

A MODERN COMMENTARY ON KARMA LINGPA'S

# ZHI-KHRO

*teachings on the peaceful and wrathful deities*

BY

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 • BARDO
- 1 • LINEAGE
- 5 • PREVIEW
- 7 • BARDO OF BIRTH AND LIFE
- 14** • BARDO OF THE DREAM STATE
- 22** • BARDO OF MEDITATION
- 25** • BARDO OF THE MOMENT OF DEATH
- 25 • THE ELEMENTS
- 26 • CHAOS IN THE WINDS
- 27 • EARTH DISSOLVES INTO WATER
- 28 • WATER EVAPORATES INTO FIRE
- 28 • FIRE DISSIPATES INTO AIR
- 29 • WIND DIFFUSES INTO SPACE
- 30 • SPACE DISSOLVES INTO CLEAR LIGHT
- 30 • WHITE, RED AND BLACK
- 34 • THE WAY OF THE ADEPT
- 37 • MANDALA OFFERINGS
- 38 • *PHOWA*
- 41 • SUBTLE SIGNS
- 43 • SUMMARY
- 44** • BARDO OF THE LUMINOSITY OF THE TRUE NATURE
- 51** • BARDO OF BECOMING
- 52 • WANDERING
- 58 • FULL CIRCLE
- 60 • QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
- 66 • COLOPHON

## **BARDO**

*Bardo* is a Tibetan word. *Bar* means between and *do* signifies place or island. So it can be translated as "in-between place" or "intermediate state." The term bardo is used to describe the primary transitions through the various levels of experience constituting the process of embodiment and reincarnation. There are many different ways of understanding the concept of bardo.

Bardo teachings are about the continuity and ongoing nature of mind and experience. These instructions relate directly to everyday life as well as death. If we can recognize what is happening right here, while we are alive, we can go forward with confidence.

According to the Buddha, all sentient beings are naturally enlightened and have been pure since the beginning. However, due to a small mistake, a little grasping develops into ego-clinging and a state of delusion. As long as we are deluded, awareness of our true nature is obscured. The bardo is the interval from the beginning of delusion until the return to the state of primordial nature. All our wandering in between is the bardo. Until we reach enlightenment, everything we feel, know and experience, is bardo phenomena. Even now, we are wandering in an intermediate state. This will continue as long as we persist in dualism, clinging to the belief in the inherent existence of self and world.

The bardos do not exist outside of us. They are the context of our experience. This is very important to understand. Do not think that you are only in the bardo at certain times. The entire universe of samsara and nirvana happens within the bardos. From the onset of our dreams until we completely wake up is all bardo territory. As long as we are trapped by ego-clinging and attachment, we are in the bardo.

Even highly realized beings and great practitioners arise within this process, but they are already awake so that they do not make false distinctions between the bardo and pristine awareness. They understand that everything which appears is a display of primordial wisdom.

## **LINEAGE**

Where do the bardo teachings come from? These teachings came from Buddha Shakyamuni and continued through Guru Padmasambhava, who brought them to Tibet in the eighth century. Guru Padmasambhava's instructions and explanations regarding the bardo are very specific and clear while Buddha Shakyamuni's are more general and spread throughout his discourses. When Guru Padmasambhava came to Tibet, he gave some bardo teachings to his students and with the help of Yeshe Ts'ogyal, hid others in different areas to be discovered in the future. Over the generations, many great tertons have brought them forth, with the result that there are now extensive teachings on the bardos.

In order to awaken sentient beings of various capacities, Buddha Shakyamuni offered many levels of instruction which have been categorized into nine yantras.

The *zhi-khro*, which translates as the peaceful and wrathful deities, is considered part of the inner tantra. It is actually a condensed teaching based upon the essential meaning of the Guhyagarbha Tantra combined with the views expressed in the anu and ati yoga teachings. Many great masters have said that the *zhi-khro* teachings are the inner tantra of the inner tantra. In this case we're not making distinctions among the various inner tantras, nor between the creation and completion stages, but joining them all together. This is the union of *rigpa* and emptiness, the oneness of birth, death, and life experiences. There is no basis for discriminating because all are aspects of one true nature. Nothing is rejected or exclusively accepted. This teaching is known as the one that unifies everything into a single state.

Guru Padmasambhava transmitted the bardo teachings to a great many students in Tibet, all of whom became enlightened. Historically, many of these masters were Dzogchen adepts, and that lofty view is central to the *zhi-khro* teachings. Bardo instructions were spread through both the *kama* and *terma* lineages. The terma texts became very popular through tertons such as Karma Lingpa in the fourteenth century. He was one of the great masters who discovered the *zhi-khro* treasure, a part of which contains the *bardo thodrol* which has been translated into English as, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

Traditionally, there are five great tertons, Dorje Lingpa, Ratna Lingpa, Padma Lingpa, Karma Lingpa and Sangye Lingpa, who are related to the five directions: east, south, west, north and center. Karma Lingpa was a reincarnation of one of the twenty-five students of Guru Padmasambhava known as Cokro Lüi Gyeltsen, a famous translator of the Kangyur in ninth century Tibet. Many of the Buddha's vinaya teachings were rendered into Tibetan by this master. After receiving instructions from Guru Padmasambhava, Shantarakshita and Vimalamitra, he practiced and became enlightened. Through his bodhicitta commitment and the wishes of Guru Padmasambhava, Master Cokro reincarnated many times in Tibet as various tertons and great bodhisattvas. One of those reincarnations who lived in the 14th century was a lay practitioner named Karma Lingpa.

Karma Lingpa, the "northern" terton, was born in south-eastern Tibet north of Takpo, Gampopa's birthplace. Following Guru Padmasambhava's instructions, he discovered the *zhi-khro* teachings and other treasures on Mount Gampodar, where the rock formations resemble dancing gods. After extracting the termas, he practiced them in complete secrecy as requested by Guru Padmasambhava. He only shared them years later with his son, Nyinda Chöje. Both Karma Lingpa and Nyinda Chöje practiced the *zhi-khro* in secret and acquired rainbow bodies. For three generations, these instructions were transmitted to only a single individual. Finally, the grandson of Karma Lingpa, Namka Chöki Gyamtso received the *zhi-khro* transmission. Namka Chöki Gyamtso presented this teaching just three times during his entire life. Since then, this cycle of teachings has been among the most popular in Tibetan Buddhism.

The first time, he taught a small group, among whom was Ena Lingpa, another famous terton. Through Ena Lingpa it spread to Sruming, which is Chogyam Trungpa's lay monastery. The second time Namka Chöki Gyamtso presented these teachings was to a larger gathering, and as a result, it spread

throughout the Katok monasteries. A very famous master named Heba Chunyung, was largely responsible for propogating the *zhi-khro* among the Kagyus. Toward the end of his life Namka Chöki Gyamtso expounded on the *zhi-khro* one last time. Many of those present were from Nindal, a temple-monastery associated with both Kagyu and Nyingma practitioners. Included in this gathering was the famous master Karma Chamling, who also transmitted these teachings to many students. Although Namka Chöki Gyamtso only offered these teachings three times, he gave rise to three separate lineages of transmission in the Nyingma and Kagyu schools.

The practices associated with this teaching quickly became very popular and are still practiced every day by many high level practitioners, renowned lamas and lay devotees. Entire families will recite it early in the morning. Even those who don't know how to read, learn to memorize it from hearing other members of the family chant it daily.

The *zhi-khro* does not just cover the bardos. It is a complete teaching. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is just a small part of the *zhi-khro*. The actual text is huge and contains detailed explanations of the visualization and completion stages, Dzogchen teachings, *threg-chod* and *thod-rgyal* instructions. It is an entire cycle, but only the bardo section has been translated. The rendering of these teachings in the Tibetan language is especially beautiful. Each of Guru Padmasambhava's words has special mantric power, revealing the inner meaning of many visions and experiences.

That's a brief introduction to the lineage behind these teachings.

## PREVIEW

This is a very powerful and special teaching. The bardo instructions provide us with a body of techniques and practices by which we can discover our Buddha nature. If we are well-acquainted with the bardos, we won't be surprised or confused when major transitions take place during life or between lives. Instead, we will enjoy a continuity of understanding and spiritual growth. To acquire such a panoramic view takes courage, confidence and commitment.

In the terma discovered by Karma Lingpa, Guru Padmasambhava introduces six different bardos. The first bardo begins when we take birth and endures as long as we live. The second is the bardo of dreams. The third is the bardo of concentration or meditation. The fourth occurs at the moment of death. The fifth is known as the bardo of the luminosity of the true nature. The sixth is called the bardo of transmigration or karmic becoming. This is the sixfold division of the bardos. I will go into a little more detail on each of them.

The first bardo of birth and life lasts from the time you are conceived in mother's womb until your last breath, when consciousness leaves the body at death. This is called the *shi-nay* bardo.

The second is the *mi-lam* or dream bardo and in other teachings, this is considered a subdivision of the first bardo because during our lifetime, we frequently sleep and have dreams. There are ways to learn to integrate the dream

state into the practice, so that even while sleeping, we can develop our realization.

Third is the *sam-ten* bardo of meditation. Generally, this is only experienced by practitioners and those who meditate or are looking for inner peace and understanding. The onset and duration of this bardo depends on the capability of the practitioner. The meditation bardo is also considered a subdivision of the bardo of birth and living. Guru Padmasambhava categorized them this way because dreams and meditation are very important aspects of life and practice. Meditation is the primary method of maturing our spiritual insight and understanding. It allows us to go beyond the confusion of the bardo into the clarity of the primordial nature.

The fourth is the *chik-khai* bardo of the moment of death. It begins when the outer and inner signs indicate that death is approaching, and continues through the dissolution of the elements until the moment after the last breath or perhaps a few minutes after the expiration of the last breath, when the inner breath has completely stopped.

The fifth is the *chö-nyid* bardo of the luminosity of the true nature which begins right after the last breath. In the outer sense, this is usually considered the moment of death; however, inwardly there is still a subtle movement of winds which continue to dissolve in stages. At this point, preternatural forces in the form of sounds and lights appear to burst forth with tremendous power. In the Dzogchen teachings, these are known as *thod-rgyal* visions and they arise spontaneously, without anyone calling them up. Along with these visions, there's an experience of profound peace and pristine awareness. The duration of this could be anywhere from one second to half an hour or more.

The sixth, or *sid-pai* bardo, is known as the bardo of becoming or transmigration. Ordinary beings who have never practiced and have failed to recognize the clear light at the moment of death are usually deluded throughout the fifth bardo of luminosity. Eventually they arrive in the sixth, the final stage before rebirth. This phase lasts until we have visions of our new parents and are conceived in a womb. The average duration of the period between death and rebirth is forty nine days, although it could be as short as three. It is not always the same for everyone. Under certain conditions it could be a lot longer, but on the average it is forty-nine days.

The bardo process mirrors the wheel of interdependent origination. It turns on and on, so that after we die and transmigrate through the bardos, we again take birth and live. This cycle continues until we are totally enlightened. The purpose of studying the bardo sequence is not simply to have a general familiarity with these states but to become adept in recognizing them. Using these teachings wisely will develop your realization and provide invaluable skillful means toward accomplishing benefits for all beings.

Because of their supreme importance, Guru Padmasambhava gave extensive instructions on the bardo. Since we are all travelers on this highway, we should be aware of our circumstance and make good use of these teachings.

## **BARDO OF BIRTH AND LIFE**

*shi-nay bardo*

The bardo of birth and life refers to the present time and experience. We have already taken birth and are still alive, so we are now in the first bardo. How should we use this time in a meaningful way? Guru Padmasambhava made it clear that to take advantage of this opportunity and fulfill our aspirations during this life, we have to learn to focus our minds. Our time here isn't going to last forever.

**WHEN THE BIRTHPLACE BARDO IS DAWNING UPON ME,  
THERE IS NO SPARE TIME IN THIS LIFE;  
ABANDONING LAZINESS...**

We can never be sure how long we will be in the bardo of the living. No one can say. When and where we will die is always uncertain. It is completely unpredictable. No matter how rich or clever you are, you can never know how much longer you have to live. Since we're not sure how long this life will last, Guru Padmasambhava advises us to abandon laziness.

Now is the time to increase appreciation and gratitude for our life situation, to arouse ourselves and make a joyful effort to realize great results. We should develop confidence in our way and be happy in our endeavors. Don't just assume that you are worthless and incapable. Don't let this opportunity slip by and have cause for regret. Learn to work effectively, happily, and with commitment.

The biggest obstacle to spiritual progress is laziness. There are many forms of laziness but they all share the feeling that there is plenty of time. "I won't bother with this today. I'll do it later." When we think like this again and again, we miss many important opportunities and lose sight of our goal. That is the worst thing about laziness.

One type of laziness is based in doubt: "How could I ever do this?" You put yourself down, and even feel special in considering yourself so low and incapable. To overcome this requires courage. Discover your natural dignity. Feel the preciousness of this moment; how amazing it is to be alive! If you understand the truth of this, there's nothing that you cannot accomplish. That's exactly what the Buddha and many other great masters did. They worked on the basis of this inspiration. Since we all have the buddha nature, and have inherited the wisdoms, why can't we do as they did? So learn to apply yourself diligently and engage the practice fearlessly.

Another type of laziness has to do with attaching to lesser interests and missing the greater opportunity. You know that the practice is special, you have some awareness that this is a very unique moment, and you are inspired by this beautiful opening, but you still waste time and cling to meaningless, worldly involvements. You are like a cat who is always trying to catch another mouse. Guru Padmasambhava taught that this kind of activity is as endless as waves on the ocean. Just when you think you're going to finish, the next wave arrives, and then another. There is always something else to do or acquire. This form of laziness

depends on staying distracted with countless things to achieve and do. There is no time when it could be said that you've completed everything. Such preoccupations never cease. Unaware of the cause of this unsettledness, you habitually cling to externals and are subject to an endless procession of wandering thoughts and impulsive actions. This happens all the time when there is attachment to externals. But start looking inwardly and you will discover the source of all those restless feelings. You will also find joy, tranquility and thoughts that bring peace and harmony.

Don't just believe this because Guru Padmasambhava said it. Look into the history of renowned people, warriors, kings, or those with great artistic talent. All of them died with dreams and projects unfulfilled. Everyone leaves this world with unfinished business. Inquire for yourself. You'll find that this is really true.

When we see laziness in ourselves, what should we do? Respond immediately and with vigor. Don't fall for, "I will do it later." You don't have to be patient with laziness. Guru Padmasambhava said that when you observe laziness in yourself, act like a timid person who has just discovered that a snake has crawled up into his lap. You would not just sit there to see what the snake does next. You'd get right up, throw it off you and run away! Guru Padmasambhava also said that to overcome laziness, you must act immediately, like a beautiful lady whose hair has just caught on fire. These are very clear examples about how to respond to laziness.

Among the six bardos, the first bardo of birth and living is the most important one we have to learn about. This is where we can really develop, grow strong, realize what is precious, and fully awaken to our Buddha nature so that we can easily handle the remaining bardos. Through practice and meditation we can learn to recognize what is and move through all the changes of birth and death with great confidence and joy. You won't have to worry, be concerned or even hesitate. Everything you need will appear in the palm of your hand; you'll be right on track.

Guru Padmasambhava said that if you practice well during this bardo, you can transmigrate without doubt, returning home like a hawk who makes a safe nest high on a cliffside. She just flies up there and without any hesitation or indecision, enters the nest. So if you really learn something during this life, the rest of the bardos will not cause you any concern. You will move through them with confidence and full awareness, so that it all becomes part of a glorious adventure.

Guru Padmasambhava is emphasizing just how precious this time is, right where we are now. Refrain from non-virtuous actions. Constantly be engaged in activities which will bring benefits for yourself and other beings. Many teachings state that where we are now is an island of jewels: you can find all kinds of valuable gems here. You must take some in your hand, put some in your pocket and fill your backpack. If you return empty-handed, the cycle of samsara revolves again.

Time does not wait for us. We should use it to do something meaningful. Of course, there are many things we have to do just to get along in this world, but we should really expand our view and adjust our attitude. Guru Padmasambhava

advises us to be attentive to the present, but not to neglect looking toward the future; to think about tomorrow, as well as the day after, next year, and the following ones too. Thinking in this way, we will develop the intelligence and compassion necessary to realize benefits for all living beings, today, tomorrow and continually.

These teachings were given by the precious Guru himself. The same truth has been spoken by all the buddhas and bodhisattvas. All of the great masters who have benefited beings for generations worked hard to develop love, compassion and bodhicitta. That's the standard they kept. We should do the same. Think of the men and women who became spiritual masters, and keep them in mind. Learn to do as they did. Do not deceive yourselves. We might think we are very smart, but if we're still fooling around, the cycle of karmic bondage will remain intact.

### ABANDONING LAZINESS ENTER UNDISTRACTEDLY IN THE THREE PATHS OF LISTENING, REFLECTION AND MEDITATION

Guru Padmasambhava and Buddha Shakyamuni have both said that we should do three things: study, contemplate and meditate. At first, study and consider the teaching, then contemplate it. To settle the mind, we must first become aware of the obstacles and obscurations masking its true nature. Finally, you are ready to meditate.

Meditation is the fruit of study and contemplation. In this context, meditation doesn't mean merely sitting calmly and focusing the mind on an external object. Rather, this is meditation on the true nature. As the true nature pervades both internally and externally, meditation on it clarifies our view and helps us learn to penetrate both subjective and objective phenomena. The focus in meditation itself should be on the nature of the mind. This will reveal everything.

Meditation on the true nature yields a lucid clarity and profound openness which is very mysterious. Abiding continuously in that state will cause beautiful qualities, such as compassion and wisdom, to arise and shine naturally. At first, thoughts will become less interesting or insistent. As you learn to abide in deep meditation for longer periods, dualistic conceptions will be completely pacified. When you become freely established in the radiance of the primordial nature, thoughts will become like servants. At that point, you will have a greater capacity to take responsibility for your mental events.

Gradually, a great blissfulness will arise. At that time there will be no more suffering but only an unshakable equanimity as you merge with the true nature. Once you gain authority over conceptions and the mind, you become more capable of mastering all the other aspects of your life. Every moment becomes workable because you understand the bardo process.

Listening, contemplating, and meditating are known as the "three wisdoms." Each of these practices is vital to actualize our Buddha nature and the ability to benefit others. First, listen carefully and closely to the teachings you receive. This

should encourage and inspire you to make a joyful effort. Do not simply collect teachings; look into the implications and contemplate their meaning. Then, apply them to your self, so that what you receive does not merely penetrate your ear and brain. To really connect with the meaning behind the instruction, take it into your heart and reaffirm the truth of each word with your own understanding. That is known as contemplation. By deeply contemplating the teaching, you will naturally actualize the result known as meditation. Meditation will help mature what you've learned so that your knowledge is not simply intellectual or conceptual. Results will ripen as you grow. Although all three are indispensable, meditation is the most important.

To apply these three practices, you must learn to recognize and release the tendency to indulge distractions. This is especially true when we are first beginning, but distractions can be a serious hindrance at every stage of practice, especially during meditation. In Dzogchen they say, "There is no meditation; non-distraction is the meditation." In the Prajnaparamita teachings, Buddha Shakyamuni listed ten categories of distraction that can occur during practice.

