

So, welcome back everybody. In this third class I want to talk to you a little bit about what you can do for yourself and others during death. The first and most important theme— if there is one to really take one with you from this program—is that the most important thing you can do during death is simply relax and open into the experience. But as we all know, sometimes the simplest and easiest instruction is ironically the most difficult. It's good to have a “Plan B” in our pocket and even an emergency “Plan C,” so that if things don't go as we planned we have a parachute and things we can rely on. The fundamental irreducible instruction during life and especially during death is simply to relax and let go. It's the one thing that we don't have to do. If we get out of the way and don't interfere, death will always take care of itself. We will die successfully. That's what constitutes a good death—simply being there for it.

Ram Dass once said it so beautifully: “Be here now.” When you are dying don't try to be a living person when living isn't what's happening. Be there for your death. Don't contract defensively around it, which unfortunately is the reflex that most of us have. As everything dissolves the natural conditioned reflex which we are most familiar with is grasping onto whatever we can to stay alive. It is that grasping that transforms an otherwise very easy trip into a bad trip. That's what transforms simply the bardo of dying into the painful bardo of dying. It does not have to be painful if we simply allow nature to do its thing.

Don't expect to die in a prescribed way. This is interesting especially for us because, even though the Tibetan Buddhist tradition puts forth this extremely elegant map; don't let it constrict your experience. Your experience will be much richer than any map. You can use this to help guide you, but don't think that you're going to die in exactly this way. You can aspire to die like the great beings but die in your own way. Expectation is premeditated disappointment. If we can drop our expectations and allow this natural process to happen, that's all you need to do. Don't compare your death to someone else. Die your own way. We want to be present for it and—as we're present for our death—we can also look forward. When I asked Rinpoche about this particular set of teachings he said, “Give a little promotion on the deathless side. Give people something to look forward to.” So this view is important. If we have something to look forward to – there is a teaching that in order to let something come, we have to let something go.

Release your attachment and infatuation with this existence and direct or transfer your mind, which is the essence of *powa*. Move your mind forward by releasing all the baggage that would otherwise hold you back. Realize once again that truly the single greatest once-in-a-lifetime opportunity is unfolding before you. Take advantage of it and be there for it. Rely on the practice that you are the most familiar with, like an old friend. Whatever practice you have the greatest familiarity with, take refuge in. This is not the time to introduce new practices unless they are directly requested by the dying person. Rely and take refuge in what you are already good in. Be open, spacious and relaxed; the central teachings that Khempo Rinpoche gave me over and over: open, spacious and relaxed. Rest in the confidence of your own preparation. If you have a connection to devotion, especially in the Vajrayāna teachings of Buddhism, realize that you are about to

mix your mind with your teacher’s mind. Allow that to happen. That’s the union of the mother and child luminosity reuniting.

With that said, one other thing that can help you that provides a sophisticated map that you can use, is realize when you are dying there are only two aspects of your body and mind that are dying. We are fundamentally composed of three bodies; there is the outer gross body, which we don’t need to say much about. We are familiar with that. But interior to that and foundational to this outer body is an inner subtle body. The eastern medical traditions target this body for health. Spiritual practice targets this body for liberation. The subtle body is composed of the winds, channels, drops and chakras. Even interior to that and more foundational is what’s referred to in Tibetan as the *mi shig pa’i thig le*, the indestructible body. If we’re very careful—and this is a four-letter word in Buddhism—you could say this is almost one soul. We have to be very careful when we use that term. The idea is that this fundamental, naked indestructible body is your deathless nature. When we die what is happening is you’re removing the outerwear of this gross outer body, even releasing the underwear of the subtle body and it’s naked mind itself that continues. It’s naked mind itself that traverses into infinity. That’s what we want to take refuge in. This provisionally lies at the center of the heart, which is where the death process is going to take us.

