

So welcome back for this final installation in transforming obstacle into opportunity—how to bring this most unwanted experience of life onto the spiritual path, and see it as a great opportunity for awakening. In this session we’re going to talk about what we can do for ourselves after we die and what we can do for others.

Of course, we begin right off the bat with this kind of given tenant in virtually all Buddhist traditions of reincarnation or re-embodiment that something does continue. We take that as a given. It’s beyond our scope to try to prove this either directly or inferentially. The first thing to do is recognize, or try to recognize, that you are in fact dead. According to these teachings, this is not such a simple thing to do. Again, a way to get a sense of this is to look at the experiences of the night. How aware are you of your descent into sleep? This is a concordant expression of the painful bardo of dying. We go through a microcosmic application of this bardo every night when we go to sleep. How aware are we of these very final stages before we drop off into deep dreamless sleep? Then when we drop into deep dreamless sleep, how many of us are lucid to that? This is a concordant expression of the luminous bardo of dharmata. How awake are we to deep dreamless sleep? This is where the practice of sleep yoga comes into play. Then of course, how aware are we of our dreams? How many times do we have lucid dreams? Most of our dreams are non-lucid. This is a concordant expression of the karmic bardo of becoming.

We can use these practices of the night through lucid dreaming practice, dream yoga and more refined sleep yoga to both assess and prepare for what happens after death. This can serve also to inspire us. “I can do something about it. I can gain familiarity with these subtle qualities of mind now by engaging in practices like this.” The idea is before we can apply any remedy to the bardos, we first have to realize that we are in them. This is why these particular practices, yet again, of dream and sleep yoga came about, to help us gain this level of recognition.

One way to practice this now—these sets of signs I’m going to put forth to you are also ways to work with the practice of dream yoga. One of the things that tradition says, or several things to look for to assess whether you’re dead or not are the following: Do you leave a shadow? It almost seems like a vampire movie as we go through this. Is there a shadow in your experience? Are you leaving any footprints? Are there reflections? When you look in a mirror do you see yourself? Does your body leave any sounds? When you walk are there any sounds? Do others respond to you or not? Can you move unimpeded through matter and travel with incredible velocity? Do you have the capability to read other people’s minds?

According to the tradition if you have these experiences, chances are pretty good you are either dreaming, which is a way that increase and ignite lucidity in your dreams, or you are dead. One way to practice this which may seem silly, but next time you’re walking across a sunlight driveway, look for your shadow. The next time you look at a mirror, see if there is a reflection there. Condition your mind and sensitize it to prepare for these signs now. These signs will help you increase lucidity. These are ways and dream signs.

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They are ways to trigger lucidity in the dream state every night. By a natural consequence, they are ways to recognize that you’re dead when you are dead. This is the first and most important thing.

The second thing is once you wake up to this fact, which is usually somewhat startling, work to stabilize your mind. Steady your mind, just like in a lucid dream. Remember once again mind becomes reality. The stability of your experience, just like in a dream, is nothing more than the stability of your own mind. As you cultivate intentional stability with your own meditations that we’ve already referred to, this natural proficiency will extend. You will start to have more lucid dreams because you are more lucid during the day. Being mindful and present during the day is a way to practice lucidity during the day. That proficiency will naturally extend into the dream state. This is why repeated studies have shown that meditators have more lucid dreams. It is simply because they are more lucid to the contents of their own minds now. One researcher, a neuroscientist out of California said, this is a very humbling fact, “Most people are unaware or non-lucid to 99% of what takes place in their own lives.” No wonder they are non-lucid or non-aware in the dream state. No wonder they are non-lucid or non-aware in the bardo states. It’s because we practice non-lucidity or the distraction all the time. It’s the same process being played out on these different levels of manifestation. This is why the central practice of mindfulness and lucidity—mindfulness is the practice of lucidity. If you are mindful or lucid during the day, you will be mindful and lucid during the night and in the after death states. This is why, once again, the central practice of mindfulness is so critical in preparation.

