

Caring for the Dying and Dead



Essential Advice from Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Caring for the Dying and the Dead

Make the place as beautiful as possible; a calm, peaceful, serene, holy environment is so important. There should be beautiful views, beautiful art, flowers, images of deities and holy beings. The point is to make a positive imprint on the person's mind. The person's mind is elevated and they are not afraid of dying.

- Lama Zopa Rinpoche

During an illness the main thing is to take care of the dying person's mind. Many others can take care of the body, but we can take care of the mind.

The most worthwhile thing to do is to inspire the person to think of others with loving kindness and compassion, to wish others to be happy and free from suffering. If a person dies with the thought of benefiting others, their mind is naturally happy and this makes their death meaningful.

You can teach the person taking-and-giving (tonglen) meditation or loving kindness meditation, according to the capacity of his or her mind. If the person has a more compassionate nature, a "brave mind," they will be able to do tonglen, taking others' suffering and giving out happiness. If the person can do tonglen, that is the best way to die, as it means dying with bodhichitta. His Holiness the Dalai Lama calls this a self-supporting death. For those who don't think others are more important than themselves, wishing others happiness and to be free of suffering is more difficult.

It is very important to know a person's mind. You can teach according to their capacity: check at the time, use your own wisdom, and judge how profound a method to present to them. It would be best if you could give the dying person some idea of the death process according to tantra: the evolution of the dissolution of the elements, the senses, the consciousness, all the way to the subtle consciousness.

For a person who has lost their capacity to understand because of coma, dementia, and so forth, there is not much possibility for them to understand. We should aim to help them get at least a precious human

rebirth. This should be our aim, not that the person must necessarily believe in karma, for example, but that they die with a positive, happy mind, with loving kindness and compassion; this is our precious gift. Our main aim in taking care of the physical body is so that we can take care of the mind, to transform their mind to the positive so that at least the person can die without anger, desire, and so forth.

You should learn various methods to benefit and calm down the mind, and to benefit now and in the future. You should get an idea of what level of method to offer.

If, for example, one visualizes Buddha or watches the conventional nature of mind – its clarity – other thoughts such as anger and attachment do not arise. If one is able to do this at the time of death, according to the person's mind, you can talk about the “fully enlightened being” rather than the Sanskrit “Buddha.” You can talk about God if that is more skillful: a compassionate God or a loving God, or Omniscient One. Explain to the person that the nature of their mind, their heart, is completely pure; that the fully enlightened one, God, is compassionate to everyone, including them. Help them to think that their loving heart is oneness with God, that the kingdom of God is within. This frees people from guilt and anger, from their negative thoughts.

Mantra, for example, helps a person to eventually attain a higher rebirth after their positive karma is used up. Even if a person doesn't want to hear mantra, still it leaves a positive imprint on the mind. Then sooner or later that person will meet the path and have the ability to practice the teachings, to clear obscurations and attain enlightenment. Even if someone gets angry hearing mantras and dies with an angry mind, it is still better than not hearing any mantras at all and staying peaceful. In this way, step-by-step, a person's karma will bring them to the Mahayana path and to enlightenment. Someone on the Mahayana path will attain enlightenment, while an arhat gets stuck, even if the arhat starts off with the higher rebirth.

One way of thinking about this issue is to not recite mantras to a dying person if it causes the person's mind to be unhappy, to generate anger, and to be disturbed at the time of death, so that he or she will not be reborn in the lower realms. However, by leaving imprints on the person's mind, Buddha's mantras offer the benefit that the person will not be reborn in the lower realms.

Even if a person becomes angry from hearing mantras, still, in the long run, they receive benefit, because the mantras leave imprints on

the mind and bring them to enlightenment. This comes just through the power of hearing the Buddha's mantras. Otherwise, although the person who is dying may have a happy mind, if you don't recite mantras, you have done nothing to cause the person to achieve enlightenment, or to save him or her from the lower realms. Even though the dying person's mind may be positive, if there is desire in the mind – for example, fear of separation from family and friends – then the person won't have a peaceful mind when dying.

