

# **Meditation: Dissolution of the Body At Death**

## **Joan Halifax Roshi**

### ***Posture***

*A powerful way to do this practice is to lie down in the “sleeping lion position,” the position that the Buddha assumed upon his dying. To do this, lie on your right side, legs slightly drawn up. Your left arm is resting along your left side, and your right hand is supporting your head, with your hand holding your cheek. You may press your little finger against your right nostril to complete the posture.*

*Make sure that you are comfortable and allow yourself to adjust your position as needed throughout the course of this practice. The top of your head, the fontanel, is directed toward the image—real or visualized—of your choice. This could be Jesus, the Buddha, Muhammad, Abraham—any being who represents to you the essence of awakened mind, of compassion, of love, of essential goodness. Or you can just visualize such a being. Your hope is that your consciousness, when it leaves your body, will leave through the top of your head and will manifest as the essence of enlightenment.*

### ***Practice***

#### ***The Mind***

*Let the mind become still. Let the breath become even and smooth. Focus your attention by abiding in your breath. As always in this kind of practice, whatever comes up—resistance or concern, grief or joy, boredom or story—notice it, accept it, and then return to the breath.*

*Although this is a specific practice of dying and for dying, it is good to remember that meditation is always an opportunity to*

*consider that we are dying: that we are releasing, that we are letting go completely, that we are dissolving into space, dissolving into radiance.*

*This particular practice involves the dissolution of not only the elements of our mind but also the elements of our body—earth, water, fire, air—and then releasing into space. In releasing the elements of our identity that compose what we know as “I,” we allow ourselves to dissolve our form, our feelings, our perceptions, our mental formations or conditioning, and ultimately to let go—or at least imagine letting go—of what we know as our consciousness.*

*This practice is about awakening as the mental processes dissolve and as the physical processes of the body go through the transformation that we know as death. Concentrate on your breath and let your body relax. Although this may put you at the edge of sleep, do not fall asleep.*

*At this time all beings, in one way or another, are dying. Although some of us are closer to death than others, the time of our death is uncertain. If you are not actively dying at this time, imagine yourself as dying, and remember, on some level you are dying.*

*You have a sense of who you are as an identity. You are now going to release that distinct identity into spaciousness, into vastness. Let yourself attend to your breath. Be in the breathing. Mark the outbreath with a slight increase of attention, an increase of commitment to the breath of releasing, expiring, letting go.*

*Imagine that this is an actual description of dying, of your dying. Notice what goes on as you do this practice. Let each of the feelings and sensations come up for you, pass through*

*your mind and body, be noticed, and then released. This practice is about awakening to your essential spaciousness.*

***The Dissolution of Earth into Water and the Unbinding of the Body:***

*Imagine that you are in your bed at home.*

*You are dying.*

*Friends and family are around you.*

*You are barely aware of them.*

*You are somewhat agitated, and you accept this state of mind.*

*Your body is thin and weak.*

*You cannot get up.*

*You cannot quite sit up.*

*You cannot pick up anything.*

*You do not have, nor do you need, the energy to do anything but simply be here. You are releasing this flesh and bone, this nerve and marrow.*

*You are letting go as you die.*

*Feel your body becoming heavy, pressed down by a great weight.*

*This is a heaviness that is dense and deep, going right to the core of your body.*

*Let yourself be pressed down by the weight of death.*

*As you become weaker, your body feels less defined.*

*Your arms and legs feel not quite part of you.*

*It seems as if your legs could slip off your hipbone, your arms off your shoulders.*

*Experience this body dissolving, melting.*

*There is no distinction between the bed and you.*

*It's as if you were sinking into water.  
With this sinking feeling comes a sense of even greater  
weakness and tiredness.*

*The boundary between your body and space is beginning to  
dissolve. Wake up as this body lets go.  
Your senses are less attuned to the outside world.  
Your sight is dim and dark.  
It is difficult to open and close your eyes.  
Your sensory grasp on the world is loosening.  
The outside world is slipping away from you.*

*Your skin is pale as your blood pressure drops.  
The blood withdraws into the central part of your body.  
There is no strength left now in what was this strong body.  
You are drowsy and weak with no interest in the outside  
world.  
You sink deeper and deeper into an undifferentiated mental  
state.  
Whatever visions you see appear like shimmering blue  
mirages.  
This is the dissolution of body and of our relationship to the  
physical world— these feelings of heaviness, drowsiness, being  
weighed down, the loss of definition, the withdrawal of color  
from our bodies, the loss of control, and our inability to see  
the form world around us.*

*In this state of mind and body, be awake, effortlessly present.  
The mind can be still and reflective as you wake up, as you let  
go.  
Be present as this body is dying.  
This body is not you.  
This is the dissolution of the element of earth*

*as it sinks into water and form unbinds into feelings.*

***The Dissolution of the water element into fire  
and the unbinding of feelings:***

*Feel your body dissolving.*

*As you are letting go, your hearing is diminished,*

*And you sink into an undifferentiated state of mind.*

*You have now lost control of the fluids in your body.*

*Your nose is running; saliva is leaking out of your mouth.*

*There is a watery discharge coming out of your eyes.*

*It is difficult for you to hold your urine.*

*Your generative fluids have dried up.*

*Your skin is clammy.*

*As fluids leave the body, the body becomes parched.*

*Your skin is papery.*

*Your mouth is drawn, and your lips are chapped.*

*Your tongue is thick, sticky, and heavy.*

*Your throat is scratchy and clogged.*

*Your nostrils seem to cave in, burning with dryness as you inhale.*

*Your eyes feel sandy and sting.*

*You are not passing much urine.*

*You have a thirst that no amount of water can quench.*

*Moisture is leaving your body, never to return.*

*Wake up as you are desiccating.*

*Let go fully into this dryness.*

*Release the fluid element of your body, the element of water  
and of feeling.*

*Your mind is hazy, and you are somewhat irritable.*

*You have ceased to experience pain, pleasure or even indifference.*

*You do not have feelings related to happiness or unhappiness. You are numb and do not differentiate between physical and mental impressions.*