With this view of the three bodies, what happens in the painful bardo of dying—I want to say this ever so briefly to give you an idea of the elegance of this—is that the outer body will dissolve in five successive stages. The inner body will then dissolve in three more interior and subtle stages called the inner dissolution. When both of those drop away, it is the subtle indestructible body that continues. This is what we want to take refuge in.

We have some idea of the five stages of the outer dissolution and the three stages of the inner dissolution. Once again, these can act as sign posts that will help us orient our experience as we go through it. What’s going to be happening here is a gradual dissolution from the grossest most dualistic element—in a sense—into increasing non-duality and subtlety, as we’ll see. The outer dissolution—which can take place instantly in sudden death or over a period of years—is basically the earth element dissolving into the water element, dissolving into the fire element, dissolving into the wind element and dissolving into the space element. This takes place fundamentally as all the winds of the body will come to rest in the central channel—the one that resides at the center of the body. That’s what constitutes the dissolution of the outer body. All the winds will come to rest in this central channel through these five stages.

As they do that, there are associated signs of outer, inner and sacred signs that are helpful to know about. Outer signs are just that. They are signs that anybody can be aware of; caretakers can be sensitized to these signs and take advantage of them. The inner signs are your own cognitive experience—what you are experiencing phenomenologically and interiorly. This is something that is visible to you. The secret signs are really only those experienced by practitioners because they signal the approach to the luminous nature of the mind. As the outer and inner dissolutions take place, there are these successive inner

signs that arise that will point out this gradual progression into the nature of the luminous mind itself.

Briefly, the outer signs of earth dissolving into water are the body losing strength and gets heavy. Vision disintegrates. The inner sign is that the mind becomes very heavy and listless. Sometimes it's said that it's almost as if a heavy object is resting on your own body mind. The secret sign at this level is referred to as a shimmering mirage. It's something that the practitioner mind's eye will see.

The next step is water dissolving into fire. The outer sign is you lose control of bodily fluids. They say that one becomes incontinent—drool and bodily fluids are no longer controlled. Hearing tends to dissolve. The sense of hearing dissolves at this stage. The inner sign is that the mind becomes very foggy and confused. The secret sign is Khempo Rinpoche says that it's as if you're in a smoke filled room. There is an internal mental eye seeing smoke or fog.

The third stage is fire dissolving into wind. The outer sign here is that the person will become hot and feverish and then cold. The sense of smell tends to disintegrate at this phase. Interestingly—I've used this sign frequently—is people stop eating. Fire is associated with metabolism and digestion. This is a very helpful thing. I used it when my mother was dying. My father called me and said, “Your mom stopped eating today.” I realized she is entering this stage. It was extremely helpful. I got on the plane and was able to be with her for the last weekend of her life. I have used this indicator of the fire dissolving as a marvelous way to indicate this is where this person is. If you want to go see them before they die you should go. The inner sign is you lose the ability to recognize or identify people and things. The mind alternates between clarity and foginess here. The secret sign for a practitioner is an interior vision of sparks or even fireflies.

These interior signs are all indicators of these winds entering the central channel. As each one of these winds enters, these particular inner signs take place. Parenthetically there are very advanced esoteric meditations that allow you to bring these winds into the central channel even now, therefore see and prove these inner visions in meditation during life. That's one reason we know that these processes are something that take place. We can mimic them now even in our meditations.

The fourth stage is wind dissolves into consciousness. What takes place here is a very helpful indicator as well: breathing becomes more labored. Short inhalations are followed by long exhalations. I noticed this in particular when my father was dying. This is referred to as the death rattle—when mucus and whatnot accumulate in the respiratory system. There is a very unsettling rattling that takes place. This is associated with the wind element dissolving. At this stage taste tends to dissolve. That is another outer sign. An inner sign is the sensation of being blown by the wind or floating/elevated by the wind. This is something you will recognize within your own mind. You lose any sense of purpose or motivation interiorly. The secret sign here is the practitioner will start to notice quality of light or a butter lamp. It's this encroaching upon the luminosity of the mind.

