

The Bardo Teachings of Guru Rinpoche

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The text on which this present teaching is based is called A Supplement to the Profound Meaning of Liberation Through Hearing, which is a part of the Cycle of Dispelling All Obstacles, the Accomplishment of the Heart of the Guru. Most of the text was composed by the tertön¹ Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa, and the quotations were composed by Guru Rinpoche himself.

The first thing we must understand about the view of dying and death presented here is that everything we experience or acquire during our lives, everything that appears to us, and everything that apparently exists surrounding us—no matter how wonderful, vivid, or abundant it may be—is utterly impermanent. When something changes from being what it is into being something else, or when it is destroyed or lost in some way, it vanishes as completely as the contents of last night’s dream. Just as you can never recover the images of a previous night’s dream, once something has been destroyed or changed, it is gone. Nothing that is composite (meaning that it results from the coming together of various causes and conditions) is beyond that. Nothing that is composite is permanent, nor can it remain unchanging.

Therefore, everything that we experience during our lives—including our very lives themselves—and everything that we have built up, will at some point be lost. Nothing is beyond what are called the four ends. The four ends are that: (1) all births must end in death; (2) all gatherings must end in separation; (3) all accumulation must end in dispersal; and (4) all creation must end in destruction. Whatever we have around us, and whatever we possess during our lives, we are definitely going to lose. Of all the things to which we become attached during our lives, that to which we are the most attached is, ironically, that which is most fragile—our life itself. The life of any being—especially someone of our species, because humans have a very uncertain life span—is as transitory as a flash of lightning in the midst of the night. It is as fragile as a candle flame in a strong wind. It is as unstable as a bubble that appears on the surface of the water. Like these analogies, a human life is very brief and fragile.

What we call death is when this fragility, this impermanence of human life, finally manifests for us. It means leaving this world and going to our next form of existence. The first thing that needs to be understood about death is that although we become very concerned about death when it happens to us, we are by no means the only person to whom death has happened. Death happens continually to all human beings and to all beings in general. Once any being has been born in any form of existence, it is absolutely certain that this being is going to die once again at some point in time. If you look at it from that point of view—that death is the natural result or completion of the process of birth—you can see that there is no reason to be so unhappy about the idea or the fact of death.

Rather than being so unhappy or obsessively fearful about the prospect of death that you cannot even think about it, it would be better to focus one-pointedly in supplication of the sources of refuge—your teachers, the Three Jewels, and so on, those to whom you look for assistance—in order to go through the process of dying and death in the most positive way you can.

The second point that needs to be emphasized in the beginning is that, not only are you impermanent, but everything you have accumulated during your life will be lost when you die.

All of the things you have accumulated, and all of the people to whom you are attached, will be lost to you when you die. You will never see them again in that form and they will not accompany you through the process of death. They can accompany you up to the moment of your death, but once you die, you are alone. You are going through the process completely alone.

Your possessions in particular cannot help you through the process of dying, and possessions most certainly cannot help you after you are dead. In fact, not only do they not help you, but they can cause you problems. This is the case because all of the things that you did in order to acquire those possessions, and all of the attachment that you have for those possessions and for everything you are leaving behind, can agitate you so much that it can make the process of death—and therefore the subsequent rebirth—much worse than it need be.

The Bardo of Dying: Dissolution and the Four Wisdoms

As we have seen, the different bardos can be categorized and presented in different ways. In this presentation they are divided into three, which are the three bardos that are aspects or parts of the process of dying and death. The first of these is the interval or period of dying—the experience of dying itself, which leads up to, but does not include the actual process after death. This is defined as the process or experience of the separation of your body and mind, which during your life have been integrated. The fundamental characteristic of the experience of dying is called the dissolution of the elements. In the text called *The Tantra of the Play of Wisdom*, it says:

First, earth dissolves into water, water dissolves into fire, fire dissolves into wind, and then wind dissolves into consciousness. This consciousness, which apprehends, finally dissolves into the clear light.

These stages of dissolution occur when three things that sustain your life are exhausted or used up. The first is your vitality. Your vitality is basically the result of your previous accumulation of karma. In any case, when the vitality—the conditions that enable you to remain physically or biologically alive—is used up, then the elements that are the aspects of your physical living being start to dissolve. The second is the karma that has caused you to be reborn as, for example, a human being and has caused you to remain a human being for a certain length of time. The third is the merit that has kept you alive. Your life is maintained by your store of merit. When the particular store of merit that causes this particular life to last is used up, then the elements—the balance of which maintain your health and your life—start to dissolve.

What is meant here by the elements is the fundamental qualities of physical existence, particularly as they are found in biological life. What is called earth refers to the aspect of solidity of a living being. Just as our bodies are produced by the coming together of various physical causes and conditions, and our bodies therefore partake of the characteristics of the physical substance, our health is maintained by the proper balance of these physical characteristics.

At the time of death, there is the dissolution of these physical characteristics, one into another. The first step is that earth, which means solidity, dissolves into water, which is fluidity. This refers to the first stage of dying where your physical toughness or strength gradually diminishes. The second stage is that water dissolves into fire, and fire is, of course, your body's warmth. At this point, the liquid quality starts to dissolve. From the outside inward, the fluids of your body dissolve into the fire element. The third stage is fire dissolving into wind, or air. At that point the warmth of your body starts to be withdrawn inward. It leaves the limbs from the extremities inward, and gradually you become cold. The fourth stage is that wind or air dissolves into

consciousness. That is the name for the point where you stop breathing. Our normal breathing is referred to as “external breathing,” which means the type of breathing that could be detected easily by an observer. This breathing ceases at this point. The next stage of dying is called consciousness dissolving into space. At that point most, but not all, of the functions of your energy and mind stop. Your breathing stops altogether. Then the final stage is space dissolving into the clear light. That process actually has four stages within it, which are called “the arising of the four wisdoms.”

During our lives, there is a channel at the very center of our bodies called the *avadhuti*, and within that channel there is a wind called the “wind of vitality.” One of the things that this wind of vitality does is maintain the position of two fundamental constituents that link our mind and body together as a sentient form of biological life. One of these two constituents is identified with the original sperm from the father which fertilized the ovum. This is called the “white constituent” and is held in place by this wind at the top of our head. The other constituent is identified with the ovum of our mother. It is called the “red constituent” and it is held in place below the navel, at the bottom of the central channel, by this same wind. The wind of vitality keeps these two constituents (which are also known as “drops”) separate. Through the process of the dissolution of the elements—in other words, through the process of dying up to this point—the energy or wind of vitality has withdrawn. As it withdraws, there is nothing keeping these two constituents in their previous locations, and their movement in sequence is what causes or precipitates the emergence of what are called the four wisdoms.

The first of the four wisdoms is called the *wisdom of appearance*. Through the cessation of the wind of vitality, the white constituent that was previously at the top of your head moves down through the central channel, finally reaching the center of your heart. While that is going on what the dying person experiences is that everything turns brilliantly white. That appearance of whiteness is why it is called “appearance.” At the same time, as a cognitive experience, you experience a state of wisdom, a state of primordially pure awareness within your mind that is extremely lucid, but fairly free of conceptualization. Because your state of mind turns into that pure awareness, all of your aggression, aversion, hatred, and anger ceases. We have within us a great deal of aversion, attachment, and apathy. These three basic samsaric patterns are connected with how we take rebirth at the beginning, and they are maintained by us throughout our lives. At this point, though, the whole complex of emotions that we could categorize as aversion and anger ceases as this white drop reaches the heart.

