



ANYEN RINPOCHE

TRANSLATED BY ALLISON GRABOSKI

AFTERWORD BY TULKU THONDUP

DYING WITH CONFIDENCE

A TIBETAN BUDDHIST GUIDE
TO PREPARING
FOR DEATH



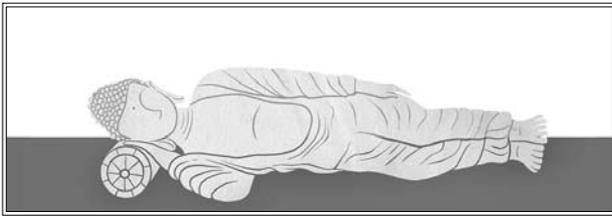
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A TIBETAN BUDDHIST GUIDE TO PREPARING FOR DEATH

Anyen Rinpoche

Translated by Allison Graboski

Edited by Eileen Cahoon, Ph.D.



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The essence of Buddhism is what is real;
what is real is what we practice
and what is in our hearts.
—Anyen Rinpoche

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DEDICATION TO TSARA DHARMAKIRTI RINPOCHE

*You, who are indivisible from the primordial protector,
Father, accomplished mighty Dzogchenpa:
outside, you are the son of Shakyamuni
adorned by the three trainings;
inside, your heart is filled with bodhichitta;
secretly, you are the great, secret Vimalamitra.
Bestow the common and supreme accomplishments upon me,
a wanderer of the world,
so that I may establish the perfectly pure Dharma without hindrance.*

*Beings living in the modern, degenerate age
are continually tormented by five lethal poisons and drunk
on the five sense objects
following after fleeting worldly phenomena;*

*distracted by unattainable worldly actions;
believing that the insubstantial is substantial.
Protector, by your blessing and the mighty truth of the
Rare and Supreme Three Roots,
may all beings awaken from ignorance!
While in the Bardo of Birth and Living,
may beings first listen impartially to teachings,
then cut through doubts about the meaning,
and finally, take up the meaning that was understood.
May they follow after the sacred ones who have come before,
attain a fearless and confident death, and attain liberation
free of the bardos!
Especially, may they follow an authentic lama
with respectful body, speech and mind,
contemplate the view free of extremes and manifest
the uncontrived Mahamudra!
Based on realizing the meaning of effortless Dzogchen,
may they attain the stronghold of the Lineage of the
Longchen Nyingthig,
instantly accomplishing the stages and paths,
and reach the stage called Exhaustion of Phenomena!
Watch over me, blessed lama!
Watch over me, compassionate lama!
May the torment of the five poisons be pacified!
May all beings receive the heart of the sacred Dharma!
May they take up the path and put it into practice!
May they attain a fearless and confident death!
May the terror of the bardos be pacified!
May all attain Buddhahood, the primordial ground of the expanse!
AH! AH! AH!*

KYABJE TSARA DHARMAKIRTI RINPOCHE passed away at the age of 90, on the first day of Sakadawa, 2005. Rinpoche had prophesied the month of his death six months prior, and passed away after giving teachings on the nature of birth and death. Just before he spoke his final words, he called the doctors and nurses around him and said, “Please remove the IV from my arm, and stop administering me any medication.” He seemed to be telling us, “*This is how a true master dies.*” Then, he spoke these final words, “At the moment of death, the ability to abide in the nature of mind, the indivisible three kayas—with its empty essence, clear nature and all-pervasive compassion—is extremely important.” He spoke the seed syllable *AH* while seated in the vajra posture and then passed away.

Many miraculous signs manifested after Rinpoche’s death. After Rinpoche’s body was cremated, his bones became many-colored, glowing balls of precious medicine. The image of Tara arose from his skullcap, which did not burn in the fire. Rinpoche’s body expressed the sign called “*tuk jak chen sum*” in Tibetan, or “heart, tongue, and eyes.” This sign is attained by only the most superior of yogis, and was also attained by the omniscient Longchen Rabjam.

May all beings find inspiration in this story of Rinpoche’s passing, and doing so, put the teachings into practice in their entirety.

