

**NOTES ON DEATH & DYING  
FOR  
VAJRAYANA PRACTITIONERS**

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## Applying the Bardo Teachings

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*Many westerners, having received teachings on the Bardo states, wonder how these might be applied at the time of their death or the death of others. Basically, the teachings say that, rather than fearing death, one should approach the Bardo states as opportunities for enlightenment and, in order to be open to these opportunities, one should have prepared through practice during one's lifetime. However, even with no experience whatsoever, if one can die a "conscious death"—calmly and openly with no fear, anger, or attachment—one can still create the conditions for enlightenment or a fortunate rebirth. These notes were compiled to help all practitioners attain that goal.*

### About These Notes

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The Bardo Thötröl or TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD identifies six Bardos: The Bardos of Life, Dreams, Meditation, Dying, Dharmata, and Becoming. These notes apply only to circumstances surrounding the Bardo of Dying. This is the interval between when the terminal condition first manifests to the moment of physical and spiritual death. The notes seek to address the practical decisions which must be made in helping one die in accordance with the teachings.

### The 'Ideal' Death

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Ideally, one should die in a supportive environment, attended by a Lama or others who are sensitive to the possibilities inherent in the death experience. After the "physical" death, the body should remain undisturbed for a period of three days, during which time prayers are said and ceremonies performed to help guide the surviving consciousness towards enlightenment. After three days, the body may be cremated or otherwise disposed of.

### The Challenge

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Is it possible to create these conditions? What are the laws concerning disposition of the body? Are autopsies required? Embalming? How long can you keep a body at home? Can you be involved in the cremation of the body? Can you bury the body on your property? Is it possible to help someone die a 'good' death? These are some of the questions the notes try to answer.

There are also questions, unique to our modern society, which challenge the Teachings. Consider Organ and Tissue donation: One donor can benefit as many as 40 individuals†, however, organs must be freshly harvested. The usual procedure is that, once the person is diagnosed as “brain dead”, the body (organs) is maintained on Life Support until the organs can be harvested and immediately transported to their new host. So, if the brain is dead but the heart is still beating, is the person, according to the teachings, really dead? These are questions only a Lama can answer.

### **Who These Notes Are For**

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These notes were written for Vajrayana practitioners of all lineages. Although there are many books available containing Bardo teachings, the primary source used for these notes was *The Mirror of Mindfulness* by Tsele Natsok Randgrol as well as the teachings of Chhoje Rinpoche. Those interested in studying the subject in depth are referred to Note 5., Recommended Reading.

Also, each city, county and state may have their own laws regarding the issues presented here. Texas in general, and Dallas County in particular were used as the primary source of information. The questions presented in Note 2. should be asked of the authorities in the locality of interest by the local Dharma Center or practitioner.

### **Toward A Buddhist Hospice**

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The ultimate solution for Vajrayana students would be the establishment of a Buddhist Hospice, staffed by professional and volunteer practitioners under the direction of a resident Lama. This hospice would be dedicated to providing the environment, help, and assistance through which a practitioner might find enlightenment in their journey through the Bardos. May that ideal someday become a reality.

*May whatever merit accumulates from this document be dedicated to the benefit, happiness, and enlightenment of all beings.*

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† *What To Do When Someone Dies*, TLC Group, Dallas, TX, 1992.

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## Practical Considerations

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*In compiling the information below, the following organizations were contacted in Dallas County, Texas - a funeral director, medical examiner's office, a hospice organization, the health department, a memorial society and a crematory. All were extremely open to the questions posed, but admitted the questions were new to them. The entire experience was really interesting in that a great deal was learned by all in the process. The person most knowledgeable and most accommodating turned out to be the owner of a small funeral home.*

*Because, the information is only specific to Texas, please use the following as guidelines for questions to the above persons in your own state or city. The authors strongly advise that every Dharma Center find answers for their own area so they can be of most help to the Sangha at a crucial time. Also, they should urge all members to file instructions with a funeral home and/or their family.*

*The following are the basic questions asked of the above organizations or practical information obtained through Rinpoche's teaching.*

## Acknowledgements

*We would like to acknowledge the generous help provided and the sincere interest expressed in the preparation of these notes to the following persons:*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization</b>
Kelly Best	Hospice Care, Inc. - Dallas
Cindy Lewis	Grove Hill Funeral Hill
Stan Null	Metrocrest Funeral Home
Pierson Ralph	Dallas Area Memorial Society
Dr. Elizabeth Todd	Dallas County Medical Examiner's Office

## Questions

**Q:** *If a person dies at home, can you keep the body in the home for three days?*

**A:** Yes, because there is no specific law against this action. However, you must keep the body between 34 - 40 degrees Fahrenheit for health reasons and to slow decomposition. This can be accomplished with dry ice. The decomposition rate is different by body type and disease.

