



## FACING WEST

### The Yoga of Death and Rebirth

*Compiled from the Teachings of Our Lamas*

*Now when the moment of your death arrives, this is what you should do. Just as the Buddha did when he passed away, lie on your right side and rest your head on your right hand. [...] Meditate on love, wishing happiness for all beings, numerous as the sky is vast, and generate compassion with the desire to free them from every suffering.*

*Using the support of your ingoing and outgoing breaths, exhale all your happiness, comfort, and wealth, sending them to all who suffer. And inhale all the diseases, evil, negative emotions, and obscurations of other beings, taking them upon yourself.*

*Afterwards, you should reflect that samsara and nirvana are themselves illusory, just like a dream or a magical display. Everything is devoid of self-existence. Everything is but the perception of the mind, and where nothing exists, there is no cause for fear, here or in the bardo. Try to remain in that conviction, without any mental grasping.*

—Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche

#### **Obeisance to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas!**

In pastoral work, witnessing the deaths of others, and having near-death experiences of my own, I have become acutely sensitive to the physical and psychological suffering involved in dying. Some questions inevitably arise: What is death? What is dying? When a sentient being dies, who, or what, dies? What is lost in death, if not a person? What is dying well? Who or what is reborn? What follows, then, are not my words, but the words of our Lamas. I have tried to faithfully compile their instructions on death and rebirth. May they prove useful and beneficial.

Accepting the imminence of my own death, I have learned that what is important is not what to do, but how to do it. I can only live this life, this moment, and not others. With relentless compassion, service, and joy, I go forth. Light cannot fade. Life cannot die. I will go gentle into this good night.

#### **The View**

The static, unalterable dogma which posits a permanent and reincarnating self of persons is rejected by Buddhists. The Dharma teaches us that the concept of “I” is just that—a notion without a true basis, lacking permanence and substance, an emptiness. That which we believe ourselves to be is a conceptual elaboration, imputed upon the five aggregates of form, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness. It is assumed and grasped. “The doctrine of self” is one of the four forms of grasping (the others are sense-pleasures, exclusive dependence on rule-and-ritual, and fixed views.)

These five aggregates (*skandhas*) are impermanent and insubstantial. Upon analysis, we cannot find in them anything durable, individually or collectively, because all are subject to change. Yesterday’s form (the body) is not here today, and the mind (which includes the other four aggregates) changes from moment to moment. Sensations arise and subside momentarily, and our perceptions are also transitory; the volitions that urge us to act are mutable, and consciousness (the recognition of experience) lasts but an instant. Even memories are current fabrications that combine elements of the past with present appreciations and future expectations.

Who or what, then, is reborn? How do we understand that something ephemeral and insubstantial can project itself through time and space, generating a series of different lives? Paradoxically, it is precisely impermanence—constant change—that occasions the rebirth of beings.

When we contact an object, sensations arise. We perceive this sensation and generate an impulse to possess what we find pleasant, avoid what we find unpleasant, and ignore what we find to be neither pleasant nor unpleasant. We then recognize the volition, and act on it, generating further contacts.

One moment of consciousness produces the next moment, in an interminable series. This series of consciousnesses is not interrupted by the death of the body (the end of one form), but rather extends indefinitely. Causes and conditions continue to merge, to result in a next stage. Volitional tendencies and values succeed into a new body through the operation of the law of causality (dependent origination). The “last” consciousness associated with one body generates the “first” consciousness of the next body. The label “I” imagined on the prior assortment does not carry over.

The various lives that we experience are not independent periods of existence. They are simply segments of an interminable chain of causes and effects, a succession of acts and their consequences.

The Buddha says in the Sutra on Rebirth (*Bhavasamkranti Sutra*):

*Nothing passes from this world to another world, and yet there is death and birth. The disappearance of the last consciousness associated with a form, we call “death”, and the appearance of the first consciousness associated with the new form, we call “birth.”*

*At the time of its disappearance, the last consciousness does not go anywhere; at the time of its appearance, the first consciousness does not come from anywhere.*

Death is a particular form of deprivation, the loss of a certain number of faculties (*indriyas*) that sustain life. The faculties are the primary elements of life that are responsible for initiating and sustaining the physical and cognitive functions that allow a sentient being to survive and thrive. The number and the type of faculties that are possessed by a sentient being determine the range of capacities that each sentient being can execute, as well as the conditions that are required for its ongoing survival. Because the faculties are the essential elements that sustain life, the deterioration of the faculties determines the ultimate demise of a sentient being.

There are three methodological tenets regarding the nature of the faculties. The first is that, while each faculty presides over a specific and unique domain, the domains of each faculty overlap and are not exclusive of one another. The second is that no faculty can operate independently from other faculties. The third is that the full power of a faculty can only be obtained through interaction with other faculties. Although each faculty is separate and distinct from other faculties, the twenty-two faculties overlap and together empower the capacities of all sentient beings.

The faculties constitute the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for life; each faculty obtains its power through coordination with other faculties, and the coordination of at least three faculties is required to sustain life. The presence of at least three faculties, working in coordinated action, distinguishes a living sentient being from a dead sentient being. It is the presence of multiple faculties, in conjunction with their operational bases, the material organs within a body, that differentiates a living organism from a dead body.



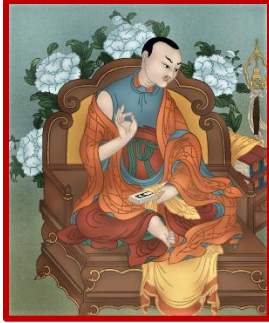
### **The Faculties**

The twenty-two faculties are divided into five categories: (1) the six faculties of perception that are comprised of the five ordinary senses and the mind, (2) the three embodied faculties that are independent from the sense faculties, (3) the five affective faculties (joy, pleasure, suffering, perseverance, and aversion), (4) the five cultivatable faculties or the skillful roots, and (5) the three uncontaminated faculties.

- Faculties 1-6: The six sensory faculties include touch-and-movement, smell, taste, hearing, sight, and mind.
- Faculties 7-9: The three embodied faculties are based in an intact and able body and are independent of the sense faculties. They include the reproductive faculties of males, the reproductive faculties of females, and the faculty of vitality, responsible for the maintenance of the vital organs and fundamental life-processes, such as cardio-pulmonary functioning. The faculty of vitality is the dominant factor in four vital functions: the capacity to transmit species-specific traits by way of the procreation, the ability to induce the timely expression of these traits at specific points in the development of an organism, the maintenance and regeneration of vital organs throughout the life cycle, and the retention of specific traits that are shared by members of a common phylogenetic or genetic heritage.
- Faculties 10-14: The five affective faculties include joy, suffering, pleasure, anxiety, and aversion.
- Faculties 15-19: The five cultivatable or skillful faculties include faith, perseverance, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. Developing these wholesome roots involves disciplined practice.
- Faculties 20-22: The three uncontaminated faculties include knowing what is to be known and heretofore unknown (present), knowing what is already known (past), and knowing what is not yet known and to be known (future). These faculties are described as uncontaminated or undefiled because they share a wholesome nature that is incorruptible. The three undefiled faculties describe the achievements of wisdom, the comprehensive knowledge of past, present, and future lives. The development of the faculties of wisdom is gained through following the path of insight, the path of cultivation, and the path of no more training. The realization of all three of these faculties is the state of Buddhahood. In the words of Vasubandhu: *“The three uncontaminated faculties are dominant in the ultimate achievement of nirvana and the analytical cessation of delusions.”*

The twenty-two faculties grouped into the five categories of the faculties of sensory perception, the embodied faculties, the affective faculties, the wholesome roots, and the uncontaminated faculties provide an exhaustive enumeration of the essential components of sentient life and a complete classification of all life forms.

All forms of sentient life can be categorized into six groups, depending on the number of faculties with which a sentient life is endowed at birth, and the number of faculties that a sentient being, with training and practice, can realize during that life period.



### **Categories of Life**

Arya Vasubandhu lays out the categorization that encompasses the full range of sentient beings in Chapter Three of the *Treasury of Abhidharma*. The six categories are intended to capture the full spectrum of sentient life and include: humans, non-human animals, celestials, hungry ghosts, hellish beings, and transitional beings. Vasubandhu bases the six categories on three factors: the minimum number of faculties possessed by a specific form of sentient life, the maximum number of faculties that a form of sentient life can actualize, and the sequence of the faculties possessed by a specific sentient being.

Vasubandhu lists the six categories of sentient beings in descending order, from the most robust forms of life that possess the greatest number of faculties, to the most attenuated forms of beings that possess the fewest number of faculties. The list spans spiritually advanced humans who possess close to the maximum number of faculties, to the transitional beings, who survive with only three faculties. In his listing, Vasubandhu contains five realms, whereas other Buddhist texts include the asuras, or jealous gods, in a separate realm. Plants are living beings, but in contrast to animals, are not sentient. The difference between a sentient being and an insentate being is the presence in an organism of the sixth sensory faculty of mind.

Celestials and humans are considered to be the more advanced forms of reborn sentient life. Transitional beings are the temporary forms assumed by sentient beings between rebirths. The lesser of the three forms of rebirth include the forms of hell-wraiths, hungry ghosts, and non-human animals.

The categorization of life is as follows:

- (1) Humans have nine innate faculties and can realize up to nineteen faculties with cultivation. The minimum number of faculties required for human survival in the Saha world is three: the embodied physiological faculty (*kayendriyam*), mind, and vitality. However, Vasubandhu generally speaks of the “nine faculties native to the human.” These nine faculties include the five senses (1-5), the mind (6), the male or female reproductive faculty (7-8), and the faculty of vitality (9).
- (2) Non-human animals have from thirteen to nineteen faculties: the five ordinary senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, a coordinative mind to direct the senses (1-6), the two embodied faculties of male or female procreation, (7) vitality, (8) and the five sensation faculties of joy, suffering, pain, pleasure, and aversion (9-13). (While not in Buddhism’s elaboration, animals sensing electromagnetic spectra outside of the six traditional categories would have those senses grouped with them.)
- (3) Gods or celestials require a minimum of three faculties to survive but can possess a maximum number of nineteen faculties. The minimum number of three faculties borne by the devas are mind, aversion, and vitality. Because the devas do not possess the sensation faculties of suffering, anxiety, or the procreative faculties, they can only have nineteen faculties.
- (4) Hungry ghosts have from eight to nineteen faculties. The minimum and maximum number of faculties for the ghosts are the same as those for other terrestrial non-human animals: nineteen at the maximum, excluding the three uncontaminated roots of wisdom, and eight at the minimum, including the five ordinary senses, aversion to pain, a suffering mind, and long-lasting vitality. Ghosts are the only forms of life that can be reborn either in a warm-blooded mammalian womb or via spontaneous karmic transformation.

(5) Hellish beings have from eight to nineteen faculties, again without the three faculties of higher wisdom.

(6) Transitional beings inhabit the “intermediate state” between births in a fleshly body. They possess a minimum of three faculties and a maximum of eight. The minimum number of three faculties include the three bodily faculties of aversion, vitality, and procreation. The maximum number of eight faculties refers to the hermaphroditic forms of transitional beings that possess both female and male faculties, the five physical senses, and vitality. Other categories of transitional beings do not possess reproductive faculties and therefore have a maximum of seven faculties.

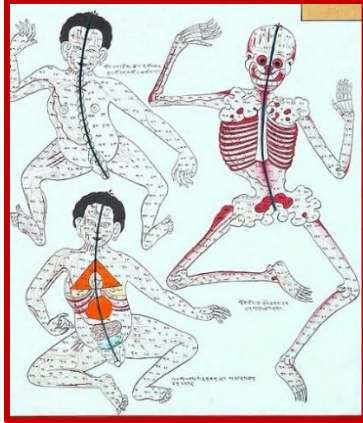
Vasubandhu states: *“The intermediate state is defined as the distance between dying and being reborn.”* The intermediate state is very fragile and is said to last for a maximum of forty-nine days and a minimum of two human weeks. Vasubandhu describes the transitional being as the form of being that a sentient organism assumes during the course after death that precedes birth as a human, non-human animal, hell-borne being, hungry ghost, or celestial.

Karma dictates the species, the nature of the environment, and the transmigratory standing into which an organism is reborn. It determines the shared biological factors of the species, in addition to the individual’s station in life, the level of education that a being can attain, and the vehicle of Buddhism or other religion to which the individual belongs.

The faculties of sight and hearing are crucial for human survival, as it is by way of seeing and hearing that one avoids threats and dangers. Smell, taste, and touch are indispensable in the consumption and digestion of food, and therefore necessary for survival. The mental faculty along with the five ordinary senses comprises the full complement of human sensory capacities. These six senses are the very “root of sentient life.” The sixth sense of the mind plays a supervisory role over the five bodily senses by sustaining and coordinating their activities. Essentially, the presence of the sixth faculty of mind separates humans from vegetables, as it enables choice.

The mental faculty is further defined in terms of its two primary capabilities: the capability to continue sensory experience, and the capability to promote independent action. The mind is described as dominant over these two capabilities as it plays a primary and indispensable role in sustaining sensory experience and independent action. Without the sixth sense of mind, humans would be inert.

The sensation faculties form the basis of “sensation experience.” Sensation experience consists of painful, pleasurable, and neutral sensations. This group of five faculties (5-9) are united in the common function of registering the affective states of pleasure, pain, suffering, joy, and aversion of stimuli. They are described as the natural growths that “sprout forth” from the senses. Sensory and emotional experiences are dependent upon the presence of a mind that registers feelings.



### **Defining Death**

The definition of death centers around faculties 1 through 9 in this list. These are the faculties that are destroyed when ordinary humans perish. The dominant tasks performed by each of the five senses are: nourishing and guiding sensory perception, adorning the body, engendering consciousness, and serving various purposes.

Vasubandhu states, in the twenty-second stanza of the second chapter of his *Treasury of Abhidharma* that, “possessing a body-with-sense-faculties emerges from nine elements.” In his auto-commentary Vasubandhu determines that this “nine-fold constituency” contains the nine faculties that characterize the able-bodied human.

The nine faculties that are required to sustain the human are the five physical senses (1-5), the mind (6), the reproductive capacity of males and females (7-8), and vitality. Although the reproductive capacity faculties are not necessary conditions for the survival of an individual, they are necessary for the propagation and survival of the species. Hence, these nine faculties are considered to form the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions required to sustain human life. Vasubandhu argues that the nine faculties distinguish the living human from the dead human; the eight-fold constituency (lacking vitality) is simply an inert body, while the nine-fold constituency is a human being “bestowed with faculties.”

Humans born with congenital disabilities do not possess fewer than nine faculties. A congenital disability is not the result of the absence of a faculty. Deaf humans, for example, do not lack the auditory faculty. Rather, the faculty is “dormant,” but retains the latent, or “non-manifest” potentiality.

Although there are no forms of ordinary humans who evince fewer than nine faculties, there are forms of humans who exhibit more than nine. Ordinary humans possess the five affective faculties of joy, pleasure, suffering, anxiety, and aversion. Certain earthly sages develop more than the nine faculties by adding one or more of the five cultivable skillful faculties (10-14). The addition of the skillful faculties and the subtraction of undesirable faculties is accomplished through a process of disciplined practice.

What differentiates the body and its material capacity from a living being? In addressing this question, Vasubandhu applies three methodological tenets: that faculties are essential to the continuation of life; that no single faculty operates in isolation; and that the cooperation of faculties provides the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for sentient life. By enlisting these three methodological tenets in the analysis of death, Vasubandhu concludes that death does not entail the loss of a single faculty. Three faculties comprise the minimum number that are necessary to life. Anything less results in death.

Vitality, proprioception (perception or awareness of the position and movement of the body), and the mind are the three factors that make the difference between the living body and the corpse. Vitality consists of three discrete factors that work together to sustain the vital operations of the body: vital power, bodily warmth, and consciousness. Because it is one of the three vital factors necessary to sustain life, the loss of consciousness results in biological death.

Vasubandhu’s *Treasury of Abhidharma* elaborates on the three vital constituents of bodily warmth, vital power, and consciousness. These three constituents map onto the three vital faculties of physiology, vitality, and mind. In his *Auto-commentary on the Treasury of Abhidharma*, Vasubandhu articulates this

principle as follows: *“As for vital power, bodily warmth, along with consciousness, when these three factors desert the body, the deserted body is numb, stiff, and insensate like a plank of wood.”*

The inclusion of consciousness indicates that the faculty of mind, one of the six senses that characterize a sentient being, is always present in a living body. The deprivation of consciousness is coterminous with the death of the living organism.

The classification of vitality as separate from the mind and yet analytically distinct from the body is important because it means that the operations of vitality cannot be fully accounted for in purely physical or psychological terms. Vitality is partially physical and partially psychological, and is not reducible to either set of explanations. Vitality cannot be viewed as separate or distinct from any of the faculties or the organs of the body.

Ultimately, Vasubandhu regards vital power as the most basic of the three constituents. The presence of the three constituents of bodily warmth, vital power, and consciousness is required to sustain life. The presence of these three constituents is an invariable sign of life and applies across all three transmigratory realms. These three are the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the continuation of life in a body.

The faculty of vitality is lost whenever a living organism dies, regardless of the nature of the organism or its karma. Even here, however, the presence of vitality alone does not delimit the border between what is dead and what is alive. The faculty of vitality is not located in any particular part of the body. We cannot see it with the naked eye. Rather, we may validly infer that vitality inheres in the body simply by sensing vital signs such as a pulse. From where does this mysterious source of power in the body derive, as its presence is known only indirectly, via inference? Vasubandhu postulates that vitality is imperceptible by nature, in that it does not contribute to the perceived. At the same time, vitality constitutes the most rudimentary basis for the survival of all organisms. It is the bearer of life. All living beings possess consciousness, albeit in an attenuated or dormant form, as in the case of the catatonic body on the brink of death. However, the continuation of the “storehouse of life” must have the right kind of cause. What then ultimately sustains life?

### ***Who or what dies?***

The Dharma provides a naturalistic way to determine what brings about biological death. As an explanatory account of death, the theory of faculties does not postulate supernatural entities such as a soul or a personality that transcends corporeal existence. Adhering to theory of the faculties and to the doctrine of karma, we come to understand dying as the deterioration of a specific cluster of the faculties borne by an individual.

However, dying is more than the formulaic loss of a vital triad of faculties, or the disintegration of the organs in the body. Dying is a complex sensory and emotional experience caused by the termination of a set of dynamic interactions between the mental and physical faculties. Karma, the accumulation of the effects of wholesome and unwholesome actions taken by an individual over a lifetime, influences the interaction of the faculties at the end of life.

Karma and the faculties play essential roles in determining the ritual purity, quality of feeling, and timing of dying. The quality of dying is determined by karma and by the specific number, type, and condition of the faculties that are possessed by an individual at the end of life. What an individual does, or does not do, to nurture the faculties during a lifetime, accounts for the physiological and psychological conditions

of the faculties at the end of life. Ultimately, it is the cultivation of the faculties of faith, perseverance, concentration, mindfulness, and wisdom that improves the ritual purity, sensation quality, and timing of death. In living and in dying, nurturing the faculties matters.

Dying is not the loss of a singular core, self, or soul. It is not the release of an immortal soul from the fetters of the physical body. There is no need for any explanation of dying other than the ending of the coordinated action of the faculties. There is no self.

The Buddha consistently relies upon the faculties to explain what constitutes the locus of rebirth. Non-Buddhists contend that the faculties require the presence of an executive in the form of a person, or soul, to animate them. This premise directly contradicts the core Buddhist tenet of no-self. The Buddha and his disciples take the position that the faculties, in and of themselves, are sufficient to sustain life. Nothing is required to empower the faculties.

The Buddha was born with the faculty of suffering. This powerful statement is meant to place the Buddha on equal standing with all ordinary humans. It is also intended to neutralize the Brahmanical claims that the powers of insight are an outgrowth of supernormal organs that are possessed by few. Ordinary humans are born with the faculties of suffering and anxiety. The Buddha, in his earthly human birth, knows the pain of having an impermanent and contaminated body. Moreover, the Buddha is intimately aware of the undesirable psychological experiences of ordinary humans who, like him, bear the faculties of suffering and anxiety.

The Buddha, through practice and insight, overcomes the pains and emotional suffering associated with having a mortal body. The uplifting message that any ordinary human being can be enlightened contains the premise that the preexisting conditions for Buddhahood are present in every human.

There is a doctrinal motivation behind the placement of the mundane and spiritual faculties on an equal standing. It is intended, very literally, to bring the spiritual faculties down to earth, to make them accessible, and to inspire lay people to undertake the practices of concentration and insight. All people are born with the assets necessary to become Buddhas if they undertake sufficient practice. A supramundane organ such as a “third eye” is not required to attain Buddhahood, and everyone is born with the faculties, the building blocks of Buddhahood. Buddhahood is available to those who cultivate their innate faculties through spiritual practice. If the Buddha is human and can transcend the universal experience of suffering with dedicated practice, so too can every ordinary human.

The faculties and the interaction between them are sufficient to explain the survival of humans. No other entities above and beyond the faculties are required to explain the vitality of life. Applying the principle of parsimony, the Abhidharma-based theory of the faculties offers a naturalistic explanation for life that is unencumbered by the supernatural and superfluous entities that populate the eternalist theories of living and dying. The Abhidharma theory of the faculties is more naturalistic and parsimonious than the rival eternalist theories and therefore preferable because it does not involve occult entities such as an immortal subtle body, a psychic person, a bearer of subtle life, or an ego to explain the animation of the body. Such views rely upon the presence of unobservable entities and veer into the realm of the supernatural. The authentic, unalloyed pure Dharma has no place for occult supernatural entities. The more biologically based accounts regarding the survival of the human body provided by the Abhidharma are sufficiently robust to explain the complexity of living and dying.



The fourth century C.E. scholar Gunamati<sup>1</sup> writes: “Because the five sensory faculties are born out of the five great material elements, when the five sensory faculties are annihilated, they revert into the five great elements of the material world. When the auditory faculty is annihilated, it reverts into ether, and when the ocular faculty is annihilated, it reverts into fire, when the taste faculty is annihilated it reverts into the watery element, smell reverts into the earth, and touch reverts into wind. Therefore, all these factors of the faculties are eternal.” The five faculties of the senses are eternal because they exist as part of five great elements that make up the physical universe.

If there is no self and no soul, then what is the agent of physical action in the body? Dispensing with the opposition to the Buddhist tenet of no-self presented by theories of the soul, we turn to the challenge found within Buddhism itself. The Vatsiputriya and the Sammitiya schools<sup>2</sup> of Buddhism, while dismissing the notion of the soul, assert the presence of an entity that is defined as the part of a human being that carries karma and is reborn after death. To preserve the doctrine of no-self and uphold the theory of the faculties, we must contend with the doctrines of the Vatsiputriya and with the Sammitiya Buddhists who believe in a *pudgala* that endures after death.

### ***Is There a Person?***

The Vatsiputriya and the Sammitiya schools, also known as the Pudgalavada, or the Personalist schools, are two of the nearly twenty early Buddhist schools in India. The doctrine of the *pudgala* as an explanation for karma and rebirth is said to have originated in ancient India around the second century B.C.E., two centuries after the parinirvana of the Buddha.

