

Nine-Point Death Meditation (lightly edited transcript)
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I. Death is Definite

There's a story they tell in this context about one old man who said, "This is the story of my wasted life: the first 20 years of my life I spent playing and getting an education. The second 20 years I spent working and supporting my family. And the third 20 years, I'm too old to practice."

It was very interesting. One year in Bodhgaya His Holiness told this story. There was a young American boy, I think he was about 10 years old at that time. I was sitting close by him in the teachings. He heard that story and he thought and he thought. Later he said to his mum, "I want to be a monk." And he became a monk!

If we have this idea of later, later, later -- I'll practice Dharma after I've done all these other things -- that may not necessarily be the case. We're always in the middle of doing something else, we will not have completed everything when death comes. We have to be really aware that death is definite. It is inevitable. The conclusion to draw from that, is that because death is inevitable, there is no way around it. Therefore, I should practice the Dharma, in other words, I should transform my mind. Why? So that this inevitable thing can be a pleasant experience for me. So that I can use my life wisely to face the greatest challenge of my life. So that I can keep doing my Dharma practice.

II. The Time of Death is Indefinite

Now we may recognize that *death is definite*, and that it's important to practice Dharma. But we may still have the *mañana* mentality: "I'm too tired this morning. I'll wake up early tomorrow morning to meditate." "This fruit is very nice. It'll be nice to offer it to the Buddha. But I like it and if I offer this now, I won't get to eat it. I'll get some nice fruit for Buddha tomorrow instead." "I know there's Dharma teachings tonight, but there's also this old movie on TV that I've wanted to see for a long time, so the Dharma can wait. I'll listen to the tapes." This is the *mañana* mentality. We're always going to do it later.

And so here in the second main heading, we begin to think that the time of death is uncertain. In other words, we're not sure how long we're going to have to live. We always want to postpone the practice until later, but in actual fact, we're never certain we're going to have time later to practice. Why? Because the time of death is indefinite.

Now if you think back to this morning, and then you think of right now. Many people who were alive this morning have died now. I would say almost all of the people who were alive this morning and were dead by tonight, when they woke up this morning, they didn't think "I'm going to die today." Even if you're sick in the hospital, you wake up in the morning thinking, "I'm going to live today. I'm not going to die." Yet death happens.

Stories

1) I had a friend whose mother was deathly sick with cancer. Her stomach bloated up. She couldn't get out of bed. Yet she sent her daughter out to buy her new bedroom slippers. It is so clear: "Death isn't going to happen to me now. I still have time to use these slippers even though I can't get out of bed." And yet death happens in so many situations just like that. Maybe even if you're dying of cancer, you still don't think, "Today, I'm going to die." Death always comes as a shock when it happens.

Many people die just so suddenly, either from traffic accidents, or seizures, or strokes, or heart attacks. It's very helpful to think about people you know who have died and the circumstances they died in, and whether they've been aware that they were going to die that day.

2) I have one Dharma friend whose younger sister died when she was in her late twenties. Her younger sister did ballet dancing. She was in her home, practicing her ballet dancing, and her husband was in another room. Her husband heard the record end, but it still kept scratching. He couldn't figure out what was happening, because whenever she was doing her dancing, she would turn it over and practice again. So he went into the room and found that she had had some kind of stroke. In her late twenties she was dead. Just like that.

3) I met a woman right before I came back to Seattle. She had a daughter who was twenty-six years old who died of a heart attack.

If you start thinking, there're just so many things like that. It isn't guaranteed that we're going to die only in old age. So many people die when they're young. We always feel that it is other people who die when they're young, but all those people who died when they were young also felt the same way, that it is other people who would die when they were young. When I was preparing for this talk, I was just sitting and thinking about all the Dharma people I know who have died, including people whom I have gone to Dharma courses with and sat next to.

4) I sat next to one young woman, Teresa, on my first Dharma course. She'd been to a course before, so she helped me and we talked. We corresponded a little bit because we were both going to go to a course in Nepal. I said I'd take her out to dinner. And she said she'd take me out to dinner when we got to Nepal. So I got to Nepal and I was at the meditation course but Teresa hadn't arrived. I don't know what's wrong. There were other people who knew her saying, "Yes, she left America. Why wasn't she here? What happened?" It turned out that several years ago, there was one man in Thailand (I think a French man) who was murdering people. Teresa met him at a party and he asked her out to lunch. He poisoned her food and they found her body in a Bangkok canal. I said to myself, "Wait a minute. This is my friend who is supposed to come over. We were going to meet in Nepal and go out to dinner. These horrible things don't happen to people like my friends. This happens to other people." It doesn't. It happens to people we know. It happened to her. And so we start to think of so many situations like that.