Distractions come uninvited, so we need a clear, vivid mindfulness to undermine their influence and practice effectively. This doesn't always come easily, even if we have the right motivation and can sustain a joyful effort. Learn to listen undistractedly. Do not let attention wander during contemplation practice. Avoid clinging to ideas and images while in meditation. To avoid following thoughts, be mindful and observe with relaxed alertness.

The next line explains the result actualized through the practice of the three wisdoms:

### **BRING APPEARANCE AND THOUGHTS TO THE PATH AND REALIZE THE NATURE OF THE THREE KAYAS.**

Actualization of the three kayas is the result of applying the three wisdoms. Dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya represent three inseparable aspects of the Buddha. According to the inner tantras, the three kayas have no objective existence, rather they are non-local and all-pervasive, encompassing both mind and appearances. This means that everything is always in a condition of perfect enlightenment.

All things are the display of the kayas. The three kayas are never separate from each other but exist primordially within the singularity of the true nature. The trikaya is what we and all external phenomena essentially are. When you fully realize what you are, you will know that you never had to do anything or go anywhere in order to be enlightened or see the pure land. The pure land is the trikaya and all six bardos arise within these kayas. The display, activity, and true nature of the kayas are all within us. It is not a matter of escaping from "this horrible place" to somewhere else fancy and beautiful where the three kayas dwell. We must realize the three kayas as the true nature and reality of all phenomena.

Infinite and uncreated, the true nature of mind is great emptiness or the

inconceivable openness known as dharmakaya. Great emptiness is not blank, empty space, a void or nothingness. It is very luminous, clear and full. Brightness and clarity shine forth spontaneously. This unceasing luminosity of the true nature is known as sambhogakaya.

The mind is always active, radiating a world of transformations. Due to its inertia, it never stays the same for two instants. Each spark or radiant moment of manifest existence is non-separate from the original state of the true nature. Each spark is the union of emptiness and clarity. That radiance manifesting as point-instants of space/time is known as nirmanakaya.

Guru Padmasambhava taught that the three kayas are inherent in the nature of mind. Many people don't know this and are always wandering, looking for something outside of themselves. This search opens them to many experiences: good and bad, high and low, deep and shallow, sequences of gain and of loss. But in every case, these percepts are created by one's own mind. None of these qualities exist in a solid, objective sense. The present flows and changes, and this impermanence indicates that there is no inherent being in objects and events.

All perception and conscious experience is nothing other than the expression of your mind. Everything you see, hear, feel, taste, smell and touch is mind. What does mind really refer to? Mind is open, empty and pure from the beginning. Mind is also the embodiment of the three kayas. Our practice is to discover and express the true nature of the mind. We must study, contemplate, meditate on and ultimately actualize the trikaya realization. If we are devoted and one-pointed in our efforts, all phenomena reveal the trikaya. When the moment of death comes, we will recognize this event as a lucid display of the three kayas, another design of the true nature. There is no conflict when we understand that this is part of a natural process.

The bardo of birth and life is a very special circumstance for practice. Since everything is pervaded by the three kayas, we must come to recognize that our present vision and perception are ultimately not any different from the original nature of the mind. The understanding of the innate purity of all perception is the highest teaching of the inner tantras. All of our dualistic conceptions, such as self and other, good and bad, assisting friends and avoiding enemies, arise as thoughts in our minds. Mind creates all of these fabrications. There's nothing among all of those names with any solid existence, yet the mind creates notions and projects visions which we are inclined to believe and act on. Distracted and unmindful, we habitually grasp and cling.

What is grasping? To grasp means to be attached to what we think. It is to believe that things actually exist the way the conditional mind perceives them. That is called grasping. We continually cling to beliefs and create artificial divisions. We have decided that some things are invariably good and others are not. This clinging to concepts is based in the assumption of permanence. Even though phenomena are constantly changing, mind projects a fixed image and holds onto it, assuming things are a certain way all of the time. Trying to see the world as we'd like it to be and holding on to that image is referred to as ego-clinging. It is like you are suffocating in a tight cocoon. Trapped by attachments, we ignore opportunities to release our

hold and grow.

To be confined to a small room with no space to move back and forth creates a contraction in the body. When we want to shift our position there is no room, so we suffer; we move a little to one side, but it is still uncomfortable. We suffer at every turn, because our movements are constricted. This is the effect ego-clinging and grasping have on both body and mind. We create a small, cramped space for ourselves and others by withholding love and compassion. Ego-clinging, grasping and dualistic thinking make us narrow and uptight so that we naturally communicate these qualities to others. They tend to make everybody uncomfortable. The door to this room is wide open, but if we don't walk through it, it may as well be sealed; we will suffer those limitations. When we open our hearts and minds, and love all beings equally, we are liberated into the infinite expanse, the reality beyond all limits, the original or primordial nature of our mind which is forever open and free. By releasing ego-clinging, we are merely returning to the primordial nature as it was and as it is.

In cherishing such dualistic notions as absolute good and evil, we subconsciously develop hopes and fears which lead to emotional cycles of elation and depression. We shun what we don't like and assume that there's something good we should attach to and be expectant about. If these assumptions go unchallenged, hope and fear can destroy our vision and crush us. We lose our power and true identity under their influence. Where do hopes and fears originate? In a mind divided by dualistic concepts. Mind is the principal source of everything. Where is the mind? To begin answering this, we should start our search knowing that we're not going to find any solid, substantially existent mind. Everything is disappearing as fast as it is arising. The deeper we look, the more it disappears until we come to the point where we can't find anything at all. Now the search is complete. We really have no idea what to do next!

In one sense, we are completely lost. In another way, we are quickly approaching the primordial state which the Buddha called great emptiness. Here there are no divisions, distinctions or boundaries. We've reached the ultimate point: the original, infinite, true nature of the mind. By diligently chasing rainbows, we finally reach a horizon where there is no longer anything to pursue. Everything merges in that unfathomable state. As the mind dissolves in the boundless dimension of the true nature, relax and remain in meditation. This is the central place. When there is no disturbance or dualism of body and mind, that is real meditation. It requires no magic. Simply observe your own mind. If you keep looking into it you will eventually arrive at that blissful point of perfect equanimity.

## BRING APPEARANCES AND THOUGHTS TO THE PATH

The practice of meditation teaches us to transcend the conceptual distinctions between appearances and thoughts. Subject and object fuse into one single intensity. We no longer see a world of inherently existent things and entities. In reality, even atoms are not actually solid. Although they exhibit many properties, they are not concrete, independent objects. Every apparent thing is an impermanent mental construct based on the interdependence of everything. Nothing exists outside of this

interdependence. There are many sub-atomic particles in even the smallest atom. Any entity is completely reducible to its parts which are also reducible on down to infinity. Atoms and everything they constitute are nothing but the mysterious lighting up of the true nature as appearances. This is why great masters can walk in the sky or transmute the elements. You could say they aren't really changing anything when they do these things; they're actually demonstrating the interdependent reality and true nature of what is arising.

The primordial nature is wonderfully inconceivable. Void of inherent existence, great emptiness is perfectly open and flexible. Each and every luminous manifestation is precious and unique. We can see this in many ways. For instance, all beings have slightly different perceptual systems. Animals, gods and human beings see very different worlds. But this is true even among humans from the same culture.

Look at this (Rinpoche holds up a bell). Although everyone can name this, we each have our own way of perceiving and understanding what it is. The way you see the color red is not the way everyone sees it. Things do not inherently exist the way they appear. The mind has a very special way of speaking to each of us because different beings can look at a single object and not see the same thing. This is very unique! Obvious discrepancies, such as the difference in our points of view, are part of the relativity of the external world. But inwardly it goes deeper than this because we all have different approaches and make unique associations that illuminate our particular way so that we each see a personal version of the world. This is the reason why there are so many different buddhas. For example, there are five dhyani buddhas. They each realized their Buddha nature in a slightly different way and then displayed their special qualities for the benefit of all beings.

Like athletes who train for the Olympics to win a gold medal, the bardo of birth and life is the training ground to exercise and actualize our skills so that the other bardos, particularly the fourth, fifth and sixth, provide the conditions to acquire a gold, silver or bronze medal. The first bardo is the best place to develop these valuable skills.

Emphasizing this point, the text reads:

**AT THIS MOMENT,  
WHERE WE HAVE FOR ONCE ATTAINED A HUMAN BODY**

It is very special and precious to be human, to be surrounded by all this wealth and beauty, and to have the opportunity to realize buddhahood. This is a very crucial time. Don't take this possibility for granted and waste it. Actualize your true nature. The human realm is a unique place where we can work to accomplish something meaningful and develop our understanding. Buddha Shakyamuni reiterated this many times throughout his life. This is not a pure land, as we can see by observing what goes on in the world, but it is the best place for us to learn and develop ourselves.

There are many other worlds. Some are exceptionally beautiful, luxurious and

comfortable. In comparison, ours might not look that wonderful, but it is actually a very special place, because here we can mature and transcend ourselves. There is a lot here that challenges us to grow, helping us to discover and express our Buddha nature. Qualities such as courage, confidence and love are called forth in response to many situations. If we accomplish something meaningful here, we will also be able to go other places and enjoy higher realizations. But for now, this is the place where we must do something significant with our lives.

By practicing during the bardo of birth and life, great devotees can become enlightened within one lifetime. Yogis and yoginis with high realizations are able to perceive the entire universe as the mandala of the deities, so that every form is seen as the Buddha's body, and all sounds are perceived as the speech of enlightened beings, or mantra. Recognizing the true nature of this continually unfolding vision is part of the spontaneous activity of pristine cognitiveness. Ultimately, everything appears as a display of primordial wisdom, and within that realization, you can begin to help all sentient beings.

As Guru Padmasambhava said:

**IT IS NOT THE TIME TO CONTINUE FOOLING AROUND**

## **BARDO OF THE DREAM STATE**

*mi-lam bardo*

If you have a deep understanding of the bardo of birth and life, you can also learn to make good use of the time you spend dreaming. In Tibetan, this is called the *mi-lam* bardo.

According to the Vajrayana teachings, the bardo of birth and life can be divided into two basic categories; the experience of the day and the experience of the night. During the daytime, we work and are physically active. At night, we lie down and relax. Sleep then becomes our major occupation. Animals have similar habit patterns.

Each day, we go out and engage in many activities with our body, speech and mind. Normally, people are not trying to cultivate positive qualities and accumulate merit. Most of the time we are bound up with feelings like jealousy and competitiveness, which are based in ignorance and attachment. These are typical emotions characterizing human beings during the day.

At night, most people go to sleep. While asleep, habit patterns similar to those experienced during the day recycle through our minds. So dreams follow the pattern of activity that was established during the day. If you tend to be competitive, or dramatize emotions such as desire or anger, those same qualities will also arise in dreams and condition your experience until morning.

Sleep is a very important part of our lives. Like nutrition, it is necessary for our physical well-being. While we sleep, our body and speech are not doing anything. We need rest, so external activities cease. Our five senses become inactive: the eye

does not see, the ear does not hear, the nose does not smell, the tongue does not taste and the body does not feel. At various places in the Buddha's teachings, sleep is described as a state of dullness. It is also known as "the little death." All five consciousnesses merge into the sixth or mind consciousness. This is where dreams occur. The mind consciousness wanders through the channels under the influence of affective tendencies and we begin dreaming.

In the dream state, everything you see is a reflection of your habit patterns. You might be falling from the top of a two hundred story building, or be flying through the sky without a plane. You may suddenly find yourself desperately trying to escape your captors or lazing around in the lap of fantastic luxuries. Perhaps you've won the lottery or conversely, you are distressed over losing a million dollars. Whatever you experience is not happening anywhere except in that space above your pillow. Everything you encounter in the dream bardo arises entirely within the domain of your tiny consciousness and its habit patterns.

Most of the dreaming we do at night reflects the actions and attitudes of the daytime: accepting and rejecting, analyzing, arguing and fighting, all kinds of emotions and activities occur as they do in our waking experience. Our mind is carried by the emotions according to habit patterns, whether we are awake or asleep. Most dreams, perhaps 80%, are related to conditioning acquired in this lifetime. About 20% are connected to past lifetimes or relate to something which has not yet arrived, but because it potentially exists, our subtle consciousness reflects it through dreams. Two or three percent relate to our spiritual path, such as encounters with buddhas and bodhisattvas. These dreams strengthen our motivation and encourage the practice of pure love and compassion. But no matter what type of dream it is, all are experiences communicated by the mind to the mind, so that even in sleep, our mind is busy.

The second line says:

### **STUPIDLY LYING LIKE A CORPSE, ABANDON CARELESSNESS**

Guru Padmasambhava uses strong words like these to arouse and awaken us to the importance of developing a continuity of mindfulness and clarity in the dream state, because we spend a lot of our lives sleeping. If we live for a hundred years, almost forty of them are spent sleeping. If we can use this time for practice, we can significantly increase the time we have in which to actualize a meaningful result. To this end, the Vajrayana dream yoga teachings provide us with an extremely skillful method to expand the practice of mindfulness into the dream state and not just sleep in the ordinary wasteful way.

The third line, clearly explains how we should sleep:

### **ENTER IN THE NATURAL SPHERE OF UNWAVERING ATTENTIVENESS**

Prepare for bed mindfully, keeping a pure motivation. Abandoning carelessness, try to fall asleep in a state of relaxed alertness. How do we practice mindfulness in the dream itself? This is explained in the fourth line:

## RECOGNIZING YOUR DREAMS, PRACTICE TRANSFORMING ILLUSION INTO LUMINOSITY

In order to make the time we spend dreaming more meaningful, we must first recognize that we are dreaming. That is the initial exercise. The next step is called transforming the dream; the third is known as multiplying. The fourth practice is to unify the dream with the clear light. Recognizing, transforming, multiplying and unifying the dream with the luminosity of the true nature; these four outline the essential applications of dream yoga.

You can do these practices at any time, but normally you will begin before going to sleep at night. Start by aligning your motivation with the bodhicitta and the awareness of natural purity. These two are the foundation and structure of the whole path. Without these, your practice will fall apart, even if you've already grown a little. Bodhicitta aspiration and awareness of purity are indispensable.

Feel a deep love and compassion for all sentient beings, including yourself. Really open your heart to everyone. If you have any trouble with this, remember that you're doing this practice for all beings, and that everybody needs love in order to awaken their Buddha nature. Think deeply about the many good reasons to generate compassion for everyone. Then work on applying it in the present moment by changing your attitude.

Awareness of purity could be called a deep sense of appreciation and reverence toward all the buddhas, bodhisattvas and lineage masters, as well as a good feeling about yourself and sincere gratitude for your life situation. All of this is really important. In this disposition, begin the dream yoga practice.

Relax your mind, let go of all conceptions except those associated with bodhicitta, and after a while you even let go of these until you have reached the sphere of the true nature, the infinite state. Relax your mind as long as you can in the openness of the true nature, free of any mental fabrication or disturbance by mundane thoughts. Eliminate any trace of hope or fear, abandon analysis, discrimination, let go of any emotions such as anger, jealousy or attachment. Just release everything, let it go in all directions and dissolve; simply remain in the pristine awareness of the present moment.

Secondly, think, "Tonight, I'm definitely going to recognize the dream as a dream." Develop a strong determination and encourage yourself to recognize any dreams you have this evening. Feel into the supportive presence of the Buddha, Guru Rinpoche and the blessings of the bodhisattvas, all helping you to see the dream as a dream.

What we are at present is a type of dream. Our sense of self is like a dream. There's not really any way to make a fundamental distinction between this whole vision before us now and what we will dream tonight. We are in a waking dream and tonight we will experience a sleeping dream. In this way, everything is a dream. Think about this deeply, because it's really true! Perceptions in the waking state are

a reflection of your mind and mental events. This is also true of perceptions in dreams. So what is the difference between the waking state and the dream state? Consider the possibility that there is no basic difference. We're already in the dream state. At night, your dream self is lying in a dream bed under dream blankets in a dream house. All of these visions are dreams, the buddhas are dream beings, conceptions induce dreamlike states, day dreams, night dreams, they are all dreams. Contemplate this point deeply, because it is very important.

Buddha Shakyamuni often told his disciples to regard all phenomena as dreams. He used many examples, like an echo, a city in the clouds or a rainbow to illustrate the illusory nature of the phenomenal world. Dreams represent just one type of illusion. The whole universe arises and dissolves like a mirage. Everything about us, even the most enlightened qualities, are also dreamlike phenomena. There's nothing that is not encompassed within the dream of illusory being; so in going to sleep, you're just passing from one dream state to another.

With this understanding, lie down to sleep. It is suggested that you lie on your right side with your right hand underneath your right cheek. Keep your left leg on top of the right leg, with your left arm placed along the left side of your body. This is the same posture which was assumed by Buddha Shakyamuni as he prepared to enter mahaparinirvana. It is known as the lion posture.

First you must generate compassion and love for all dream-like beings. Then combine this with an awareness of the essential purity of all things. The third step is to make a very strong resolution to recognize that you are dreaming. In fact, affirm your intention to realize that everything, including yourself, is a dream and that what happens during sleep is but another dream. Intensify your determination toward this end and then concentrate. Various techniques may be used to support concentration, such as visualizing the bodies of the buddhas, seed syllables or ritual objects.

One of the primary methods used to stabilize concentration during the transition from waking to sleeping is to visualize a red lotus in the speech center. Imagine a very fat, red lotus with four petals which is in the process of blooming. The petals have not yet opened, but are not completely closed either. In the center of them is a bright light. Concentrating on the light is sufficient. If you can manage another visualization, picture a small white triangle at your third eye, inside of which sits a tiny Vajrasattva.

As you lie there, focus on these forms. Let them become smaller and smaller, subtler and subtler, relax and let yourself go deeper and deeper. Then, the instant you think of it, Vajrasattva sends out a great white light from your third eye which covers your body. He then takes a seat in front of you. Go to sleep concentrating on that. Unless you've entered the alaya, sooner or later you will begin to dream. If you're able to fall asleep without disturbing your concentration, you will easily be able to recognize that you are dreaming. Usually, when you recognize that you're dreaming, you also wake up. Learn to maintain this recognition while continuing to sleep and dream.

Dream practice is important to do regularly, with joyful effort. If we can recognize the dream as a dream, we can recognize the truth of any situation, even if we have died. Often people don't recognize that they've died, but I will say more about this when we get to the fifth bardo.

After you recognize the dream as a dream, and can maintain that awareness without waking, continue to observe the dream. This prepares you for the second step in dream yoga, which is to transform the contents of the dream. Now you're going to play around and have some fun. Here is where you can practice gymnastics. If you wish, you can free fall from thirty-seven thousand feet, touch the earth and not hurt a thing before quickly jumping back to your starting point again!

In the reality of the dream you can transform anything, including yourself. If you want to be a lion, you'll immediately experience yourself as a lion and know how that feels. You can also be transformed into a mountain, a tree, the earth, water, a man or woman, a child, or any of the beings in the six realms. You're not bound by physical circumstances. You can be free and independent and do whatever you like. There are no barriers here. You can be anything. Go beyond the limits of your hopes or fears. For instance, we tend to distance ourselves from what we don't like; but in the dream, we can creatively restructure phenomena, beings and events to penetrate our fixed assumptions and remove our preconceptions, revealing the deeper truth beyond the boundaries and limitations of dualistic systems and traditions. This is an exercise in openness and freedom and is known as transforming.

