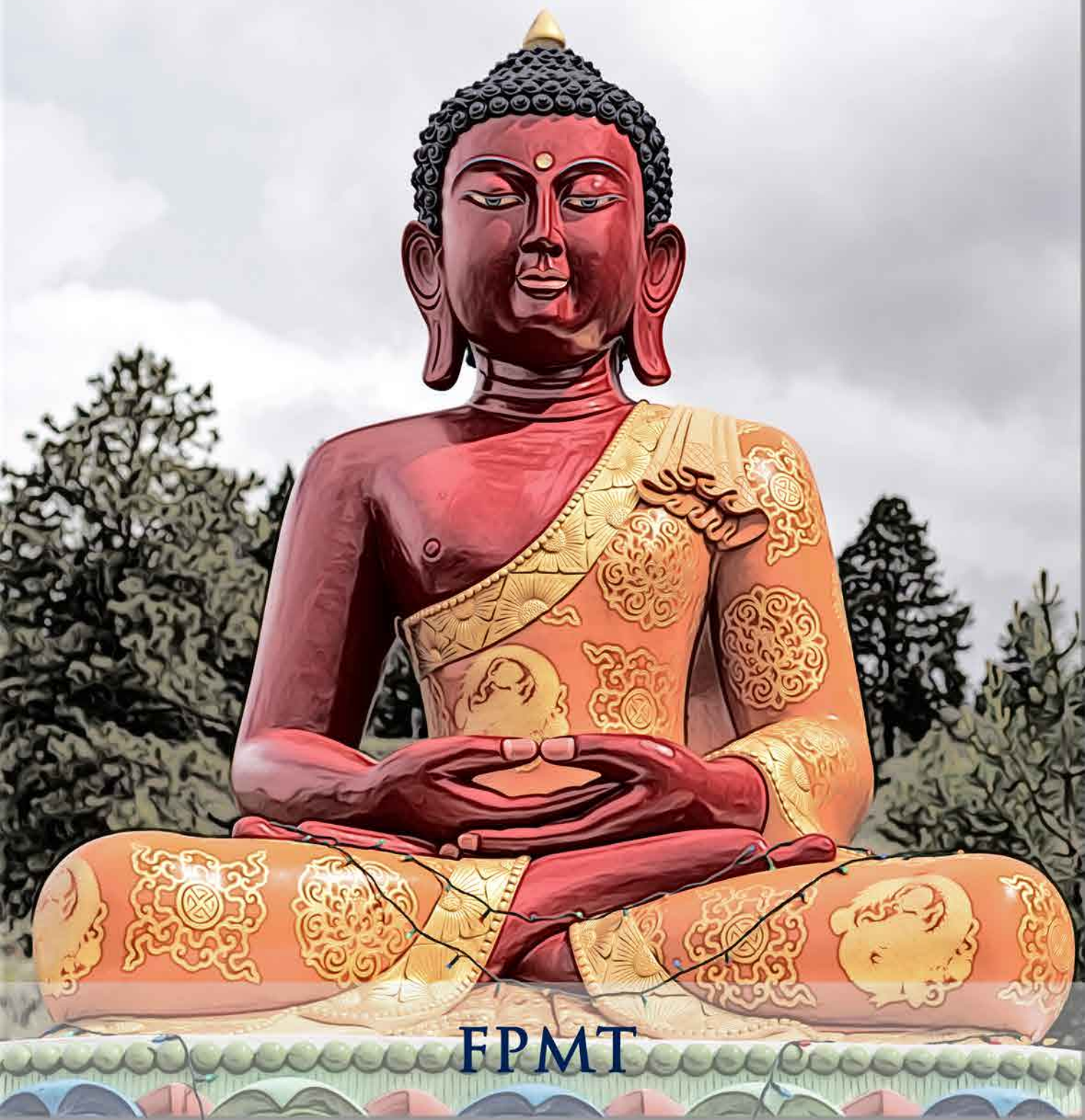


MEETING DEATH WITH WISDOM

A MANDALA EBOOK ON DEATH & DYING



FPMT

Meeting Death with Wisdom

A Mandala Ebook on Death & Dying

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Cover image: Amitabha statue at Buddha Amitabha Pure Land, Washington, US. Photo by Chris Majors.

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Introduction

“Not only is death definite, the time of our death is most uncertain,” Lama Zopa Rinpoche teaches in *How to Enjoy Death: Preparing for Life’s Final Challenge without Fear*. “If we can’t stop death – and we can’t, at least not until we have cut the root of samsara, of death and rebirth – then the only other thing we can do is prepare for death. When we die the consciousness will not cease to exist. That is a basic fact of karma. Our consciousness existed before this human life and will continue to exist after the destruction of this body.

“In fact, our consciousness is beginningless. Right now we have the freedom to think about what is worthwhile in life and to change our life so it is truly meaningful. Then we will be ready to die with a happy mind, to die with satisfaction.”

For this *Mandala* ebook, we’ve searched through three decades’ worth of archival material to find teachings, advice, interviews and stories that we believe can help guide and inspire our personal preparations for death as well as our ability to support the death process of our loved ones. This collection of archive pieces, which have been minimally edited for length and to capture their timelessness, offers a diverse look at how both high lamas and ordinary students have experienced the death and dying process.

We have intentionally left out of this ebook many important teachings on death by Lama Zopa Rinpoche as they have already been collected into books, including the forthcoming title from Wisdom Publications *How to Enjoy Death: Preparing for Life’s Final Challenge without Fear*, edited by Ven. Robina Courtin. Please see the end of this ebook for more [resources on death and dying](#) and for information on the book *How to Enjoy Death*.

1. A Cheerful Face on Death

By Lama Thubten Yeshe

Mandala December 2003–January 2004

At the seventh Kopan meditation course in November 1974 at Kopan Monastery in Nepal, Lama Zopa Rinpoche was giving extensive and detailed teachings on impermanence and death. Lama Thubten Yeshe then came to give a talk to cheer everybody up.

I hope you people understand the scientific Buddhist teachings on impermanence and death and are not trying to hide or escape from facing the reality of death. Of course, because of the way you've been brought up, this subject might be too much for you; nobody in your country talks about the nature of reality in this way.

Perhaps you think the way lamas talk about this topic is just a Tibetan thing, not a Western thing – even though, at this very moment, impermanence and death are within you. So, how can you reject nature? How can you escape from death while you are living in a state of impermanence right now? It's impossible.

Buddhist teachings are not diplomatic. They expose your true nature. But that doesn't mean you should cry emotionally, "Oh, it's too bad; I'm going die." Don't think like the person in the street. Do you think that's wisdom? Ordinary people say, "Don't talk to me about death. I don't like it." Is that wisdom? It's not. Check up carefully. Old people reject talk about being old. Is that wisdom or not? From the lamas' point of view, from Buddhism's point of view, that's stupid, ignorant. How can you reject that fact that you're old? How can you hide from knowledge of death? How can you say that such things are simply customs of the East? Is your death an Eastern custom? Did Lord Buddha create your death? Your death is created by neither Buddhism nor the East. It's part of your nature, that's all. How can you reject it?

This does not mean that we're trying to make you to cry. We're not. Emotional crying over death shows stupidity, not wisdom. What we want to show you is the reality of your impermanent nature so that you will gain knowledge-wisdom.

I'm not saying that everybody thinks like this, just the ordinary, common people that you might find in the streets and ice cream shops. If you think, "Lama's scaring me. I don't want to feel

afraid. I just want to eat ice cream and be happy. I think I'll leave this course tomorrow," you're being irrationally emotional. Wisdom is not emotional in nature. If your fear of impermanence and death makes you cry and prevents you from sleeping, "Oh, I'm going to die tomorrow," if you're just pumping yourself full of emotional terror, that's not wisdom. True wisdom feels, calmly, "Death is natural," and you're not made emotionally nervous by talk of impermanence and death. Emotional fear of death is ignorance. The understanding of impermanence and death we're trying to impart is wisdom.

Say there's a prisoner sentenced to death and on the day he's scheduled for execution, his jailers offer him nice clothes, accessories and perfume. Do you think he's going to be attached to these things? Of course he's not. Psychologically, it's not possible.

Similarly, if we have deep understanding of impermanence and death, it's easy for us to control our attachment to things. Control comes naturally. I think that's a great example. Check up.

Therefore, you can see how effective understanding the nature of impermanence and death can be in helping you release clinging attachment to the sense world. Just as it comes naturally to the condemned man on the day of his death – he's not pretending; he really has no attachment to food, clothing or ornaments – in the same way, if you develop the wisdom understanding impermanence and death, you will spontaneously release the attachment that causes you agitation and conflict, and will easily control your mind.

Lama Thubten Yeshe (1935-1984) established the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) with Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the organization's current spiritual director, in 1975. To learn more, visit fpmt.org.

Edited from the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive (lamayeshe.com) by Nicholas Ribush.

2. A Last Letter from Lama Yeshe

Mandala April-May 2007

Some 20 minutes before dawn on the first day of the Tibetan New Year – March 3, 1984 – the heart of Lama Thubten Yeshe stopped beating. He was 49 years old.

Lama Yeshe had been seriously ill for four months, although according to Western medical reports since 1974, it was a miracle that he was alive at all. Two valves in his heart were faulty and because of the enormous amount of extra work it had to do to pump blood, it had enlarged to about twice its normal size. And he himself had said 10 years before that he was alive “only through the power of mantra.” By November 1983 it was obvious that his life was in serious danger.

Yet in that last year while in New Dehli, he found the time to write a letter to Geshe Wangdu, a highly-accomplished Dharamsala scholar and yogi, and a close friend of Lama Yeshe.

Mindful of our root guru unequaled in kindness, king of great bliss, Heruka of the body mandala, crown ornament of the holders of the practice lineage of Ganden, I here pay homage to Trijang Dorje Chang and in doing so reply to your series of advises my spiritual brother, Ven. Jampa Wangdu, which you sent with such great affection. I will avoid exaggerations and will write a reply reflecting the nature of illusion-like dependent arising.

Due to my right and left channels being filled with the violent movement of thought-winds and overflowing out of control beyond the capacity of my ordinary heart to cope with, and in order to safeguard myself from this, I was forced to place this “difficult to find body of leisure and endowments” in the hands of a strange doctor. Upon examining me for half an hour, he advised that I must definitely go into the intensive-care unit of the hospital. Believing that this was the case, I asked him to protect my life. Never have I known the experiences and sufferings that then followed.

First, unending injections throughout the day and night. Second, because the capacity of my heart to pump oxygen was impaired and in order to breathe, I used an oxygen tank from which a rubber tube ran to my nose. This was never disconnected and caused me great discomfort. Third, I had to constantly take medicine day and night, sometimes more than 10 pills at a time. Due to this medication my mind was powerlessly overcome with pain every two hours and my memory degenerated. Food lost its taste, I was given only salt-less, Indian style food, I had no appetite for

more than a month, and whatever food I did eat I threw up and suffered. Some days I could not do my commitments.

My brother, Thubten Tsering, came to see me. I asked him to recite the self-generation of the body mandala and self-entry and listened with great effort. Often, in my mind's confusion my speech would become garbled and I would laugh at myself and then become sad. I experienced and understood the confused mind even in regards to merely this. It is extremely difficult to maintain control without becoming confused during the stages of death when the four inner elements are being absorbed. It was at this time that I felt the power of my mind degenerating. When I tried to think about different things and ideas, my mind became confused.

These experiences I am relating to you my pure-pledged, spiritual brother. Keep them secret from the hardheaded logicians.

My ability to recite prayers of ordinary words degenerated and, after considering what to do, I did stabilizing meditation with strong mindfulness and introspection. By the power of this there arose clarity of mind. Within this state I continued stabilizing meditation with great effort and this was of much benefit, though the enemy of lethargy often overcame my meditation. I was reminded of the time my spiritual brother and I received the oral transmission, listening to the so-called precepts of the skillful Ensapa tradition at Tsechogling Monastery, from our root guru possessing the three kindnesses.

During this period I received hundreds of letters but was not allowed to read them.

My holy spiritual brother, through reading your series of advice I developed immeasurable joy and happiness in my mind. The strength of my mind increased and my problems lessened and ceased. I will write here in verse the essence of the series of advice of my heart-jewel, spiritual brother.

Practice and meditate mind training:

The sole remedy alleviating unwanted sufferings,

The main object of cultivation

Of really awe-inspiring retreaters,

The path traveled by the great meditators of the three times,

You need a happy mind, a conscientious mind,

An open mind.

Especially you must cultivate the precept

Of transforming bad circumstances -

The experience of unwanted sufferings -

Into the path.

Take into your heart the sufferings

Of mother sentient beings

And again and again give away your merit

And happiness to them.

Transform the ripening results

Within the beings and the environment

And unfavorable circumstances

Into a pathway leading to enlightenment.

Live contemplating just this - mind training.

My mind has found peace through these and the other advice of my heart-jewel, spiritual brother. I request you, Venerable Jampa Wangdu, to be my Dharma friend all of my life.

In order that my three doors may never be separated from the holy path, I will ever hold fast to the greatness of mind training. The five degenerations are flourishing and the Dharmas of hearing, thinking and meditating have become the causes of ignorance, hatred and attachment to this life. It is very rare to make these leisures and endowments meaningful through the practice of the five powers, the essence of all Dharmas. We two and all mother sentient beings, although desiring happiness, are confused about the means of finding it and thus are continually tortured by the three sufferings. Seeing this, may we generate the realization of the equality of self and others.

It has been 41 days since I become ill. The condition of my body is such that I have become the lord of a cemetery; my mind is like that of an anti-god and my speech like the barking of an old, mad dog. I still take 16 pills a day and because I must depend upon others for moving about and sleeping, and because my hand shakes when I write, read my letter depending upon the meanings intended and not upon the mere words written.

Translated by Gelong Jampa Gendun and Gelong Lobsang Jordan. Thanks to Ven. Sean Price and Nicolas Ribush, director of the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, for reminding us of the existence of this precious letter, published as “Letter to Geshe Wangdu,” Archive #472 (lamayeshe.com).