A person needs a positive mind in order to have a good rebirth. A positive mind means having non-anger, non-attachment, and so forth. Only then will the result be a good rebirth. Even if a person dies with anger, Buddha's powerful words – mantras, sutras, and especially the tantric method of *jangwa* – can change their rebirth, because of their power.

You may think that to have a good rebirth, the person has to have a positive mind when dying. But the goal, what you are wishing for, is for the person to achieve enlightenment. This comes from leaving imprints on the person's mind from the power of Buddha's mantras, and so on. Even if they are temporarily reborn in the lower realms because they were annoyed by the mantras, nevertheless, because of the imprints left on the mind, they will later achieve enlightenment and liberation from *samsara*.

There is a story about Wusun, who was about to give teachings to 500 monks. They all would have achieved arhatship upon hearing them, but Manjushri arrived before Wusun, and gave them Mahayana teachings first. The 500 monks developed heretical thoughts toward the Dharma, and were reborn in the lower realms. Wusun went to the Buddha, and said that because Manjushri gave them Mahayana teachings, the 500 monks were reborn in the lower realms. The Buddha answered that this was very good, and that this was an example of Manjushri's skillful means. If the 500 monks had just heard teachings on the lesser path from Wusun and achieved arhatship, they would still be there now in the state of arhatship, but because of Manjushri's skillful means, they generated heretical thoughts and took rebirth in the lower realms for a shorter time, and then they achieved enlightenment.

Creating a Conducive Environment for Dying

Make the place as beautiful as possible; a calm, peaceful, serene, holy environment is so important. There should be beautiful views, beautiful art, flowers, images of deities and holy beings. Flowers give a very special spiritual feeling. The point is to make a positive imprint on the person's mind. Because of being there, the person's mind is elevated, and they are not afraid of dying.

The advice you give the person depends on what you have been doing yourself – the lam-rim, thought transformation – what you have been practicing in daily life, beyond mere sitting meditation. In general, the Mahayana has much to offer to the dying, or to anyone with problems. Highest yoga tantra is the only system that offers a real explanation of death. The precise instructions only exist in highest yoga tantra, not in other traditions. Other traditions give only general instructions; they do not provide explanations in terms of the subtle consciousness, winds, chakras, etc.

If one becomes accomplished at phowa and receives the signs of accomplishment, then this can be the best public service – liberating others and helping them at the time of death.

It is okay to ask lamas to do phowa; one can ask any Tibetan lama who is a good practitioner. The lama can do phowa wherever they are, from a distance. You will need to inform the lama which direction the head is facing.

When the Person is Dying

If you have studied the death process, you will be able to recognize the stages through which a person's consciousness is passing, what elements are absorbing, and so forth, when the person is actually dying. It is better if the family members don't cry within hearing distance, as this creates clinging in the mind of the dying person. There are sounds to help the consciousness at the time of death, sounds that benefit, such as mantras and so on. Other than this, it is best to keep quiet and don't make any sounds. You should teach the family how to create this atmosphere.

It is okay to medicate pain in order to help the person to be able to think, but medicating for mental anguish is not advisable. Sedation of this sort before death prevents the person from exhausting negative karma. Anguish becomes fruitful if the person can experience it and

finish the bad karma. It is hard to tell the difference. Often families want the patient medicated, but it is more for their own comfort than the patient's.

At death, invite the Sangha to chant mantras nicely, in an uplifting way. When they chant like this, the person feels that nothing is more important than Amitabha Buddha. They feel protected, supported, and guided.

Chanting the names of the Thirty-five Confession Buddhas is extremely powerful; people can come to the room and chant together. Also, it is good to chant the very powerful mantras of the five deities normally used in jangwa puja that liberate both those dying and those already dead. These mantras also purify living beings and liberate those in the lower realms. The text *Giving Breath to the Wretched* has powerful mantras and is also good to recite.