*Those kinds of distinctions are not important to you now. When you look behind your eyes, you see a vision of swirling smoke.*

*See this haziness that dissolves all differences  
The water element is dissolving into fire.  
This is the end of your responsiveness to phenomena.  
As you let go, wake up in this vision of swirling smoke.*

***The Dissolution of the Fire Element into Air  
and the Unbinding of Perceptions:***

*As the fire element of your body begins to dissolve into air, your body feels cool.*

*Heat withdraws from your feet and hands into the body's core.*

*Your breath is cold as it passes through your mouth and nose.*

*Your mouth, nose, and eyes dry out even more.*

*Your ability to perceive is further diminished.*

*The fire element is dissolving into the element of air.*

*You cannot smell anything.*

*You are not hungry nor can you digest food.*

*You cannot drink or swallow.*

*The inbreath is less strong, and the outbreath is longer.*

*Your mental perception alternates between lucidity and confusion.*

*You cannot see, hear, taste, touch or smell as the sense fields  
fade away.*

*Your inbreath is short.  
Your outbreath is long.*

*You cannot remember the names of your loved ones,  
And you cannot recognize those around you.  
You have lost any sense of purpose in your life,  
And have no interest in what is going on around you.  
You may feel as if you are being consumed in a blaze of fire  
that rises into space.*

*Let go into this fire and see it as your mind releasing itself.  
Or you may see a vision of sparks, almost like fireflies.  
Wake up in this vision of shimmering sparks behind your eyes.  
Let yourself discern the truth of dying.  
This is the dissolution of the fire element into air  
and the unbinding of your ability to perceive.*

***The Dissolution of the Wind Element into Space  
and the Unbinding of Mental Formations:***

*You now have given up any sense of volition.  
There is nowhere to go, nothing to do.  
Accept this aimlessness, free of meaning and purpose.  
You are at last free of these pressures.  
Your inbreath is short; your outbreath is long.  
The mind is no longer aware of the outside world.*

*As the element of air is dissolved, you are having visions.  
Your visions may be jewel-like and filled with insight that can  
never be expressed.*

*These visions relate to who you are and how you have lived your life.*

*You may be seeing your family or your ancestors in a peaceful setting.*

*You may be seeing beautiful people, saints, or friends welcoming you.*

*You may be reliving pleasant experiences from your past.*

*Or you may have demonic and hellish visions.*

*If you have hurt others, those whom you have injured may appear to you. Difficult and dreadful moments of your life may arise to*

*haunt you.*

*You may see people with whom you have had negative interactions*

*attacking you.*

*You may even cry out in fear.*

*Do not identify with these visions.*

*Simply let them be.*

*The element of air is dissolving.*

*You do not have to do anything.*

*Just practice this breath of release and let go of everything.*

*Your tongue is thick and heavy; its root is blue.*

*You have lost your taste for life as you lose the sense of taste.*

*You cannot feel texture or body sensations.*

*Your body is barely moving.*

*The last energy of your body is withdrawing now to your body's*

*core.*

*Whatever heat left in your body now resides in the area of the heart.*



*The inbreath is short, a mere sip of air.  
The outbreath is long and uneven.  
Your eyes, gazing into emptiness, roll upward.  
No intellect is present.  
Your consciousness at this point is reduced to a smaller and  
smaller entity.*

*Three rounds of respiration.  
Your body lifts slightly to meet the breath, which does not  
enter.  
Your mental functions cease altogether.  
Your consciousness has dissolved into space.  
The perception from the outside is that you are dead.  
Breathing has stopped.  
Brain function has stopped.  
The body feels no sensation.  
Know this empty state.  
Know this stillness and surrender to it.  
Experience it.  
This is the element of wind dissolving into space.  
Become space.*

*At the moment of physical death,  
one sees the small, flickering flame like a candle.  
Now it is suddenly extinguished,  
and you are without any awareness.*

***The Inner Dissolutions:***

*From the crown a white drop  
Is propelled by the inner winds  
Downward through the central channel toward the heart.  
This is the male essence, and anger transforms into profound*

*clarity.*

*You experience an immaculate autumn sky filled with brilliant sunlight.*

*A red drop from the base of the spine is propelled upward through the central channel toward the heart. This is the female essence, and desire transforms into profound bliss.*

*You experience a vast and clear copper-red autumn sky of dusk.*

*The white and red drops meet in the heart and surround your consciousness.*

*The winds enter your consciousness.*

*You are now freed from the conceptual mind.*

*Thick darkness like a deep autumn night sky appears.*

*You dissolve into unconsciousness.*

*Out of this nothingness, luminescence arises.*

*You are one with a clear dawn sky free of sunlight, moonlight, and darkness.*

*You are bliss and clarity.*

*Now the Clear Light of Presence is liberated, the Mother Light of your awareness.*

*This is your ultimate Great Perfection.*

*This is the actual moment of death.\**

*\* Joan Halifax wishes to thank the late Chakdud Tulku Rinpoche, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and the late Diane Shainberg for help with this practice.*