5) One time when I was in India, I had just become a nun, and I was walking down from Tushita one day. For those of you who know McLeod Ganj, as you come off the bus station going along the road towards Tushita, it kind of curves. There are some shops on the right side now. In those days, there wasn't any. I was walking down one day and on the right side, there was an Indian version of a stretcher -- two bamboo poles and a canvas sack. It was the most incredible sight. There was a leg bone with a green sock and a brown shoe sticking out of it. And obviously the rest of the body was underneath. We found out he was a young Westerner who came to India to have a good time. He went hiking in the mountains. We don't know what happened to him. He disappeared. He had been missing for a while.

Obviously he had died somehow. The animals had eaten his body, because all that remained were the bones, and of course with this green sock and brown shoe sticking out. And he had come to have a good time! How many times do people go on trips, thinking they're going to have a good time, but they never returned after having their good time?

Or people go to work, thinking they're going to come home, and they don't make it home. Or people lift up their spoon to eat, and they die before they have a chance to put it in their mouth.

6) My cousin was getting married. He was from Chicago. His fiancée was from California. He and his mother (my aunt) had come from Chicago for the wedding. My aunt was staying at the bride's house and the morning of the wedding, she didn't come out of the bathroom. She died in the bath-tub. We always think that death comes later, not now. "My son is getting married; I don't have time to die now." But look what happened.

a. In general there is no certainty of lifespan in our world

It doesn't matter whether we feel we have time to die or not. *The time of death is indefinite*. People die at all sorts of ages. Some people die in their nineties. Some people die in their thirties. Some people die when they're children. Some people never make it out of the womb. There's no guaranteed lifespan on our planet. This innate feeling inside of us that "I have forever," or "It will happen later" is a complete hallucination, because there's no guarantee. Absolutely none.

It's really helpful to think very, very deeply about that. Because then, each day when we wake up, we feel like our life is a very precious treasure. We're still alive. What an incredible treasure. "I want to make my life useful. I want to make it meaningful."

b. There are more chances of dying and less of remaining alive

Then the second sub-point here, is that there are many more chances of dying than there are of remaining alive. Now this sounds very strange. But think about it this way:

(i) You lie down, and you don't move. You do nothing. Eventually, you're going to die. Right? In other words, it takes incredible effort to keep our body alive. We have to feed it. We have to protect it from the elements. We have to give it medicine. We have to exert so much effort to keep the body alive. Whereas if we didn't exert any effort, the body would just automatically die. As you can see, it's so much easier to die than to stay alive. Our whole life is such an effort. So much effort to stay alive.

(ii) And then, so many of the things that we create to keep us alive, actually become the cause of our death. This is again why there're so many more chances of dying than staying alive. We make cars to make our life easier; I don't know how many people die on the road each year. We make houses to keep ourselves alive; look what happened when there was the earthquake in Armenia, how many people died because their house fell on them. We create all sorts of modern appliances to make our life easier; and we electrocute ourselves.

It's really quite amazing. Even the food which is supposed to be the source of our life. We eat it and people choke and then that's it. And so just everything that we think that's going to increase the lifespan, again it doesn't necessarily, because it actually is in fact very, very easy to die.

c. Our body is extremely fragile

And then the third point here, is that our body is extremely fragile. We feel big, strong. But if you look at it, one little virus that we can't even see with our eyes can kill us. When you think about that, one little bacteria. You step on one thorn, I mean, so many small things can kill this big body. So many little insects, little animals, can kill this body. The skin is very easy to break. The bones aren't that difficult to break either. Our body is really not that strong. It's very fragile. So again, another reason why it's quite easy to die.

It's helpful when we're doing this meditation, to think about this in terms of ourselves. To think about the fragility of our own body. To think about how so many things that are supposed to be conducive for life can become the cause of our death. To think about the fact that we're always in the middle of doing something, but that is no guarantee that we're not going to die. Everybody who's dying is always in the middle of doing something. So again this whole notion of "I'll die later when I've finished all my work," -- when will we ever finish our work? There's nothing to give us a sense of security, or to put off the feeling

of death.