Place a stupa on the person's chest or let them hold it. Each time the stupa touches them, it purifies negative karma. Even if the consciousness has already left the body, there is still benefit in touching the body with the stupa. This is also good to do with babies or with people who don't understand. If the person is a non-Buddhist, say that the stupa is for peace or healing or purification. The person can visualize light rays coming from the stupa.

It is also good to have a few stupas on hand for healing or to dispel spirit harm. Also, a sheet of paper with the ten great mantras written can be put on the dying person's body (at the heart) while reciting a dedication prayer.

When the Breath has Stopped

The very first thing to do after the breath has stopped is Medicine Buddha practice. As a group or individually (and for animals as well), chant the names of the Medicine Buddhas and the mantra. Medicine Buddha made a promise that if anyone chants his name and mantra, all their prayers and wishes will succeed. The power of prayer has been accomplished by Medicine Buddha, so this practice is very powerful to make your prayers succeed. From among the ten powers, one is the power of prayer; pray as if you are the Medicine Buddha's agent, on behalf of the being who has died.

Then you can do Amitabha phowa, transference of consciousness to a pure land, followed by other practices.

Recite Sang Chö, *The Prayer of Good Deeds*, commonly known as *The King of Prayers*. At funerals, it is also good for everyone attending to read this prayer together.

You can recite the Namgyälma mantra twenty-one times, then blow on water, sesame seeds, perfume, or talcum powder, and then sprinkle that over the dead body. The Namgyälma mantra is very powerful for purifying. It is best to recite the long mantra if possible, but the short mantra can also be recited. Also, if this mantra is written on cloth or paper and placed on a mountaintop or roof where the wind can blow it, whoever is touched by the wind receives blessings and their karma is purified. Circumambulating a stupa that contains the mantra purifies all the karma to be reborn in the hot hells.

In Tibet, after the breath stops, you would not touch the body until a lama in the village did phowa; this is important. Look for signs that the consciousness has left the body: the white drop, like pus or water from the nostril, or for a woman, blood and water from the lower part. Then, before moving the body, pull the hair in the center of the crown towards the back, so that the consciousness comes out through there.

Essential Activities at the Death Time

This is the most essential advice given by Lama Zopa Rinpoche for the time of death. It may not be possible for everyone to do everything on the list due to lack of materials. That is all right and you shouldn't worry; just do what you can.

Before Death Essentials

If person is open to listening to mantras, any mantras are good – especially Medicine Buddha and Compassion Buddha. There are a few that are very good, such as the mantras for pain and the sutra for pain (*Recitations for Pain*, an audio CD, is available from the FPMT Foundation Store website, www.fpmt.org/shop). This is very good for the dying person to listen to, especially if they are in pain.

The mantras Zung of the Exalted Completely Pure Stainless Light and Mantra Taught by Buddha Drogen Gyalwa Chhö are extremely beneficial. If you recite these mantras, anyone who hears, sees, or touches you has all their negative karma purified. In addition, whatever you touch becomes a holy object. Therefore, these mantras are very beneficial if recited by the people who are caring for the dying person.

Put holy mantras and images in a place where the dying person can see them. (The FPMT Foundation Store carries a Card for a Dying Person, which was personally designed by Lama Zopa Rinpoche for maximum benefit).

Place a stupa filled with the four dharmakaya relic mantras near the person. At the time of death, this stupa should be placed so it is touching the dying person's head.

The main practice to do before, during, and after death is Medicine Buddha. It is best if this practice is done near the dying person, so they can hear it being done, hear the mantra, etc. You may do the Medicine Buddha Puja (available as a reader spread for easy use at www.fpmt.org/teachers/zopa/advice/Default.asp, and as a convenient booklet at www.fpmt.org/shop) or Medicine Buddha Sadhana. The simple practice is to visualize Medicine Buddha above the dying person's head. As you recite the mantra, nectar flows from the Medicine Buddha and purifies the dying person. Then make dedications for the person's future rebirth, that they may meet the Dharma, meet the perfectly qualified Mahayana teacher, practice, and become enlightened as quickly as possible. You may also dedicate that the person takes rebirth in a pure land. It is more important to focus on dedicating for the person's future rebirth rather than this life or the intermediate state. Now is the time to dedicate strongly for this person's future life to be a most precious one.