3. Journeying Skillfully from Life to Life

Mandala September–October 1997

Ven. Pende Hawter, the former director of the Karuna Hospice Service in Brisbane, Australia, interviewed several lamas in Dharamsala, India, in May 1990 about the process of dying, death and rebirth. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche, Garje Khamtul Rinpoche and Geshe Lamrimpa answered his questions.

How to benefit the dying?

Ven. Pende Hawter: *What is the best way that we can help people who are dying or who have just died?*

Garje Khamtul Rinpoche: For those who are dying or have just died the best practice is to bring out the compassion in yourself, because as long as you have compassion you can always do something for the other person. You must not feel that because the person has a certain disease you are going to catch it, or that the person is dirty, or anything like that. You must not feel these things. You must try to remove all this from yourself and develop as much compassion as possible. According to Buddhism we believe that all sentient beings have been our parents in past lives, so we must always remember this and do as much as possible for them.

When you are sure that the person is going to die, then out of this great compassion that you have developed you can sit by the person's side and recite the names of the various buddhas such as Shakyamuni Buddha, the Thirty-five Buddhas and so on. If you can do this with a lot of compassion then it helps the dying person.

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche: There are two types of people we should consider here. The first is a person who for some time has had a religious faith and, secondly, a person who does not have a specific religious faith. If a person has faith in Buddhism, for example, then we can enunciate to them when they are dying the things they have learned to trust and take refuge in.

For a person who does not have a specific religious faith, the best thing to tell them is to try to have good thoughts rather than bad ones. When a person is dying and in great trouble there is great benefit in trying to get them to feel a bit better, a bit happier, to turn their mind to good thoughts.

I will elaborate on how to help these two types of people. For a person who already has faith in Buddhism, we can bring to their mind a remembrance of the things they rely on, their refuge. We

can remind them about bodhichitta, about equanimity, about stabilizing the mind in meditative concentration, etc. These things are very beneficial for a Buddhist. For a person who does not have a specific religion like Buddhism, we can advise them to think, “May everybody be happy, may all living beings please be happy, may every living being *please* somehow be freed from their misery.” These sorts of ideas, general ideas of wishing well to others, are very helpful.

For a Buddhist who is about to pass away it can be very beneficial to gently remind them of the qualities of the Buddha, to encourage them to bring to mind the form of the Buddha, to put a picture of the Buddha in their room, etc. These things can have great benefit and can cause the person to take rebirth in a fine place. You can also say prayers in their presence.

After the person has died it is very important not to disturb the body immediately, especially in the case of an adept. This is because a person has a gross or rougher consciousness, or mind, and a more subtle consciousness. Although the gross consciousness has left the body, the subtle consciousness remains in the body for some time after the breathing has stopped. For a person who has practiced meditation, this is a time when they can be doing things; but even for a non-practitioner it is important not to disturb them too much just after death. Even though they are not able to do anything with their subtle consciousness, it should nevertheless not be upset.

Geshe Lamrimpa: Generally speaking, when it is definite that the person is going to die, it is very important to comply with their wishes. If they usually have a lot of anger we should do what we can to stop anger from arising, to keep them peaceful and calm. Excessive movements and noise around that person should be avoided. If they do get angry then someone they like should gently and indirectly try and find out by talking to them what they are angry about and then try to remove whatever it is that is making them angry. This will greatly help the dying person. Seeing that they are going to die anyway, whatever they want should be given to them.

Similarly if they have a lot of attachment and clinging to their relatives, partner and parents, we need to assess whether it is better to allow them to visit or to keep them away. In this way efforts should be made to stop the person’s attachment and clinging. However, if they are definitely going to die we should give them whatever food they are attached to in order to keep their mind happy, even if the food doesn’t help their condition. But of course we must not give them poisonous or life-threatening foods.

If we try to give Dharma advice to the dying person but they don’t want to listen to it, it may cause them to want to be in a place where there is no Dharma. If they do think that way then in the next life they would have no interest in Dharma.

Similarly, with food and drink, if the dying person doesn’t feel like eating or drinking, but we, through wanting to help, keep pushing them to do so, they may develop the wish to be in a place where no-one is asking them to eat. This would cause them to be reborn in the hungry ghost

realm. Conversely, if they have a great desire to eat but we don't give them anything, this again causes them to be born in the hungry ghost realm.

If they are a person who believes in helping others and has helped others in this life, we should remind them of the help they have given others and congratulate them on this. If their mind is made joyful, this will help them attain a happy rebirth.

If we carry out the dying person's wishes, their mind will be satisfied. If this prevents the arising of attachment, clinging, anger and other impure minds, this will help to stop a bad rebirth and to attain a good rebirth.

For someone who likes Dharma and has experience of Dharma practices, it will be beneficial to give that person Dharma advice such as the following ten remembrances taught by the Buddha:

1. One should not generate a mind that is attached to the pleasures of this life. One should try and avoid attachment towards one's parents and those one is close to by remembering that whoever is born must die and whenever people meet they must later separate. At the time of death one must leave everything behind. One should also not be attached to one's body because at the time of death one also has to leave one's body. Similarly, one should not be attached to various objects such as food, clothing and one's house, because one also has to leave all these things behind.
2. One should generate a mind of love and compassion towards all sentient beings.
3. One should completely let go of all resentments and enmity, otherwise this will harm one in the future.
4. Any vows one has received during empowerments (initiations) that have degenerated or been broken, and any other transgressions of morality, should be purified before dying.
5. One should generate the strong aspiration that in all of one's future lifetimes one will uphold the Buddha's precepts of correct morality and ethics. There is great benefit in this.
6. One should feel that through expressing regret one has completely purified all the negative actions that one has committed or caused others to commit during one's lifetime so that none remain in the mind. This will also help to gain rebirth in a good place.
7. One should remember the virtuous deeds that one has done during one's life and also the virtuous deeds that one has caused others to do. One should reflect repeatedly on the good things that one has done during one's life, and think how this will be of benefit in the future.
8. One should think that one now has to go on to the next life but that is nothing to be frightened of because ultimately after birth one has to die and after death one will be reborn.

9. It is also beneficial to reflect that everything that has come from causes and conditions has the nature of change and that all compounded phenomena are impermanent. Thinking in this way will stop one developing *lung* (wind) diseases.

10. One should also reflect that all phenomena are without self and that going beyond sorrow (nirvana) is peaceful and virtuous.

These are the ten remembrances taught by the Buddha in *The Discourse Sutras*. For a Dharma practitioner these instructions should be slowly explained, but they should not be given to someone who is not a practitioner or who has no interest in Dharma.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: The best way to help a dying person is with actions and words that are motivated by compassion. However, if the person has no faith in the Buddhist teachings, there is not much point in trying to advise them according to Buddhist practices.

The merit of offering butter lamps can greatly help even a person with some karmic obstacles.

It is good to request a qualified lama to perform *powa* (transference of consciousness) for the dying person. When carried out by a highly accomplished being who has realized the ultimate nature, transference of consciousness can bring to a Buddha field the consciousness of someone who has even committed the most serious negative wrongdoings, such as the five wrongdoings that precipitate one immediately to the lowest realms. This power comes from the truth of the realization of emptiness.

Whether individuals who practice transference of consciousness for themselves succeed or not depends entirely on the quality of their concentration and their level of practice.

Transference of consciousness practice done on its own may shorten life, which is why one concludes it with a longevity practice. When lamas give the live-transference of consciousness to old people some time before their death, they always conclude with a longevity blessing. Some teachers say that transference of consciousness should be performed in the interval between the stopping of the outer breath and the inner breath. Others say that it can also be performed at any time up to many years after and that it will always benefit the being wherever their consciousness is, whether in the intermediate state (*bardo*) or reborn in one of the six realms.

Revival is impossible from the moment the *chika bardo* has occurred. The consciousness leaves the body before the arising of the ground luminosity.

According to the *Vinaya*, it is said that one should cremate the body as soon as possible after death. According to the tantras, in particular according to the *Karling Shitro* teachings, it says that one should not move the body for three days after death.

Ven. Pende Hawter: *For someone who is dying with a great deal of fear and anguish and is very frightened of dying, what is the best way to help them overcome this fear?*

Garje Khamtul Rinpoche: As well as reciting the names of the different buddhas, you must also tell the person that, because they are dying, they will be seeing different illusions, different visions. They will feel that something very difficult is happening and so they have this great fear. You must assure them again and again that what they are seeing and feeling is not real, it is just an illusion. And you must also give them things like *mani* pills, the holy pills of the great lamas. This will also help them.

Ven. Pende Hawter: *If the person is not a Buddhist, say they are a Christian, or someone who is not accepting of Buddhism, are these practices still appropriate or are there other methods that we could use?*

Garje Khamtul Rinpoche: For a person who does not believe in or know anything about Buddhism, then just giving them *mani* pills and so forth would not make any difference. So the best thing for such a person would be to assure them that what they are feeling and seeing is just an illusion, like a dream. It is like when you have a dream you experience things but it is not actually happening. So for the dying person also it is like this.

Is it okay to reduce the pain of the dying?

Ven. Pende Hawter: *For people with severe pain, is it wise to give injections or medication to reduce the pain that may have the side-effect of lowering the level of consciousness or clouding the mind?*

Geshe Lamrimpa: This is not advisable for Dharma practitioners, but for ordinary people who are not thinking about Dharma it can be of some benefit. Even if a person has a lot of pain when he is dying, as he enters the death process this pain will dissolve and he will be able to think more deeply. If pain-killing injections, etc. are given then it causes a type of madness in the mind and it makes it more difficult to think clearly.

Ven. Pende Hawter: *So is it better then for Dharma practitioners to take as little medication as possible?*

Geshe Lamrimpa: It is best if Dharma practitioners can avoid having pain-killing injections. I also think that it would be a great nuisance, if I was dying, to have an intravenous bottle hanging on either side of me!

Garje Khamtul Rinpoche: I personally feel that giving injections and medications, etc. would not make much difference to the consciousness. For example, when a person has an operation they are given different sedatives and seem almost dead so that while the operation is going on they do not feel any pain. But once the operation is finished then they are again back to normal and nothing has happened to their mind or anything like that. So I personally feel that it would make no difference. In fact by relieving the pain it would give relaxation to the person's mind.

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche: There is no blanket answer here. You have to look at the individual person. If a person is in excruciating pain, then to somehow relieve them of that pain is obviously

a good thing. However, if the person has a tremendous spirit or a tremendous capability, who can bear the pain and bear up under it and keep a clarity of what is happening to them, then to give that person a soporific that takes away that clarity is maybe not the thing to do. So it completely depends on the person. For the person who has the capability to remain with a knowledge of what is happening and not just be made more vegetable-like, if they can bear up to it then it is obviously better to leave them. But if the pain is excruciating then it is obviously better to alleviate it. So one has to look at each specific case.

If a person with Buddhist or meditational practices begins to experience pain when they first come into the hospice or hospital it can be very helpful to employ practices such as: bringing to mind that the pain has arisen because of certain causes and conditions, karma; remember various mind training ideas that can really strengthen and build up the mind, like convincing themselves that they are capable of bearing all sorts of difficulties. If the person has done these sorts of practices before, we can try to nudge them in that direction, awaken these thoughts within them. Then they are able to find a way to laugh at things that would ordinarily be excruciatingly difficult to bear.

What about the person who has never had the opportunity of doing such practices? This person can be told things such as, that whether they believe in a religion or not, everybody at a certain point is going to get these horrible pains, the pains of dying, etc. No matter what a person believes, they are going to get these pains so there is no point in being tied up in them and worried by them; it is better to try to distance themselves from them and to see that just like everybody else it is happening to them too.

Even a person with no religious training can probably get their mind around the idea (at times at least) that if they are upset it is not making the pain go away, it is not giving any relief. So because it has to be experienced anyway, they should try not to be upset or get tied up in it. It can also be tremendously beneficial to repeat prayers such as, “May this excruciating pain never happen to anybody else,” or “If this pain ever happens to anybody else may they quickly be relieved of it.” Even if a person has never been religious in their life before, these sorts of prayers can help greatly.

When does the consciousness leave the body?

Ven. Pende Hawter: *In the West the usual signs of death are when the breathing and heart have stopped. But, in Buddhist terms, how long is it before the consciousness leaves the body after these things have occurred?*

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche: There are probably two types of people that can be identified here. The first type is somebody like a young child or someone who has been wasting away for a long period of time, a person who has had a long gradual process leading to death. In this sort of case the subtle mind or consciousness probably won't remain in the body very long, perhaps only for a day or so.

The second type is somebody who has quite a strong body, who has been in quite good health, and dies rather more quickly. For this type of person the subtle mind or consciousness can stay for as long as three days.

Another sort of death is that of a sudden, violent death. An example would be the case of two people fighting and one of them is killed and dies suddenly. In terms of the length of time the consciousness remains in the body of such a person we would put this type of case in the first category, that is, a person who has undergone a long slide into death, with the subtle consciousness leaving fairly quickly. In general then, people will fit into one of these two categories, those whose subtle consciousness remains for a shorter time and those whose subtle consciousness remains for a longer time.

Geshe Lamrimpa: When the breath and heart have stopped it indicates that the gross consciousness has dissolved, but there are cases where the subtle consciousness has stayed in the body for a week or even a month after that. Mostly it takes three or four days for the subtle consciousness to leave the body, during which time the body does not decompose or smell.

Garje Khamtul Rinpoche: It is not definite that in an ordinary person the consciousness stays in the body for three days and then leaves. In some people it stays longer and in others it stays for a shorter time. There are many examples amongst the Tibetan lamas. You must have heard about His Holiness Ling Rinpoche, the senior tutor of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who stayed in meditation about a week after dying. In my hometown there was a lama who stayed in meditation for three weeks after he died.