There is no exception to the law for death from a contagious disease although the medical examiner's office emphasized that this should be a concern for the health of those attending the body. The only agency that seems to have any jurisdiction over the location of a body is the health department who could, with a complaint, investigate and deem the attending unsafe to public health.

**Q:** *Can you transfer a body from the hospital to the home?*

**A:** Yes, if you are deemed by the hospital to be legal family or authorized to make decisions on the disposition of the body.

**Q:** *Are there any funeral homes who will allow you to stay with the unembalmed body for three days?*

**A:** Yes. One was located which was very accommodating and said they would allow the body to be on dry ice for three days and to be attended around the clock. Also, the family and friends can accompany the body to the crematory if requested. In one case a son, who was Buddhist, was allowed to start the fire.

**Q:** *If an autopsy is required by the Medical Examiner, can it be delayed three days?*

**A:** It depends on the type of death, but the **ME's** office said that the family's wishes should be made to the **ME's** office as soon as possible. Usually the family is contacted before an autopsy is begun to get a medical history so the **ME** can decide whether an autopsy is necessary to determine the cause of death. The **ME's** office tries to abide by the wishes of the family and in some cases can draw blood for a toxicology sample, but delay surgical procedures for a few days.

**Q:** *What types of deaths can require an autopsy?*

**A:** Deaths in the home (unless under hospice care), traumatic deaths, all nursing home deaths (most counties don't require), or if death occurs in the hospital within 24 hours of admittance. Not all these will require an autopsy, but there is that possibility. If there is a medical history or doctor who will assure the **ME** that death was from a certain cause, probably no autopsy will be required. If the person is under hospice, paperwork is filed with the **ME** prior to death by the hospice to avoid the possibility of an autopsy.

**Q:** *Does a body have to be embalmed?*

**A:** No, but if you want the body viewed publicly, most funeral homes require embalming which is replacing the blood with embalming fluid.

**Q:** *Can you donate organs or tissue?*

**A:** According to the teachings about dying, subtle consciousness does not leave the body for approximately three days after a person is declared legally dead. Until then, the person is considered alive. Organ harvesting is done after a person is considered legally *brain dead*, but while the heart is still beating and the person is artificially breathing.

Tissue donation is done after the heart and brain have ceased functioning, but within 18 hours of legal death. Rinpoche said that organ and tissue donation would not only disturb the natural dying process and therefore the consciousness but would prematurely end the 'life' as defined by the teachings and would constitute murder. This action could disturb the consciousness and reduce the opportunity for enlightenment. Donation would only be permissible if you knew your organs or tissues were to be used for someone who had a possibility of enlightenment in this lifetime.

**Q:** *Can you wait three days to donate a body to science?*

**A:** Yes, but there is no guarantee it will be accepted especially if there is much decomposition. Also, a body is not accepted if death was from AIDS, if it has been in an automobile accident, if an autopsy has been performed or if there is no use for it, which is often the case.

**Q:** *Can only a doctor sign a death certificate?*

**A:** No. By law a death certificate can be issued by a M. D. , D. O ., Medical Examiner, Justice of the Peace or Coroner. And, in order to bury, to obtain a cremation certificate or a transfer permit you must have a signed death certificate.

**Q:** *Does a funeral home have to be involved?*

**A:** No, the family of the deceased can dispose of the remains. A family member obtains a blank death certificate from the Bureau of Vital Statistics, has a doctor sign it, can take it to the Medical Examiner, Coroner or Justice of the Peace to obtain a cremation certificate, returns to the Bureau for filing of either and can take the body and certificate to the crematory or to a family burial place. If you need to transport the body to another state, you will need a transfer permit as well.