Others who care about the dying person might want to do something of benefit, and they may also do the Medicine Buddha practice themselves. When people who care about the person do this practice, it is very, very powerful.

Sponsor Medicine Buddha pujas for the dying person at Kopan Monastery or Land of Medicine Buddha, where the puja is done every day (www.medicinebuddha.org).

During Death Essentials

When the death time is very close, it is best not to have anyone emotional around the dying person. Especially as the time grows very close, it is important that there is a calm and peaceful environment. No one who is crying or hanging onto the dying person should not be in the room at all. This can not be stressed enough.

It is best if there are mantras playing or someone is reciting Medicine Buddha mantra in the dying person's ear.

When it seems like the person is very close to dying:

Place the mantra sheet face down on the body, so it is touching the

skin (this mantra sheet is available at www.fpmt.org/teachers/zopa/advice/Default.asp).

Place a stupa so it is touching the dying person's crown.

If you have it, place Kalachakra sand on the dying person's head. (Kalachakra sand is sand from a sand mandala blessed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama). Mix the sand with butter to make it stick, and at the time of death, place it on the dying person's crown. You may also do this after the person passes away, but best is to do it before.

The main practice to do throughout this time is Medicine Buddha Puja.

When the breathing stops, no one should touch the body for as long as possible (best is seventy-two hours, but this often is not possible), even one hour (ideally the mantras and stupa would have already been placed so they are touching his body).

After Death Essentials

The first time the body is touched after the person has died, touch the crown. Tug the hair on the crown of the head so that the consciousness leaves from the crown of his head. Do a firm tug.

Recite the traditional eight prayers for the time of death. These can be downloaded from the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition website: www.fpmt.org/teachers/zopa/advice/Default.asp. They are also available in a convenient booklet format from the Foundation Store website: www.fpmt.org/shop.

After the person passes away, again do Medicine Buddha Puja dedicated for the dying person's future rebirth. It is best to do it every day for forty-nine days, and if that is not possible, then it can be done every seventh day for forty-nine days. The last puja should have more extensive offerings, and one should recite the King of Prayers.

Medicine Buddha pujas can be sponsored for the person who has died at Kopan Monastery or Land of Medicine Buddha (www.medicinebuddha.org)

Mantras

The following are mantras mentioned in this book as being beneficial for a dying person to hear:

Medicine Buddha Mantra

TAYATA / OM BEKANZAY BEKANZAY MAHA BEKANZAY / RADZA SAMUDGATAY SVAHA

Namgyälma Mantra

Long Mantra

OM NAMO BHAGAVATE / SARVA TRAILOKYA PRATIVISHISHTAYA / BUDDHAYA TE NAMA / TADYATHA / OM BHRUM BHRUM BHRUM SHODHAYA SHODHAYA / VISHODHAYA VISHODHAYA / ASAMA SAMANTA / AVABHA SPHARANA GATI / GAGANA SVABHAVA VISHUDDHE / ABHIKSHINCHANTU MAM / SARVA TATHAGATA / SUGATA VARA VACHANA AMRITA ABHISHEKERA / MAHAMUDRA MANTRA PADAIIH / AHARA AHARA / MAMA AYUS SANDHARANI / SHODHAYA SHODHAYA / VISHODHAYA VISHODHAYA / GAGANA SVABHAVA VISHUDDHE / USHNISHA VIJAYA PARISHUDDHE / SAHASRA RASMI SANCHODITE / SARVA TATHAGATA AVALOKINI / SHAT PARAMITA PARIPURANI / SARVA TATHAGATA MATE / DASHA BHUMI PRATISHTHITE / SARVA TATHAGATA HRIDAYA / ADHISHTHANA ADHISHTHITE / MUDRE MUDRE MAHAMUDRE / VAJRA KAYA SAMHATANA PARISHUDDHE / SARVA KARMA AVARANA VISHUDDHE / PRATINIVARTAYA MAMA AYUR / VISHUDDHE SARVA TATHAGATA SAMAYA ADHISHTHANA ADHISHTHITE / OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNI / VIMUNI VIMUNI MAHA VIMUNI / MATI MATI MAHA MATI / MAMATI SUMATI / TATHATA / BHUTAKOTI PARISHUDDHE / VISPHUTA BUDDHI SHUDDHE / HE HE JAYA JAYA / VIJAYA VIJAYA / SMARA SMARA / SPHARA SPHARA / SPHARAYA SPHARAYA / SARVA BUDDHA ADHISHTHANA ADHISHTHITE /