EDITOR'S PREFACE

MY HEARTFELT REQUEST for Anyen Rinpoche to prepare this guide for dying came as a result of my own mother's death. As she lay dying over a period of seven months, I was drawn to Buddhist texts for advice on how to help her die skillfully.

The wish for her to be free of all her pain and suffering stirred deep in my heart. She'd had a stroke, and subsequently had shed those personality traits that had driven me crazy as a child; she was now transformed into a woman who radiated love at everyone she saw no matter who they were. I wondered if I could die too with such unconditional love.

My mother's death gave me the most precious gift of bringing me to Buddhism as well as helping me to recognize the immense opportunity we all have to share love and compassion, both in this life and at the time of death. It inspired me to learn more about the process of dying and how I could best help others go through it as well.

In this book, Anyen Rinpoche gives us practical information that will benefit both those seeking a Tibetan Buddhist death and non-Buddhists wanting to help a loved one or friend die in this tradition. He encourages us to take responsibility for ourselves as Dharma practitioners, to assess our practice honestly, and to contemplate

impermanence—our own impermanence—deeply. He shows us how to create the necessary vehicles for using the process of dying to further our aspirations for enlightenment in the service of all beings.

Rinpoche has a grassroots vision of “*phowa* groups” throughout the Buddhist community practicing *phowa*, or the transference of consciousness at the time of death, both for themselves and for others. If a lama cannot be present at someone’s death, experienced practitioners trained in *phowa* can be there to assist the dying person. Thus, through practicing *phowa* together, we can benefit our sanghas and Dharma communities.

There is, of course, much more to study in depth on this topic than can be presented in this one book—and ultimately, close contact with a teacher or lama is crucial. Nonetheless, by using the foundations in this guidebook, we can create the conditions for an excellent death and rebirth and make the most of our prior efforts to practice the Dharma and embody its principles.

I would have been grateful for such a guide to help my mother, and I am grateful now for these preparations for my own death and to help others. I hope we can all heed the advice given here, as we don’t know when death will come.

The teachings in this manual were given in many different settings by Anyen Rinpoche since he came to America in 2005. They have been translated from the Tibetan by Allison Graboski, who is also the translator of Anyen Rinpoche’s books *The Union of Dzogchen and Bodhichitta* and *Momentary Buddhahood*. Allison gave generously of her time and skills to not only translate additional teachings for this book, but to clarify numerous questions and offer wise insights. Without her untiring efforts in translating for Anyen Rinpoche, Western students would miss the opportunity to receive many precious teachings.

Rinpoche answers a number of direct questions from his students in this book that are relevant to Western culture and not addressed in traditional texts. I am very grateful that Rinpoche has agreed to continue to answer questions about the dying process on the website for the Phowa Foundation, a project of Orgyen Khamdroling, a non-profit organization founded by Anyen Rinpoche. The Phowa Foundation offers prayers and ritual practices for those who are ill, dying, or have already died, as well as retreats, education on the dying process, and special related materials.

Whenever Anyen Rinpoche gives teachings on preparing for death, the question-and-answer sessions could go on for hours. We are fascinated, curious, and a little uncomfortable all at once at the descriptions of the dying process and the bardo states. Part of this book grew out of just such question-and-answer sessions, and the gist of that material has been integrated into the flow of the chapters.

As we face the deaths of parents, loved ones, and our own unknown time of death, we will have many more questions that could not be included here. Students who may not have regular access to a lama will be able to benefit by asking their questions of an authentic teacher of Dharma, and exploring the resources and opportunities offered by the Phowa Foundation.

May this effort benefit all beings and help bring us swiftly to enlightenment.

Eileen Cahoon, Ph.D.

1

INTRODUCTION

STARTING WHEN I was about two or three years old, I began to have experiences of death. One day, a woman named Kaki Padmatso came to my village. She gave me a walnut with a red-painted husk as a gift. It may sound incredible to a Western audience, but after I received that gift from her, strange things began to happen to me. I would stop breathing—and, one might say, literally die—for several minutes up to a half an hour. These death experiences continued to occur for about three years.

These were unique experiences in my life. Lama Chupur, the realized Dzogchen yogi who raised me, could not explain why this was happening to me. But he worked very hard to bring me back to the living, and practiced hard to release my life from the grasp of this obstacle. Although this could have been a very frightening time, the instructions I received helped me work through any fear I might have otherwise experienced.