The fifth state is consciousness dissolves into space. At this point the outer sign is the body becomes motionless. Respiration ceases with one final long exhalation—and that’s it. In both the inner and secret signs are continuities of the last stage. These constitute the outer dissolution. You can become very familiar with these things at the level of the teachings and then through your experience in meditation. When these experiences unfold before you, you will know where you are and what’s going on. The inner dissolution, the death of the inner subtle body – at this point according to western medical science you are clinically dead. The heart has stopped, brain activity has stopped and respiration has ceased. According to the Tibetans, for a period of about twenty minutes—the time it takes to eat a meal, as it says in the literature—the inner dissolution takes place.

As we talk about this inner dissolution, we’re really talking about what’s happening with the inner subtle body. This is what the inner yogas are all about. The inner yogas constitute a third of the entirety of the Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist path. So many other classical yoga schools refer to the workings of this inner subtle body. Everything that’s going to take place now is taking place at the level of the subtle body. The outer body from a western clinical point of view is considered dead. Respiration has ceased and at that point you are clinically out.

What’s going to take place here is three progressive final stages of descent into the heart. I want to say a little bit about the subtle anatomy and physiology because it will help you understand several compelling things. Remember what has happened in the outer dissolution is all the winds that have brought about the motion and the physiology of this outer body have all entered into the central channel. At the central channel, which runs from the base of the spine to the top of the head, according to the inner systems—you can experience this through meditation—there is a subtle, white element called bindu that resides at the top of the head that you receive from your father, resides at the top of the central channel. At the base is a red element or essence of bindu that you receive from your mother. While these two bindus are here during the entirety of our lives, they constitute what we know as life when they are held in this stable position. What’s going to happen in these three phases, as we’ll see in phase one, the element at the top of the head will descend to the heart. In phase two the red element at the base will ascend to the heart and they will then close at the center of the heart. This has some very interesting implications, as we’ll now see.

The first of these inter phase dissolutions is called the stage of white appearance. Once again, all the winds are in the central channel. Now the winds that are above the heart will collapse into the heart center itself. It’s almost like a balloon deflating. The white element that resides at the top of the head will descend. There is no longer any outer signs here of course because the outer body is dead. There is no way from the outside to tell what’s going on. The inner sign here is a sky filled with moonlight and a sense of whiteness—a sense of clarity and whiteness. The secret sign is in fact just that—it’s a sense of tremendous mental clarity. What this is comprised of gets a little bit subtle – there are eighty thought states—they are very subtle winds of mind that always move the

mind out towards this object. In each one of these phases a collection of these thought states will dissolve. So in this white appearance phase, the thirty-three thought states associated with aggression—the coarsest wind moving out—cease. As that quality of aggression ceases, it’s replaced with a quality of tremendous clarity. That’s the wisdom aspect of aggression—tremendous clarity. That’s what your view as a practitioner will be and the mind will become very clear.

What’s very interesting for me in this regard is that when we’re talking about these essences or these bindus, these are the hardest aspects of the subtle body to understand. Rinpoche once said that these bindus are basically consciousness. That’s the easiest way to think of them. Think about this for a second. As consciousness is dropping down through this central channel toward an experience of white light, is this not familiar who have undergone near death experiences? How many people who have had these classic NDE’s, as they are called, talk about falling through a tunnel heading toward white light? This could in fact be what’s going on. Their consciousness is dropping through the central channel experiencing this quality of white appearance.

The second phase, the winds below the central channel—below the heart—they collapse like a balloon deflating. The red essence comes up. This is the stage of what’s called red increase. The inner experience here is everything appears reddish. Bindu is consciousness so your vision at this point is one of tremendous red. The forty thought states, this is a secret sign, the forty thought states associated with passion. Passion is a more subtle movement of the mind towards its object. Aggression is kind of a coarse movement out. Passion is a little bit more medium grade. As that energy is transmuted, it’s replaced with a sense of tremendous bliss. This is why people often talk about, when going through these near death experiences, tremendous clarity and bliss. That’s because they are experiencing these subtle winds moving through this central channel. Advanced practitioners experience this in their own meditations. This is something that you can mimic in your own deep meditation.