Understanding that death is definite, we want to practice the Dharma. Understanding the second point, that the time of death is indefinite, then we get the feeling, "I want to practice the Dharma now." It's not sufficient to say, "*Mañana, mañana.*" In other words, "I really want to take it and make this an important thing in my life now. Why? Because I may not have tomorrow to practice." Lama Zopa used to tell us, "Your future rebirth can come before tomorrow!" And yet we spend so much time planning for tomorrow and for the rest of our life. How much time do we spend preparing for our future rebirth? So this helps bring us back to the present. We become very wise, very alert while we're alive, not on automatic mode.

III. Nothing else can help at the time of death except the Dharma

a. Wealth is of no help.

The third major heading here is that nothing else but the Dharma can help us at the time of death. This point really strikes at the core. For example, our wealth. We spend our whole life trying so hard to get money, trying to get material security, trying to get possessions -- buying clothes, getting houses, getting comforts, getting things. Yet at the time we die, does any of it come with us? Does any of our possessions come with us? Does any of our money come with us? None of it comes with us! Yet we spend our whole life working for it. And we have nothing to show at the end of our life, except all the negative karma that we've created in the process of seeking after all these material possessions -- negative karma created by cheating other people, or by clinging and by being miserly, or by taking things that belong to other people, or by screaming at other people who harm our possessions.

So all this stuff that we've worked so hard to get, that we've created so much negative karma to get and to hold on to, comes to nothing at the time of death. And worse than that, all of our relatives are going to fight over who gets it. You lie there on your deathbed, and all the relatives are coming up asking you to sign this and that. Who's going to get this, who's going to get that. It's incredible what happens in families sometimes when somebody dies. Incredible! Other people fight over who gets the jewelry and who gets the stocks and bonds. Can you imagine working your whole life to get material possessions and all your kids or your brothers and sisters fighting over them while you're trying to die peacefully? Or you're sitting there worrying about what's going to happen?

When I was in Dharamsala, I had a friend, a Tibetan woman. Her father died. And as he was dying, he told her that in 1959 when he escaped from Tibet, he had some gold coins. He came into India and buried the gold coins somewhere to protect them. And here he was dying, and he was trying to tell his daughter where the gold coins were. This is how he left this life. The mind's still clinging on to the gold. I think that's so tragic. And yet many people in our country are very similar.

The wealth does absolutely no good at the time of death. Because when we're dead, it doesn't matter whether we've died on a nice, soft comfortable bed, or whether we've died in the gutter. It really doesn't matter after we're dead. And it really doesn't matter after we're dead, whether we have a beautiful casket and beautiful flowers, with everybody crying politely, at our graveside, or whether nobody shows up, and we're just thrown in a mass grave. It really doesn't matter.

It doesn't help to accumulate wealth with this clinging, grasping mind, thinking it's the be-all and end-all of the world and that we need so many things. We need to buy a nice plot at the cemetery. People do that. They preorder their plots. They preorder their tombstone. Incredible business! And the wealth, what good does it do? The Chinese have this custom of burning paper money to send wealth with their relatives on to the next world. They won't burn real money. So you spend real money to buy paper money. And they burn tones of paper money and paper houses and all this stuff to send on to their relatives. These things don't get there!

We do need a certain amount of wealth to live, and to stay alive; we have to be practical. But that mind that is just obsessed and that mind that accumulates so much more than we need, and the mind that can't share and can't give, and that mind that creates so much negative karma out of lying, stealing, cheating, whatever, to get our possessions, those minds are really useless.

b. Friends and relatives are of no help

Secondly, our friends and relatives don't help us when we die either. We put so much emphasis on

attachment, clinging to friends and relatives, depending, needing, possessing. "This person's so important, I can't live without this person." Another person becomes so much a part of our own ego-identity, that we don't know who we are if we separate from them. And yet at the time we die, we separate, and they can't come with us. No matter how much they love us, and no matter how much they praise us, they can't stop us from dying. No matter what they do. Even if the whole world loves us, and are sitting there praying, praying, praying, "Please live, please live, please live," they can't do anything to stop us from dying. So the mind of clinging attachment, this mind that forsakes the Dharma practice to have the pleasure of attachment, relationships with other people, this mind distracts us from what's really valuable, thinking that "If only I can make this relationship work, I'll be happy. I'll be fulfilled." But we're never fulfilled. And then we die and the other person stays here. What to do?