The third aspect of dream yoga is called multiplying. Here, you're opening more opportunities and expanding qualities. In the transforming practice, you change things, but stick to a single manifestation. This time you try to multiply aspects of the dream, such as your self, millions of times. You might take a hundred forms, or become ten different things at once. You could be various gods, a few buddhas, a naga, three bodhisattvas, a dozen human beings, many types of animals and a grove of trees, all at the same time. You can multiply yourself in millions of forms. Increase the variety and open yourself to the way that you embody the whole cosmic system. Understand that this is all you. The inconceivable vastness of our nature is what is revealed by this practice.

If you accomplish this, you can tour the pure lands and visit all five of the dhyani buddhas at once, making offerings, receiving teachings and returning from all five directions simultaneously. While you are meditating in the pure land of Ratnasambhava, listening to teachings, making offerings, multiplying yourself and the offerings by thousands, you are also doing the same in the western pure land of Buddha Amitabha, as well as in the north in the presence of Amoghasiddhi and in the center, where Buddha Vairocana turns the wheel of the dharma in his pure land. You can visit them one by one or be with them all and receive their teachings simultaneously. In the dream bardo, mind is faster than the space shuttle or even the speed of light. You can be anywhere in a moment. There are many different pure lands where sentient beings can go and receive teachings, realize various benefits, and return. This is really true.

All the great Nyingma tertons have gone to the pure land of Guru Padmasambhava in their dream state. Many also meet Guru Rinpoche and his wisdom dakini, Yeshe Ts'ogyal, face-to-face in the waking world, but this often happens in dreams too. Typically, a tertön returns from one of these dreams and writes a beautiful guidebook on the route he took, how he was received, who he contacted and other details. Sometimes the vision features a few weeks or a month's worth of experience, but in our time they inevitably return the very next morning.

For example, Tsasum Lingpa, one of the renowned Nyingma tertons, had a dream while he was camped on a mountain in the center of Tibet. He had no tent or sleeping bag. He was just sleeping on the mountain when five dakinis came and said, "Let's go now, you have to come."

So he asked, "Where to?"

"To see your parents," they replied as they held out a big shawl. "Sit here, we'll carry you."

Tsasum Lingpa replied, "I don't want to go now. I'd rather stay here."

But the dakinis told him, "You have to come. Now's the time, so let's go." They practically had to force him. Each dakini held a corner of the shawl and carried him off into the sky.

As he flew over India, he looked down and wondered, "Which mountain is that? What is the name of that river?" His description is similar to what we experience when we travel by plane. Upon arrival, he had an audience with Yeshe Ts'ogyal and Guru Padmasambhava. Tsasum Lingpa mentioned that Yeshe Ts'ogyal was very kind to him. He attended a big ceremony with Guru Padmasambhava and many other realized beings. Yeshe Ts'ogyal had Tsasum Lingpa sit near her and this made him feel very happy. At the end, when they said he must return, he insisted that he didn't want to leave. Guru Padmasambhava told him that he should go now, but that he would be able to come back later. He had already been there about three weeks when Yeshe Ts'ogyal walked him to the gate where the four dakinis awaited his return. She told him that she would never be apart from him, and after giving him more instructions, said goodbye. When the dakinis dropped him off, he was back on the mountain, the sun was shining over his head and he was sitting straight up. This type of vision was not unique to Tsasum Lingpa; many tertons have given similar accounts and details of what they saw in these pure lands.

Another great tertön, named Dro-'dul/Dud-'dul/Chögyur Lingpa, was also carried off into the sky by dakinis. When he arrived at Guru Padmasambhava's pure land, he could also see that it had four doors. His party approached the eastern gate and had begun to open it when a great dakini appeared. She threw something in front of them that made everything go totally dark, so they couldn't enter. Then the dakini guides led him to the southern gate. As it opened, the same great dakini appeared again and threw something black which completely blocked the door. They went to the western and northern gates and the same thing happened. So Chögyur Lingpa asked the gate keeper dakini, "Why are you so mean?"

She said, "I'm not mean, but you were very cruel to me!"

The tertön replied, "I don't remember doing anything like this to you."

So she explained, "We were both there when Jetsun Lingpa was giving teachings. I was the ugly old lady you were so mean to. Do you remember now? That's why I won't let you see Guru Padmasambhava."

Dro-'dul/Dud-'dul/Chögyur Lingpa said, "Forgive me. I was wrong, and apologize for my rudeness. I'm very sorry; that was inconsiderate of me." With that, she opened the gate wide.

What I've said today is very brief, but many tertöns have given elaborate descriptions. For example, after the dakinis brought Tsasum Lingpa to the palace, they all opened the main gate together. He describes the color of the door and all of the things he saw when he walked in, beautiful gardens, an emanation of Guru Padmasambhava, some lamas, and many other specific details.

Everyone of the great tertöns kept thorough records of their experiences. If you're able to maintain awareness during the dream, you can do as these masters did. Such visions will arise naturally. The great tertöns don't actually have to do the practices we're explaining here because they're always aware of the dream-like nature of existence; these events reflect that understanding through the specific details of what they experience.

The fourth step is to unify the dream with the clear light, the luminosity aspect of the true nature. That is the most important of these exercises. Learn to maintain this understanding throughout the dream state. Whether you simply recognize the dream or go on to multiply and transform it, it is essential to maintain this unified awareness.

Clear light or primordial luminosity has many different aspects, but the most important is the complete absence of clinging and freedom from attachment. The best way to do dream yoga is to not cling to the dream, not be attached to recognizing the dream, not hold onto the results of multiplying or transforming, and in general, to not cling to any of these practices. If you don't cling, dreams themselves take on a radiant, transformed quality, becoming almost transparent to the clear light. In this way, dreams become an emanation of the five wisdoms. This is called unifying the dream with the clear light or merging the dream with the luminosity of the true nature.

## DON'T SLEEP LIKE AN ANIMAL

In the fifth line, Guru Padmasambhava is again encouraging us to develop a pure intention, to become proficient in sustaining mindfulness and relaxed alertness in the bardo of dreams. We are admonished to take up the practice that mingles dreams and the waking state, to unify the night's perceptions with the day's perceptions. Through the exercises of recognizing, multiplying, transforming and

unifying the dream with the clear light, we learn to be free of all grasping and clinging to unreal phenomena. Form is a dream, feeling is a dream, touch, sound and taste are dreams; the mental state is also dreamlike. Samsara and nirvana are dreams, and enlightenment is a great dream. Therefore Guru Padmasambhava urges us to mingle the dream and waking realities. In truth, they are already mingled. There is ultimately no difference between them. As the Buddha instructed Subhuti in the Prajnaparamita teachings, "See all phenomena as dreams."

It's not just that the Buddha said this so we have to believe it. We can refer to our own experience. All these external activities are no different from dreams. They are so very much the same that no absolute distinction can be made between them, even when you consider it logically. For example, tonight we are in West Palm Beach. I'm talking and you're listening, but before this, where were you? Where are the parents we had when we were young? Where is the old school? What kinds of friends did you have? What did you talk about? What did you do? All of these are just memories now. We can't bring any of that right here except through remembering it. Last night's dream is just like those memories because we cannot produce it here in a tangible way. Think about memories, which are conventionally held to be real, because they correspond with our past experiences in the waking state, and dreams, which are usually considered to be unreal. Investigate closely and I don't think you'll find any difference between dreams and memories except in your imagination.

Consider how our physiology changes. As a new born, you're not very heavy. Maybe you weigh six or seven pounds and are about a foot long. You'll never be that small again. It is as if that happened in a dream.

As for myself, I was born in Tibet, and grew up there. I remember many events vividly, but they are all just memories. Tibet has completely changed since then. If I go back, I won't see anything that is the same. When I was a little older, I crossed the Himalayas and suffered various hardships until I finally arrived in India, where I lived for many years. Now all that has passed and another chapter of the dream is complete. Presently, I'm in the United States working on a new chapter. You could say that in this life, I've already been born three times. This is just a personal example, but basically, that is how things are.

When we carefully observe phenomena, they are all dream-like, but very often we don't look that close; we gloss over the surface and cling to dualistic tendencies, reinforcing old habit patterns. In truth, even this moment is changing, moving, evanescent. There is nothing solid or permanent about any of this. What is past, can never come back to the present. Everything is moving, nothing stays the same, just like in our dreams. For that reason Buddha compared the nature of all phenomena to a mirage, a magician's illusion, a bubble in a stream, a flash of lightning, etc. This evanescence does not merely apply to things that happened long ago, but even to this morning's activities which exist only in memories. It's all gone now. That was just another dream sequence that we went through to get to this dream. This is the reality of the big dream.

As practitioners of the Vajrayana, our minds must be redirected. Continuous

joyful effort is required to perform more positive activities, to gain more understanding, to develop wisdom, loving-kindness and compassion. The more we involve ourselves with this effort, the easier it is to transcend negative feelings and reactive emotion. Those who apply themselves in this way develop an uninterrupted insight into the body of enlightenment, the speech of enlightenment and the mind of wisdom, or the emanation-display of enlightenment. They see these three aspects of the Buddha all the time and have a deep understanding of their interplay. This same insight can also continue at night, in the dream state. This means you have established mind in the sphere of wisdom, beautified by love and compassion, for twenty-four hours a day.

Empowered by an understanding of the dream bardo, we can accomplish profound results and benefit all of the dream-like beings in samsara because we know we aren't truly limited by conventional strictures and boundaries. If you generate tremendous vitality, courage and commitment, liberating knowledge will manifest both in and out of dreams, transforming and benefiting everyone.

Since all phenomena are of an illusory nature, we are able to actualize the ultimate result. If things were really concrete and solid, we could never grow or develop. But because everything is dream-like, it is possible for us to discover and reveal all of the beautiful qualities of enlightenment, and radiate blessings like sunlight to all beings. With this understanding, we can use dreaming to benefit others. To not know very much about the dream-like nature of existence and seek the original nature within the purview of ego-clinging is an exercise in futility.

That is a brief teaching on dream yoga.

## **BARDO OF MEDITATION**

*sam-ten bardo*

There are many types of meditation. You have all heard about *shamatha*, *vipasanna*, creation stage meditation involving visualization, and the *rtsa-rlung* meditations of the completion stage. All of these help the mind become more gentle, peaceful and single-pointed so it is not disturbed by thoughts. As in the dream yoga, every form of meditation must be based on the bodhicitta motivation and awareness of original purity. These two are always essential. Bodhicitta is the foundation and awareness of original purity is the inner structure of every practice.

## **WHEN THE CONCENTRATION BARDO IS DAWNING UPON ME, ABANDONING ALL KINDS OF WANDERING AND DELUDED THOUGHTS**

Watch out for distractions, such as wandering or discursive thoughts. These are a great hindrance to meditation. Maintain a comfortable posture, keeping your spine straight, and let meditation deepen into a calm and clear state. Stay one-pointed, do not be distracted by conceptions, and continue maintaining the mind this way, whatever you're meditating on. And that is basically it. As Guru Padma-sambhava said, 'No distractions, no grasping and free of all aspects.' These three qualities are essential to every form of meditation.

Right motivation and joyful effort are also indispensable. During meditation you will be faced with obstacles, clinging, compulsive thoughts and feelings, and other hindrances. To stay on target, meditate without distraction in the limitless expanse which transcends any territorial focus, the all-pervasive nature. Relaxing into that state is meditation.

## OBTAIN FIRMNESS IN BOTH GENERATION AND COMPLETION STAGES

The division of meditative practices into a creation/visualization stage and a completion/dissolution stage is unique to the schools of Vajrayana Buddhism. These are the means for becoming firm and strong in our meditation. Creation stage practice is understanding the purity of all phenomena including yourself, so that everything is perceived within the buddha mandala. This mandala is not a solidly existent thing; it is of the nature of a reflection, a mirage, a dream or a rainbow. It is a wisdom display of clear light, the luminosity aspect of the true nature. Even in the shorter *zhi-khro* practice, all phenomena appear as the mandala of the peaceful and wrathful deities, and these deities dissolve into rainbow light. All speech and sound are mantra and all momentary thoughts are magical emanations of the open sky or space-like nature. This understanding characterizes the creation stage meditation, which means that you are relatively free of clinging, holding or grasping to self and phenomena and are adept at merging with the true nature beyond all bias and limitation, where no dualities exist. Relaxing into that state of innate purity is known as the completion or perfection stage practice.

Awareness of purity can be developed through devotion, by recognizing the preciousness of this human rebirth, the lineage teachings and all sentient life. Indeed, every situation is very special. So see this, learn to appreciate and enjoy it, explore and celebrate the beauty in the world and in yourself. Discover the mandala and realize that the pure land is not far. It's right here. According to the *zhi-khro* teachings, the peaceful and wrathful buddhas do not exist externally; one's body is the palace of the deity and the entire universe is originally in an enlightened state. Awaken to the preciousness and purity of each moment as it arises, and be devoted to this great realization.

Guru Padmasambhava said:

**IN THIS MOMENT OF ONE-POINTED MEDITATION, ABANDON ALL  
ACTIVITY**

Lay everything aside for the moment, even if it is for a good purpose.

**AND DON'T LET YOURSELF BE INFLUENCED BY DELUDED EMOTIONS.**

Beware of indulging negative emotions. Guru Padmasambhava emphasizes this again because it is so crucial for the practice of meditation.

To get specific, in the Vajrayana, we meditate while visualizing Guru Padmasambhava and reciting his mantra, until finally Guru Padmasambhava

dissolves into the primordial expanse as the wisdom lights at his crown, throat and heart, mingle completely with our body, speech and mind in a state of pure awareness. To abide in that purity is meditation. This is the main part of the practice. After that, dedicate the merit.

Whenever you feel you've done something good, do not hesitate to share the benefits with all sentient beings, without any exceptions. Proceed with the motive of love and compassion and finish the session by blessing all beings through the dedication prayers. Happily share that goodness with the entire world. How will dedicating merit help us to develop enlightenment? Sharing your good karma with all sentient beings opens your heart and mind and expands awareness of love and compassion. Directing the blessing to all beings without exceptions, translates your prayer into the limitless state. When no dualistic thoughts block the dedication, you approach the infinite condition.

If we don't share in this way, if we don't feel love and compassion for all sentient beings, we are creating false divisions and will not grow in our capacity to serve others. Eventually these self-imposed borders reduce us to a state of intractable ego-clinging, which is where we were before we began to practice. Ego-clinging obscures our capacity for wisdom and denies us opportunities for meaningful involvement. Everything contracts into a static and fixed condition, so that at times we cannot even help or protect ourselves, never mind others.

So always begin in the spirit of love, compassion and bodhicitta. Meditate on the Buddha, recite mantra and finally dissolve the visualization while focusing on the true nature. Keep your hearts and minds open by dedicating the merit from the practice to all sentient beings at the end of each session. This is an extremely simple explanation of the formal practice.

If you are an advanced practitioner, the moment you recognize the true nature of the mind, the primordial condition, you are totally enlightened. This ability is the mark of a yogi or yogini of the highest caliber. For example, upon recognizing the true nature of the mind, the very famous Dzogchen master, Garab Dorje, was immediately and fully awakened. In other cases, there is a very short interval between recognition and full enlightenment. After initial realization of the true nature, these beings quickly learned to perceive all phenomena as a display of primordial wisdom. Guru Padmasambhava, the great master Vimalamitra, and Shri Singha are examples of this second type of adept. They realized themselves and everything else to be a manifestation of primordial wisdom: the union of emptiness and appearances.

Other great masters from India and Tibet had to meditate for a long time before coming to this understanding. Through years of meditation and practice, they became enlightened. In Tibet, for example, there was a master called Jetsun Sangye Wangchuk, who meditated for twelve years and attained the rainbow body. Also, Mipham Gonpo meditated for a long time and eventually realized the rainbow body. Master Dang Gangma Lhangyal meditated for about six years before actualizing the transcendental rainbow body. All these masters practiced meditation for years before attaining the rainbow body of transcendental wisdom.

The bardo of meditation is actually a big topic. You see, all the bardos are encompassed by the meditation bardo because it is only through meditation that we come to recognize the true nature in the midst of all the bardos. Once you awaken to the true nature, the confusion of the bardos comes to an end.

This has been a brief teaching on the meditation bardo.

## **BARDO OF THE MOMENT OF DEATH**

*chik-khai bardo*

Life is followed by the bardo of the moment of death. Death is inevitable on this highway we travel. All compounded things dissolve. Birth is followed by life and then death; that is the natural sequence of existence for all beings. Things arise, abide for a moment and then decay. Nothing and no one is exempt. This is true for us also. It is only a question of when it will happen. Relatively, you may have a longer or shorter amount of time left, but every creature who ever lived has died. Worldly power, beauty and wealth will not prevent it. Although we tend to fear it, death is not evil, but a natural transformation which we have all been through many times. Death serves the renewal of life and is a necessary part of reality until we realize Buddhahood.

Many of the great masters have written in their songs that we only die because we're ready to take another birth. This is part of an ongoing process, with one form of experience following after another uninterruptedly. As number one passes, number two arises. Die bravely and peacefully, be happy with what you have achieved. Go joyously. This kind of inspired acceptance of death is necessary, even for ordinary people. Practice and meditation will help us learn to die with awareness, to recognize the true nature and merge with the visions. These abilities are an invaluable result of a life of practice.

To die satisfied and peacefully is crucial to a good passage. Let go of any fear or regret, do not be sad or hold onto any sense of loss or separation. Meanwhile, learn about this process and prepare yourself in order to make a smooth transition. The presentation and study of these details alerts us to what lies ahead so that we can preview the obstacle course and learn to act appropriately and courageously through every stage, without being distracted by the futility of hopes and fears.

## **THE ELEMENTS**

We are born and live amidst the five elements: earth, water, fire, wind and space. Space pervades the others. It is everywhere. The Buddha taught that the formation of the world is based upon space, followed by strong wind energy, water, earth and fire. All internal and external phenomena, everything we perceive, the objects we use, our bodies, the places we stay, and the food we eat, are composed of these five. We are intimately involved with the elements and if any of them are out of balance, it can cause serious trouble.

The health of this flower garden and all these trees depend on this balance. You must have some idea of the complex interplay of elements which make up our external environment. This is the same system constituting our bodies. The slightest

imbalance can lead to sickness. When the elements no longer co-ordinate and finally disintegrate, we call it death. Guru Padmasambhava gave extensive Dzogchen teachings on the interrelations between the internal and external elements, describing how they function and dissolve, in *The Self-Arising Awareness Tantra*

Now let us look at the qualities of the five elements as they occur in the body. Our flesh, bones and muscles are all part of the earth element. Blood, mucus and other liquids are part of the water element. Vital warmth or bodily heat is due to the fire element. Breath, circulation and all movements depend on the wind element. Consciousness or mind is considered part of the sky or space element. All the open, uncompounded spaces within the body are no different than the space which is occupied by the universe of forms, such as the sun and moon.

These five elements comprise the basic ground of the world we exist in. When we die, the five elements dissociate and the body disintegrates. The vitality that brought them together no longer has the energy to organize and maintain them in this form, so the elements are released back into the universe. When only consciousness is left, death has occurred.