The next stage, the second wisdom, is called the *wisdom of increase* (or augmentation). “Increase” refers to the red constituent moving up from below the navel until it, too, reaches the heart. When that happens what you experience in terms of appearance is that everything turns bright red. That is called the appearance of increase. At the same time, as a cognitive experience, you experience a wisdom that is even more intense than the previous one. You experience a wisdom that is not only lucid, but also blissful and pleasant. There is a tremendous sense of well-being. The cognitive lucidity and the well-being are not two different things. They are the same thing, although we describe them in two different ways using words. Because of that intense experience of well-being that emerges out of the lucidity at this point, all attachment and desire cease. Whereas previously all aversion ceased, in this stage all attachments and desires cease because they have become irrelevant.

Eventually these two constituents or drops meet together at the heart. At that point, the third wisdom arises, which is called *attainment*. This is the point where if someone has led a very, very negative life, they may become extremely terrified. Basically what happens here is that the person becomes unconscious briefly. As they become unconscious, they experience everything turning

into utter darkness. It is not like a small amount of utter darkness, but an endless expanse. The cognitive experience that accompanies this darkness is that the wisdom becomes even more intensified. It is not only a wisdom characterized by well-being and lucidity, but it is also utterly non-conceptual, free of any kind of thought. At that point the klesha of apathy ceases. We normally do not recognize apathy, but up to this point it is constantly present in our lives.

Next, the fourth stage or wisdom ensues upon the third. At this point, the person has momentarily become unconscious. It is like blacking out for a moment. All of this happens much more quickly than it takes to describe, which is the problem with the description. It sounds as though we are talking about a very gradual process that you could witness comfortably. It is not like that, however.

As we have seen, through this process of dissolution, all our usual types of reactivity (attachment, aversion, or apathy) have simply dissolved into space. Because all of this has dissolved into space, then the moment after that the fourth situation arises, which is a completely pure wisdom called *perfect attainment*. This is the ground clear light.

At this point, what is experienced is the fundamental nature of your mind—buddha nature. Buddha nature is that naked, simple awareness, which is aware without any conceptualization or thought of the present moment of experience. In the language of the tradition of this instruction, it is called “a self-arisen, primordial awareness that is pure from the very beginning.” In and of itself, it is free from any kind of impurity, any kind of conceptualization. It has no defect. It is not missing anything and does not require anything being done to it, anything being removed from it, or anything being added to it. It is perfect just as it is. It is utterly unpolluted by any kind of attitude, state of mind, or cognitive process. This is what you experience at that fourth moment. Every being experiences it at this point in the process of death, but they would never be able to describe it.

However, if through the process of practice during your life you have familiarized yourself sufficiently—through meditation practice and so on—with the nature of your mind so as to be able to recognize it at this point, then you achieve buddhahood. This is the dharmakaya as the ground. There is nothing to be afraid of if you have assurance that you can achieve buddhahood in the dharmakaya at the moment of death.

To illustrate this, a quotation is given from the teachings of Guru Rinpoche about this process and the state with which it ends. He says:

Fortunate children of good family [*i.e., of the mahayana*], listen with undistracted mindfulness. All of the appearances of this world, whatever they are and how many they be, are like dreams—like the illusions or the seductions of a deceiver—in that all of them are impermanent. All of them are destructible. Therefore, let go of suffering, attending upon their loss. The appearances during the processes of dying—the whiteness, the redness, the blackness—all of these appearances are the display of your own mind. There is nothing in any of this that appears to you that is something other than yourself. Therefore, children of good family, be not afraid, be not terrified. And at the culmination of these, when it seems that you become unconscious, and that your awareness fails you, externally you perceive an appearance that is like a clear sky, and internally your cognition becomes like a lamp burning inside a vase. It is lucid, but utterly

non-conceptual, and naturally remains, one-pointedly. This is the clear light that arises at the time of death, and this is the wisdom of all buddhas. Rest in this, relaxed, without attempting to alter it, without attempting to change it. If you do so, you will be liberated in the dharmakaya.

At this point the process of death is complete. The person has died. Therefore that is the end of the first of the three bardos, the bardo of dying.

In discussing the first of the three bardos associated with the experience of death, we have seen how, if you have gained sufficient familiarity with the nature of your mind to be able to recognize the ground clear light when you experience it after death, you can attain liberation at that moment in the dharmakaya. This is how liberation can be attained in the first bardo, the bardo of dying. If, however, you do not attain liberation in the bardo of dying because you do not recognize the fundamental or ground clear light, then the second bardo will arise. This is called the bardo of dharmata or the bardo of the nature of things.

The Bardo of Dharmata: The Peaceful and Wrathful Deities

The second bardo, the bardo of dharmata, consists of the experience of what is called “spontaneous presence.” This is the spontaneous expression of the qualities of the ground, in the form of the peaceful and wrathful deities, light, rays of light, and so on. It is the display of the goodness of the ground itself, manifesting in this form. In general, the opportunity for liberation in this bardo consists of not being overwhelmed by the brilliance and majesty of the display, and especially recognizing that all of this light and all of these deities are nothing other than the display of your own awareness. In brief, it means recognizing that these are simply the display of the inherent qualities of your own buddha nature. They are not in any way external to yourself. If in the second bardo, you can recognize the appearances that occur as the display of your own mind and rest calmly in that recognition, then you will attain liberation in the sambhogakaya. In the first bardo, the opportunity is for liberation in the dharmakaya. In the second bardo the opportunity is for liberation in the sambhogakaya. This is explained in more detail in the words of Guru Rinpoche:

The first experience of death is the experience of the ground clear light, and if you do not recognize that awareness—because the ground clear light is your own fundamental awareness—then for a period of seven days after that, you start to experience certain visions or appearances. Throughout this period of the bardo of dharmata, everything that you see, everything that appears to you, is like rainbow light, which is to say that it is brilliant five-colored light and rays of light. Amongst this light and rays of light are spheres or droplets of brilliant five-colored light. Within these you see the forms of various deities. All of this—the five-colored light, the rays of light, the droplets and so on—are the display of the five buddha families, that is to say, the five buddhas. They arise as a display before you because they are aspects of your own buddha nature. They are inherent within you. The wisdom, the inherent or innate wisdom of your own buddha nature, manifests at this point, apparently external to yourself. During your life, these things are within you. They are within your channels, winds, and drops. Normally you do not experience them directly

or visually, because you have a body. After death, your mind having separated from the body at this point, or at least being within the body, but not being biologically seated in it, these things are free to be experienced. The light and the rays of light that you see in the bardo of dharmata are so bright and powerful that you find them threatening or frightening. You want to run from them. The usual reaction a sentient being has at this point in the bardo is to try to escape from all of this brilliant multi-colored light. What is recommended here is not to be frightened of this light, but to recognize it as being your own display. In other words, it is the light of radiance of the inherent qualities of your own nature.