So again, no matter how popular we are, how good our reputation is, how much people love us, how many friends we have, at the time we die, we die. They can't stop it. And in addition, if we've created a lot of negative karma out of our attachment in our relationships with people, then although the people don't come with us at death, all that negative karma does. We lie to protect our loved ones; we slander other people to protect our loved ones; we criticize and blame and yell and scream at other people because they harmed our loved ones -- so much negative karma we can create. We cheat other people to get more things for the person we love. We kill animals to protect the person we love. We do so much negative karma in the name of "love", which is actually very often a lot of attachment with a little bit of love. And then at the time we die, there's nothing to do but separate. There's no choice.

I'm not saying here that you should give away all your wealth and give up all your relationships. That's not the point. The point is when we're clinging to the wealth, and we cling to friends and relatives, that's where the problem comes. Because with the clinging, we develop wrong motivations. That leads us to negative actions. With the clinging, we neglect our Dharma practice to get the happiness from friends and relatives and possessions. So the problem is that clinging mind. The solution isn't to give up the relationships and possessions. The solution is to give up the clinging, the attachment. And to really recognize what wealth can and cannot do for us and what our friends and relatives can and cannot do for us.

And like I was saying, when I saw this old monk die and how his Dharma friends acted, they were completely happy to let him die. They were happy to let him die, and they acted at that moment in a very beneficial way to help him die in a good way. Whereas very often, when we're involved in these clinging relationships, when it comes time to die, the other person who is also clinging to us, they are so immobilized. Since the Dharma has never been the center of our relationship, they're incapable of helping us through the death process. Instead they sit there and cry and cry and grasp our hand and say, "Please don't die. How am I ever going to make it without you? I can't live without you!" Here you are trying to die peacefully, and this person is clinging to you, and you're clinging to them.

I think friendships are very important. And being affectionate with other people is very important. But we really have to keep Dharma as the focus of our friendship, so that we can accept our Dharma friend's death, and we'll have the clarity of mind to be able to help each other at death time, and to encourage each other in the Dharma, to remind each other to take refuge and to make prayers and cultivate altruism and think of emptiness at the time of death. Then our friendships become really meaningful, very important. Very worthwhile. We're willing to let each other go, because actually, whether we're willing or unwilling, we separate.

c. Not even our body is of any help

At the time of death, even our body doesn't help us. The body that we've been together with, since the time we were born. Sometimes we haven't been with our wealth, and we haven't always been with our friends and relatives. But our body, this body, my most cherished possession – we spend so much time taking such good care of it. We go to the gym, we work out, we get vitamins, we comb our hair, we dye our hair, we do this and that to our fingernails, toenails, and to our beard. So much attention on our body! Decorating it, glorifying it, and making it smell the right way. And what does it do at the end of the day? It dies!

It is like sand through the fingers -- there's nothing to hold on to. We spend our whole life attached to this body, creating so much negative karma to protect this body. We fight wars to protect our body, and to protect our wealth. We kill, steal and slander to protect our body, friends and relatives and our wealth, but at the end of the day, they all stay here. We go somewhere else, without any of them. So what's the

use of creating all the negative karma? What's the purpose? Completely illogical.

So that attitude, especially that which clings on to this body, that doesn't want to let the body go. That attitude, that clinging to the body, is what makes death so terrifying. Because we get this tremendous fear, "If I don't have this body, who will I be? If I don't have this ego-identity, of being an American and this and that, who am I going to be?" That clinging mind is what makes death so fearful. Because at death, it's so clear we have to separate from the body. If we can work during our life to get rid of this clinging of the body, then, when we die, it's so easy and so pleasant. And also when we're alive, it's a breeze.

Really contemplate this. Sit down and ask ourselves, spend some time thinking over these three points: "How much time do I spend accumulating wealth and possessions? What kind of negative karma do I create in relationship to wealth and possessions? Can these things be of any benefit to me when I die?" And then you do the same with your friends and relatives and think about it very, very deeply. And you do the same with your body.

When I first met the Dharma, I had beautiful long hair that I spent years growing, down to my waist. It was beautiful. I was so attached to it. I couldn't think of cutting my hair. No way! Because this was my one mark of beauty, the years I had grown my hair out. The thing that enabled me to finally cut my hair with a happy mind was thinking about death. Really thinking, "What good does a lot of long, beautiful hair do in your death?" What's the use of it? And I had to meditate a great deal on this, because I was very attached to my hair.