Most of the original Indic scriptures of the Pudgalavada have been lost. The literature that depicts the doctrinal positions of the Pudgalavada survives in the form of Chinese translations of their summaries and critiques of their positions from within the opposing Buddhist schools. As these sources are far from neutral, the doctrine of the Pudgalavada is regarded by scholars as largely reconstructed.

The Vatsiputriya held that the *pudgala* is composed of the five aggregates, the factors that constitute the physical and mental existence of the sentient being. The five aggregates are material form, feeling and sensation, ideation and perception, volition, and consciousness. In his teachings found in the Agamas, the Buddha attests that no self is to be found either in or outside the five aggregates.

The Pudgalavadin assert that, while there is no soul or self, the *pudgala* is the part of the individual that is reborn after death and through successive lives until enlightenment is attained; the *pudgala* is neither the same as nor different from the aggregates; and the *pudgala* is the carrier of karma, the personality traits, and the memories of the person. Essentially, the Pudgalavada affirm the reality of an aspect of the self that exists outside the aggregates and transcends death. While the account of the Personalists is

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<sup>1</sup> A monk of the Yogachara school who lived in southern India around the sixth century, revered as one of the ten great scholars of the school. Gunamati refuted the Hindu scholar Madhava who enjoyed the respect and patronage of the king of Magadha, and converted the king to Buddhism. Later he lived at Nalanda Monastery. He is the author of “A Commentary on The Thirty-Stanza Treatise on the Yogachara.”

<sup>2</sup> These sects are known as Pudgalavāda or “Personalist.” They broke off from orthodox Buddhism around 280 BCE. The doctrine of *anatman* means that, since there is no true “self,” all that we think of as a self (i.e., the subject of sentences, the being that transmigrates) is merely the collection of the aggregates. The Pudgalavadins asserted that, while there is no *atman*, there is a *pudgala* or “person,” which is neither the same as nor different from the aggregates. They argue that without such a person, it is impossible to account for karma, rebirth, or nirvana.

clearly at odds with the Buddhist tenet of no-self, the Pudgalavada hold that the doctrine of the *pudgala* provides a plausible account of the way karma is transmitted during rebirth.

The Vatsiputriya posit the presence of a real entity, a *pudgala*, that remains constant throughout life and afterwards. In this view, the *pudgala* bears responsibility for all the wholesome and unwholesome effects of the karma that an individual performs and acquires over the course of a lifetime. The *pudgala*, in the Vatsiputriya schema, is conceptualized as the container of karma in the form of an entity that transcends the body and is reborn until nirvana is achieved. The conception of an enduring *pudgala* stands in sharp contrast to the view of no-self, in which there is no eternal, unchanging, or essential self, entity, or soul.

The Vatsiputriya doctrine of the *pudgala* is couched in the teaching of the five aggregates. The Buddha teaches that there is nothing that counts as a self that is included within or outside the category of the five aggregates. The Vatsiputriya equivocate on this core teaching and support both the view of a self as the totality of the five aggregates and the self as something other than the totality of the five aggregates. Vasubandhu encapsulates the Pudgalavadin doctrine in the following statements: “*The person is neither identical with, nor non-identical to, the five aggregates*” and “*The self is neither one with, nor different from the material aggregates.*” Vasumitra<sup>3</sup>, in *The Treatise of the Wheel of the Different Tenets*, writes: “*The fundamental tenet of the Vatsiputriya is that the pudgala is neither identical, nor separate from the aggregates.*”

Pudgalavada holds that the stability of the personality is due to the clustering of the five psychological and physical aggregates listed by the Buddha: corporeality, sensation, perception, volitions, and consciousness. The bundle of states that comprises the person is equated by the Vatsiputriya with the *pudgala*. In this interpretation of the doctrine of the five aggregates, the *pudgala* is viewed as essentially bundling together the ephemeral states of the personality of the individual at any given moment in time. Within the Vatsiputriya schema, the five changing states determine the course of the movement and the progress of a person from one moment to the next moment, and ultimately from one rebirth to the next.

In his *Treatise of the Wheel of the Different Tenets*, Vasumitra describes how the Vatsiputriya devise the doctrine of the *pudgala* to formulate a desirable and accessible explanation for how an individual personality persists, given that the physical and psychological states that make up the individual constantly change. The *pudgala* thus becomes the enduring locus of the personality of the individual within the Vatsiputriya doctrine.

However, karma and the memories of experiences are borne throughout life by the faculties. The faculties are the bearers of karma and memories and there is no need for an entity in the form of a *pudgala* that is separate from the faculties. The faculties a sentient being has in this life and those formed in the next birth are solely determined by karma.

Vasubandhu begins his examination of the Vatsiputriya doctrine by asking: Is the *pudgala* one of the aggregates, or is it different? If it is the same, then presumably it cannot be a sixth aggregate, because the Buddha very clearly spoke of only five aggregates and took pains to explain why the line was drawn at five, rather than at six or four aggregates. Vasubandhu highlights how the Buddha makes a deliberate point to show that none of the five aggregates contains an enduring self.

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<sup>3</sup> Vasumitra helped compile *The Great Commentary on the Abhidharma*.

If the *pudgala* is different from the aggregates, then what is it? The *pudgala* is not classified under any of the standard Buddhist classifications, including the comprehensive categories of the dhatus or the faculties. Vasubandhu then asks if the *pudgala* has an independent existence from the basic classification categories in the Buddhist canon. If the *pudgala* has an independent existence, then the *pudgala* must be a “real existent” and not merely a “nominal construct.” Here Vasubandhu holds the Vatsiputriyas to the principle of “nominalism” and argues that if *pudgala* is a real entity, it must exist in more than in name only.

The idea that the personality of an individual is composed of a bundle or an aggregate (*skandha*) of impermanent states that change from moment to moment is emphasized by the Buddha. According to this core Buddhist teaching, the five aggregates that compose an individual are momentary in that they are reborn and perish from one moment to the next. The five aggregates that make up the sentient individual are thus understood as discrete and ephemeral momentary states that are linked together to create the impression of a continuously existing person.

In the arguments directed against the Vastriputriyas, Vasubandhu uses the concept of momentariness to dispel the entrenched notion that the core features of the individual, such as memory, require the presence of a *pudgala*. The Vastriputriyas contend that the *pudgala* provides the essential function of containing the memories of an individual over a lifetime and into the afterlife. For the Vastriputriyas, the formulation of the *pudgala* as a container explains how the memories of an individual are retained in the face of constant change.

In his Refutation of the Pudgalavadin, Vasubandhu refutes the idea that only a *pudgala* can explain the retention of memories. The view of the faculties provides a valid explanatory account for the persistence of memories within the individual personality. “Residual traces,” or *vasanas*, retain the memories of a sentient being from the past into the present. These *vasanas* are retained in the *alayavijnana*, the storehouse consciousness located within the faculties and based in the aggregates. The presence of the *pudgala* is not required to contain stable memories across the lifetimes of an individual.

### **No Self**

The minds of sentient beings are composed of eight distinct regions of consciousness. The first through fifth regions are the sensory consciousnesses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch; the sixth is mental consciousness, or the realm of the mental faculty; the seventh is the sense of self-awareness, or the *manas*; and the eighth is the storehouse consciousness, the subconscious mental repository of memories and other experiences. Self-awareness originates in the *manas*, the “I maker” (*ahamkara*). Among the eight layers of consciousness, the *manas* is negatively tinged, as it gives rise to egotistical desires.

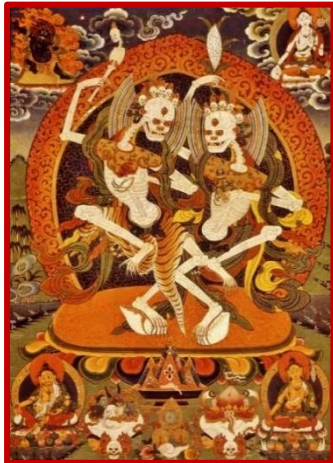
The genesis of the self is based on the separation between subjective “interiority” and objective “externality.” *Manas* is the locus of the sense of self. The adherence to the unchanging individual, in the form of the *pudgala*, is the root of the delusion based in *manas*, the negative part of conscious experience. The separation between interiority and externality is an illusion rooted in the seventh consciousness, the “I maker.” This false dichotomy results from one of two processes: either the *manas* falsely superimposes the notion of an egocentric and continuing selfhood onto the constantly shifting sixth consciousness, or *manovijnana*, or the *manas* falsely superimposes the notion of a self onto the relatively stable storehouse consciousness. Cognitions that are mediated through the *manas* are distorted, as the *manas* is the locus for the creation of mistaken views of selfhood, of “me and mine.”

Hence, both of these processes that generate an egocentric attachment to the self are contaminated by illusion and delusion.

The *pudgala* is self-awareness and the locus of a stable sense of self, craving, and attachment. As the source of self-conceit, it is wedded to arrogance. Eradicating the *manas*, the level of consciousness that is laced with negative attachments, is the focus of Dharma practice.

There is no need for a *pudgala* to preserve the history of karma and its accumulation over a life cycle. The idea that something comes to an end when biological death occurs does not mean that this something is a soul, or a person, or any individual thing characterized by a singular personality. There is, in short, no need for a *pudgala* to explain dying. The *pudgala* is merely a deep-seated illusion based on the *manas*, the seventh consciousness, and the locus of negativity in the sentient human.

Dying is the deterioration of a collection of faculties and not the release of a spiritual entity (in the form of a *purusha*, an *atman*, or a *pudgala*) from the body. The Dharma view of the faculties is a biologically based and economical account of living and dying that does not rely on a fictional supernatural entity.



### **What differentiates being dead from being alive?**

Possessing a body is not equivalent to having a sentient life. Because having a body is not equivalent to being alive, the loss of a body is not equivalent to being dead. The condition of the body alone is not sufficient to make the distinction between a living being and a dying being. It is the condition of the faculties that determines the difference between living and dying.

Dying entails the loss of the sensory faculties that work in collective action within the body to support and sustain sentient life. Because the sensory faculties are analytically separate from the body, the condition of the faculties and the condition of the body are both implicated in the process of dying.

The *Mahavibhasa* states: “There are followers of outside paths (tirthikas) who postulate that (1) the bearer of life is identical to the body, (2) that it is different from the body, (3) that the bearer of life is not simply the body, or that (4) it is no different from the body.”

However, life is neither identical to nor entirely independent from the state of having a body. The faculties bear the essence of life, and the survival of the body requires the presence of multiple faculties working in collective action. The faculties carry the essence of life.

To be alive means to evince *sattva*, the vital quality that distinguishes sentient forms of life from insensate objects. *Sattva* is equated with the vitality of life but is not equated to life itself. Instead, the life-giving force of *sattva* is carried within the faculties that work in collaboration with other faculties within the body to sustain sentience. The life-sustaining quality of *sattva* is carried by multiple faculties and not by a soul.

The faculty of vitality carries the responsibility of bearing the qualities necessary to sustain life. While the faculty of vitality bears *sattva*, it does not sustain life on its own. No single faculty bears the burden

of sustaining life, not even vitality. At least two other faculties are present with vitality to sustain the physical and cognitive activities that are required to sustain sentient life.

Life cannot be defined by the possession of a body. The doctrinal implications of this stance are significant. In making a clear distinction between sentience and the materiality of the body, the Dharma directs the practitioner toward adopting a detached attitude to the body. The subjective experiences of both pleasure and pain come with the possession of the body and the sensory faculties, and the possession of a physical body presents obstacles to enlightenment. This doctrine is rooted in a deeply ingrained understanding of how the perception of belonging to a body in the present is linked to the perception of belonging to a body in the past. Clinging to a body is an affliction of the mind. It is an unwholesome grasping of something that is changing and impermanent in nature. Among the sixty-two views leading to rebirth in an inferior destiny, *satkayadrsti*<sup>4</sup> is the root and source of other wrong views.

The element of “wind” plays a vital role in sustaining life. Whether it is termed *prana*, the “vital breath,” or the “great wind element” (*vayurdhatu*), wind is required for survival. However, there is no invisible entity charged with directing the process of taking in and expelling wind through the oral and nasal orifices of the body. Invisible entities are not required to sustain the process of circulating life-giving wind throughout the body.

Prana and *vayu* are omnipresent throughout the body, and initiate and sustain the vital movements of the organs, such as the beating of the heart and the peristalsis of the intestines; activate the limbs and joints to promote locomotion; and sustain all of the body’s functions through the essential and life-giving activity of breathing.

Vasubandhu states: “*Without the element of wind, and sound carried by wind, there is merely the eight-fold insensate constituent.*” In his auto-commentary on this statement, he states that airborne sound is a necessary condition for life because sound and wind initiate and sustain the voluntary and involuntary physical actions of the body. Movement does not occur in a vacuum.

To align the faculties with the teachings of the five aggregates, the five physical senses are clustered under the aggregate of form, and the functions of the mental faculty across the four psychological aggregates of sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness. Distributing the complex functions of the mental faculty within each of the four psychological aggregates highlights a central tenet of Buddhism: that all sentient creatures have a mental faculty. Within this model, all human and non-human animals bear the faculties of vitality and physiology.

Consolidating the six faculties into the five aggregates preserves the original teachings of the Buddha. The six faculties are omnipresent within the sentient being in that they are not limited to specific physical functions, organs, or locations within the body. The six faculties contain all the elements necessary and sufficient to sustain sentient life. Dying, then, is the result of the loss of the faculties, rather than simply the deterioration of the material organs of the body.

Each faculty is composed of a mixture of uncontaminated and contaminated seeds. The expression of the seeds depends upon how a sentient being cultivates the specific type of seed in a faculty. For

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<sup>4</sup> *Satkayadrsti* is translated as “view of a personal identity,” “view of a real person,” “view of the perishable collection,” etc. It is the belief in an “I” and “mine” based on the five aggregates. All other mistaken views are based on this misapprehension.

example, with the practice of wholesome behaviors, the uncontaminated seeds of the faculty of the mind are expressed in the form of wisdom, discernment, and an overall improvement in standing in the moral universe. However, if the contaminated seeds in the faculty of aversion are cultivated with immoral actions, they are expressed in the form of moral and physical degradation. The innate or inherited karmic disposition of a sentient creature is modifiable through either the cultivation of the uncontaminated seeds through wholesome practices or the elimination of the expression of contaminated seeds through the reduction of unskillful behaviors. Within this framework, all sentient beings can improve their moral status through karmic action.

The storehouse consciousness serves as the bearer of the uncontaminated and contaminated seeds, the *bija*. The storehouse consciousness refers to the container within which the seeds of karma, or the thoughts and actions of the sentient being, are stored. The storehouse consciousness is the container of the seeds from which the biological and physical aspects and the psychological and moral dimensions of sentient life emerge. The “variegated capacities” (*samarthyavishēṣa*) that are necessary for the sustenance of the biological and psychological life of the organism grow from the seeds stored in the storehouse consciousness. Thus, the storehouse consciousness is identified with the faculty of vitality. The “proximate seeds,” or the seeds that potentiate the capabilities directly required for the survival of the sentient being, are located within the faculty of vitality.

The storehouse consciousness is “indeterminate” in that it can potentiate seeds of a wholesome or an unwholesome nature. Therefore, the doctrine of the storehouse consciousness imbues the doctrine of karma with an important psychological dimension: both contaminated and uncontaminated seeds reside in the storehouse consciousness until they are cultivated or eliminated. Thus, karma is carried in the storehouse consciousness, as it is cultivated or eliminated through the intentions and actions of the sentient being throughout life. This idea is of doctrinal importance, as it supports the rationale for the range of spiritual practices intended to cultivate wholesome karma through meritorious action and eliminate harmful karma through the observance of wholesome practices.

As the bearer of the seeds that potentiate the physical and psychological dimensions of sentient life, the storehouse consciousness operates outside of the awareness of the sentient being. It continuously supports the vitality of the body and consciousness throughout life and maintains sentience in the state of dying, or “the state of becoming deceased.”

The presence of the storehouse consciousness explains why a sentient being maintains faint traces of consciousness at the end of life. As the organs of the body and the sensory faculty deteriorate in dying, the storehouse consciousness maintains the baseline cardio-pulmonary functions, as well as states of consciousness, however vegetative. Therefore, the loss of the faculty of vitality, in which the storehouse consciousness is predominantly present, is equivalent to the loss of sentient life.

The doctrine of the storehouse consciousness articulates how karma and the faculties determine the feeling quality (pleasant, unpleasant, or indeterminate), ritual purity, and timing of dying. In providing an explanatory account of the involvement of both physical and psychological suffering in dying, we can discern guidelines for alleviating the physical and psychic pain of dying: improving the faculties through practice and training can alleviate the pain of dying. In addressing the question of what dying is, we come to understand that a good death requires a good life.

The Buddha says in the Abhaya Sutra:

*Who are the persons who, subject to death, are not afraid or in terror of death? There are persons who have abandoned passion, desire, fondness, thirst, fever, and craving for sensuality. Then they become seriously ill. As they become seriously ill, they do not think: "O, those beloved sensual pleasures will be taken from me, and I will be taken from them!" They do not grieve, are not tormented; do not weep, beat their breast, or grow delirious. These are persons who, subject to death, are not afraid of death.*

*There are persons who have abandoned passion, desire, fondness, thirst, fever, and craving for the body. Then they become seriously ill. As they become seriously ill, they do not think: "O, my beloved body will be taken from me, and I will be taken from my body!" They do not grieve, are not tormented; do not weep, beat their breast, or grow delirious. These, too, are persons who, subject to death, are not afraid of death.*

*There are persons who have done what is good, have done what is skillful, have given protection to those in fear, and have not done what is evil, savage, or cruel. Then they become seriously ill. As they become seriously ill, they think: "I have done what is good, have done what is skillful, have given protection to those in fear, and I have not done what is evil, savage, or cruel. To the extent that there is a destination for those who have done what is good, what is skillful, have given protection to those in fear, and have not done what is evil, savage, or cruel, that's where I'm headed after death." They do not grieve, are not tormented; do not weep, beat their breast, or grow delirious. These, too, are persons who, subject to death, are not afraid of death.*

*There are persons who have no doubt or perplexity, who have arrived at certainty regarding the True Dharma. Then they become seriously ill. As they become seriously ill, they think: "I have no doubt or perplexity. I have arrived at certainty regarding the True Dharma." They do not grieve, are not tormented; do not weep, beat their breast, or grow delirious. These, too, are persons who, subject to death, are not afraid of death.*

### **What Is Dying Well?**

Dying involves much more than the formulaic loss of the faculties, or the deterioration of the base material organs of the body. In the teachings of Asanga we find descriptions of a five-stage program of yogic training and ritual observances intended to enhance the physical and spiritual fitness of the sentient being, and thereby improve the possibility of dying well. Following Asanga's definition in *The Basis for Yoga Practitioners*, a "good" death is that death for which one has "well prepared." By contrast, a "bad" death is one for which the deceased cannot be said to have prepared.

Because karma, or the actions that a sentient being undertakes in life, greatly influences the condition of the faculties, the quality of dying is necessarily informed by karma. In the examination of Dharma texts, we find doctrinal support for practices that are intended to improve the quality of dying through the cultivation of the faculties of faith, perseverance, concentration, mindfulness, and wisdom.

According to the law of karma, every thought, deed, or action generates a force of energy in the form of a reaction. For example, a meritorious gesture that brings happiness to another person returns in the form of positive energy, or wholesome karma. A destructive action that harms a sentient being exerts a force that comes back in the form of negative energy, or unwholesome karma. Merit is produced through activities, such as sponsoring Dharma activities and publications and compassionate activities, donating to the Sangha, and meditating and maintaining wholesome thoughts. Demerits are incurred through negative and harmful actions, the primary example of which is killing sentient creatures, human and non-human.

The mechanism of merits and demerits operates under the law of karma, whereby merits produce wholesome karma and demerits incur unwholesome karma. The system of merits and demerits is akin to a spiritual balance sheet, in which wholesome deeds are assets and unwholesome deeds are liabilities. In this system, the maintenance of a positive balance of meritorious actions and deeds contributes to the growth toward enlightenment of a sentient being, and to an improvement in the quality of dying.

Merits are spiritual “resources” that are accumulated by a sentient being during life, a resource that can be amassed through meritorious actions or depleted by harmful activities. However, merit does not provide a full explanatory account of the karmic standing of a sentient being approaching death, or of the type of dying experienced. Karma, rather than merit, plays the primary role in determining the quality and the timing of the end of life. Because dying is determined by the faculties, and karma influences the conditions of the faculties, karma is the mediating force in determining the quality of the end of life. Therefore, by improving the faculties through cultivation, a sentient being can assuage the suffering associated with dying.

The faculties can be cultivated by nurturing the uncontaminated seeds located within the faculties with the nutrients of meritorious practices and actions. The faculties can also be improved by depriving the contaminated seeds of the fertilizer of unwholesome activities. Karma, the actions that a sentient being does or does not perform to cultivate the faculties during a lifetime, directly influences the condition and the quality of the faculties at the end of life. Because karma, and to some extent merit, are implicated in the manifestation of the seeds that are expressed in the quality of the faculties at the end of life, karma and merit are involved in all expressions and types of dying.

Vasubandhu and Asanga concur that two factors are implicated in dying: the genetically determined life expectancy of an organism’s species, and karma. There is also a role of karma in dying due to “inescapable imbalances,” or random and accidental events. In the analysis of dying from inescapable imbalances, there is a notion that consequences of prior actions are served at the end of life.

*Owners of their deeds are the beings, heirs of their deeds; their deeds are the womb from which they sprang; with their deeds they are bound up; their deeds are their refuge. Whatever deeds they do —wholesome or unwholesome— of such they will be the heirs.*

*And wherever the beings spring into existence, there their deeds will ripen; and wherever their deeds ripen, there they will earn the fruits of those deeds, be it in this life, or be it in the next life, or be it in any other future life. —Buddha Shakyamuni*

The timing and the feeling tone of dying can be improved in two ways: by undergoing courses of training designed to improve the five skillful faculties of faith, perseverance, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom, and by performing practices that accumulate spiritual merit. Abhidharma authorities in the *Mahavibhasa* make it clear that specific types of dying are caused by a “poverty of merit.”

### ***The Quality of Death: Merit and Karma***

Vasubandhu, in the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, concludes that merit and karma are involved to a greater or lesser degree in the dying of all sentient beings. Asanga concurs with Vasubandhu in the supposition that merit is pervasively involved in all types of dying. Merit plays an important, yet circumscribed, role in determining the moral purity, the feeling tone, and the timing of dying. Asanga presents a paradigm in which karmic merits and karmic demerits form a spiritual balance sheet of credits and debits. In this system, karmic merits are accumulated over a lifetime, and then used to provide a benign death, a mild



afterlife, and a heavenly rebirth. Asanga affirms that the practice of making donations to the Sangha, attested by the Buddha, creates the “spiritual capital” necessary to obtain a good death and afterlife.

Surviving only in the Mahavibhāṣa and in Treasury of the Abhidharma, the *Prajñapti śāstra* is one of the six fundamental texts in the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma tradition. The *Prajñapti śāstra* is revered as the touchstone source for discussions on the effects of merit and vitality in dying. The *Prajñapti śāstra* contains a *catuskoti*, a four-part logical argument, that articulates the permutations of dying in terms of two variables: vitality and merit.