At the same time you see all these rays of brilliant multi-colored light, you see other lights that are much dimmer, and much more comfortable. They are much more appealing. They are more like what you would want. They are the degree of brightness you would choose naturally if you could choose light. The standard reaction a sentient being has is to run away from the bright light and to be attracted to, or be drawn to, the muted light. However, the muted light is the display of your five poisons (kleshas). The muted light, which is comfortable and familiar to you, is the path that will lead you into rebirth in samsara. Therefore, just as you need to not be frightened of the brilliant lights of wisdom, you also need not to be seduced by the muted or comforting light of the kleshas. This is the point where you actually visually see the choice between wisdom and confusion, or nirvana and samsara, in the form of brilliant light and muted, comforting, soft light respectively. This is the point, as it says in the text, where you have to *not* make the wrong choice.

Within all of the brilliant light, you see the forms of the five male and female buddhas. Along with all of the other rays of brilliant light, rays of light emerge from the hearts of the five buddhas, and these enter or strike your heart and eyes. That is called “the great secret path of Vajrasattva,” and it is the point where you have the greatest opportunity to achieve liberation. It is also the point where you are likely to be the most frightened or threatened by the deities, because not only are these rays of light everywhere, but they actually seem to be shooting towards you as though they were going to pierce you in some way. If you recognize that these lights and these deities are not other than yourself, and especially if you can supplicate them with sincere devotion, saying something like, “Take hold of me with your compassion,” you will attain liberation in the sambhogakaya. If you can supplicate them rather than running away from them, and recognize that the deities are not other than yourself, simply just remaining with that, without attempting to do anything, without feeling that there is anything in the situation that you have to get rid of or anything that you have to add—simply by resting in that, the deities will start to dissolve. At that point, because you did not run away from them, you will attain liberation in the sambhogakaya.

That is the first half of the bardo of dharmata. It is called the peaceful bardo, or the bardo of the peaceful deities, because as threatening as the displays of light, rays of light, and so on may seem to be, up to this point they are nevertheless peaceful in appearance. The deities—the buddhas of the five families—appear as peaceful male and female buddhas.

If you do not attain liberation in the sambhogakaya at this point, then the appearances of the deities will change. The nature of the situation itself has not changed, however. The deities themselves are not changing, but your perception of them changes. Whereas previously you saw extremely brilliant (and therefore somewhat frightening) but otherwise beautiful rainbow light everywhere, now above, below, and all around you the rainbow light starts to be tinged with a

light that is like fire. It becomes an endless expanse of five-colored flames of wisdom. The deities that you see at this point are extremely wrathful in appearance. Again, there are the five female and five male buddhas, but their appearance is transformed from being peaceful and smiling into being extremely wrathful and threatening. These are the rest of the deities who are spoken of in the bardo. Normally it is said that there are forty-two peaceful and fifty-eight wrathful deities who appear. These wrathful deities have all sorts of different appearances, and they are quite terrifying. They are holding lots of different sorts of ghastly weapons, and they are laughing in a very, very threatening way, exclaiming sounds like the mantras *Hung, P'ey*, and so on. They are blazing with light and flames that are even more intense than those of the previous deities.

Again, this is a further opportunity for liberation—and again, the same response is necessary. You need to not be frightened of them. These deities are not in any way threatening. They are again a display of your own wisdom, just in a particularly intense form. Recognizing that all of these deities are simply the display, the appearance, of your own awareness, and being certain of that, then just simply stay put. Simply rest in that, without attempting to flee. Especially at this point, rather than attempting to run away from them, if you can actually mix your mind with the mind of the wrathful deities who appear to you, then you will attain liberation in the sambhogakaya.

If you do not attain liberation in the sambhogakaya while experiencing the second bardo, it is due to the habit of dualism. It means you are conceiving of these deities that appear to you as separate from yourself. Because you are holding onto your mind and your being as inherently different from the appearances of those deities, then you do not attain liberation in the sambhogakaya. In other words, it is through a fixation on the appearance of duality that this liberation may not be attained.

The Bardo of Becoming: The Journey of the Consciousness

If you have not attained liberation at that point, then the third bardo begins. This bardo begins with your consciousness exiting your body. Previously, of course, you had died, so your consciousness was no longer functioning in your body the way it did when you were alive. However, it was still remaining within the center of your heart. But if you do not attain liberation at the end of the bardo of dharmata, then the consciousness will leave your body at that point. At that point your consciousness will, in your perception, take the form of your previous body. The appearances of the bardo of becoming, this third and last phase of the bardo, are explained in the *Abidharmakosha* as follows:

Your form appears to be that of your previous life, and can be seen by similar beings and those with the divine eye. You possess karmic miraculous powers. Your senses are complete, and you can move without impediment, without being stopped. This is the form of a *gandharva*.²

You do not actually have a body at this point, but your consciousness, which has now exited your previous physical body, appears to you to take the form of that body. Because you are used to looking a certain way, you assume you still do. A bardo being at this stage can be perceived by other bardo beings, and by individuals who have attained the divine eye of being able to see bardo beings and so on. Possessing karmic miraculous powers does not mean that you have the genuine miraculous powers that arise from meditation. However, because you do not have a body, you have what we normally would regard as the miraculous power of being able to move anywhere in an instant just by thinking of it. Although that is the case, it is not under your control, which is

why it is called “karmic.” What happens is that you think of a place and all of a sudden you are there, whether you want to be there or not. No time elapses in traveling there.

Regardless of whether all your senses were functional in your previous life, this mental body appears to have complete senses. It appears to be able to see, hear, smell, taste, and feel. You feel hunger and thirst, but the sustenance you want is smells. The bardo beings are called gandharvas, or “smell consumers.” If you take food that is consecrated to the benefit of bardo beings in certain ways and you singe or burn it, the smoke from that can actually nourish them. This is why in the period of time (usually forty-nine days) after someone’s death we often perform this kind of burnt offering where food is singed and dedicated to those beings.³ They are actually nourished by it. They consume it just the way we would, and feel a sense of well-being from that, just as we would from eating food.

Throughout this forty-nine day period, you seem to have the body that you had in your last life. It will probably appear more or less the way it appeared toward the end of your life. As well, you will experience an uncertain and bewildering variety of other appearances. You think of a place, and you find you are there. Many of these appearances can be frightening, and you experience a great deal of anxiety and even terror because you feel that you are being threatened by things. You feel that you are going to be burnt by a fire or drowned by water. You think you are about to fall off a precipice or be crushed by a boulder, or other things like that. The correct approach to this bardo is to regard whatever appearances that arise as unreal, as illusory, and in that way you do not react to them. In traversing this bardo, you need to resist the tendency to react emotionally to the appearances that you experience—to be attached to some, averse to others, and apathetic about the rest. You need to regard whatever you experience as the display of emptiness. Regard everything as being without any substantial existence. As well, you need to try to preserve an outlook of compassion. These are the most important things. If you can earnestly preserve a recognition of the emptiness of the hallucinations or appearances, and an attitude of compassion, this will help a great deal.

The other thing needed here is renunciation for samsara, because the bardo of becoming is the point where you start to be impelled toward taking rebirth. Therefore, at this point it is important to recollect that wherever you might be reborn in samsara, in whichever of the six realms, it is going to be an experience that is fundamentally one of suffering, without any true or complete happiness at all. During this bardo, in addition to recognizing emptiness and maintaining compassion, if you have the thought, “I must, at all costs, attain liberation from samsara,” that is very important. If you have renunciation for samsara, you will not be compelled to be reborn in the same way you would if you lacked such renunciation.