But finally that was what enabled me to be able to cut it. It is actually quite freeing when we give up attachment to our looks and our body. Otherwise the mind is so involved and so tight, and we're never satisfied with how we look. We're always trying to look good, be healthy, be what all the models are. And of course, nobody is like that. It's just a form of mental self-torture, I think.

So we come to see that Dharma practice is the only meaningful thing for the time we die. Because when we die, we leave everything else other than our mental transformation behind. In other words, if we spend our life cultivating loving-kindness, that goes with us. We die peacefully. We have a strong imprint of loving-kindness. We get to the next life, it becomes very easy to meditate on loving-kindness again.

When we spend our life really trying to act constructively towards others, then all the imprints of those actions come with us to the next life. All that good karma, all that positive potential - that's our wealth. That's what makes you feel mentally, spiritually rich, and that all can come with us. And all the training, the different attitudes we try to develop, the different aspects of our mind that we try and increase and really make them blossom, all that makes it so much easier for those same attitudes to arise again in future lives. So this mental transformation comes with us. And not only does it come with us, but it is also what makes us happy now, happy when we're dying, and happy in future lives. We can see quite directly, that if we spend our time, let's say, developing loving-kindness rather than worrying about how we look, we're going to be a lot happier now, a lot happier when we're dying and a lot happier in our future lives. Makes a lot of sense.

How to Meditate on the above

There's a lot of material in here for meditation. When you're doing the meditation, go through each point. That's why I gave you the outline, so that when you meditate, you have the outline in front, you know the points and the development, and then think of each point, explain it to yourself, try and understand it. And especially think about it in terms of your own life. Think of the people you know who've died. How they've died. And if they thought they were going to die. Think of yourself getting older and approaching death. Really make it a very personal thing. Then definitely the feeling starts to arise, and you gain a lot more clarity in what you're doing in your life and why and what's valuable and what's not. And it makes it much easier to come to the conclusion to practice the Dharma, to practice it now, and to practice it purely without getting distracted by our attachment to wealth, family and relatives, and our body.

Review

So we talked about the six benefits of remembering death, that it helps us to act meaningfully now, that all of our positive actions become very powerful and effective, that remembering death is important at the *beginning* of our practice because it poses that question to us -- what is the meaning of life? -- and spurs us into action. It's effective in the *middle* of our practice to keep us going. We don't get lagged. We don't get Dharma-lag. It also keeps us going at the *end* of our practice as we have our strong goals in mind, so we don't get distracted. And then lastly the other benefit is that we die very happily and pleasantly because we spent our life cultivating attitudes that are helpful at death and we spent our life acting constructively so we have this whole wealth of good karma to take with us. At the bare minimum, we can die without regrets. In the middle level, we can die happily with no worries. And at a higher level, death is like going on a picnic.

One of the ways to meditate on death is the *9-point death meditation*. First of all, thinking that death is inevitable. That it comes to everybody. There's no way to stop it, just being born leads to death. That our death is constantly approaching with each moment that passes. We're closer to death now than we were when we came in here tonight. And that death can happen before we've had the time to complete our practice or whatever it is we think we want to do. Understanding this, we want to practice the Dharma, because we see it's important at death time.

Then we think about how the time of death is indefinite, uncertain. You may feel, "We'll live forever." But there's no guarantee. Why? Because there's no fixed lifespan. Because we're always going to be in the middle of doing something when death comes. Because there're more causes for death than for life. We have to exert so much effort to stay alive and very little effort to die. Our body is really quite fragile and easily harmed. Understanding these helps us see that the time of death is indefinite; it could happen very quickly. Who knows? Then we get some sense of, "Oh, I want to practice the Dharma now!" There's no longer this "should" mind. It's not "I should practice the Dharma." It's "*I want to practice the Dharma.*"

And then we go on to think about what is meaningful at the time of death. We see that at death, we separate from our wealth, we separate from our friends and relatives, we separate from our body, so that spending our whole life clinging to all these things and creating so much negative karma on their behalf, just leads us to a total dead end at the time we're dying. We want to develop a constructive attitude. We have the material possessions we need, we give the rest away. We have friends and relatives, but we make the center of our relationships our spiritual practice where we help each other grow. We have a body, but instead of pampering it indulgently, we keep it healthy and clean so that we can use it in Dharma work, we can use it for meditation. That helps us to practice Dharma purely, without getting distracted by the eight worldly concerns.