Vasubandhu excerpts the *catuskoti* from the *Prajñapti śāstra* in his exegesis of the implications of merit and vitality in dying. In this ancient treatise, types of dying are categorized according to the natural lifespan of a sentient being, as demonstrated by the presence of vitality, and to the karmic standing of a sentient being, as evidenced by the merits and demerits accumulated by the end of life. The enumeration of the four categories of dying, presented in the *catuskoti* in the *Prajñapti śāstra*, is presented as an exhaustive classification of all possible types of death experienced by sentient beings.

The four types of dying, according to the *catuskoti*, are:

- (1) Dying due to the exhaustion of vitality and not to a privation of merit. This type of death occurs when a sentient being belongs to a species endowed with longstanding merit and a short life. Transitional beings, who reside in the *rūpadhātu* (form realm), serve as examples of beings who perish shortly after birth, yet bear significant merit. The abundance of merit held by transitional beings is manifested in the achievement of a rebirth into the deva heavens of the *rūpadhātu*.
- (2) Dying due to a poverty of merit. This type of death occurs because of the specific moral failings of a sentient being. For example, after slaying several members of a caravan in a robbery, a thief is killed by his accomplices to obtain the ill-gotten treasure. The death of the thief is attributed to the poverty of his spiritual resources resulting from the demerits he has amassed by killing sentient beings.
- (3) Dying due to privations of merit and vitality. This somewhat rare type of dying occurs when the specific moral failings of a sentient being coincide with the natural depletion of vitality at the end of life. For example, after many years of oppressing his subjects, an ancient and tyrannical king has a heart attack while whipping his servant with a cane. The king’s type of dying is attributed to the poverty of his spiritual resources and to the privation of vitality due to his advanced age.
- (4) Dying due neither to privations of merit nor to privations of vitality. This type of dying is caused by a random event or an accident. For example, after being bitten by a snake in a remote desert region, a young man dies before he can receive treatment to save his life. The death of the man falls into the category of a random event and is not determined by either the status of his merit or the loss of his natural vitality.

The four ways of dying enumerated in the Mahavibhāṣa translation of the *Prajñapti Śāstra* illuminate how merit and vitality impact the timing of the death of a sentient being. Some ways of dying result from a poverty of spiritual merit due to an overabundance of demerits, and other types of dying are due to the natural depletion of the vitality of a sentient being. The timing of dying can be influenced by unwholesome karma that is accumulated in prior lives. Often the accretion of unwholesome karma is due to demerits collected through the killing of sentient life in a previous birth. The length of the life varies according to the merits or demerits amassed in the prior lives of a sentient being.

Merit plays a role in some, but not all, ways of dying. Merit is implicated in types of dying that involve an extreme poverty of merit, or when the exhaustion of merit co-occurs with a loss of vitality.

What do ways of dying have to do with the exhaustion of merit and the natural lifespan? Vasubandhu makes a distinction between dying from the loss of the vital force that determines the life expectancy of a sentient being (*jīvitāsaṃskāras*: hereon, life expectancy), and dying from the loss of the vital power that rejuvenates and restores the faculties (*āyuhṣaṃskāras*: hereon, vital power). Life expectancy is the species-specific or genetically endowed determinate of dying, and vital power is the developmental factor that is implicated in dying. Together, life expectancy and vital power dictate the timing and quality of dying.

Because it is biologically determined through the genetic and prior karmic endowment of the sentient being, life expectancy is immutable. Life expectancy cannot be “discarded” or otherwise modified by the activities performed by a sentient being during a lifetime. Simply put, the natural life expectancy of a sentient being cannot be altered through karmic activity. Vital power, however, that infuses the faculties with vitality throughout life, is mutable and can be developed and enhanced by the actions or karma.

By enhancing the store of vital power, a sentient being can extend life and improve the quality of dying. Merit, because it is viewed as a means by which the faculties are cultivated, is therefore a mechanism by which the repository of vital power can be increased. While practices that alter merit are part of the mechanism, modifying the quality of the faculties has the greater impact in the timing and quality of dying. Practices that change the conditions of the faculties also modify vital power, and thereby alter the quality and timing of dying.

Vital power, because it is malleable, can be discarded or retained by a sentient being. The agency of a sentient being is involved in the determination of whether to engage, or not engage, in practices that build the stores of vital power. According to the Agamas, the Buddha chooses to discard, rather than to retain, his reserves of one hundred fifteen years of vital power. By electing to live within the life expectancy determined by life expectancy, the Buddha highlights his status as an ordinary human. In emphasizing his humanity in this manner, the Buddha teaches his disciples to refrain from clinging to aspects of the material world. By accumulating and then discarding vital power, the Buddha demonstrates that all humans possess the agency to determine how they live and die.

The *Prajñapti Śāstra* says: Dying from the exhaustion of vital power is different from dying from the exhaustion of merit (*puṇya*). All the forms of dying are included in the *catuṣkoṭi* (literally, “four corners” or “four categories”), as follows:

- (1) The first is dying due to the exhaustion of the natural lifespan of the sentient being (life expectancy). In the first category of the *catuṣkoṭi*, dying results from the termination of the natural lifespan of a specific class of sentient being. This type of dying occurs when the genetically determined life force of life expectancy is depleted. For example, a human being dies at one hundred one years of age. While the lifespan of this sentient being is long, it is within the range of the natural life expectancy of humans.
- (2) The second is dying due to the deprivation of the vitality necessary to maintain the survival of the sentient being, being the effect of the power of karma (*āyuhṣaṃskāras*). In the second category, dying results from the deprivation of the vital power of *āyuhṣaṃskāras*. Dying in this category does not involve life expectancy, the genetically pre-programmed life force that determines the natural life expectancy of a sentient being. The second type of dying occurs

when a sentient being is suddenly deprived of the vital power that sustains and replenishes the vital organs of the body and the faculties. For example, a young man dies of dehydration after being stranded in a desolate desert region during a windstorm. The deprivation of *vital power*, due to the dehydration of his bodily organs, is the cause of death. His natural life expectancy, or *jītivāsamskāras*, is not involved in his unfortunately premature death.

(3) The third is dying due to the co-occurring deprivation of life expectancy and vital power. The third category depicts a type of dying that is brought about by the simultaneous and fatal deprivation of life expectancy and vital power. This third category describes dying that occurs when the loss of vital power and the natural life expectancy of a sentient being converge. For example, a ninety-year-old man dies when he breaks his hip while attempting to mount his camel. He is not able to recover from the broken hip because he lacks reserves of vital power due to his advanced age. Here, the injury to his body, and his natural life expectancy are involved in his unfortunate, yet timely, death.

(4) The fourth category of dying is due to an extraneous “imbalance” that one cannot avoid. It describes a type of dying that is brought about by “inescapable imbalances” or by accidents or random events. This is dying due to the deprivation of neither life expectancy nor vital power. That is, this type of dying is due neither to the loss of vital power nor to the termination of the natural life expectancy of the sentient being. For example, a man, at the age of twenty-seven, stumbles into a bullpen while intoxicated, and is gored by a bull. He is unable to access medical care and dies from a loss of blood. Here, the man’s death is due neither to reaching the end of his genetically allotted average lifespan of sixty to one hundred years nor to a moral failing. While the man has placed himself in harm’s way by over-indulging in alcoholic drink, there is no causal link between his alcohol intake and his death. Because he is unable to access medical care in time to address his loss of blood, he very quickly drains his reserves of vital power and dies.



Arya Asanga, in *The Basis for Yoga Practitioners*, poses the question: “How does one die?” His presentation of the root causes of dying is essentially identical to the accounts found in the earlier Treasury of Abhidharma composed by Vasubandhu. In his categorization of dying, however, Asanga winnows the *catuskoti* enumerated in the earlier account of the *Prajñapti Śāstra* from four to three categories of dying. Asanga coalesces the exhaustion of the lifespan and vital power into one category. The reconfiguration of the categorization by Asanga is doctrinally significant in that it serves to amplify the role played by merit in determining the lifespan of a sentient being.

Asanga lists the ways of dying as follows:

(1) Dying due to the exhaustion of the lifespan (*āyuh-kṣepāt*). This type of dying is due to the exhaustion of the natural lifespan of a sentient being, as determined by genetic and biological factors. For example, a ninety-five-year-old-woman dies from influenza during an epidemic. Due to her advanced age, she does not have the stores of vital power to overcome the illness.

(2) Dying due to the exhaustion of merit (*puṇya-kṣepāt*). This type of dying is due to the specific moral failings of the sentient being, as determined by the balance of merit and karma accumulated from past and present lives. For example, a fifty-year-old man dies of a heart attack while packing his baggage. In a prior life, he hunted and killed tigers for sport. His relatively untimely death is due to the demerits and poor karma amassed in his prior life. This form of dying has as its causes the gradual maturation of karmic seeds over the lifespan.

(3) Dying due to an inescapable imbalance (*viṣamāparihārataḥ*). This type of dying is due to neither the exhaustion of the natural lifespan nor the moral status of the sentient being. For example, a twenty-year-old man is bitten by a rattlesnake while walking in a remote area and dies before obtaining treatment. His untimely death is neither due to the exhaustion of his life span nor to moral failings.

Because vital power fuels the activities that sustain life, including respiration and cardio-pulmonary functioning, dying occurs when the sentient being runs out of vital power. Without the fuel of *vital power*, the life-sustaining work of the faculties comes to a halt. Dying becomes imminent. Merit plays a crucial role in the regeneration of the store of vital power located within the faculties: the seeds embedded in the faculties flourish into the vital power when nurtured with karma and merit.

By engaging in meritorious action, a sentient being continuously waters the seeds that grow into the vital powers that sustain the faculties and the organs of the body. Therefore, when the seeds that grow into the capacities of the faculties are not nurtured or cultivated with meritorious actions and practices, the vital power withers and the sentient being perishes. The depletion of seeds, and the resulting diminishment of the store of vital power, portend imminent death.

Because performing merit nurtures the vital seeds and replenishes the vital power, merit necessarily influences the timing and quality of dying. Therefore, even in a case of dying due to imbalances, merit plays a role in determining the amount of vital power a sentient being has in reserve to recover from a random or untimely life-threatening injury. Running out of vital power is involved in dying due to the exhausting of life expectancy. This occurs when a sentient being, nearing the end of an expected lifespan, no longer has the reserves of vital power necessary to sustain the activities of the organs and the faculties. Therefore, by continuously contributing to the reserves of vital power through meritorious practices, a sentient being prolongs life and improves the quality of dying.

### ***Imminent Death***

In his discussions on the physiology of dying and death found in the third chapter of the Treasury of Abhidharma, entitled *Discriminating Worldly Things*, Vasubandhu enumerates the five bodily signs that are predictive of the imminent death of a human being: incontinence, weight loss, profuse sweating, bodily stench, and discomfort sitting upright. Within the trajectory to death, the five signs of grave decline are preceded by six minor signs of physical degeneration. The lesser signs of physical decline include groaning, pallor, excessive perspiration, loss of mental poise or alertness, squinting of the eyes, and constricted pupils. While a sentient being may recover from the minor signs through proper medical intervention, the five signs of irreversible decline mark the entrance into the final stage of dying.

### ***Postponing Death***

Practices and rituals that create merit, restore vital power, and improve the quality of the faculties postpone dying. Improving the quality of the faculties, particularly the faculty of vitality, favorably impacts the timing and the quality of dying of a sentient being. Therefore, by improving the faculty of vitality, dying can be postponed. The faculty of vitality contains both species-specific (*sabhāgatā*), and species non-specific components. Together, these two factors determine the totality of the lifespan of a sentient being. The *sabhāgatā* portion that is embedded in the faculties determines the quantity of life expectancy held by a specific species of sentient being, and is genetically pre-ordained. The non-specific components determine the amount of vital power that is stored in the faculty of vitality.

The quantity of vital power is determined by the karma accumulated over the course of a life. The degree to which a sentient being can cultivate and augment vital power is not predetermined at birth. Because life expectancy is written in the genetic code of a species, the extension of the life of a sentient being is only possible by enhancing vital power.

Hence, extending the mortal lifespan of a singular sentient being is specifically connected to the accumulation of vital power. The mechanism by which vital power is built and restored is indicated in Asanga's *The Basis for Yoga Practitioners*. Here Asanga introduces the theory of the "field of good merit" (*puṇya-kṣetra*) located in the *ālayavijñāna*, the storehouse consciousness. The seeds of vital power are buried in the storehouse consciousness. When the seeds buried within the subliminal layers of consciousness are suffused with the fertilizer of either meritorious or non-meritorious actions, the faculties are impacted.

Because dying is the result of the deterioration of the faculties, the quality and timing of dying is contingent on the condition of the faculties. Meritorious actions nurture the seeds located in the field of good merit of the storehouse consciousness. For example, constructing a *stūpa* nurtures the wholesome seeds in a karmic field of merit. The practice of generosity, sponsoring the reading or publication of Dharma texts, or doing other forms of compassionate action, cultivates the seeds of the storehouse consciousness that restore vital power and in turn prolong life. The practice of meditation and the performance of Dharma activities also accumulate merit, restore vital power, and ultimately extend the lifespan of a sentient being.

The life of a sentient being can be extended or curtailed by actions that impact the balance of karma. The life expectancy of a sentient being can be altered through the judicious management of the fields of merit that restore the stores of vital power in the faculty of vitality.

### **Ameliorating Fear**

In *The Basis for Yoga Practitioners*, Asanga advances a means by which the fear of dying is ameliorated and the quality of dying improved: meditative insight (*darśana*). Within the path of Dharma cultivation, any sentient being can strengthen the faculties and improve and extend the final stages of life. The practice of meditative insight is available to sentient beings of any moral station in life and does not require monastic training, a Lama, or the possession of supernormal bodily capacities or skills. Given the crucial role of faculty development in the path of insight (*darśana-mārga*), the prerequisites to the course of practice are none other than the faculties one was born with and a desire to improve them.



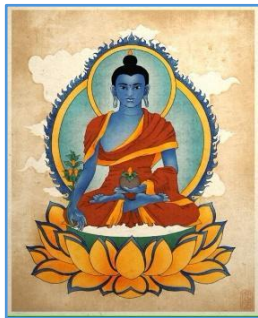
The yoga of dying involves training the five spiritual faculties of faith, perseverance, concentration, mindfulness, and wisdom to quiet and subdue the faculties of suffering and anxiety. By using meditative insight, the sentient being overcomes the fear of dying by counteracting the faculties of anxiety and suffering with the faculties of concentration and detachment. When the capacities of the skillful faculties are amplified, the feeling faculties of suffering and anxiety attendant with dying are quelled. Ordinary human beings, without the benefit of extraordinary spiritual prowess or training, can attenuate suffering and stress at the end of life. The path of meditative insight is available to any sentient being who chooses to undertake the practice.

A sequence of five steps is required to tame the body and the mind. By following the path, a sentient being ultimately overcomes the primordial fear that is associated with dying. The five stages of the path, as attested by Asanga, are:

- (1) The stage of preparation, during which the yogic practitioner undertakes and develops initial practices.
- (2) The stage of applied practices, during which the practitioner further cultivates the two faculties of knowing the past and the present. During this stage, the practitioner gains leverage over anxiety.
- (3) The stage of attaining proficiency, during which the two faculties of knowing the past and knowing the present take sprout.
- (4) The stage of cultivation, during which the groundwork for cultivating the faculty of knowing the future is laid.
- (5) The stage of completion, the final stage during which the ingrained faculties of anxiety and suffering are eliminated, and the spiritual fruit of enlightenment is reaped.

The practitioner accumulates wholesome karma and neutralizes unwholesome karma, enhances the physical and mental capacities necessary to tolerate the distress of dying, and ultimately overcomes the fear of dying through the observance of Dharma activities. Gravely ill practitioners are instructed to avoid thoughts of attachment, aversion, covetousness, delusion, and conceit. The sick and dying are enjoined to avoid latching onto unskillful behavior patterns and thinking during this important time.

The idea of adding to the store of merit through the performance of Dharma activities is not exclusive to Mahayana Buddhism. References to practices that build merit through *dāna* are found in the Agamas, in Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Abhidharma*, and in the commentaries on the *Treasury of Abhidharma* by Sthiramati and Yashomitra.



The Medicine Buddha Sutra describes a practice intended to help the beneficiary avoid the nine sources of untimely death. To perform the practice, the family and friends of the dying person gather around the deathbed and recite the Sutra forty-nine times. The practice aims to ward off the disease and engender peace and well-being in the sick and suffering person and thereby delay the demise of the recipient by “postponing the date” of death. “Women and men of good faith” should sponsor the production of spiritual paraphernalia, such as Sutra pillars, banners, and elaborate lamps, to use in the performance of the practice of the Medicine Buddha.

Within this opulent setting, the lapis lazuli image of the Medicine Buddha, with one hand indicating the “no-fear posture” (*abhayamudrā*) is placed near the suffering person. For the practice to be efficacious, the participants must observe the “eight purification disciplines for lay people”<sup>5</sup> and avoid sources of mortal hazard during the seven day and night duration of the practice. While it postpones the date of death and attenuates the physical and psychological suffering of the sick or dying person, it also provides patrons of the ritual with a means of building merit through *dāna*.

The myriad of benefits obtained with proper observation of the practice are expounded throughout the Sutra. The worldly benefits include the promise of happier rebirths for some, and the assurance of a less

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<sup>5</sup> Abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual activity, lying, intoxication, eating after noon, entertainment and ornamentation, and using luxurious furniture.

stressful death for others. For the beneficiaries of the practice, the concrete benefits include improvements in health and vitality, and the extension of life, in certain cases, by years. The ability for laypeople to receive these benefits is predicated upon avoiding sources of mortal hazard by adhering to the eight precepts for purification.

The Medicine Buddha Sutra describes the causes of death due to inescapable imbalances: *“As has been explained by the World Honored-One, inescapable imbalances refer to nine causes: 1) excessive consumption, 2) unwholesome food, 3) not yet digesting before eating the next meal, 4) consuming raw food without expulsion, 5) retaining digested food, 6) not being near doctor or medicine, 7) not knowing what is harmful or beneficial, 8) untimely acting, and 9) improper acting. This is called untimely dying.”*

In the Medicine Buddha Sutra, an alternative list of the nine ways of the dying from inescapable imbalances is provided: getting sick without available medical treatment, being executed as a criminal, having vital energy stolen, burning in a fire, drowning, being bitten by a wild animal, falling off a cliff, consuming poison, and dying from starvation or dehydration.

Dying from inescapable imbalances can be avoided by taking the proper steps to prepare for dying. These steps include the applied practices comprised in the yogic practice offered by Asanga, or through certain interventions for the sick and dying presented in the Medicine Buddha Sutra.



The *Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Purvanidhana Sutra* instructs:

*When men or women are on the verge of death, their consciousness becomes confused and dark. They are unable to discriminate between the wholesome and the unwholesome, and their eyes and ears are unable to see or hear. That is why relatives of those deceased people should make generous offerings, recite the sacred Sutras, and invoke the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Such wholesome conditions can cause the deceased to leave the Inferior Paths, and all the demons, ghosts, and spirits will withdraw and disperse.*

*If at the time of death beings of any kind have an opportunity to hear the name of one Buddha or Bodhisattva or to hear a sentence or verse of a Mahayana Sutra, such beings can quickly be freed from the pull of their accumulated minor unwholesome deeds that would otherwise send them to the Inferior Paths. The exception to that is crimes involving Fivefold Acts of Immediate Retribution (matricide, parricide, killing a Bodhisattva, wounding a Buddha, and dividing the Sangha).*

### **Dying Skillfully**

The earliest and most venerated portion of the Yogachara scripture on the nature of dying is the *Manobhūmiḥ*, or The Basis of Mind. In it, Asanga states that the karmic standing or the mental state of a sentient being, leading up to and during the time of dying, determines the course of dying. The karmic state of the mind of the sentient being determines the capacity to practice skillful detachment, concentration, and mindful recollection while dying. The mind of a sentient being at the end of life holds one of three karmic valences that reflect a mental disposition toward wholesome, unwholesome, or neutral thoughts and behaviors. The karmic grade depends on the balance of positive and negative karma that the sentient being carries at the end of life: dying with a skillful state of mind, dying with an unskillful state of mind, and dying with an indeterminate or neutral state of mind.

Asanga states: *“How does the skillful mind die? Sometimes in dying the individual can remember teachings that have been learned previously. Sometimes the individual can remember the teachings*

*when reminded by others. At the time the individual remembers the skillful teachings, such as the teachings on faith, and so forth, crudely formed perceptions arise in the mind. When the subtle perceptions of outside things arise in the dying mind, the dying mind returns to an indeterminate state. Why does the mind return to an indeterminate state? If the dying mind cannot recall the skillful practices that are learned during life, then the individuals from the outside will not be able to restore the memories of the skillful practices for the dying mind.”*

Dying skillfully requires the ability to maintain a calm state of mind in the face of impending death. When facing mortality, the sentient being who carries out the pure practices of Dharma cultivation during life is more likely to be able to sustain a state of mind of brightness and clarity and resist a mental state of confusion and opacity. The maintenance of a clear and serene state of mind is advantageous. In his *Summary of Abhidharma*, Asanga describes how the skillful mental states of “brightness and clarity” in the face of death are predicated upon the maintenance of the skillful teachings a sentient being has learned through a lifetime of practice and cultivation.

Retaining a state of mind of “brightness and clarity” in the face of impending death requires preparation and practice. Those who die well possess a single-minded resolution and conviction that is honed by practice and cultivation. Dying well requires an ability to focus on tranquil meditation, mindful absorption, or the recitation of the name of the Buddha or a revered Bodhisattva. The practice of dying skillfully requires honing and enlisting the faculties of faith, concentration, detachment, and memory. Dying skillfully requires the ability to utilize the skills of faith and concentration to quell the activation of the faculty of anxiety that occurs when a sentient being faces mortality. The faculties of anxiety and suffering are genetically pre-programmed to recoil at the signs of dying and death. Without learning the skills required to regulate the faculties of anxiety and suffering, the actions of these undesirable faculties will be exacerbated at the end of life.

The cultivation of the faculties of faith and concentration, through the practice of Dharma cultivation, reduces the natural and innate anxiety and fear that is associated with dying. When the faculties of faith and concentration are functioning well at the end of life, the process of dying is less stressful. The practice of dying skillfully requires the ability to efface sensations, however subtle, outside attention. This requires enlisting the faculty of concentration and using the “pure objects of faith” (Guru, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) to maintain a laser-like focus through the trials of dying.

The pure objects of faith “take the form of the aspirations.” Spiritual aspirations are used as lodestones to guide the sentient being toward meritorious thoughts and actions and away from impure objects or distractions in the material world. This, again, requires an ability to enlist the faculties of concentration and mindfulness that have been honed by practice prior to the end of life. Dying skillfully requires an ability to regulate the unskillful affective states of torpor, vexation, and the “six root afflictions” of attachment, aversion, indifference, pride, doubt, and deluded views. The six root afflictions originate within the mind and the body, and function to divert the dying mind from meritorious action and thought. The affective state of detachment is central to dying skillfully, as the unwholesome factors of attachment, aversion, indifference are rooted in “hostility and resentment.” By enlisting the faculty of detachment, the sentient being discards unskillful mental states and overrides the sensations of pain that impinge upon the equanimity and mental clarity that are necessary for dying skillfully.

