

# PEACEFUL LIVING, PEACEFUL DYING

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## COURSE OUTLINE AND SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

### A. What Buddhism says about death

1. Death is a natural, inevitable part of life
2. Death is when the mind separates from the body and goes to another life
3. It is important to accept and be aware of death – 2 reasons:
  - a. We will be more careful about our actions
  - b. We will prepare ourselves for death, so we can die with a positive state of mind
4. Death isn't necessarily a bad experience, so we don't have to be afraid of it
5. It is possible to become free of death and rebirth.

### B. Meditation on impermanence

The Buddha said: "Of all plowing, plowing in the autumn is supreme. Of all footprints, the elephant's is supreme. Of all perceptions, remembering death and impermanence is supreme." (*The Extensive Sport Sutra*)

There are two levels of impermanence: **subtle** (things changing every nano-second), and **gross** (things going out of existence by dying, being destroyed, etc.)

There are several ways of meditating on gross impermanence/death, such as the 9-point meditation on death (see below). For a meditation on subtle impermanence, see the book *How to Meditate* (Wisdom Publications).

### C. The 9-point meditation on death

#### a. The inevitability of death

1. Everyone has to die
2. Your lifespan is decreasing continuously
3. The amount of time you have for spiritual practice is very small

*Conclusion: I must practice Dharma, i.e. transform my mind.*

#### b. The uncertainty of the time of death

1. Human life-expectancy is uncertain
2. There are many causes of death
3. Our human body is very fragile

*Conclusion: I must start practicing Dharma now, as the future is so uncertain.*

#### c. The fact that only spiritual practice can help you at the time of death

1. Your loved ones cannot help
2. Your possessions and enjoyments cannot help
3. Your own body cannot help

*Conclusion: I must prioritize Dharma practice, practice it purely, and work on overcoming attachment to the things of this life: body, possessions, family and friends.*

#### **D. The benefits of meditating on death and disadvantages of not doing so**

Benefits of meditating on death:

1. Your actions will become very beneficial
2. Your spiritual practice will become very powerful
3. It is important at the beginning of your practice
4. It is important in the middle of your practice
5. It is important at the end of your practice
6. You will die with a peaceful, happy mind, free of regrets.

Disadvantages of not meditating on death:

1. You will not remember the Dharma
2. Even if you remember the Dharma, you will not practice it
3. Even if you practice Dharma, you will not practice purely
4. Your practice will not be persistent
5. You will create many unwise, negative actions
6. You will have many regrets at the time of death.

#### **E. How to prepare ourselves for death**

1. The four tasks of living and dying (from *Facing Death and Finding Hope* by Christine Longaker):
  - a. understanding and transforming suffering
  - b. healing relationships
  - c. cultivating a spiritual practice (see below)
  - d. finding meaning in life
2. Cultivate a spiritual practice—some recommended practices from the Buddhist tradition include:
  - a. living ethically
  - b. studying spiritual teachings
  - c. taking refuge
  - d. mindfulness
  - e. meditations on loving-kindness and compassion
  - f. purification practices, mantras, and prayers

#### **F. The five powers** (from *The Seven-Point Mind Training* by Geshe Chekawa)

1. The Power of the White Seed: give up attachment to your possessions and make offerings of them (i.e. give them away); meditate on refuge in the Three Jewels; generate positive thoughts such as bodhicitta; reaffirm your commitment to whatever spiritual goals and values you cultivated during your life.
2. The Power of Intention: generate strong, positive resolutions such as not allowing your mind to come under the influence of negative, disturbing emotions, or not letting your mind be separated from the altruistic attitude of bodhicitta. In general, approach death in a positive state of mind, such as wanting to use the experience to

create the causes for enlightenment and to help all beings. For example, thinking: “No matter what happens, may I always have love and compassion for all beings, and use every experience that occurs to get closer to enlightenment for the benefit of all beings.”