In addition to the attitude of renunciation through feeling sadness for samsara, during this bardo you need to supplicate those in whom you have the greatest faith—your teachers, the Three Jewels, and so on, and you need to generate the intention to take rebirth in a pure realm. A pure realm here means a pure nirmanakaya realm—the realms of the five buddha families. In particular, it is recommended to aim for the pure realm of the Buddha Amitabha. Because of Amitabha’s aspiration, it is very, very easy to achieve a rebirth in his realm simply through wishing to be reborn there. Especially at this point in the bardo, through hearing the name of Amitabha and through wishing to achieve a rebirth in his realm, you can actually achieve it. The goal in this third bardo is to achieve rebirth in the realm of Amitabha. Therefore, at this point, along with emptiness and compassion, renunciation, and supplication of your teachers and the Three Jewels in general, bring to mind Amitabha and the qualities of his realm, Sukhavati (Dewachen in Tibetan).

It is also important that your intention for wishing to be born in Sukhavati is a compassionate one. To be successful, the intention needs to be the thought that, “In order to be able to liberate all beings from existence, I wish to be reborn in Sukhavati.” If you have bodhicitta as your motivation, it is quite possible to achieve this. Through these attitudes on your part—the aspiration to rebirth, compassion, bodhicitta, and so on—and through the truth of dharmata, through the blessings of your teachers, and especially through the momentum of your aspiration at this point in the bardo, you will achieve rebirth in the natural nirmanakaya realm of Sukhavati.

This part of the bardo is discussed in the following quotation by Guru Rinpoche:

At this point in the bardo you are experiencing the appearance of a body that is actually just your basic energy and mind which are inseparable. It is not a physical substance. In that mental body what you experience are the unstable appearances of the bardo of becoming.

If you have not attained liberation already—in other words, if you have reached this point—you probably did not know you were dead until now. Now, however, you figure it out. You realize that you are dead. Your natural reaction to this, of course, is to miss very much those you left behind and to yearn for them, which can be a problem for the dead person. At the same time, you may have some hallucinations of things being out to get you. You feel pursued. It is somewhat individual, but you will have some hallucination of something, or some things, being after you. You will hear things that will frighten you, and in general you will be quite scared.

The experiences in this phase of the bardo are of two types. Some are standard, which is to say that basically everyone experiences the same things. Some are individual, according to your own particular makeup. However, whatever you see and whatever you hear, you must recognize that it is all the display, the projection of your own mind. Being the projection of your mind, it is of the same stuff as your mind and your mind is empty, like space. Therefore, none of these projections can do anything to you. All you are is a mind, with no substantial physical existence whatsoever. Therefore, it cannot be hurt. No matter what you think you see coming after you, what you hear and so on, none of it can hurt you. In fact, none of it actually exists. It is all just projections or hallucinations of your mind. Remind yourself of that at this time in the bardo, and generate a courageous confidence of recognizing the nature of what is occurring.

It is traditional to prepare a *sur* or burnt offering for the deceased during this phase of the bardo. They can actually be nourished by it, because beings experience hunger and thirst at this time, and what they want are smells. Usually there are blessing substances mixed in with these which also affect them beneficially and make it possible for them to attain liberation. The most important thing that the person needs to be reminded of, or that the person needs to remember, is not to be obsessively concerned with what they left behind, but to direct their minds in an attitude of supplication to those in whom they have faith—their teachers, the Three Jewels, and so on. It is especially important to recollect the existence of the realm of Sukhavati. In other words, it is essential not to try and get back to the life you left, but to move on, and especially to move on to Sukhavati, which is experienced by a being in the bardo as being located in the western direction. Moving west, they move toward Sukhavati. Buddha Amitabha resides in the midst of that realm, and at this point in the bardo anyone who supplicates him by name can achieve rebirth at will in his realm. The text addressing the deceased says:

Recollecting his name, pray to him. Ask for the assistance of Avalokiteshvara and Padmasambhava. Generate devotion and if you can

do so without doubt, in an instant, you will find yourself in the realm of Sukhavati, born instantaneously in the calyx of a lotus.

In this way, the deceased is instructed not to be depressed about the fact that they have died—which they are just coming to terms with—but to be delighted because they have the opportunity to achieve rebirth in a pure realm.

Taking a Positive Rebirth

If you think back to what we have discussed so far, three different opportunities for liberation have been described: the opportunity for liberation in the dharmakaya during the bardo of dying; the opportunity for liberation in the sambhogakaya in the bardo of dharmata; and finally the opportunity for liberation in the nirmanakaya by achieving rebirth in a pure realm in the bardo of becoming. Obviously, however, not everyone attains liberation during any of these three stages. Therefore, the next thing presented is what to do if you are in the bardo of becoming and you have not achieved rebirth in a pure realm.

At this point, since you are going to be reborn, you have to choose an appropriate rebirth, one in which you can progress toward liberation. As has been said, during your time in the bardo of becoming you have possessed a mental body that looked like the body you had in the previous life. Now you are getting closer and closer to entering your next place of rebirth and therefore you start to experience your body appearing as what it is going to be in your next life. For example, if you have the karma to be reborn as a preta or hungry ghost, your body starts to change into a preta body, with a very, very narrow neck and an extremely big belly and so on. If you are going to be reborn as a *deva* or god, then you start to experience your body as a deva body, and so on.

At the same time, you start to perceive the environment that you are moving toward, the one into which you are tending to be reborn. As you approach the entrance into that realm, which in the case of the human realm is the time of conception, you actually see the parents. In the case of a rebirth which involves parents, such as human or animal rebirth, you will generally see the parents. This is the point at which you can do something to control where you are reborn. The reason you can do something is that the actual proximate cause of your being conceived is the attitude you take towards the parents. Without taking a certain pair of attitudes, you will not enter into the womb, or enter into the union of the parents. Basically, if you are going to be reborn as a male, you will feel attachment and desire for the mother, and aversion and aggression towards the father. If you are going to be reborn as a female, you will experience attachment for the father and aversion for the mother. Therefore, if you can stop these kleshas from arising, you will not be pulled into the rebirth. In not being motivated by kleshas, the rebirth that you take will be motivated by your positive aspirations.

Since at this point you actually see your prospective parents, a very effective way to stop the kleshas is to transform your perception of the parents into a pure perception. Instead of regarding them as being just male and female human beings, or whatever other kind of beings they are, regard them as male and female deities—your particular deities, whichever ones they are. You can also regard them as male and female gurus. For example, if you are someone who meditates upon yidams such as Chakrasamvara, Gyalwa Gyamtso, or some form of Guru Rinpoche, then you can view the parents as these. That will stop your generation of an attitude of obsession with the parents which would cause you to achieve rebirth unwillingly. At the same time, making the aspiration to be born to parents who will enable you to progress further on the path of Dharma will cause that to happen. Since you are not being pulled into rebirth through kleshas, then the

force that comes into play is your positive aspiration. The primary function of this is to prevent your being reborn in lower realms, so that at least you can achieve a human rebirth, and especially to achieve a human rebirth through which you can progress further along the path.