One day, a poor, one-handed beggar named Pasang Lhakto came to our village. My mother told me later that Lama Chupur gave him all of the food we had in our humble kitchen—butter and steamed corn. Usually, my mother is a very generous person but on that day, Lama Chupur’s generosity was even greater than hers. “What are you

doing?” she asked him. Lama Chupur just smiled and said, “Your son will not experience this obstacle any longer.” And I didn’t. I did not experience death again until many years later.

Later, I felt as though the teachings on death and dying were, in a way, narrating the experiences of my childhood. I realized I had received an incredible gift: I know that what the Vajrayana Buddhist texts describe about death is what a being actually experiences before the inner breath ceases. I know that the descriptions given in the teachings on the bardos, literally *the intermediate states*, are accurate—and I know all this as a matter of personal experience. As a result, my trust in these teachings can never be shaken.

In 1997, I had another experience of death. I became very sick with pleurisy and fluid began to fill up my lungs. My body became very heavy. The Chinese doctor, untrained in any of the techniques of Western medicine, had never used a needle to remove fluid from the lungs before, but he decided he needed to do so now—and so he put a large needle in my back. No one knows exactly what he hit when he put the needle in, but I was unconscious for more than an hour. I didn’t breathe for more than forty minutes.

I can assure you that when you are unconscious and not breathing, it is very difficult to recognize that you are dying and that you need to continue your Dharma practice. As I began to experience the stages after death, I was enveloped in heavy blackness. I don’t know at what point, but suddenly I remembered my lama deeply in my heart, and began to pray to him. I was filled with devotion, and I thought to myself, “If I die now, I die with no fear. But if I am able to live, I will rejoice in that opportunity.” Remembering that I had more work I wanted to do for the Dharma and for all beings, I thought to myself, “I am going to live and I am going to go back.” With that thought, I was able to wake up again.

I can tell you it is very, very difficult to remember to practice at

such a time. I can also tell you that it is sometimes even possible to “come back to life” if we recognize the state of death and then exert our will to live.

Throughout my life, I have remembered these experiences over and over again. I often reflect on death and the process of dying, and this has inspired me to begin working on projects to support those who are preparing for death. I feel that if practitioners have the same conviction about what will happen during the dying process that I do, they will feel more inspired to practice. Knowing what will happen when death arrives is so useful and practical—it is like a road-map. After all, who wouldn’t look for clear directions before they travel somewhere new?

We all know that death is certain—no one ultimately evades death. What we often forget is that death can come at any time. For Buddhists, the moment of death is the most potent opportunity to practice. Indeed, it is the key opportunity to attain realization or a positive rebirth. Thus, meditation practice in Buddhism is actually practicing for death. You are practicing so that you can have mindfulness and clarity in that moment when you are dying, so you are confident you are prepared to use the experiences after death for the best rebirth possible—or even complete and perfect liberation.

We must redefine the meaning of our practice so we can cultivate a feeling of *rejoicing* about the moment of death. If we practice hard enough in our lifetime, the experience of death will be our absolute best opportunity to have the strongest result from all of the aspirations and practices we’ve cultivated in our Dharma life. If we are duly prepared, I can promise that the moment of death *will* be an experience of rejoicing. If we are not prepared, it will surely be a time of fear and regret. When we think about death in this light, we should feel strongly motivated to practice every day.

Some people think that contemplating their own death will make them sorrowful. They would prefer not to think about it. For a meditation practitioner, however, this is a great mistake. By avoiding thinking about the reality and moment of death, we are losing a chance to really motivate ourselves to practice. We must reflect on our lives: there may only be a short time left. Do we have the confidence and the tools to die skillfully? Have we done the utmost to practice properly? Although we may plan how we would like to die and express our wishes to our friends and family, it may not always be possible to have someone next to us reminding us what to do. It is our responsibility to be prepared. No one can do this for us.

There is a metaphor in the Tibetan texts that says that one who receives teachings but does not gain experience through practice is like a farmer who doesn't tend his own fields—even as he constantly tells others how they should tend theirs.