3. The Power of Countering Negativity: remember the disadvantages of the disturbing emotions – anger, attachment, pride, jealousy, and so on – and resolve to not let your mind get caught up in them, and instead apply antidotes to them. Do purification with the four powers (regret, reliance, remedy, and resolve).

4. The Power of Prayer: make strong prayers to never be separated from bodhicitta, to not be dominated by the misconception of self or the disturbing emotions, to obtain a fortunate rebirth in the next life so you can continue your practice of the Dharma, and so forth. Dedicate all your virtues to the welfare of all sentient beings. You can also pray that by undergoing whatever suffering occurs at the time of death, all the negative karma, obscurations, etc. of yourself and all other beings will be purified.

5. The Power of Familiarity: whatever we are most familiar with, or habituated to, is what will arise most easily and naturally in our mind. If we are familiar with anger, anger will arise easily, again and again. But if we are familiar with compassion, that is what will arise most easily and frequently in our mind. So during our life we generate as much love and compassion as possible, and we can continue doing this while dying. We can also utilize whatever difficulties we face at the time of death to reflect on the teachings, e.g. remembering the suffering nature of samsara, and developing compassion for all beings.

When the time of death comes, lie on your right side with your right ring finger blocking your right nostril (this is the “lion posture” used by the Buddha during his Parinirvana). Meditate on tong-len (taking and giving), and on the emptiness of true existence of all things.

## **G. Helping others who are dying**

1. Working on our own emotions (see section I. below)
2. Giving hope and finding forgiveness
3. If the dying person is a Buddhist....
4. If the dying person follows another religion....
5. If the dying person is non-religious....
6. Accumulating and dedicating merit

## **H. The eight stages of the death process**

*There are eight stages in the death process. On the first four stages, the mind is still on the gross level. The gross level of mind includes sensory experiences and gross thoughts; these gradually diminish over these four stages.*

### **1. The earth element absorbs; the mirage vision appears**

The earth element is the quality of solidity in our body. As it absorbs, our body loses strength, becomes thinner and weaker, and we feel drained of energy. It becomes difficult to sit upright, or to hold anything. Our body color fades, and our cheeks become sunken. Our eyesight becomes unclear, and it becomes difficult to open and close the eyes. These are the outer signs of the first stage of the death process, and the inner sign is a vision of a silver-blue mirage.

### **2. The water element absorbs; the vision of smoke appears.**

The water element consists of all the fluids in the body, as well as the quality of cohesion—what makes things stick together. As it absorbs, we start to feel dry in the eyes, mouth, and throat. It becomes difficult to move the tongue. Our sense of hearing weakens, and the ringing in the ears ceases. Our mind may become hazy, frustrated, and nervous. We experience an inner vision of a haze with swirling wisps of smoke.

### **3. The fire element absorbs; the vision of sparks appears.**

The fire element is the heat in our body. At this stage, our mouth and nose dry up completely. The warmth of the body begins to disappear, usually from the feet and hands to the heart. We can no longer eat, drink or digest anything. Our mind alternates between clarity and confusion. We can't remember the names of people, even family and friends; we may not even recognize them. Our sense of smell weakens, and our breathing becomes difficult: breathing in becomes very weak, and breathing out becomes stronger and longer. We experience an inner vision of shimmering lights, like sparks or fireflies in space.

### **4. The air element absorbs; the vision of a dying flame appears.**

At this stage, we can no longer move our limbs; our body becomes immobile. Our mind becomes bewildered, unaware of the outside world. Everything becomes a blur. Our last feeling of contact with the environment is slipping away. Our senses of taste and touch dissolve. We may have visions—frightening ones if we did negative things in our life, or beautiful, joyful ones if we did good things... Our breathing becomes more and more difficult, then it stops altogether. The last thoughts now cease, and we have an inner vision of a dim red-blue light, or of the last flickering of a candle-flame that is about to go out.

Our gross thoughts and sensory experiences have now ceased. Breathing has ceased, and there is no more movement in the brain or circulatory system. Over the next four stages of the death process, the mind becomes more and more subtle.