**Q:** *Does a body have to be cremated in a crematory?*

**A:** Yes.

**Q:** *Where can you bury a body or ashes?*

**A:** Burial can be in a cemetery or on a private piece of land from one to five miles from an incorporated city depending on the size of the city. You must get consent from a county judge so that the property deed shows a burial space. If you bury on your land, beware that plot now becomes a cemetery and could make selling that land very difficult in the future. Ashes can be distributed or held wherever you wish.

**Q:** *Are there any organizations who can help you pre-plan or have clout with funeral homes?*

**A:** Most cities have memorial societies. A listing can be found in *Dealing Creatively With Death* by Morgan (see Note 5. Recommend Reading). They will be able to direct you to the most open funeral homes and directors. They also usually have instruction forms for members to file with your funeral home of choice. The cost to belong is modest.

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## Visible Indicators of Impending Death

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Once death is eminent, the nadi-wheels of the chakras fall apart, the five winds disappear and the outer, inner, and secret elements begin to dissolve into each other. These events proceed step by step and are accompanied by physical signs which are identifiable. This section summarizes these signs and the events which precipitate them.

### The Winds

- 1) **First Indicator**
  - **Outer Sign:** Increasingly poor digestion—Cold extremities
  - **Caused By :** Disappearance of the *equal-abiding wind*
- 2) **Second Indicator**
  - **Outer Sign:** Confusion and unclear thinking
  - **Caused By :** Disappearance of the *life-upholding wind*
- 3) **Third Indicator**
  - **Outer Sign:** Extreme constipation
  - **Caused By :** Disappearance of the *downward-clearing wind*
- 4) **Fourth Indicator**
  - **Outer Sign:** Shortness of Breath—Inability to swallow food & drink
  - **Caused By :** Disappearance of the *upward-clearing wind*
- 5) **Fifth Indicator**
  - **Outer Sign:** Shrinking veins—increasing inability to use arms & legs
  - **Caused By :** Disappearance of the *pervading wind*

### The Nadi-Wheels

- 6) **Sixth Indicator**
  - **Outer Sign :** Lack of physical strength in neck and extremities—bad facial complexion and color—increased production of saliva and nasal mucus.
  - **Inner Sign :** Dull, obscured and depressed mind.
  - **Secret Sign:** Vague, mirage-like manifestations of luminosity
  - **Caused by:**
    - a) Disintegration of the *nadi-wheel of the navel*
    - b) Disappearance of the *supporting wind*
    - c) The Earth element dissolving into the Water element

**7) Seventh Indicator**

- **Outer Sign** : Body becomes dry—mouth and tongue dry up—nostrils draw in—great thirst develops
- **Inner Sign** : Mind becomes hazy, irritated, and nervous
- **Secret Sign**: The person experiences a smoky, misty-like haze
- **Caused by**:
  - a) Disintegration of the *nadi-wheel of the heart center*
  - b) Disappearance of the *radiance-producing wind*
  - c) The Water element dissolving into the Fire element

**8) Eighth Indicator**

- **Outer Sign** : The breath chills the mouth and nose—body heat withdraws—the extremities become cold
- **Inner Sign** : The mind feels alternately clear and unclear—outer appearances are not clearly perceived—hardly anything is recognized
- **Secret Sign**: Red lights, like fireflies, appear
- **Caused by**:
  - a) Disintegration of the *nadi-wheel of the throat*
  - b) Disappearance of the *refining wind*
  - c) The Fire element dissolving into the Wind element

**9) Ninth Indicator**

- **Outer Sign** : The eyes turn upward—breath rattles—long exhalations and difficult inhalations
- **Inner Sign** : The person becomes confused and bewildered—various visions are perceived
- **Secret Sign**: Similar to a flaming torch
- **Caused by**:
  - a) Disintegration of the *nadi-wheel of the secret place*
  - b) Disappearance of the *karmic wind of the kalpa*
  - c) The Wind element dissolving into consciousness

**10) Concluding Dissolutions**

- a) The five subsidiary winds disappear
- b) All sense faculties and bases (eyes, nose, ears, tongue and body) gradually degenerate and dissolve. At this point, the person will be unable to interpret or distinguish between forms, sounds, odors, tastes, and textures
- c) Consciousness dissolves into space
- d) The external breathing ceases
- e) The body tone and color fades and dissipates
- f) Only a slight warmth at the heart remains