## **CHAOS IN THE WINDS**

The primary signs indicating the onset of death are caused by the dissolution of the elements. Most of the time, these changes reflect the natural degeneration of the bodily systems under the influence of age and disease. The Dzogchen teachings of Guru Padmasambhava state that the wind element is the foundation of our physical system. Wind takes the principal role in establishing, maintaining and building up the body. The winds give rise to all the chakras and channels. The first sign of impending death manifests as a growing disorder in the wind system. When the winds are disturbed, the other elements are immediately affected and dissolution begins.

At the moment of conception, a subtle mind consciousness and wind unite to fuse the essence elements of the father and the mother into a zygote. The wind continues to organize the elements as the embryo begins to develop. The force of that wind creates all the major channels, distributes the elements and develops the nervous and circulatory systems. Basically, we have five winds. The life force wind is connected to the heart, keeping it strong to continue pumping blood. The upward moving wind sustains the breath, helping us inhale oxygen and exhale gases we don't need. The downward wind processes the materials we can't use and expels them. The wind of fire helps digest food and send it to whatever parts of the body need it. The pervasive wind is like a reserve army which backs up the other wind systems, pervading the whole body. When we begin to die, the normal coursing of these winds will be disrupted.

First the pervasive wind becomes disordered and all movement becomes difficult. Your whole body may develop a numbness and your hands and legs won't move easily. This in turn affects the life force wind. When this happens, the mind becomes clouded and frightened, because it cannot identify objects or see well. Imbalance spreads, disrupting the downward wind system. It becomes difficult to

control your bowels. This affects the upward wind so that shortness of breath may develop. Finally, the equalizing heat of digestion is upset. With the disorder of the wind of fire, bodily warmth disperses. The feet and hands grow cold as the balance of heat withdraws. Body temperature gradually drops, which also contributes to poor digestion.

Such experiences usually indicate the onset of death, and although conditions could change, most of the time these signs indicate that consciousness is preparing to depart from the body. As disorder increases in the wind system, it creates disturbances in the channels. The first effect of this relates to the navel chakra.

## **EARTH DISSOLVES INTO WATER**

The navel is the primary root of the body. When you are conceived and start to form in your mother's womb, the body develops through the movement of winds which emanate from the channel at the navel. During the process of dissolution, the changes begin where they originally started, in the movement of the winds associated with the navel chakra. As the navel chakra begins to disintegrate, the winds grow more out of balance until the earth element begins to quake.

Three signs will arise when the navel chakra begins to cease functioning: an outer sign, an inner sign and a secret sign. The most external sign is that your body becomes extremely heavy. When all five wind systems are in disorder, this has an immediate effect on the navel chakra, causing your body to feel very heavy and stiff. This is a result of the earth element dissolving into the water element. It also indicates that the pancreas, which is associated with the earth element, is malfunctioning. The person dying may not be able to hold up their hand if you pick it up and let it go. They cannot walk without support. Their complexion becomes very pale, and you may be able to see dark spots on their teeth.

The inner sign is that their mind becomes dull, lacking clarity or stability. Consciousness seems to be fading, or sinking. In response to this, the individual may try to take off their clothes, feeling that this will help them feel lighter or more awake. They may seem to be hot, but this is really in response to the changes happening within. They may ask to be lifted or supported with a higher pillow to counter the feeling of sinking. These are the inner signs of dissolution. Help them get comfortable and reassure them that everything is fine. If they are a practitioner, remind them of their practice, the Dharma, and their beliefs. No matter what school they belong to, create a peaceful environment, full of love and compassion. Even if the person is not interested in Dharma at all, serve him as he likes. Don't think that the Dharma is so great that you have to force it on anyone. This is the time to work with the individual's interests and passions. Be calm and peaceful, try to soothe and relax the dying one, help them be courageous. This is crucial. Use kind words and speak with respect. Do whatever will help ease and comfort them.

The secret sign consists of a mirage experience. It may seem like everything, even the external environment, is flowing and moving. Things may appear closer or farther away than they actually are. Vision becomes undependable. Guru

Padmasambhava compared this to seeing a scintillating mirage moving across the landscape in the springtime. These secret signs are all aspects of primordial luminosity. Though not continual, the one dying might experience a mirage of haze in the sky, and subtle, peripheral movements as if fleas were jumping around. These visions won't stay very long and mark the first appearance of the luminosity of the true nature.

Technically, you could say there's two bardos here; the bardo of dying as well as a secret revelation of the fifth bardo. At this time, they share such a thin border that we can hardly distinguish between them. In fact, the luminosity bardo is secretly happening even before the dissolution of the elements in the bardo of birth and life. The secret signs happen quickly and don't take as long as the external and internal do. Thus begins the dissolution of the elements, and during this time it is very important for the individual and those around him to create a quiet, peaceful environment with as few emotions as possible.

### **WATER EVAPORATES INTO FIRE**

As the water element evaporates into the fire element, the heart chakra begins to disintegrate. There are also outer, inner and secret signs associated with this phase. The external sign is that the mouth and respiratory passages become very dry and the nostrils constrict. The tongue becomes dry and difficult to move. The brightness of the complexion is gone. It is helpful to offer the individual some water or a moistened cloth at this point.

The inner sign is strictly experienced by the individual who is undergoing the process. The mind becomes unstable and one may feel agitated, moody, frustrated and a little frightened. Awareness can be quite sharp and precise at times, but in other moments there is no clarity and the mind is very dull. These states shift back and forth in an irregular way, so that the dying person might become a little short-tempered, or even angry.

The secret sign is a vision of smoky, blue-grey clouds repeatedly forming and dissolving. This will not last very long, but it may happen often. Again, these are signs of the primordial luminosity. The smoky visions occur when the kidneys, which are associated with the water element, cease to function. During this phase, continue to make the person who is dying feel loved and appreciated, offer her support and encouragement. Create a harmonious environment. If the person is a practitioner, remind them of their particular wisdom deity and help them maintain a continuous meditation. This is extremely important.

### **FIRE DISSIPATES INTO AIR**

As the fire element is dispersed by the wind element, disorder moves from the heart chakra to the speech chakra. The outer sign of this transition is that the hands, feet and breath become cold. Heat is radiating away from the body, gradually cooling toward the heart center, as the fire element dissolves into the wind element. There may be hot and cold flashes, which finally settle into cold. Once in a while, you will see a mist or vapors rising off the dying person. The immune system disintegrates, along with the power to make distinctions between good and bad.

The inner sign associated with disorder of the speech chakra is that the mind and vision become even more blurred and unstable. The dying person may recognize friends and family one minute, but not the next.

The secret sign associated with the luminosity of the true nature is an inner vision similar to the flashings of lightning bugs. At this time, the liver ceases to function. The liver corresponds to the fire element.

These stages may not last a long time, but they generally proceed in this order. Become familiar with the sequence so that during the process of dissolution you are able to recognize all the signs and courageously go forward. It is also very important for everybody present to be free of anger and attachment, because these attitudes are big obstacles to the person who is dying.

## **WIND DIFFUSES INTO SPACE**

As the wind element dissolves into the space of consciousness, the fourth, or secret chakra becomes disordered. The body shakes, movement becomes unsteady and then is completely out of control. The external signs associated with this transition are a lengthening of the breath accompanied by a subtle rattle. Speech becomes unclear and mumbled. It becomes difficult to inhale and exhale. The lungs are collapsing. The eyes may roll upward.

The inner sign of this stage is that the mind is no longer quite as agitated, but is still very unstable. The person may feel quite happy one moment and sad or a little angry the next. The emotions are continually changing. One may experience a rapid visionary display of the habit patterns and emotions characterizing the most recent lifetime. For example, if the dying person has been a good practitioner, he will have a sublime experience of love and compassion. A person with non-virtuous habits will be having quite another experience. If he has any good karma, he may feel remorse and ask for help getting over it at this stage. Vivid memories arise momentarily and disappear before returning in new, effective combinations. It is similar to the headline news in review. The nature of one's habit patterns are made quite clear during this period.

Advanced practitioners will now see the Buddha or Guru Padmasambhava, so they are not afraid and are even able to enjoy the process of dissolution and be happy. Simply reciting some mantras while beholding the Teacher, the mind is peaceful and relaxed. The equanimity this engenders can be seen outwardly as well. The specifics of this phase depend on the activities performed during the lifetime.

The secret sign of this stage is a vision of many glowing lights in different places. They are very small but they do not blink on and off like lightning bugs. This is the fourth vision of primordial luminosity. At this point, the lungs cease functioning. The lungs correspond to the wind element, which is dispersing into the space of consciousness. When the lungs cease to function, one exhales the last breath, and that's it. The individual's heart center still maintains some heat and that is where consciousness finally dissolves. This marks the last stage of the bardo of dying.

## **SPACE DISSOLVES INTO CLEAR LIGHT**

The four gross elements have all dissolved. Some teachings explain that after the wind element dissolves into consciousness, consciousness dissolves into the sky or the luminosity of the true nature, which is great openness. The movement of the breath has stopped. The five senses are inactive, there's no I-consciousness, so that eye, ear, nose, tongue and body consciousness are all interrupted. This is known as the completion stage. Nothing is left outside of you, it's all completely within at this stage. It is seen that everything we perceive is mind and nothing else. Having encompassed everything, perception completely dissolves into the clear light. Although other people can still perceive the world, the one dying no longer registers external stimuli. For the moment, that is all over. External appearances dissolve and although at the level of consciousness there are still a few more transitions to go, all dualistic concepts and thinking are suspended. There's no longer any activity.

In the case of a practitioner who understands the visualization and completion stages, recognition of each inner or secret sign helps them perfectly abide in the process of enlightenment. Through practice, you can merge your mind with the visions of luminosity the moment they arise. This is a very powerful time and one of the best chances to realize our Buddha nature. We don't even have to meditate to generate these things; the inner and secret signs will all arise naturally. Practice prepares us to connect at any point. Clear recognition of even the first secret sign can lead directly to enlightenment.

These are Guru Padmasambhava's bodhicitta teachings on the nature of mind, revealing the details of what we'll have to face during and after death. It's kind of like the airline hostess showing us how to use the life jackets and escape ramps; but unlike most airline passengers, every one of us will definitely have to make this exit. That's why we're considering all of this in some detail. Guru Padmasambhava said that we should deal with the bardo of dying like a beautiful woman going to market. She doesn't have any doubt or fear about her attractiveness. She is already very beautiful, but she checks herself one last time before she leaves the house to ensure that her hair and makeup are perfect. Similarly, we should prepare for death by developing a strong practice so that, when the time comes, we too can make one last check and then move forward with great courage, dignity, and happiness.

What I have said here relates to the gradual process of the dissolution of the elements that we call "dying." Now let us go on to what happens after death.

## **WHITE, RED AND BLACK**

By this time, the dying person has stopped communicating with the external world. He no longer sees form, hears sound, smells odors, tastes flavors or feels anything. There is no awareness of the objects of sense.

Breathing has stopped, but there is a subtle wind or inner breath present, so consciousness is still associated with the body. Occasionally people have come back

from this point, because until the inner breath stops there's a slight chance one could revive. At this time, the white and red elements begin to vibrate toward disintegration. The inner experience of this phase is associated with three visions: a white vision, a red vision and a black vision.

The white and red elements, which we received from our parents in the form of sperm and egg, are known as the root elements of the body. The white essence, which we got from our father, pervades the body, but mainly resides within the crown chakra. The red essence, received from our mother, is also found throughout the body, but is concentrated in a place about four finger-widths below the navel chakra. As these two elements drift toward disorder, the white element is affected first. In the form of an upside-down Tibetan syllable HAM, it will start to descend down the central channel from the crown chakra to the heart center. At this time, the dying person will experience bright moonlight radiating through everything, flashing silvery-white. For a short time, everything goes white, as when lightning strikes. This is the fifth experience of the clear light of reality which is known as *ngo bo* or the vision of brightness.

HAM is the Tibetan mantric syllable with the power of inducing a sense of shock to the system. We make sounds like HA and HO when there is any energy surging through the crown because the white HAM which resides there is stimulated into motion. As the crown chakra begins trembling, the white element starts dripping down through the central channel toward the heart center.

A few seconds, or perhaps a minute after the descent of the white element, the downward winds begin to shake and dislocate the red element from its residence four finger widths below the navel chakra. In the form of a red AH syllable, the solar essence begins ascending toward the heart. As it starts rising, you will have a crimson vision, the color of flames or the deep red of the sky before dawn. In Tibetan this is called "*skyes pa*;" the eruption or vision of burning fire. This is the sixth appearance of the clear light of the true nature.

When the white element, contributed by the father, begins to drip from the crown to the heart, all anger is dissolved. When the redness comes up from below the navel and merges with the heart, attachment comes to an end. The thirty-three emotions associated with anger are stopped, and the forty emotions related to attachment cease.

Now comes the third vision, known in Tibetan as "*topa*" or the completing vision. When the red and white elements merge at the heart, consciousness is trapped between them. Finally the two elements dissolve. At this point, vision goes black, like the new moon. This darkness is the seventh vision of primordial luminosity. Simultaneously, the seven ignorant emotions are completely stopped and the eighty gross emotions are inactivated. A few seconds after you have the black vision, you enter a state which is similar to being unconscious. You don't have any more visions or experiences. It is as if you had fainted. This does not just happen to human beings; it even happens to animals when they die. The mind goes completely blank for a short time as consciousness settles in the clear light. Most beings stay in this space for a few seconds or a few minutes, but not much longer.

Very soon, another experience called "regaining vision" arises. This is simply consciousness waking up again. The eight subtle winds which are naturally part of the mind begin to stir, and rays of primordial wisdom radiate, waking you up. The moment you come to, you are in the absolute state of the true nature, beyond conception, free of all complexity and emotion, awake in the naked brilliance of pristine cognitiveness. You experience it directly now, unobscured by subject-object dualism. Clear and bright beyond description, this is an unconditional experience of the absolute reality of the true nature.

Through practice, you may have had some experience of this true nature while alive, but due to the dissolution of the different elements, it is clearly revealed at this time, free of any physical, mental or emotional barriers. If you practice regularly during life, your recognition in this moment will be free of error, hesitation and doubt. You can fearlessly and effortlessly mingle your awareness with the true nature, like a child crawling up onto her mother's lap. If you're able to do that, you will attain enlightenment in the bardo of the moment of death.

Very subtle teachings about this condition are dealt with extensively in the Dzogchen Tantras. Master Jigme Lingpa describes the clear light as the most pristine openness, transparent as the autumn sky free of dust, clouds and wind. There is no longer any notion of separate self or an external world. All is perfectly unified in the natural singularity of unqualified awareness. One is completely liberated by recognizing this non-dual state, thereby merging the Dharmadhatu with the primordial ground. In the colophon to this beautiful prayer Jigme Lingpa explained that he wrote it while meditating in the mountains near Samye monastery. Early one morning he walked outside and while gazing upon Mount Hepori, he thought of how Guru Padmasambhava along with his twenty-five disciples had done many practices there on behalf of the Buddhadharma, almost a thousand years before.

Reflecting on this, he thought, "Now we only have the history of these events because almost everything from those days is gone. As for myself, someday I too will be a part of history or just a memory. Therefore I should try to realize all phenomena as a manifestation of the three kayas so that I don't have to suffer this movement through time." Then he composed this prayer spontaneously. It is known as the prayer to help actualize realization of the three kayas at the moment of death.

Dzogchen practitioners can be classified into high, middle and low levels. The top two won't have to go through the bardos and so won't need to apply these techniques. These instructions are for ordinary beings who will have to go through all the bardo transitions and experiences. This also applies to inferior practitioners who may have already received a lot of teachings, but are so far unable to actualize the real meaning. Practitioners usually have a wider horizon of spiritual opportunities, more vitality, and better vision in the bardos than normal people, but low level practitioners and ordinary people are classified together here because even though they might handle it differently, both will have similar experiences.

The highest of the low level practitioners can realize the dharmakaya the

moment it arises on the basis of having meditated and practiced while alive. If they weren't able to fully realize the true nature while alive, they have at least become intimate with it through meditation so that after death, they can easily identify and enjoy the ecstatic luminosity of pristine cognitiveness, free of obstacles, impurity or impediments. Awareness merges with that realization in the dharmakaya. Having practiced during life, the practitioner finally sees what s/he has been focusing on and merges with that understanding. This is enlightenment or realization of the dharmakaya, the absolute condition described in the Prajnaparamita as "inconceivable, inexpressible, unborn and unceasing, by nature like the sky, experienced solely by self-originated primordial wisdom."

We meditate in order to realize the essential understanding expressed in the Heart Sutra: "Emptiness is form and form is emptiness." Release all conceptions and abide in the sphere of pristine awareness. In the moment immediately after death, there is a direct seeing. It's not like you're meditating and happen to have a vision. This time you're seeing it as it really is. Most of the time, gross conceptions block our true vision so that meditation does not penetrate as deeply as we'd like it to. There's always a feeling of separation, the duality of a self and whatever it is we're meditating on. But in the bardo there will be no feeling of separation. There, we enjoy complete freedom from the eighty emotional conceptions. There are no hindrances; we see everything vividly, clear as crystal, in the mode of direct perception. As you learn the practice during this lifetime, you will be able to merge mind with that original brightness free of the usual notion of separate self.

For example, if during life you were able to meditate one-pointedly for five minutes, you might stay there for five minutes. If you could remain in meditation for one week, you can extend this phase for a week. If you can only stay non-distracted for one minute, you might last a minute. These periods are referred to as meditation days, indicating the average length of time that you are able to remain in meditation. If you have not cultivated any meditative equanimity during your life, you probably won't be able to remain in the clear light for more than a second or two before you begin the next phase.

In the Dzogchen teachings it is said that primordial wisdom arises fresh and naked, without any coverings or shields. By recognizing it at this time, we make all further bardo experience unnecessary. This is the best opportunity to gain enlightenment in the dharmakaya, but if we're somehow unable to recognize this opening, a further experience of the primordial luminosity arises.

It becomes progressively harder from here. Pristine cognitiveness is free of emotion. It begins open, fresh, peaceful, tranquil and clear, but as you slowly come back into the world of duality, subtle complexities begin arising. The eighty emotions which had temporarily disappeared start to return.

These stages of dissolution happen during the process of death. An ordinary person with no meditative experience or spiritual knowledge will enter a state of overall dullness for a short time, after having been frightened, irritated, agitated and so on. Dharma practitioners, even though they may not be totally realized, can track every step. Their recognition of these signs allows them to merge the process

of dissolution with the path. If they are fully aware of everything and can maintain that awareness, they can be in a state of constant meditation. In particular, toward the end of the process of dissolution, the mind becomes a bit more settled. At first this stability is irregular, but it gradually becomes continuous. Through recognition of the signs, awareness can be easily maintained.

When great practitioners die, they become enlightened, but even ordinary people who are just beginning to understand these processes can make good progress toward realization. If there is any wisdom in relation to the stages of dissolution, the mind will be more settled and calm. This peace allows one to handle the situation quite well.

The dissolution process could pass in one day, though subjectively it appears much longer. To the dying person it can seem like months or weeks, although it may only last for an hour. What I have explained here applies to a gradual process of dissolution. An accidental or sudden death doesn't always allow enough time to manifest the outer, inner and secret signs. Even in the case of a natural death, the bardo teachings state that you can experience the secret signs very quickly, particularly the final signs involving the disorder of the two elements and the white, red, and black experiences.