At this point in the bardo, since you have not yet stopped the process of rebirth by attaining liberation, you start to see the environment in which you are tending to be reborn. It could be something like the rotted stump of a tree or a dark cavern, or it could be a forest. On the other hand, it could be a magnificent palace. It all depends upon whatever rebirth you are heading toward. The first thing you have to do is let go of any attachment or craving you have for the environment, because no matter how unpleasant the environment is from our point of view, at that point in the bardo, if you have a karmic compulsion to be reborn there, you are going to be attracted to it. Make the aspiration to be born in this human realm, and especially in a place where genuine Dharma has spread, and be born in a situation such that you can receive guidance from authentic teachers. Make the aspiration to be born to parents who will encourage or facilitate your spiritual growth. To do this you can regard any parents that you seem to be moving towards as the father and mother guru. Our source text refers to “father and mother Guru Padmasambhava.” That is because the text was written by Guru Padmasambhava, but it could be any deity with whom you are familiar. That will enable you to let go of attachment for one parent and aversion for the other, so that the motivating force that propels you to rebirth is your positive aspiration, not compulsion. You will be able to rest in meditation through faith, and by doing this you will then be reborn in a situation such that you will be a receptacle for the profound Dharma, and will quickly attain liberation.

These are the four stages of instruction concerning the profound possibilities of liberation at the time of death and soon thereafter. We have seen how it is possible to achieve liberation in the bardo of dying, in the bardo of dharmata, and in the bardo of becoming, and then if you do not achieve liberation at those opportunities, how to achieve a positive rebirth in the bardo of becoming. The instructions are presented sequentially, so that if one does not work, you do the next one, and so on. This ensures that if you learn these instructions during your life and familiarize yourself with them, regardless of how confused and ignorant you may think you are, you will definitely achieve liberation within seven lifetimes. These instructions are so powerful that if you learn them, or if they are actually spoken to you after your death, you can achieve liberation through them, even though you may not have been the most heroically diligent practitioner during your life.

Questions and Answers

Question: I believe you said that life comes to an end when the merit associated with that life is used up. Is that true for bodhisattvas who have chosen to reincarnate in this world?

Rinpoche: Not really. The presentation we have gone through is really about what happens to a normal being. There are two types of beings who do not experience the bardo at all. One type is an awakened person who does not go through these kinds of experiences because they have already fully awakened, so the process is not one of any kind of loss of control. They do not experience what we would normally call the bardo at all. The other type of person or being who does not experience the bardo is someone who has been so viciously harmful to others that they have turned their state into one so profoundly negative that the whole thing just happens very, very quickly. They do not have a bardo at all. They just basically proceed to hell. For most beings, however, it happens in the stages we have been discussing.

Question: How much do you have to practice to accomplish this recognition after death?

Rinpoche: It depends upon your own degree of insight. There are people who have so much receptivity that when the nature of their mind is pointed out by their guru, they recognize it on the spot and they do not need to practice at all—ever. If that does not happen, then really the only answer to that question is to say that the benefit will be in accordance with however much you practice and study.

Question: If someone falls into the state of hell, do they ever find their way out, or are they there eternally?

Rinpoche: They do not stay there forever. Nothing is forever. However, they stay there until the karma that caused them to be reborn in hell is used up, which could take a very long time.

Question: I have often heard that at the moment of death people have a life review, an experience in which their whole life passes in front of them. I was wondering where something like that fits into the four dissolutions, or if that is not something that is taught in the Buddhist system.

Rinpoche: That probably happens after the death process is over and you are in the bardo. When you are in the bardo after death, your awareness is said to be many times more lucid than it was during your life, so you can remember everything that you did.

Question: Would someone going through a near-death experience go through the same process as someone who is dying?

Rinpoche: According to this tradition, a near-death experience is a partial experience of dying. The appearances that you undergo in a near-death experience are basically the same experiences as those in the dying process, except that at a certain point it stopped—you did not go all the way. This brings up the question as to exactly how far you can get in this before you are at the point of no return. According to these texts, if you remember the sequence of dissolution we went through, you can get up to, but not including, the point that is called consciousness dissolving into space. The external breathing could stop, but internally there is still going to be some warmth about the heart. There is still something that is not completely shut down, and at that point the person can possibly be revived. However, if they actually experience the appearances of white, red, and so forth, which are the experiences that a person goes through when they really go all the way through the death process, at that point there is no turning back.

Question: In the reports on near-death experiences, people do say that they see a white light. Would that be different than what you are talking about here?

Rinpoche: It would not be what is called the radiant appearance. It is probably one of the appearances of the dissolution of the elements, which occur earlier. That stage is possible to experience and still come back. You can go through the dissolution of the five elements, and that process also has different kinds of things that you see and so on, so the reports of near-death experiences are probably one of those. No one has ever been able to come back and say what the radiant white appearance is like, because when you go that far, you are going the rest of the way.

Question: Do the stages of dissolution all the way into the four wisdoms always take the same length of time, or is it slower or faster in different kinds of death, or with people with different levels of realization?

Rinpoche: The duration of each stage of the dying process is uncertain and depends on how you die. If you die suddenly, such as through a sudden violent death where you lose consciousness very quickly, you go through all of this, but you go through it in a split second. That is why it is considered so important for someone who is a practitioner to have a very tranquil death, if possible, so that nothing interferes with their consciously going through the process of dying, and so that they might be able to recognize the ground clear light.

Question: Do the four stages that occur after you are beyond the point of no return also take place faster or slower depending on the type of death?

Rinpoche: Yes, very much so. In a violent death, for example, these stages would happen very quickly.

Question: Do all beings go through this experience, or is it only those in the human realm?

Rinpoche: We tend not to recognize it, but all beings will experience this, not just humans.

Question: When I was watching my mother die, I noticed that her limbs got extremely cold, starting at the feet and hands. As she approached death, her breathing became labored and she eventually stopped breathing. At that point I noticed her whole body was cold with the exception of the crown of her head, and a portion of her heart. That remained warm for some time, until the coroner came and then, of course, I had to leave. But up until that point, which was probably a good hour, it was still warm. Is that a physiological phenomenon, or could you say that the consciousness was dissolving into space?

Rinpoche: It is very difficult to say, but generally warmth being present in a certain part of the body indicates that the person's consciousness has not yet left the body. This is very important in the case of performing the ejection of consciousness (*powa*⁴) for the deceased. There is a distinction between the consciousness being *present* in the person and its being *seated* within their organism. If the consciousness is still in the body, and if in fact it is still biologically seated in the body, then technically the person is not yet dead. By ejecting their consciousness at that point, when it is still seated within their organism, then they are still not dead, and by performing the ejection of consciousness you would be killing them. Therefore the transference cannot be done at that point. If someone were present who was going to perform the *powa*, they would determine, based on various signs, if and when the consciousness had departed.

Question: Could that be the case even though the person had stopped breathing and were pronounced dead by a medical doctor?