Dying skillfully means exercising the faculty of recollection to mindfully recall and implement the yogic practices that have been practiced routinely prior to dying. Asanga recognizes that even the most single-minded and committed sentient being may suffer from limits in the ability to recollect actions and



practices due to loss of mental acuity. For this reason, an individual who is dying skillfully can be assisted by others in the practice of Dharma cultivation.

There is no doubt or irresolution in the mind of the skillfully dying. This is because the sentient being who is dying skillfully does not fear the consequences of karma and is able to resist an unwholesome desire to cling to material pleasures or to the pain of sentient life. The practice of the yoga of dying results in the relinquishment of the unwholesome thoughts and behaviors that create suffering in the mind of the sentient being on the brink of death.

In the *Manobhūmiḥ*, Asanga defines dying unskillfully as follows: *“How does an unskillful mind die? Sometimes in dying the individual remembers unskillful practices previously learned. Sometimes in dying the individual remembers unskillful practices by being reminded by others. At that time the individual remembers the unskillful practices, confusion, and resentment, and unskillful thoughts enter the dying mind. A coarsely formed and subtle perception then arises. Exceedingly painful experiences are incurred in approaching death with an unskillful mind. For the sentient being who is unable to maintain a calm and resolute state of mind when facing mortality, the pain and suffering attendant on dying beleaguer the body and the mind.”*

Asanga contrasts the subjective experiences of those who die skillfully with those who die unskillfully. For example, while a sentient being who dies with a skillful mind may experience benign visual phenomena, the being with an unskillful mind may see disturbing images at the end of life. For the sentient being approaching the end of life unskillfully, states of delirium and hallucinations are common. When unwholesome karma outweighs the wholesome, the hallucinations can be terrifying and vivid. The unskillful mind is flooded with thoughts of attachment, aversion, and indifference that make the process of dying psychologically terrifying and physically painful.

The production of this imagery is the unique function of the storehouse consciousness. At the end of life, the memories stored within the storehouse consciousness are activated and projected onto the unskillful mind. The narrative thread of greed, anger, keeping company with immoral people, adhering to improper doctrines, and engaging in perverse thinking begins to unravel and take the form of horrific images. A life poorly lived produces a frightening death and an afterlife of suffering. Dying unskillfully is the consequence of the negative karma accumulated during a life misspent. However, all sentient beings have the potential to obtain a benign and peaceful death by practicing meritorious actions and Dharma cultivation during life.

Asanga completes his account of the three ways of dying with a description of what it means to approach dying with an indeterminate state of mind. The status of karmic indeterminacy means that at the time of dying, the karmic tendencies of the mental state of the sentient being have not been determined. The indeterminate mind stands in the balance and can be tipped toward a benign or a painful death, depending on the actions taken by the sentient being at the end of life.

Asanga writes: *“Dying with an indeterminate mind means that one’s practices are neither skillful nor unskillful. Or one does not undertake any practices at all. When one is about to meet one’s final moments of life, one cannot recollect anything. Nor can others induce recollection. Then, the neither skillful nor unskillful mind, dies. One does not die peacefully, nor does one die with much vexation. In this state, some humans independently recall the good Dharma that they have practiced. Some, in meeting their final moments, cannot remember anything—and moreover, there is no one available to remind them who is dying, and induce recollection of these practices. Furthermore, when individuals who have*

*acted in a wholesome or unwholesome way are about to die, they may spontaneously remember the wholesome or unwholesome dharmas that they previously cultivated, and that may lead to further memories. At that time, their minds will tend to register those of their repeated habits that were most dominant. The rest are entirely forgotten.”*

Asanga identifies three factors that are specific to this category of dying. The first is that the state of the memory of the indeterminate mind is vague and the ability to recall practices is impaired. The second is that dying with an indeterminate mind is hedonically neutral, in that it is neither particularly benign nor particularly painful. The third is that the conditions of the mind can be either improved by carrying out skillful practices or remain unimproved by eschewing rituals and yogic practices.

As in other types of dying, the quality of the mental projections experienced by a sentient being nearing death is due to the balance of karma. Asanga proclaims that if wholesome karma outweighs the unwholesome, the mental images that are experienced at the time of dying will be benign, rather than frightening.

The psychological and physiological experience of dying is determined by the mental condition, or the quality of the thoughts and behaviors that are held in the mind of the sentient being approaching the end of life. The mental condition of the sentient being is determined ineluctably by karma. With this theoretical groundwork in place, we turn to investigate practices to achieve a benign and peaceful course of dying. Improving the course of dying necessarily begins by learning how to overcome the biologically pre-programmed fear of death that is innate to all sentient creatures.

### ***Fear of Dying***

The fear of dying is experienced by all human beings. All sentient beings, even those who die skillfully, must contend with the primitive and innate fear of dying. In the face of impending death, all sentient beings have a basic and primal desire to cling to life.

According to the categorization laid out in the Mahavibhasa, the three forms of fear related to dying are as follows: the fear of no-longer living, the fear of suffering at the end of life, and the fear of rebirth into a life of suffering. In the discussion of the primary fears of the human being, the Mahavibhasa considers the “appropriating aggregates,” the aggregates that account for the bodily desires, or the urges to “appropriate” food, sex, and material objects for pleasure. The fear associated with the relinquishment of the possessions and sensory pleasures of the material realm is regarded as a form of suffering for sentient beings. The root of this type of suffering is found in raga, the “greedy clinging” to the sense of well-being that feeds the “appropriating aggregates.” The Mahavibhasa identifies a deeply ingrained aversion to the loss of possessions as central to the fear of no-longer living. No-longer living involves facing the inevitable loss of worldly pleasures.

The ego (*atman*) of the sentient being is invested in the preservation of the material objects and sensory pleasures of life. This is due to the illusion that the “owner” of material things is permanent and unchanging. The Mahavibhasa posits that the covetous seeking and clinging to pleasurable objects perpetuates the delusions of a permanent self. Therefore, the fear of loss is driven by the fantasy of an ego, atman, or self, to whom the material possessions and pleasures of life belong. Clinging to bodily desires and material objects is based in the mistaken view of *satkaya*, the idea that the atman is embodied. Instead, according to the Dharma, the stream of the conscious mind provides the continuity of the sentient being.

The fear of dying is a pre-programmed aversion to suffering that is based on experiences of dying in past lives. The subliminal awareness of the pain of past lives is rooted in the storehouse consciousness of the sentient being. The trace memories of pain and suffering endured in prior lives that are stored in the mind inform the subjective experiences of sentient beings dying in the here-and-now. Sentient beings know that rebirth entails re-death. The mastery of the fear of dying results in liberation by breaking the cycle of death and rebirth.

One hundred eight mental and bodily afflictions<sup>6</sup> contribute to the fear of dying in a sentient being. The fear of dying is generated by the three poisons that form the primary afflictions of attachment, aversion, and indifference. When the six sensory faculties of sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch, and the mind are exposed to the toxins of attachment, aversion, and indifference, they become afflicted in six negative ways. The six afflicted states of the faculties are unfaithfulness, sluggishness, disheartenment, excitability, unconsciousness, and forgetfulness. When, for example, the faculty of mindfulness is afflicted by disheartenment, a secondary wave of fear is released into the mind of the dying.

The categorization of the one hundred eight afflictions provides the doctrinal support for the practice of the rites of purification that are observed in the Mahayana. The practitioner holds the mala or rosary of one hundred eight beads that represent each one of the afflictions. Through chanting and recitation while holding the beads, the practitioner clears the unwholesome karma generated by the three poisons and subdues the one hundred eight barriers to peaceful dying. This practice is recommended for the living as well as for those dying, as it is meant to cultivate the five skillful faculties (faith, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment) that aid the skillfully dying mind.

A sentient being who has accumulated a share of negative karma in life can improve his or her moral circumstances in the final days and hours of life. Improving the moral and feeling quality of dying entails deactivating the unskillful faculties of anxiety and suffering, and activating the skillful faculties of faith, concentration, perseverance, mindfulness, and discernment. This concept is based on the idea of the indeterminacy of mind, which asserts that even the mind of a deluded sentient being can be improved at the end of life.

The “state of dying” comes at the end of a life and before the afterlife. Vasubandhu elaborates upon the qualities of the state of dying, depicting the moral and amoral qualities manifested by the dying sentient being: “Rupture of the skillful roots or retaining them, detachment or loss of detachment, dying and becoming reborn, all of these are regarded as mental consciousness. Dying and becoming reborn are naught but aversive sensation.” Dying is characterized as “naught but aversive” for two reasons. First, aversion represents a state of indeterminate karmic and feeling quality. Raw aversion – the primal sense of recoiling in the face of pain – can be transformed into a skillful sense of detachment in the face of pain. Second, the sense of aversion accounts for the “hazy and faint” nature of sensation in the dying being. The morally neutral non-impedimentary conditions one finds oneself in during the stage of death make room for adjustment – changes for better or worse.

The exercise of the “skillful-cultivable faculties” and the “skillful exercise” of indeterminate faculties is thought to eventually lead toward higher rebirths, and thus the prospect of achieving liberation, while “unskillful” actions do not. Because physical and verbal actions are thought to be merely an expression

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<sup>6</sup> The number 108 is derived as follows: the three sense experiences (pleasant, unpleasant, and neither) × the six senses (hearing, touching, seeing, tasting, smelling, thinking) = 18. Attachment and aversion to these experiences =  $18 \times 2 = 36$ . Past, present, and future incidents of attachment or aversion =  $36 \times 3 = 108$ .

of some inner intention, physical and verbal actions in and of themselves do not have the karmic quality of wholesome or unwholesome but are rather of indeterminate karmic quality. Accordingly, a karmically neutral death is a death of neither positive nor negative feeling quality. It is neither particularly painful nor particularly peaceful. A karmically neutral death is a karmically indeterminate way of dying that has already happened – that is, the sentient being has already died in a way that is neither hedonically nor morally unwholesome or wholesome.

In such scenarios, there is room for improvement as well as for deterioration. “Intrinsically neutral” refers to things that are basically not of a karmic nature, in the sense that they are not related to wholesome or unwholesome karma. According to the understanding of intrinsic karmic neutrality established by Asanga in the Summary of Abhidharma, factors include vitality, conspecificity, name, syllable, and sentence. These factors are neither inherently unwholesome nor inherently wholesome – rather, they are invested with a moral dimension with a specific intention – whether skillful, unskillful, or neither. For example, having vitality is not inherently wholesome or unwholesome; it is just a brute fact of life. The same is true of conspecificity. Some species are more spiritually advanced than others, but belonging to a given species is not a trait that bears an intrinsic moral shade. It is how one lives that imbues the factor with a particular moral tinge.

Impedimentary moral indeterminacy describes entering the stage of dying under the conditions decreed by the course of prior karma. Non-impedimentary moral determinacy describes the conditions that are modifiable or subject to improvement, either by yogic practice or by ritual intervention at the end of life. Moral impedimency and non-impedimency are the most general twofold distinction within indeterminacy. The term “impedimentary moral indeterminacy” indicates the capability to present two forms of impediment of the practitioner: firstly, it can obstruct the pure dharma upon the sagely path, and secondly, it can shade over the clear mind and render it impure.

So, what, if anything, can the dying human mind do to tilt the scale in its favor, even in the final moments of life? Those who make contrition for past misdeeds upon their deathbed can achieve the result of a more peaceful course of dying. This result can be achieved through the proper practice of purification, which entails repenting for any negative actions one may have done in present or past lives to clear karmic obstacles that may be causing worldly difficulties.

Negative karma can be purified through the Four Powers:

REGRET – the realization that unskillful acts lead to suffering, like swallowing poison, and the strong determination to neutralize them

RELIANCE – taking sincere refuge in our own natural perfection and the noble friend; in the Dharma that clearly explains suffering and its causes, liberation from suffering, and the path to liberation; and in the community of practitioners that encourages and supports us on the path

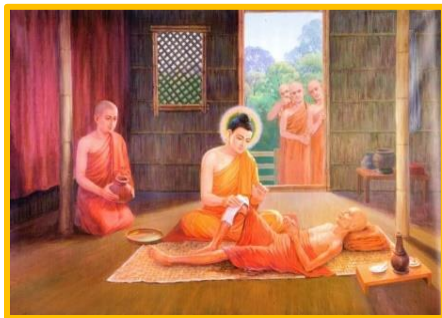
RESOLVE – making temporary and lifelong vows to avoid further unskillful acts, cultivating right intention, and applying right effort

REMEDICATION – employing skillful means to counteract the consequences of negative acts through the practice of virtue and the dedication of merit.

According to the doctrine of the storehouse consciousness, when we perform actions, we have sensory impressions, which are combined in the form of the variegated seeds stored up in the storehouse consciousness. In this functional capacity of the storehouse consciousness, all the memories and mental impressions of past events are retained in the form of latent seeds. These impressions remain dormant

or inert for most of the time in the form of the seed, but manifest continuously in those dying with a mind bent upon unskillful and unwholesome thoughts. They recycle mental impressions, forming the departing visions and creeping sensations experienced by the dying. While the storehouse consciousness is a subliminal form of consciousness, it is omnipresent in the sensory or cognitive activities of the sentient being and is the last form of consciousness in the body prior to death. It represents the dormant capacities that distinguish death from biological life. Death is not the same kind of unconscious state as dreamless sleep, because the storehouse consciousness has deserted the person in death, but is merely dormant in sleep.

All ways of dying ultimately fall under the remit of karma. This karma explains why all sentient beings, both human and non-human, recoil at dying and death. We are biologically programmed to recoil in aversion from dying. However, even with an ingrained and preconditioned nature of the fear of death, the Dharma provides a constructive program for overcoming the fear of dying through practice. Fear is rooted in the uncertainty and anxiety that arise in the mind facing dangerous and taxing circumstances. Subtle aversion is fear transformed from an unwholesome or karmically indeterminate moral grade into a skillful moral grade. The erosion of fear comes about through gaining some distance from an irresolute and begrudging attitude towards danger and threats. This is fear transformed into the skillful state of retiring and equanimity. The faculty of aversion, when skillfully employed, can undermine the unwholesome tendency of fear and modify brute fear into a retiring sense of detachment and tranquility.



### ***Dying Well***

In contrast to dying poorly or dying neutrally, during which little effort is made to improve the conditions of one's way of dying, dying well involves the neutralization of the unwholesome activation of the feeling faculties. The skillful ways of dying are manifested and sustained by the "wholesome faculties" or "skillful roots:" the five uncontaminated faculties of faith, spiritual perseverance, mindful recollection of practices, concentration, and wisdom.

The karmic grade of the faculties indelibly impacts the karmic quality of the way a sentient being dies. The feeling faculty of aversion is paramount to overcome the fear of dying. This is because of the nature of the faculty of aversion. The faculty of aversion is regarded as morally indeterminate in that it can be either a skillful or an unskillful condition, according to its activation. For example, the unskillful use of the faculty of aversion manifests in cringing in the face of pain, while the skillful use of aversion manifests in the equanimity of the mind of the Buddha.

Because of its indeterminate status, aversion is grouped with the feeling faculties and not with the skillful faculties of faith, concentration, perseverance, mindful recollection, and wisdom. Aversion can be applied to wholesome ends, which means enlisting it to counteract the negative karma and impurities accumulated by the feeling faculties when free rein is given to unskillful purposes. For example, the cultivation of aversion is necessary to combat the fear of dying by overcoming anxiety.

The way to start to overcome one's fear of dying consists in subordinating the faculty of anxiety. The way to quell the unwanted aggravation of the ingrained faculty of anxiety is to activate the countervailing force of the skillful faculties of faith, concentration, and perseverance. The practitioner strives to curb the "immediately manifest activity" of the faculty of anxiety by counteracting the faculty

of anxiety with the “wholesome” activities of the faculties of faith, perseverance, concentration, and positive aversion (*upekṣēndriyam*). This helps overcome anxiety by converting aversion into its pure and sublime sense of detachment from pain and discomfort. This wholesome sense of aversion is distinct from the tainted or contaminated sense, which refers to the sense of aversion that animals – both humans and otherwise – show when they cower in the face of pain. Equanimity is the skillful manifestation of aversion. Whereas the activation of aversion in a benighted worldling may only reinforce an unwholesome detestation of painful stimuli, in the enlightened sage the faculty of aversion works in a wholesome way to efface aversive tendencies and to maintain a calm and collected attitude towards the bodily pain experienced throughout life, and especially at the end of life, during the states of being chronically ill or dying. During the course of dying, the practitioner may be beset by depression and disconsolation created by the faculty of anxiety in conjunction with the mental faculty, and the sense faculties. Equanimity, or aversion in the skillful sense, also directly counteracts other mental impediments, fear foremost among them, that suffuse the mind with a generalized sense of anxiety and unease in the face of mortality.

In his elaboration of the states of dying, Vasubandhu focuses on the faculty of aversion as central to the condition of mental consciousness, or the moral and feeling state of mind, of the dying sentient being. The faculty of aversion, in a primitive and uncultivated state, manifests in the psychological experience of distress, and the behavioral response of recoiling, when a sentient being encounters an aversive stimulus. The uncultivated form of the faculty of aversion creates the disturbing physical and psychological responses that are experienced by a sentient being during the process of dying. The faculty of aversion, however, can be trained to respond to pain without either the behavioral reaction of flinching, or the response of negative thoughts. The faculty of aversion can be cultivated to respond with detachment to the negative physical sensations that occur during the demise of the physical body during the process of dying.

In addition to the positive role of the faculty of aversion implemented towards spiritually constructive ends, the five cultivatable skillful faculties of faith, concentration, perseverance, mindful recollection, and wisdom are involved in the way the human sages approach their inevitable mortal death. In addition to the feeling faculty of aversion, the two faculties of faith and concentration play a dominant role in neutralizing the aggravation that the individual suffers due to the inborn faculties of anxiety and suffering.

Additionally, the primitive state of the faculty of aversion accounts for the hazy and faint mental status of a dying sentient being. By altering the faculty of aversion through the cultivation of the faculties of concentration and mindfulness, the psychological torpor associated with the state of dying can be mitigated. The sentient being who transforms the faculty of aversion into its subtle form (detachment), therefore reaches the end of life with equanimity, acuity, and clarity of mind. This is counteracting fear and anxiety with equanimity.

If one can make a reverent offering to the Tathagata, then all the nightmarish signs, including all sorts of inauspiciousness, will cease and one will not be afflicted by them in dying. Even if one is poverty stricken and unable to give monetary offerings to the Sangha, observing reverent devotion to the Buddhas in moments of need can tangibly improve the conditions of one’s final hours.

### ***Dying the Good Death***

What is a good death? By attending to the condition of the faculties, the physical and psychological suffering of dying that is innate to all sentient beings can be ameliorated. An improvement in the quality

of dying, in this life or the next, is attainable. The possibility of improving the quality of dying well in this lifetime, or of increasing the chance of being reborn into a realm in which the experience of dying is benign, remains available to all sentient beings, up to and during the end of life. It is possible for sentient beings, including those burdened with unwholesome karma, to increase the likelihood of dying well in the present life or in future births by engaging in practices that improve karmic standing.

Dying well means dying quickly, and with a minimum of mental anguish and physical pain. Dying well is equated to dying skillfully through the cultivation and development of the five skillful faculties of faith, perseverance, concentration, mindfulness, and wisdom. To die skillfully, the sentient being converts the faculty of aversion into a sublime form and counters the physical and psychological manifestations of the faculty of anxiety with the five skillful faculties.

While the psychological and physical aspects of suffering that are concomitant with dying for sentient beings living in the realm of desire cannot be eliminated entirely, a sentient being who conditions the skillful faculties with meditation and other wholesome practices increases the likelihood of facing dying with clarity of mind and equanimity. Additionally, the cultivation of the skillful faculties through the path of insight increases the possibility of being reborn into a favorable transmigratory realm.

The transmigratory realm, or the *dhātu*, into which a sentient being is born dictates the range of possibilities of dying that a being will face. The type of dying is determined, to a large extent, by the faculties that are innate to the sentient being who lives within a specific *dhātu*. The quality of dying varies widely within the three environmental realms of the *kāmadhātu*, the *rūpadhātu* and the *arūpyadhātu*. For example, a sentient being born into the earthly realm of the *kāmadhātu* will experience physical and psychological distress while dying because the faculties of anxiety and suffering are innate to beings who reside in the *kāmadhātu*. The spiritually advanced sentient being who is born into the Pure Lands of the *rūpadhātu*, however, will have a quick and painless death, because beings in the *rūpadhātu* are born without the faculties of anxiety or suffering. Moreover, unlike the sentient beings in the *Sahā* world, inhabitants of the *rūpadhātu* need not worry about a “gradual process of dying” that is ridden with physical pain, terrifying visions of a gruesome nature, and emotional distress. Beings in the *rūpadhātu* die quickly, and without physical or mental torment.

Obtaining a skillful death may not be possible, either because a sentient being does not cultivate the faculties prior to or during dying, or because the being is born into a *dhātu* in which a painful way of dying is predetermined. Two factors determine the type of dying experienced by a sentient being: species-specific and non-species-specific factors. Species-specific factors are the innate biological and genetically pre-programmed variables that allow a sentient being to live in, and adapt to, a specific *dhātu*. They include the type and the number of faculties that are borne by a sentient being living within a specific environmental realm. Non-species-specific factors include the experiences and the behaviors that the sentient being engages in from conception until the moment of death. Genetics and development are involved in how a sentient being lives and dies, and that karma conditions the expression of both factors. Karma is ineluctably related to the species-specific and non-species-specific factors involved in the dying of a sentient being.

Karma is implicated in the quality of dying in two ways. First, because the balance of wholesome and unwholesome karma that is accumulated by a sentient being determines the condition of the faculties at the end of life, karma dictates the moral and feeling quality of dying. Second, because the balance of karma dictates the species-specific variables, such as the type and number of faculties carried by a sentient being in a specific realm, karma determines the type of dying that is experienced by that being.

For example, sentient beings that are born into the realm of the *kāmadhātu*, as opposed to those living in the *rūpadhātu*, carry the faculties of suffering and anxiety. Dying skillfully in the Sahā world, unlike dying well in the Pure Lands, therefore requires training of the faculties with meritorious practices.

Karma plays a decisive and pervasive role in determining the way a sentient being dies and the dhātu into which a sentient being is reborn. While the transmigratory realm determines a range of possibilities for how a sentient being dies, karma dictates the dhātu into which a sentient being is reborn. While karma is the ultimate authority, a sentient being has agency in determining the moral and feeling qualities of the last stages of life. By choosing to improve the mental condition of dying by accumulating wholesome karma, or by neutralizing unwholesome karma, a sentient being improves the quality of dying and the placement into the next realm of rebirth.

The seeds of wholesome karma can be cultivated through yogic practice and merit, even in the last minutes and seconds of life. By sponsoring or receiving rituals, a sentient being may improve the spiritual faculties, the quality of dying, and the afterlife. However, if the seeds of spiritual enlightenment do not bear fruit in the form of a benign death in this life, they may in another birth. Ultimately, a sentient being can influence the karmic balance, in this life and the next, through the practice of Dharma cultivation and meritorious actions.