The final stage of the inner dissolution is sometimes called black attainment or black near-attainment. What happens here is these two elements have come together and cup at the heart center. At this point everything is returned to the heart. The inner sign here is one for most of us a black out. That’s why it’s called black attainment. For a non-practitioner and someone not familiar with this quality of mind, this is the moment of death. For a practitioner as we talked about earlier, this is a moment of recognition of the luminosity of the mind, the dense clarity of the mind. The secret sign here is associated with the seven thought states associated with ignorance. Just a very subtle movement of the mind away from the center or what I refer to as the primordial puff of Samsara, this very gentle movement of the mind out and away. When that dissolves the resulting experience is one of non-thought. Here, of course, for those of you who have familiarity with the three classic deep meditative “*nyams*”—they are called the deep meditative experiences. What are those? Bliss, clarity and non-thought. These are exactly the experiences that are brought about in death and deep meditations.

At this point, everything has collapsed into the heart center. This is where the mind will provisionally reside during this stage of tuktan that we talked about earlier, the stage of resting in the heart center. Then as we’ll pick up in the next class the mind will eventually leave through one of nine portals, which we’ll talk about. That will constitute the bardo of becoming.

What I want to finish this session with is talking very briefly about what we can do for others. The first part is understanding what we can do for ourselves. Understanding these eight stages of the outer and dissolution are a way to become doctrinally and experientially familiar with these eight stages of dissolution. I guess it’s worth mentioning briefly that if you think about what’s happening, if you’ve been paying attention, there is a dissolution of the senses from the eyes to the ears to the nose to the tongue. It’s as if our most dualistic sense which is sight, dissolves into the next most dualistic sense which is audition, and the next most dualistic sense which would be smell then taste and touch. It’s as if our sense and every aspect of our experience is heading toward non-duality almost like a decrescendo into the heart point. When I now read a very famous heart sutra, I realize that the heart sutra is really a death sutra. What does it say there? In a certain part of this classic text it says, “No eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind.” This is exactly the sequence of dissolution that takes place through these stages that we’ve just described.

We’re heading toward non-duality. We’re heading toward the point which provisionally resides at the level of the heart, which is why when someone is resting in deep meditative absorption after death, heat can be felt there because the mind is still resting here.

Let’s talk a little bit about what we can do for others. There is a great deal that we can do to help others as they die. I believe it’s incumbent upon us as spiritual practitioners to do this for our fellow practitioners and others, this is a time of greatest need. It’s interesting to me that we become midwives into the bardos. It’s as if the same type of qualities that we need as we enter this world as a baby, the same type of qualities that are helpful to us as we transition and enter into the next world. By understanding these basic tenets we become midwives into the bardos. This material can be of tremendous benefit for those as they die.

The first thing is don’t get too hung up on helping. We don’t want to become too invested with helping. We want to practice sacred listening. By this I mean it’s very easy to come in armed with all these teachings—this is kind of the shadow or near enemy side of all this information—feeling that we can somehow come in to orchestrate and conduct a perfect death. We have to be careful here with our motivation and tendency. We should practice sacred listening. We should completely tune into what’s happening and let the dying person lead this dance. It’s their death. Whatever their version of a good death might be, we should support that. We should not impose our own visions of what we would constitute or comprise a good death. Let them guide you. Don’t let your ideas of a good death actually prevent one. Relax, listen and pay attention to what the dying person is pointing out to you both through their own verbiage or most importantly through their own body language and what’s happening.