There is a tremendous opportunity here in the after death state as we’ll see. Just like in the dream state, we no longer have a physical body. We have a mental body, just like in a dream. This mental body has both blessings and curses. The blessing is that it can move and be easily guided. It’s very fluid. The curse is that it’s very fickle and easily forgets. It is very easily distracted. These teachings are ways to work with the potential of this fluidity of the mind without being thrown by it.

The classic instructions here—as you realize you are dead and in the bardo state—are as follows. First of all realize that you are at the most critical juncture of your entire life, according to these teachings. For the sake of your future, so much depends on what you do now. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that the bardos are a very dangerous time, but they are also a very opportune time. As we’ll see a single, placed positive thought can move you into the direction of a pure land and bring about a very auspicious birth. A single poorly timed negative thought can conversely drop you into the lower realms. This is why we have to be very careful and mindful of what’s going on in the contents of our own mind. Mindscape will eventually transform into landscape. The contents of your mind will eventually throw you into physical form. We shouldn’t waste a single moment here once we become lucid in the bardo states. We should realize the preciousness of what is before us and take advantage of it. Secondly, remember and feel happy. Take refuge in whatever spiritual practice or path you have traversed in this life. Take refuge in what you’ve already accomplished. This can provide great solace and strength in the bardo state. Thirdly, realize that everything that’s taking place is the display of your own

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mind just like in a dream. Don’t struggle or grasp. Try to stay open to whatever arises. Relax into the perfect purity. Relax into the basic goodness of whatever is taking place. This is where the teachings of the great perfection—the teachings of Dzogchen—come into play. Everything that arises, even now, is fundamentally good and basically pure.

If you have this relationship to experience as it arises in the after death state, that sacred relationship which is referred to as pure perception or sacred outlook, will allow you to relate to whatever arises with tremendous equanimity. This is a very essential ingredient to a successful bardo path. Fourth, associated with staying steady, is stay calm.

Remember any form of spiritual support; a teacher, a divine presence or a positive experience, once again rely on the confidence of your own stability and practice. Come into the bardos holding the hand of whatever practice you are most familiar with and take refuge in it. Rinpoche goes so far as to say that at this point in the bardos, it’s almost as if confidence itself becomes your body. The stability of your own mind becomes your body. There’s nothing else.

The other thing that’s very important to do at this point of course is to sustain positive thoughts, aspirations and motivations. As I alluded to earlier, a single positive thought—this is the good news of the bardos—a thought of the Buddha Amitabha, who’s the Buddha of a pure land sukhavati or a thought of sukhavati itself. According to these teachings a single thought can—pardon this play—FedEx your consciousness into that pure land. In short of full blown enlightenment, which really can take place at any bardo, but the greatest opportunity takes place in the luminous bardo of dharmata, at this point in the karmic bardo of becoming the single best thing we can do is take manifestation into a pure land.

The reason we want to do that is because—it’s beyond our scope to explore the pure lands in too much detail—the developmental center of gravity in a pure land is so high. It’s as if you are in a city where everybody is a teacher, a Rinpoche or a lama. Everybody is highly evolved spiritually so the center of gravity is so high. The developmental center is so high that it can’t help but pull you up. The reason you want to go to a pure land like Sukhavati or Shambhala or the copper colored mountain. Sukhavati is the one that has the easiest visa access requirements according to these teachings. It’s the easiest pure land to get into.

Amitabha created this pure land for sentient beings like ourselves. Once we’re there, it’s like going to graduate school. We develop very rapid powers of super cognitions.

Spiritual progress is very rapid. Contrary to running away from our Bodhisattva vows, people often wonder, “I don’t want to go to these pure lands because I’ve made the aspiration to help sentient beings here.” We can help people a lot better in and coming out of graduate school than staying back in kindergarten. The aspiration here is make that choice, which really constitutes almost the entirety of most pure land practice. Aspire to be reborn in to the pure land of Amitabha. At this point, a well-placed thought can send your consciousness there. Conversely, you want to stay away from negative frames of mind because the bad news and dangerous aspect of the bardos is that a single bad-placed thought if we reify and chase after it, can plunge us down into the lower realms.