Ven. Pende Hawter: *Is this quicker for people with serious diseases like cancer or AIDS, or for people who die in an accident or very quickly?*

Garje Khamtul Rinpoche: This is not very certain. It does not really depend on things such as whether they die by accident or of a very harmful disease like cancer. I feel that it is related to some previous karmic actions. For example, people who have been meditating on dzogchen or bodhichitta or anything like this, after death they seem to meditate on emptiness and their consciousness remains longer in their body, even though they do not have any direct attachment to their body.

Ven. Pende Hawter: *How can you tell when the consciousness has left the body? What are the signs of the consciousness leaving the body?*

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche: We can again discuss this in terms of the two types of persons. For the moment we will put aside the type of person whose mind or subtle consciousness leaves almost immediately after death and we will discuss the type of person whose mind may remain in the body for as long as three days. It is said that just before the subtle consciousness leaves the body is becomes enclosed in a smaller and smaller dimension and that dimension is said to be defined by

a red and white sphere. When the red and white sphere enclosing the mind comes apart, the subtle consciousness is let free and this is indicated by a small amount of blood coming from the nose and a white fluid from the lower part of the body (the sexual organ).

However, you sometimes find people in which there is no sign of any blood or fluid from the lower part of the body. Usually this *does* occur and it is the sign that the final death has occurred, that is, the subtle consciousness has left the body. These signs will be seen in a person undergoing a slow process of dying. Remember that there are two types of death you are going to see and I am not talking here about the person who dies suddenly.

Geshe Lamrimpa: For most people, other than those who are ravaged by serious disease, when the subtle consciousness leaves the body drops of fluid will come from the nose and the sexual organ. In men the white “enlightenment mind” drops, called white bodhichitta, come from the nose and the red drops, red bodhichitta, come from the sexual organ, but this is reversed in women.

Someone who is with the dead person will be aware of a momentary (and probably faint) smell when the subtle consciousness leaves the body. His Holiness the Dalai Lama had discussions with a well-known Western doctor-scientist who said that scientific tests had revealed that when the subtle consciousness was thought to leave the body, smoke was observed to leave the body simultaneously, albeit briefly. These tests were done by enclosing the dying person in a glass tube and subjecting the body to careful analysis.

The drops happen with most people, but not in those who are ravaged by serious disease. But the body is often disposed of before the drops appear, so in these cases the drops are not seen. In Tibet, it was customary to keep the body for up to seven days before disposal (mostly three or four days), in order to give the subtle consciousness time to leave. During this time various services (pujas) and prayers were recited.

Ven. Pende Hawter: *So they did not dispose of or move the body for three to seven days?*

Geshe Lamrimpa: This would be the case for those with experience, but inexperienced people would be less careful about moving the body around.

Garje Khamtul Rinpoche: You can tell when the consciousness leaves the body from the appearance of the body. When the consciousness is still in the body you do not really feel that the person is dead. The person still seems very wholesome and you do not feel uneasy to look at them or anything like that. But once the consciousness leaves the body then you feel very uneasy looking at that person. The body starts to smell and you believe that the person has died. You think of them as a dead body and not as a person. So you can tell from the body itself when the consciousness has left it.

The [experience of the drops] is not found in all people. It is only found in very few people. In these people, when the consciousness leaves the body those fluids come out from the nostrils and

the sexual organ. There was a high lama who died and when the consciousness left his body the two fluids started pouring out of his nostrils, one a white fluid and the other a red fluid.

Ven. Pende Hawter: *So this does not happen with everybody, it is not a reliable sign of the consciousness leaving?*

Garje Khamtul Rinpoche: At the time when the person is dead, just before the consciousness leaves the body, the [white and red drops] come into contact. At that time when they join together there is an experience of blankness, when the person loses consciousness. After that they separate and the consciousness leaves the body, and it is at this time that the red and white fluid should come out from everybody. I feel that it is extraordinary that it only comes out with some people.

Ven. Pende Hawter: *Is it true that, until the consciousness leaves, the body does not smell or show signs of decay?*

Garje Khamtul Rinpoche: It is true that as long as the consciousness is within the body it does not smell. But once the consciousness leaves the body then the body starts to smell. And then the natural fluids start to dry up and the body looks very dry and you no longer think of the body as a person.

Ven. Pende Hawter: *When a person dies but the subtle consciousness is still in the body, what feeling does that person have if their body is touched?*

Geshe Lamrimpa: They will not feel anything; when the gross consciousness has dissolved the person can no longer experience feelings. When the highly realized lamas and Dharma practitioners pass away, while their subtle consciousness remains in their body they can stay sitting in a state of meditation with their body remaining straight and motionless. Then when the subtle consciousness leaves, their body immediately slumps down.

When the Tibetans first came to India many of the monks and old people stayed at a place called Buxa, which was like a monastery where Buddhist philosophy was taught. At one time two of the monks had a fight and one of them was killed. After this many of the local Indians and Indian officials were very critical, saying that the Tibetan monks were bad for fighting and killing. Later on a high lama, Gyari Rinpoche from Ganden Monastery in Tibet, passed away and stayed in a state of meditation for seven days. The Indians were called in to see this lama and when they tried to move the body by pulling the bedclothes, etc., the body remained upright and firm. There was also no smell from the body. After this, their attitude changed greatly towards the monks and they stopped being critical and they let the monks do whatever they wished to do.

At the time when the gross consciousness is dissolving, the skin seems to dry up and shrink around the nose, mouth and forehead, and the body becomes weaker. But when the gross consciousness has absorbed to the subtle consciousness and the practitioner is sitting in meditation, the body gets better and the appearance more interactive.

Ven. Pende Hawter: *What effect does it have on the consciousness if the body is touched or moved before the consciousness leaves the body? For example, often in a hospital, after the person's breathing and heart have stopped, various procedures are done on the body. Does this interfere with consciousness?*

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche: Firstly, if the person was an adept with some sort of meditational abilities, they are trying to remain with a gentle sort of concentration at this point. If we shake the person violently at this stage it will disturb that concentration. Moreover, at this point the only conscious element is an extremely subtle consciousness, which does not see things that are ordinarily apparent. There is a certain amount of pain and anxiety associated with that subtle state. To suddenly upset the person at this time is not going to help them at all. So as I said previously, it is better not to disturb the person at this time.

It goes without saying that if you were dealing with a yogi who had just died, you would obviously not go up and start disturbing that person. But even in an ordinary person it is possible that their mind or subtle consciousness may not leave their body for up to three days. If a person is asleep and you shake them vigorously they will immediately wake up, so it is like that.

So if we can possibly avoid disturbing the dead person for a while, then this is obviously the best thing to do. That is why there is a tradition in Tibet for the helpers of a dying person, even if that person is not a great yogi or yogini, to avoid disturbing the body for as long as three days. And if the body has to be moved, they would do so very gently and carefully, not violently or suddenly. This tradition has come about in Tibet to avoid disturbing the mind of the dead person.

In addition, if we have to remove the sheets and mattress, etc., from the bed of the person who has just died, we should do so slowly and gently so as not to disturb the person's mind. Similarly, if a person dies with their eyes open there is a tradition to close the eyes, and if there is an unpleasant expression on the face it is common to smooth out the skin to make the face look more pleasant. These things should also be done with gentle and slow movements to avoid disturbing the mind of the person who has just died. If a person has died with their eyes and mouth wide open and somebody then comes into the room to pay their last respects, that person may be taken aback and frightened. So to avoid this happening and so as not to disturb the atmosphere in the room, it is advisable to close the person's eyes and mouth to make them look better.

Everybody has their own burial habits, and in Tibet we had ours. The tradition in Tibet was for the body to be taken away for disposal after three days. To facilitate this, the arms and legs would be bent into the flexed position. Because the weather could be cold, if the person's arms and legs were outstretched when they died it could be rather difficult to get them into that flexed position. So slowly, slowly over the three days you would make sure you could work them up into that position so that you would be okay when it was time for the body to be taken away. I doubt if there is much need for that where you all come from!

Ven. Pende Hawter: *Is it beneficial to touch or stimulate the crown of the dying or dead person, in particular just when they die?*

Garje Khamtul Rinpoche: When a person dies, the first place you should touch is the crown and then the consciousness will leave from there. After that you can touch them anywhere.

According to Buddhist philosophy, when a person dies and the person sitting next to the body has a very strong connection with, or relationship to, the dead person, then the consciousness of the dead person is likely to enter into that person who is sitting next to the body. So the first thing to do after a person dies is to touch their crown, the area that Je Tsongkhapa called “the Golden Gate.” You have to touch this area and if the consciousness leaves by this path then the person is likely to have a very good rebirth, either in a Buddha-field or in any of the good rebirths.

But if the consciousness leaves from any of the lower parts of the body, from the navel downwards, then the person will have a very bad rebirth. For example, if the consciousness leaves from the sexual organ or from the navel then the person will take rebirth as a hungry ghost, or as a hell-being or an animal. So Tibetans have the belief that the consciousness should not be allowed to leave from the navel downwards. Because of this we never touch the body from the navel downwards, nor should a person sit next to that part of the body. Anybody who is sitting next to the body should be sitting somewhere around the person’s head and shoulders, that is, the upper part of the body.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: Touching the crown of the dying person is known as the “transference of consciousness of means.” It is not simply a matter of touching the person’s crown; as a means to trigger or enhance the meditative transference of consciousness, one should measure eight finger breadths back from the normal hair line – the place where the hair line is or was before one started losing one’s hair! – and pull out one hair from that spot. If there is no hair left, one should tap the skin of the crown several times with the forefinger by first blocking the forefinger with the thumb and then suddenly releasing it. This technique often helps the fluids to come out from the crown, the sign that the transference of consciousness has been successful.

Geshe Lamrimpa: If the dying person has accomplished transference of consciousness then it is very helpful to touch their crown at the time of death because the consciousness would transfer upwards. Otherwise it is not very helpful. For a transference of consciousness practitioner, when someone with consecrated sands pulls the hair on the dying person’s crown, the hair will come out. Buddhist texts say that when the consciousness is transferred upwards in this way the dying person will be reborn in the formless realm.

How long does the consciousness stay in the intermediate state before it takes rebirth?

Ven. Pende Hawter: *After the consciousness has left the body and enters the intermediate state between this life and the next, how long is it before it takes rebirth in another body?*

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche: The longest amount of time that a person can stay in the disembodied or newly embodied state (the intermediate state) is seven weeks, 49 days. If, say, a person is going to be reborn as a human being again, the longest they will stay in that disembodied state of a human is for seven weeks. After each seven days the intermediate state being dies and is reborn as another intermediate state being. The shortest time a person can stay in such a state is for just a few seconds – they get reborn almost immediately.

So why do beings undergo this process of minor deaths and rebirths in this ghost-like intermediate state? The reason is that if the person's karma is going to cause them to be reborn as an animal or as a human being or whatever, they also have to have a certain set of conditions met in order to find themselves in such a state in the future. An analogy would be somebody who is going to travel from here, Dharamsala, to Delhi. They are going to go, but cannot actually go until the condition of the ticket is ready. Some people may have to wait a day or two until they can get a ticket, so it is like that.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: Forty-nine days is the general duration for most people, but some people can wander in the intermediate state for much longer than this, even up to several years. A lama who performs the transference of consciousness and accomplishes virtuous deeds for the sake of these intermediate state beings can free them from that indeterminate state.

Normally one should give the “pointing out” instruction while the dying person can still hear, even faintly. However, it is said that the consciousness in the intermediate state has the faculty to hear or perceive the reading of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

The consciousness of a baby who dies before birth, at birth or in infancy, goes through the different intermediate states again and takes another existence. The same meritorious actions can be performed as those that are usually performed for the dead (for example, Vajrasattva ceremonies or recitations, offering butter lamps, purification of the bones, etc.).

The consciousness of a fetus that has aborted goes through the different intermediate states in the same way. As well as the meritorious acts usually performed for the dead (as described above), the parents, if they realize the negativity of their act and feel regret, should do extensive confession and reparation practices, such practices as reciting 100,000 times the hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva, offering many butter lamps and saving the lives of many animals that are going to be killed or slaughtered, such as fish, game birds, etc., by buying them and setting them free.

Geshe Lamrimpa: There is nothing definite about the duration. If a person is to take rebirth in a formless realm they go there directly without passing through the intermediate state. But generally a person can stay in the intermediate state for any period up to 49 days; some remain for one day,

some for four days, some for seven days, etc. During this period the intermediate state being dies and another is reborn, and this can keep happening for up to 49 days, that is, seven cycles of seven days.

Garje Khamtul Rinpoche: For some people the maximum period of intermediate state is seven weeks and the minimum is three days. Most people stay in the intermediate state for three or four weeks, mostly four weeks. Those who stay the longest in the intermediate state or intermediate stage are the different spirits that we call ghosts. They were not able to give up their previous body and they are not able to enter into the next body, so they stay in the intermediate state for ages, years.

Not everybody enters this intermediate stage. There are some people who attain enlightenment directly when they die and do not have to go into the intermediate stage. These are people who have mastered their minds by practicing a lot in their lifetime on practices such as bodhichitta and dzogchen.

There are others who have committed the worst actions such as killing their parents or other sentient beings, and such people go directly into hell without going through the intermediate stage. Whether or not a person goes into the intermediate stage depends on the individual. For example, if a person in the intermediate stage realizes that they are dead and thinks about his rebirth, then for them the intermediate stage seems like a dream or an illusion and they do not realize that they are dead, so for such a person it takes longer to be reborn.

How to prepare for one's own death?

Ven. Pende Hawter: *What is the best way to prepare for one's own death?*

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: The best way to prepare for one's own death is to practice Dharma during one's whole life.

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche: So again one has to think about two sorts of people, the person who has spent some time in their earlier life familiarizing themselves with religious practices and the person who has not done anything like that.

For the first sort of person, the one who is already familiar with religious meditational practices, when they see that their death is approaching, this is the time to turn the mind to religious practices.

For the other sort of person, the one who has not thought much about religious things at all in their life, they should try and get hold of that which is the heart of religion. And what is the heart of religion? It is to be kind, to think well of others, to hope that good comes to others in their lives. These are the essential things in any religious practice, and if a person who has never before

thought about those things can somehow do so, then this is the best thing they can do to prepare for death.