Vasubandhu states in the *Treasury of Abhidharma* that the process of dying is shaped by the wholesome and the unwholesome karma that is accumulated by a sentient being at the end of life. The karma amassed during the current life and the karma inherited from past existences determine three things: the way a sentient being dies, the course of the intermediate state between births, and the placement into the species and the dhātu of the next life. The causal factors that determine the moral status of the sentient being in present and past existences regulate the process of dying, the quality of the intermediate state between births, and the station into which a sentient being is reborn. Vasubandhu states: *“Dying is the state created by the presence of prior karma, from which it draws forth. It is the state before the moment of becoming reborn and after death.”*

The entirety of the karma accumulated by a sentient being, in the past and in the present, influences the final moments of the present life and the transition into the next life. Dying “draws forth spiritual fruit.” The process of dying draws forth the totality of the karma that is borne by a sentient being and transforms it into either a reward or a karmic retribution. The seeds of the wholesome karma that a sentient being plants in current and past lives produce a benign death, afterlife, and rebirth. Conversely, the fruit of unwholesome karma planted during past and present lives manifests in a painful death, and a less than benign afterlife and rebirth.

The five factors which, by their relative degree of intensity, either mitigate or intensify any particular volitional act are:

1. the frequency of the act;
2. the intensity of the motivation to perform the act;
3. the skillful or unskillful manner in which the act is performed;
4. the presence or absence as objects of the act of those who have assisted one in a positive way, such as one’s parents, teachers, and benefactors; and
5. the presence or absence as objects of the act of those possessed of especially great virtue, such as the Three Jewels, Dharma teachers, and world benefactors.



The moral grade of dying can be improved through the retention and the cultivation of the five skillful faculties of faith, perseverance, concentration, mindfulness, and wisdom. The promise of a better death in this lifetime, and eventual liberation from the endless cycle of birth and death, remains available to all sentient beings, including those who are freighted with unwholesome karma.

A sentient being up to, and during the very last moments of life, possesses the agency to modify and enhance moral standing. A sentient being can either improve the quality of dying by conditioning the five skillful faculties or maintain the karmic status quo by neglecting to cultivate the faculties. A sentient being can choose to either retain, or to discard, the skillful faculties, and thereby alter the feeling and moral quality of dying during the transitional moments between life and the hereafter.

The mind of a dying sentient being is in a state of moral indeterminacy. While in an indeterminate state, a sentient being may elect to sever or to retain the roots of the faculties of faith, perseverance, concentration, mindfulness, and wisdom. This choice determines whether a sentient being dies in an impure and contaminated or in a pure and uncontaminated state of mind. Both conditions of mind depend upon the choice a sentient being makes to either cultivate or detach from the skillful faculties.

If a sentient being elects to discard the skillful faculties, the balance of karma carried at the time of dying directs the moral quality of dying and the placement in the afterlife. The decision to retain or discard the skillful faculties is, for the sentient being, a critical moment. The Mahavibhāṣa enumerates the “four types of unskillful actions” that constrain a sentient being from executing practices that improve or restore the skillful faculties at the end of life. This categorization is endorsed and refined by Vasubandhu and Asaṅga. The four types of unskillful actions include:

- (1) Actions that are unskillful for the attainment of enlightenment, including obstinacy and an unwillingness to engage in disciplined practices that foster the skillful faculties.
- (2) Actions that reflect mental states of poor moral character, including angry outbursts that demonstrate disregard for the well-being of others.
- (3) Actions that are associated with unskillful states of mind, including violent or aggressive actions that are aimed at harming others.
- (4) Actions that are contaminated because they originate from an unskillful faculty, such as actions that are derived from anxiety, and demonstrate mental or physical restlessness, such as excessive perspiration and bodily shaking.

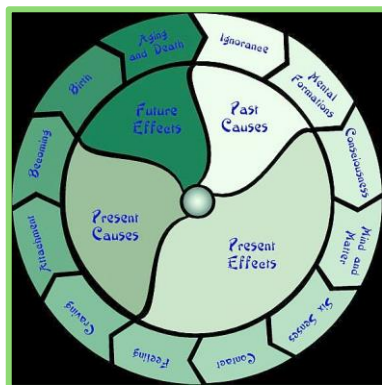
Vasubandhu asserts that the skillful faculties are never lost, unless a sentient being actively and deliberately chooses not to engage in the work required to retain them.

The cultivation and retention of the skillful roots require constant maintenance on the part of the sentient being, throughout life and during the final moments of dying. Maintaining the skillful faculties entails associating with Dharma friends (*kalyāṇamitras*), engaging in meritorious practices and rituals, and continuing to refine the spiritual faculties of faith, concentration, perseverance, mindfulness and wisdom. By living meritoriously and following the path of Dharma cultivation, a sentient being accumulates the karma that is necessary to die well and be reborn well. A sentient being with moral determination can improve karmic standing and the quality of dying and rebirth.

There is a difference between dying as a process and dying as a state of completion that results in the death of a sentient being. The distinction between dying and the state of being dead is significant in terms of the doctrine of the cycle of life. Within the cycle of life, the process of dying is the final stage of

living. The state of being dead, however, begins with the first moment after death and gives rise to the first state in the endless cycle of birth and death. Within the doctrine of the cycle of life, dying is a state of consciousness that is linked to the next moment of consciousness. There is no permanent or enduring self that is lost in dying, or in the state of being dead. The word “death” describes the state that a sentient being occupies between life and the afterlife. Death is a moment-to-moment transition rather than a final or permanent state of being or non-being.

In the analytical discussion of aging and dying as a stage in the cycle of life, the Abhidharma focuses on the differentiation between dying and death. The moment of biological death is viewed as the beginning of the afterlife, and not as part of the present life of the sentient being. Hence, the definition of aging and the relationship of aging to dying and death are crucial because “aging-and-death” (*jarā-māraṇam*), is the link that precedes rebirth in the twelve-link cycle of dependent arising.



The twelve links of dependent arising describe the chain of the twelve causal events that result in the endless cycle of rebirth and suffering. Each of the twelve links on the chain gives rise to a condition, which in turn gives rise to another condition, then a further condition. The twelfth link circles back to the first, thus forming a continuous cycle of rebirth and re-death. Ignorance, followed by mental formations, form the first two links on the chain, with aging and death forming the penultimate link on the never-ending cycle of the twelve-fold chain. The link of aging-and-death is followed by the final link of rebirth. By breaking the chain of continuous death and rebirth, nirvana, or liberation from suffering, is attained.

The *Pratītyasamutpāda Sutra* poses the question: Why is death linked to old age? Why is death, one of the most crucial borders in the cycle of human life, not a separate link in the chain of dependent arising?

Aging, in and of itself, is not a sufficient condition to give rise to the next link in the chain of dependent arising. Taken together, old age and death provide an inclusive category of the condition for the arising of the next link in the cycle of life. The union of old age with death is intended to take the deaths of all sentient beings into account in the lifecycle, including those who do not live to old age. For example, a stillborn fetus, who experiences death but not aging, requires a place on the chain of dependent arising. Therefore, by placing aging and death together as the eleventh link, all deaths of sentient beings are included in the chain of dependent arising.

In his *Treasury of Abhidharma*, Vasubandhu analyzes each link in the twelve-fold chain in dependent arising. He examines the twelve links in four ways: the moment in which the link occurs, the position of the link in the cycle, the relationship of the discrete event of the link to other links on the chain, and the link as a state of existence in the life cycle. Vasubandhu posits that each of the twelve links in the chain of dependent arising can be analyzed using the four modes. For example, the link of aging and death can be analyzed in the following four ways:

- (1) As two “moments.” Here, aging and death are conceptualized as two moments in the life of a sentient being. Moment one is aging, and moment two is dying.
- (2) As grouped together into one independent and discrete stage in the life of a sentient being. Here, aging and dying are grouped together as one link on the chain.

(3) As two conjoined states in the life cycle. Here, aging and death are conceptualized as one, non-momentary state in the Buddhist life cycle.

(4) As related to the previous link on the chain of living in a healthy and able-bodied way and to the future link on the chain of rebirth. Here the link of aging and death is viewed as adjacent to other links on the chain.

The discussion of aging and death in terms of the four modes is doctrinally significant in that it serves to defend the analytical distinction between dying and death. The collation of aging with death within the eleventh link on the chain upholds that death cannot be equated to dying. Dying is understood as an impermanent state, and death is viewed as the impermanent state of no longer being alive. In the teaching of the Buddha on the chain of dependent arising, aging and death unfold in successive moments, as two parts of a gradual process that ends with the aging and death of a being and gives rise to the next stage in the cycle of life, rebirth.

The state of dying belongs to the last moments of the state of being alive. The period of death, or the state of being dead, is defined as the period of the afterlife that immediately precedes rebirth.

Vasubandhu divides the life cycle into four “states”:

- (1) The state of being alive in past lives (*pūrvabhava*).
- (2) The state of being dead (*maraṇabhava*). This is the moment at which a sentient being dies.
- (3) The intermediate state between corporeal births (*antarābhāva*). This describes the discarnate afterlife, or the bardo, the state a sentient being occupies between corporeal births. During this state, the sentient being exists as an intermediate being.
- (4) The state of being reborn (*upapattibhava*) This is the state during which the sentient being is reborn into a new life.

The four states of the life cycle analysis demonstrates that rebirth is preceded by a process of dying, and that the moment of death is linked to the moment of rebirth, upholding the teachings on no-self, impermanence, and rebirth.

Why is dying painful for sentient beings? What happens to the body during the process of dying? How does the body register the physical sensations of pain associated with dying? According to Vasubandhu, the organs of the body are sustained by the three vital forces (*tridhatu*) of motility (*prana*), transformation (*agni*), and stability (*ojas*). The three forces are generated by the “vital spots,” or the *marmāṇi*, located within the organs of the body. The *marmāṇi* supply the physical body and the faculty of vitality with the life-giving forces that support, restore, and revitalize the physical processes that sustain the sentient being.

When a part of the body is mortally damaged, the *marmāṇi* in the injury are “severed from the living body.” This causes the three forces to “spill forth” into the cavities of the body. As the humors bleed out from the *marmāṇi*, the organs near the original injury shut down and the activities of the faculty of vitality begin to terminate. At this point, the organs throughout the body gradually and sequentially begin to cease functioning. The faculty of vitality, no longer restored by the vital forces, ceases to sustain the life-giving physical and mental functions of the body.

An injury to the *marmāṇi* initiates the process of gradual dying by depriving the faculty of vitality of the three life-sustaining forces. The *marmāṇi* are connected throughout the neurological system of the body

and are part of the physical faculties that sustain sensory consciousness within a sentient being. A sentient being experiences the physical sensation of pain through the *manovijñāna*, the mental consciousness of bodily sensation. When the *marmāṇi* are severed from the organs, the *manovijñāna* becomes activated and conveys the physical sensation of pain to the conscious mind of a sentient being. As the *marmāṇi*, the faculty of vitality, and the systems of the body begin to fail, the network of *manovijñāna* registers the sensations of pain and discomfort from all parts of the body to the mind. Finally, as the *marmāṇi* and the faculty of vitality deteriorate and cease to function, *manovijñāna* begins to retract, thereby causing the sentient being to lose consciousness of physical sensation. As the vitality of life and consciousness depart the body, a corpse is left behind. This is the moment of death.

In the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, Vasubandhu describes how *manovijñāna* is lost gradually as a sentient being undergoes the severing of the vital spots from the physical body. Vasubandhu lays out a central Yogachara tenet, that the presence of consciousness is equated with life in a sentient being, and the loss of consciousness is equated with death. The deprivation of consciousness from the body leaves insensate, dead matter behind. Once consciousness departs from the body, all that remains is a corpse.

In the auto-commentary to the *Treasury of the Abhidharma*, Vasubandhu addresses the departure of consciousness that occurs during the process of dying and the transition of consciousness into the next species and dhatu of the afterlife. He postulates that the location in the body from which *manovijñāna* departs is significant in that it predicts the species and the dhatu, into which newly deceased sentient beings will be reborn. Vasubandhu acknowledges that karma plays an invariable role in determining from what part of the body *manovijñāna* exits. Karma is therefore ineluctably involved in the placement of the deceased being into a species and transmigratory realm.

Vasubandhu describes the three destinations and the types of species into which a sentient being who dies gradually within the *kāmadhātu* is reborn. A sentient being can be reborn into one of the realms of the *kāmadhātu* or the *rūpadhātu* in the form of a human, a nonhuman animal, a hell being, a ghost, or a celestial. The locations in the body from which consciousness departs correspond to the three tracks of rebirth: when dying is gradual, *manovijñāna* departs from the feet, the navel, or from the heart, according to whether the being is going downward, going among humans, going among devas, or not being reborn. The location of the body from which *manovijñāna* departs is dictated by the balance of karma, held by the sentient being at the end of life. The *manovijñāna* of a sentient being who dies with predominately good karma, departs from the upper part of the body and the *manovijñāna* of a sentient being with poor karma, departs from the lower portions of the body, including the feet. The final location in the body from which consciousness mental consciousness disappears indicates the species into which the deceased will be reborn: if *manovijñāna* leaves from the feet, the sentient being is reborn as a hell being or ghost; if it departs from the navel, the being is reborn as a human, and if it departs from the heart, the being is reborn as a celestial.

In the discussion of karma and the departure of consciousness, Vasubandhu considers the cases of sentient beings who are destined to be reborn into higher realms, and those who have attained liberation from the cycle of rebirth and dying, and therefore will not be reborn. These include humans who will be reborn into a celestial realm, and ārahats, sentient beings who have attained temporary liberation from the bondage of dying and rebirth through the disciplined practice of meditation over multiple births. For the celestials heading toward the heavens, the last location of consciousness is in the heart. For arhats, consciousness departs from the head. This is because the faculty of proprioception is annihilated first in the feet, then in the heart, and finally in the head. Once the faculty of

proprioception is destroyed, *manovijñāna* departs. However, in fully enlightened practitioners, consciousness departs from the heart. In fact, for all humans, regardless of their karma or future rebirth, the final seat of *manovijñāna* in the body before death is the heart, the most fundamental and precious organ of the body.

Sentient beings who live within the three *dhātus* of the universe (*kāmadhātu*, *rūpadhātu*, and *arūpadhātu*), are categorized according to the number and type of faculties that are lost in dying. Vasubandhu holds that the type of dying experienced by a sentient being is dictated by the species and by the *dhātu* into which a being is reborn. Vasubandhu writes:

*Dying annihilates numerous faculties. In the immaterial realm (arūpadhātu), dying annihilates three faculties: vitality, manêndriyam, and upekṣêndriyam, the faculty of aversion. In the subtle material realm (rūpadhātu), dying annihilates eight faculties: the five sensory faculties of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch, and the faculties of vitality, manêndriyam, and upekṣêndriyam.*

*In the kāmadhātu, if dying is sudden, eight, nine, or ten faculties are annihilated: the five sensory faculties, the faculties of vitality, manêndriyam, and upekṣêndriyam, and the two gendered faculties. (The number of faculties lost is determined by the number of the reproductive faculties possessed by a sentient being. A sentient being who is androgynous and does not bear either of the gendered faculties will die with eight faculties. A sentient being who carries the gendered faculties of either the male or the female reproductive capacity will die with nine faculties. A sentient being who is a hermaphrodite, and bears the reproductive faculties of two genders, will die with ten faculties.)*

*In the kāmadhātu, if dying is gradual, thirteen faculties are annihilated: the four faculties of kayendriyam, vitality, manêndriyam, and upekṣêndriyam, the four feeling faculties of joy, suffering, pleasure, and anxiety, and the five skillful faculties of faith, perseverance, mindful recollection, concentration, and wisdom are annihilated.*

In the sixth verse of Chapter Two of the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, and in his auto-commentary on this text, Vasubandhu describes a group of humans who are regarded as morally degraded or “incorrigible” (*icchantika*). In the Mahayana Sutras, the epithet, “one having severed the skillful roots,” is given to the *icchantika*. The *icchantika* are depicted throughout the Indic scriptures as “lacking in any shred of desire to cultivate moral thoughts or behaviors.” In his *Basis for Yoga Practitioners*, Asanga interprets the renunciation of the skillful faculties demonstrated by the *icchantika* as volitional. The *icchantika*, rather than listening to the teachings of the Buddha or heeding the spiritual advice of others, are driven by base cravings and sensory desires. The recalcitrant and refractory *icchantika* inhabit the *kāmadhātu* and not the spiritually advanced realms of the *rūpadhātu* or the *arūpadhātu*.

In his commentary on *The Basis for Yoga Practitioners*, Kuiji<sup>7</sup> lists six conditions that lead a sentient being to become an *icchantika* with no hope for liberation in that particular birth:

- (1) Using the faculties for harmful purposes
- (2) Using the faculties to satisfy sensory desires
- (3) Associating with people of poor moral character
- (4) Lacking in embarrassment or remorse about engaging in morally impure behavior
- (5) Maintaining grossly distorted views
- (6) Lacking compassion for other sentient beings

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<sup>7</sup> Kuiji, also known as Ji, was a Chinese monk and an exponent of Yogācāra.

All humans have the choice to either retain, or to discard the skillful faculties in the process of dying. By refusing to cultivate the skillful faculties, the *icchantika* harm themselves. The body of the *icchantika* must die and be reborn to regain the skillful faculties.

In an auto-commentary to Chapter Two of the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, Vasubandhu writes: “*The icchantika die gradually with eight faculties: the five feeling faculties of joy, suffering, pleasure, anxiety and aversion, along with mind, proprioception and vitality. First, they lose the other six physical faculties (i.e., the five senses of sight, hearing, taste and smell, along with aversion and the faculty of procreation). Dying with the assignment of the eight faculties borne by the icchantika is distinctly unpleasant, as it involves a high quotient of pain as well as aversive sensations and psychological distress. By failing to exercise the skillful faculties, the icchantika suffer the dire consequences of poor karma and reap bitter fruit at the end of life.*”

Birth into the Pure Lands is regarded by Buddhist practitioners as favorable. Beings that are reborn into this *dhātu* have benign deaths and opportunities to work toward enlightenment. The three famous texts of the Pure Land tradition present an example of humans becoming reborn by “sprouting forth” from a golden lotus blossom pedestal that floats above a crystalline lake of seven jewels within the Pure Land (*buddhakṣetra*) of Amideva.

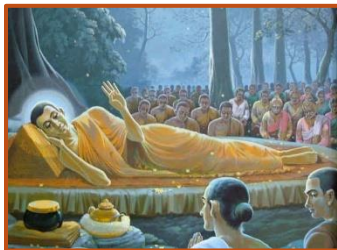
Humans and devas in the Pure Lands possess a minimum of three faculties and a maximum of fifteen faculties and do not bear the faculties of suffering, anxiety or reproductive capacity. Human and devas born in this *dhātu* carry the feeling faculties of pleasure, joy, and aversion, the sensory faculties of sight, hearing, and touch and the faculties of mind and vitality. They are also born with the five spiritual faculties of faith, concentration, perseverance, mindful recollection of practices, and wisdom, and the three faculties of wisdom: knowing the past, knowing the future, and knowing the past, present, and future simultaneously. Because they do not procreate, humans and devas are reborn in the Pure Land through “spontaneous transformation.” Sentient beings who die in Pure Land are either reborn into the *kāmadhātu* or the *rūpadhātu* or break the cycle of death and rebirth and achieve nirvana.

In *The Basis for Yoga Practitioners* and in the *Compendium of the Mahayana*, Asanga states that the final seat of consciousness for all humans, regardless of their karma, is in the fleshly heart of the sentient being. Once consciousness departs from the heart of the sentient being, all that remains is a corpse. The termination of the human heartbeat thus marks the ending of one life and the beginning of the next in the cycle of birth and death.

The storehouse consciousness is responsible for maintaining specific biological states in the body, including dreamless sleep; annihilative concentration, a form of meditative absorption wherein all sensory activities come to a halt; and the vegetative state of the body that occurs during the final moments before dying. The storehouse consciousness is the last form of consciousness in the body prior to death. While subliminal, the storehouse consciousness is omnipresent in the sensory or cognitive activities of the sentient being and is responsible for the vestigial consciousness of the sentient being in the final moments before death. During the process of dying, the storehouse consciousness sustains the vital life functions, such as the beating of the heart up to and during the last moments of life. The final resting place of consciousness in the dying sentient being is in the heart, and the final form of consciousness that persists in the sentient being is the storehouse consciousness, which contains memory and karma. That subliminal consciousness is the part of the sentient being that transcends the body in dying and is reborn in another body.

In *The Basis for Yoga Practitioners*, Asanga describes the subliminal state of consciousness provided by the storehouse consciousness, as follows: “When the physical sense faculties are not impaired, the storehouse consciousness, exists below the conscious mind. The storehouse consciousness contains the seeds of the forthcoming moments of mind.” Asanga describes the storehouse consciousness as the omnipresent and primal source of consciousness for all sentient beings. When a sentient being is gradually dying, the gradual decay of the body causes the sensory consciousnesses to recede. The storehouse consciousness, existing below the conscious mind, maintains the rudimentary physical functions and the vital organs of the body as well as the memories and traces of consciousness of the dying sentient being.

The storehouse consciousness is described as subliminal because it does not manifest in response to a percept in the way that visual consciousness or auditory consciousness responds to an object outside the body and registers the response to the sentient being. Instead, the storehouse consciousness activates the autonomic physical and cognitive functions of the body without stimulation from the external environment. In addition to maintaining the autonomic cardio-pulmonary functions, the storehouse consciousness is present in the form of a hazy consciousness during vegetative states at the end of life. The departure of the storehouse consciousness, rather than the loss of the consciousness of physical sensation, is the marker of biological death for the sentient being. The final “moment of becoming deceased” comes about with the final and complete departure of the storehouse consciousness from the body.



### ***The Process of Dying***

When the dying process begins, the airs, or vital energies, first become disarrayed and begin to disperse, and we pass through two stages of dissolution. In the first stage, the outer dissolution, the forces of the four physical elements of the body dissolve, and then the sense faculties cease to function. In the second stage, the inner dissolution, mental concepts and emotions cease.

Each of these stages is accompanied by certain inner experiences. What is the nature of the inner experiences that occur in the passage of dying? It is important to understand that when we withdraw our outreaching perception inward and focus our total attention one-pointedly on the changes occurring in the body during the process of dying, our whole world becomes that particular happening. For us the whole universe becomes the changes taking place in our body at that moment. That is why changes occurring in even one drop of blood will feel earth-shattering. A single hair on our head might appear like a huge tree. Our habits of fear and other tendencies and emotions will arise in the form of various images of beings, worlds, sounds, and feelings.

First, the earth element of the body dissolves into the water element. At this time we feel that we are losing energy or connection with our body’s earth element, which has the qualities of solidity, strength, anchoring, and grounding. Our complexion pales as the energy drains from the body. We might feel that we are falling or sinking, and that the ground under us has given way. We cannot get up or stand, we lose our balance, and we feel as if we are under the pressure of a heavy weight. That is why dying people often ask, “Please pull me up. I feel as if I’m sinking.” We may feel cloudy and see mirage-like appearances.

