

In this second class, we’re going to talk about what we can do before death. As you’ll see, the Tibetan tradition is fabulously rich in so many different practices. I will give you some sense of introduction to over the counter practices that anybody from almost any tradition can do and progress just a little bit into esoteric practices; just to give you some idea of the scope of different meditations that are available for you.

The first thing that anybody can do is lead a good life because, as Kabir once said of death, “What is found then is found now.” If you lead a good life, perform good actions and have a life of integrity, you will be taken care of by the force of that goodness. In the Buddhist tradition, the term that really summarizes this most beautifully of course is the cultivation of *bodhicitta*, the awakened heart mind. This is the motivation that brings about goodness in terms of having your life be a gift of offering and service to others. In so doing, the force of this goodness and karma and the momentum of this will take good care of you when you die. I find this fantastically encouraging because anybody from any tradition of course can have a good death. It’s just not Buddhists that have a patent on dying well. Anybody who performs good activities will be taken care of by the force of that goodness.

Secondly, as we’ve already suggested, is practicing how to let go. So much of our life, so much of suffering in life—both psychological and spiritual—you could almost say the suffering is virtually synonymous with grasping, attachment and our fear of letting go. If we can practice this release now, if we can practice what we talked about earlier—dying before we die, letting go before we’re forced to let go—then we’ll slide with tremendous grace into and through the bardos, because everything that would cause suffering has already been released. It’s like the country music song once said, “I’ve never seen a hearse with a luggage rack.” You fundamentally can’t take anything with you in the after- death state. Anything constituted of form will not go through. Everything constituted of form does die and has to be left behind. If we can practice this release now, these forms of generosity—if we can release all these attachments now—then the bardos will take care of themselves very beautifully and gracefully.

These are some of the more specific practices. The first two are directly associated with what I’ve come to determine as the central teachings of the entire *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The first is do not be distracted. This is a teaching that’s referred to many, many times in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which of course is the principal guidebook of the bardos and the Tibetan tradition. This means practicing mindfulness. This means practicing *shamatha*—developing a stability of mind. The stability that almost really becomes your body because as we go through the bardos and our physical body is left behind, our mind becomes reality just like in a dream. If we have a stable mind now, that stability itself will be of immeasurable benefit for ourselves as we go through the after- death state.

My teacher Khenpo Rinpoche, Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, talks about a very interesting progression of this mindfulness. The first is called deliberate or effortful mindfulness. This is what most of us work with when we sit down in mindfulness

meditation. We work to stabilize our mind by bringing it back to our body, breath or our mantra. As this matures into the second phase of mindfulness that Rinpoche refers to as effortless mindfulness, this is a quality of mind that starts to reveal itself more effortlessly. This is very interesting to know in a general spiritual sense; that is as you progress along the path, it becomes easier. It’s as if skillful momentum takes on its own life and starts to carry you.

You start to notice this in particular in the third phase of mindfulness, according to Rinpoche, which is called spontaneous mindfulness—where mindfulness just naturally starts to pop up in your life—you are simply more mindful naturally. These latter two phases, by the way, Rinpoche refers to these as the two qualities of mindfulness that do not die. The first level of mindfulness that we start with, effortful mindfulness, does dissolve. It’s associated with what the Buddhists refer to as a mental factor. That does dissolve, but these latter two aspects of mindfulness, effortless and spontaneous, are also associated with mindfulness of the nature of the mind, which is a deathless nature.

These two qualities of mindfulness do not disintegrate, either at sleep or at death. If we can gain proficiency in these practices alone, they can act as a lifeline that will guide us as a thread of sanity through the after-death state. This very simple practice of *shamatha*, the practice of tranquility and mindfulness that is so commonplace in all the Buddhist traditions, proficiency in that practice alone has inconceivable benefit especially if it evolves into the more refined stages.

The other practice, the one that’s referred to very commonly at least in terms of the second principle, an iteration in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, is a teaching that says recognition and liberation are simultaneous. This line is referred to and mentioned many, many times in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. This refers of course to the practice of Vipassana, the practice of clear seeing. We cultivate this also in most of our standard meditation practices. So for instance, if you’re engaged in a meditation—a mindfulness meditation—one common instruction, especially in the way I’ve been taught in mindfulness practice, is that whenever a thought or some distracting event arises, we simply recognize that distraction by labeling it “thinking” and we simply let it go. That recognition, the very recognition liberates the distraction or has the potential to liberate that distraction. This becomes very important because in the bardo states—when mind becomes reality—if we’re unable to let go or recognize that whatever takes place in the after-death state is the display of our own mind just like in a dream, if we can do that, then that display no longer has power over us; and we’re free from it exactly in the same way that we’re free from discursive thinking now if we recognize the thought as it arises. We practice this central teaching of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*: recognition and liberation are simultaneous every time we recognize a distraction and return to the medium of our breathing, body or mantra.