### **5. White vision (“luminance”).**

At the beginning of this stage, gross conceptual consciousness absorbs. Due to this, we have a vision of a very clear, empty sky, like the sky in autumn, filled with the brightness of the full moon.

## **6. Red vision (“radiance”).**

This is an inner vision like a clear, empty sky filled with reddish light, like a copper-red sunset.

## **7. Black vision (“Imminence”).**

This is a vision of total darkness, like dark and empty space. It ends in a momentary complete loss of consciousness.

## **8. Clear-light vision**

One awakens out of unconsciousness into the clear light state, the most subtle level of the mind or consciousness. The appearance is like that of the autumn sky at dawn, completely pure and empty, and filled with clear, colorless light.

There’s no certainty as to how long it takes to go through the eight stages. It depends on various factors, such as the causes of death; it could take days, in the case of a natural death, or seconds if death happens suddenly.

There’s also no certainty about the amount of time one stays in the clear-light stage. For a person who has practiced meditation during their life, they may stay in this stage for hours, days, or even weeks. For someone without any experience of meditation, they may stay in it only a few seconds or minutes.

When the clear light of death ceases, the consciousness passes back through the stages of dissolution in reverse order: the black vision, then the red vision, and so forth. As soon as this process begins, the person is in the intermediate (Tib: *bardo*) state, with a subtle body that can travel instantly to any place it thinks of, pass through walls, etc., as it searches for its next rebirth. The form of the bardo body is that of the next rebirth

A lifetime in the intermediate state can last from a moment to seven days, depending on whether or not a suitable birthplace is found. If one is not found within seven days, the being undergoes a “small death,” briefly experiencing the eight stages of death, and then again experiences the eight stages in reverse order as it takes another intermediate state rebirth. This can happen for a total of seven rebirths, or forty-nine days, in the intermediate state. Thus the maximum amount of time one remains in the bardo is 49 days, and during this time a place of rebirth is necessarily found.

## **I. Working with Disturbing Emotions Regarding Death/Dying**

As we approach death, or when facing the death of a loved one, we might find ourselves experiencing painful, disturbing emotions or attitudes. These can include denial, anger, fear or anxiety, sadness, and guilt. What can we do about these?

### **General Ways of Working with Disturbing Emotions**

1) Accept and acknowledge them non-judgmentally. Avoid thinking, “I shouldn’t feel this way” or “I’m bad because I feel this way.” Being judgmental only makes things

worse. Remember that it's only natural to have such emotions, given your present situation.

2) On the other hand, try to not be overwhelmed by them, or get stuck in them. Remember impermanence: emotions are just aspects of your mind, transitory, like clouds passing through the sky. They arise due to causes and conditions, and they will pass.

3) Understand that you have a choice: you can get caught up in the emotion, and even act it out, or you can deal with it in a more skilful way, such as turning your mind to more positive thoughts. Consider the different consequences of these two choices: how they will affect you and the people around you.

4) Learn to de-identify with the emotion. It's not *you*, it's just something passing through your mind. Sometimes it's there, sometimes not. Don't identify with it as "I." Say to yourself "anger/fear is in my mind" rather than "*I* am angry/frightened."

5) Remember the nature of your mind: clear, pure, with infinite potential to feel love, compassion, joy and other positive emotions.

6) Remember that you are not the only one who experiences such emotions. There are many other people who also experience them, and some have even greater suffering than you do (for example, someone who loses several loved ones at the same time). Generate compassion for all other people and beings, wishing them to be free from all suffering and its causes.

Disturbing emotions are usually based on self-centeredness, the attitude that thinks, "I am more important than others." Meditating on love and compassion, or doing the practice of tonglen (taking and giving) will help us to decrease self-cherishing and increase altruism: caring for others. The more altruism we have, the less our mind will be invaded by disturbing emotions. Also, these meditations are very beneficial tools for transforming difficult situations into spiritual growth.