Second, the body’s water element dissolves into the fire element. At this point we might feel that we are losing water energy or connection with the water element, which is wet, fluid, and sustaining. We might

feel very thirsty. Saliva drips. Tears fall and then dry up. That is why dying people often ask, “Please give me water. I am thirsty.” We may also feel suffocated and irritated, and witness visions of smoke-like appearances.

Third, the body’s fire element dissolves into the air element. At this point we might feel that we are losing the fire energy or connection with the fire element, which is warm, maturing or ripening, and burning. If the dying person has been a devoted meditator and led a meritorious life of compassion and service to others, the dispersion of heat from the body starts at the lower end and moves up toward the heart. If the dying person has led a negative, destructive, and selfish life, the dispersion starts from the upper body and moves downward toward the heart. In both cases, however, the heat finally disperses from the heart. The person can no longer see objects; everything looks full of red sparks against a dark background.

Fourth, the body’s air element dissolves into consciousness. At this time, we feel the loss of the air energy or connection with the air element, which is light and mobile. We struggle to breathe. Inhaling becomes shorter and exhaling becomes longer. Then the “outer breathing” ceases, and the eyes roll up inside the head. At this time, people who have led negative lives may see illusions in the form of various fearful visions, while virtuous people may see joyous visions. One may also see lamplight-like appearances.

Fifth, consciousness (*vijnana*) dissolves into space (*akasha*). At this time, the cessation of “inner breathing” occurs. Different sources give somewhat different timings for the cessation of the outer and inner breathings. They occur differently for different people because of their individual natures. Basically, when the breathing of the lungs stops after three long breaths, that is the cessation of outer breathing. Total separation of the mind from the body (or unconsciousness, according to some texts) is the cessation of inner breathing. If death is due to karmic debts, it will be very difficult to reverse it. If death is due to some accidental circumstance, not a karmic debt, then one might still be revived by medical or spiritual means. But in normal cases, one cannot be brought back to life once one has gone beyond this fifth stage.

### ***Three Inner Dissolutions***

Now that the inner breathing has stopped and the mind has lost its connection with the physical elements, the channels, the airs, and the essences of the gross body will also be dispersed. Breathing merges into space. As the result, during that time, three stages of subtle, more subtle, and most subtle inner dissolutions or withdrawals will take place:

1. Consciousness dissolves into “appearances.” At this time, the white essence received from the father descends from the top of the head through the central channel. One sees everything as “whitish.” It is not luminous or bright white like daylight, but a whiteness like moonlight in a cloudless sky. All thoughts of anger and hatred will cease.
2. “Appearances” dissolve into “increase.” At this time, from the bottom of the central channel at the navel, the red essence received from the mother ascends through the central channel. Everything looks “reddish,” like the light of the setting sun in a cloudless sky. All thoughts of attachment and greed will cease. However, some people experience the reddish vision first and then the whitish vision. This is the best time to perform *powa*<sup>8</sup>, the practice of consciousness transference.

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<sup>8</sup> Tib. *powa* or *phowa* (Skt: *samkrānti*) is the practice of “transference of consciousness at the time of death”,



3. "Increase" dissolves into "attainment." At this time, intrinsic awareness, moved by the force of air, becomes enveloped between the two parental essences, and everything becomes "blackness," like the cloudless sky of a dark autumn night. Thoughts of confusion will cease. Now air, essence, and mind gather at the heart level. This is called the dissolving of space into luminosity. The arising of the "luminosity of the basis" will take place next, heralding the entry into the next passage, the state of ultimate nature.

Following the dissolving of space into luminosity, ordinary people fall into unconsciousness, but there are different interpretations about what happens when the luminosity of the basis arises. According to Karma Lingpa, between the cessation of outer and inner breathing, advanced meditators will see the luminosity of the ultimate nature when the air of the body is admitted into the central channel. Ordinary people become unconscious instead.



Jigme Lingpa writes that after air dissolves into consciousness, one will become unconscious and inner breathing will stop. Then the luminous nature will arise. Jigme Lingpa also writes: "*When the blackness arises, you will fall unconscious in the universal ground. Then the eight life forces arise again, and unconsciousness will fade away. At that time, the original brightness of the primordial state will arise. It is clear and unceasing, like the autumn sky. You remain in emptiness and clarity, free from obscurations and coverings.*"

As the five consciousnesses that are associated with sensory organs stop operating, the storehouse consciousness continues to sustain the vital functions of life: the beating of the heart, breathing, and the vestiges of consciousness in the body. As the sentient being gradually dies, the work of sustaining the rudimentary vital functions of life falls squarely to the storehouse consciousness.

In the Mental Basis section of *The Basis for Yoga Practitioners*, Asanga describes how the accumulation of karma determines the physiological experience of the sentient being in the process of dying. The evacuation of consciousness registers physiologically as the loss of bodily warmth. As consciousness withdraws from the extremities of the body and coalesces in the region of the heart, bodily warmth gradually vanishes, leaving portions of the body cold.

The storehouse consciousness is the form of consciousness that transmigrates from one life to the next. Karma is implicated in the consciousness of the sentient being and responsible for determining the quality of dying and the afterlife. Thus, by improving karma through the practice of Dharma cultivation, the conscious experience of dying can be improved.

During the time between death and rebirth, the storehouse consciousness exists as a disembodied form of consciousness. In this state, the storehouse consciousness carries the wholesome and unwholesome karma of the deceased being in the form of seeds. During this period, the storehouse consciousness is buffeted in space until it infuses a new form with the seeds of the karma of the recently deceased sentient being. The karma of the deceased sentient being is thus retained and then transmitted to a new life through the storehouse consciousness.

At the moment of death, form becomes separated from the other four aggregates. As it becomes disaggregated from the enlivening force of the other aggregates, it ceases to live. The four remaining aggregates persevere for forty-nine days in the form of the disembodied storehouse consciousness until they become associated with another living form aggregate. This is the process of rebirth.

## The Practice

### **What are the Bardos?**

The central orienting view in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of the study of death and dying is that of the bardos. The Tibetan word “*bardo*” is translated as “gap, interval, intermediate state, transitional process, or in between” and usually refers to the gap between lives. According to the teachings, there are three death bardos: the painful bardo of dying, the luminous bardo of *dharmata*, and the karmic bardo of becoming.



*Suppose the unwholesome karma created by beings were such that they ought to fall into inferior destinies. If their relatives cultivate wholesome causes on their behalf when they are close to death, then their manifold offenses can be dissolved. If relatives can further do many wholesome deeds during the first forty-nine days after the death of such beings, then the deceased can leave the unwholesome destinies forever, be born as humans and gods, and receive supremely wonderful bliss. Their surviving relatives will also receive limitless benefits. [...]*

*The arrival of the Great Ghost of Impermanence is so unexpected that the deceased ones' consciousnesses first roam in darkness and obscurity, unaware of offenses and blessings. For forty-nine days the deceased are as if deluded or deaf, or as if in courts where their karmic consequences are being decided. Once judgment is fixed, they are reborn according to their karma. In the time before rebirths are determined, the deceased suffer from thousands upon thousands of anxieties. How much more is that the case for those who are to fall into inferior destinies.*

*Throughout forty-nine days, those whose lives have ended and who have not yet been reborn will be hoping every moment that their immediate relatives will earn blessings powerful enough to rescue them. At the end of that time, the deceased will undergo rebirth according to their karma. If someone is an offender, he may pass through hundreds of thousands of years without even a day's liberation. If someone's offenses deserve Fivefold Relentless Consequence, they will fall into the great hells and undergo incessant suffering throughout hundreds of millions of eons.*

*Moreover, when beings who have committed karmic offenses die, their relatives may prepare pure offerings to aid them on their karmic paths. In the process of preparing the pure meal and before it has been eaten, rice-washing water and vegetable leaves should not be thrown on the ground. Before the food is offered to the Buddhas and the Sangha, no one should eat it. If there is laxness or transgression in this matter, then the deceased will receive no strength from it, but if purity is rigorously maintained in making the offering to the Buddhas and the Sangha, the deceased will receive one seventh of the merit. Therefore, by performing pure offerings on behalf of deceased fathers, mothers, and other relatives while making earnest supplication on their behalf, beings of Jambudvīpa benefit both the living and the dead. —Sutra of Earth Store Bodhisattva*

### **Traversing the Bardos**

Cultural differences and personal idiosyncrasies generate a variety of experiences. Why would a Christian or Muslim, with very different beliefs, experience death the same way as a Buddhist?

While the Tibetans have breathtaking resources that easily translate from their tradition into our own, modern Tibetan masters admit to instances of cultural insularity and peculiarity. The issue of universal truth versus cultural vicissitude is present anytime teachings migrate from an ancient and foreign culture into a modern one. This is something each of us must wrestle with as we consider the *bardo*.

### ***A Journey Through the Mind***

In the Buddhist view, the essence of mind is the same for all sentient beings. But the surface structures that cover that essence are different. Hence the journey through the surface structures (*bardo* of dying), into the essence of mind (*bardo* of *dharmata*), and then out of it (*bardo* of becoming), is not the same. But the general pattern of this three-stage process is universal.

Any meditation that allows you to become familiar with your mind will prepare you for death. In the *bardos* we are “forced” to relate to our mind simply because there is nothing else. The outer world is gone, the body is gone, so the mind becomes the only referent. Through insight meditation we discover that whatever arises in the *bardos* is just the display of our mind. That recognition sets us free.

By exploring the depths of our mind in meditation, we are preparing for what happens after death. In many ways, the spiritual path is just death in slow motion. We can summarize it thus: if you die before you die, then when you die you will not die. If you spiritually die, or transcend your false sense of self before you are “forced” to do so at death, then when you physically die at the end of this life you will not die, because you are already “dead.” You have already died to your limited sense of self.

### ***The Painful Bardo of Dying***

The painful *bardo* of dying begins as one gets a terminal disease and ends with death. This *bardo* begins with the outer dissolution, which is the five stages of the death of the body. This is followed by the inner dissolution, which is the three stages of the death of consciousness. Each stage is accompanied with signs that can help the dying person and those around them. The signs help us recognize where we are, and where we are going. When someone stops eating, for example, that can be a sign that the fire element is dissolving, and death is imminent. The fire element is involved in digestion, the “burning up” of food. If a seriously ill loved one stops eating, it is time to go see them if we want to be there before they die.

Not everyone will experience all eight stages clearly, or in the following order. Thinking that death will unfold in such a systematic and predictable fashion can hinder our experience instead of enhancing it. These stages are orienting generalizations, not immutable and definitive steps. Also, with a sudden death, this first *bardo* of dying comes and goes in a flash.

This *bardo* is painful because it hurts to let go. We are forced to let go of everything we have, and everything we think we are. One of the reasons it is difficult to leave this world is because we are so familiar with it. It is all we know. Even though it is *samsara*, we feel snug and secure in its ways, and these ways are hard to abandon. Conversely, one of the reasons it is difficult to enter the next world is because it is so unfamiliar. We do not know it at all. Even though it presents great opportunities for enlightenment, we are afraid to step into the unknown. Too much familiarity with this world, and not enough with the next, is what makes this transition difficult.

Releasing our grip is what transforms the painful *bardo* of dying into simply the *bardo* of dying. The Sixteenth Karmapa said that “nothing happens” at death. (The Karmapa is the principal Lama of the Karma Kagyu, one of the major schools of Tibetan Buddhism.) For someone who has completely let go during life, nothing happens at death because there is nothing left to release. *Bardos* only exist in *samsara*, which is defined by grasping and attachment. It is said in the teachings that for someone without grasping, there is no *bardo*.

### ***The Luminous Bardo of Dharmata***

The luminous *bardo* of *dharmata* follows the painful *bardo* of dying. In this *bardo*, the nature of mind is laid bare. What is revealed is the same for everyone, but it is not experienced in the same way. The nature of the mind, or formless awareness, is raw and naked mind itself, before any conceptual or cultural clothing is placed upon it. Nothing is obscuring the nature of the mind in this *bardo*.

According to these teachings, if we are highly accomplished meditators, in the *bardo* of *dharmata* we will see and realize the intrinsic awareness, the true enlightened nature of our own mind, as it is. If we can realize and maintain it, we will attain Buddhahood.

For most people, this emptiness, even though it is revealed, is not experienced. Unless you have some familiarity with emptiness before you die, it is “experienced” as no experience —that is, you black out. If you are unfamiliar with the subtle states of mind revealed in this *bardo*, it will flash by in an instant, or be completely missed. Although all of us will see this intrinsic awareness during death, the true nature of our mind, the experience of it is so brief that most of us will not even notice it, let alone maintain it.

After missing that profound opportunity for awakening in the *bardo* of *dharmata*, we will find ourselves in the last of the three *bardo* states, the *bardo* of becoming. The power of thought and habit becomes the overwhelming issue in this *bardo*. Thought becomes reality —just like in a dream. But unlike a dream, we cannot wake up and take refuge in a solid body.

Since this *bardo* is ruled by the winds of karma, the experiences are particularly fickle. These “winds” are not literal winds, of course, but a metaphor for how we are blown about by the power of karma. The mind of the being in the *bardo* of becoming has a very hard time coming to rest at all. Therefore, the most important preparation for this state is to develop stability of mind through the practice of tranquility (*shamatha*). To the degree that you can control your mind now, you will be able to control it in the *bardo*, and to the same degree you will be better able to withstand the onslaught of your own thoughts.

The winds of karma pick up strength the further we go, recognition becomes increasingly difficult because of a developing panic, and unless you know what is going on and can direct these winds into a fortunate realm of existence, you will be tossed uncontrollably into your next life.

The *bardo* of becoming is a cosmic Pandora’s box. The urge to escape from the contents of this box, the *bardo* itself, is nothing more than the urge to run away from the contents of our own mind (our karma). This is what forces us to take refuge in a new solid body. We want to get away from ourselves. In this regard it is like a dream. We eventually do take refuge in a new form and wake up into our next life.

*The basic preparation for this bardo consists of cultivating now, while you are still alive, the ability to rest your mind at will and, within that state of tranquil mind, the ability to make choices mindfully. This needs to be cultivated during one’s life and if it is cultivated, it will be of great benefit during the bardo of becoming.*

—Thrangun Rinpoche

### ***How To Prepare for the Bardos***

After you wake up in the *bardo*, steady your mind. This is difficult because we have a shifty mental body that darts around at the speed of thought. If we think of Paris, or New York, or our home, we are instantly there. With a measure of stability, we can apply our meditations and attain liberation. This is why meditation is such a powerful preparation for death. The momentum of practicing meditation will

automatically kick in during the *bardos* and take care of us. By practicing now, we are using the power of karma, or habit, in a constructive way.

The teachings on the *bardo* (*antarābhava*, the interval between death and rebirth) establish that all sentient beings, without exception, have the experience of Clear Light after the dissolution of the body and the ordinary mind. However, most beings are too agitated and fearful to recognize it, and thus identify with —and are carried by— the winds of karma to another samsaric birth.

The constant recollection of our own Buddha Nature (*buddhānusmṛti*) gives us the confidence and mental stability to recognize the Clear Light and free ourselves from all karmic identification.

*Now when the bardo of this life is dawning upon me, I will abandon laziness for which life has no time, enter, undistracted, the path of listening and hearing, reflection and contemplation, and meditation, making perceptions and mind the path, and realize the “three kayas:” the enlightened mind. Now that I have once attained a human body, there is no time on the path for the mind to wander. [...]*

*Remember the clear light, the pure clear white light from which everything in the universe comes, to which everything in the universe returns —the original nature of your own mind, the natural state of the unmanifest universe. Let go into the clear light, trust it, unite with it. It is your own true nature, it is home. —Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava*

Buddha Nature is original, adaptable, and unpredictable. It is original in that it produces the aspiration for its own manifestation, adaptable in that it expresses itself through overcoming obstacles, and unpredictable as it transforms itself and evolves from ordinary being, to Bodhisattva, and finally to Buddha. It generates effort, sustains virtue, and redresses conditions that obstruct enlightenment.



### **Protection at Death**

*Oh, You Buddhas and Bodhisattvas abiding in the ten directions, endowed with great compassion, endowed with foreknowledge, endowed with the divine eye, endowed with love, affording protection to sentient beings, condescend through the power of Your great compassion to come here. Condescend to accept these offerings actually laid out and mentally created.*

*Oh You Compassionate Ones, you possess the wisdom of understanding, the love of compassion, the power of performing divine deeds and of protection, in incomprehensible measure. You Compassionate Ones, we and all sentient beings must pass from this world to the world beyond.*

*We must leave this world. We must take the great leap. No friends do we have; our misery is great. We are without defenders, without protectors, without strength and support. The light of this world will set.*

*We shall go to another place; we shall enter thick darkness. We shall fall down a steep precipice. We shall enter a jungle solitude. We shall be pursued by karmic forces. We shall go into the vast silence. We shall be borne away by the great ocean. We shall be wafted on the winds of karma.*

*We shall go in the direction of instability. We shall be caught by the great affliction. We shall be awed and terrified by the messengers of death. Existing karma will lead us to repeated existence. No strength do we have left. We shall come upon a time when we must go alone.*

*Oh You Compassionate Ones, defend us who are defenseless. Protect us who are unprotected. Be our strength and our support. Protect us from the great gloom of the bardo. Turn us away from the red*

*storm wind of karma. Turn us from the great awe and terror of death. Save us from the long narrow passage of the bardo.*

*Oh You Compassionate Ones, let not the force of Your compassion be weak, but aid us. Let us not go into misery. Forget not Your ancient vows, and let not the force of Your compassion be weak.*

*Oh You Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, let not the might of the method of Your compassion be feeble towards us. Catch hold of us with the hook of Your grace. Let us not fall under the power of karma.*

*Oh You Three Jewels, protect us from the miseries of the bardo! —Bardo Thodol*

### **Recommendations**

- 1) Perceive everything in the *bardo* as sacred and realize it is all the play of the mind. Do not grasp or struggle. Open to whatever arises, and become one with it. Relax into the innate purity and goodness of whatever you see.
- 2) Calm and stabilize your mind. Remember any form of spiritual support, be it a Lama, a divine presence, or a positive experience. Keep your mind on this support without distraction. Rely on the confidence you have developed with your meditations. It is said that confidence becomes your body in the *bardo*, a body you have strengthened with the exercise of meditation. Remember that everything is exaggerated in the *bardo*. This means that hesitation, the opposite of confidence, can flap you around like a flag in the wind.
- 3) Do not be angry or afraid. See everything as illusory, like a dream. Avoid negative states of mind. Pray to whichever divine presence you have a connection with and ask for blessings and guidance. Keep your mind open, positive, stable, and peaceful. Do not be swayed by anything — hold your seat. Relate to everything with equanimity.

The *bardos* teach us that we really do have something to look forward to when we die. There are more opportunities for spiritual awakening after death than during life —if we know what to do and when to do it. We can transform the greatest obstacle to life (the end of it) into the greatest, once-in-a-lifetime, opportunity. Instead of fearing death, we can celebrate it.

*By the time we are about to enter the bardo, the intermediate state between death and birth, it will be far too late to begin our Dharma practice. But if we have already prepared ourselves, if we feel confident in our practice and know how to go to a Buddha-field, there will be no suffering in death. —Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche*

*If you study powa (Skt. saṃkrānti), then at the time when death is approaching you will know no despair. If beforehand you have become accustomed to the path of powa, then at the time of death you will be full of cheerful confidence. —Marpa*

### **Step By Step**

*Powa* means transference of consciousness. *Powa* is the yoga of taking whatever steps are necessary to guarantee that we do not continue in samsara, that we transfer our awareness to the Pure Land — which is not a place, but a mental state of certainty in our Buddha Nature.

Right now, we must study and practice the Dharma, and in particular cultivate the Four Immeasurables: compassion, loving-kindness, rejoicing in the virtue and happiness of others, and equanimity —the non-discerning, universal, radical acceptance of the equality of all sentient beings. We must also cultivate the Six Perfections: giving, ethical conduct, patience, effort, concentration, and wisdom.

*I shall engage in the exceptional methods of accumulating merit: abandoning harm; making extensive aspiration prayers; making offerings of light to the Buddhas, food to the hungry, and clothing to the poor; giving to those who have helped me, the suffering, those who do good, and others; cultivating humility and honoring my teachers and spiritual companions; making offerings to the Lama and my parents; befriending all beings and protecting them from exploitation; and promoting, attending, assisting, and sponsoring Dharma teachings and rituals. — Jetsun Taranatha*

*Reproducing Dharma texts, dedicating, and distributing them; studying, reading, remembering, and explaining them; reciting them aloud, contemplating, and pondering them: these ten activities bring merit beyond measure. — Maitreya*

When signs of death are distant —when we have no imminent concern about death, even though it is an illusion to think “I am not about to die anytime soon”— *powa* needs to begin. Bring in recitations of the Definitive Aspiration, the Pure Land Practice in Buddha Power, and the Prayer for Dewachen. This is training in the Easy-Difficult method of the yoga of transferring consciousness.



### **When Signs of Death are Proximate**

1. *Cheating Death*: One of these practices is purification, which is basically a formal utilization of the four Rs, the four powers of purification: Regret, Reliance, Resolve, Reparation.

Regret means that we realize that an activity is unwholesome and produces negative consequences. (Shame and guilt perpetuate or deepen negative karma, and are not helpful.) Regret is to recognize those things that are unbeneficial. Reliance means we go to the Dharma to understand the positive way to behave, the best way to approach the situation, the most wholesome way to abandon wrongdoing —and if we do not know how, reliance implies we go to a member of the Sangha who can give us guidance.

Resolve means that we make the determination: “I will not continue to engage in this.” We understand that we are creatures of habit and so this abandonment does not have to be immediate; it can be a process. Some things we can leave right away, and some things take more time. Reparation means that we engage in extraordinary beneficial activity (some beneficial act that we do not already perform) and dedicate the merit to universal happiness. It does not mean that we go to the aggrieved party and try to make amends. Sometimes approaching the aggrieved party deepens the hurt. Just engage in extraordinary beneficial activities and dedicate the merit. That is Reparation.

Another practice of “Cheating Death,” the most effective one, is animal liberation. Saving animals is a doubly beneficial way of cheating death. You can do this for yourself or on behalf of someone else. But be careful, because, in our modern times, this has been corrupted. Some entrepreneurs have made an industry of raising captive animals to be “freed” by Buddhists. It is more beneficial for animals if we support ongoing sanctuary activities, not things that add to the marketing of animals or their suffering.

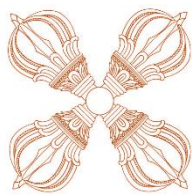
The third way to cheat death is to perform long-life practices (*puja*) for Dharma teachers. This is effective because the consequences of their actions are generally beneficial for large numbers of people. Therefore, if you wish them a longer life, you are increasing the benefit for countless sentient beings. You can also sponsor long-life practices for Dharma teachers.



We can do these practices a total of three times (not three times each). We do this because the activities are beneficial in themselves and give us the satisfaction that we have done as much as can be reasonably done. If the immediacy of death does not recede, then we accept that it is going to happen (whether for you or for someone else). Insisting, grasping, is a part of illusion. Remember, the mortality rate for sentient beings in samsara is always 100%.