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We should avoid negative states of mind. This is a marvelous thing to extrapolate into daily activities. We can prepare for the stage in the bardos now by engaging in positive thoughts and thinking now—avoiding negative states of thought. Once again, as Kabir once said, “What is found then is found now.” Start to cultivate these practices by relating to experiences in this way now. Relate to everything now as basically pure as a projection and radiance of your own mind. Cultivate positive states of mind now. Those good qualities will then naturally carry through and extend into the after death state. Try not to contract. Be open. Do not be defensive or afraid. See everything as illusion. As it says in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, emptiness cannot harm emptiness. Illusion cannot harm illusion. If we recognize that everything is illusory, it’s just a play of mind, then that removes fear. It’s that fear as we talked about earlier that brings about the sense of defensive self-contraction. That’s what we want to avoid.

Fundamentally another irreducible instruction that I suggested earlier, relate to whatever arises with equanimity. This is a way to balance and purify. See everything in this equanimity fashion. It’s an extremely powerful tool. Practically speaking some very interesting recommendations from Anyang Rinpoche. In the bardos keep your gaze up. Do not look down. As esoteric as that may seem, it’s a way to keep your attention elevated toward the higher realms.

Conversely, avoid looking down. In a similar fashion, don’t look back metaphorically or allegorically. Always look forward. Keep your gaze ahead and up. Don’t make impulsive moves. This is the quality of staying calm and stable. Slow down and take control of what’s happening by taking control of your mind now. It is what we cultivate in mediation practice. Here we have once more this basic tenet that even though there is this vast armament of esoteric practices—the fundamental baseline practice that all Buddhists from any tradition do—are marvelous preparations for the bardo. This is why, in many ways, these teachings are sometime referred to as insurance dharma. In many ways you don’t need a lot of these esoteric teachings. If your foundational practice is of good heart or Bodhisattva, if mindfulness and awareness are stable, that’s all you need to traverse these otherwise perilous straits of confidence and calm.

The image that I like to have here that I nurture is that our mind is like molten iron at this point. It’s very fluid. What we’re going to do at the end of this bardo is this molten iron will eventually be poured into some form, hence the bardo of becoming. This formless awareness will eventually be forced through the impulse of karma involuntarily or through our own conscious direction, will take on a new form. We want to have that form as most auspicious as possibly can be for ourselves and others. These are ways to actually do that.

According to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, there are two very specific practices here that are worth mentioning. These are practices that we can apply right now that will help us directly after we die. The first one is the practice of blocking. The second, as we will see, is the practice of choosing. These are basically ways to practice conscious rebirth now.

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What I mean by this is in terms of the practice of blocking, let's say you're engaged in a conversation with someone and you feel the energy of anger coming up. You feel this contraction and rage building. If you can take recognition of what's happening and not allow yourself to cave in giving into that, you will prevent your rebirth into a hell realm, even right now. We all know this point. You are engaged in a conversation. There is a tipping point where you are just about to lose it and flash out with anger. The minute you lose it you are reborn in a psychological hell realm.

It's exactly that same type of inappropriate relationship to this energy that will, according to these teachings, involuntarily hurl you into an ontological state of hell—according to the Buddhist tradition, a hell realm. We can practice conscious reincarnation now by blocking. We can say to ourselves, “I don't need to go there. I don't want to go there because I know the repercussions of what happens if I cave into passion, aggression, ignorance, jealousy, pride or greed.” Those are six fundamental poisons that seed the six realms of samsaric existence all together. By the way, this is what we practice when we sit in meditation. A thought arises and instead of allowing ourselves to take birth in that discursive thought, whenever we recognize that and say such as the technique I was taught, “Thinking is an act of recognition. It is a mental act of recognition that the mind has strayed.” Really what you are saying is, “I'm not going there. I'm not going to take rebirth in this state of mind.” This is something that you can practice now. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* says it this way, “Close the womb entrance and think of resistance. This is the time when perseverance and pure thought are needed.” Practice conscious reincarnation now. You will have the ability to practice it then. Another way to do this is a beautiful practice of equanimity. Relate to whatever happens with this quality of one taste with no preference.

