

AN EDITOR'S APPROACH TO THE WORDS OF HER PERFECT TEACHER

BY VEN. ROBINA COURTIN

Over the past several years, Ven. Robina Courtin, a former editor of *Mandala*, has been compiling and editing the teachings of Lama Zopa Rinpoche into an accessible and clear book on death. Ven. Robina shared with *Mandala* her process for developing this much-needed publication, which is entitled *How to Enjoy Death: Preparing for Life's Final Challenge without Fear* and will be published by Wisdom Publications later this year.

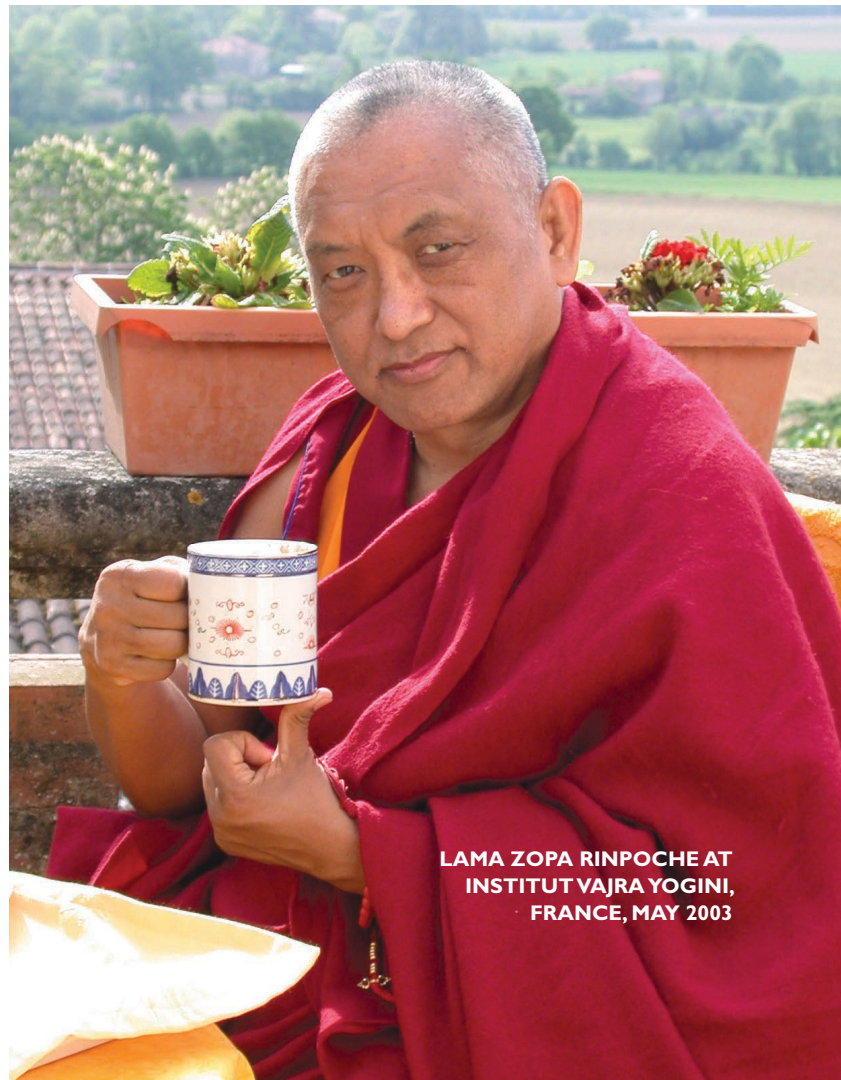
Midway through a Kadampa retreat at Institut Vajra Yogini in France, in May 2003, Lama Zopa Rinpoche switched directions and began to teach about how to help our loved ones at the time of death. This was prompted by one of his students telling him, Rinpoche said, that “her father had died suddenly and she didn’t know what to do. That made me think that knowing how to help others at the time of death is such important education to have.”

The main source Rinpoche used for the teachings was advice that Choden Rinpoche had given at Land of Medicine Buddha in California a year earlier, as well as a book called *Tibetan Ceremonies of the Dead*, written by Thupten Sangay and published in Tibetan by the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala. “It was written,” Rinpoche said, “to educate the Tibetan people outside of their country about their traditions.”

By the time the book came to me to be put together – from Ecie Hursthouse in New Zealand, who got it started – Merry Colony and her team in the Education Services department of the FPMT International Office were already nearing completion of Rinpoche’s *Heart Advice for Death and Dying* and its companion volume, *Heart Practices for Death and Dying*, published in 2008. They used as their source, of course, the French teachings but also the hundreds of hours of teachings Rinpoche has given over the years. Nevertheless, it seemed that a book for wider publication was needed.

