

# Making Peace with Death and Dying



*"To stay with that shakiness—  
to stay with a broken heart, with a rumbling stomach,  
with the feeling of hopelessness and wanting to get revenge—that is the  
path of true awakening.*

*Sticking with that uncertainty, getting the knack of relaxing  
in the midst of chaos, learning not to panic—  
this is the spiritual path."*

*- Venerable Pema Chödrön*

# The Top 5 Regrets of the Dying

*from the Guardian News Report 2013 survey*

1. "I wish I had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me."
2. "I wish I hadn't worked so hard."
3. "I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings."
4. "I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends."
5. "I wish that I had let myself be happier."

## Reflect (and/or journal):

- If I were to die in the next year, which of these regrets (or others) would I have?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What needs to change now so that I die with little or no regret?

# 3 Point Death Meditation

*From the Lam Rim Chen Mo by Lama Tsong Khapa; adapted by Venerable Yönten*

## **Steps:**

- 1) Settle the mind with breathing meditation and body relaxation.
- 2) Set your motivation that the wisdom gained benefits everyone.
- 3) Reflect on each point, making it your own, until you can naturally and genuinely settle on each conclusion before moving on to the next one (or chose only one or two points per session).
- 4) Dedicate your merit at the end.

## **Short Version:**

1. Death is Certain: Everybody dies...I'm getting closer to my death with each moment...There is no avoiding death...There is not much time left to practice the spiritual path...

Conclusion: I MUST practice a spiritual path [a.k.a. Dharma].

2. The Time of Death is Uncertain: People die at every age...There are many more causes for death than supports for life...My body is extremely fragile...

Conclusion: I must practice a spiritual path [Dharma] NOW.

3. Only Dharma Benefits at the Time of Death: Not wealth and possessions...Not friends and family...Not even my own body...only my mind's development will help

Conclusion: I must practice ONLY/PURELY a spiritual path [Dharma] –  
imbuing all the activities and thoughts in each day.

# 9 Point Death Meditation

*From the Lam Rim Chen Mo by Lama Tsong Khapa; adapted by Venerable Yönten*

## Extended Version:

### 1. Death is Certain

- a. because death will definitely come and therefore cannot be avoided
  - i. No matter how well you take care of your body or how safe you keep it
  - ii. Death doesn't wait for you to finish tasks or heal grudges
- b. because our lifespan cannot be extended and diminishes unceasingly
  - i. Yet we make excuses not to practice, as if life could be lengthened:
    1. When we are young we put off practice,
    2. When we're middle aged we're too busy and distracted to practice
    3. When we're old we look back with regret and feel too sick or tired
- c. Even when we are alive there is little time to practice
  - i. half of our life is sleeping
  - ii. the majority of waking life is spent lolling around or rushing about - quarrelling, shopping, travelling, puttering around, watching TV, eating, grooming ourselves etc. – all while being unmindful of practice or the imminence of death
    - First decision: I must practice.

### 2. The Time of Death is Uncertain

- a. because our lifespan in this world is indefinite
  - i. young people die before old people every day
  - ii. healthy people die before sick people every day
- b. because the causes of death are very many and the causes of life are few
  - i. We are at the mercy of the elements
- c. because the time of death is uncertain due to the fragility of the body

- i. even things that support life can bring death such as food, medicine, etc.
  - Second decision: I must practice now.

### 3. At the time of death nothing helps except practice

- a. because at the time of death our friends and family are of no help
  - i. they can't come with us and aid our transition
  - ii. they may even distract us from our practice with their needs and emotions
- b. because at the time of death our wealth is of no help
  - i. There is no buying off or bribing death
- c. because at the time of death our body is of no help
  - i. when our karma for this life finishes, it doesn't matter how strong our will is, the body will eventually rebel and fail us.
    - Third decision: I will practice purely
      - without indulging the 8 worldly concerns (attachment to comfort, acquisition, praise, & good reputation and aversion to discomfort, material loss, criticism & bad reputation).