Rinpoche: There are a lot of things that have to be examined to see exactly where someone is in this process. There is a standard diagnostic procedure at that point. The various arteries, veins, and so on have to be checked. In the case of a person who actually has a realization of the nature of his or her mind, this warmth will last around the heart region in particular not only for an hour, but sometimes for days or even weeks. In that case, we would have to say that technically the person is deceased, but nevertheless they are not completely done with their bodies yet, because the complexion does not deteriorate the way it normally does after death. It does not become mottled or pale. In fact, in such cases the complexion generally looks better than it did while the person was alive. That remains, and the warmth in the area of the heart—which you can feel by touching them there—remains for this period. Then when their consciousness has left the body completely, they start to look like a corpse. Another way you can check for this state of meditation is that normally if you pinch or distend a dead person's flesh in some way, it will stay

the way you have pressed it. It will stay pinched, because it does not have the elasticity of living flesh. In the case of someone who is remaining within this meditative absorption after death, the flesh of the body responds like living tissue.

Question: Are you saying that even though the person has stopped breathing, the heart has stopped, and he or she has been pronounced dead by a physician, that all these other phenomena can still take place, and the consciousness could still be remaining in the body?

Rinpoche: The person is actually dead at that point, but because they are resting within samadhi the consciousness has not yet left the body.

Question: For a highly realized being, when they have died and perhaps even taken on another body, is there some aspect that remains particular to that incarnation—some form, even though they may have taken on another body? For example, I know people who have seen Kalu Rinpoche. Even though he has taken on another body, there are aspects of him that seem to have remained from his previous incarnation.

Rinpoche: That is an instance of their being able to display whatever form is going to be most beneficial for a particular being. In the case of someone who is going to be more benefited by having, for example, a vision of their appearance from a previous incarnation, then they will have that vision. That being or teacher will manifest to that person in the perceived form of a previous incarnation, or whatever form is going to be the most beneficial. For those who will be the most benefited by direct, ordinary contact with the present incarnation, the teacher will manifest in that form. The fact that they might choose to appear to someone in the form of a previous incarnation does not mean that there really is a difference between the nature or effectiveness of the previous and subsequent incarnations. It is simply a necessary concession being made for our fixation with appearances. Having become accustomed to their having a certain appearance, we identify that appearance with them, and therefore we are more receptive to it. We might have more faith in it. Because we would be more open to blessing in that form, therefore they would appear in that form. However, it is only a concession to our fixations.

Question: I have heard it said that when a being dies there is a period of some days when the consciousness stays in the body, and during that time it is best if the body is not disturbed. Could you comment on that?

Rinpoche: The period for this is normally said to be three days. Again, this is different from the case where someone is remaining in samadhi. Then the amount of time is actually uncertain. It can last for a long time. The reason for this three-day period is twofold. One reason is that normally when someone dies, they may—although they are dead and their mind is no longer biologically seated in their body the way it was when they were alive—their mind may stay in their body for a few days. The other reason is that even if it does not, they may not realize they are dead for a while, and they may therefore identify very much with the body. If the body is disturbed when they do not yet realize that they are dead, they can get quite angry. And the anger that they generate at seeing what is done to their body can negatively impact the process of rebirth for them. For that reason, it is traditionally recommended to leave the body undisturbed for three days. Nowadays, however, this is almost impossible.

Question: I am concerned that nowadays many people are heavily sedated or drugged at the time of death, primarily to ease the pain. I am concerned that this might affect their proper experience of dying.

Rinpoche: First of all, the use of painkilling drugs is an entirely different situation from giving them something to actually kill them, to hasten their death, which is something else. If they are given medication to ease the pain, that will either not affect the situation, or it will help. The reason it can help is that the worst thing—the most distracting thing—is going to be extreme pain. Therefore, the reduction of the person's pain during the process of dying will make them much more able to recognize the dissolution process than they would be in the midst of pain.

Question: You mentioned that there are certain kinds of experiences from which a person cannot return to describe, because they have gone too far to come back. If no one has come back from beyond that point, how do we know about these things?

Rinpoche: There are three ways that we know about this. The fundamental way is that the Buddha taught about it. The second way is that there was a phenomenon in Tibet which was called *delok*, which is considered to be different from a near-death experience. People would actually go all the way through this, really die, and after up to a week or more come back to their bodies. Because of what they undergo, this is considered to be different from someone being in a coma and waking up. The proof of the difference lies in what the person could describe about the bardo and other things that they saw. And deloks—which means people who really died and came back—are able to give very accurate and consistent descriptions of the dying process. They are a second source of information about this. Then the third source—although it is uncommon—is people who, especially in early life, remember their previous death and bardo experience.

Question: I have heard that there are directions called “pointing out” that can be given which enable one to directly recognize the nature of the mind at death. Could you comment about that?

Rinpoche: I cannot give those instructions in this context because it is our tradition to only give them when someone has completed what are known as the preliminary practices, or *ngöndro*. The ngöndro practice is a set of what are called the common and uncommon preliminaries. The common preliminaries are the four thoughts which turn the mind to Dharma, and the uncommon preliminaries are four sets of intensive meditation practices. You can find out about these in the book *The Torch of Certainty* by Jamgön Kongtrül the Great. These preliminary practices are in themselves quite an extensive subject, so I would not be able to go through them here in detail.

Question: If an animal is hit in the road and they are in excruciating pain and you come upon them, is it alright (even though it is difficult) to end their life so they are not in extreme agony? The other question concerns humans if they are terminally ill. It is not an easy transition if they are in constant pain. Is it ever permissible to assist somebody in dying? Let's say there is somebody in your own family who is in constant pain and there is just no medication to help with that—is there ever a time when you can help them to end their life?

Rinpoche: It is actually the same situation whether you are talking about an animal or a human being. In either case, it is taught that you should not kill them. What we call assisting death is killing. For example, in the case of an animal that has been hit by a car and you find it on the road suffering tremendously, the almost instinctual wish to “put them out of their misery” is based upon the mistaken idea that by killing them you are going to end their suffering. The only thing you are ending by doing that is your having to watch their suffering; you are not ending their experience of suffering. If their life is ended unnaturally through your action, then the karma that is causing them to experience that suffering has not been dealt with. This means they are still going to experience it, and it is probably going to be much worse. Therefore, although you may not be able to get rid of all their suffering, you simply have to do what you can to alleviate it without killing them. You can also do other things to help them, for instance, before they die or

immediately after their death you can recite in their ears the names of buddhas as well as mantras such as those of Amitabha and Avalokiteshvara. The same thing is really true for human beings as well.

Question: How does the taking of one's own life affect the process of death and subsequent rebirth?

Rinpoche: Killing yourself is no better than killing anyone else. Karmically it is the same thing. You accumulate the karma of killing by killing yourself, just as you would by killing any other being.

Question: In the third bardo, is the mind different from the mind that we have now? When you were talking about it I was feeling anxiety, because it felt like being in a dream state, and when we are in a dream state we can't help reacting, and I was wondering if the mind or the consciousness is different in the bardo than it is now.

Rinpoche: No. Your mind is not unclear or intoxicated the way it is in a dream. In fact, it is clearer than it is now. Of course, dreams vary. Some people's dreams are very, very vague and their minds are very unclear, and other people have very clear consciousness during dreams.

Question: In this teaching, it seemed like you were talking about the mind as a thing in itself, whereas I have heard it described as being like a stream.