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## Helping Someone Die

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*Included here are some suggestions on how to help someone die. These suggestions are not comprehensive as there are too many variables associated with circumstances surrounding the death of a person and the environment within which it happens. Included here is a summary of information—easily adapted—which should be applicable in all circumstances. For more in-depth information, please refer to some of the books listed in Note 5, Recommended Reading.*

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### Helping Non-Practitioners

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- 1) **Check your intention**—Affirm every morning, in meditation, that you are working solely for the benefit of the dying person. As with all Dharma practice, if you have “right intention”, your actions will be more compassionate and helpful. Meditate that you will have the clarity to intuitively know how to best help the dying person.
- 2) **Establish Communication**—Studies show that most people with terminal illness know that they are dying even if this information is purposely being withheld from them. Additionally, most dying persons want to talk about it but don’t because it makes their family or friends are uncomfortable.  
  
You can help by encouraging the person to talk about their thoughts, concerns, and fears about dying. Listen without trying to give answers. Ask what would be helpful to them and give them comfort, who they would like to see or call, and what would give them peace on a spiritual level, then try to make those things happen.
- 3) **Resolve Anger**—Encourage the person to recall every situation, person, or event that holds anger for them. Tell them that now is the time for them to resolve all anger, reconcile conflicted relationships, and let all animosity fall away.
- 4) **Give Permission**—Give the person permission to die. As strange as this seems, it is often very helpful for someone to say things like: “It’s okay; you can let go now”, “Don’t worry about anyone now; everyone is just fine, you can go when you’re ready”, “Just relax, everything is taken care off, everybody wishes you well, there is nothing to worry about”. Make every effort to remove any worry, anxiety, or concern that the person may be holding on to.

- 5) **Discourage Negativity**—It is common for those around the dying person to feel anger and display negative thoughts and emotions. Family, friends, care-givers, hospital staff, and others can, at times, feel hostility towards the dying person and each other.

Negative statements are often made in the presence of sleeping, medicated, or comatose persons which can be understood and carry great negative impact. Recent studies show that even heavily anesthetized patients can understand and respond to comments made during operations and recovery. It is extremely important that, to the extent possible, others are encouraged to suppress all negativity in the presence of the dying person.

- 6) **Help Loosen Attachment**—Saying goodbye to family and friends is extremely important for everyone. Unfortunately, the process, if emotional, can create great attachment in the dying person.

It is not uncommon for friends or family members to breakdown and say things to the person like “You can’t die now”, “Please don’t leave me”, “I don’t know what I’ll do without you”, etc. This results in the person clinging to life, friends and family at the very time they should be letting go. This great inner turmoil can result in fear and confusion.

Although you may have little control over this situation, you might be able to suggest that the visitors say their good-byes one at a time, in as calm a manner as possible. You may be able to explain to them individually how essential it is that the remaining hours of the dying person be as peaceful as possible.

- 7) **Just Be There!**—Just being there, creating a space of peace, calmness, and understanding, may be all that you can do, and is often enough. If the person is coherent, encourage them to talk about their concerns. If the person is medicated or comatose, talk to them positively, softly and calmly as though they can hear you. Most likely they can.
- 8) **Spiritual Help**—Always defer to the dying person’s belief system. If the person is Christian, a statue of Jesus will give them more comfort than four-armed Avalokitésvara. Similarly, it is probably not a good idea to give readings from the Bardo Thötröl or TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD to anyone other than a practitioner. The images therein could cause great anxiety in a Jew, Moslem, or Baptist.

Attempt to keep their mind on the present moment. Stand and, if possible, have visitors stand at the head of the dying person. You may want to gently rub the crown of their head to direct their consciousness to that part of the body. Quietly and consistently tell them not to be afraid; that nothing they may perceive is real but only projections of their own mind, directing these thoughts also to the crown of their head.

- 9) **Summary:** Help the person die gently, calmly, and openly without fear, anger, anxiety and hostility.