People today receive many teachings, but at the time of death have they gained enough experience to die well? If we don't rethink how we are spending our lives and investing our energy in terms of our practice, we will be like the farmer and have nothing to eat at harvest time.

Preparing for Death

Students from many different cultural and spiritual backgrounds come and ask me for help when a loved one is dying. When someone close to us is dying or has died, we begin to think seriously about what our own death will be like. While this book will guide Buddhist practitioners preparing for their own death, it will also serve Buddhists and non-Buddhists who would like to help someone die while relying upon the supports of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Those who would like to help non-Buddhists in the dying process will also

find these instructions useful and can adapt them to incorporate the spiritual tradition of the dying person—even if they are not Buddhist, they might appreciate your efforts anyway. And if they do not want you to perform *phowa* for them, you can instead generate compassion and pray for the person as much as you can.

For Tibetan Buddhists, however, unless you have extreme confidence or certainty about your ability to properly recognize and rest in the nature of mind, and unless you can rest in the Dharmakaya constantly, you should train in and practice *phowa*. It will not create any obstacles so it is always good to do. Furthermore, our assessment of where our practice is now may not be accurate. We may think that we are more skillful practitioners than we actually are. In light of this, it is best to practice *phowa*. What's more, it cannot be emphasized enough that everyone—practitioner and helper, Buddhist and non-Buddhist—will benefit by learning about the signs of death. Knowing what to expect will help us know what to do at the right time.

Before we learn the traditional Buddhist teachings on the signs and stages of death, before we take up the practice of the transference of consciousness, before discussing medical and spiritual considerations at the time of death—all topics we will explore together in this book—there are necessary preparations to enhance our chances of using these teachings effectively.

First, I am a strong advocate of each of us as Buddhist practitioners taking time for honest self-reflection and knowing where we are now on the spiritual path and where we would like to be in the future. Then I suggest creating two documents: one, a Dharma Vision, a realistic plan and commitment for accomplishing this lifetime's aspirations for practice; and two, a Dharma Will, a plan for how we wish to die that designates “entrusted Dharma friends” who have agreed to assist with rituals, prayers, and practices at the time of death. When

people in the West get older, they write wills for their children. What we need now is a Dharma Will for ourselves!

After reading through this guide and creating your Dharma Vision and Dharma Will, I encourage you to prepare a special “Dharma Box” as well—this box should contain the Dharma Will, copies of our advance medical directives and other legal papers, as well as all the practices and ritual items we wish to have with us as we die.

I will offer specific instructions on using the different stages of the dying process as a spiritual practice and will also give detailed instructions on a phowa text that was passed down to me by my root lama, Kyabje Tsara Dharmakirti Rinpoche. This text is from the Longchen Nyingthig lineage. It is important to learn the visualizations now while you are healthy and sound of mind and body and able to practice energetically. This does not mean that phowa cannot be learned or trained in when we are elderly or sick, however, it is easier to master this practice when we are young and healthy. It is, of course, best to study with an authentic teacher and to attend phowa retreats whenever possible so there is appropriate support and sufficient time to experience the results of successful practice. The essence of all phowa teachings is the same, although there are slight differences in the texts. The phowa instructions given later in this book are sufficient to begin practicing now if you have not had prior instruction, or will serve as a reminder of any prior phowa teachings you have received.

Finally, we will explore the role of the entrusted Dharma friend and decide if we wish to serve sangha members and friends by practicing with them as they die and reminding them how to use the unique opportunity of death. I encourage each and every one of us to consider performing this service to our Dharma brothers and sisters. With very little effort, everyone can learn to do phowa successfully and contribute to the enlightenment of all sentient beings.

The phowa text and other practices to be recited as we are dying and to guide the consciousness after death can be found on the Phowa Foundation website at www.phowafoundation.org.

May these teachings inspire and guide us to practice the true Dharma and to face death fearlessly. May they help create the conditions for all to attain liberation and perfect enlightenment!