The principle blocking mantra—many teachers say that one of the best things we can do in preparation for the bardos, and while in the bardos—is practice the mantra of equanimity. Once again is this six-syllable mantra, “Om Mani Padme Hum.” The reason to do that is that each one of these syllables, “Om Mani Padme Hum,” is designed to block rebirth in these six classic negative states of mind that are referred to as passion, aggression, ignorance, jealousy, pride and greed. If you've ever been to Asia, that's what everybody seems to do. You're practicing the mantra of equanimity. You are saying, “I'm not going to take rebirth in these negative states of mind even now.”

Tenga Rinpoche once pointed this out in a really powerful statement when he said, “Bodhisattvas control their thoughts and therefore they control their rebirths. By controlling or relating properly in an equanimous fashion to whatever arises, you're blocking rebirth to these six psychological states of existence even now. And that mindscape will prevent you from tripping into landscape after you die.” This is a way to practice blocking.

The other practice in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* that applies just as much to life is the practice of choosing to be in equanimity, maintain virtuous and positive states of mind and engage in the practice of Bodhisattva. This is conscious rebirth moment to moment that purely—almost by physics, the pure laws of positive habitual pattern or karma—will

naturally extend into the after death state. Just like “Om Mani Padme Hum” was the principle blocking mantra, the principle choosing mantra upon which the entire pure land tradition of which a hundred million practitioners rely upon, is the mantra of Amitabha and his pure land. According to different traditions, this is a little different. In the Tibetan world it is "Om Ami Dewa Hrih." This is a choosing mantra. This is another mantra you can recite as a way to direct your mind toward the pure land of Sukhavati. These two mantras are pure gold in the bardos—the blocking and choosing mantras. They are extremely helpful.

There is one final instruction from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* that I think warrants mentioning because once again it's something we can apply and practice now. This is a very famous teaching on choosing the bright lights. This is an extension of the blocking and choosing approach. The idea, as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* asserts, is block the natural tendency to be seduced into the soft lights. Choose the more difficult choice of going toward the bright lights. The way this applies to daily life is as follows. The bright lights really are the bright lights of truth. The soft lights are the soft lights of deception and negative habitual pattern. When we talk about following the bright lights in the after death state, the way to practice that now is to maintain integrity and truth in your speech. Choose to stay with the bright light of what's happening with reality. Choose to stay with that truth. That's the practice of the bright light. Notice the tendency to engage in light lies—the incredibly proficiency that we have towards deception. Deception is the practice of choosing soft lights, which we're so good at because we practice it all the time.

If we can gain some proficiency in that and say, “I do not have to go toward deception. That's the soft light. I elect to go toward the bright light of truth.” When this takes on a metaphorical archetypal expression in the bardos, once again that proficiency will extend. You will be guided toward the lights. These—by the way, in the after death state—are the luminosities of the mind. Each one of these six realms has its archetypal light. The most important ones for us to know about, according to these teachings—if you are going to follow “literal light” in the bardo here—they say that the most auspicious realm to be reborn, if you are not to be reborn in the pure lands, the next best thing is to be reborn as a human. In the after death state they say this is a bluish light. Follow the blue light. The next best would be to be reborn in the God realms. This is a white light. Choose the blue or the white light and stay away from the other darker lights or softer lights that will seduce you into the lower realms of existence. Once your mind—once this molten led or material is poured into a material form or once it's born, it freezes. At that point you are stuck or locked into that particular form until, of course, that particular karma is exhausted and you go through an endless recycling yet again.