SHUDDHE SHUDDHE / BUDDHE BUDDHE / VAJRE VAJRE MAHA VAJRE SUVAJRE / VAJRA GARBHE JAYA GARBHE / VIJAYA GARBHE / VAJRA JVALA GARBHE / VAJRODBHAVE VAJRA SAMBHAVE / VAJRE VAJRINI / VAJRAM BHAVANTU MAMA SHARIRAM / SARVA SATTVANAN CHHA / KAYA PARISHUDDHIR BHAVANTU / ME SADA SARVA GATI PARISHUDDHI SHCHHA / SARVA TATHAGATA SHCHHA / MAM SAMAS VASAYANTU / BUDDHYA BUDDHYA / SIDDHYA SIDDHYA / BODHAYA BODHAYA VIBODHAYA VIBODHAYA / MOCHAYA MOCHAYA / VIMOCCHAYA VIMOCCHAYA / SHODHAYA SHODHAYA VISHODHAYA VISHODHAYA / SAMANTENA MOCHAYA MOCHAYA / SAMANTA RASMI PARISHUDDHE / SARVA TATHAGATA HRIDAYA / ADHISHTHANA ADHISHTHITE / MUDRE MUDRE MAHA MUDRE / MAHA MUDRA MANTRA PADAIIH SVAHA

Short Mantra

OM BHRUM SVAHA / OM AMRITA AYUR DADE SVAHA

Compassion Buddha Mantra (Chenrezig)

OM MANI PÄDME HUM

Zung of the Exalted Completely Pure Stainless Light

NAMA NAWA NAWA TEENAN TATHAAGATA GANGA NAM DIVA LUKAA NAN / KOTINI YUTA SHATA SAHA SRAA NAN / OM VOVORI / TSARI NI* TSARI / MORI GOLI TSALA WAARI SVAHA (a few times)

*indicates a high tone

Mantra Taught by Buddha Drogen Gylawa Chhö

OM HRI YA DHE SARVA TATHAAGATA HRIDAYA GARBHE / ZOLA DHARMA DHATU GARBHE / SANGHA HARANA AYU SANGHSHODAYA / PAPAM SARVA TATHAAGATA SAMENDRA AUSHNI KHA VI-MALE BISHUDHE SVAHA (a few times)

For teachings on death and dying according to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, please see Heart Advice for the Dying, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche. For extensive practices to be done at the time of a person's death, please see Advice and Practices for Death and Dying. Lama Zopa Rinpoche has also designed a special Card for a Dying Person to put near the bed of one who is dying. All these materials are available from the Foundation Store, www.fpmt.org/shop.

Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition



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FPMT Education Department



The aim of the Education Department at FPMT International Office is to serve the needs of Dharma centers and individuals in the area of Tibetan Buddhist educational and spiritual materials. This includes prayers and practice texts, retreat sadhanas and other practice materials, a variety of study texts and translations, deity images for meditation, and curricular materials for study programs in FPMT Dharma centers.

One of our principal objectives is to serve as a repository for a wide variety of practice texts primarily within the Gelug tradition, especially those authored or translated by Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Lama Thubten Yeshe. We work in close collaboration with the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, Boston, Massachusetts, which serves as a repository for the commentaries and transcripts of teachings by Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe.

If we can be of service to you in any way, please contact us at:

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