The other teaching that’s very common in the Tibetan world is a teaching by Rinpoche, which is referred to as the four reminders. These are also taught as the four thoughts that turn the mind. They are powerful ways to bring about a level of recognition of the

futility of conditioned existence, of our attachment to form, and our marvelous rehearsal for bringing about a proper view that we talked about in the first class. I will recite these to you. I will recite these for you. I recommend that you memorize these and work with them every day. Rinpoche once went so far as to say that if we could truly take these four reminders to heart, fifty percent of the path is complete. They are that powerful in terms of turning the mind away from always looking out and chasing after its projections, and having the mind turn back in to look at and toward the true source of liberation. These four reminders are as follows: first, contemplate the preciousness of being so free and well favored. This is difficult to gain, easy to lose. Now I must do something meaningful. Second, the whole world and its inhabitants are impermanent—in particular, the life of beings is like a bubble. Death comes without warning. This body will be a corpse. At that time the Dharma will be my only help. I must practice it with exertion. Third, when death comes, I will be helpless because I create karma. I must abandon evil deeds and always devote myself to virtuous actions. Thinking this every day, I will examine myself. Finally, fourth, the homes, friends, wealth and comforts of samsara are the constant torment of the three sufferings just like a feast before the executioner leads you to your death. I must cut desire and attachment and attain enlightenment through exertion.

I really encourage you to take these four reminders to heart. Work with them and translate them into a vocabulary that speaks for you. Do whatever it takes to really take these four supreme contemplations to heart. If you do, I promise you it will realign your life. It will show you what's important. It will point out the futility of conditioned pursuits and point you in the right direction. The power of these four contemplations cannot be overstated. I do them every single day of my life because I forget. Hence, they are called reminders. I forget about my impermanence. I forget about conditioned distractions. These four reminders are extremely powerful tools to point my mind and heart in the right direction.

The next level of preparation is one I've alluded to from the very beginning. This is a doctrinal preparation—simply becoming familiar with contemplating and becoming familiar with the map, as we've already talked about. Study the trikaya, study the three bardos, and study the teachings on the bardos all-together, which actually constitutes what's referred to as bardo yoga. It's the practice of becoming familiar with these teachings so that the map can become immediately applicable and useful for you when you do enter this trajectory.

The idea is you don't want to enter the bardos with a rear view mirror mentality, which most of us do. We always, I should say most of us, look back. This is what causes so much suffering in the death and dying state. We're always looking back. We don't want that rear view approach. We want a forward view. Understanding the view alone will give you something to look forward to.

The other practice that is extremely helpful is the practice of Tonglen—the practice of sending and taking. This is a very rugged practice. It's beyond our scope to really define

it in this context, but there are many recourses. Pinacho speaks so elegantly about this practice, but the practice of sending and taking is a rugged practice almost designed to match the toughness and rugged quality of death itself. It acts for me as a kind of perspective generator, because once again I realize I suffer when my mind gets small.

The image I like to think about is that without spiritual practice and without some level of Tonglen or practice like it, our minds are like shot glasses. They are very small and contracted. If we have a shot glass filled with water and we take a teaspoon of salt and put that teaspoon in a shot glass, it will powerfully affect that small container. But if we take that container—we take that shot glass and transform it to Lake Michigan—then that same experience, the same teaspoon full of salt has virtually no effect. So the practice of Tonglen and many other *metta* practices are designed to take our mind from a shot glass to Lake Michigan, so that the same experience still arises within life, but it arises in a larger container—a larger and bigger mind. That big mind can comfortably and gracefully contain whatever arises within it. So Tonglen is a marvelous practice to bring about the quality of big mind.

Tonglen itself is part of a group of practices that are referred to in the Mahamudra tradition of Tibetan Buddhism as reverse meditations. Reverse meditations are a marvelous way to expand our sense of meditation all together. They are ways to formally bring unwanted experiences onto the path on our terms. Of course, this entire teaching that we’re going through in this program is a kind of reverse meditation. It’s a way to bring perhaps the most unwanted of all experiences, which is the experience of death and dying, onto the spiritual path.

There are smaller practices that we can do that will be extremely helpful in preparing for death. One reverse meditation and these come from the tradition. I’m not making these up. One reverse meditation is to work with pain voluntarily on your terms. It may seem patronizing to do it, but I’ve been engaged in this meditation for many years. You simply can bring about pain—bite your lip, dig your fingernail into your thumb in the sanctuary of meditation practice all together. In other words, you’re already engaged in your meditation and say, “Now I’m going to work with a reverse meditation of pain.” You bring about something that hurts and then you establish a sane and healthy relationship to that pain. The pain doesn’t go away but the quality and texture of the pain changes. You are changing your relationship to the pain. You can also do this: put yourself in really wild and crazy environments. When I teach my bardo seminars, what we’ll do is sit and I’ll crank up a bunch of blasting boom boxes where there is cacophony taking place. People will sit, almost like those Vietnamese monks that self-immolated. You sit in this voluntary fire and establish a relationship to the cacophony, so that it therefore no longer has power over you. It’s as if you sit in this center of this voluntary cycle. These events are still taking place but you’re not reacting to them in a negative way. You’re allowing your mind to actually embrace them. These silly practices are extremely powerful. You may find just the view of these things if you travel to Times Square or someplace there’s a tremendous amount of chaos; just the view of these reverse meditations will allow you to embrace this otherwise unwanted

experience and relate to it in a spiritual way.