The summary instructions, to bring it to a very practical point—it's one of the fascinating things of the Tibetan Buddhism as I have come to understand it—is this very interesting juxtaposition of extremely practical, earthy and ordinary instruction. What could be more practical than being kind to others and relaxing? Yet at the same time, conjoined with that are these very sophisticated tools that give us all these different ways of working, depending on our predispositions, with these marvelous teachings. To bring you back to more simple summary instruction, relax. There is that word again from the central

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teaching—relax. Recognize that it’s all the play of your mind. Don’t react to whatever is arising negatively. Practice equanimity. Think of your teacher with devotion. Call out to your teacher with devotion. Think of Amitabha or any pure land you might have a connection with intense longing and take refuge in these wisdom forces.

I want to finish by talking briefly about what you can do for others after they have died. This is one of the great gifts of the bardo literature. There is a tremendous wealth of teachings and practices that can be done for others after they have died. It’s really incumbent upon us as practitioners to reach out to those. According to these teachings, unless someone is prepared, they are being buffeted around by the winds of their own mind or karma and facing the projections of that uncontrolled mind—confused, alone and afraid. It’s like a bad dream that eventually transforms into a nightmare. This is a time for us to pull out the stops. We need to step forward as practitioners and help those who are in the time of greatest need. Just like coming into this world, going out of this world is a time of great, great need.

One of the helpful things here is to realize that once the mind is liberated from the body, it is much clearer and sharper. The tradition talks about whether it is literal or metaphorical, seven to nine times clearer. This is a tremendous blessing. Rinpoche says that bardo beings have extremely refined and supple minds. The practice that both they do and we do (for them) have a much more beneficial and powerful impact. This is very helpful for us. We may think we don’t have much ability to help, but the teachings are very assertive here. We have tremendous capabilities, especially if we have a karmic connection to the person who’s died. What they’ll do is come into your mind space. They will come around you. Those of you who are sensitive and have experienced the loss of a loved one, you realize you can feel their mind. You can feel their presence. What we can do as practitioners is invite that disembodied mind into our mind space. We can practice for them. They can take refuge in the stability of our own mind. We can guide them by that mere fact.

The image that is given in the literature is that it’s like having a big tree stump that maybe twenty-five people on land would have a hard time moving and all of the sudden it is placed in a body of water. It’s much more fluid and easily guided. This is why the principle guidebook, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, was written. It was written for exactly this purpose, to guide those in this particular state.

One of the qualities of the bardo of being is that if they possess temporary psychic powers. What this means is they have the capacity of a clear audience. They can hear and see. The teachings are very assertive that they can read our minds after they die. This is one way to determine that you are dead. This is something that you can bluntly say to yourself, “I didn’t used to be able to do this. Maybe I’m dead.” Once again, that’s a way to recognize that you are dead. The idea is that because of their temporary psychic powers and your karmic connection with them, they will be drawn to you and enter your space. They will read your mind. The teachings say, “Think of them only with love”, especially the first forty-nine days if you can do it. But especially for the first three weeks. I’ll say a little bit more about that shortly. Think of them only with love.

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One of the things that I do for the first few days with loved ones that die—I will append the mantra “Om Mani Padme Hum.” I will think of them and immediately recite that as a trigger to the mantra of equanimity, which they can tune into according to these teachings. For the first three and a half weeks we might wonder when the best time to help is. I’ll say a little bit more about the specific practices. But for the first three and a half weeks after they have died is when we really want to step it up, especially on the day that they died for the first three weeks. According to these teachings there is a recapitulation of this bardo process that takes place every three weeks. The teachings say that this is the time when you want to lean into your practice. Do some of the rituals that I will share with you. Think of them with love. Practice for them during that time. At the end of the forty-nine day period, there are also classic rituals you can do.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead—most translations of this have practices at the end. Many of the bardo texts have some of these practices. My own book, *Preparing to Die*, has many of these practices that can be done at each of these stages in the after death process. Every year on the date that they died is another time that you can step it up. If you can practice and do these rituals at the place where they died, it does seem to help. If you can’t do it, don’t worry about it. The teachings also say very practically for the first three to five days, try not to disturb their possessions. Try not to mess with their stuff. Remember there are often—a bardo person will not recognize that they are dead and come back to their old haunts. They will hang around this landscape and attached to their stuff. The idea is not to disturb it.