The person with some knowledge of religion from before will enjoy listening to stories about the Buddha's excellent qualities, what they did for others and so forth, and this will bring joy to their mind. For the other sort of person, it can make them feel good and bring joy to their mind to tell them how certain people have helped others, how somebody did something nice for somebody else, etc. So those are the two ways to prepare for death.

An analogy could be the case of someone who is planning a plane trip. Now everybody knows that you can get into some serious trouble on a plane because it might go down, so the person needs to get a parachute. But once the plane has gone down and they have parachuted to earth they need to have thought about what they will eat, so they need to get themselves a little food to prepare a little care package. If they have also organized some food for their friends on the plane, then that is even better, as they will be happy at that time too. But the main thing the person needs to prepare for all this is some money. Without money there is nothing they can do. If the person is on a train and they need something they can get it from the station but when they are on an airplane, up in the air, if they have not brought everything with them, they cannot rush outside and buy it. The difference is that with a plane they have got to get ready before they take off because once they are up there, there is not a lot they can do.

What I am saying, in other words, is that dying is a situation where a person needs to have prepared beforehand because you can't get it together while you are in the middle of it.

Garje Khamtul Rinpoche: Like going to a dentist, it is something that cannot be avoided, it has to happen ultimately, so it is best for us to know in the beginning what it feels like to be dead. To know this we must consult a lama who has a knowledge of such things, who has knowledge of death. We must consult him and then he can tell us what it feels like when a person is dead, the different states a person goes into when they die. When you have this knowledge within you then you do not really have fear of death and this helps a lot.

Geshe Lamrimpa: If a person is preparing only for the purpose of attaining a happy rebirth they have to give up the ten non-virtuous actions as well as purifying the non-virtuous actions they have done in the past, through expressing regret and making determination not to repeat them in the future. This is the general explanation for all sentient beings. For a fully ordained person or a bodhisattva or a tantric practitioner, they have to purify all pledges, or vows, that have been broken.

On top of that, to have wealth in the next life a person needs to practice generosity; to have happiness they need to practice morality; to have many admirers and great splendor they need to practice patience ("by patience one will have luster"). The practice of each of the six perfections of the bodhisattva will bring the four fruits, or results.

In general, if we keep purifying all of our negativities and dedicate all of our virtues, our merits, this becomes very powerful. When it comes time for us to die, the force of the dedicated merits will vitalize the virtuous actions and one will have a happy rebirth. If the dying person prepares like this it will be very helpful.

Ven. Pende Hawter: *In Buddhism there are certain death meditations such as thinking about death and actually rehearsing the death process. Is it beneficial to do these meditations?*

Garje Khamtul Rinpoche: According to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy this practice of rehearsing death, becoming familiar with the different processes a person goes through when they die, is very beneficial. In this the person must be aware of the different signs that occur during the death process such as the diminishing of the five senses (hearing, sight, etc.), the gradual dissolution of the five inner elements (the flesh, the bones, etc.), and of the outer elements (fire, earth, water, etc.).

We must also realize that when we take birth it is due to the fusion of the father's sperm, the mother's blood and your own mind. And again at the time of death, it is the fusion of these three. This is also something that one must know, so according to Buddhist philosophy this practice of rehearsing death is very important.

Altruism is the heart of Buddhism

Ven. Pende Hawter: *In the West in recent years there has been a rapid development of the hospice movement for the care of the dying. Do you think that we can be of benefit to those who are dying?*

Garje Khamtul Rinpoche: I feel that this hospice movement is very good because the people they serve know that they are going to die, so as long as they remain alive it is best to do something, as much as we can, for them. It is like when you travel in an airplane you know that you are just traveling in space and it feels unreal. But when you have all the facilities around you, all the air hostesses running up and down giving you things, then you feel as if you are at home, you feel very happy about it. So I feel that this hospice movement is very good.

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche: Firstly, it is certain that hospices, these hospitals made specifically for people who are facing the end of their lives, are beneficial at this present time. Hospitals generally are greatly beneficial but these hospices offer an additional benefit.

This idea of going into hospitals or places specifically made for the dying comes about within the context of thinking about ourselves and others and seeing that our responsibility to other people is extremely great, that they are incredibly important because they have been very kind to us in past lives as our parents. It is within this context that you are in the situation of going into hospitals,

trying to do what you can for these people who are facing tremendous hardship and suffering as they die, as they are in the throes of death.

If you can somehow get across to others that it is this thought that has motivated you and, more than anything else, get across the realization that being upset does help, not to think of others and to bear up by seeing the importance of others. To bear up in such a manner that a person does not allow their concern with themselves to completely affect his mental state and that regardless of the hardships that a person has to bear, the importance that they are giving to others is such that it somehow diminishes the importance of what is happening to themselves and gives them an inner strength. If you can somehow impart that to others, then indeed the benefit of this whole project, this whole idea that you are undertaking, will be great.

So finally then, the heart of Buddhism is the altruistic thought to do the most helpful things for others, that is, bodhichitta. The essence of this bodhichitta is that the importance we give to our own affairs in life, the importance we continually give to ourselves doing okay and the lack of concern for others, is reversed. What becomes our major concern is that others are doing well and are able to bear up in life and that the concern we give to our own personal well-being is diminished. And this is what is happening here; you are attempting to go into hospitals and places for the dying motivated by the thought that the well-being of these people, how they are doing, is incredibly important. That seems to me to be a real way of practicing this bodhichitta. To try and generate this in your mind is excellent and what you are doing is helping that to happen, so from the bottom of my heart I say thank you very much.

Incidentally, you should not think that you are alone in this work. Since what you are doing comes out of the whole presentation of a religious meditational path, then buddhas and bodhisattvas and holy beings are certainly backing you up in this.

4. Advice on Caring for Mother

By Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Mandala October–December 2013

In this letter, Lama Zopa Rinpoche responds to a long-time student who wrote to Rinpoche in thanks for his “blessings, guidance and protection” over many years. The anonymous student wrote Rinpoche about how she takes care of her mother who suffers physically after a series of strokes. As a method to deal with the challenges of caregiving, the student visualizes taking care of Rinpoche when taking care of her mother.

“I know I have not developed special qualities,” concluded the student in her letter. “Without your teachings, without your example and blessings, without your guidance and protection, it would have been unbearable to face all this.”

My most kind, most dear, most precious, wish-fulfilling [student],

Billions and zillions and trillions and numberless thanks for your most kind letter. Yes, you are right: even though we haven’t seen each other for so many years, I feel very close to you as before, heart to heart, and I am so happy that you are serving your mother with the thought that you are serving me. I’m very sorry that your mind was unhappy when you heard that I had a stroke [in April 2011]. So sorry for that, but I hope that it was meaningful for you to be free from samsara and to achieve enlightenment.

First of all, it is really great the meditation you are doing: serving your mother and thinking you are serving the guru. When I was in Tibet (not the last time, but the time before) our journey took us to Reting, Lama Dromtönpa’s monastery, which he built on the advice of Lama Atisha. I didn’t know, but our guide directed the tour through His Holiness the Karmapa’s monastery in Tshurpu. We stayed there one day and slept outside the monastery in tents for two nights. I went to visit nearly every temple in the monastery. The monks were doing puja and I personally made money offering to each one, handing them the money myself. As I did this, I started to think that each one was my guru, His Holiness Trijang Rinpoche or Lama Yeshe (maybe the first one). This is what I was thinking as I gave the money, so I collected the most extensive merits and accumulated the most powerful purification because I was thinking of each monk as the guru.

So first of all, this life’s parents are very powerful objects of merit. Even very small negative or positive actions done towards this life’s parents are extremely powerful. Therefore, as a result of

offering service to your mother, you will have so much happiness even in this life, your wishes will succeed and you will have a very good life. And the result is experienced not only this life; each positive action of offering service that you create towards the parents will bring benefit for thousands of lifetimes. It brings a good rebirth and unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable happiness while you are in samsara. I'm talking about each small service; every one results in happiness for thousands of lifetimes. So can you imagine the result of 24 hours of service? Wow, wow, wow, wow, wow, wow. Then, if the service is done with bodhichitta, each one is the cause of enlightenment. The merit of every small service, every virtue created is so powerful.

My guru, His Holiness Song Rinpoche, from whom I received many initiations and teachings, was very devoted to his mother. When he was in Lhasa and already very learned and famous (maybe he was the abbot of Ganden Shartse at that time) he even wanted to sweep his mother's room and take care of her, but because he was a high lama, people wouldn't let him. However, this was his wish because it was so much unbelievable merit. He did many other things to take care of his mother, but was not able to do the sweeping. You collect unbelievable merit in relation to the mother because she is so very precious.

So especially when you are serving your mother, think you are serving me, the guru, and then because we have a Dharma connection, you will collect the most extensive merit and perform the most powerful purification. When you offer service to the mother like this, it is the quickest way to achieve enlightenment. With every day, every hour and every minute you come closer to enlightenment. That means, at the same time, great, great, great benefit to the sentient beings with every hour and every minute.

It is mentioned by Sakya Pandita that, "Even the merit from practicing the six paramitas and giving up one's head, hands and legs to others for a thousand years is included in one second by following the path of the guru. Therefore, offer service and meditate on happiness." That means when you offer service to the guru by obtaining the advice and fulfilling the holy wishes, you create as much merit in one second as you do by giving up your hands, legs and so on for that many years. It's unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable; really the quickest way to achieve enlightenment. It's the most powerful and quickest way to purify negative karma and defilements. This is the most powerful purification.

Also, it is mentioned in the *Drop of Mahamudra*, "As fire burns wood and turns it into ashes in one second, like that, if the glorified guru is pleased, in one second the negative karmas are burned."

For example, in his early life, Jetsün Milarepa killed many people and animals using black magic, but after meeting his guru, Marpa, he purified all of this by following his guru Marpa's wishes. He purified all those heavy negative karmas and received clairvoyance and many other powers and then full enlightenment in that brief lifetime of degenerate times. Therefore, there is no more powerful way to purify negative karma than by devoting to the guru.

So what you are doing is a very, very, very, very good way to make your life meaningful and most beneficial to free the sentient beings from the oceans of samsaric suffering and bring them to full enlightenment, especially as it is dedicated to sentient beings. Therefore, when you do every single service for your mother, as much as possible, think of me.

Again, I want to say billions and billions and trillions of thanks for your every service to her, to me. That's GREAT, really GREAT.

With skies of love and prayers,

Lama Zopa

Colophon: Scribed by Ven. Sarah Thresher, June 2013, Tushita Meditation Centre, Dharamsala, India.

Lightly edited for inclusion in [Mandala October 2013](#).

To read more letters of advice from Lama Zopa Rinpoche, visit the Lama Zopa Rinpoche Online Advice Book on the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive (lamayeshe.com).

5. The Passing of a Great Lama: Ribur Rinpoche's Advice for Facing Illness

By Lorne Ladner

Mandala April-May 2006

From the summer of 2004 through the fall of 2005, Ribur Rinpoche stayed in the Washington, D.C., area with his family while receiving treatment for cancer. Just before returning to India, Rinpoche asked me to write something about his experiences related to his medical care in the hopes that it might be helpful to some people. Rinpoche mentioned that people might benefit from understanding how combining Western medical treatment with meditation and Buddhist practices could be particularly good in treating serious illnesses.

During the summer of 2004, Rinpoche's health had been worsening, so extensive testing was done in the fall. It was discovered that in addition to Rinpoche's diabetes and lymphedema, he had cancer that had spread extensively to his bladder, skin and lymph nodes, also forming a large tumor in his groin. I went with Rinpoche as he visited numerous doctors and specialists. All of them presented a very grim picture for the future – it appeared likely that Rinpoche could pass away within days or months. A radiation oncology specialist said radiation couldn't be used and feared that Rinpoche would either pass away quickly or more slowly with much pain.

We went to another very kind oncologist specializing in chemotherapy. He also wasn't very hopeful, but he indicated that a trial of chemotherapy was worthwhile. Meanwhile, Lama Zopa Rinpoche had suggested some meditative practices for Rinpoche's students to do – one in particular involved reciting the mantra of Black Garuda while visualizing eagle-like garudas swooping down to very precisely take away the cancer. As this was what we were hoping the chemotherapy would do, I visualized garudas inside the chemotherapy bags going into Rinpoche's body to take away the cancer. During the time when Rinpoche was taking chemotherapy, Lama Zopa Rinpoche and also Gehlek Rinpoche came and did extensive pujas for Ribur Rinpoche's long life. Pujas were also done by various lamas and monks in South India.

After a few chemotherapy visits, the doctor was really shocked. During one visit, he told Ribur Rinpoche that he was very happily surprised by Rinpoche's positive response to the chemo and thought it was likely now that Rinpoche would show a full recovery from the cancer. Rinpoche

smiled and said, “Thank you.” The doctor suddenly blanched. He said that Rinpoche had smiled and responded in exactly the same way when he’d said that there was little hope of survival. He said that in all of his many years of treating cancer patients, he’d never before met someone who reacted exactly the same when told they would die and then that they would live.

An article in [Mandala March 1997](#) described how Rinpoche went through years of torture in Communist Chinese prisons in Tibet while, through practices of mind training, transforming those terribly difficult experiences “into nothing but pure joy” Rinpoche met the experiences of chemotherapy in just the same way. It wasn’t that Rinpoche didn’t experience pain or disorientation from the cancer and medications, it was that Rinpoche’s basic joy and compassion completely overwhelmed those temporary difficulties.

One day in the hospital a urologist came in to briefly check Rinpoche’s prostate and bladder. After just a couple of minutes, he came out deeply moved, saying, “He’s really a great, remarkable man.” Another day, a nurse who’d only seen but never spoken with Rinpoche grabbed me in the hallway of the doctor’s office with tears in her eyes, saying, “You’re so lucky to know someone like him!” Other nurses who’d seen Rinpoche just once for a minor surgery came running out into the hallway when he returned for a checkup, saying, “Our favorite patient is back,” each trying to be close to Rinpoche. Nearly every doctor and nurse who worked with Rinpoche over the course of more than a year reacted similarly, and none of them were Buddhist. One day I mentioned to Rinpoche that this must be a sign of the power of bodhichitta. Rinpoche smiled at that.