## **THE WAY OF THE ADEPT**

High level practitioners don't have to go through any of the bardo transitions. When they are dying, they already have a good understanding of the true nature and are aware that everything is part of the mind. Although their body is dying, they are actually moving into the dharmakaya. For such adepts, death is a freeing of old habitual bindings associated with this body. Their fully developed awareness of *rigpa* or primordial wisdom is realized and their consciousness continues to manifest on that basis. This is not the normal way to die. They have a private exit. They don't go through all the changes that normal people have to.

It is traditional to use the example of the space contained by a vase. When the vase is broken, the inner space and the outer space interpenetrate without boundaries. Nothing happens except this natural merging of space into space. So it is with those who understand the true nature; the moment they leave the body, they merge with the heart of Buddha Samantabhadra in the great Dzogchen realization, free from the stains of birth and death. This is great enlightenment. For these sublime beings, death is not a time of sadness and sorrow, but of supreme happiness.

At death, the greatest Dzogchen adepts display what are known as the four highest signs of realization, indicating that they have reached enlightenment. The moment the most enlightened yogis and yoginis abandon their bodies, they dissolve in transcendental wisdom and acquire the rainbow body. Their awareness merges with the dharmakaya and their bodily elements are transformed into transcendental wisdom energy, like the substance of a rainbow. This is also known as the transcendental wisdom body.

Others leave the body in a blaze of light or a heap of flames. Sometimes it is white light, sometimes blue or green. Occasionally they exhibit a multi-colored: white, yellow, red, blue and green. This light stays for a short time and then disappears. People see the fire, but when it is through burning, there is no trace of body, bone or ash; it all just dissolves. These are definite signs of enlightenment. Such practitioners have awakened to their true nature, and gain full realization the moment they leave the body. They merge with the luminosity of the clear light in the sambhogakaya.

The third class of accomplished practitioners attain Buddhahood in the nirmanakaya. As soon as they depart their bodies they merge with the luminosity of the true nature. Externally you might see light, fire, water or other elements dissolve into the nirmanakaya. This is the highest way to die. For example, when the Dzogchen master Garab Dorje died, he was immediately transformed into light. His foremost student, Manjushrimitra, yearned longingly for him, and in that moment he saw his master's right hand stretch out from a sphere of light in the sky and drop a small cask containing the "Three Words That Strike The Essence," This was Garab Dorje's final Dzogchen testament, given to Manjushrimitra before he disappeared, and it exemplifies the third extraordinary way of dying.

The fourth type of death is known as the way of dakini transformations. As soon as awareness departs from the body, it disappears. Only the nails and hair remain. Everything else dissolves. There are also great masters whose body size decreases after death. After three days or a week, the body begins to shrink until it totally disappears except for the nails and hair. All of these processes are associated with the actualization of the rainbow body.

Many Dzogchen masters in both India and Tibet become enlightened through meditating on the space instruction (*longde*), and acquire a rainbow body. During the days of Guru Padmasambhava, the eighty-four Mahasiddhas attained rainbow bodies at the time of their deaths. Seven generations of practitioners in the lineage of Vairocana enjoyed this attainment. Shri Singha and Manjushrimitra also realized this state. We have even heard more recent news from India along these same lines.

In the Buddha's teachings the attainment of the rainbow body is equivalent to enlightenment or Buddhahood. This is the way of death for great adepts in the Dzogchen tradition, where the rainbow body is a well-known phenomena. It is a sign which tells us that after realizing Buddhahood, you don't just disappear into space; you begin to act spontaneously for the good of all sentient beings.

Those who do not attain the rainbow body, but are nevertheless advanced practitioners, don't hesitate when it is time to die. They are beyond doubt and fear, and don't make any big deal about dying. They simply die and attain enlightenment. These courageous beings let go like babies. They have no regrets, they are not worried or sad. Without any plans or expectations, they don't have any thought about what they like or don't like, and they are not afraid. Having seen through the distinctions between life and death, they are not attached to staying here and are unafraid to die. They just go naturally wherever they happen to be, whether up on the mountains near the glaciers or down in the green valleys, they

die like lions without any fear. Although they appear to be experiencing death, they're actually leaping from samsaric phenomena to enlightenment. This is why Guru Padmasambhava and other masters taught that such practitioners are not really dying; they are perfectly released into full awakening. This manner of death applies to all those of the highest capacity. Those who have developed spiritual awareness and mindful equanimity do not experience any bardo after death.

Most practitioners of Mahamudra and Dzogchen leave the body through the central channel. This indicates a degree of control over the mind, allowing them to choose the direction and destination of their next rebirth. Those who can merge with the clear light might remain in the meditative posture. Some drop their heads forward, but most don't and they stay in meditation for anywhere from three days to a week. This is a sign that they have merged with the primordial luminosity.

In Tibet, it is quite common for practitioners to die in a meditation posture. They sit exactly as they have sat for meditation during their lifetime, so that they are resonant with that state. They merge their awareness completely with the true nature, while externally remaining in the vajrasana. When the wisdom wind forces consciousness to leave through the central channel, the head drops and often you see a little blood drain from the left nostril. You'll also find a clear liquid or perhaps a whitish liquid, mixed with some blood coming out of the lower part of the urinary tract. That is a sign that the consciousness has left via the wisdom wind. It is very important to not disturb the deceased at this time. Be quiet and don't touch them, so that they aren't distracted.

In the 1960's when we first arrived in Darjeeling, there was a lama who died in the hospital. He stayed in the meditation posture after death. Some Indians thought he was still alive and had just fainted, so they tried to resuscitate him. Others realized that he had died and was in meditation, and advised that he be left alone. Before long his head dropped and it was clear that he had died. When we asked who he was we learned that he was not a master, but an ordinary Nyingma-Kagyü practitioner who apparently had a good realization.

To die with clarity and full awareness, free of any external complications is also one of the favorite themes expressed in the teaching songs of the masters. Once Milarepa said he would be very happy to die alone in a cave, with nobody there to ask, "How are you feeling?" He boldly sings, "Let me die here with no one to lament my passing or to see my corpse afterwards."

In our own time, it was the fifteenth day of the eleventh month of the Tibetan calendar when His Holiness Dilgo Rinpoche said, "Now I have completed everything." He said this to his wife and those close to him. Usually he would do all his regular practices and meditate and pray for the people who requested his prayers in many directions, but on this day, he said, "I have completed everything, every prayer that has been asked of me. Now I'm going to leave. Please be careful in the future to pay attention. Karma can be very subtle and tricky. We might think something is no big deal which turns out to have serious consequences, so pay good attention to the karmic process. This is what every practitioner needs to pay attention to, even those with the highest realization. I've done my part." Upon

hearing this, many of those present didn't believe him. They thought he was making some casual statement, but soon after he got sick and passed away. This is how the great ones move.

## MANDALA OFFERINGS

In Tibet, many practitioners have very few possessions. Others have more things, such as money, property and loved ones, to which they might cling and feel attached. Do not dwell on attachments or succumb to ego-clinging, anger or fear. Try to avoid these attitudes and generate more courage and joy by mentally making mandala offerings to the Buddha, to Guru Padmasambhava and especially to the Buddha Amitabha.

Here in the west it is the custom to make out a will. If it is done in the spirit of bodhicitta, such an exercise can help you prepare to give up attachment. When you see that your time has come, consider all the valuables that you are leaving behind, collect them in your mind and make a beautiful mandala offering to Buddha Amitabha. Give away everything without exception in your last moments. The merit of your generosity will accompany you.

If you know the mandala prayer, do it as you offer up everything. Say, "I offer my body, speech and wealth, my belongings and everything else, to Buddha Amitabha. Please accept these offerings and lead me to enlightenment on the bodhisattva path, so that I can benefit all sentient beings. May I fully understand this process and enter the dharmakaya. Please support and help me through these changes." Meditate and cherish these thoughts and offer everything to Amitabha. Once you do this, you should no longer feel regret, clinging, or attachment to any belongings or people, because once you give them to the Buddha, there is no need to cling to them. After you've given everything to Buddha, you don't have to think about it any more. You already gave it up!

In Tibet, they make *torma* offerings. Once you've offered them up, you don't care what happens to them or who takes them. It is no longer your concern. Try to die peacefully and happily, in this detached disposition without a sense of having left anything unfinished. Feel that everything has been completed. By sincerely making this offering, you will move beyond fear and can joyfully prepare to begin the process of death.

If you haven't developed the mandala visualization, concentrate on Buddha Amitabha or Guru Padmasambhava. Feel their presence and look forward to this great transition.

In the root text, Guru Padmasambhava has written:

**REMAIN IN THE SPHERE OF THE CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS  
WHEN THE BARDO OF THE MOMENT OF DEATH IS DAWNING UPON ME,  
ABANDONING ATTACHMENT AND CLINGING-DESIRE TO EVERYTHING**

This is the time to remember your teacher's pith instructions, the heart essence

of the practice. Refresh your memory and remind yourself of the key points.

There are two main stages of application in the Vajrayana: the creation stage and the completion stage. The creation stage practices involve seeing every form in the universe as the body of the buddhas, hearing all sounds as the speech of the buddhas and knowing every level of awareness and even space itself as the mind of the buddhas. This is to help you stabilize in the understanding that you are already enlightened, it's simply a matter of continuously abiding in that awareness and clearly recognizing all things in the sphere of pristine cognitiveness. Because this is not accomplished through the relative activities of abandoning and adopting, the completion stage practice is referred to as "beyond coming and going."

If somehow you aren't able to maintain this understanding, then just meditate, and visualize the buddhas in the space before you or visualize yourself as the Buddha, relax into the inconceivable expanse of the real and remain there, confident in liberation, full of love and compassion, calm and peaceful. That is another way to practice the completion stage.

## **PHOWA**

The moment of death is the time to implement the *phowa* practice for the transference of consciousness. There is nothing arbitrary about when to do phowa. If your practice is on a high-level and you already see everything in the three-vajra states, it will not be necessary to employ it; you've already got it covered. If your practice is not on such a high level it is a good thing to do. The transference of consciousness is to be done specifically when we see the signs of approaching death or feel the need for rebalancing by practicing on the Buddha Amitabha. Guru Padmasambhava advocated doing the regenerative practices at least three times before you transfer consciousness through the power of phowa.

Phowa has many different meanings; in Tibetan it means "transferring consciousness." The highest form is known as the phowa of the dharmakaya which is meditation on the great perfection. When you do Dzogchen meditation, there's no need to transfer anything, because there's nothing to transfer, no place to transfer it, nor anyone to do it. That's the highest, and greatest phowa practice.

The second phowa is known as the phowa of the sambhogakaya. The sambhogakaya phowa involves seeing everything as the mandala of the deities, wrathful and peaceful, as in the *zhi-khro* practice itself.

ALL PHENOMENA APPEAR AS THE MANDALA OF THE PEACEFUL AND WRATHFUL DEITIES. THESE DEITIES DISSOLVE AS A RAINBOW IN THE SKY. RELAX THE MIND IN THE NATURAL STATE WHICH IS THE UNION OF APPEARANCE AND EMPTINESS, FREE FROM COMPLEXITIES. ALL SOUNDS ARE THE SPEECH OF THE WRATHFUL AND PEACEFUL DEITIES. THIS EMPTINESS SOUND DISSOLVES AS THE DRAGON'S VOICE OF THUNDER DISAPPEARS IN THE SKY

This describes the completion stage practice. Learn to merge your mind with

everything in the mandala, just be part of the as-it-is and relax into that nature. This is known as the transference of consciousness through the sambhogakaya.

The third transference practice is known as the phowa of the nirmanakaya. Visualize Buddha Amitabha above your head and yourself as Vajrayogini or Yeshe Ts'ogyal. In the center of your visualized form, imagine the central channel as being hollow and blue. In your heart chakra, visualize your consciousness fused with the wind element in the form of light-blue *thig-les*. Using these means, eject your consciousness up through the central channel and crown chakra all the way up to Buddha Amitabha's heart center. This requires imagining both yourself and Buddha Amitabha in the form of the wisdom rainbow body. Do not perceive any of this as solid. Practice it again and again. Engage the exercise until signs appear. This is known as the nirmanakaya phowa and was practiced widely and openly in Tibet.

## TRANSFER THE UNBORN SELF-AWARENESS INTO THE OPENNESS OF SPACE

This is another reference to the phowa of the dharmakaya. There's nothing to visualize in this case. Just stay merged with unborn awareness.

## WHEN WE ARE ABOUT TO LEAVE THIS BODY COMPOSED OF FLESH AND BLOOD, REALIZE THAT IT IS IMPERMANENT AND ILLUSORY

In these two lines Guru Padmasambhava emphasizes freedom from grasping and attachment to the body. We habitually cling to the body and attach to the notion of a separate self. This body of flesh and blood is on loan from the five elements. It is compounded and fragile, an impermanent, magical mirage. Why do we cling? What are we holding onto? If you're still clinging, you don't understand the real situation.

In case of sudden death, concentrate your mind in meditation and visualize your yidam deity to help balance out the shock of the transition. Actually, whenever you come upon disturbing situations, it's best to maintain the mind in meditation. Relax into the primordial nature and do not give in to panic. Concentrate on your yidam deity, feel the immanence of the Buddha and Guru Padmasambhava, or simply meditate on the true nature without thought. In the Dzogchen teachings we are told to visualize the deities arising instantly like a rainbow in the sky, or like a fish jumping out of water. These are examples of visualizations where you immediately invoke the entire form of a divine being for a short time. The stages of elemental dissolution during death are usually so quick that there is not much time to develop a visualization through different stages. This is because your faculties are decomposing and increasingly dysfunctional. That's why it's important to meditate and develop your practice now while you are still in good health.

When you see the signs of approaching death, let go of all attachment and anger. Maintain equanimity, whether it is yourself or another person who is dying. Try to create a peaceful environment and harmonious conditions. Don't force anything on them. If they don't believe in Dharma, allow them to die in that state of

non-belief. If they do believe in Dharma, help create an appropriate space in which to practice. Do whatever is suitable. The best way to support and benefit a dying person is with love and compassion. Above all, help them to die peacefully. This is a crucial transition point, and if we let them get confused, it could mess them up, even if they were good practitioners.

There are situations where the dying person really believes in the Dharma although their relatives and friends do not. In that case, we should not force any issues. We should just try to support a dharmic environment. If we begin to perform some dharmic activities for the dying person and their family members and friends don't appreciate it, it could cause a big scene. This would be a great obstacle toward realization, and hard on the dying person. This is not necessary. Instead, we should indirectly honor the Dharma and create a meditative atmosphere for that practitioner. Support them in simple ways like offering to raise their pillows. Find ways to serve in the spirit of love and compassion. Inwardly, meditate on Guru Padmasambhava, Vajrasattva or Buddha Amitabha. Recite some mantras quietly and invoke the presence of Dharma through your being. If you have the opportunity, right before the dissolving stages, you can move the body some, adjust the pillow to help them assume an upward, not-quite-sitting posture. If that's not possible then try to get them into the lion posture.

When the wind element dissolves into consciousness, and consciousness is leaving the body, touch the dying person on the top of their head, creating a little sensation around the crown chakra: even tug on some of the hairs. This can make a big difference, because when the consciousness leaves the body of an ordinary individual, it will leave through any opening that is available. The body has nine holes, but leaving through the central channel is always best because it provides a very neutral trajectory, free of anger and attachment. Even non-practitioners, if they can somehow manage to exit through the central channel, will make smoother transitions which will help them to go to higher states of rebirth. To leave from the lower parts of the body increases the likelihood of rebirth in the lower realms. Most of the time the consciousness won't stay around too long. On the average, it will be gone after three days. This is why in Tibet they keep the corpse in the house for at least three and a half days. So it is good to occasionally pat the top of their head after the breathing has stopped to direct consciousness to the exit. If it looks strange to others who are in the room, just touch them gently on the crown and hold your hand there for a moment. Avoid causing any sensations in the lower parts of the body.

In a good dharmic environment, you can discern the external signs and indicate the current phase of the process to the dying person. If she is a practitioner, and no one is going to react, then a close sangha member, a friend or a relative can explain that this is the part of the process where consciousness leaves the body and remind them to let go of all attachment and ego-clinging.

In Tibet, it is the custom to read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, very slowly and gently at the bedside of the one dying. It is called the *Bardo Thö-dröl* which means "Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo" and it is very powerful. Chant it with great honor and respect, in a calm, gentle voice. This will help them recognize the

signs and remember their practice. Support the mood of meditation and faith. Even if the dying practitioner has already learned to recognize the signs, you can still be of help by simply recounting them. It is especially helpful to point out some of the main transitions such as the descent of the white and the ascent of the red elements and most importantly, to remind them to concentrate undistractedly and merge with the clear light. To say all this in a calm and peaceful tone is very beneficial. This is also a good time for all of the sangha members to pray together. Recite the Vajrasattva mantra and make offerings, meditate and make everything very calm and peaceful. Keep unnecessary noise to a minimum. Recite softly, meditate and practice in support of the dying individual. A focused meditation on bodhicitta will truly put the power and blessings of the Buddha into the ceremony and affect the bardo voyager's mental state, even if he is not a practitioner. It will help him be confident and brave, and orient him toward the pure lands.

## **SUBTLE SIGNS**

Guru Padmasambhava wrote a small book in which he explains all the subtle signs associated with the approach of death. According to the zhi-khro teachings, there are two types of death: accidental death and natural karmic death. Karmic death is like a candle; it burns for a certain number of hours, until its time is up. This is an example of the span of karmic life. Whether we live for 100 years or 30 years depends on our karma. Karmic force is powerful, but it also allows for other things to happen. This is known as accidental death. A person's karma might give him a 100-year lifespan, but an adventitious obstacle suddenly appears like a gust of wind: instantly, the candle of life is blown out, even though it still had fifty years to burn.

There could be non-virtuous actions performed in the present life which would hasten the coming of a natural karmic death, but that is not necessarily the result. Non-virtuous actions may not bear any result during the present life time. Most adventitious obstacles are actually part of our unpaid karmic debt from previous lives which has come due, not anomalies that happen at random. They always have causes.

One section of the book deals with how to tell the difference between a karmic death and an accidental death; according to Guru Padmasambhava, there will be indications. Another section deals with removing the obstacles associated with the signs of accidental death. These are divided into outer, inner, and secret signs.

One possible outer sign is a personality change. Someone who was basically calm and peaceful, suddenly becomes short-tempered, moody and small-minded. This may be a sign of the coming transition. With other people, you can look at their head and see that their aura or energy has decreased. The complexion becomes pale, certain marks appear on the body or face, the fingernails become dull, the hair on the nape of the neck stands up, even if you try to comb it down. When sneezing, there is involuntarily urination or they might pass a stool at the same time. Hearing and vision begin failing, smell and taste no longer work very well. All of these indicate physical weaknesses and imbalances in the system.

Other signs appear in dreams, but generally, they are not considered

significant if you only dream of them once or twice. If you have any of these dreams regularly, this is a definite sign. In one dream, you are completely naked and running downhill all the time. Another one is similar to running the gauntlet and involves people trying to catch you and lots of hands attempting to grab and punish you. There are others, such as being completely naked or wearing heavy black cloth, riding certain animals and travelling in certain directions. In another dream you are very calm but are handcuffed or discover you are inside a place with no doors, like an iron box, or you're always traveling through tunnels. You may dream that you're climbing a beautiful ladder which suddenly breaks or that you have fallen into a big hole, or are interrupted by a broken bridge. You may be with many people who have died, family members or friends. Dreams in the earlier and middle parts of the night tend to reflect habitual patterns based in memories. Early morning dreams often pertain to the future. If one of these dreams occurs repeatedly in the early morning, this is a symptom of psychic or physical imbalances and is a definite long-term sign of death.