Questions & Answers

Antidote to Regret

[In response to audience:] Purification is the best antidote to regret, whether it's rational regret and constructive regret, or irrational regret and neurotic regret. Purification solves both of them. I think it's very healthy to just be honest with ourselves, be realistic with ourselves. There's no sense in tormenting ourselves. But the whole idea of regret is to learn. The purpose of regret is so that we can go to the future with a happy mind. Often when we regret, we get stuck in the past. But that does no good at all. So if we have regret that comes from wasting our time, or doing negative actions, really acknowledge that in the presence of Buddhas and bodhisattvas and do the purification practice, visualizing light streaming in and purifying. Or the prostrations, or whatever kind of purification practice you do. And then make a determination about the future, how you want it to be.

Accepting the death of a person who's likely to have a lower rebirth

[In response to audience:] With reference to that story where the Tibetan monks accepted the death of their friend who was a good practitioner, what if the dying person is a criminal or somebody who is going to have a lower rebirth, would the friends be able to accept that person's death?

I can never say what people are going to do. But I would say, ideally, what we would aspire to do, is do

what you can to save the life. If you can't, then you do what you can to help them die peacefully. In any case, getting anxious and freaking out doesn't help us or them.

Being Calm is not the same as being passive

[In response to audience:] Being calm doesn't mean you are being passive. Remember we can be calm and yet be very active in saving somebody's life, or, you can be calm and be very active in trying to soothe somebody else's fears.

[Audience:] How do we help a very anxious dying person?

It is hard to give a general suggestion. I think we need so much sensitivity in each situation, to know why that person is anxious. One person might be anxious because he had a fight with his brother twenty years ago and now he has a lot of regret for it and he'd like to feel forgiven and he would like to forgive. So when you try and talk to him, you want to help him forgive, to help him recognize that the other person probably has forgiven him and that he should just let go of the negative, bad energy from the past and have a positive attitude for the future.

Somebody else might be anxious about death for a totally different reason. So we have to figure out what is going on in each person's mind and address it the best way that we can and not expect to give him the miracle pill. We can influence to the best that we can, but we shouldn't feel like, "I am going to transform this person's death." We do our best.

Reading materials on Death

[In response to audience:] In each of the Lamrim text, there is usually a chapter about death. If you look into "An Anthology of Well Spoken Advice", "Taming the Monkey Mind", "Essence of Refined Gold" -- most of the Dharma books have something about death. They say impermanence was the Buddha's first teaching, and also his last, that he showed by his own death.

Purpose of prolonging life

[In response to audience:] I think the advantage of prolonging life, is so that the person could use his life to practice more. Besides that, there is no use in prolonging life. I remember one of my teachers was saying if a person is living their life only creating negative karma, it is no use prolonging their life. But this doesn't mean that you do not try to prolong people's life. Everybody likes to live and life is valuable, but to prolong life and then everybody just creates more and more negative karma, what is the use (from a long-term view)? From the view to ensure someone has some more happiness, yes, that's valuable, people have some more happiness. But from a long-term view, the real reason for prolonging life is so that people can practice more.

Preparation for death

[In response to audience:] So was that old man really being very kind telling his daughter where the gold was when he was dying?

That's one way to look at it, but he could have also told her beforehand so that when he was dying, he could concentrate on something that's more important.

I mean I cannot tell you in one particular instance what was going on in somebody else's mind. But it just seemed to me a tragedy that one's last thought was about gold. They said in the thought training practice, if you know you are going to die, settle all your worldly affairs. Give away what you have to give away, or write your will and be done with it so then you can just forget about that and die in peace and use your attention on something more valuable as the time of death is approaching. So I think actually the responsible thing to do would be to tell somebody before hand.

Violent Deaths

[In response to audience:] So you're asking about violent deaths: can we say how somebody is going to die if the death is violent?

It is very difficult to say. Just because somebody dies a violent death doesn't mean that they are a bad person. It means that they did create some kind of karma in the past and that karma ripened. But you know, we have negative karma that can ripen even on very high levels on the path. So you can be a very good practitioner and a very spiritual person and a very kind person and still die violently because of some karma created from fifty million eons ago that you still haven't purified.