I suppose I’ve always had an image of what a “holy person” should be or act like. One thing that was very striking about Ribur Rinpoche – which made him so attractive to everyone who met him – was that he made no effort at all to live up to any artificial image of holiness or compassion. Free from all artifice, his natural joy, wisdom, playfulness, affection and genuine compassion could shine through even while preparing for a CAT scan or while receiving chemotherapy.

Rinpoche had genuine respect for his doctors, and mentioned that he thought it was beneficial for people to use Western medical treatment. In addition to this, Rinpoche emphasized the benefits of viewing the suffering of illness as a ripening of past negative karmas; thus, one could rejoice in the experience of being sick as a powerful purification. Rinpoche also said that practicing taking and giving meditation (tong-len) on the basis of the suffering that one was experiencing made that suffering very meaningful, transforming it into a means for developing bodhichitta! In addition, Rinpoche mentioned that Pabongkha Dorje Chang had told him that in these degenerate times doing the practice of Medicine Buddha was especially powerful. Due to the Medicine Buddhas’ vows, during degenerate times when other practices become less effective, Medicine Buddha practice becomes even more powerful. Rinpoche noted as well that Pabongkha Rinpoche had said that (for those with appropriate initiations) the practices of Chakrasamvara/Vajrayogini also became even more powerful and effective during these degenerate times. Rinpoche said that when

facing the difficulties that inevitably arise during these degenerate times in samsara, if one can sincerely strive to engage in such practices each day, then there is nothing more beneficial than that.

Lorne Ladner is a clinical psychologist and the director of FPMT's Guhyasamaja Center in Virginia, USA. He is the author of The Lost Art of Compassion: Discovering the Practice of Happiness in the Meeting of Buddhism and Psychology (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004) and edited The Wheel of Great Compassion (Wisdom Publications, 2000) and The Easy Path (Wisdom Publications, 2013).

6. Caring for Lama Lhundrup

By Jo Hathaway

Mandala October–December 2011 and Mandala January–March 2012

Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup Rigsel tirelessly offered his service to accomplishing the wishes of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche for almost 40 years at Kopan Monastery in Nepal. Lama Lhundrup came to Kopan in 1972 at the request of Lama Yeshe, who wrote to Lama Lhundrup simply, “I have some monks, can you teach them? If so, please come.” Since then, Lama Lhundrup has touched the lives of thousands of students, taking care of the monks and nuns of Kopan as well as international Dharma students who traveled to Kopan from places like Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, Europe and the Americas.

Lama Lhundrup received the title Abbot of Kopan Monastery officially in 2001, although he had unofficially held the position since the time of Lama Yeshe’s death in 1984. Lama Lhundrup stepped down as abbot in July 2011 due to advanced stomach cancer, a diagnosis he received in January 2011.

On September 7, 2011 at 11:10 p.m., after a lifetime of Dharma study, practice and selfless service to sentient beings, Lama Lhundrup stopped breathing and passed into clear light meditation. On September 9, 2011, at 5 p.m., his attendant, Ven. Thubten Kunkyen, observed signs that Lama Lhundrup’s consciousness had left his body.

Jo Hathaway, a palliative care nurse from New Zealand and a student of Lama Lhundrup, stayed at Kopan from January to September 2011 to help take care of his medical needs. She wrote about her experiences with Lama Lhundrup for Mandala in two parts.

January–July 2011

I was extremely fortunate to meet Lama Lhundrup in 2001, after attending the Kopan November course. Right from the first time I met him, his smile, humor and profound wisdom generated a deep fondness in my heart. I was overjoyed and filled with gratitude when he later accepted me as one of his students, knowing that he was the perfect guide to help me tackle and transform my powerfully stubborn and delusional mind.

Right from the first day that Lama Lhundrup came home to Kopan from the hospital in Singapore, his approach to illness was different from any other “patient” I have cared for. As we began discussing new routines for feeding, Lama Lhundrup sat swinging the end of his recently

inserted stomach-feeding tube around in the air, laughing as he exclaimed, “Look, my new mouth!”

No matter what the situation, Dharma is always the first thing on Lama Lhundrup’s mind. At Losar, many people came to see him and made extensive offerings. After weeks of not eating anything by mouth, he was surrounded by mountains of the most delicious foods and drinks. He commented on his karma to have all his favorite treats while not being able to eat any of it. I suggested that he could chew the things he liked, just to get the taste. He replied woefully, “Then some danger coming.” I reassured him that it would be very safe as long as he spat out the food rather than swallow it. “Danger of more desire coming,” was Lama Lhundrup’s reply.

Physical needs just don’t rank as highly for Lama Lhundrup as they do for most ordinary beings and he doesn’t seem to pay much attention to any changes in his body. This can make our job of trying to keep a handle on what’s happening a little tricky because, unlike most seriously ill people, he never complains of anything. Ever. Once, when trialing a new medicine for nausea I tried to ask if he felt any different, better or worse than the previous day. He gave me a very puzzled look; yesterday was yesterday, there was no point dwelling on yesterday’s troubles today, and besides, what does it matter if the body is good one day or not so good the next? (So much for all my fancy symptom assessment training!) Even when the manifestation of Lama Lhundrup’s illness is very obvious, like when his body needs to vomit, he just grins at those around him and exclaims, “Samsara! Are you renouncing yet?”

Lama Lhundrup’s wish to make others happy also takes precedence over his own welfare. When we became concerned that physiological changes in his body may indicate that he was experiencing pain, I tried to ask him about it. The conversation started out well:

“Do you have any pain?”

“Yes.”

“Can you show me where the pain is?”

“Around here.”

Then I fell into concerned-nurse mode while asking the next list of questions. Instead of answering, Lama Lhundrup said to me with a relaxed smile, “You don’t like pain?”

“No, of course not Khenrinpoche,” was my perplexed reply. (Nobody likes pain, right?)

Lama Lhundrup simply responded, “Then I don’t have pain.” And with that, turned back to his text and continued his evening prayers. End of conversation, end of my reason to be worried.

Another time when we were again discussing pain I asked him how he would like us to treat it. He replied, “It’s better to experience it, for the sake of all sentient beings.” Lama Lhundrup uses the

manifestation of illness to practice tong-len for others and he often tells people to send all their worries and sicknesses to him so they can be free from suffering. These days, I suspect out of compassion for us and to ease our worry, Lama Lhundrup accepts a small amount of pain relief medication, just enough to enable him to concentrate well when doing his prayers and practices but without the need for, or intention of, stopping the experience of pain completely. His views on illness are definitely extra-ordinary!

Lama Lhundrup is my perfect teacher who never wastes any opportunity to challenge my thinking and behavior, whether as his student, his nurse or both. Even the most seemingly ordinary situations can become profound teachings in his presence. For example, several months ago I became concerned that he had developed an infection in his mouth and throat (a very common occurrence with the illness he is manifesting). When I explained my concerns to him and asked if I could look inside his mouth, he just simply said “no.”

ARGH! What to do!?

It later dawned on me that as a nurse I expected a level of compliance from patients. Embarrassingly, the subtext to that assumption went something like: “After all, they need my help!” Even though we always asked permission before carrying out physical examinations of patients, I wasn’t actually prepared for someone to just simply say “no.”

I was completely stumped. The nurse in me knew it was important to identify and deal with any possible source of infection as quickly as possible but the student in me didn’t want to second-guess my guru’s very clear reply. But which role should take priority? After a couple of minutes of silent mental anguish I plucked up the courage to try again. I re-explained my concerns, this time adding that if there was infection, we could give him some medicine which would help him to feel better.

Well, that really did it. Lama Lhundrup looked straight at me, eyes wide with surprise and incredulity and said, “You think you can make samsara better!” There it was like a bolt of lightning, one of the fundamental differences between me and my guru; all my concerns were solely based on the wish to make this life more comfortable (coupled with the delusion that this was actually possible) while his focus was solely on getting us out of samsara altogether!

Fortunately for me, Lama Lhundrup did show me the tip of his tongue later on, the infection was confirmed and we were able to treat it quickly and effectively. Although I doubt he felt “better” as the infection had hardly bothered him in the first place!

August–September 2011

There had been few of the usual physical signs of impending death. We knew Lama Lhundrup was manifesting serious illness, the scan results and physical examinations showed that the cancer was rapidly growing and we could see the tumors in his stomach had made their way to the skin surface. Yet he was still having the equivalent of three meals a day through his feeding tube – or “new mouth” as he called it – and was able to walk and remained as alert and uncomplaining as ever. The signs were subtle. He talked about impermanence and death with visitors more frequently and his goodbyes were somehow more final. Many of his treasured possessions were being gifted to others. Two weeks before he died, Lama Lhundrup asked Ven. Kunkyen, his devoted attendant for over 15 years, to arrange pujas for him at Sera Monastery in South India; the date for the pujas was to be September 7. The week before he died, he announced it was time for him to move from his room above the main gompa to his retreat apartment above the Chenrezig Gompa; the date he set was September 4. And in the final week, Lama Lhundrup began answering questions about his health – “How are you feeling today, Khensur Rinpoche?” – with sparkling eyes, a wide grin and cryptic replies like “feeling is feeling” or “feeling doesn’t exist.”

When the time came for Lama Lhundrup to leave his room, he instructed Ven. Kunkhen to make offerings on all the remaining altars then, with khata and offering in hand, he spoke quietly to Ven. Sangpo with a message for Lama Zopa Rinpoche:

*Please inform Rinpoche that day and night there is unbearable suffering, but I pray that this will purify my negativities. Please request Rinpoche to bless me, that I may generate unshakable respect and devotion to Rinpoche. May whatever broken samayas I have with Lama Rinpoche since beginningless rebirth up until now, be purified. May I be freed from the suffering, I offer my body, speech and mind to Lama and whatever obstacles Guru’s holy body has, may they ripen upon me.**

Tearful, the monks carefully helped Lama Lhundrup to dress in his full robes before slowly wheeling him from the room. First, they circumambulated the Yamantaka mandala before Lama Lhundrup said goodbye to a tearful Geshe Tsering (Lama Yeshe’s brother). Before leaving the building, they made offerings to the thrones and statues in the main gompa. On arrival at the apartment, Lama Lhundrup raised his hands in prostration and said a quiet prayer as he was wheeled through the door. There was time for prayers before each altar before he settled, exhausted, into his chair in his meditation room.

Although the move had left Lama Lhundrup’s body drained of energy, his condition appeared to return to usual on September 5. I gave him his regular foods and medications throughout the day and returned to my room at 7 p.m. Just before 11 p.m., my phone rang. It was Ven. Kunkyen requesting that I return to the retreat apartment. Lama Lhundrup had announced to his two attendants – Ven. Kunkyen and Ven. Thardoe – that he was dying. The time had come to start the preparations for his death. Ven. Kunkyen had already contacted Dagri Rinpoche to send a prayer request to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and then gone to inform Lama Zopa Rinpoche. I went in to see Lama Lhundrup. Somehow his condition had dramatically changed over the last four hours.

He was now very gaunt, pale and showing physical signs of advanced bowel obstruction and intense pain, but still sitting in his chair, smiling calmly. Every word took great effort for him to say yet he continued to guide us through what needed to be done.

There had been times in the previous months when the thought of Lama Lhundrup's death had invoked a sudden sense of panic in my heart. Yet now that the time had come, it seemed like the calmness and clarity of his energy pervaded his entire surroundings. Both Lama Lhundrup and Lama Zopa Rinpoche had prepared us so perfectly. There was no panic or despair, just the wish to do our best to fulfill our Guru's wishes at such an important time.

I gave Lama Lhundrup a small injection of morphine for pain. Above all else, he wanted to be as alert as possible at the time of death, so we had been experimenting with pain medicines in the previous weeks to find what worked best with the least side effects. Although morphine reduced the pain effectively, he didn't like the sleepiness it caused and therefore only ever accepted the smallest of doses.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche soon arrived at the apartment with his attendant Ven. Sangpo and Geshe Jangchub. Many of the Kopan monks had been woken and were now reciting Medicine Buddha puja in the main gompa. Over the next two and a half hours Rinpoche recited preparation for death texts and prayers beside Lama Lhundrup before placing blessed cords around his neck and mantra against his heart. Softly and slowly Lama Lhundrup made the following request:

*I, from the bottom of my heart, single pointedly pray to you, Lama Rinpoche. Please joyfully guide me from now until buddhahood is achieved. Until then may my three doors fully engage with the holy Mahayana Dharma. May I be able to practice complete Dharma of sutra and tantra in a fully qualified way. May I be able to do this and may I gain such abilities for this to happen. I pray to you, Lama Rinpoche, please bless me to become like this, and whatever Rinpoche has to do, from Rinpoche's side, please compassionately bless this to happen. I make supplication to you. If there happened to be any mistake and if I have disturbed your holy mind, please forgive me. This is what I have to request of you, Rinpoche. Sorry this may be a bit too much to ask for and disrespectful, but there is no one other than Lama that I can seek guidance and help from.**

Lama Zopa Rinpoche assured Lama Lhundrup that there was no need to worry. Due to their strong karmic connection, whatever Lama Lhundrup wished and prayed for would undoubtedly come true. As Rinpoche left, Lama Lhundrup prayed:

*In case I am going to be reborn and tortured in hell, may the sufferings of all beings in that hell and the sufferings of those who are going to be reborn in that hell in the future, ripen upon me. Please bless me.**

Ven. Kunkhen, Ven. Thardoe and I sat quietly at Lama Lhundrup's feet. He thanked us for our service and gave instructions for future practice. They recited the "King of Prayers" together. As night passed into morning, Vens. Kunkhen and Thardoe tirelessly cared for their Guru, giving him

sips of fluids, helping him to the toilet, adjusting his pillows and massaging his stomach and legs, often for hours on end, seemingly knowing exactly what Lama Lhundrup needed. As the sun rose over the mountains casting its golden glow across the room, we helped Lama Lhundrup to settle into bed.