If you feel you may not live very long, examine your life. Remember to conduct your inquiry in the spirit of bodhicitta with the intention of gaining knowledge and making the best use of your time here so you can accomplish something meaningful for yourself as well as all sentient beings.

Signs indicating the presence of life-threatening obstacles reflect our attachment to things in this world which act as a hindrance and interruption to the continuity of beneficial activities. In order to overcome these, Guru Padmasambhava tells us to begin by making offerings to develop a strong feeling-connection with the Three Roots: the guru, the yidam, the dakini and dharmapalas. Be really generous with your sangha. Prepare a Vajrayana feast, a ganachakra or *ts'ok* offering for your vajra brothers and sisters. Expand that feeling of love and compassion outward to all sentient beings. Be charitable to others who you feel really need it, like homeless persons. In the spirit of peace and love for all beings, you can even offer something to an animal. Then proceed to investigate the signs.

Distant signs may appear three or even five years before death. These are inauspicious omens, but if you recognize them for what they are, it may be relatively easy to modify the course of events by changing certain attitudes and applying practices to alter the destiny associated with that sign. But when the final signs appear, it is very difficult to change things. Once in awhile it might happen, but in most cases the portents of the final signs are irreversible. However in most cases, the possibilities implied by the longer-term indications can be changed relatively easily. Therefore, Guru Rinpoche gave extensive teachings on all of this. Of course, the signs will not occur for everyone in exactly the same way. If we respond by taking up the appropriate remedies and things do not change, this is an indicator of karmic duration, and there is nothing we can do to change it unless we transform our body into a rainbow body. In any case, we must renew our practice, stabilize our meditation, and prepare to approach this transition joyfully.

Guru Padmasambhava explains that these signs do not always foreshadow death. In some cases they may signify the presence of serious obstacles, which could lead to death if ignored. If you see any of these signs in yourself, it is good to

meditate and practice, particularly on Guru Padmasambhava or Buddha Amitabha, and to rebalance your life-habits. There may be symptoms that your vital energy is decreasing, and that your potential is degenerating. Daily practice and meditation will definitely help balance and revitalize your life force. On the external level, efforts to preserve the lives of others, such as giving money to charities, working in shelters or a hospice, are restorative. You can help protect animals as an expression of bodhicitta. It is also good to improve washed-out roads and repair broken bridges. These are very auspicious activities which will prolong our life.

In the fourteenth century, there was an accomplished master known as Iron Bridge Builder who built over 108 bridges throughout Tibet. He was possibly the first person in the world to engineer massive iron bridges able to span big rivers. A great tertön who lived for more than 125 years, he wore a long beard. Throughout Tibet, there are many statues of him holding an iron chain in his right hand to symbolize the bridges. He used a special metal that never rusted. Even the Chinese appreciate him because he was a practitioner who directly improved the lives of ordinary people.

## **SUMMARY OF THE CHIK-KHAI BARDO OF THE MOMENT OF DEATH**

Guru Padmasambhava said, "Never thinking death will come, we make long term plans." Even happy families and good friends must eventually part. It's as if we are meeting in an airport, and will soon have to go our separate ways. The signs of death should not cause us to be frightened, angry or upset. Death is a natural process. Without it, there is no birth. The two create an ongoing cycle that persists until we reach enlightenment. Death can make it seem like we are losing everything, but actually, if we are mindful and have a good understanding of the true nature, we obtain great spiritual benefits and can approach full realization through this transition. Therefore, we should not be worried, sad, or upset about death.

Life and death are two sides of a coin. They are as inevitable as the cycle of day and night. We may as well cling to the daytime and be afraid of all phenomena which occur after dark. From the viewpoint of higher realization, death is the experience of the dharmakaya and sambhogakaya. The experience of life is a nirmanakaya manifestation. From the nirmanakaya, we can enter into the sambhogakaya and the dharmakaya, so we should not be upset or hesitant around death. We should go forward with wisdom, and joyfully engage the process.

Many practitioners in Tibet have recognized the signs of death approaching. When they understand that they are dying, they don't feel upset or sad, but invite all their friends and family members to come to their departure. A teacher will ask all his students, a hidden practitioner will invite sangha members and friends to a big festival. They often perform a *ts'ok* ceremony as a farewell gift before they leave. With great joy, they host the festival, and then abandon their earthly form to enter the dharmakaya and sambhogakaya states alone.

Death is another dimension of our existence to be explored. You've been here

for awhile. To stay here forever would be boring. Sooner or later you're going to have a look at the other side of this life. Buddha Maitreya taught that for those who realize that appearances are the display of the true nature of mind, the cycle of life and death is like walking from park to park, strolling from garden to garden. There is nothing strange or fearful about it. How beautiful it is!

Read the life stories of many of the great masters and you will be amazed and astonished to see the simple, joyful way they approached death. The 15th Karmapa was Khakyab Dorje, whose first name means pervasive sky. As he was about to die he sang, "Now it's time for Khakyab Dorje to pervade the sky!" When Longchenpa arrived at Samye monastery, he said to his student, "I'm going to die in this place." He wasn't sick or anything, but he called the shot. "I would be happy to die here rather than acquire a rainbow body somewhere else." He wrote a beautiful poem which says, "The time has come to go; like a traveler, I must be on my way. My joy in dying has been well earned: it is greater than all the wealth in the ocean a merchant may have won, or the godlike power of having conquered armies or the bliss found in meditation. So I wait no longer, but go to sit firmly on my seat in the bliss supreme that knows no death." He continued teaching for about two or three weeks and then one day he said to his students, "Now I'm going to enter the dharmakaya, so let us meditate together one last time." Then while sitting in meditation, he dissolved his mind into the primordial nature.

We should not be frightened, hesitant or timid. These transitions are part of the process of our total development. If we don't allow change, we will never get new results or make any progress toward enlightenment. This particular change at the end of each life represents a great opportunity to gain realization. Your mind becomes very influential at this time. Your intentions during the moment of death have an extraordinary effect on your future direction. Even an expert archer can shoot poorly if he is distracted at the moment of the arrow's release. Similarly, you may be a good practitioner in this lifetime, but a moment's carelessness during the dying process can drastically affect your chance for recognition during the bardo and a good rebirth. Likewise, increased concentration continuing in a positive direction at this time will be of great benefit, even if you were not such a good practitioner during your life.

This concludes the teaching on the bardo of the moment of death.

## **BARDO OF THE LUMINOSITY OF THE TRUE NATURE**

*chos-nyid bardo*

The next stage is called the bardo of the luminosity of the true nature. This is also known as the bardo of the clear light. After the moment of death, when breathing has stopped and the gross elements have dissolved into the subtlest space of consciousness, we reawaken in the clear light of the dharmakaya. Most ordinary beings with no spiritual knowledge or exposure to bardo teachings will not recognize what is happening at this point and it will last only a short time. There's no fixed duration for the amount of time you will spend in any of these phases. Various elements such as the condition of the channels and the manner of death determine just how the changes proceed. But even if the vision is fleeting and only lasts a moment, a good practitioner can recognize and expand on that flash and gain

enlightenment in the dharmakaya.

If our recognition is full at that time, the confusion of the bardos comes to an end. This is the best opportunity for enlightenment in the dharmakaya, but if we're unable to recognize it, a secondary form of clear light will arise. From here, liberation becomes progressively harder. The eighty emotions which had been momentarily inactivated, gradually return. Because one has not yet recognized and merged in the clear light, this bardo begins with an experience of awesome sounds and beams of light. The sounds and sights that are experienced at this time do not exist externally. All are emanations of your own primordial nature, appearing in forms that you have to recognize for what they truly are.

During the final moments of the bardo of the moment of death we had a chance to gain enlightenment at the level of the dharmakaya. If this does not happen, we enter the bardo of luminosity where there is a chance to become enlightened in the sambhogakaya. If you are familiar with the *thöd-rgyal* or "leaping over" practices which employ meditations involving light and color, you are prepared for transcendent recognition and liberation in the sambhogakaya.

The visions that arise at this point are not created by anyone, nor are they a reflection of conditional habit energy. They arise spontaneously from the true nature, the domain of primordial wisdom, and appear to consciousness under certain conditions. In the Dzogchen teachings they mention that these colors and lights are natural qualities inherent to the primordial wisdoms. These are visions of what we are intrinsically, as well as being the ground of all the sounds and colors perceived during our lifetimes. But now we're really experiencing it all effortlessly, at full intensity, unobscured by the poisons. If you're able to recognize the true nature of these radiations and merge awareness with this luminous display, you have an opportunity to gain enlightenment in the sambhogakaya.

First comes the experience of sound. This is actually the fifth [?] experience of the luminosity bardo, which is known as the voice of the true nature, or the echo of primordial wisdom. This sound is not soft and nice. It is much louder and stronger than heavy metal music. Guru Padmasambhava compared it to the sound of a thousand thunders or the destruction of the universe; it is a very big noise! But this awesome turbulence is not happening externally; it is an echo of the primordial nature. If you can recognize it as the reverberation of transcendent wisdom and not react, you can put an end to the bardo process.

If you don't recognize this sound for what it is, things get a little bit harder. The earlier experiences are relatively gentle and peaceful. As you continue, the waves get a little rougher, like white-water rafting in the Rocky Mountains.

If you are frightened by the sounds and miss the opportunity for recognition, concentrate in preparation for the next visions, which involve light. Very powerful, blazing lights will appear in front of you. Guru Padmasambhava states that this light is stronger than a thousand suns. It is shining so brightly it feels like it is going to pierce right through you, like a shower of powerful arrows. This is followed by a vision of tiny beams of light shining in five colors.

The sounds may be irritating or frightening. You may get upset or angry, and start running to escape, but the sounds follow you, the beams of light pursue you. You desperately want to get away and all your hopes and fears begin to come on strong. This same distress may continue when you experience the lights of the peaceful and wrathful buddhas. If you begin to cherish an attachment or become frightened, clinging to false discriminations, you will only be trapped in more confusion.

The opportunity for liberation here is still wide open for determined practitioners. When hearing the sounds, recognize the voice of the true nature as what you were practicing during your lifetime by reciting mantra. The brilliant lights are perceived while alive through the Dzogchen *thod-rgyal* practices. So when yogis experience these things after death, their recognition is perfect because they've seen it before. They don't feel scared but quite naturally understand and merge with the true nature of these visions, and are thus easily liberated.

If you don't recognize the lights and sounds, the next phase introduces a procession of distinctly colored bright lights which arise one after another, heralding the appearance of the dhyani buddhas. Along with each bright light, a very dull light glows nearby. Ordinary beings who are afraid of the bright light will feel attracted to the duller light. These dull lights are the essence of the negative emotions. Your ignorance is being put to the test. The tendency to grasp phenomena has regenerated.

When the sounds, the lights, and the rays originally appear during the secondary clear light, your mind is still relatively lucid. Now subtle obscurations and emotions, such as anger, attachment and jealousy, begin to reappear in an active form. People who don't have any practical experience of the Dharma will tend to react at this point. It is quite common for the recently deceased to feel as though they are still associated with the old body and not understand that they are actually dead. It feels like a dream. This initiates a new phase of detailed displays and reinvolves one's latent tendencies to further confuse the situation. In compassionate response to the notion of embodiment, visions of various buddhas arise. This is the second opportunity for liberation through recognition of the visions of the dhyani buddhas, as described in *The Tibetan Book of The Dead*.

First, the peaceful buddhas will appear, beginning with the five buddha families. A sky-like expanse of great blue light is projected out from one's heart center preceding the appearance of the buddha forms. This is the light of the dharmadhatu wisdom. At first it is apparent that the light emanates from you, but when the buddhas appear, it is as if they were autonomous. In the center of this radiant blue field, you'll see a small circle of white light. This is the same light that is worked with in the Dzogchen creation stage or *thod-rgyal* practices. If you are able to recognize it now, you'll see that this point is no other than Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri in union. In this way, you attain enlightenment here and now without further experience.

Failing this, the white light expands, encompassing the entire visionary space.

If you are well acquainted with the practice of visualizing the buddhas of the vajra family, you will easily recognize Buddha Vairocana and his consort sitting in yab-yum in the center of this white field. If you understand even for a second that this vision is an emanation of primordial wisdom non-separate from your natural mind, you will completely change your karmic momentum and attain enlightenment in the presence of Buddha Vairocana.

If you fail to recognize Vairocana as a display of your own primordial wisdom and instead assume the subject-object duality in relation to what appears, another white light appears. This presents the next opportunity for recognition which is described as "white lights following one after another like clouds." It is also known as the light of Vajrasattva and is associated with mirror-like wisdom. If you recognize it as the radiance of your own mind, this is the end of bewilderment and there are no more bardos. The clouds soon change and from the center of this brilliant white light the Buddha Vajrasattva and his consort appear surrounded by the entire refuge tree. This is all emanated from the heart center.

The next phase is qualified by a golden-yellow light. Non-dual recognition of this light as the wisdom of equanimity leads to enlightenment in the sambhogakaya. To welcome you, Buddha Ratnasambhava and his consort will appear from the midst of that radiance and you can be liberated without further wandering.

This is followed by a deep red light which pervades the whole of space. This is the radiation of discriminating wisdom. Having practiced on the Buddha of Infinite Light, you can easily recognize this light and break the cycle of karmic rebirth. Resplendent in sambhogakaya display, Buddha Amitabha and his consort will appear, surrounded by the whole refuge tree.

Subsequently, an intensely green light radiates. This is the light of all-accomplishing wisdom. To have practiced on the deities of the karma family will allow you to recognize the nature of this display. If there is a clear understanding of this vision, one can be immediately enlightened. From the center of that green field, the Buddhas Amoghasiddhi and Tara will appear in union on the central lotus of the cosmic refuge tree.

Buddhas Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri, or Vajrasattva and his consort are the main deities related to the *zhi-khro* teachings. As they sport in the center, five other dhyani buddhas, together with various bodhisattvas associated with these families, arise as their retinue. These make up the forty-two peaceful deities, which are followed by the appearance of the fifty-eight wrathful deities. This is the mandala of the Guyagarbha tantra. All these buddhas are a display of the original wisdom which structure our body and mind.

Through the inspiration of these teachings, begin to investigate the subtle dimension of the world, and you will discover that the whole mandala is appearing within you. There is nothing that is outside of you. On the basis of this insight, practice and meditate so that when the time comes to die, you will recognize all the visions as your own projections and blissfully merge with the transcendent source

condition. To have regularly practiced visualizing the deities and reciting mantra will be of immense benefit in this *chös-nyid* bardo. If you have good practice habits, you already know that these visions are projections of our minds which arise from the true nature, laden with the energy of pure love, compassion and wisdom. This is what the deities or the dhyani buddhas represent. If you are familiar with this kind of meditation, you have a good chance of getting enlightened. You don't have to introduce yourself to your own mother. By recognizing any one of these buddhas, you will be enlightened. In that case, all bardo experiences will stop. It's all over in the moment of recognition. The whole external cosmos dissolves within you. Then, instead of being defined by the limitations of karmic rebirth, you can go anywhere and take any form. You get a pass to the red carpet club, while those who aren't practiced wander around for awhile in a very busy place that looks something like Calcutta!

If we somehow overlook all of these opportunities for liberation through non-recognition of the peaceful buddhas, we will be subject to the onset of the wrathful buddhas. So it gets even tougher. Not only is there the reappearance of the blinding radiance and intense beams of light shining right through one, but terrifying thunders are resounding and a thousand fires burn as we are introduced to the wrathful buddhas.

The text reads:

THE UNIMPEDED SKILL OF THEIR RADIANCE  
ARISES IN THE CONCH-LIKE MANSION

The "conch-like mansion" refers to the brain. The channels projecting away from the brain represent the wrathful deities. I won't go into all of the details, but presently, most of the peaceful buddhas reside within the heart center, while some abide in others chakras and channels of the nervous system. All together these are known as the forty-two peaceful buddhas. Fifty-eight wrathful buddhas reside within the conch-like dimension of the brain chakra. Together, the peaceful and wrathful groups make one hundred buddhas.

You have probably seen wrathful buddhas in thangkas with three eyes and four or six legs, and many arms, surrounded by a halo of fire. These are the kinds of forms that will appear before you now. All these visions are no other than a display of your own primordial wisdom. If you are experienced in the visualization of the peaceful and wrathful buddhas, you understand these visions as inseparable from your own primordial wisdom. They are communicative forms of the Buddha. Don't get in the habit of rejecting or running away from things that you don't immediately recognize, or nervously assume you know what something is without inquiring. By recognizing these forms you have another chance to merge with the vision and attain enlightenment. This is called the tertiary clear light, the third opportunity for liberation.

In Tibet there was an artist who was a thangka painter. He was working on a painting of the one hundred peaceful and wrathful buddhas. His young daughter was always by his side, but she didn't pay too much attention to his art until he

painted a certain wrathful buddha with the head of a snake.

The little girl had a strong reaction to this image and asked her father, "What is this strange looking creature?"

"This is nothing to feel strange about," the father said. "This is one of the many forms of the Buddha. All these figures are buddhas."

Then she asked, "Where are these buddhas now?"

He explained, "While you are alive, you might not be able to see these buddhas, but when you die, they will come and show themselves. This buddha with the snake's head is the last among all the buddhas that you will experience at that time. When you see this form don't be deluded into thinking you have not died."

So this snake-headed buddha made a very big impression in the little girl's mind. She would remember his form and how her father said it was important to remember that she would see the Buddha in this form after death. Throughout her life, this thought was in her mind, again and again. After she died, she went through all the bardo experiences, but didn't recognize what was happening until she saw the final, snake-headed buddha. At that moment she remembered. "Oh! Here is the vision of the Buddha my father told me about. This is my own mind's projection in the bardo. It does not exist externally, so I shouldn't react and create more karma."

Simply remembering this helped her relax and stopped her from drifting into a more deluded or confused state. She actually enjoyed a good realization due to that understanding.

The wrathful buddhas emanate from our crown chakra accompanied by a violent eruption of light and sound. Visualization is extremely clear during this time. Everything is coming on strong. If you meditate well and know the importance of concentration, you have another opportunity to recognize that all this is a projection of your own mind, a display of primordial wisdom. Knowing this, all further stages become unnecessary and you can rest on mother's lap.

All the peaceful and wrathful buddhas are no other than a reflection of our own primordial wisdom. They are our own emanations, and do not exist in and of themselves. They are like another dimension of the dream state, a display of your own mind. You are actually traveling in a deeper dimension of the dream world.

Let us look at the text to summarize:

## **WHEN THE BARDO OF INTRINSIC REALITY IS DAWNING UPON ME ABANDONING ALL TERROR AND FEAR...**

This bardo begins with the most intense experience of the primordial luminosity of the clear light. Because we cling to hopes and fears, Guru Padmasambhava urges us not to be timid or afraid at this time. We need to know that whatever is arising is the self-radiant energy of the mind and does not contain

one external or objective atom; the entire experience is contained in our mind, like a dream. When understood, this crucial point leads to liberation.