**His Holiness the Dalai Lama:** *"Mere knowledge of the process of death and practices is not sufficient; you must gain familiarity with these over years. If now, when the senses are still clear and mindfulness has not degenerated, your mind is not made serviceable with the way of virtue, it will be difficult—when dying—for the mind to proceed of its own accord on a strange path. When dying, you may be physically weak from illness and mentally depressed from terrible fear. Therefore it is necessary to become intimate with the practices related to dying."*

**Dedication:** By the merit, mental energy, good karma etc. that I have created by analyzing these points deeply, ***may I embody the wisdom of them. May all sentient beings live life fully, kindly and meaningfully and work to benefit others in this life and continue a kind and beneficial attitude for whatever comes after death...***

# Impermanence Reflection

*The following reading is from The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*

*by Sogyal Rinpoche:*

Life is nothing but a continuing dance of birth and death, a dance of change. Every time I hear the rush of a mountain stream, or the waves crashing on the shore, or my own heartbeat,  
I hear the sound of impermanence.

These changes, these small deaths, are our living links with death. They are death's pulse, death's heartbeat, prompting us to let go of all the things we cling to.

...As we search for meaning in death, we often find inner wisdom, compassion and understanding. A close encounter with death can bring a real awakening, a transformation in our whole approach to life.

It can bring a reduced fear and deeper acceptance of death, an increased concern for others and a wish to help them.

We gain a clearer perspective about life, what is important and meaningful – and through this a greater sense of the value of living each day well.

*Impermanence Reflection continued*

“To see ultimate reality through the eyes of the mountain eagle is to look down on a landscape in which the boundaries that we imagined existed between life and death shade into each other and dissolve.

Reality is unbroken wholeness in flowing movement. What is seen by those who have achieved the highest realisation is that flowing movement and that unbroken wholeness.

What we, still in our ignorance call life, and what we in our ignorance call death, are merely different aspects of that wholeness and movement.”

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### On Grief and Loss

*“When her pain is fresh and new, let her have it. Don't try to take it away. Forgive yourself for not having that power.*

*Grief and pain are like joy and peace; they are not things we should try to snatch from each other. They're sacred.*

*They are part of each person's journey.*

*All we can do is offer relief from this fear: I am all alone.*

*That's the one fear you can alleviate.”*

*— Glennon Melton*

# INTRODUCTORY IMPERMANENCE REFLECTION

*POINTS TO SIT WITH IN ORDER TO*

*OVERCOME GRASPING AT*

*PERMANENCE/EXPECTING STABILITY*

- Underpinning everything we think is a fundamental but mistaken assumption that stability and consistency (of yourself, others, things and situations) is possible...
- Despite all the evidence to the contrary, we still believe in a possibility of a stable, permanent, changeless existence at an innate level & that is why dramatic change is such a shock to our system...
- All relationships are undergoing constant flux, influenced by countless conditions... yet who hasn't been surprised when a relationship ended, changed or formed?
- If we fundamentally understood impermanence and the certainty of death, we would be less likely to treat people carelessly or waste our own potential for spiritual growth...
- We also have this mistaken idea of unchanging permanence in regards to our own identity, our own feelings & emotions, etc.
  - this mistake makes our grief worse because we add to the current pain the idea that it will be unending...
    - this way of thinking can be a self-fulfilling prophecy limiting the mind's ability to integrate traumatic experiences and turn them into compassion for oneself and others...
    - Are our disturbing emotions, like anger, fueled by this unrealistic expectation of stability in ourselves, others and situations?
- Anything that is produced is subject to change... Our problems do not come from not knowing about impermanence, but from not being mindful of that fact...
- ***What conclusions do you draw from these points about new ways to live and approach life?***



# Needs of the Dying from a Buddhist Perspective

## Support in letting go/transitioning

- a. Keep the room quiet and calm
- b. Remember this part of the process is not about you, the carer, friend or family member – it's about the dying person and their process.
  - i. It is helpful if support people to the dying person manage their grief and other emotions with people outside the situation or at least in a different location to where the death is occurring
- c. This includes asking emotional friends and family to work out strong emotions in a way that doesn't disturb the dying person
  - i. Ideally any *hysterical* crying or anger happens out of sight
- d. Helping the dying person connect to their spiritual refuge by reminding them of the prayers, practices, songs, meditations and teachings that they love
- e. Surrounding them with images that remind them of their practice
- f. Organize distribution of possessions well in advance if possible (Will sorted before the person becomes too ill to discuss it).
- g. Remind the person of the positive things they have done in their life and how the impact of those actions will continue.
- h. Family and friends reassure them that they are loved, will be remembered but will be ok without them.
- i. Reassure them that projects, animals, etc. that they feel responsible for will be taken care of and make sure that happens.
- j. Check that the aspects of a funeral/life celebration that the dying person cares about, have been discussed
  - i. Discussion and decisions about the person's physical remains
- k. Find out what prayers and practices they want done at death and for the 49 days after their death and get that organized.