On September 6, Dr. Bishnu, a local oncologist experienced in palliative care, visited. Lama Lhundrup welcomed him warmly as usual. Although he wasn't interested in further food or medicines, he agreed to have more of the excess fluid accumulating in his abdomen drained to ease his discomfort. Before Dr. Bishnu left, Lama Lhundrup thanked him intently, offered a final khata and prayed for his health and continued ability to ease the suffering of all those who were sick. Even so close to his own death, Lama Lhundrup's thoughts remained steadfastly centered on the comfort and welfare of others, not once wanting to draw attention to the sufferings of his own body.

While I monitored the abdominal drain, Vens. Kunkhen and Thardoe continued to make arrangements for the various pujas and rituals that needed to be performed. We took turns sitting quietly in the room with Lama Lhundrup as he did his prayers, complete with hand mudras. At 2:45 p.m., Lama Lhundrup asked Ven. Kunkhen to wash his arms, hands, face, mouth and tongue. Now, covered with his gold zen, lam-rim text at his head, he asked to be placed on his side in the Reclining Buddha position before thanking and dismissing his two faithful attendants.

The three of us sat outside his room and waited. I asked Ven. Kunkhen what we should do now. "Be as quiet as possible and do not disturb him," he answered. "But if we don't go in, how will we know when he is dying? He may die on his own!" was my perplexed response. Very gently Ven. Kunkhen explained that this was the intended plan. It had never occurred to me that Lama Lhundrup would be alone at the time of his death. We had taken turns accompanying him day and night since he became ill, and like many Westerners, I guess I regarded leaving someone to die alone akin to abandonment. I had unconsciously assumed that out of respect, someone would be with Lama Lhundrup up to and including the moments of his final breaths. But of course it made perfect sense that an accomplished Dharma practitioner, who had been preparing for this moment his whole life, would be best left undisturbed.

But we still needed to make sure Lama Lhundrup had everything he needed so Ven. Kunkhen quietly checked on him regularly throughout the afternoon. Lama Lhundrup continued to stay alert, reciting prayers and preparing for death, occasionally smiling at him or waving him away as he peaked around the door.

At 7:45 that evening, the senior Kopan monks were set up and ready to begin the puja vigils in the apartment that would ultimately continue throughout the process of Lama Lhundrup's physical death, clear light meditation and the following 49 days. Often, groups of monks and nuns would set up in two rooms in the apartment and the pujas would continue seamlessly, day and night,

alternating from one group to the next without a break. Now I could see why he had moved to the apartment: it had the space and privacy to accommodate everyone comfortably without disrupting the day-to-day workings of the monastery.

I watched as the community gathered in and around the apartment. Like a perfectly choreographed dance, senior Kopan Sangha intuitively knew what needed to be done. With few words spoken, everything manifested at just the right times, be it flowers for the table, a vegetarian noodle feast at 3:30 a.m., offerings for the pujas or a steaming coffee just as energy levels began fading.

In a quiet moment late that night, I began to worry that Lama Lhundrup had been lying in the same position for more than seven hours. My training told me this could cause discomfort and bed sores, although admittedly I was pleased to realize that it had taken this long before my Western obsession with the welfare of the body had resurfaced! I asked Ven. Kunkhen if we should be worrying about such things. “Lama Lhundrup’s mind is already out of range of his body so these things have no effect on his mind now,” he reassured me.

Lama Lhundrup’s prayers and meditations continued throughout the night as Sangha offered pujas on the other side of the wall. By the morning of September 7, the effects of not taking his regular foods and medicines started to show: Lama Lhundrup’s abdomen was swelling again, his bowel was cramping and esophageal secretions were pooling in his throat. Not that he noticed; he was completely immersed in his meditations. When Ven. Kunkhen, followed shortly by Ven. Thardoe, entered his room at 8:45 a.m. to inform him that Lama Zopa Rinpoche was on his way, Lama Lhundrup emphatically greeted them with “You don’t exist! And you don’t exist either!” When Rinpoche arrived shortly after, he was met with the same proclamation.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche sat with Lama Lhundrup and recited prayers. When they had finished, Lama Lhundrup lay with his hands in prostration, slowly and softly repeating “Thank you Rinpoche, thank you so much, thank you for everything, thank you, thank you, thank you” as Rinpoche made his way to the door. On leaving the room, Rinpoche again did mos, re-checking all of Lama Lhundrup’s symptoms. He gave guidance on which medications (Western, Tibetan and Nepali) to use and advised us to help Lama Lhundrup live as long as possible as every hour, every minute, every second more was infinitely precious.

We formulated a new plan for giving food and essential medicines and the three of us went into Lama Lhundrup’s room. He had other ideas. Everything we tried to give him was met with a dismissive wave of his hand, except the blessed water which had been sent by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and miraculously arrived just in time. His body may have had the appearance of failing and being near death, but his mind remained as clear, focused and fully in control as ever. He even refused morphine, instead preferring to hit his fist against the floor as a way of managing the pain, which for an ordinary being would have been unbearably excruciating by now. For the next

couple of hours I watched a most remarkable display of guru devotion. Bent over his bed at angles difficult to tolerate, Vens. Kunkhen and Thardoe took turns trying to halt the blows or cushion Lama Lhundrup's fist as it hit the floor time and time again. A silent game of wits they were unlikely to win, though they calmly and lovingly tried everything. When they held his arm, he overpowered them; when they covered the floor in cushions, he threw these across the room; when they put their hands in one place on the floor, Lama Lhundrup hit out in a different direction; and when they put their bodies between his fist and the floor, Lama Lhundrup hit harder.

At 2:15 p.m. Lama Zopa Rinpoche requested to see me. I hurried up to his room and confessed our lack of success. Rinpoche laughed as I explained we were no match for Lama Lhundrup's powerful will. He sent me back to the apartment with a direct message for Lama Lhundrup:

"Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup, Lama Zopa Rinpoche says that death will happen when it happens. In the meantime we need to take care of your body as best as possible with food and medicines."

Instantly Lama Lhundrup agreed, even adjusting his body to make it easier for us to access his feeding tube and arm. Now he completely accepted our presence and our medical care – although we still tried to keep our interruptions to a minimum.

By early evening, Lama Lhundrup was resting comfortably although his breathing was starting to change, a sign that death was approaching. After giving Lama Lhundrup his evening medicines and a small amount of food, I left his room at 11 p.m. His condition was much the same with no obvious signs of the death absorptions. He had been aware of my presence, half opening his eyes and moving his right hand away from the feeding tube as I quietly approached his bedside, replacing it over the tube when I had finished. I had never before seen someone so close to death remain so aware and yet so calm and in control. Before I left, he allowed me to gently lift his right hand and lay it at his side; I was concerned that the weight of it on the tube would become painful in the hours ahead.

Minutes later Ven. Sangpo arrived at the apartment, out of the blue, khata in hand. Before taking him into Lama Lhundrup's room (so he could see how peaceful Lama Lhundrup was and report back to Lama Zopa Rinpoche), I did a quick check. Lama Lhundrup was lying peacefully, not breathing, his face now emitting a soft glow. The air in the room was absolutely still. It seemed like nothing had moved since I left, except Lama Lhundrup had once again placed his hand back over the feeding tube – or more accurately, as I now realized – over the mantras Rinpoche had placed at his heart. Ven. Kunkyen joined me as Lama Lhundrup took one last, small breath. It was 11:10 p.m., 48 hours since he had announced he was dying.

As Vens. Kunkyen, Thardoe, Sangpo and Geshe Jangchub spent a few minutes with Lama Lhundrup, I sat outside the door. Never had I imagined that his room would be filled with such peace, calm and tranquility that it would be impossible to feel anything but these things. The tears

that gathered in the corners of my eyes were tears of gratitude, that I had been able to witness such a remarkable and profound event: the passing into clear light meditation of our precious Guru, the passing of a great Buddhist master.

Jo Hathaway is a palliative care nurse from New Zealand and a student of Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup. She wrote these accounts of Lama Lhundrup's passing in late [July 2011](#) and [November 2011](#). She expressed, "deep gratitude and heartfelt thanks to Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup, Ven. Kunkyen, Ven. Thardoe and the Kopan community for opening their hearts and home to me for eight-and-a-half months. Also, limitless thanks to the many others who supported us in so many ways, enabling us to care for our Guru his way and in his own home."

** Transcribed and translated from Tibetan by Ven. Sangpo Sherpa.*

7. Looking Forward to Death: Inta McKimm Discovers the Happiest Time of Life

Mandala September–October 1997

Inta McKimm founded [Langri Tangpa Centre](#), an FPMT center in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, in 1982. She served as director of the center until her death in 1997. Inta wrote about her final months living with lung cancer and preparing for death and shared part of her correspondence with Lama Zopa Rinpoche.

May 10, 1997

I've known concretely that I've had cancer since the Kalachakra initiation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Sydney last September, but subliminally I've known for a long time. There have been signs in the dreams, for example; and it's a long-term life karma ripening.

I made a pact with Kalachakra: to help me live long enough to finish my painting of him. And I did finish, to my satisfaction. I feel that that was what my life was about somehow, and I didn't balls it up.

Every day it feels as if the little doors of my life (like in the Christmas cards) are opening. When they are all open, the mandala of my life will be revealed.

Because we have gone through the most amazing adventures of paradoxical happiness, we need to look back and share those experiences of love and pain affectionately with all other living beings. Skillfully use all that pain and the greatness of caring about yourself to benefit everyone. Life is a reality to be lived and shared with aliveness, warmth, love and joy.

Suffering is unnecessary, a mistake, a glimmer in the light. The irony is that all the sufferings we go through have no substantial cause. Although it is the universal mistake and hurts like hell, suffering is a myth. ...

May 13, a letter from Lama Zopa Rinpoche

My very dear Inta,

I don't know how to say how sorry I am and how fantastic it is that you have found this disease. As a Dharma practitioner, it may be good to read the book [Transforming Problems](#) if you think there is

need. And also to read talks I gave about thought transformation, of utilizing sicknesses in the means of the path causing happiness to all sentient beings, including bringing them to enlightenment. In this way you use your sickness to practice bodhichitta, which means experiencing the illness on behalf of all sentient beings.

So you can do these things to make basic preparation. These are the most important. Try to use these methods as much as possible; think that this is your best retreat, one hundred times more powerful than years of doing Vajrasattva retreat with a self-centered mind, with a comfortable life and so forth. Because here the fundamental practice is that you give your life to other sentient beings, you give your happiness to other sentient beings and experience their sufferings yourself. Like the earth, the fundamental practice is bodhichitta, exchanging oneself with others. So study and practice every day, and remember as much as possible the practice of the five powers near the time of death.

Also it is very important to remember those stories about the benefits of bodhichitta, the benefits of generating great compassion. For example, remember how Asanga was able to see Maitreya Buddha only after he made a sacrifice; he was unable to see Maitreya just by doing retreat. He could see only when he learned to appreciate great compassion, giving up his life for a wounded dog.

And then there was the disciple of the yogi Ngagpo Chöpa, who sacrificed himself to touch and carry the female leper, who was totally black and very ugly looking, filled with leprosy disease with pus coming out. But then just in the middle of the river he was able to see the leper woman was Dorje Pagmo, who took him to the pure land Khechara with the same body, which means that he became enlightened there.

Then also there is one story about when the Buddha was born into the hell realms, when he was pulling the carriage with another hell being. This is the first time he generated great compassion. Then he thought to pull it himself alone; why let the other person suffer? They were pulling the carriage over the iron ground that was oneness with fire. So he let the other one go free and pulled the carriage by himself and took on the suffering. He freed the other person from the suffering of pulling the carriage and took it on himself. As soon as he did that, the karma guardians hit him on the head with a hammer. Immediately his consciousness was transferred to Tushita pure land.

All these are benefits of bodhichitta, of sacrificing the life for others, even for just one sentient being. This is how to become enlightened so quickly, by sacrificing the life for one sentient being.

So it is good to go over the past life stories of Guru Shakyamuni Buddha, how for three countless eons he practiced charity – especially charity – and morality and patience, all the paramitas. He made charity numberless times, offering his eyes, limbs, even his whole body.

There is also a story about his practice of patience and how he made charity of his body to the ants. Once there was a king who came to look for his wife in the forest. When he found his wife in the same area as the Buddha, who was a bodhisattva in that lifetime, the king got upset with the bodhisattva, because his wife was near. The king asked the bodhisattva, "What are you doing?" And the bodhisattva replied, "I'm meditating." But the king got angry and cut off one of the bodhisattva's limbs. Then the king repeated his question and the bodhisattva answered the same, so the king cut off another limb. This went on until he had cut off all four of the bodhisattva's limbs. Then only his torso, his basic body, was left. When the people found him, they threw the rest of his body away, saying what was the use of just that. But even then, the bodhisattva made charity of what was left of his body to the ants.

There is one unbelievably inspiring lama, Je Drom Gonpa, who had a hermitage very high on the mountain above Sera Je Monastery. He had one guru, Atsaya, from whom Je Drom Gonpa received teachings on bodhichitta, and so was able to realize bodhichitta. One day he saw his guru on the mountain in the forest. He was alone reading a text and giving the thumbs-up sign. "What are you doing?" Je Drom Gonpa asked. "Reading the Buddha's past life stories," his guru replied. He was giving the thumbs-up sign to show how very worthwhile it is to be in a human body.

You can also ask Geshe Tashi Tsering [from Chenrezig Institute] to tell you more stories of this kind to inspire you.