Whether it's peaceful or wrathful:

## RECOGNIZE THAT WHATEVER IS ARISING IS THE SELF-APPEARANCE OF AWARENESS,

Everything we see is a display of primordial wisdom, the lighting up of the true nature. Why should we be scared or frightened by our own mind? In considering the moment when we are presented with the clear light of our true nature, perhaps we're a bit apprehensive and afraid, but Guru Padmasambhava and the Buddha both teach us to regard birth and death as mere thoughts and dualistic notions.

## REALIZE IT AS THE APPARITIONS OF THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

The bardo of the luminosity of the true nature actually consists of two stages. At first you are completely trapped between the red and white elements and everything goes black as the night of the new moon. Then you have a vision of the true nature, unimpeded, completely transparent, beyond conceptions, uncompounded and beyond complexity. In Dzogchen, this is called the primordially pure vision of *khregs-chod* which is identical with Mahamudra or Maha-Ati realization. This is the emptiness-aspect of the true nature, coemergent with the clear light. You are just having an experience of it at this time. You are one with the condition of primordial purity, the *khregs-chod* state of the true nature. Merging our awareness with that reality in the moment it is presented, resolving everything into one taste, is known as "merging the child with the mother clear light." In this way you become enlightened in the dharmakaya.

From the moment the secret signs appear during the dissolution of the elements to the first glimpse of the true nature, through the subsequent experiences of the sounds, lights, and rays, to the visions of the hundred buddhas, everything is a manifestation of the bardo of the luminosity of the true nature. Recognition during the descent of the white light, the ascent of the red light, or through one of the visions of the *zhi-khro* deities, are all forms of liberation in the bardo of luminosity and lead directly to enlightenment in the sambhogakaya or nirmanakaya. If you practiced at all while alive, you can realize accomplishments during this bardo which may have seemed completely beyond your capacities during life.

This bardo features many different visions, one following after another, so there are endless opportunities to become enlightened, especially if you have any previous experience with *thod-rgyal* visualizations. If you're practicing Kalachakra, or the Six Yogas of Naropa, there are six applications, including such exercises as *tummo*, and *gyü-lus*. Both of these yogas are extensively detailed within the body of *thod-rgyal* practices, enabling the practitioner to make use of many different states in the development of transcendent insight.

The continuity of primordial experience embodied in these visions is known as the lamps in *thod-rgyal* practice. In *thod-rgyal* we see the very same hues, rainbows, rays and also what are called vajra-chains of light. These represent the activity of transcendental wisdom which arises spontaneously as sound, color, and shapes in motion. Without meditating or visualizing anything, the visions we've been cultivating in practice appear before us now in all their intensity. To awaken during this display is known as enlightenment in the rupakaya. All of these visions are part of the bardo of the clear light, the luminosity aspect of the true nature.

## **BARDO OF BECOMING**

*sid-pai bardo*

Having come through the transitions of the first five bardos, consciousness is now heading toward its next, karmically dictated embodiment. This is the Bardo of Becoming. Guru Padmasambhava also refers to it as the Bardo of Karmic Possibilities. This stage lasts from the end of the visions of the peaceful and wrathful deities until we are conceived in a womb.

This is known as the time of the six uncertainties.

There is still no certain place to settle. You only seem to be able to find marginal shelter, under trees or between rocks. Often you are in wide open spaces that offer no refuge. You are not sure what you are doing. Only change is certain. There is no continuity. You become involved with something, and then it totally changes, just as in dreams. The source of your food is uncertain unless someone dedicates it to you through meditation and mantra recitation. The moods and concerns of friends are another uncertainty, as are the visions and the view. The focus of awareness and your very identity have also become uncertain.

Generally the bardo experience lasts no longer than forty-nine days, but that's just an average. The fourth and fifth bardos, including the arising of the awesome sounds, lights, and five-colored rays, and the visions of peaceful and wrathful buddhas, can all be experienced in as few as three days. It depends on the person. Seven weeks is an average. Guru Padmasambhava said that the luminosity bardo is usually completed within two or three weeks and that the rest of the time one is approaching rebirth, as habit patterns gradually develop toward a new birth and life.

Some people have all these experiences very quickly. Others stay in the bardo for years, because their karma is conditioned by strong ego-clinging, heavy attachments and powerful anger, but generally, the bardo experience averages about seven weeks. That's why Tibetans consider these forty-nine days very important. When I was a young boy in Tibet, they would often leave the body in place for forty-nine days after death. Of course, our legal system allowed for this. You see, Tibet was a very independent and free country with its own ways. After seven weeks, they would take the body out, and give it to the vultures in what is known as a "sky burial." Many lamas insist on this in place of cremation or earth burial so that their death is of direct benefit to sentient beings.

The process of rebirth is a complex situation where many things can happen, so it is quite common for Tibetans to perform ceremonies on each of the forty-nine days, meditating on love and compassion and generating bodhicitta on behalf of the deceased for the entire seven week period. Since everything is uncertain now, these blessings help them be mindful and have a positive influence on transmigration. Even if the deceased was an accomplished practitioner and has already taken birth, it is still good to do these prayers, and offer them encouragement. Mantra recitation and generosity practices are both very important. The Seven Line Prayer, the Vajra Guru Mantra, Tara's Mantra, or the Hundred Syllable Mantra will all remind them of their daily meditative practice, and help them to apply themselves more fervently in the moment. At the end of each session, dedicate the merit to them by name. This is a great support, which has an immediate influence on the impressionable mental body.

There are special prayers you may want to recite from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* which invoke all the buddhas and bodhisattvas to guide and assist the bardo voyager. The dedication of food to the deceased is done in every school of Buddhism. Generous offerings are also made to sangha members and the resultant merit is dedicated to individual beings. In the Vajrayana, we perform special devotional ceremonies invoking Avalokitesvara. We meditate and make offerings of fire and smoke. This is usually done for forty-nine days after someone dies. Water offerings and tormas are also used in these rituals. There are practitioners who do this practice all the time, even when no one they know has died, because there are many beings who are wandering in the bardo at this very moment. Even if they are not practitioners, to dedicate the merit gained through acts of kindness and generosity is definitely of great benefit to them.

## WANDERING

When highly realized beings die, their consciousness is ejected up through the central channel and out the top of their head via the wisdom wind. In ordinary beings, karmic winds drive consciousness out through any part of the body *except* the central channel. Ordinary beings subject to dualistic confusion, commonly experience the familiar reality they lived during their lifetimes. The abhidharma and the Dzogchen *Self Arising Tantra* both state that if you are not able to recognize the clear light, your habitual patterns reactivate and the corresponding visions can remain very vivid for about two and a half weeks, or even a little longer.

Because thoughts are extremely powerful in determining experience, beings in the sixth bardo have full-blown tactile hallucinations. Not recognizing what has happened, you just continue distracting yourself as you have always done. During this time, you will have experiences identical to what you typically saw and heard during your life. You will dress as you are used to and busy yourself in familiar ways. You wander around the house or the places you used to work. Your psycho-physical habits are still powerful.

The transparent mental body with which you are identified is replete with feelings and sense consciousnesses, although your perception and experience are very unstable, as in a dream. The only ones who can see the mental body are those

who are in the same situation or highly developed beings with wisdom eyes. So after two and a half weeks, most of the visions will have subsided. It helps to have been practicing meditation and mindfulness during your life because in the bardo, the moment you think of something, it manifests. There is no effort required for this to be so. Thoughts become extremely powerful and your mind is virtually controlled by habit patterns. Engrossed with our physical body and shielded by layers of karmic involvement, we don't see such immediate effects while we are alive. But in the bardo, although dualistic conceptions can still operate, certain psycho-physical barriers are completely gone.

At this time, the continual wandering of your mental body may become tiresome and you may start to have some doubts that your practice will ever lead to a higher rebirth or to the pure lands. Do not be discouraged. Devoted practitioners can still have a liberating insight at this time and completely change their direction. The mind is very powerful now, and whatever you imagine will happen immediately. If you recite the Seven Line Prayer three times, chant the Vajra Guru Mantra and visualize Guru Padmasambhava, he will definitely be with you. Any or all of the buddhas will appear the instant they are invoked. Thought is so powerful at this point that the mind is immediately and profoundly transposed into the context of one's mental events. If one can take advantage of this, it can serve as a great support for a successful transmigration.

The true devotee is never separate from the guru. It is said that the guru takes up residence on the devotee's doorstep. I will tell you a short story about this. The fifth Dalai Lama became the King of Tibet, and although he was a Gelugpa outwardly, his inner practice had strong roots in the Nyingmapa tradition. He was also a great terton. A well known geshe named Tugger was his good friend. One day Tugger arrived and tried to climb into the Dalai Lama's room through the window. The Dalai Lama asked him why he didn't use the door and Tugger replied "I know that Guru Padmasambhava sits on your threshold, and I didn't want to crush him."

In the Mahayana Sutras, Buddha Shakyamuni declared, "Whenever anyone thinks of me, I am immediately present right there before them." This is not only true of the Buddha; if you focus on anyone with true love and compassion at this point, your experience is instantly changed. Simply meditating on the true nature for one moment transforms everything. It is extremely important to train our minds in the ways of love and compassion. Whenever you are faced with a difficult situation, if you can simply relax your mind, feel back into meditation and reconnect with pure love and the presence of Guru Padmasambhava, you are developing a very important skill. In this way, the more frightening bardo experiences will remind you to return to the primordial source and merge your mind with Guru Rinpoche, Vajrasattva, or any of the buddhas. All the terrifying noises and uncomfortable visions are related to the winds. If you learn about these phenomena now, the bardo experiences will be just like a fire alarm going off, and you will remember precisely what you need to do.

Bardo beings can move freely in any direction without encountering obstacles. The Buddha taught that the mental body could be stopped only by two things,

entry into the womb of a female with whom you share a karmic connection for conception, and *dorje-den* or vajrasana, the diamond seat at Bodhgaya. There is a powerful double vajra directly under the spot where Buddha meditated. That place and your own mother's womb cannot be penetrated by the mental body. Other than this, you are free to go anywhere. The mental body has no visa or immigration problems. Travel is extremely quick. Maybe you'll fly to Tibet, circle it three times and zip back to America. However, it is all a little uncomfortable, because everything is so unstable.

At this point, bardo voyagers are restless, and their uncomfortable feelings gradually increase. This continues for about two weeks. You don't like who you are or your circumstances even though you may not recognize your real situation. For the ordinary individual the speed and uncontrollable chaos is overwhelming. Fear and anxiety may come to dominate your mood.

There are no gross elements present at this stage, but the bardo consciousness is developing in relation to the karmic winds of the four elements: earth, water, fire, and air. These four winds interact with our habit patterns and emotional instability and give rise to further visions, which tend to be rather frightening. When the earth wind becomes unbalanced, it causes you to feel like there are landslides and earthquakes. As the water wind is affected, you get stormy visions of heavy rain and crashing waves, as if there were a hurricane, and this makes your consciousness more unsteady. When the fire wind is influenced, you'll see houses, buildings, and whole cities burning and great fires spreading through mountain forests. When the wind of air is affected, there will be intense pressures, howling and rumbling, like a tornado is approaching. If you were a kind-hearted, loving person, a guide often appears to assist you through this phase. This is very helpful because the situation is beginning to seem exhausting and endless, while new changes are developing rapidly. For those who have been involved in negative activities like torturing, killing humans or even butchering animals, malicious beings appear who cause trouble and confusion for them wherever they go. Any time they begin to feel safe and secure, someone suddenly appears to disturb them and destroy their peace of mind. This happens over and over again.

According to the Vajrayana, the sun and moon are directly connected to the red and white elements which cause our experience of day and night. This is what we usually experience, but on the bardo, these two elements separate and disintegrate and without them there is neither night nor day. So, during this part of the journey, the environment appears in a dim twilight.

After about three weeks, the habit patterns of your previous life begin losing force and dissolving. Their energy begins to wane and your normal vision of things is shown to be false. At this point, your consciousness comes to a crisis of deep uncertainty about the nature of existence. Everyone who wanders this far into the bardo will have this kind of experience, regardless of their habits. Gradually, visions of a future life appear like the glow before sunrise. This gets stronger and clearer as you approach the dawn of future habit patterns and karmic rebirth. It is not yet very bright, but even so, it is attractive because one is tired of being afraid and wandering without support.

During the fourth week the emergent pattern of the future becomes even stronger. You start to feel comfortable with it. Association with the old body of habits is ending as the new form arises and you like the feel of the energy. It's like taking birth in the god realm, with a rosy anticipation of some security as the light slowly increases.

While the dawn of the future life is inevitably approaching, lights of different colors and intensities will appear. The nature of your thoughts and attachments determine which color is attractive and where you will take rebirth. By the seventh week almost all attention to past memories is abandoned, and your focus has shifted to the new situation. Things become increasingly defined until, after forty-nine days, the average person takes up residence in a womb.

In most cases, reincarnation is not a conscious decision; it is rebirth by the power of karma. If you have not practiced, you will have difficulty recognizing the opportunities for liberation in the clear light, and you will be carried by the force of karmic wind. It will drive you along and you won't have much choice. Practitioners who have some understanding of the mind have the ability to influence their destination and choose a higher rebirth. They may even get to be born to parents they like. But most beings just wander for awhile, visiting different places in their mental body. After an average of forty-nine days, they re-enter the bardo of birth and life in one of the six realms according to their karmas.

When consciousness begins to take rebirth it is conceived in the same way that it left: between the two elements contributed by the parents, the red element from the mother and the white element from the father. During conception, consciousness is again trapped between the two elements, where it is relatively comfortable for awhile. In human beings, this usually results in birth from a womb. Buddha described four ways to take birth: from a womb, through an egg, in the presence of moisture, and miraculously, or instantaneously. These are the four types of birth possible for beings.

As Guru Padmasambhava said:

**WHEN THE BARDO OF TRANSMIGRATION IS DAWNING UPON ME  
HOLDING ONE-POINTEDLY TO THAT SINGLE GREAT WISH**

Concentrating your attention with devotion and spiritual inspiration is what really matters now. Maintaining one-pointed mind is extremely important. You've heard me say many times that the mind is powerful; it's the engine for all our activities. But in this bardo its power is so great that if we have even a little devotion and inspiration, we can stop being scattered and make significant progress toward accomplishing our goals.

Buddha Shakyamuni said, "Inspiration and devotion are the door to enlightenment." You must have them in order for practice and meditation to ripen into realization. Without them, we close the door to awakening. Inspiration and devotion connect what you learn with the energy of the heart. You may have

memorized all of the Buddha's teachings and be very educated and culturally sophisticated, but without inspired devotion, this is dry knowledge and will be of no help in the face of death. Even during your life you'll only touch the surface of the teachings and never come to a profound understanding of yourself.

If we study the great realizers, we find that every one of them demonstrated three things: a single-pointed mind, inspired vision and great devotion. These qualities led them to transcendent awakening. The great Dzogchen master and scholar Longchenpa claimed that his final realization was due to the inspiration of the lineage masters and devotion to his teachers. Look at the life of Milarepa, who had no monastic education. How did he attain enlightenment? He had tremendous devotion to his teacher, cherishing Marpa's every word in his heart, like drops of golden nectar. Marpa's teachings inspired him to attain Buddhahood. By simply accepting his guru's every word as true, Milarepa was able to focus one-pointedly on that single great wish and became one of the most accomplished masters of Tibetan Buddhism.

## CONNECT FIRMLY WITH YOUR FORMER GOOD KARMA

Joyful effort creates the continuity which lies at the heart of spiritual growth. Therefore, joyfully reestablish a link with your good karma. The bodhicitta motivation must be uninterrupted. Courage, joyful effort, commitment and confidence are the essence of maintaining that connection. In Tibetan we would say *n'en jen tut* which means firmly re-connecting with our stream of merit, so that body, speech and mind are continually conjoined with the path.

In Tibet and India farmers dig irrigation channels to bring water to their fields. They clear out all the debris that collects so the water won't flow over the sides, but can continue on to the fields. Guru Padmasambhava used the example of renovating a broken channel to indicate how you should correct your understanding and try to ensure a reconnection with the Dharma in your future life.

The Vajrayana is replete with effective techniques to help us reconnect with clarity. Having missed all the previous opportunities, coming to realization in the sixth bardo is like linking one continuum with another, so that the flow of virtue is uninterrupted across lives. By one-pointedly holding this single great wish, we secure the way, leading consciousness directly to the heart of Amitabha in the nirmanakaya pure land. The bardos have to be learned through diligent study and practice so that we become intimate with this territory, not just intellectually acquainted, but adept in our responsiveness. With practice, you can definitely reach enlightenment either during or immediately after the moment of death. If we miss both those opportunities, Guru Padmasambhava advises us to use the technique of repairing the channel to reconnect with our higher intelligence, because consciousness is looking to take rebirth.

**CLOSING THE WOMB DOOR, REMEMBER TO TURN AWAY. IT IS THE VERY TIME WHEN COURAGE AND PURE PERCEPTION ARE NEEDED.**

Now is the time to renew your joyful efforts, and prepare to take rebirth. The

teachings explain that we still have many choices, which appear as different lights. Whenever dull lights loom before you, try to avoid them. If a light is bright and strong, go for it, even if it makes you feel a little uncomfortable. You're moving toward conception and rebirth and are in the process of choosing your parents. The more brilliant lights lead to good parents who are kind and supportive. The weak, dull glow may seem more easy-going, and attractive but will turn out to be a poor choice. Ideally, the couple should be very spiritual, open, kind, compassionate and intelligent; these are the best kind of parents to connect with. Courage, pure perception, and high motivations are really needed now, in order to avoid an inauspicious situation.

When you see these lights in the bardo of karmic possibilities, remember the instructions. If consciousness is drawn toward the dreamy dull lights, muster all your strength and courage to pull yourself back from going in that direction. Remember the teachings and recognize the primordial nature of mind. If this is not possible, at least hold to pure perceptions and have good thoughts. This will turn you away from lower rebirths.

Consciousness is conceived through the perfect union of the red and white elements contributed by the mother and father. If the three humors, the bile, winds and flames are all in balance, consciousness will be bound up with the elements of conception. Immediately before you are about to be conceived, you'll see your parents in union. If you are to be a girl, you naturally develop two emotions: attachment to the father and jealousy toward the mother. If you are going to be a boy; you'll attach to the mother and be jealous of the father. To avoid this reaction, meditate on your parents as the father and mother deities in *yab-yum*. Regard them as Vajrasattva and his consort, or as Guru Padmasambhava and one of his consorts. See the mother as wisdom and the father as skillful means, empowering your consciousness through their union. In this way, conception is a great moment, an extraordinary opportunity to see everything as the mandala of the deities and a manifestation of transcendent wisdom. In full awareness of the innate purity of the world you are approaching, see the womb as a pure land, like Akanistha. The nine or ten months you remain there symbolize the yanas or the bhumis.

Realized beings are conceived at a moment when both the mother and father are in a very beautiful state. One-pointedness, devotion and inspiration have come together in such a powerful way that even the parents notice remarkable signs. Wonderful dreams and omens often accompany the conception and birth of a tulku. Tulkus born this way are generally not totally enlightened. They have a good understanding of the true nature and are able to maintain a continuity of awareness throughout the process of transmigration. This allows a degree of choice regarding rebirth.