As to how somebody's mind is going to react if they die violently, that depends very much on the individual and what they happen to be thinking about at the time, and if they can turn their mind to the Dharma right away.

Alex Berzin tells this story – one experience he had that really shocked him as he has been practicing Dharma for so long. One day he was in Dharamsala walking through the market place, and he slipped and he fell and he cracked his rib, and his first thought as this was going on was “Oh xxx!” [Laughter]. And he said that really woke him up. He had been practicing Dharma for so long but in the moment of crisis, look what happened.

On the other hand, the same thing can again happen to the same person, but in a slightly different situation, and maybe causes and conditions then are such that he can really hook into the Dharma right away. It is so hard to say. Each situation is going to be very different, but the basic thing is, that the more you habituate yourself with an attitude when you are alive, the easier it is for that to arise in a crisis or at death.

Dharma friends vs Ordinary friends

[In response to audience:] It is causing you to feel a dilemma that Dharma friends can help you when you are dying while ordinary friends can't. Well, it's going to depend on how your ordinary friends are. If your ordinary friends have some spiritual streak in them and they can respond compassionately, and they can, even if they don't practice the Dharma, realize that that's something important to you and help you to think about this at the time when you're dying, that can help. But if your ordinary friends or relatives are just so involved in attachment and they are freaking out because you are dying and they are crying, they are sobbing, and they are hysterical and they are clinging on saying “Don't die, I can't live without you”, or they are sitting there reminding you of all the past things you did together, so that you get more and more attached to this life, then it doesn't help. If a Dharma friend comes and sobs and cries, they are not really a Dharma friend.

[Audience:] Do we need help when we are dying?

It's true one may want to die alone so he can guide his own mind. But having a group of people who are helping you is much easier, because at the time of death your body is going through all these changes and your mind is dependent on your body and your mind is changing. You know how it is when you are sick. When we are sick, our body elements go out of whack and so does our mind. Now if you have somebody who is with you when you are sick who can help steer your mind in a good direction, it can help you.

[Audience:] What would Dharma friends do to help their dying friend?

It would depend on the level of the other person's level of practice – where they are at.

- (1) Basically, the important thing is help the person when they are getting ready to die to settle all of their worldly things -- make offerings with their possessions, make charity -- so that they free their mind from all worries about wealth and stuff like that.
- (2) Help them also to develop a sense of forgiveness so that if they're still carrying around hurt or pain from past relationships, or if they are still angry at other people and bearing grudges, help them to work that through and give that up and realize that past situations are long gone. That they have much greater potential than to cling on to something like that from the past.
- (3) Help them to create as much positive potential as possible through making offerings.

- (4) As death approaches, put an image of the Buddha nearby. Put a picture of their spiritual teacher. When you talk to them, talk about Dharma as much as possible if they are open and want to talk about it. Remind them of the Dharma, remind them of loving kindness, remind them of refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha and imagining the Buddha and having light come pouring into them and purifying it all.
- (5) Have the person also make a lot of prayers to never be separated from the altruistic intention. Have them pray to attain precious human lives in the future or to be reborn in the pure land so that they can continue their practice in future lives. Ask them to make very strong prayers for what they want to happen in future lives and to always be able to meet pure Dharma teachers and good, conducive circumstances for practice.
- (6) When you are with them, you have to be sensitive to their needs and all. Don't do anything that would cause them to generate anger or attachment. Don't bring up memories or things or topics that might make them angry or attached. Try and create a very peaceful atmosphere, do a lot of mantra – that is very helpful, very peaceful for people.
- (7) There are also some pills. The Tibetans make these herbal pills with relic substances in them. It is very good to take them orally when one is alive. You can also, at the time they die, crush them and then mix them either with yogurt or with a little bit of honey and put that on the top of the head as the person is breathing at the end or just after they've stopped breathing. That helps the consciousness leave through the top, which is very good.
- (8) Make dedication prayers for a precious human life and not to be separated from the Dharma and particularly, the bodhicitta mind. This is very important.
- (9) If the person has any kind of tantric practice, you would remind them of their main deity. Or you could do the self empowerment with them. You could do purification practices with the person, that's going back again to the thing of forgiveness and apologizing.

OK, let's just sit quietly for a couple of minutes to digest. Please take this material home and think about it in the coming days.

This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>