The most helpful person is one who can tune into what’s happening and can provide a quality of steadiness by their mere presence. This is why practitioners can be so helpful here. A practitioner can come into this environment with their stable mindfulness—with their stable, steady mind. Their simple mere presence without uttering a word can provide the quality that is most desperately needed. It’s stability that’s being lost as the dying person is dying. If we can present that stability to them through our mere presence, we don’t even have to say a thing. This is why in my community one of the things that we do for each other as we die is simply enter the space of a dying person and meditate with them. In a very real way, it’s almost as if we’re practicing for them. As a person is dying their minds tend to mix into the environment. If you’ve been around a dying person you realize this. They are extremely aware of what’s going on. You can almost feel their mind leaking into space. You can practice for them. Your stability can bring about the greatest sense of solace and refuge for them.

The most helpful person is not the know-it-all but someone who is comfortable with uncertainty and willing to be with the unknowns as well as someone who can practice in addition to sacred listening, unconditional presence. This is really another way to talk about unconditional acceptance.

While someone is having a harsh or difficult death, they can be there for that without reacting inappropriately. If someone is having an easy death they can be there for that. It’s the ability to create this holding environment. This is a wonderful, interesting term that was coined by a developmental psychiatrist named Donald Winnicott. I mention him because he brought about this idea of a holding environment as a way to bring about a stable environment as children are being brought into this world. Here is this idea of midwife again. The idea, with holding environments in death as in birth, is you want to create an environment that is conducive for relaxation and release. For me, this is the best way to think about this. If you can use this tenet as a guiding view, everything will fall in behind it. Think about how it feels when someone gives you a nice warm hug—a beautiful soft loving bear hug. What does it do to you inside? There is this sense of release and relaxation. I think of holding environments as hugging environments. If you can create a hugging environment in whatever way works for you that is perhaps the single best thing you can do for someone who’s dying. This is where you have to listen and tune into what might actually constitute that. Hugging environments really allow people to feel comfortable, to relax and to let go. That’s it.

So as a general central rule, keep it simple. Speak from the heart. If you default into anything, default into silence. If you’re going to give teachings, they should be those that may be requested. Those teachings should be kept very simple and be repeated. Don’t introduce anything complex at this point unless they request it. Now is the time to keep things very simple and straightforward. Even though this time of life, the end can be very solemn. Those of you who have worked around death you realize there are times when they can be really funny. Don’t lose your sense of humor. Don’t be too serious.

I have found in understanding these teachings, being around death and having a deep personal sense of what takes place, it brings a sense of comfort and quality of lightness to

the situation. I have a larger view of what’s actually taking place here. Even though there is a loss, remember a loss at the level of form is tremendous gain at the level of spirit. This is why we can celebrate this time of life. It doesn’t have to be this morose and heavy thing.

Again, practically speaking, remember that when a person is dying there is so much to hear. Their energy is waning. We have to be sensitive to that. When you see signs of fatigue it’s time to be quiet or time to leave. Be reliable. Remember that everything is failing this person and letting them down. If you make a commitment to meet with somebody to be with them. Make sure you fulfill your commitments because what might seem like an un-consequential point in your week could be something that you’re really looking forward to. Don’t let them down while everything else is letting them down. Keep your commitments.

A little bit more esoterically this is connected to the inner yogas. The teachings say towards the very end of life gather at the top of the head because this is where you want to direct consciousness. What I often do when I was with my parents or others in the very final stages as their respiration is ceasing, I will gather at the top of their head and caress or tap the very top of the channel. This is associated with this esoteric practice of *powa*. It’s a way to direct the mind towards the top.

Fundamentally, we want to help them let go, release and relax. We want to, if the opportunity arises, remind them that the greatest spiritual opportunities for awakening are about to unfold before them. Give them something to look forward to. If they are receptive to that teaching, this is perhaps the greatest gift you can give them. Remind them of their teachings and the teachings of their teacher. Remind them that they really do have this incredible opportunity right in front of them.

With these heart instructions at your disposal, use your own intuition and intelligence. Really listen to what’s happening. Use the confidence born of practice and study to enter these environments with a tremendous stability. From that basic matrix of understanding, allow the process to unfold. This is the best way to help someone as they die.