When the fetus is completely developed, realized beings come forth with very special indications. For instance, they are often born without causing the mother any pain. Her state may even be blissful and tranquil, accompanied by great signs like rainbows and other omens. Or perhaps immediately following the moment of birth the infant recites some mantra, or says a few auspicious words. These babies take birth with great understanding and awareness. Many of them remember part

of their life in the womb, and some even remember who they were before conception. A number of the great masters could remember everyone they'd ever been in the past quite clearly. These memories of past lives usually fade after the child is two or three years old, under the influence of innate and acquired habit patterns.

## **FULL CIRCLE**

This completes the Transmigration Bardo and we're back in the Bardo of Birth and Life, which was explained at the beginning. We've completed a big circle, sightseeing all around the islands, and finally have come back to where we started.

To really understand the bardos, it is necessary to take up the practice. This is essential. Practice means to mingle our mind with what is positive; activities based in love, compassion and the wisdom which arises through profound meditation on the true nature. One of the most valuable activities in our lives is spiritual practice. Although you may have many other priorities, try to understand why this effort is so important. You can cultivate ways now which will reap untold benefits not only during this life, but also in endless future lives.

From the viewpoint of enlightenment, transmigrators in the bardos seem as if they are caught in their own imaginary visions, like a child who encloses himself within a sand castle and then makes a big fuss about getting out. To a good practitioner, bardo phenomena are like magical projections. It is obvious that none of it has objective existence. The whole mirage completely evaporates into the luminosity of the true nature. No longer do you experience confusion and struggle. For those who are enlightened through practice in this lifetime, there is no bardo experience at all. Everything is spontaneously transformed into the expanse of primordial wisdom. This is the state which was realized by Garab Dorje, Guru Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra and other great masters. The bardo cycle is completely terminated and there is no return to delusion.

Again, it is very useful to inquire in what way is your current perception of things any different from visions in the bardo or the dream state? All phenomena, all perceptions and all experiences encountered in any realm or bardo are of the same nature. The experience we are having in this moment is essentially no different from any form of experience anywhere. Even though we think this is solid and real, what we are seeing now is no more substantial than these other dimensions which we think are either less real or completely imaginary. In fact, they are all very much the same. There is no difference as to their nature. We think this experience is more real due to the strength of our habitual clinging. Presently, this form seems to be established, and we are accustomed to grasping in it, so we feel that this naïve modality is real. Such concepts originate in our mind, which is immersed in duality and ego-clinging. In ignorance, mind creates elaborate notions and fabrications, defines boundaries, builds walls, and invents rules and regulations that perpetuate conditions which are suffered in turn, by the mind. Ultimately, neither conventional reality nor the bardo experiences exist as we believe them to. Our vision is obscured by dualism. The truth transcends conceptions.

The dualistic mind may not believe the bardos exist in any sense, but this is a very narrow view. The bardos exist in other ways than how we normally perceive things. They arise in the sphere of primordial wisdom, beyond subject-object dualism and all ego-clinging, but they do not exist at all within the territory of dualistic conceptions. For that reason, Buddha Shakyamuni taught that sentient beings live in a state of untruth. We arise in ignorance, rely on confusion and bewildered states, and create more confusion. Within this chaos we are so totally involved with delusion and suffering that we don't see that everything we experience is the result of what we ourselves have set in motion. Trouble returns to us like an echo. This is karma and it must be understood. Basically, there are two ways to purify karma; the tough way is through experience, the smooth way is to purify it through practice. Meditate deeply on all of this and then practice diligently to remove any obstacles to clear understanding.

Great beauty exists in the primordial expanse of the true nature where all beings and worlds abide in perfect union, beyond the confines of dualism. Ego-clinging and attachment create obstacles and block our awareness of this. To overcome these barriers we practice and meditate according to the Buddha's teachings. We must learn to go beyond everything. That is what Avalokitesvara meant when he said "no eye, no ear, no form, no sound," in the Heart Sutra. We have to break with every possible style of ego-clinging and dualistic thinking. This is the end of practice. The true nature will not be discovered outside of your mind. You will not encounter it by searching across the continents. The reality transcending dualistic conceptions is directly revealed as the ground of mind. Discover this and abide in the truth of pristine awareness.

Realization depends on practice and meditation. Begin by generating the bodhicitta and then visualize the Buddha or Guru Padmasambhava while reciting the Vajra-Guru Mantra. Receive the blessing energy from Guru Padmasambhava in the form of lights and mingle it inseparably with your mind. Meditate in that state without making any particular judgment or forming conceptions. This is the simplest way to meditate. Don't think practice has to be difficult and fancy. There is no need to take up an elaborate discipline.

There was a famous Indian master who came to Tibet around the 11th century named Phadampa Sangye. He believed that practice does not have to be all that formal or complicated. As he explained it, practice means keeping mind with the self. To be more loving and compassionate and to maintain that disposition is the essence of it. You don't have to go anywhere to get that because you already have that capacity within you. This is very true. You don't have to do anything difficult or make a big deal about practice. It is just something that you can do very simply in this or any other moment. If you understand this, it becomes natural to develop courage and strength.

Paltrul Rinpoche said that wherever you go, you have your body, your speech and your mind. Simply apply yourself to every situation with the bodhicitta motivation. You don't need any other ingredients. The spot where you are sitting now is as good as any. Actually, if you are loving and compassionate, you are already displaying the living form of the practice. Relax and radiate peace to all

beings. In this way, you may even consider yourself the vehicle of practice. That is what I think we should do.

Through practice, we can accept and understand that death is a natural stage of life. After birth and infancy we become children, teenagers and grown ups; finally we grow old and die. Knowing this, why are we afraid and attached? It makes more sense to see every aspect of our lives as part of a beautiful rainbow which has many different colors. By clearly knowing the truth, death becomes a once in a lifetime opportunity to attain enlightenment.

## QUESTIONS and ANSWERS

Q: Is the process of bardo and rebirth the same for all human beings regardless of whether they have Vajrayana training or not?

A: Yes, everybody goes through this process, whether they are Buddhist or not. All sentient beings take birth. They all have five aggregates. They must have parents to contribute the two elements and these elements are going to dissolve at death. Whether Buddhist or non-buddhist, earth dissolves into water, water evaporates into fire, and all physical systems degenerate. The details of the visionary sequences may vary according to one's beliefs, but basically everybody will have similar experiences. According to the Vajrayana teachings, the bardo visions are reflections of your mental state, so the forms and images do not always have to appear in the same way for everybody. There may be differences as to the color and the shape of the visions, but the main thing is to recognize them as projections of your own consciousness. Therefore in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Guru Padmasambhava repeats, "Do not be afraid of your own visions. Don't be afraid when the wrathful deities appear. Do not be distracted. Recognize them as your own mind forms." He repeats that again and again throughout these teachings. This is the basic message, the main point.

Q: Eastern teachers postulate many births and deaths. Western teachers express only one birth and death. Are western teachings incomplete?

A: In my heart I feel we are all considering the same thing and are just using different methods or different maps. Western masters use a one-life model, and eastern masters prefer a paradigm that assumes many lives. One focuses exclusively on today and the other provides a schedule for tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. There is only one true nature and it doesn't have any divisions such as east or west. However, I strongly believe that we have to come to this fundamental recognition in order to be liberated. Simply believing something could lead you to some kind of a higher state for a time, but then you might have to repeat the whole process again. On the other hand, if you come to understand the visions as projections of your own mind, you can really bring an end to this cycle. The form of the visions are not as important as the recognition that what you see is part of your mind, without making dualistic judgments. To have hope and fear will not help us. If you have a good understanding and practice pure perception, then the demons, the gods and everything else are known to abide in one single state. Developing that understanding to the point of equanimity is the essential realization.

Q: Do you think it is possible for human consciousness to be reborn in the animal realm or in the body of an insect, or in one of the other realms?

A: Yes, definitely. I didn't mention this because I didn't want to scare you! With the appropriate causes and conditions, you could be reborn anywhere. There are a wide selection of openings.

Q: If consciousness is coming into the bardo of possibilities and you are not practiced enough to have control over rebirth, is your consciousness yanked out of the bardo all of a sudden and you find yourself in a womb?

A: You are not forcefully yanked but your visions lead you there. You are drawn to a place that seems safe and comfortable. It happens naturally, in the same way that we like to go to the park. You see that environment and you want to go there and rest. Since you are very unstable and moved about by karma, the womb looks like an attractive place to rest and find shelter. Once there, you want to stay. There is no force indirectly causing this to happen other than your own karma. When conception has taken place in a womb, active consciousness subsides and awareness becomes very dark and dull. Having associated with the developing fetus, the four skandhas which were so restless during the previous bardos exist in a subtle, latent state.

Q: Is there a conscious decision taking place to abide in the pure state or to return and take rebirth as a great bodhisattva might?

A: It happens spontaneously. There is no moment of decision outside of one's bodhicitta commitment. In this way, there is the ability to serve sentient beings more effectively. When you merge with the true nature, you are completely aware. You know what you are doing and what you will do in the clear light of wisdom. That is definitely a wonderful reward. From there, it is perfectly natural to emanate in some form to help sentient beings, specifically, to manifest in the most suitable ways. You naturally feel into the appropriate circumstance and follow that course. The power of compassion spontaneously orients the emanation without any effort. You could enjoy the dharmakaya state for a while before manifesting in the sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya forms in response to the needs of sentient beings. And you are not limited to human birth. You can manifest as a god, an animal or whatever would be most beneficial.

Q: What happens when you don't choose a womb?

A: Are you thinking that you wouldn't take birth at all?

Q: Yes.

A: Generally, you can't make the choice. There is nothing causing you to stay there. Your karmic wind will carry you and you won't be able to turn away, so you must choose; this is an opportunity.

Q: If a person commits suicide, is there karmic retribution in the bardo? Do they have to stay longer? What happens in the bardo after suicide?

A: Generally, everybody follows the same pattern of dissolution, but if someone died while angry and holding very strong attachments such as jealousy, this could extend their stay in the bardo. Due to deep attachment and clinging to negative emotions, they might continue to hover in the bardo, but it won't necessarily always happen this way. A lot depends upon their last moment of consciousness before death. If they aren't particularly angry or jealous, then their disposition could change and they would have a normal bardo experience. But to die under the influence of powerful emotions could completely change this situation.

Q: I had an experience after a family member died in which I felt like they were present with me and trying to help by telling me something. Does this mean that they were still in the bardo and trying to communicate due to attachment?

A: I don't think so. Sometimes that happens, but if you experience warm feelings and a sense of goodness, this is usually a nice reverberation they have left. In Tibet we call this energy *lha*. Even though the person died a long time ago, there may still be blessing potential which remains from their being a good person with strong altruistic motivations. This *lha* is not physical or mental. It is the power resonance of that person and may remain for a long time. A good person has good *lha* and a bad person has bad *lha*. They say that an especially good person's spirit can affect family members for quite a few generations.

Q: Is the world a chain of existence and nonexistence happening very rapidly in succession along a time line or is it all within an eternal moment?

A: The world is based upon continual changes of state. Everything is transformed, one subtle instant after another. This doesn't merely apply to the external world; even what you call your self changes from moment to moment. These subtle instants are discrete, independent states which occur very rapidly, following one upon another, continuously. The first moment is not the second moment, the second moment is not the third moment. These "sparks" are also directly dependent on each other. The first becomes the cause of the second, and the second becomes the cause of the third. Things consist of these chains of moving moments. In Buddhism this is called relative truth. We are all experiencing momentary change on the relative level, but on the absolute level, things neither exist nor do they not exist. The categories of existence and non-existence are part of a conceptual game. The absolute level is beyond existence and non-existence.

Q: I've read that there are mind tulkus, body tulkus and speech tulkus which all emanate from the same being. Do these three ever incarnate at the same time?

A: Why not? That is their choice. They can all manifest at once or keep some time between them. They don't have to follow any laws! (laughter) They can do whatever they like.

Q: Concerning the four kinds of enlightened deaths, you said that practitioners give up doubt and fear, but do they really give up hope, too?

A: Yes, they also give up hope. They don't hope and they have no fears. They go beyond both of these. Hope and fear go together. In fact, they are very good friends. If you lose one, then the other is kind of disappointed and leaves, too.

Q: How did you figure all this out?

A: We have to refer to the Buddha and Padmasambhava. These are their teachings. Guru Padmasambhava compassionately condensed them for presentation in a simple form. In Buddhism, we believe that when you discover primordial wisdom, you are fully aware so that there is no impediment to knowledge of all things. You can understand everything, even subtle phenomena, in detail. Primordial wisdom is that powerful. Guru Padmasambhava and the Buddha have perfectly realized that primordial nature, and since their wisdom is actively involved with the liberation of sentient beings, in the spirit of compassion and loving-kindness, they have given these teachings for our benefit.

Q: No one ever came back and said "This is it?"

A: In Tibet, there have been some people who have returned from death. Their outer breath stops completely so that they are effectively dead, but their inner breath is somehow suspended. They might remain like this for an entire week and then come back and explain what they have been through. Generally, in Tibet, they don't cremate the body immediately after death. They keep it around for at least three days, and many times people will wait forty-nine days, so there is a lot of time to come back! In Tibet, those who come back are known as *delogs*. Often they become very passionate spiritual teachers. There were six or seven renowned delogs, particularly in eastern Tibet.

A: One woman who died and came back related the details of her experience in a book. It may have been destroyed by the Chinese, but it was all written down at one point. She met many bardo beings who gave her messages to deliver to people she didn't even know, living in different parts of the country. The bardo beings gave her their family names, described the places where they lived, and asked her to deliver messages. When she returned to life, she delivered them to the right people. Many of the visions and experiences of the woman correspond exactly to the descriptions given in bardo teachings.

Q: You were talking about how everyone perceives things differently, I was wondering if enlightened people perceive things similarly?

A: Definitely. But even among the buddhas, I think we can see some individual differences according to the way they express their wisdom. They all see pretty much the same world we see, but in specific, the teachings speak of two kinds of knowledge; knowledge of variety and knowledge of what is. Buddhas can see the world we see, but they also see it as it is. Ultimately, a buddha's vision can't be explained. The famous Indian master Dharmakirti wrote that the realization of an

enlightened being is inconceivable.

Q: What happens if you rarely dream?

A: You are in a state known as deep sleep. The five consciousnesses have entered the sixth consciousness and the sixth consciousness is submerged in the *alaya*, the eighth consciousness or ground of the mind. This is dreamless, deep sleep. Practice and meditation will help lighten the mind and activate dreams.

Q: In our society, if someone is really sick and dying in the hospital, instead of letting the process happen naturally, they are either given chemicals or are attached to machines. What does this do to the journey? How does it affect the process?

A: According to the bardo teaching, it is important to let people die naturally, and not to interfere with futile techniques or drugs that dull awareness. If it is not going to cure them, perhaps it would be better not to employ such means. I have heard about these machines. Some people are left on them for a long time, and I don't think that is really helping them. If their time has expired and we don't allow them to depart, it is just like holding them back and trying to hang on in the wrong way. Use medicines and all those techniques as long as they are useful, but when it is time to leave, it is better to just let it happen

Can your progress be hindered if you are connected to machines? That depends. If you are a very good practitioner, I really don't think anything will hinder you. But if you are just a beginning practitioner, it could definitely interfere with your progress and create a big distraction. At the time of death the inner sensations and feelings caused by the machine may be very strong and affect your ability to concentrate. If your mind is not very clear at that point, you could remain in a dull state for a long time.

Q: Is the mental body of a bardo being the same as a ghost?

A: Ghosts or pretas, are called *yi-dvags* in Tibetan, and belong to the hungry ghost realm. These beings have already gone through the bardo and have taken rebirth as hungry ghosts. Birth as a hungry ghost is due to prolonged greed and attachment.

Beings transmigrating in the bardo are not ghosts and do not see ghosts. Ghosts exist in another dimension. Beings in the same state can see each other. Transmigrators only see those who are also in transmigration. They can't perceive other levels of existence. This is why we don't see any invisible beings, we only see each other. The Buddha assures us that there are definitely a multitude of invisible beings everywhere. Although we rarely interact with each other, invisible beings can easily see us because humans are resplendent with the qualities of the Buddha nature. Our capacity for love and compassion makes us more powerful than most invisible beings. Therefore, when you are doing a ritual, ask the invisible beings to come, even if they don't want to. the Buddha's message is one of peace and harmony, and we need to get along with everyone. To insure that we're not trespassing and to demonstrate that we are truly harmless, we acknowledge the

intention to realize our Buddha nature for the benefit of all other beings, visible and invisible. So at the beginning of any powerful ceremony, it is good to ask for the approval of the local invisible beings. This is the meaning behind the white and red tormas offerings which precede every Guru Padmasambhava sadhana. These practices are designed to make friends with the invisible beings of the local area.

Q: Is there a world soul and if so, are there bardo places and reincarnations for the cosmos?

A: In Buddhism there is no belief in a universal consciousness. Without observing closely and inquiring, we can emotionally evoke the notion of a universal mind, like a big dome that covers everything. But if we examine very carefully and investigate this through deep contemplation, we will find that there is no universal consciousness.

Q: You mentioned that there are different approaches to enlightenment, citing Garab Dorje as an example of the first kind, while Padmasambhava and Shri Singha illustrated the second kind. What is the difference between the two types?

A: Garab Dorje is an example of the type who realizes it instantly. Guru Padmasambhava embodies the second way, in that he received the teaching and afterwards became realized. Garab Dorje immediately recognized it without hesitating, whereas for Guru Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra, a few moments passed before they understood perfectly. So we study under Guru Padmasambhava, because in our own case, there is a temporal gap between receiving the teachings and attainment.

There is also a third category of practitioners who usually take longer than a few moments, but still manage to reach realization within their lifetime. In terms of enlightenment, they are all identical, but the way they approach realization is slightly different.

All are considered extraordinary practitioners because they became enlightened within one lifetime and attained the rainbow body. This is not a method, but a spontaneous process in which the physical body is completely transformed into light. At the time of physical death, these adepts melt or dissolve the body into light and leave no trace. They just become pure light.

[33,807 words: 1/11/00]

**Colophon:**

*All praise to my Guru  
Wealth of excellent knowledge  
Heart-son of the Lotus Born  
Revealer of secrets  
Perfect embodiment of the precious ultimates  
Who compassionately appears in this world  
For the sake of his devotees.  
Emaho!  
The way has been made clear.  
Aeons of useless wandering have come to an end.  
What more do you need?  
May all who are fortunate enough to encounter this manuscript  
Take it into their deepest heart  
And through the power of the Padma Siddhi  
Realize the trikaya state in this very life.*

These invaluable teachings on the bardos were originally given in Tibetan by Khenchen Palden Sherab on a spring weekend in 1991 at Padma Gochen Ling, a Vajrayana retreat center on the Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee, and again more extensively during a week long retreat in West Palm Beach Florida during the winter of 1994. In the summer of 1996, I, the shameless upasaka Padma Shug Chang, at the request of my teachers, began the work of fusing Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal's English translations of these talks. As of January 2000, this is the unpublished manuscript of those efforts. As the Khenpos have not yet given their final approval to the work, all errors are completely my own responsibility. May every one of the vajra children of the Venerable Khenpo Rinpoches realize the extraordinary treasure they have encountered and through contemplating the ultimate meaning of these bardo teachings, may each of them quickly come into the fullness of perfect awakening, blissful and at ease through all the empty transmigrations, freely enjoying the play of transcendent wisdom and blessing sentient beings in countless world systems for the whole of time to come.

**-Padma Shugchang**