PART ONE



*Spiritual Preparations for the Time of Death:
An Evolving Meditation on Life and Death*

2

ON DEATH AND MINDFULNESS

*May the wisdom of our teachers' minds be transferred to our minds.
May we understand the teachings and put them into practice.*

FROM THE MOMENT we are born, we are carried by four great rivers: birth, sickness, old age, and death. From the time that we enter the mother's womb until the actual moment of dying, there is no escape from this ordinary life into which we are born. No being escapes death. We all must die; we all *will* die—the only question is when.

The river of birth carries us to old age. No matter what we look like on the outside, we are all going to get old. We should not think that just because we are young, just because we are healthy now, that we have time. And we don't need to wait for the signs of death to appear; the signs of "far-away" death have already manifested for all of us! We have been born—that itself is a sign of death. We must therefore reflect on the fact of death now. If we do not think about it now, it will be difficult to think about it when it is happening—as it inevitably will. Most importantly, it will be impossible to have any kind of *mindfulness* that death is approaching if we refuse to reflect on it during our life. Through the cultivation of mindfulness now, the forces of habit and practice will help us practice it at the time

of death. Truly, through the power of committed practice, there is nothing that cannot become easy. So if we put effort into reflecting upon death during our lifetime, we will find that this will support our practice and mindfulness at the actual time of death.

As the river of birth carries us to old age, it will also carry us along the river of illness, bringing us even closer to death. Reflect on all the various kinds of illnesses that exist on the planet today. Some are chronic and can make us ill for twenty or thirty years—or a whole lifetime. Some occur suddenly and are incurable. Some have gradual onset, so slow we barely notice until they are already very far advanced. As we get ill and closer to death, the “close” signs of death will begin to manifest. We can all recognize these signs if we train in mindfulness.

Many of you have taken birth in the country of America, where there is access to many material things. What is most needed, though, is access to true Dharma teachings. We may even have the good fortune to encounter the Dharma and to receive precious teachings, but often we lack the diligence to actually practice the teachings we receive.

Teachings on death and dying and on the transference of consciousness are supreme teachings. For ordinary practitioners, phowa is the teaching which is most accessible and which we are most capable of mastering. We should receive these teachings many times over, as often as possible. Doing so will strengthen our connection to that practice, which in turn will help us to be more present at the time of death.

The fact of death is certain. And for this very reason, because it is completely certain, death is something we should be fearless about. If we are not fearless at the moment of death, the only choice is to return to samsara, to re-enter the cycle of birth, suffering, and death, over and over again. We should reflect deeply on this.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, many great lamas predict their

own death far in advance. We wonder how they can do this with such certainty, often predicting the exact day they are going to die. One simple answer is that they have gained great experience in the signs of death and have such mindfulness that they can tell exactly when any of the senses begins to degrade. This allows lamas or yogis to abide in the profound teachings and do incredible things like dying in the posture of meditation, shrinking their bodies—a sign of nearly-complete realization—or even dissolving into rainbow body, a sign of complete realization. After their bodies are cremated, other signs appear, like the manifestation of *rangsel*, or luminous beads. The *rangsel* is able to manifest because these great yogis were able to abide in their lama's heart teachings at the moment of death.

In the West, old people are often placed in nursing homes to die. They don't want to depend on their children or accept help, and sometimes their children are just too busy to take care of them. If the children are in a position to offer care, their parents should accept it. Then the children can see every day how their parents get older and older; they can see the dying process. Then it becomes natural to think about death.

During our lifetimes, we generally pay a lot of attention to our bodies, but rarely think about what goes with us when we die. We cannot, of course, take any physical or material aspect of our lives with us when we die. It is only the consciousness that goes with us. It is also only the consciousness that experiences suffering or, more accurately, is able to perceive the experience of suffering. Most importantly, it is the consciousness itself that can be transformed into wisdom during the dying process. The majority of the time we are focused on maintaining our physical body and material environment, when we actually need to place our attention on practice! Realizing this can help us shift our focus and motivate us to practice every day.

An example we can use to understand this is the act of fainting. While the body and consciousness don't actually separate when we faint, we "lose consciousness" and as a result are not aware of what is happening with our bodies. Just like during the experience of the dying process, it is the consciousness that experiences everything, including our fears and our past experiences.