Another thing you can do is Namgyälma mantra, not only for long life but it is very powerful for purification. What other people can do for you is Medicine Buddha practice. Also they can do Amitayus mantra for you. Visualize nectar flowing from Buddha Amitayus and entering into your body and mind, purifying all obscurations and obstacles to life, diseases, spirit harms, and so forth, and then filling your body with the nectar of immortality. While they are doing this for you, they can also do for others, for the numberless beings with cancer, with life obstacles, for those people who do good things for others, and even for those beings who change their mind from harming others to helping others. They can pray also for their long life. Other people can do group practices or they can do them individually.

Also, since you have been doing much Vajrayogini practice, Vajrayogini becomes a very important answer to your life situation at this critical point. Vajrayogini becomes the most precious thing for you. Of course, this doesn't mean that at other times Vajrayogini is not precious. You should do the self-initiation, once a week even if you cannot do it every day. Other people can help. Other Sangha or lay people can come and pray with you. Or if you wish to do it alone, that is okay too. You can invite anyone that you like, that you feel comfortable with. Also you can invite Geshe-la to practice it from time to time with some people. Then Geshe-la can do the chanting in Tibetan. It is very good that way. Also if Khensur Rinpoche is in the area, you can invite him for Vajrayogini practice. During the Vajrayogini self-initiation, you can make shortcuts. You can leave out the long

prayers at the extensive offerings and do just the mantra of the offerings. You don't need to do the prayer. The most important part is after completing the sadhana, the part of taking the vows.

This is the key thing, reviving your vows and making them pure, and then there is introducing the secret Vajrayogini. Even if that part doesn't get done, you can do the last part where it says, "Now the four initiations." Sometimes you can do this. You can do any version according to your convenience. So put more effort into this on the basis of bodhichitta practice. Also you can take the Vajrayogini initiation if you feel like from Geshe-la.

As the dreams are happening, we can check. It can also change.

So your main refuge should be dying with the bodhichitta attitude, experiencing the suffering of death of all sentient beings. Also karma. Then you just keep on praying that whatever suffering sentient beings have, may it ripen onto you. Then by relating to the breath, meditate on their specific sufferings.

Then when according to your dreams and to your physical health, when it is time, maybe it is better for you to lay down like Guru Shakyamuni Buddha did, in the lion position, when passing away in the sorrowless state. That helps the mind to be transferred into virtue more easily. It reminds you of Buddha, and so also leaves a positive imprint. It is easier to stop attachment, anger and so forth. Unless you would prefer the sitting position. But generally it is better to die in the lion position as the Buddha did.

Then you should ask people to put Lama Tsongkhapa's lam-rim on your pillow at your head. That also helps you not fall into the lower realms. There are different things that are useful to arrange for common people at the time of death. In your case you should be higher than that. During that time it is up to you whether you wish to just be quiet or if you want Geshe-la and others to come and do prayers, for example, Vajrayogini practice or Medicine Buddha and so forth.

So, like this, go ahead, enjoy your death. Make the best use of it; take the greatest profit from it. Like the most successful business person in the world, become a billionaire. I will pray for you. Don't worry. You met His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Lama Yeshe, and many other great bodhisattvas. You met the correct Buddhism, the Mahayana, heard complete teachings on the complete path, and specialized in the quickest path to enlightenment. So you have prepared so much, done lots of meditation on lam-rim, benefited lots of people. Rejoice in this many times every day.

It can also be possible to recover; but as a Dharma practitioner, it is the best psychology to decide every day that I am going to die today. That is the best practice.

I want to say thank you very much for everything, for your own practice and your help have benefited so many people and the organization, as well as your service for Lama and myself, and for your prayers.

Thank you very much.

Since there has been much karmic connection, we may meet somewhere. Please enjoy. Good luck.

With much love and prayers,

Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche

May 21

I don't know why, but I have never been so happy. Things are getting better. In life everything was so difficult, but now not. We do need to be there for others.

The struggles in life, the hustle and bustle, always push and shove, all the worries; it's all so unnecessary. And when all that drops away, things become much clearer, much happier. I've been feeling this way for months now.

This experience has brought surprise after surprise; it has been nothing like I expected. We are so full of preconceptions, and even when we've chucked them out, still they are there in subtle forms. All of that has to go, to be loosened. The major thing is to really recognize impermanence; to really recognize it as a reality.

Once you accept that your life is impermanent, the rest doesn't hurt. Then of course, the only thing really worthwhile is bodhichitta, equally, to everyone. You can't leave even a tissue cell out of our bodhichitta, you can't even leave out the cancer, it's all part of the equation. Nothing should be left out. Then you just rely on your gurus, on your karma; you have trust.

I was pretty negative in the past, didn't have much trust, was nihilistic. Now I can say that there are angels, bodhisattvas, whatever, beings who are there, a stable reality for us to rely upon.

June 6

Dearest Guru,

Although I am dying, this is the happiest time of my life. This can only come through the great love of the Guru. For a long time life seemed so hard, so difficult. But when really recognizing death it turned into the greatest happiness.

I wouldn't want anyone to miss out on their own death, the great happiness that comes with having recognized impermanence and death. This is quite surprising and unexpected, and extremely joyful. It is the greatest happiness of my whole life, the greatest adventure and the greatest party!

Here I am just one person, but there all these many very kind beings looking after me with such care and love. I thank them for their infinite kindness. Also thanks to the little black cat, Buffy, who sits with me during the day, being infinitely kind. From the Gurus to everyone else who is in connection here, to the ordinary beings (who are not so ordinary at all); may they attain enlightenment in as quick a time as possible, for the benefit of all.

I really want to thank my dearest Guru for the wonderful letter and for the two cards that are an inspiration for myself and everyone. And for the incredible kindness and potential of all beings in general. There is no other way than commitment to the Dharma until full enlightenment. One can't finish before that!

May the very pure and strong energy of the center, and all the good efforts of the Dharma students increase and keep going. The center is really our mandala, of the students and everyone who comes into contact with it. Our mandala is the center. My wish is for the welfare of the students and center, and their development and unfolding, so they can be strong in themselves and an inspiration to others. The gumpa and altars look very beautiful. They reflect the feeling of what our students are practicing. My wish is that they be enhanced.

There are no adverse circumstances really. If you keep going with the various hardships, it transforms. Just doing things as they have to be done, without expectations, and because of this, the total amazement and surprise when something difficult turns into unbelievable happiness.

There are so many helpers, whether we know of them or not, and they are there all the time. There are so many fine and subtle interconnections, that everything becomes meaningful.

I am especially thankful that Shri Kalachakra allowed me to finish painting my thangka, that I had enough time to complete it, so it could be of benefit.

Giving up material things is easy. Giving up thoughts and concepts is more difficult. To get the butterfly to still the wings is the most difficult! When it (the mind) is still, then I will be ready to die.

I have absolutely no pain and no fear.

My heart really overflows with gratitude and happiness. In the mornings the birds chant *tuk-che-chö* (thanks for the Dharma)! That is actually what I want to say myself!

With thanks from Inta

June 20

I will die soon. Rinpoche's letter is the most precious gift I've ever had. I try to do my bit as best I can, without straining at the reins, can't do it perfectly. Not feel I am a failure. If only I could skip all the expectations, no obstruction, the expectations that create the pain.

There is so much to learn.

This human rebirth is for other sentient beings. I want to be reborn close to Rinpoche. Just like the auspicious verses in Lama Chöpa: to be born into a good family. If I have the choice, not to be a woman; that might be a disappointment for some. But whatever is most beneficial. It's not important what happens to me; what's important is what can be done for others.

Human life is so precious, so worthwhile. If I had known how to keep human life, in the tantric sense, really pure, I did not know it. If I had been able to do this ... I've had so much help from all these wonderful beings around me.

It is clear that this dying is the biggest adventure in my whole life. It's important not to be afraid. We are crippled by our fears and anxieties. We should chuck away the fears. The anxieties, the fears, are delusions, they come out of mistakes, totally. And they spoil our fun.

I am ready now for wonderful things to come.

See you in sky, as Lama Yeshe would say!

August 4

Inta's daughter Miffi Maximillion was with her when she died on Saturday, August 2.

On Friday night Inta had difficulty breathing and was having a slight seizure. We recited Vajrayogini mantras very beautifully, and the seizure subsided.

The director of the Karuna Hospice Service, Ven. Yeshe Khadro, and Inta's friends, Margaret Holtham and Diane Thompson, and I stayed up all night with her reciting mantras. Then in the late morning, just like that, her breathing stopped; she breathed in and didn't breathe out. Yeshe Khadro spoke the name of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Vajrayogini's mantra into her ear. Then we performed Lama Chöpa in Inta's room and recited lots of Vajrayogini's mantra.

We had put a stupa and the text of Lama Tsongkhapa's *Lam-rim Chen-mo* at Inta's head and had mixed with cream some sand from the Kalachakra mandala from His Holiness the Dalai Lama's initiation last year and put it on her crown chakra.

That night people came to the center (where Inta lived), and we had a video night and did White Tara practice dedicated to Lama Zopa Rinpoche's long life. Those who knew that Inta had died did their practices in her room.

Throughout Sunday, we let Inta stay there. We felt absolutely without a doubt that her consciousness was still present in her body. Her face was glowing and golden, very peaceful. Somehow though we felt that the energy was finer, more sensitive, as if Inta was further away. We tried not to rush about the house, to keep our minds quiet. We know that this mattered, not the words we said.

On Sunday night we did Mahakala puja and Vajrasattva mantras. Then Marg checked Inta's body by putting her hand above it and could feel that the heat was mainly at the heart chakra; before you could feel it at her navel.

On Monday morning Yeshe Khadro rang: were there any signs of the consciousness leaving the body? No, not yet. Then at 9:40 we noticed a big trickle of blood-like liquid come out of her mouth – not her nostril, which is what the texts give as a sign that the consciousness has left the body. So we took this as a sign.

At lunch time we decided to wipe Inta's body down, to dress her. When we rolled her over we could detect a faint smell; earlier it had been very sweet smelling. And she definitely looked different, not golden anymore.

And then we rang the funeral people and they came and put her in a bag and took her away. And then we had a cup of tea. It was a very special experience.

The funeral took place on August 15. Inta and I had planned it with glee weeks before. Inta wanted, very first, to have a tape of the Australian grunge gothic singer and songwriter Nick Cave singing, very loudly, "Mack the Knife"! Then she wanted Geshe Tashi Tsering from Chenrezig Institute to recite Lama Chöpa while the rest of us recited, in English, the lam-rim prayer from Lama Chöpa.

8. We Die as We Live: The Lessons of Hospice Work

Mandala September–October 1997

Vicki Mackenzie talked to Ven. Pende Hawter about his work at Karuna Hospice Service, which he started in Brisbane, Australia, in 1992. At the time of the interview, Ven. Pende was stepping back from Karuna Hospice Services to serve Lama Zopa Rinpoche in other capacities.

Vicki Mackenzie: *What motivated you to start working with the dying?*

Ven. Pende Hawter: Probably the most significant experience was when my father was dying of cancer. I spent the last two weeks of his life with him in the hospital. I found it an incredibly uplifting and inspiring experience. Two years before that my brother had been killed in a light plane crash, and I'd been involved in the search party. Although I was around 19 years old, I discovered that around death I was calm. That was a big turning point in my life. So when my father died a couple of years later (which I'm sure was related to his grief at the loss of his son), it was more or less expected that I'd come back and be in charge. So from then on I knew that I was very comfortable around death.

Why was that do you think? Most people would think that being around death was depressing or frightening.

That's an interesting question because over the years I have seen many people be depressed by the death of a parent or friend. I think the reason is because of the depth of the relationship you develop with someone who is dying – the very deep level of connection and communication. It's extremely intimate. The person is dying and is aware that they have very little time left. Each day is very important, and there's no time for superficiality. You talk about and share very deep things – what happens after, the meaning of life. That's what I have always found extremely special.

When I look back I've never had the concept that people disappear when they die. Even before I knew about the Buddhist beliefs I always felt that death was like a transition. When my father died I felt in a very strong sense he was still around at some level, even though the body had died.

Did you come from a Christian background?

I came from a nominal Anglican background. My own inner faith was always there quite strongly as I was growing up.

When did the idea of the Karuna Hospice Service start?

I went to Kopan Monastery in Nepal in 1983 to do the November Course with Lama Zopa Rinpoche and was with Lama Yeshe the night after he'd given his last discourse. I was called up to Lama's room because I'd trained as a physiotherapist and had actually run a clinic at the Atisha Centre in Bendigo, at Lama's suggestion. He was very sick. I went on to Bodhgaya and did many practices and prostrations and dedicated them to his recovery, but he passed away at Tibetan New Year, March the year later.

At the end of '84 Lama Zopa Rinpoche suggested I go back to Queensland and start another physiotherapy clinic. Then two years later Rinpoche asked me to start a hospice.

So it was Rinpoche's idea?

Yes and no. What had happened was that Rinpoche had just been to the Atisha Centre, had looked at the original plans of Lama Yeshe and seen a place allocated to be a hospice. I don't know if that original idea had come from Lama Yeshe, me or both. But Rinpoche liked it. So we set up a committee and had meetings and a year later I sold my physiotherapy clinic and worked full-time for Karuna.

How many people did you start off with?

Basically three – Hilary Clarke, the volunteer coordinator, and Margaret Gulley, the nursing coordinator, and me.

What was your brief?

The instruction from Rinpoche was to work with the dying, because at the time of death when people are losing everything there's a lot of fear. To help people at that time, to help put positive imprints into their mindstreams in order to help them in future lives.

Was it specifically to work with the dying at home?

Not necessarily, but that was the easiest way to start, and the cheapest. Our aim was to start there with the intention of setting up our own hospice. We still have that in mind.

How much of the Buddhist approach towards death did you adopt in your work?

It wasn't that overt. In our voluntary training courses there was a segment on the Buddhist view of death and dying, complemented by a segment on Christian and Jewish views. The nurses certainly did not have any formal training in the Buddhist approach.

How did you go about implanting positive imprints?