Rinpoche: You can call it a continuum or stream if you want to, but the mind is not a "thing" in the sense of being a substantial entity. The problem with leaving it at that is that we may then assume that the mind is nothing at all. It is no more "nothing" than it is "something," because while your mind has no substantial existence whatsoever, it nevertheless is the cause of your falling into samsara, and the cause of your achieving liberation from samsara. Therefore it is said, "The mind is not 'something' because it is not seen, even by buddhas, but the mind is not 'nothing,' because it is the ground or starting point of all samsara and nirvana." However, saying that it is not something and not nothing is not contradictory, because the mind cannot be conceived of in those terms.

Question: I am concerned that, if I died right now, how I could get somebody, maybe a lama like yourself, to come and do those prayers over my body. I am not really well-practiced at this point, so in order to be liberated I would need somebody to help me. How could I do that? Who would help me?

Rinpoche: The most important thing is not so much whether an external person such as a teacher and so on is there with your body to say these words to you or not. The most important thing is that within yourself you have certainty in your understanding of this process of death and bardo. That means having the confidence of a clear understanding of what is going to happen, and in that way being prepared. It is especially important that you have faith in the sources of refuge—the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—because they will never let you down. If you depend upon an external person such as myself, then you are putting yourself at risk, because, who knows, I might die first, and then you would be left stranded. The way this is explained in this text and in other texts of instruction about dying and death is that the best way to prepare yourself is to practice enough meditation—that is, tranquility (shamata) and insight (vipasyana)—that you familiarize yourself with the nature of your mind. If you succeed in doing so, you have no need of any external individual to remind you, because you are familiar with it and then you simply recognize it. If you cannot do that, then the particular approach taken within Tibetan Buddhism in general,

which is based upon the vajrayana tradition, is to attempt to mix your mind at death with the mind of your guru, based upon the confidence that your guru is the embodiment of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. If you have a certainty and confidence in your guru such that you can mix your mind with his or her mind, then the physical presence or absence of your guru is irrelevant.

Question: What if I do not have a guru at this point?

Rinpoche: Well, if you do not have one, then you might think about gradually looking for one. If you do not actually ever find one, then you can direct your mind to the Three Jewels—the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

Question: I would like to know what our local Buddhist community should do if one of the members of our group dies. Are there particular rituals or responsibilities of the sangha when that happens?

Rinpoche: It is definitely good to do something as a sangha when someone you have known personally, or a member of the sangha, passes away. What we do at KTD is that whenever anyone passes away, for at least forty-nine days after their passing, butter lamps are offered in the shrine room in front of the images of the Buddha and deities, with the merit of that being dedicated to their wakefulness in the bardo. Also the community is invited to participate in special ceremonies for them. These generally consist of performing the Chenrezig and Amitabha practices, more or less as usual, except that they are specifically dedicated to that person's welfare. It is not always practical to have that going on for the whole forty-nine days, but special observances take place at least for some period of time, and regularly during the period. You could do the same thing wherever there is a center and a community of practitioners. It is also excellent to request the prayers of great awakened teachers when someone dies.

Question: If this type of thing is done for people who are not Dharma practitioners—let's say our relatives, friends, or people we may know who are not part of the Dharma—how is it that this is helpful to them, when they have no apparent connection?

Rinpoche: It still helps, regardless of their belief system, because essentially when you do these practices you are actually praying for all beings, for the benefit of all beings. You are cultivating an attitude that is completely altruistic and positive, and then you are dedicating the virtue and goodness of that attitude to the benefit of the deceased. Regardless of the deceased's belief system, it still is going to have a positive effect on them. A distinction needs to be made, however, between the prayers you might say for someone after they have passed away and things you might say to them before they pass away. If someone who is dying has a strongly held belief system—for example, let's say they are devoted to a religion other than Buddhism, exclusively, and are not particularly receptive to Buddhism—you should obviously not go to them at the point of their death and say, “Now, direct your mind to the Buddhadharma” and so on, because it is going to upset them. But it is not going to upset them after their death if you are praying to Amitabha and Chenrezig for their benefit. People's attitudes change after death based upon what they are experiencing. Also, whether they believe in karma or not, karma still affects them, and can be used to benefit them.

There is a story in the sutras about two of the Buddha's closest disciples, the Arhat Maudgalyayana, who was the greatest performer of miracles among the Buddha's disciples, and the Arhat Shariputra, who was the wisest of the Buddha's shravaka disciples. At one point, through their miraculous powers, they travelled to a certain hell realm. There they encountered a being who had previously been a non-Buddhist teacher, someone whom they had known when he

was alive. After his death he had been reborn in this hell realm. His followers believed that in order to ensure a positive rebirth after someone's death, the best thing to do was lots of animal sacrifice. That was part of their religion. Every year on the anniversary of his death they would get hundreds and hundreds of animals and slaughter them. Therefore the being who was now in hell said to Maudgalyayana, "When you go back up there, you must tell those people to stop doing this, because every time they kill all these animals it just makes my situation much, much worse." They went back to the human realm, and Maudgalyayana tried to tell the followers of this teacher that what they were doing in commemoration of his death was causing him unbelievable suffering. But they were so angry at what Maudgalyayana was claiming about their teacher that they did not listen, and beat him up instead.

Question: What types of beings are the ghosts that people sometimes see? Are they bardo beings?

Rinpoche: The ghosts that people see are not necessarily beings in the bardo. They could actually be experiencing a type of incarnation that is called pretas or hungry ghosts in the Buddhist tradition. This is one of the six realms of samsaric existence.

Question: When a being takes rebirth in the pure realms, is that the end of cyclic existence for them?

Rinpoche: In a sense, yes. Once someone has been reborn in a pure realm, such as that of Amitabha, they will never again be reborn in samsara. On the other hand, this does not mean that being reborn in the pure realm is like a permanent vacation of some kind. The precise name for these realms is "natural nirmanakaya realms," but normally we call them pure realms. When you are reborn in one of these pure realms, from the moment of your birth, things are quite different from what we know. For example, you are born in the sense that you just appear in the midst of a blooming lotus flower. Immediately upon birth there, you are already a bodhisattva. I said that being born there is not exactly a vacation because the purpose of being born there is to progress through the rest of the path until you finally attain buddhahood. Once you attain buddhahood there, you do what all buddhas do, which is to engage forever in non-conceptual activity for the benefit of beings. The activity of a buddha is different from ours in many ways, but the most obvious way is that whenever we do anything, we have to plan it. We have to think about it. We have to decide what we are going to do and what we are not going to do. We have to think, "Well, I will help this person, and then I will help that person, and I will do this by buying that," and so on. Buddhas do not have to think. It just kind of happens automatically. That is the final result of being born in a pure realm.

Question: Could you talk about what the Amitabha practice entails, how frequently it should be done, and if it is good to do it individually as well as in a group?

Rinpoche: The Amitabha practice can be done either as a group or individually. You can also do either the long or short form of the practice. The short form is the one that is normally done after the Chenrezig practice at KTD and in the centers. If you do not perform one of the complete practices, then you can simply recite his name mantra, *Om Ami Dewa Hri*. The most important thing, which is more important than what form of the practice you do, is that you amass what are called "the four causes of rebirth in Sukhavati." If you are aiming to be reborn in Sukhavati, the realm of Amitabha, whether or not you will be successful depends upon these four things. The first cause is called the recollection of the realm. This means to think regularly, or frequently, about the appearance of Amitabha and his retinue—the bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara and Vajrapani and so on. You think about the existence of this pure realm and bring it to mind often.

