was a Buddhist or not.

It is good to use some of the person's own money to create merit, for example, making donations to charity. Also, merit accumulated by family members (direct relatives of the deceased person) is especially powerful and helpful. Doing virtuous actions and dedicating the merits to the deceased can help the person in the *bardo* (the intermediate state between death and the next life, which could last up to 49 days). However, once they have taken rebirth, the merit we dedicate may not help them in that life, but could help them in their subsequent rebirth, for example, by shortening the length of an unfortunate rebirth.

CONCLUSION

I hope that the ideas presented in this booklet will help you to be more accepting and less fearful of death, your own and others'. There is a great wealth of material—from ancient religious and spiritual traditions as well as from modern fields such as psychology, sociology and palliative care—that can guide us in living our lives in such a way as to be peaceful, calm and courageous in the face of death. And when someone we love is going through that experience, we can be a source of comfort, serenity and hope for them. May this small work inspire you to learn more on this subject. And may all beings become free from the sufferings of death, and attain the highest peace and happiness beyond the cycle of birth and death.

APPENDIX 1

A Simple Tong-Len (Taking and Giving) Meditation Using One's Own Problem

You can use this method whenever you are experiencing any kind of problem—physical, emotional, in a relationship or at work. Sit down, calm the mind, generate a positive motivation for doing the practice. Then focus on your problem, allow it to arise in your mind, feel how painful it is, how your mind wants to push it away... Then think: “I am not the only person experiencing a problem like this. There are many others...” Think of other people who may be experiencing the same or a similar problem, some to an even greater degree than yourself. (For example, if you have lost a loved one, think of people who have lost many loved ones, in a war or a famine.)

Then generate compassion, thinking: “How wonderful it would be if all those people could be free from their suffering.” Then decide that you will accept or take on your own experience of this problem, in order that all those other people could be free from theirs. You can do this with the breath: visualize breathing in the suffering in the form of

dark smoke. It comes into your heart, where the self-cherishing mind is located, in the form of a solid, dark spot or rock. The dark smoke of suffering absorbs into the rock of self-cherishing and destroys it.....

Then breathe out happiness and positive qualities and merit, in the form of bright light, giving to yourself and all those other people whatever qualities are needed to be able to deal with the problem and to progress along the path to enlightenment.

Conclude the meditation by feeling joyful that you have done this practice, and dedicate the merit (positive energy) of the practice that all beings may be happy and free from suffering.

APPENDIX 2

Meditation on Forgiveness

As we develop in our practice of meditation we naturally become more conscious of what is going on in our minds. We become clearer about what we feel and why. We start to uncover the discrepancies in our lives, and get in touch with the bruises and hurts of old relationships. Slowly, we are able to tie loose

ends and heal the wounds.

The practice of a forgiveness meditation is a wonderful way to heal the pain of the old hurts that block our heart and prevent us from trusting and loving ourselves and others. Forgiveness is the key to opening our hearts, to learning from the painful lessons of the past in order to move into the future unhindered.

Begin by sitting quietly, relaxing your body and focussing your mind with the breath. Allow memories and images and emotions to float freely in your mind—things you have done, said and thought that you have not forgiven yourself for, no matter how painful they are.

From your heart say to yourself, “I forgive myself for whatever I have done in the past, intentionally or unintentionally, my actions, my words and my thoughts. I have suffered enough! I have learned and grown and I am ready now to open my heart to myself. May I be happy, may I be free from confusion, may I know the joy of truly understanding myself, others and the world. May I come to know my own wholeness and fullness and help others to do the same.”

Now, in the space in front of you, imagine a

person you love whom you want to forgive or whose forgiveness you need. From your heart to their heart directly communicate the following: “With all my heart I forgive you for whatever you may have done, intentionally or unintentionally, by your actions, your words or thoughts that have caused me pain. I forgive you, and I ask that you forgive me for whatever I have done, intentionally or unintentionally to you, by my actions, my words or my thoughts—I ask your forgiveness. May you be happy, free and joyful. May we both open our hearts and minds to meet in love and understanding as we grow into wholeness.” Imagine that this message has been received and accepted, and affirm the healing that has taken place within you and between the two of you. Then allow the image to melt into space.