Other reverse meditations would be to create. This is a very interesting one to do: sit in meditation and quiet your mind. Then for maybe a minute or so create as many thoughts as you possibly can. Make your mind just go ballistic. You finally get to do on the cushion what you always wanted to do—crazy, wild mind. Sit there and bare witness to this voluntary craziness without allowing yourself to be sucked into it.

Another practice my teacher Rinpoche suggests is to watch horror movies. This is a very interesting one. It's part of a subset of a classic Tibetan charnel ground meditation. Charnel grounds were kind of the open graveyards in Tibet where great yogis would go to practice a wonderful and very intense mediation. Rinpoche suggests and I've done this—it is a very difficult practice for me to do because I find these things just wretchedly violent—but watch these incredibly crazy, unwanted movies and try to bring a sense of practice to that. Virtually any unwanted experience, if it's held within the view of a reverse meditation, can really help you at the end of life when so many unwanted experiences come about.

I alluded earlier to the practice of dream yoga. Dream yoga in the Tibetan tradition came about principally as a means for preparing to die. Associated with dream yoga, even more refined, is the practice of sleep yoga. These are two very subtle practices that can help you establish a relationship to very subtle qualities of mind as they reveal themselves every single night when you go to sleep. Whether you know it or not, you are cycling through a concordant expression of these bardos every night when you go to sleep. In fact there is a classic Tibetan saying that says, “Based on my experiences last night, I can infer I'm going to have a hard time in the bardos tomorrow.” So sleep and dream yoga are both kind of litmus tests for where we stand in relation to the subtle qualities of mind and ways to become familiar with them. They are very powerful practices that I really recommend you explore.

I once asked Rinpoche, the great Tibetan master, “If a practitioner realized they only had one year left to live, what practice should they emphasize?” I was somewhat surprised for a Tibetan Buddhist master to say, “Pure Land practice. Pure Land meditation.” This is another vast corpus of teachings. In fact, Pure Land Buddhism is the largest form of Buddhism in the world. The Pure Land teachings are a marvelous way to prepare for death because, as we'll see in the last class, for most of us going into a pure land is the best we can do after we die. So the pure land practices can be studied by studying the three classic pure land sutras, by looking at the vast literature on Pure Land teachings now available in so many different books. As we'll see in the third class, we'll have more to say about ways to practice pure land teachings all together.

Another practice that's very helpful that is a little bit more esoteric, but worth mentioning, is the practice of *powa*, or the transference and rejection of consciousness. This is a little bit more esoteric, but I wanted to mention this. It's a very powerful

practice that I recommend if you can study with a fully authorized master. It’s a very effective way to work with transferring your consciousness after death. *Powa* practice came about specifically as a way to work with states of mind at the moment of death.

Finally I want to talk about how we may have our own versions of death, but sometimes reality doesn’t comply. What are you going to do if you’re about to go down in a plane crash or a car accident? What’s the best thing to do for sudden death? Well the tradition here says two things: firstly, bring your awareness to the top of your head. We’ll see why in the upcoming classes. This is connected to the practice of *powa* because where the mind goes in terms of intentionality, as we’ll see, the winds go. Where the winds go in the subtle body consciousness itself goes. So by bringing your awareness to the top of your head, you are actually performing a type of emergency *powa*. Rinpoche even says we should raise our gaze as a way to lift our mind. Associated with this, the classic instruction, these are the two: bring your awareness to the top of your head and recite perhaps the most famous mantra in all of Tibetan Buddhism—“Om Mani Padme Hum.”

This is a mantra, as we’ll see in the last class, which is called a blocking mantra. It’s a way to close the doors for rebirth psychologically and ontologically into the six lower realms of conditioned existence. So if you’re about to be killed in a sudden instance, bring awareness to the top of your head and recite, “Om Mani Padme Hum.” A way to practice this now is whenever you are involved in an unsettling experience—your car skids off the road or you just lost your job, something that is shocking or startling that almost mimics the quality of life and death—one thing that’s very helpful to do is sensitize yourself to that practice at those moments: Om Mani Padme Hum and awareness to the top of the head. It’s almost like a pending “bless you” when somebody sneezes. We’ve been trained to say bless you when someone sneezes. We can also train ourselves in the same way, so to speak, to bless ourselves in any moment of sudden transition in mini-death and life, by practicing these two aspects of sudden death now.

I want to close this session with irreducible instruction. This ties in very eloquently to the end of the first class; that is that the irreducible preparation is learning how to relax. It’s so simple and yet it’s so difficult. If we can just simply let go and relax into the basic nature of who we are, death will take care of itself. It’s fundamentally the only preparation you really need. All these other practices you could say are supplemental to this heart instruction. If you can just open your heart and relax, death will take care of itself naturally. You will glide through the bardos with grace.

In the next session we’re going to talk about what to do during death. When we enter this next one it will be not just for ourselves, but what we can do for others. Thank you.