Thus, when we receive teachings on death and dying, or teachings on Dzogchen and Mahamudra, or any other profound Tantric teaching, we should never neglect or forget these teachings. They are essential instructions and we should try to reflect on them every day. If we are able to do that, we will remember them at the time of death and we will be liberated from the suffering of the bardos. If we do not reflect on the teachings, even having someone read the *Bardo Thodrol* (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* or, literally, *Great Liberation upon Hearing*) to us at the time of death will not be meaningful. It will not stir that memory of something we did habitually during our lives.

Western students like to take a lot of notes at teachings, but I am not sure what happens to those notes after the student goes home. Condense your notes and make them truly your own; compose your own version of the teaching for personal use. Don't make something up, but write what your teacher taught you, in a way that is meaningful especially to you. Read it again and again over time. Then if a friend reads it for you as you are dying it will be easy for you to remember and actualize the essence of these teachings.

I have also found that Western Dharma students often want to do everything themselves. In this case, we should actually do so—we should take responsibility for ourselves by planning and practicing in such a way that we will be able to experience the death that we envision. We should also include others in our plan, allowing them

to help us where it is appropriate. But, of course, if we do not practice with great diligence, having a plan for death is just pretending.

We may receive teachings and develop a close relationship with a lama, but we still have to practice. We must remember that when we do not practice, it is not for lack of time. Please don't deceive yourself in that way. We *do* have enough time. It doesn't matter how busy we are; we can find some time each day. Training to be mindful at the time of death is a step-by-step process. If we make great effort now, the signs of death will become signposts for practice and they will awaken our mindfulness when death is upon us.

I just learned to drive recently, so I need a lot of mindfulness when I am driving. But when I look around at other drivers, I see that they don't seem to need as much mindfulness. They have trained in this since they were sixteen years old; it has become natural for them. Dharma practice is just like that. Right now we need to practice mindfulness no matter what we are doing—walking, eating, sitting, sleeping, driving. Then one day we don't need to try to “have mindfulness,” it will come naturally. It won't be hard to practice Dzogchen; it will be just like driving down to the grocery store!

Mindfulness training is actually based on the outer objects or conditions that are happening in the world around us all the time. When we gain experience, we begin to notice the kinds of outer conditions that make it possible to abide in meditation more easily. When we become skillful and recognize, “Oh, in this situation it is easy for me to meditate,” or, “When I have these kinds of conditions or energy around me it helps me,” this improves our mindfulness and our ability to abide in the view, to fully rest in the mind's primordial nature. It is very important that we make a study of the outer environment and our interaction with it as it relates to practice. This is something that acts as a general support for all kinds of meditation.

We need to work on summoning our motivation to practice and train hard in this life, as it will be very hard to remember our practice if we are sick or in pain. It is important to remember that practice and realization is not like a rock falling from the sky; it will not just suddenly hit us. We cannot attain skills in mindfulness and meditation instantly. Accordingly, we must not downplay to ourselves the importance of practice and training in mindfulness.

Mindfulness that is endowed with effort over time will naturally transform into effortless mindfulness. Effortless mindfulness endowed with *rigpa*, primordial non-dual cognizance, is a synonym for abiding in the view.

The Meaning of Confidence

Let me tell you a beautiful story about having a plan for death. When I was very young, I went to see a great Bon master whose lama had attained rainbow body. He was living in a tiny room and on the table was a small stupa. I was a mischievous child and I asked a lot of questions, so of course I asked him why he had that stupa. The master answered, “I have this stupa because when I die they are going to put my body in it.” I looked at him. He was *huge*. So I asked, “How will you fit in that stupa?” The master said, “I will have to train myself to fit or there is no benefit to even having a stupa like this.” This master had so much confidence, he was sure he was going to fit in the stupa when he died. This is real confidence in one’s preparation for death.

I was told that the Bon master almost attained rainbow body. His body did shrink to a very small size, but one obstacle arose. He told his niece, who was helping to care for him, that when he died she must not open the door to his room for seven days no matter what happened. He made her promise that. She was very young, though, and after five or six days she thought, “I don’t know what is happen-

ing to my uncle.” So she opened the door and as a result, his body was unable to dissolve any further. If she had not opened the door, he would surely have attained rainbow body.

Maybe here in America we can put a security code on our door so that will not happen!