Next, think about the countless people toward whom you have closed your heart. Remember how you felt and what you did when people abused you, spoke harshly, took “your” parking place, crowded in front of you in line, ad infinitum... Consider how many people you have hurt in some way, by your own conscious or unconscious actions, words and thoughts. How many times have you been the abuser, the one who crowded in, the one who spoke harshly?

Imagine these countless beings standing before you. From your heart to theirs generate the essence of the following: “I forgive you and ask you to forgive me for whatever I have done, intentionally or unintentionally, that has hurt you. May you and I and all of us create the causes for happiness in our lives. May we all come to know the joy of truly understanding and experiencing our interrelationship. May we open our hearts and minds to each other and meet in harmony.”

Repeat this reflective meditation as often as you like. At the conclusion, imagine and feel as vividly and wholeheartedly as you are able that you have actually released all guilt and blame towards yourself. In this present moment, allow yourself to feel forgiveness and a patient acceptance of your past actions.

— From *The Fine Arts of Relaxation, Concentration and Meditation* by Joel and Michelle Levey (1991)

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INSPIRING QUOTES

“My disciples, my end is approaching, our parting is near, but do not lament. Life is ever changing; none can escape the dissolution of the body. This I am now to show by my own death, my body falling apart like a dilapidated cart.

Do not vainly lament, but realize that nothing is permanent and learn from it the emptiness of human life. Do not cherish the unworthy desire that the changeable might become unchanging....” — last words to his disciples by Shakyamuni Buddha

DEATH IS CERTAIN

‘No man, though he sees others dying around him, believes he himself will die.’ — Bhagavad-gita

When you are strong and healthy,
You never think of sickness coming,
But it descends with sudden force,
Like a stroke of lightning.

When involved in worldly things,

You never think of death's approach,
Quick it comes like thunder,
Crashing round your head.

— Milarepa

HOW TO DIE HAPPILY AND MEANINGFULLY

'If a person dies with the thought of benefiting others, their mind is naturally happy and this makes their death meaningful.' — Lama Zopa Rinpoche

'A time will never come when you are free of all activities, so everyday you have to find the opportunity... Death is definite but the time of death is indefinite—it can strike us at any time, therefore do not procrastinate.' — HH Dalai Lama

DIE TO LIVE

'The Buddha told his disciple Ananda to see impermanence, to see death with every breathe. We must

know death; we must die in order to live.’ — Ajahn
Chah

WHY HELP THE DYING?

‘The needs of a person who is experiencing death, who is at this crucial point in life, are unbelievable, and they need support.... For most people, when death is approaching they find it the hardest and most difficult time in their life. So therefore, this is the time that they really need some refuge or support.’ — Lama Zopa Rinpoche

To Friends of the Dying

Oh you,
Who have come to this place,
Sisters and brothers, friends,
This person is dying.
She (he) has not chosen to do so.
She is suffering greatly.
She has no home, no friends.
Falling as from a cliff,
She is entering a strange forest.

Driven by the winds, swept by the ocean,
She feels no solid ground.
She is embarking on a great battle.
Moved from state to state,
She is alone and helpless.
Embrace her with your love.

— extracted from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* for
Reading Aloud, adapted by Jean-Claude van Itallie.

HOW TO HELP

‘The main thing is to take care of the dying person’s
mind. Many others can take care of the body, but
we can take care of the mind.’ — Lama Zopa
Rinpoche

‘The body has its own language of love, use it fear-
lessly, and you will find you bring to the dying
comfort and consolation.’ — Sogyal Rinpoche

‘When you do social service, and from the very
beginning what you have in your heart is to offer
service to others, because others are most important,

then of course you enjoy the work because of the pure heart.’ — Lama Zopa Rinpoche

“What is compassion? It is not simply a sense of sympathy or caring for the person suffering, not simply a warmth of heart toward the person before you, or a sharp clarity or recognition of their needs and pain, it is also a sustained and practical determination to do whatever is possible and necessary to help alleviate their suffering.” — Glimpse After Glimpse by Sogyal Rinpoche

BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING

‘Helping to look after people who are sick and dying is itself the best preparation for our own death’
— Lama Zopa Rinpoche

‘To learn really to help those who are dying is to begin to become fearless and responsible about our own dying, and to find in ourselves the beginnings of an unbounded compassion that we may have never suspected.’ — Sogyal Rinpoche

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