The second cause is to accumulate as much merit as you possibly can. The third cause is to generate bodhicitta, which is to say to generate the aspiration to establish all beings without exception in a state of buddhahood. The fourth cause is to dedicate whatever virtue you accumulate to the rebirth of all beings without exception in the realm of Sukhavati. If you accumulate these four causes, then there is no doubt whatsoever that you will be reborn in Sukhavati, because it is not really accomplished through your own power or spiritual attainment. It is accomplished through the aspiration of Amitabha.

Question: For someone you know who has died, is it a good thing to read the translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*?

Rinpoche: It would be helpful, but the most important thing when reading it is that you read it correctly, which means without mistakes. It should be read such that the listening bardo being can understand what you are saying.

Question: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* has specific days mentioned to read specific things, and there is always mentioned the forty-nine days after death. Does the bardo of becoming always take the same period of time for every being?

Rinpoche: There is the common custom that has developed of praying for and commemorating the person who has died for forty-nine days, which is fine. But we should not assume that everyone's bardo state is of that duration. The actual duration of the bardo is somewhat individual because in the sequence of events that are said to take one week, and so on, the days are not days of ordinary time. The days are not solar days. They are known as "meditation days." A meditation day is the length of time an individual can rest his or her mind without distraction. Thus in the text when it says something like, "And then for the next seven days everything will appear as rainbow light," seven days does not mean a calendar week. It means seven times the amount of time that the particular being in the bardo can rest their mind without thought.

Question: You spoke about the bright light in the bardo as compared to the duller light, and that some beings are more comfortable with the duller, more mundane light. Could you talk a bit more about the bright light? Why would a bright light be so frightening?

Rinpoche: The reason that the brilliant rainbow light and the deities and so on which appear within it are so frightening is not really something inherent in the quality of the light itself. It is very, very bright, but the bardo being is terrified of it because of his or her own tendencies and reactivity, not because there is something objectively present in the light that we would call inherently scary. There are many reasons they should *not* be afraid of this light, the most obvious one being that they do not have a body, so what are they worried about? There is nothing for them to be afraid of. The light cannot do anything to them, and the deities cannot do anything to them—not that they would anyway. Nevertheless, the habit of fear is so strong that we react that way, even though there is no reason whatsoever that we should. It is just like the way people react to the sight of a snake. Some people see a snake and run. Other people see a snake and pick it up by the head.

Question: What kind of person would *not* be frightened of the light? In other words, what characteristics should we cultivate and develop in this lifetime, in order not to be frightened?

Rinpoche: The person who will not be frightened is the person who knows what it is that they are seeing. And the person who will be frightened is the person who does not know what they are seeing. To use the example of the snake again—if you see a snake, and you do not know whether

it is a poisonous snake or not, you are going to be very frightened. But if you see the snake and you know exactly what kind of snake it is and you know it is not poisonous and there is nothing to be afraid of, you are not going to be frightened. Therefore, the more you know about what to expect in the bardo, the more familiar you are with what you are going to experience, and the less you are going to be frightened of it.

Question: When you encounter the deities, if you do not run away and if you supplicate them, what happens then? Do they dissolve, or do they dissolve into you?

Rinpoche: Basically what happens is that you remember that the liberation in the sambhogakaya really occurs through recognizing that the deities are not separate from your own mind. Thus, the recognition of the deities as not being other than your own mind dissolves them as something separate or external. You can think of it as them dissolving into you, or you dissolving into them. It does not make any difference. It is the recognition that they were never outside you to begin with.

Question: You mentioned that the consciousness stays with the body for some time after death, and goes through a couple of stages before it then leaves. Is there a period during which the body should be left completely alone? Should it not be embalmed or cremated or whatever during a period to allow this consciousness to remain within the body?

Rinpoche: Traditionally in Tibet, people would always keep the body undisturbed for three days, and if they had the means and opportunity to do so, for forty-nine.

Question: My understanding is that most people do not recall their previous lives, and I have heard that even tulkus frequently do not. Why is remembering the previous life so very difficult?

Rinpoche: The fundamental reason we do not recollect our previous lives is that when your consciousness gets connected with the physical substances which begin the process of gestation and eventually birth, it is almost like becoming drunk. It is like the way a substance going into your body alters your consciousness; it is like getting intoxicated or bewildered by the mind's getting mixed up with these substances. This creates an experience of discontinuity so that there is usually no recollection of the previous experience. That is the reason for ordinary beings.

With regard to tulkus recollecting previous lives, when they say they do not remember, you should take it with a grain of salt. For example, if you went up to His Holiness the Gyalwa Karmapa and you said, "Do you remember your previous lives?" he would say, "Of course not." But you have to think about whether that might be true or not. This is someone who—forget about remembering previous lives—remembers his future lives! Before he passes away, he gives the names of his next parents, the location of his birth, and other details, so that it will be easy to find him. He has done this consistently. He also recognizes other tulkus immediately when he is asked to find them. If he can do all of that, obviously he remembers his own previous lives as well, but out of modesty he is going to tell you that he does not.

Question: Since Amitabha practice is so strongly connected with death and dying and rebirth in Sukhavati, could you discuss that briefly? In particular, could you briefly describe the role that the empowerment ceremony plays in connecting us with the practice?

Rinpoche: The function of the empowerment of Amitabha is to introduce the blessing of the lineage of this tradition into your practice of Amitabha. In order to achieve rebirth in Sukhavati, you need to accomplish the four causes that I explained earlier. If you accomplish these four

causes, you will achieve rebirth there. In Tibetan Buddhism, a tremendous amount of emphasis is placed upon the continuity of the succession, or lineage, which is the basis for the authenticity of the teachings. This means that before you do any practice, you have to receive the blessing of the lineage of that practice, which depends upon receiving three things. The first is called the empowerment that ripens or matures, and the second is called the instruction that liberates. The third is the reading transmission, which is sometimes called “the reading transmission that supports, or forms a container,” and sometimes, “the reading transmission that bears blessing.”

The function of an empowerment is therefore to ripen your buddha nature, almost like watering a plant. You have an innate potential for awakening, and the function of empowerment is to help it emerge. Any practice you do, though it is virtuous, will not have the same authenticity or the same power as it will if you receive the transmission of the lineage through empowerment, reading transmission, and instruction.

Rinpoche's conclusion: The main point that I want to leave you with is to continue to practice. Whatever your present practice may be, the fundamental and ultimate aim of such practice is to cultivate the familiarity with our mind's nature that is called the path clear light or path luminosity. The point of doing so is that at the moment of our death we can recognize the ground or fundamental clear light, and achieve liberation. Always remember that this is the aim of your practice, whatever specific form it may take along the way.

¹ A *terton* is a person who discovers hidden teachings known as *terma*.

² A *gandharva* is a type of disembodied being.

³ This practice is called a *sur* in Tibetan.

⁴ *Powa* is a practice of transferring a being's consciousness to *Dewachen*. It can be performed by oneself prior to death, or by a qualified person for someone after they have died.