When I’d completed the first draft of the manuscript of Rinpoche’s 2003 teachings, there were perhaps 50 pages. That’s it. Not much of a book. Then the hard work started. How to structure these teachings? What else could be included? To whom is it addressed?

Of course, when Rinpoche teaches, he’s talking to who’s there, obviously. But as Rinpoche pointed out when his student told him about her father, “how to help others at the time of death is the most important education to have,” it made sense to address the book to helpers. Of course, by



LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE AT
INSTITUT VAJRA YOGINI,
FRANCE, MAY 2003

learning how to help others we simultaneously learn how to prepare ourselves for our own death and, as Rinpoche says in the book, we can then instruct others how to help us.

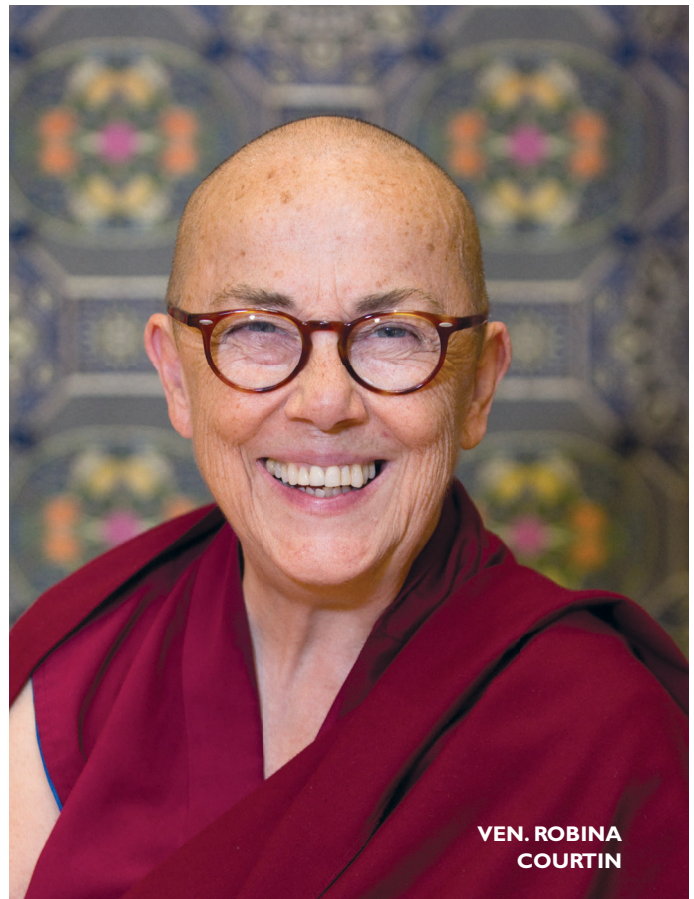
To answer the other questions, as an editor you either faithfully structure the teachings as they were given, even though there was no evident outline, breaking them up into chapters according to the days, let's say. Or you get creative and come up with your own outline.

I was in Queensland, Australia, when I'd finished the first draft so I grabbed hold of Ven. Yeshe Khadro in Brisbane, who runs Karuna Hospice. What did she think was necessary to include? The eight stages of death, for sure, she said; Rinpoche hadn't taught this in France. We also discussed the difficulty for many Westerners of traditional teachings that say the body should be kept untouched for three days after the breath has stopped, which of course is how Rinpoche always teaches it. She said that most of the people they deal with die in institutions where you don't have the luxury of three days. So we needed to find a way to help people know they could be flexible.

Rinpoche has given thousands of hours of teachings during the past 40 years. He's taught repeatedly on death, impermanence, the death process, the twelve links, and the countless mantras, sutras, and practices that we should use to help us prepare for death and deal with the time of death itself. So where to start?

Nick Ribush at Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive handed me over to one of his editors, Gordon McDougall who, Nick said, knows how to get into the archive better than anyone. So I'd request transcripts on certain topics. Gordon also sent his not-yet-finished manuscript of Rinpoche's teachings on death and impermanence that Nick will publish as part of his lam-rim series. So helpful. I used many excerpts from that, tailoring them to the needs of this book.

Gradually, the book began to take shape. Many of the practices Rinpoche recommends, such as Medicine Buddha, are done at almost every one of these stages, but others, such as tugging at the hair on the crown chakra, happens just before you move the body; shouting your loved one's guru's name in their ear happens as soon as the breath stops; and Rinpoche recommends certain mantras only in the months before death, not at the time of death.



It became clear that all the material had to be presented chronologically. All the practices had to be clearly laid out for each step of the way: what to do the months and weeks before death; the hours before death; when the breath stops; the days after the breath stops; when the mind leaves the body; the days and weeks after the mind leaves the body.