The irreducible practice that all of us can do that is very immediate, practical and extremely helpful is the practice of the gathering, accumulation and dedication of merits. Merit is a cosmic currency of Buddhism. It’s one way to talk about good karma. Merit until understood, may seem almost childlike as if we are dealing with a mental gain. But it’s only because we tend to think that the world is made of matter; it’s solid, lasting and conquerized there. Merit is something that we generate with our own hearts and minds. What kind of impact does my heart and mind have against the world made of hard, cold matter? This is a wrong way of looking at reality. The fundamental way to look at reality from a Buddhist point of view is that reality is made of the same heart, mind, spirit stuff that we are made of. The world is not a conquerized autonomist dualistic entity. It’s a projection of the mind. It’s made of the same stuff as the mind just like in a dream. If we really start to understand it at a deep fundamental level—this is one of the basic reasons to study the teachings altogether—if we realize the teachings on emptiness and interdependence and strengthen the view that reality is made of mind stuff, then what we do with our own minds can and does have a tremendous impact on what happens out there.

At the ultimate level we know there is no difference between in here and out there. This is the non-duality. We can substantiate and help others after death by understanding that reality is made of the same stuff that we are made of. What I do with my mind does have an impact. Accumulating merit is a simple enterprise at least in terms of how to do it. It’s just engaging in good deeds. Engaging with the aspiration particularly that you want to help this person or any good activity; sponsoring translations for texts, sponsoring a

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monetary, giving to an orphanage —any good deed can be harnessed, accumulated and dedicated for the benefit of a loved one. The teachings are unequivocal about the power of this simple act to help others. In fact, many of the esoteric practices—which are beyond our scope—are designed to gather, magnify and, like a laser beam, send this quality of merit into the dying person’s heart mind. The power of merit cannot be overestimated. The best thing we can do is substantiate our understanding of it.

There are very practical things that you can do that I’ve done with close loved ones. You can commission retreat centers—or even monasteries, if you have a connection here or in Asia. With the wonders of the internet you can cultivate this relationship now. In Nepal where I do a lot of work, I visited a number of different monasteries and asked, “Is this something that you do and is it good?” Every single monastery without exception said, “Yes. Requesting us to do practices for your loved one is a good thing for you. It’s a good thing for us. It’s a good thing for the dying person.” Most monasteries have a regular list of practices that they do. There is a donation that is recommended. When that practice is implemented it’s not just you engaged in it, which is challenging when you’re dealing with so much grief. Rely on your friends, resources and monasteries to take these practices upon them. Have them work to benefit your loved ones. This is part of their job description, you could say.

Thank you so much for joining me on this journey. I know it’s been a lot of material. I’ve tried to conjoin some of the more esoteric view aspects with practice aspects of what we can do for ourselves and others. I think that if we take it upon ourselves to change our relationship to end of life and our view through these teachings—by studying the literature and engaging in these practices—then we can transform this defeat into a victory. We can realize that the greatest opportunities for awakening lie before us.

I personally believe and can assert, through my own experience, that this has been the single greatest gift of these teachings for me. I realize the truth of impermanence within myself. I realize I’m not going to live forever. Through the recitation of the four reminders, I’ve developed a view that brings forth a tremendous sense of preciousness with each and every day. It allows me to bring great meaning to what I’m doing here and now. It also helps me understand what I’m doing in this life. It helps me understand that the fundamental practice of good heart, kindness for self and others, is of insurmountable benefit. All of these other teachings are supplemental means—if we can bring them to bare and practice now, realizing that the teachings on death and dying apply just as much to life as they do to death; and that we have the greatest resources ever given to the human condition by a lineage that goes back 2,600 years, that we can use to transform the greatest obstacle into the greatest opportunity.

Thank you so much for joining me. I wish you all the best on your journey in this life and in many future lives. Thank you.