# The Death Process in 8 Stages from a Buddhist Perspective

These stages can happen in a matter of seconds or over several days

a. physical symptoms    b. internal causes    c. visual experience/sign

## 1) First Dissolution, the Form Aggregate

a. Feeling of heaviness, one has the impression that they are sinking

- difficulty moving limbs and the body becomes smaller and weaker
- eyes have trouble opening and closing
- skin's lustre diminishes

b. Earth Element dissolves into the Water Element

**c. Vision of a Mirage**

## 2) Second Dissolution, the Feeling Aggregate

a. Feeling of dryness of tongue, eyes, etc.

- difficulty experiencing the pleasure, pain and neutral feeling that accompany the sense consciousnesses
- ears have trouble hearing external and internal sounds – buzzing in ears stops
- sweat, blood, urine, saliva etc. are drying up significantly

b. Water Element dissolves into the Fire Element

**c. Vision of Billowing Smoke**

## 3) Third Dissolution, the Discrimination Aggregate

a. Feeling of cold of extremities – difficulty staying warm and with digesting

- difficulty remembering this life's events and even family
- nose cannot detect odours
- breathing is shallow breathing in and heaving and lengthy breathing out

b. Fire Element dissolves into the Air Element

**c. Vision of Sparks Flying Up**

4) Fourth Dissolution, “The Compositional Factors” (**medical death**)

a. Feeling of disassociation from external world

- body cannot move, breath ceases, cannot feel external sensations

- tongue cannot taste, turns blue

- gross awareness of motivations is gone

b. Air Element dissolves into Consciousness

**c. Vision of Flickering Flame** (like a butter lamp in the wind, about to go out)

5) Fifth Dissolution, “The Eighty Natural Conceptions”

a. Thoughts such as hunger, thirst, sorrow and pain are gone

b. All the winds and channels are more flexible...

**c. Vision of Radiant White Appearance**

6) Sixth Dissolution, “Appearance into Increase” - *gross into subtler mind*

- all the winds in the right and left channels gather...

**c. Vision of Radiant Red Increase**

7) Seventh Dissolution, “Increase into Near Attainment”

- upper & lower winds gather...

**c. Vision of Black Near Attainment**

8) Eighth Dissolution, “Near Attainment into Clear Light” – last stage

a. Actual Death (4 stages after clinical death)

- in ordinary death is a drop of blood emerges from the nose & sexual organ

b. Most subtle mind is manifest without any gross conceptions.

- most notably free of the conception of subject and object

**c. Vision of Clear Light** (like autumn at dawn)

- Consciousness leaves the body, enters into the intermediate state/*bardo*

# Recommended Reading

## **Non-Buddhist**

### ***The Courage to Grieve***

by Judy Tattlebaum

### ***Living with Death and Dying***

by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

### ***A Grief Observed***

by C.S. Lewis

### ***How to Survive a Loss of a Child***

by C. Sanders Ph.D

### ***Awakening from Grief***

by John E. Welshons

### ***The Invisible String (for kids)***

by Patrice Karst

## **Buddhist**

### ***Mind of Clear Light: Living Well & Dying Consciously***

by His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama

### ***Ultimate Healing***

by Lama Zopa Rinpoche (also see his new (!) book **How to Enjoy Death**)

### ***Tibetan Book of Living and Dying***

by Sogyal Rinpoche

### ***When Things Fall Apart***

by Pema Chödrön

### ***Being With Dying***

by Roshi Joan Halifax

### ***Facing Death and Finding Hope***

by Christine Logaker

### ***Samsara Dog (for kids)***

by Helen Manos

### ***The Mountains of Tibet (for kids)***

by Mordicai Gerstain