That's something that I've talked a lot about over the years. What is a Buddhist hospice? What should you be doing for the dying? I guess in our society very few of our patients are Buddhist to start with. The basic thing we're trying to do is to help them die peacefully with positive thoughts –

to induce a gentle and calm situation. All the people at Karuna are helping to do that. The nurses by offering compassionate care and pain control, the volunteers by providing reassurance and companionship, the counselors by helping to resolve conflicts. We also have a monk or nun going out to selected families when it's been relevant.

It's been more of a subtle Buddhist influence rather than an overt one because we've never felt it appropriate to go and chant Buddhist mantras into the ears of dying Christian patients.

How many people have you helped to die over the years?

Nearly 500 in five years. We saw our first patient in January 1992. It's a lot of people.

Have your views on death changed during that time? Has your experience substantiated what you've been taught about death and dying in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition?

My experience is that the way people die co-relates very, very closely to the teachings – as does the whole death process. We see repeatedly the importance of the state of mind at the time of death, and that state of mind is in direct relationship to the way people have lived.

As I say over and over again in my lectures, basically people die as they have lived. We see very angry people who fight and struggle and die angrily and unhappily. And we have seen very kind, gentle people die extremely peacefully. It's undoubtedly completely true that our whole life is a preparation for death. We all will die as we have lived.

For instance, there was one Zen student who was dying of AIDS. He was drifting in and out of consciousness and three of his sisters were looking after him very lovingly. One of them had sat with him through the night and in the morning someone brought some food to him. In his half-conscious state he said, "Please give some to my sister sitting in the corner." Even close to death he was still thinking of others, because that was his habitual state of mind.

In these years of working with the dying have you changed?

I don't think there's been much change. As I said, I've always been comfortable around death. I think that as the years have gone by I find it less necessary to say anything when I'm with a dying person. A quiet calm presence I find is often better than words. When someone is dying and the family is gathered I often just sit there quietly, not saying anything. I'm often told how helpful that is.

I've never walked away from a death feeling I hadn't been useful. Most of the staff at Karuna are also very comfortable around death and it's that which gives such reassurance to the family.

Is the medical profession equipped to deal with the emotional and spiritual needs of the dying person and their families?

It's much better than it used to be in the hospice and palliative care movement. People now understand that you can't get rid of somebody's pain unless you deal with their emotional, social and spiritual needs. And there's now a greater effort to offer reassurance and comfort to the family.

You work has been well received all over the world. Can you tell me about any feedback you've received?

It's been an interesting exercise. By setting ourselves up in the mainstream of palliative care services, we've been very widely accepted in the community. Karuna has been a unique, highly respected service in Brisbane, the capital of Queensland. One woman even wrote her Ph.D. on Karuna. And of course the government has supported us.

In my mind there's been a struggle to find the right balance between being an upfront Buddhist organization but at the same time not pushing the Buddhist aspect. Some people feel we're not Buddhist enough – and some feel we're too Buddhist. The challenge has been to find the middle way, to manifest our Buddhism through compassionate service rather than saying mantras over people.

You've been invited overseas as well, haven't you?

Last year I went on a four-month teaching tour to Europe and Taiwan. They were FPMT centers mostly, but also some hospitals. In Taiwan I gave lectures at three hospitals. Generally the courses were well received, not because of my knowledge, which is very little, but because I had some practical experience and was able to relate the teachings to what I've observed.

The other aspect is that Lama Zopa Rinpoche is encouraging many of our centers to look after the elderly and the dying and asks them to get information from me.

Why have you left Karuna, and what is happening to Karuna now?

During the Kalachakra initiation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Sydney last year Ven. Roger Kunsang, Rinpoche's attendant, asked me if I would be able to help take care of Rinpoche. I accepted and went to Nepal to take on the job, but then Rinpoche asked me to work as the administrator for the Maitreya Project, which I am now doing.

The new director of Karuna Hospice is Ven. Yeshe Khadro, the manager of the Chenrezig Nuns' Community, who has had many responsibilities in the FPMT over the years; and Hilary Clark is the director of Cittamani Hospice. So they're in good hands.

Eighteen years after this interview, FPMT has eight affiliated hospice services, which include Karuna Hospice Service and Cittamati Hospice Service. For more, visit: <http://fpmt.org/centers/community-svc/#hs/>.

9. Transitions: Four Perspectives on Funeral Ceremonies

Mandala October–November 2004

In 2004 Mandala ran a three-part series on life's major transitions – birth, marriage, and death – in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. In part three of the series, Mandala shared four different perspectives on prayers and practices during and at the conclusion of the death process.

Buddhadharma Must Engage with Society

Geshe Tashi Tsering is the resident lama at Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London. He explains the significance of rituals when a person has died.

The purpose of praying at the time of death is wide-ranging. For example, one reason for making prayers is for the sake of the people who are left behind – relatives, parents, friends, loved ones – for the sake of their minds. By praying for a dear one who has died, they feel they have done something spiritually for that person. So even though it is a sad occasion, psychologically, there is a feeling of positive spirit.

There is, importantly, also a very profound reason: to assist the person's spiritual needs during the process of passing away. In Tibetan Buddhism, during the process of dying, Sangha members recite prayers and read from meditative manuals. Doing this in front of the body is considered to be beneficial in assisting the person's death process, especially if that person used to do these practices in their life. The idea is that although the gross consciousness has ceased to function, the subtle consciousness needs to be assisted through the process to reach the subtlest consciousness, which is called the "clear light mind." Helping that person to reach the clear light mind also assists that consciousness to realize emptiness.

This can also change the subsequent steps in the process, such as preventing one from entering into an ordinary intermediate state and rebirth so that one instead moves into a higher realization. There are many different levels of blessing, prayer, or ritual that can be performed at the time of death, depending on which of the many purposes is appropriate. The prayers themselves are done according to that person's needs, such as reciting some prayers in front of the body, or in the cemetery, reciting prayers together with the relatives and friends of the deceased in the presence of the dead body. Also, as mentioned earlier, longer prayers or extensive meditation manuals can be recited in the presence of the dead body.

Marking these three occasions [see *Mandala* April 2004 for baby-naming and June 2004 for marriage ceremonies] is very important, because Buddhadharma can be practiced not only individually for enlightenment but, as a whole, for the benefit of others, the whole society. Buddhadharma must engage with society, not just perform rituals and give teachings in monasteries and temples. These activities are important, of course, but marking events such as the three occasions with blessings and prayers is also very important.

Adapting Traditional Practices at Western Dharma Centers

With so many Buddhist centers of varying traditions in Western countries, diversity is reflected in the outer form of Buddhist practice each time the teachings migrate from one culture to another. The resident teacher at Kadampa Center in North Carolina, Geshe Gelek Chodpa, has helped students understand the inner aspect of various rituals and the purpose of various structures and practices. "This understanding, in turn, helped us learn how to adapt rituals and practices to communal ceremonies," Emily Paynter reports.

At Kadampa Center, one of these communal ceremonies, our memorial service, has evolved the most. We have had five services over several years, each changing in form. Each new change was in response to sponsor requests, as well as a result of developing awareness about how to increase participant understanding and participant involvement.

All memorial services so far have been conducted either within the forty-nine-day period following death or on the one-year anniversary date. All services have provided participation opportunities through reading prayers, offering flowers and candles, displaying photos and personal items, and speaking words of remembrance. Our most recent memorial service engaged participants in formal aspects of the program as well.

Our newest version uses a liturgical structure that parallels the seven-limb prayer. It also includes formal elements that allow participants to encourage the deceased to maintain a positive focus.

Although deeply influenced by Tibetan Buddhist prayers and practices, our current service is in many ways generic. Friends and family of the deceased can incorporate personal elements into the liturgical structure. The deceased's faith tradition, if non-Buddhist, can be appropriately acknowledged.

We currently have a memorial service prayer book that helps orient participants to the liturgy and where they join in collectively and singly (as they wish). A supplementary brochure is planned to explain the meanings of the various elements in the service. Sponsors and Kadampa Center members have expressed appreciation for the depth and richness of the ceremony.

Medicine Buddha Jangwa: A Purification Ceremony for the Deceased

Compiled from the advice and teachings of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Geshe Lama Konchog

Jangwa is a skilled tantric practice of purification, used when somebody has died. Even if the person is in the intermediate state on the way to the lower realms, you can still do *jangwa* and change the direction of the person's reincarnation. You can cause the person to reincarnate in a pure land or in a deva or human realm.

Within the practice of *jangwa*, there are different means of purification, but the recitation of powerful purification mantras is one of the primary methods used. You use the mantras to bless mustard seeds. Through meditation, you hook the [consciousness of the] people who have died, and then you throw the blessed mustard seeds over them to purify them. Finally, you do *powa* to transfer their consciousness to a pure land. After that, if you don't have ashes or parts of the body, you burn the photograph of the deceased person or the piece of paper with the deceased person's name written on it while meditating on emptiness.

This particular practice of *jangwa* associated with the Medicine Buddha is especially accessible and can be practiced by those of us who are not advanced practitioners. We ordinary people can perform this highly beneficial practice using this version without risking the possibility of creating further interferences for ourselves or for the deceased. Other *jangwa* practices associated with other specific deities require a high level of skill on the part of those doing the practice – skill in visualization, in self-generation, in ritual accuracy – in order to perform the practice correctly without creating hindrances and interferences.

Sometimes a lama will do a *jangwa* for a number of deceased persons on a specific day. For instance, in July of this year Geshe Ngawang Drakpa, resident lama at Tse Chen Ling Buddhist Center in San Francisco, was the master of ceremonies at a Medicine Buddha *jangwa* that took place at Land of Medicine Buddha, for which relatives and friends sent along photos of the deceased and made donations. About 65 people attended.

Trying on a Coffin

Pamela Gray issued an unusual invitation to her local community, in Milton, New South Wales, Australia – to try on a coffin for size or add a few layers to a papier-mâché prototype coffin. Her idea in forming the “ExtraOrdinary Death Company” was to help people to make friends with death. The display included books and information on death and dying, coffins and funerals.

In making friends with death we're following the ideas of people who want to do things naturally: such as supporting people staying at home at the end of their lives with the assistance of volunteers; providing information about the natural dying process; teaching people about writing instructions for the end of their life, e.g., whether or not to be in hospital or to have medical intervention; spelling out how we'd like our funeral to be, making our own coffins – especially

from old materials – and putting them to good use now as a drinks cabinets, a blanket box, or a coffee table.

“If we’re actively involved in death and dying, which is with us every day, we’ll have little, if any, need for grief counseling after the event. We’ll probably be able to clear up conflicts in our life, sorting out our affairs and not being ‘caught short.’ We can go beyond reacting to death with total fear or with a ‘head-in-the-sand’ attitude of denial. We can rest in natural great peace!

“In Australia there are licensed ‘celebrants’ – usually non-religious people who have a license to conduct marriages specifically. But typically we who are licensed celebrants also do naming ceremonies and funeral ceremonies. I’ve mostly done weddings in the last six years, but I have also done about 15 naming ceremonies and two funeral ceremonies.

“Funerals and death and dying are of huge interest to me for some reason, beyond the usual ‘I’m going to die,’ etc. Not many other people are motivated to get into this business.”

Pamela is also part of a lobby group hoping that the laws in each state become uniform throughout Australia and that these laws begin to take into account and respect various religious and philosophical practices and beliefs.

“Those of us involved in the ExtraOrdinary Death Company will be making coffins and running workshops in coffin-making and decorating. We hope to have a sort of hospice one day, or at least to train volunteers or others to be with people at the end of their lives. Perhaps we will be able to have a vehicle or two for carrying coffins and bodies from place to place and to rent out air-conditioners so that people will be able to have their dead friend or relative at home until the funeral.

“I have been teaching a class called ‘Creating Funerals to Celebrate Life.’ The class lasts 12 hours over eight weeks, and it’s a lot of fun – provocative, radical, but natural, and somehow reassuring and supportive. It is offered through an organization for retirees called the University of the Third Age (U3A). I hope to do more of these courses so others can come to them.”

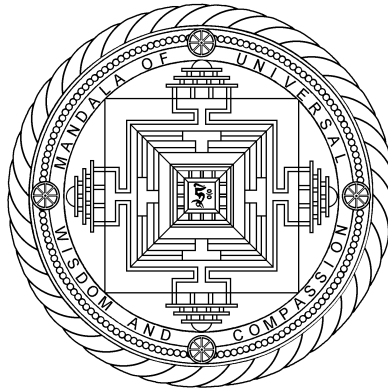
Resources for Death and Dying

Visit fpmt.org/death to find a list of resources to support yourself and others through the process of death. Resources include extensive advice from Lama Zopa Rinpoche, important prayers and mantras, and links to practice and advice books and the FPMT Liberation Box (a collection of tools for the time of death as recommended by Lama Zopa Rinpoche), all available through the FPMT Foundation Store (shop.fpmt.org).

The [Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive](#) also offers teachings and advice on death and dying. For more, visit their page on [Death and Transitions](#), part of the Lama Zopa Rinpoche Online Advice Book.

How to Enjoy Death: Preparing for Life's Final Challenge without Fear, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche and edited by Ven. Robina Courtin, is forthcoming from Wisdom Publication in late 2015. For information on the book and pre-orders, visit: wisdompubs.org/how-to-enjoy-death/. A PDF of Ven. Robina's manuscript of this book, called *How to Help Your Loved Ones Enjoy Death and Go Happily to Their Next Rebirth: A Handbook by Lama Zopa Rinpoche*, can be found at fpmt.org/death.

Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition



The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) is an organization devoted to preserving and spreading Mahayana Buddhism worldwide by creating opportunities to listen, reflect, meditate, practice and actualize the unmistakable teachings of the Buddha, and based on that experience spreading the Dharma to sentient beings. We provide integrated education through which people's minds and hearts can be transformed into their highest potential for the benefit of others, inspired by an attitude of universal responsibility and service. We are committed to creating harmonious environments and helping all beings develop their full potential of infinite wisdom and compassion. Our organization is based on the Buddhist tradition of Lama Tsongkhapa of Tibet as taught to us by our founder, Lama Thubten Yeshe and our spiritual director, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche. For more, visit fpmt.org.