## Helping Practitioners

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*Most of the suggestions given above are even more important for practitioners and should be implemented. Here are included some additional suggestions especially for Dharma students, however, keep in mind that if a Lama is assisting in the death, the Lama's instructions take precedence over all others.*

- 1) **Pre-Plan**—If possible, work with the practitioner. Have him or her explain to family and friends how they would like to die and what to expect. Find out what practice is being done and ask the practitioner or family members for the appropriate texts, statues, or other Dharma objects so that they will be available when needed.
- 2) **Seek Help**—Contact your Teacher, Dharma Center, or a Lama if one is available. If you don't have a teacher or local Dharma Center, contact a center you might have visited and see if anyone there can advise you on where to get advice. If you know any local Dharma students, call them and ask if they would help you or know anyone who could.
- 3) **Encourage Practice**—At the time of dying, remind the practitioner of his or her practice. Encourage the repetitions of vows, and other practices which may have been taken. These practices will vary according to the lineage and level of the practitioner.

If the person is new to the practice and has had no special instruction, repetition of the refuge vow is helpful. If the person has a teacher, visualizing or feeling the presence of the Lama on the crown of the head is very important.

Standing and directing the speech towards the head, read whatever practice texts have been used and, as this is a practitioner, it is also appropriate to read from the Bardo Thötröl and other books on the Bardo.

- 4) **Detachment**—Encourage the practitioner to drop all clinging and let everything go. Work towards total abandonment. It is crucial to protect the practitioner from emotional friends and relatives at this time.
- 5) **While Dying**—When it appears that death is imminent, the person should be placed in an upright sitting position if possible. If not, then the person should lie on the right side in the lion position. At this time the person, if possible, should concentrate on whatever the main practice is.

You can rub the head and direct and encourage the consciousness to leave through the crown aperture. If a Lama is present, the Phowa, or the ejection of consciousness practice, may be performed at this time. Otherwise, encourage the person to simply remain present and be without fear and confusion.

- 6) **After Death**—If arrangements have been made, the body of the person can be moved to a location where it can be maintained for a period of three days so that the appropriate ceremonies can be performed (see Note 2, Practical Considerations).

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## Recommended Reading

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*The list included here is not comprehensive but consists of those books which have proved very helpful in the areas of Death & Dying. The books are listed alphabetically within each section.*

### General and Practical

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- 1) *Caring for Your Own Dead*, Lisa Carlson, Upper Access Publishers, Hinesburg, Vermont, 1987
- 2) *Dealing Creatively With Death—A Manual of Death Education and Simple Burial*, Twelfth Edition, Ernest Morgan, Barclay House, New York, N. Y. , 1990.
- 3) *Deathing—An Intelligent Alternative for the Final Moments of Life*, Anya Foos-Graber
- 4) *What To Do When Someone Dies*, Buz Overbeck & Joanie Overbeck, TLC Group, Dallas, Texas, 1992
- 5) *When Death Touches Your Life—Practical Help in Preparing For Death*, Mervin E. Thompson, Walker and Company, New York, N. Y. , 1987
- 6) *The Wheel of Life and Death, A Practical and Spiritual Guide*, Phillip Kapleau, Doubleday, New York, N. Y. , 1989

### Teachings

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- 1) *Bardo Teachings—The Way of Death and Rebirth*, Venerable Lama Lodö, Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, N. Y. , 1982
- 2) *Death and Dying—The Tibetan Tradition*, Glenn H. Mullin, Arkana Paperbacks, Boston, Mass., 1986
- 3) *Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism*, Lati Rinbochay & Jeffrey Hopkins, Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, N. Y. , 1979
- 4) *Dying, Death, and the Intermediate State*, Venerable Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, KTD Dharma Goods, Big Rapids, MI, 1981
- 5) *Life, Death and After Death*, Lama Thubten Yeshe, Wisdom Publications, Boston Mass, 1984
- 6) *Mirror of Mindfulness—The Cycle of the Four Bardos*, Tsele Natsok Rangdrol, Shambhala Publications, Boston Mass., 1989
- 7) *Secret Doctrines of the Tibetan Books of the Dead*, Detlef Ingo Lauf, Shambhala Publications, Boston, Mass, 1989
- 8) *The Tibetan Book of the Dead—The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, Francesca Fremantle & Chögyam Trungpa, Shambhala Publications, Boston Mass., 1987