And there are so many things to do. No wonder Rinpoche's student "didn't know what to do"! I'm sure Rinpoche has come up with practices that no one has heard of! So in the manuscript, Rinpoche explains what to do at the various stages of death: what to think about; what to hear; what to see and touch; what to meditate on; what to do to purify negative karma.

At one point in 2012 I'd gone as far as I could go; I knew it wasn't finished but didn't know what was missing. What to do? Going through a transcript one day, suddenly a couple of sentences grabbed me. "Let's discuss the twelve links in relation to this human body that we have now. In our case, the very close condition at the time of our past death, just before the gross consciousness ceased, was the grasping at, the wish to receive, a human body. In other words, in order to receive this perfect human rebirth that we have now, we must have had not only the karma of perfect morality and great generosity but also the strong desire – grasping, the ninth link – to have a human body."



a person who's accomplished *phowa*, as soon as their mind leaves their body at death, they will "fly like an eagle" to Amitabha's pure land.

So now there's a beautiful chapter about that, including, with the practices, Lama Tsongkhapa's blissful prayer to be reborn there.

In October last year, at the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion in Australia, just before I left Rinpoche's retreat, I offered a copy of the finished manuscript to Rinpoche. I was moved by Ross Moore's account of how the abbot of Sera Je had highly recommended that Ross offer a copy of his editing of Rinpoche's teachings on emptiness to Rinpoche at a long life puja at Sera. Khen Rinpoche told Ross that he must print it on gold and that he couldn't offer anything better to the

guru than the guru's own words.

We printed the manuscript on gold card and wrapped it in shiny gold cloth. Miffi Maxmillion, from Langri Tangpa in Brisbane, a seamstress, sowed a pink lotus onto it, representing Amitabha's pure land, and nine blue lotuses surrounding it, representing guru devotion with the nine attitudes, and wrapped it in a gold ribbon.

May we take these precious teachings to heart and joyfully fly like eagles to Amitabha's pure land. ■

I'd never studied the twelve links, never heard a teaching, never thought about it. But now I realized this was so important to have in the book. So six months later, after much reading, much questioning of many geshe, I was able to include a chapter specifically in relation to the function of craving and grasping. (And the geshe all had different views. When I mentioned to one what another had said, he said, "Well, he's wrong!")

Now it was 2013. Again, I couldn't go any further but I knew it still wasn't finished. Then, out of the blue, Ven. Holly Ansett mentioned some marvelous teachings that Rinpoche had given the previous October during an Amitabha initiation. Rinpoche said that we must pray to go to Amitabha's pure land and that in fact, Lama Tsongkhapa often says in his teachings that we must do so, "because it's easy for us ordinary people, people with delusions, to be born there." Rinpoche said he was "surprised by that."

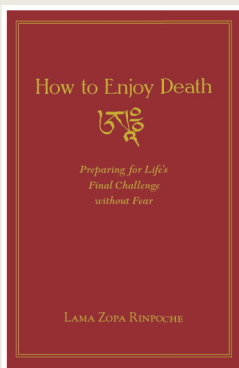
Rinpoche also said that many lamas say that you can't get enlightened there. "But my guru Trijang Rinpoche says you can."

I'd never thought about Amitabha's pure land either. But now I'm a fan, I tell you! I'm praying to go there, for sure. Rinpoche quotes Rechungpa, Milarepa's disciple who says that

See page 16 for an excerpt from *How to Enjoy Death: Preparing for Life's Final Challenge without Fear* by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, edited by Ven. Robina Courtin and forthcoming from Wisdom Publications (wisdompubs.org/how-to-enjoy-death).

Ven. Robina's manuscript for the book *How to Enjoy Death* has been published as a PDF called "How to Help Your Loved Ones Enjoy Death and Go Happily to their Next Rebirth." You can find it on the FPMT Education Services' resource page for death and dying (fpmt.org/death).

Ordained since the late 1970s, Ven. Robina has worked full time since then for Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche within the FPMT mandala. Over the years she has served as editorial director of Wisdom Publications, editor of *Mandala* magazine, executive director of Liberation Prison Project, and as a touring teacher of Buddhism. You can find out more about Ven. Robina and her teaching schedule at www.robina-courtin.com.



Wisdom Publications is now accepting pre-orders for a limited keepsake edition of *How to Enjoy Death: Preparing for Life's Final Challenge without Fear*.

Wisdom will be donating \$5 from each order to FPMT's Nepal Earthquake Support Fund.

To take advantage of this opportunity to support both a special edition of Rinpoche's book and also help those affected by the Nepal earthquake visit:

wisdompubs.org/how-to-enjoy-death