*If the sick person's consciousnesses is already scattered and their breathing has stopped, then for one, two, three, four, and on through seven days, others should continue to inform them clearly of the offerings and to read the teachings out loud. When the sick person's life ends, they will gain liberation from all their heavy and disastrous offenses committed in previous lives, even offenses warranting Fivefold Relentless Consequence. They will be born in places where they will always know past lives, so how much greater will the karmic rewards be if good men or women can write out this sutra themselves or commission others to do so, or if they can carve or paint images themselves or commission others to do so. The benefits they receive will be great indeed! —Buddha Shakyamuni, Ksitigarbha Sutra*

2. *The Difficult-Easy Practice* is one we do not perform in our Lineage. It is so-called because it is difficult to practice, but easy for us to believe that it is effective, precisely because it is difficult. The characteristics of the human realm are craving and striving. Anything that seems like hard striving sounds powerful to us. We feel anything is more effective and worthwhile if we have to sweat blood. If not, we call it “too good to be true.”



Described briefly, this is a yogic process where you purify the body with very laborious breathing exercises. You must lead the energy into the central channel and then close all apertures, a process involving visualizing multiple double dorjes<sup>9</sup> closing all the nine orifices of the body, and keeping them closed, so you need the capacity to hold a visualization for a very long time. Then you bring that energy that you have directed towards the central channel at the very base, and with very forceful mudras, you push that energy up with the mantra **HIC**, little by little, until it reaches the crown of the head, but not beyond it. At the end of the practice, you bring the energy back. You do that over and over until you get signs of accomplishment —usually drops of blood at the crown of the head, and sometimes even a little divot appears there.

However, today the guidance for this process is scarce. It requires personal attention. It is not to be done on your own, or by reading a book. There are many possibilities for error. It can also deplete the life force. We think, “If it is that terribly difficult, it must work. If it has terrible and damaging side effects, it must be powerful; I want that.” We should be aware that most people in this age of the five corruptions, given the opportunity, will misuse anything. So, it is of questionable wisdom to teach something that can easily be misused.

3. *The Easy-Difficult Method* is easy to practice, but difficult to accept. It is guaranteed to work from the testimony of our teachers. Valid testimony is one of the three ways to know something, the other two being direct perception and inference. Valid testimony is when somebody you trust, from whom you have previous experience of truthfulness, tells you something not directly perceivable by you. When it is not available to you to corroborate what they say, it is more reasonable to accept their report than not to do so. Through valid testimony, we know this method always works.

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<sup>9</sup> Double dorjes are symbols of compassion, crossed scepters.



The training has four aspects:

*a. Read the Pure Land Sutras:* the Amideva Sutra, the longer Sukhavativyuha Sutra, and the Contemplation Sutra. These three have something in common that is very rare and gives us a hint of their importance. During his 45 years of preaching, the Buddha Shakyamuni usually expounded on a topic only after it was asked of Him. With one exception: for the topic of the Pure Land, he offered the teaching without being asked. He understood that people did not know enough at that time to ask and that the subject was so important that he could not wait for them to ask. The annotated version of the Amideva Sutra is easier for us to comprehend because the text is full of images that we do not understand. Through the notations, we know what He meant when He shared them with us. Read them! Study them! Recite them!

*b. Awaken the Three Hearts:* the Heart of Sincerity, the Heart of Reliance, and the Heart of Dedication. The Heart of Sincerity is to acknowledge where we find ourselves right now, spiritually speaking. Let us not pretend that we are better than we are, nor deprecate ourselves that we are the worst, which is an exaggeration. Instead, we must know exactly where we are and simultaneously know that whatever our spiritual “status,” we have Buddha Nature. *That* is sincerity. To know that this is our reality and this is how much Buddha Nature we are manifesting at this time. We have to start from where we are.

The Heart of Reliance means to recognize that, because of our present condition and situation, we have to rely on our Buddha Nature and on the Buddha Nature of others, particularly those who are more advanced than we are, and who are dedicating their merit to *us*. We make that determination. It is Deep Mind in some other traditions, the full acceptance of the grace received from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. For though we speak of effort, it is not *willful* self-effort. Effort is necessary, but the effort we are mainly talking about is Other Power. And Other Power means the power of our Buddha Nature, not the power of our ego. We detach from the concept of self, from opinions and views. Right now, we are mostly enamored with “I will do it.” But who is the I? It is the ego. “I will accomplish, I will attain, I will storm the heavens, I will take Enlightenment by force.” That is not going to happen. When we pray, we “ordinary people” dedicate our merit, whatever little merit we have, to universal benefit. The Bodhisattvas, the Great Bodhisattvas, the Buddhas have been dedicating their merit, which is much more substantial, to us.

The transfer of merit from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to us is a reality. That is the Heart of Reliance. Transfer of merit goes on constantly. Some people, especially in the West, say that transfer of merit is not possible. If we could not transfer merit, there would be no civilization. Everything we have we received from the transfer of merit. Anyone who has ever had a child: as soon as she or he was born, did you tell that child, “Fend for yourself now! Go get your own crib, feed yourself, educate yourself, raise yourself.” No. Our merit, our work, our effort produces certain resources, and we willfully share them with others. That is transfer of merit. Whenever we give something to somebody, we are transferring merit. If you are a teacher, you’ve transferred your merit — your work and study — to many students. Transfer of merit is the basis of social existence. There is nothing mysterious or supernatural about it. What is true in the grossest physical sense is also true spiritually.

The Heart of Dedication has two meanings. One is the heart of aspiration: what are we to do with this merit, our own (that we accumulate), and the one that we receive by the kindness of others? Are we to spend it getting a good parking spot? We can direct the merit. If someone gives us a million dollars, we can go gambling with it, or buy a yacht, or do street drugs with it... Merit is like that. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas point the way, but they do not force you. Teachers do not force you — not that they could,

but even if they could, they would not anyway, because the essence of Enlightenment is liberation, freedom. So, what are we going to do with this merit?

We dedicate the merit to be born in Dewachen. Dewachen is not a place. It is the sphere of activity of the Buddha. "Pure Land" is a poor translation of *Buddhakshetra*. "Kshetra" means field, as in field of action. The field of action of the Buddha is the Pure Land. "I will be born there." This is the first meaning. "I will use this merit to be born there, and I will generate merit for others to be born there as well." This is the second meaning.

c. Recite the Prayer for Dewachen for self and others.



**EH MA HO** In front sits the magnificent Amideva,  
the Lord of Boundless Radiance.  
On His right stands the Lord of Compassion,  
and on His left, the Lord of Powerful Means,  
surrounded by innumerable Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.  
Limitless peace and happiness is Dewachen.  
As (name of deceased) passes from this world,  
may they be born there without taking cyclic birth.  
May they have the good fortune  
of meeting Amideva face to face.  
By the power and blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas  
of the three times and the ten directions,  
may they attain this aspiration without hindrance.

I prostrate to the Buddha Amideva. I pray to Guru Rinpoche.  
Beloved Root Teacher, hold them in your kind regard.  
Gracious Teachers of the Pure Lineage, guide them on the path.  
May they know that they dream while dreaming.  
May they know that they die while dying.  
Bless them to master the profound path of *Powa*.  
By the swift path of *Powa*, may they journey to the Pure Land.  
Bless them to be reborn in Dewachen.  
According to Your wisdom, may they quickly pass from this life,  
avoid the *bardo*, and immediately attain to Dewachen,  
where they can rest in natural perfection, with no more birth, disease, decay, or death;  
receive the best and purest Teachings from the best and purest Teachers;  
attain complete enlightenment for the sake of all beings,  
and return to dredge *samsara* to its depths.  
By the blessings of the Lords of Compassion and Powerful Means,  
I pray that (name of deceased) invoke the Holy Name.  
May they take refuge in the Lord of Boundless Radiance  
and spontaneously arise in Dewachen.

**OM AMIDEVA HRIH** (x10)

d. Recite the Amideva Mantra at least 10 times. Repeatedly recite the mantra of Amideva as an expression of gratitude, with certainty of birth in Dewachen. This mantra **OM AMIDEVA HRIH** is not an invocation of an external being. The Buddha Amideva is not some red-skinned person in the clouds somewhere. The Buddha Amideva is Primordial Buddha, the Buddha Essence of all Buddhas. Amideva

literally means “Boundless Radiance.” He also has two other names: Amitabha which means “Boundless Light,” and Amitayus which means “Boundless Life.” Light is wisdom; Life is compassion. Enlightenment is the union of wisdom and compassion.

If there is reason to believe that the dying person has extremely negative karma, recite **om ha ha ha vismaye so’ha**, the mantra of Sai Nyingpo (Skt. *Kṣitigarbha*) for them at least 108 times.

### ***At The Time Of Our Death***

1. We need a Last Will and Testament; if we do not have one yet, we must do so for our own peace of mind. Even if we have nothing, dispose of that “nothing,” because then we will not have to worry about it. People on their death beds, even those who are poor, may worry about who will get what. Do not entertain that thought; write it out! Distribute all possessions. It is recommended to distribute them to the Three Jewels, friends, and relatives. The Three Jewels are the best recipients: do some charitable work to awaken the Buddha Nature of others, support the distribution and propagation of the Dharma, and perform acts of generosity. Then give to friends and relatives. Why friends before relatives? Friends are those who accompany us on the path. Some of our relatives may be friends, but not all of them. If possible, do not exclude relatives that are not friends.

2. Completely and irrevocably entrust all loved ones to the Three Jewels. People near death worry, “What will happen to this person or that person when I go?” This hanging on generates suffering for the dying person. None of us is irreplaceable. We think we are. We are not. What are we going to do, reach beyond the grave? So entrust them to the Three Jewels. Aspire for their protection by that which truly rescues. After all, that is the only thing we can do. In the same way that Buddha Nature used your body to help that person, Buddha Nature will use another vehicle to continue helping, if it is necessary. Whatever we have done for somebody else —and this is hard because we love to take credit— can we actually say that it was from ourselves that it came, or were we just embodying that assistance? We cannot go on worrying about our loved ones. And if we stayed around, could we do something? When we were more powerfully alive, did we really solve their problems most of the time?

3. If we are especially attached to something or someone, remove them from sight. This sounds harsh, but it is necessary. When we are on our deathbed, we do not want to be looking at sources of attachment or aversion. This is not the state in which we want to die: “One more hug!” “One more fight!” Many people do not control their emotions very well. Someone wailing, “Please do not die,” does not help, and is mainly upsetting. A bedlam of screams is not how we should die. If we are especially attached or especially averse, remove them from sight.

4. Request the company of the Lama and Dharma friends. That is the company we want with us at that time. Even family will behave better if there are Dharma practitioners present, so overwhelm them with the Dharma.

5. Place representations of the Three Jewels in clear sight, especially of Amideva, if available.

6. If at all possible, sit in meditation posture, facing west. If sitting is not possible, lie on your right side, head toward the north. That is the position the historical Buddha used for his departure from this world.

7. Confess any transgressions to the Lama and Dharma friends —not because we need to be forgiven, but because it will unburden the mind. Any competent Lama will use the opportunity to remind us of our wholesome deeds and our Buddha Nature.

8. Take vows and accept any empowerments offered by the Lama. This is a very easy thing to do. If you are on your death bed, take the 51 Bodhisattva Vows, take monastic ordination, take all the vows you can. You will not have to do much for it or with it, and there is enormous merit in doing so. Be aware that the Four Fundamental Bodhisattva vows continue beyond physical death, but not other vows.

9. Practice the Powa Training. (a) Make a definitive aspiration for the Pure Land. The prayer called the Definitive Aspiration expresses this perfectly. What is a definitive aspiration? Literally, that there is nothing to want or need beyond enlightenment. That this is what we have chosen, and we will not pursue any other desires.

(b) Hear or Recite the Pure Land Practice in Buddha Power. In this, one renounces all the causes of birth in the temporal nirvana, in the demigod realm, in the human realm, in the ghost realm, in the hell realm, in the animal realm, in the god realm, and in the borderland of the Pure Land. We say things like, "I renounce righteous indifference. I renounce jealousy and hostility. I renounce craving and striving. I renounce greed and miserliness. I renounce hatred and cruelty. I renounce fear and helplessness. I renounce indolence and pride. I renounce doubt and hesitation." These are the characteristics of particular births. It is closing all those gates. Then it proceeds, "OM AH HUM, Amideva is True Purity. Dewachen is True Purity. The Noble Assembly is True Purity." Once we renounce all those births, what is left? True Purity. True Being. True Bliss. True Permanence. That is the Definitive Aspiration.

Practicing it ahead of time is good enough. One of our great Japanese teachers, Ippen Shonin, used to say if we cannot invoke our Buddha Nature once with sincerity, reliance, and deep aspiration, do we think that doing it many times poorly will make any difference? And if we can do it perfectly one time, do we need to do it more often? It is not a question of how frequently we do it, it is a question of how.

That is why we call it the Definitive Aspiration: we need to stop deluding ourselves. We think, "It is not too bad here in samsara; all it needs is a little tweaking." That is gross illusion. We think: "If I can get this house, or this job, or this salary, or this partner, it will be perfect." And then it isn't. This is not a safe or sane place. It is the product of illusion, of ignorance. It is the product of attaching importance and fixating on a particular perspective. That is all it is. It has no inherent meaning. None! Attachment to it is nonsense. We are here because of ignorance, because of a mistake. Ever make a wrong turn in the car? What was its purpose, that wrong turn? It had no purpose; it was a mistake. We were lost. Was that on purpose? We are born here because we made a wrong turn, repeatedly.

Make the Definitive Aspiration to choose not to be born again in ignorance, ever. We made this wrong decision. We can unmake it. This is the part that is easy to do but difficult to accept. We think, "Oh, it has got to be more difficult than that." Not at all. We did not choose *this*, but we made that original deviation, and then continued to stay lost and get more and more lost. Stop finding this illusion interesting. Instead of being fascinated by this mistake, get out of it. We try to find meaning here. There is no meaning here. Meaning is elsewhere. That is the only real meaning; that it is *not here*. Here is illusion. So do this practice now. Do not wait until death, because you may not be able to do it then.

Our Buddha Nature will not change, no matter what we do with it. We cannot lose Buddha Nature. It is always there. *We must recover our nature*. Basically, we must renounce. Dolpopa called it the path of separation from wrong views and afflictive emotions. In our Pure Land Practice, we say, "I renounce" and go through all the possible dark paths, close them all, and say, "I do not want to go there, I've had it up to here, I renounce them." To renounce something is saying, "I know there is no joy *there*." We have

been looking for something and wanting to try different things; we made that mistake over and over. Renounce it. None of it is good.

### ***In Case of Sudden or Accidental Death***

1. Do not wait until encountering a fatal accident; practice now.
2. Practice focusing all attention on the crown whenever there is reason to fear harm.
3. Practice reciting **OM AMIDEVA HRIH**. When most people see danger coming, they utter a vulgar profanity —a “fecal mantra” is not what we wish to remember at the time of death. We train ourselves to say **OM AMIDEVA HRIH**. We train constantly.
4. In case of a deadly event, when there is no time for regular *powa*, we entrust ourselves to Amideva, place our full attention on the crown of the head, and recite **OM AMIDEVA HRIH** at least once. Whenever we see a dead or suffering being, we remember to say **OM AMIDEVA HRIH**. The more we do it for others, the more we will remember to do it for ourselves.

### **Assisting Others**

#### **A. Before Death**

1. Encourage the dying person to distribute all possessions to the Three Jewels, friends, and relatives, as described above.
2. Encourage the person to entrust all loved ones completely and irrevocably to the Three Jewels. We can use skillful means and say, “They are going to be okay; they will be fine; do not worry about them.”
3. If there is someone in the room that evidently is creating a feeling of deep aversion or attachment, lead them out of the room. Invite them for coffee or tea. Get them out of the way.
4. Encourage the person to request the company of the Lama and Dharma siblings. If they’re not Buddhist, encourage them to request a parson from their own tradition —perhaps not a fire-and-brimstone type of preacher.
5. Place images of the Three Jewels in clear sight if they are Buddhist, or of their holy ones, if not.
6. Encourage the person to sit in meditation posture, facing west. If Buddhist, encourage them to sit —it is easier for the energy to rise sitting than lying down. If they want to, you can assist them and support them, so they do not harm themselves by leaning or falling.
7. If sitting is not possible, encourage them to lie on the right side, head towards the North.
8. Encourage the person to confess any transgressions to the Lama or Dharma siblings. If the dying person is of another religious tradition, where confession leads to absolution or forgiveness, by all means, do this. If their spiritual tradition does not include that, do not bring it up, as it will only remind them of their transgressions. On the contrary, you want to remind them of the good they have done.
9. Encourage the person to take vows and accept any empowerments offered by the Lama.
10. Encourage the person to practice *powa*. If they do not know how to, you can practice *powa* with them, if they are amenable.
11. Encourage the person to ask the Lama or a Dharma sibling to recite the Prayer for Dewachen audibly and clearly.
12. If a Lama is not present, you may recite the Prayer for Dewachen or other suitable scripture. If they are not Buddhist, ask them what will bring them comfort (a psalm, the rosary, etc.).

#### **B. Powa at Time of Death for Others**

1. If receptive (when awake), or if unconscious, recite **OM AMIDEVA HRIH** in the ear of the dying person as often as possible. Recite it audibly.
2. On behalf of the dying person, make the Definitive Aspiration.
3. On behalf of the dying person, engage in the practice of *powa*. When a loved one is passing, when we are sitting beside someone who is passing who is not enlightened, we can pull them out, and it is

not difficult. Do *powa* and the 49-day Prayer for them. It is not that we are that powerful, it is that they have Buddha Nature! It is never our power. Our Japanese Buddhist brothers and sisters coined the term “*tariki*” or “Other Power.” It is not the power of an individual; it is the power of Buddha Nature. It is not ego power. If we rely on the power of Buddha Nature – our own and others’ – it is overwhelming. We are basically just resonating with something that is already true. That is one of the most satisfying things we can do. If we have had the experience of doing the 49-Day Prayer for someone, even if we do not get any signs of accomplishment, it is very rewarding how we begin to feel, because our sense of impotence goes away. We are not impotent.

### **For Sudden or Accidental Death**

1. Stroke or gently pull the hair on the crown of the dying person.
2. Entrust the person to Amideva, while placing your full attention on the crown of the person’s head and reciting **OM AMIDEVA HRIH**.

### **Postmortem (Self and Others)**

1. On behalf of the deceased, recite the Prayer of Dewachen for 49 days. Start three days after clinical death. We can also start before then. Do this for 49 days or until we or another person receives signs of accomplishment. Do this whether or not the deceased is Buddhist. “We do not need people’s permission to bless them,” my Lama used to say. Recite the prayer one to three times per day, inserting the person’s name in the blank lines of the prayer. Do not do the 49-day prayers to achieve the signs. Do not fixate on those experiences. We do not spend much time teaching about them. If the signs do not happen, it is only that we did not notice them, but they accomplish the results always. Our teachers say that no sentient being in the bardo can resist the power of directed merit. We do the 49-day Prayer for 49 days because that is the longest period of time a human spends in the bardo, but this interplays with their karma and accumulated merit. It could work in one day, in fifteen minutes, in 7 days, or 14... It depends on how receptive they are, and how much their karmic wind is pushing them in a particular direction. We need to balance that out. We are just reminding them of their Buddha Nature. We are not saving them or pulling them out by our doing. We are reminding them of who they truly are.

2. Request your friends to recite the Prayer of Dewachen. This is the Easy-Difficult *powa*: easy to do but difficult for most people to accept. Sadly, for most human beings in this world right now, there is little possibility of cultivating spirituality. When overwhelmed by the struggle for subsistence, by violence, by survival, we can be motivated to practice spirituality, but the chances are very small, more often hopeless. We have this opportunity right now. Chances are not great of coming back to this human form. Other realms are not good for Dharma cultivation. The lower realms have too much motivation, but no possibility, no freedoms. The upper realms have lots of freedoms, but no motivation. This should give us a sense of urgency.

### **The Pure Land**

Those who make the Definitive Aspiration for the Pure Land do not go to the bardo; they go directly to the Pure Land. The reason that Dharma students do not want to go to the bardo is described in the *Bardo Thodol*. Guru Rinpoche says:

*We are passing from this world and leaving it behind. No friends do we have, we are without defenders, without protectors and kin.*



*The light of this world has set. We go from place to place, we enter darkness, we fall down a steep precipice. We enter a jungle of solitude; we are pursued by karmic forces. We go into a vast silence; we are borne away on the great ocean. We are wafted on the winds of karma; we go where there is no certainty. We are caught in the great conflict; we are obsessed by the great affecting sensation. We are awed and terrified by the messengers of death. Karma has put us into repeated existence, and we have no more strength, although the time has come to go alone.*

*Oh, you Compassionate Ones, defend us who are defenseless, protect us who are unprotected; be our kin. Protect us from the suffering in the depression of the bardo. Turn us from the storm wind of karma. Turn us from the great awe and terror of the Lords of Death. Liberate us from the long narrow passage of the bardo.*

When we look at this bardo situation, and we realize the perils of the bardo, we share this information to underline the urgency and the need to make that Definitive Aspiration. We do not want to risk subjecting ourselves to an environment, a condition that might be too difficult for us to handle. Think about it: are we really that brave? Do we not get fearful from things much milder than what we are reading about in the bardo? It is time to seriously make that determination. And it is not that difficult. The more we understand, the easier it is to make that Definitive Aspiration.

This is the Age of the Five Corruptions, the Dharma-Ending Age, and we should acknowledge it. Enlightenment was a common occurrence for followers of the historical Buddha upon hearing a few of His words, and it still occurred frequently in the first 500 to 1000 years after His death. Since then, the numbers have dwindled. Srimaladevi hears a teaching from the Buddha accompanied by 500 women, and at the end of a talk lasting no more than forty minutes, all attained Enlightenment. Are we that receptive? We have to acknowledge our capacity and adapt.

The Buddha gave us 84,000 Dharma gates. Remember, the Buddha taught according to the capacity of different beings, but on His own He taught the Pure Land path, because He recognized people have different capacities, abilities, tendencies, priorities. We get tired over so little nowadays. We no longer have stamina and complain of things being too long and uncomfortable. Most of us wouldn't last a month doing the things our grandparents did every day –without electricity or central air conditioning, etc. We do not have their energy. We think we are strong; we are not. Nowadays if our cell phone isn't charged, our ability to function plummets, we come to a halt, barely competent to do even little things. People used to make incredible trips. The monk who gave us *Mind Training* took a 12-year trip to find the second line of one verse! Does that sound like us today? We have to acknowledge that. That is who we are, and that is okay. That is part of the Mind of Sincerity.

So then, we need to figure out something that we can actually do. The only birth which offers the proper combination of motivation and freedom is the human birth, and it is not getting easier for humans. Look at the amount of agitation that humans now endure. Look at the number of demands on our attention. Not that long ago, we could remove ourselves from the noise of the world. Where do you find a cave where a microwave isn't penetrating your brain, that isn't full of

pollution, radioactivity, electricity? Not on this planet. We may not be aware of these things, but they affect us.