7) Do a reality check: step back and look at what is going on in your mind. Are you seeing things realistically? Or is your mind exaggerating or fantasizing, seeing things unrealistically? If you recognize mistakes in your way of thinking, change them so that you look at things more realistically.

## **J. Working with Specific Emotions/Attitudes**

### **1. Denial**

- a. Gently remind yourself of the inevitability of death: it happens to everyone.
- b. Your denial may be due to fear, so try the methods for working with fear (below). Also, understand that if you become more familiar with and accepting of death, it will seem less frightening.

## **2. Anger**

a. Contemplate the faults of anger:

- 1) It harms you, physically and mentally
- 2) It can become harmful to others, including your loved ones
- 3) It becomes a habit: each time you get angry, you create the cause to get angry again
- 4) Getting angry creates the karma to suffer in the future
- 5) It's a major obstacle to attaining more pure, blissful states such as enlightenment.

Then resolve to refrain from getting angry and acting it out, and instead learn to transform your mind and behavior in more positive ways.

b. If you are angry at someone, generate loving-kindness. Contemplate that this person is just like you: they wish to be happy and to not suffer; generate the *wish* for them to be happy and not suffer. Another way to generate loving-kindness is to bring to mind good things the person has done, or good qualities they have.

c. If you are angry about your sickness or impending death—"Why me?"—remember that you are not the only one having to go through such experiences. All other people have to go through them. And remember karma. Whatever unwanted things happen to us are the result of harmful actions we did in the past. Resolve to refrain from such actions and to do positive, beneficial actions as much as you can. Also, you can do purification to free yourself from the negative actions you have done in the past.

## **3. Fear**

a. Examine your fear: what are you afraid of? Then check: is there something I can do about it? If so, do it. If not, accept it.

b. Pray, take refuge.

c. Fear is usually based on self-centredness, so it's helpful to generate loving-kindness and compassion, and the wish to benefit others.

## **4. Sadness**

a. Sadness is usually due to attachment, not wanting to separate from people and things. Contemplate the faults of attachment, e.g. clinging disturbs the mind, causes unhappiness, and creates problems at the time of death.

b. The best remedy to attachment is to contemplate impermanence and death. We will have to let go of everything and everyone one day; we can start letting go now.

c. Remember that the love and positive experiences you had with your loved ones will live on, after death, in your heart.

d. The mind never dies—it just separates from the body, then continues in another life.

## **5. Guilt**

a. If you feel guilty about negative, harmful things you have done, generate regret, rather than guilt, and do a purification practice with the four opponent powers.

b. Remember impermanence—the I who made the mistake is not something permanent, unchanging, fixed for all of time. There is no permanent "bad" person.

Remember that you also have good qualities, and that you do positive, beneficial things.

c. Do a reality check: is your guilt justified? We sometimes feel guilty when we are healthy and happy while someone else is sick and suffering. Is that correct? Is it helpful? Instead of feeling guilty, resolve to use your health and happiness to be of benefit to others, to help relieve their suffering.

## RECOMMENDED READING

### BUDDHIST TEACHINGS AND PRACTICES FOR DEATH AND DYING

Bokar Rinpoche. *Death and the Art of Dying in Tibetan Buddhism*. San Francisco: ClearPoint Press, 1993.

Dalai Lama, His Holiness, and Hopkins, Jeffrey. *Mind of Clear Light: Advice on Living Well and Dying Consciously*.

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Lama Zopa Rinpoche, edited by Ven. Robina Courtin. *How to Help Your Loved Ones Enjoy Death and Go Happily to Their Next Rebirth*. Free download from [fpmt.org](http://fpmt.org)

Longaker, Christine. *Facing Death and Finding Hope*. London: Century, 1997.

### CARING FOR THE DYING

Buckman, Dr. Robert, *I Don't Know What to Say: How to Help and Support Someone who is Dying*. London: Papermac, 1988.

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Levine, Stephen. *Who Dies? An Investigation of Conscious Living and Conscious Dying*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982.

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