We have to be wise and with the mind of sincerity ask, “What is my capacity?” Since it is not getting easier to do this, we must use the most expedient means that the Buddha gave us. He went so far as to say that when all other teachings disappear, the teachings of the Pure Land will remain for another brief period of time, and then the Dharma will disappear from this planet for a very long time. We have seen it already. The teaching still exists, but also there is a lot of strange stuff posing as Dharma, a lot of people pretending that they can do things that they cannot really do.

In various places in the sutras, the Buddha says this is the most difficult thing he is teaching. A lot of people think Pure Land teachings to avoid the bardo and go straight to the Pure Land are a concession to those of lesser capacity. It requires that one understand the true meaning of the Dharma and that one dismisses and renounces the ego-centered conception of the Dharma as something that “I do,” accepting the transfer of merit. It is actually a very profound teaching, but one that seems deceptively simple. And you know what? It is simple.

If we do not have to strive for it, we do not think it is good, we do not think it is real. Remember, this is the realm of craving and striving. Many people recognize that self-grasping and self-cherishing are a problem, and then turn around and say, “I’m going to solve this. I’m going to do this all by myself. I’ve got this.” Who’s got this? The ego! We’re trying to solve the ego problem with the ego. It cannot be done. That endeavor is to get a bigger ego: the ego that defeated the ego, the invincible ego! In *Mind Training* we learn to recognize the pitfalls of the ego. Once we are aware of them, we tend to not fall for them.

The fundamental problem is that we believe that we are separate. Using separation to undo separation is not a particularly useful approach. The Buddha Shakyamuni says in the Contemplation Sutra, “It is solely through Buddha Power that we can, as though taking up a gleaming mirror and looking into our own face, behold that Land of Purity.” Only through Buddha Power. Not through ego power. That is not possible. The ego has no purity whatsoever. On the contrary, it is about me and mine, me and mine.

We need to purify our sense consciousnesses from relying on the distortions of our sense contacts. We need to dis-attach from the assumption that they present reality, and stop acting on what we know to be distorted. How does a person do that? Is he or she to pursue an action? We set the intention, that is all we need to do. Why? Because our Buddha Nature knows what it is doing. We just have to get out of the way. Remember there are two powers: ego power and Buddha Power. Buddha Power is our own Buddha Nature’s power. Trust Buddha Power. We set the intention: “I am purifying this,” and then recite the mantra, to remember our Buddha Nature. That is what **OM AMIDEVA HRIH** means. We are being mindful of our Buddha Nature.

That is very difficult for humans because we do not want to stop striving. We have that idea, “No pain, no gain.” Therefore, it is very difficult for us to accept something as simple as, “This is my nature and remembering my nature is all I have to do.” This is the easiest way, especially because so many of the other ways do not work. We need to renounce striving, but we need to make an effort —the effort to stop. We do not want to renounce the causes of samsara; we would like to give up suffering, but we would like to keep on accumulating the causes of suffering. It is not an effort of willful pushing; it is an effort to stop pushing.



The Angulimala Sutra is a central teaching, not a quaint story for our amusement. Angulimala was a serial killer, 999 victims, their thumbs on a garland... and what was the teaching that transformed him into a monk who attained Enlightenment in this lifetime? **“STOP!”** We are Angulimala. How many negative actions have we accumulated, and we wear them proudly, like thumbs on a garland? Even though everybody else can see that the thumbs are rotting, we are proud of what we have accomplished. The Buddha and our teachers are telling us, **“STOP!”** That is the effort it takes. When we are moving fast, it takes much effort to stop. Put the brakes on.



*It is not the case that one strives to liberate an existent self. For instance, if you are frightened when mistaking a rope for a snake, you will feel relieved when you see that there is no snake. Similarly, by conceiving of a self where there is no self, you accumulate afflictions and karma and thereby continuously experience suffering in samsara. When realizing the lack of self through authentic insight, karma and afflictions will cease to be and you will be liberated.*

*What is called “liberation” is merely the cessation of a mistake in your mind-stream or the cessation of your deluded mind. There is no liberation of an existent self. —Jamgon Mipham*

This is why Dolpopa said this is the path of letting go, of purification, of renunciation. It is not a path of fabrication, of accumulation. It is a path of stopping. When we do that, then we do not have to do anything else, because we already have Buddha Nature. This is perhaps the saddest thing of all. The Buddha actually speaks of a man who lives in a hovel, has nothing to eat, hardly a piece of cloth to cover his nakedness, and right under his hovel is buried a huge treasure. He spends his whole life going out and begging for a few grains of rice while literally living over an incredible treasure. That is us! We have this Buddha Nature, and yet we are going out to see if we can get something from someone else. It is right here. But we need to stop. And we need to begin to accept, which is difficult for us.

Ippen taught that, before death, if we do the Pure Land Definitive Aspiration and practices, our heart is already born in the Pure Land. Birth in the Pure Land is not post-mortem; we do not have to wait. It can be right now. The Pure Land is just a sphere of activity. If we act in such a way, then we are there. It is not a physical address. It is a mental state. It may not be our dominant state, right now, at this point, but it can become more and more pronounced in our life. We can do this. We can all do this. It is more difficult to pretend to be what we are not than to be what we are. Even though it requires effort at the beginning to stop going in the wrong direction, and turning towards the Great Middle Way, it is safer; we do not end up lost. In human literature, there are many stories that point to this truth: The Ugly Duckling, The Lion King —beings recovering their true nature.

Renunciation is a process, and a process needs to be started. When we first encounter and read the Definitive Aspiration, it may seem like a formality, without much significance. Many who have said the prayer repeatedly, later find deep resonance and affirmation in it that they did not at first. This is natural. Do not think that unless we generate some intense experience, the Definitive Aspiration prayer is ineffective. Virtues are more real than appearances, more real than the testimony of our senses. Rely on what is real, and it will grow. Be positive as you pray. When we say this prayer, we are living virtue,

aligning with truth. Simply understand that this is, in fact, what we want. This prayer and the Pure Land practice are very strong movements of renunciation.

Even if we were not to complete the process of renunciation in this lifetime, the advantage is that we have started it, and the moment that the awareness is free from this body, it will complete the process instantly. When this body dies, we do not have that large anchor anymore. And the shock of death also puts into abeyance even the mental karmas. Have we noticed how some things and experiences in life just stop us? It can be something very beautiful. Death is like that too. There is a moment like that —it all stops, all emotions cease. If we have started this process of renunciation, at that time it is completed because it is our nature. Only the afflictive emotions are preventing its manifestation.

The Pure Land is not a final destination. Do not think of it as a place. The Pure Land is the sphere of activity of our own Buddha Nature, and the Buddhas just want to be helpful. While we are purifying ourselves, we are preparing to be helpful, but we are not being helpful. The strong aspiration of someone in the Pure Land is, “I’ve got to finish this so I can go help,” because one of the things that we do not lose is our compassion for all the suffering that we have seen. Have we seen suffering and are we seeing it now? In the Pure Land clarity becomes more acute because we are not distracted. We see that so many are suffering, and our prayer says that we shall “return to lead all those who suffer to Great Benefit.” The Pure Land is a vast training ground without distraction. It is not a celestial spa where we sit on clouds and play the harp. There is constant teaching there. Part of Pure Land practice is called going forth to that sphere of enlightened activity, and the second part of it is called returning to lead others to enlightenment. It is beautiful. It is what we do.



### ***Amideva, Dewachen, and the Holy Name***

Who is Amideva? Amideva literally means Boundless Radiance. Amideva is the Primordial Buddha, not a person. We have the tendency to view everything from our point of view —we are persons, therefore everything else becomes a person. Amideva is unhindered Light and infinite Life. Vast wisdom, deep compassion. True Purity. True Being. True Bliss. True Permanence. When we invoke Amideva, we invoke our own nature, our own true essence.

What is Dewachen? Dewachen (Skt. Sukhavati) is composed of “Dewa” (radiance) and “chen” (great). It is the enlightened field of selflessness, signlessness, and wishlessness. It is the enlightened field of emptiness where everything is possible and there are no fixed identities. It is the sphere of Other Emptiness. Other Emptiness is a term much-used by our Lineage, meaning everything that is not true is eliminated, but everything that is real is sustained.

Dewachen is said to be in the West, but what does that really mean? It is not actually a location. West is the direction of the setting sun. Metaphorically, it is the location or direction of the end of the day. It is the direction of death, of setting. So that is why it is said to be in the West: it is the ending of the cycle of samsara. That is what it stands for. It is not far. There is no distance, because it is not a place, and we do not need to reach it.

What does it mean to be born in Dewachen? It is to recover the emptiness, the spaciousness, the luminosity of our own Buddha Nature. Basically, it is to be born to our own true nature. We are not going someplace. We use that terminology metaphorically, but we are not moving elsewhere. We die to samsara, to cyclic birth and death. We die to the cycle of birth, disease, aging, and death so that we may be born in Dewachen. It is the true cessation, the death of suffering. We renounce and discard wrong views and afflictive emotions, and we remain in the field of action of enlightenment. The Pure Land is pure because it is empty of all that is compounded: insubstantial, impermanent, and dependent.

Dewachen is *here always*. It is not somewhere else; it is not at some other time. It always is. It is the field of activity of all the Buddhas because Buddha Nature is complete, in every time and place, it is not fabricated, it does not have to be added to, it is without origin or destruction.

Dewachen is not a Buddhist version of heaven. We tend to see it that way, particularly when we read the florid descriptions. That is why we share an annotated version of the Pure Land Sutra, because every one of these apparently fanciful descriptions means something. They are not to be taken literally.

As to the Holy Name, think of how we remember anything. To remember anything, we bring to mind the label by which we (re)cognize it. How else do we remember? Can we remember something without naming it? It is not possible. When young people fall in love, they start writing the name of their beloved on trees, sidewalks, notebooks, all over the place, as a way of remembering. We remember through name. When we recite **OM AMIDEVA HRIH**, we are performing *Buddhānusmṛti*, which means “remembrance,” “recollection,” “mindfulness of the Buddha” in the most direct way possible, without the need to visualize, without the need to imagine anything.

The problem with imagination is that it will always be tainted by our previous experience. Even these beautiful paintings, these thangkas, if you look closely you can tell the ethnic origin of the person who painted them. It is no coincidence that Chinese Buddhas look Chinese, Tibetan Buddhas look Tibetan, Indian Buddhas look Indian, and Korean Buddhas look Korean. Imagination is acceptable as an aid, but it is actually limiting in some ways. Many of our teachers have said that sound is the purest form of recollection. It is also our most subtle sense. For humans, it is the sense most conducive to awakening. Does your alarm clock touch you, or emit smells at you, or place a lollipop in your mouth? No; it makes a sound. Human beings tend to wake up to sound. We are predisposed to associate waking up with sound.

And why **OM AMIDEVA HRIH**? It is not magic. Some people say **OM NAMO AMIDEVA**, or **NAMO AMITABHA**, or **NAMO AMITAYUS**. In China, they say **AMITUOFO**; in Japan, **NAMU AMIDA BUTSU**, or even **NAMANDABU**. There does not have to be only one way.

**OM AMIDEVA HRIH** is a name and two seed mantras. **OM** is the seed mantra of manifestation. **HRIH** is the seed mantra of cutting through illusion. One virtue of this particular mantra, **OM AMIDEVA HRIH**, is that it is not discursive. It is not mystery or magic. Mantras that have been used for a very long time by a large group of people with similar intentions have the capacity to help carry you. They have that energy; they have that flow. As you may have experienced, it is easier to meditate in a group than by yourself. Groups have a particular energy, and the energy helps to carry you.

Basically, when we recite **OM AMIDEVA HRIH** we are invoking our own Buddha Nature to manifest fully, cutting through the veils of wrong views and afflictive emotions. Our teachers have said it stands for:

- Guru, Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, and the union of wisdom and compassion that pierces through all obscurations.
- It is Refuge, the mind of enlightenment, confession, rejoicing in virtue, beseeching the Buddhas to remain, and dedicating all merit to universal enlightenment.
- It is enlightened body, speech, mind, qualities, activities, and abode.
- It purifies the body, speech, mind, emotions, habitual tendencies, and obstructions to wisdom.

Explanations, while sometimes overstated, are meant to inspire us to recite. The more we become familiar with these teachings, the more anchored those meanings become for us. It is not a waste of time to read through these explanations, become familiar with them — what they mean, what they have meant to the Lineage, what they have meant to our Lamas.

Reciting mantra is available to everyone, unlike, for example, prostrations. Some of you are familiar with how difficult it is, and the incredible numbers that people used to perform. They did not do anything else. The purpose of prostrations is to tame our arrogance, and it does. Honen and Ippen did 60,000 repetitions of the Name every day—that takes 20 hours, so they had 4 hours to do everything else in a day. We do not have that luxury. How many of us dedicate 20 hours every day to practice? We do not. We have to adjust our practice, and our expectations of practice, to what is feasible, to what is real: our capacity, inclinations, and our maturity. Fortunately —and this is the amazing thing— the Buddha himself says, “Ten repetitions are enough.” In other places he says, “Even once is enough.” And yet we humans, ever demanding to strive and strain, say, “No, no, no, that cannot be good. It must take 400,000 or 500,000!”

Attempt to then make it your own: What does it mean to you? It has the added advantage that it is not discursive, like **NAMO AMIDA BUTSU**, or **NAMO AMITUOFO**, or **NAMO AMIDAPHAT**. Namu/Namu has a meaning: “reverence,” “salutations to,” “I surrender to,” so then, “I take refuge in Amitabha/Amida, the Enlightened One.” **OM AMIDEVA HRIH** is not in a particular modern language. One of the things that is absolutely essential to bring out about the Jonang Lineage is that, during the time of our persecution in Tibet, we actually learned the importance of simplicity, we learned the importance of making the teachings not only available, but also accessible.

There are many practices that are very effective but are beyond the capacity of most people. They are beyond their capacity, not necessarily because people are not competent, but because they have many demands on their time, energy, and attention. Not everybody sits around in a monastery and has six periods of practice daily. These days, even in monasteries we do not have that luxury either! There used to be a time when people brought food, medicine, cloth, and other gifts to the monasteries. Now monks actually have to go out and work to obtain basic necessities. The Jonang learned the importance of looking for what is possible for the largest number of people, preferably for anyone with desire and interest.

We repeat **OM AMIDEVA HRIH** more than ten times, not because it is necessary but because we are not doing it for ourselves alone. For ourselves, *once is enough*. Remember, one of the Three Minds is the Mind of Aspiration. Acknowledging that we have received the transfer of merit from others, there is a duty: the only way we can manifest gratitude to the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas for what we have received (They do not need anything from us) is to then do what They are doing: accumulate merit and dedicate it to others.

Honen, one of the great Japanese Buddhist teachers, was asked precisely that question: “If my birth in the Pure Land is assured with ten repetitions, why do more?” He answered, “If ten are enough for you, imagine how many other sentient beings will come to the Pure Land through your chanting!” It is not for you; it is for everybody else. We need to be careful in our spiritual cultivation not to make it about me, me, me. By the Law of Interdependence, there is no separation, so we can take it upon ourselves to practice for everyone.

That is a wonderful thing that we can do. Frankly, how many of the problems of the world have we each solved so far, and how many are we likely to solve from this moment until these bodies give up? I’m not saying we shouldn’t do whatever we can to alleviate any suffering we encounter, but the best thing we can do for everyone is to actually become enlightened and help others become enlightened. The fastest, most direct way of doing that is by recognizing our Buddha Nature, abiding in the field of activity of our Buddha Nature (Dewachen, the Pure Land), and sharing that invitation to remember their own Buddha Nature with all sentient beings by reciting this Holy Name.

It is holy in the sense that it makes us whole. Remembrance of our Buddha Nature makes us whole. In a very literal sense, right now we perceive only a partial, tiny aspect of totality. We have identified with one little point of perspective, and that is what we claim to be “me.” “I am this tiny speck here, looking at the rest.” We are not whole. The Holy Name reminds us that we are not that tiny little speck. Why continue to identify with that small, lost, suffering perspective? Let that go. We are not that infinitesimal particle. Why identify with that?

The Holy Name brings us back to wholeness; it reminds us of our wholeness. It reminds us that we are already complete, that nothing is lacking, that we do not have to build anything anew — we just have to stop impeding its full manifestation. When we are ready to do that, then we can make extremely fast progress.

#### **PURE LAND PRACTICE**

OM I TAKE REFUGE IN THE BLESSED AMIDEVA,  
WELL GONE AND WELL COME,  
VICTORIOUS AND PERFECTLY ENLIGHTENED!

Amideva purifies the aggregate of Form.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva purifies the aggregate of Sensation.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva purifies the aggregate of Perception.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva purifies the aggregate of Volition.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva purifies the aggregate of Consciousness.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva purifies the affliction of attachment.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva purifies the affliction of aversion.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva purifies the affliction of indifference.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva eradicates self-righteous indifference.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva eradicates jealousy and hostility.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva eradicates craving and striving.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva eradicates greed and miserliness.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva eradicates hatred and cruelty.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva eradicates fear and helplessness.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva eradicates indolence and pride.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva eradicates doubt and hesitation.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

OM AH HUM Dewachen is True Purity.

OM AH HUM True Purity is Selflessness.

OM AH HUM True Purity is Signlessness.

OM AH HUM True Purity is Wishlessness.

OM Enlightenment is True Being.

OM True Being is Boundless Life.

OM True Being is Boundless Light.

OM True Being is Boundless Love.

AH Enlightenment is True Bliss.

AH True Bliss is Infinite Aspiration.

AH True Bliss is Infallible Skill.

AH True Bliss is Irresistible Power.

HUM Enlightenment is True Permanence.

HUM True Permanence is Incessant Activity.

HUM True Permanence is Inseparable Qualities.

HUM True Permanence is Inalterable Essence.

OM I TAKE REFUGE IN THE BLESSED AMIDEVA,

WELL GONE AND WELL COME,

VICTORIOUS AND PERFECTLY ENLIGHTENED!

Amideva manifests all-comforting Forms of Compassion.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva manifests all-accomplishing Forms of Bliss.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva manifests all-pervading Forms of Truth.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

OM I TAKE REFUGE IN THE BLESSED AMIDEVA,

WELL GONE AND WELL COME,

VICTORIOUS AND PERFECTLY ENLIGHTENED!

Amideva sanctifies the world of desire.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva sanctifies the world of form.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva sanctifies the world without form.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva sanctifies the past.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva sanctifies the present.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva sanctifies the future.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva sanctifies those outside the Path.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva sanctifies those traversing the Path.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

Amideva sanctifies the Noble and the Great.

OM AMIDEVA HRIH

I dedicate the merits of all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,  
of Solitary Realizers and Disciples,  
of all holy and ordinary beings,  
as I dedicate my own —past, present and future,  
previously dedicated and yet to dedicate—  
that I may arise spontaneously in Dewachen.

I shall manifest from a golden lotus in the Holy Presence,  
receive the prophecy from the lips of Amideva,  
swiftly attain perfect enlightenment,  
and return to lead all those who suffer to Great Benefit.

May all sentient beings everywhere hear the Holy Name.  
May they take refuge in the Boundless Radiance,  
and spontaneously arise in Dewachen!

**OM AMIDEVA HRIH** (x10)

In Pure Land Practice, we first set forth. “To go forth” means to move into the field of awakened activity, the field of Dewachen, which is a mental state.

What we do is purify the eight consciousnesses. What keeps us in this our current mental state is our habit, our tendency, to take the testimony or the report of our senses as real. Our reality right now is a projection of our consciousness. So, to abide in the Pure Land means to purify the consciousness of smell, the consciousness of taste, the consciousness of sight, of touch, of sound, of mind, of me and mine, and of experience. These are the eight consciousnesses. We need to purify them because these are the ones that keep us identifying with this character, with this ego. For those not familiar with the consciousness of experience, it means we believe we are our story. Yet we are not. It just happened. It did not happen to us — it just happened. When we identify with that particular experience, that consciousness, we are saying “That is me; I am that one.” We are not that one. Even our memory is constantly changing.

Our current reality, our perception of reality, is our own. The reality that we perceive — we are not talking here of external reality; we leave that for another time — is a projection of our consciousness. That is why people have different tastes. If we actually perceived things as they are, everybody would have more or less the same reaction. Everybody would find the same things beautiful and the same things ugly, because the quality would reside in the object perceived. But it does not, it comes from us. We are the ones generating every quality. Pigs love smells we do not like, and vice versa.

We need to purify those consciousnesses. That is an important initial part. We do that by first establishing the intention. Some people think that just saying “I’m going to purify the consciousness of smell” is not going to do anything. Well, it seeds the intention. If we are not even intending to do something, we are not ever going to do it. Everything we will ever accomplish, first we have to develop the intention to do it. Otherwise, it is never going to happen. Now, once we have intention, guess what? We will figure out how to do it.

“Amideva purifies the aggregate of form” means that only Buddha Nature can do this; the ego cannot do it. We are slaves to the aggregate of form. So, this is a first and necessary step.

People wonder what it means when we say, “purify consciousness.” How does one do that? Are we to have an object in mind, pursue an action? Fortunately, we do not have to do it. We set the intent, that is all we need to do. We set the intention, and we recite. Why? Because our Buddha Nature knows what it is doing. We just have to get out of the way. Remember, there are two powers, ego power and Buddha Power. Buddha Power is not some external Buddha’s power. It is our own Buddha Nature’s power. Trust Buddha Power. We set the intent: “I am purifying this.” And then recite the mantra. Remember Buddha Nature. That is what **OM AMIDEVA HRIH** means. We are being mindful of our Buddha Nature.

Renouncing is the same thing. We do not have to *do* anything. We set the intention. That is all. What do we renounce? The causes of birth. We are closing, blocking, our tendency to be born in the unwanted destinations. We renounce self-righteous indifference, which leads to rebirth in temporary nirvana. We renounce jealousy and hostility, which leads to birth among demigods. We renounce craving and striving, which leads to human birth. We renounce greed and miserliness, which leads to ghost birth. We renounce hatred and cruelty, which leads to birth in the hell realms. We renounce fear and helplessness, which leads to birth in the animal realm. We renounce indolence and pride, which leads to birth among the gods. We renounce doubt, which leads to birth at the borderline of the Pure Land, which is like a fancy prison house.

Once we renounce that, what is left? True Purity, True Being, True Bliss, True Permanence. Aren’t we happiest when we wish to do something for someone, and we actually know what that is, and we have the skill to do it, and the power to do it? That is True Bliss! And that is what happens when we are born in the Pure Land. True Bliss is perfect aspiration, perfect skill, perfect liberating power. We develop the purity of the aspiration, we develop the purity of the skills, and we develop the perfection of the power to do it. And True Bliss is just of the qualities we have once we attain the sphere of enlightened activity, Dewachen. The qualities are actually beyond number, but for the purpose of helping our minds understand what lies ahead, several are highlighted for us.

“*Dewachen is True Purity.*” The field of activity of the Buddha is True Purity. The noble association, the companions of the Buddha are True Purity.



*“True Purity is Selflessness.”* This is sometimes translated as Emptiness. This reminds us that it is not the ego going there, suddenly getting a promotion to a better place. Emptiness means that there is no individual being. It is emptiness of identity, emptiness of fixation, emptiness of single perspective, of isolated, independent, separated perspective. Empty means everything is possible, and nothing is fixed.

*“True Purity is Signlessness.”* *Signlessness* means there are no fixed characteristics. Do not think we can reduce anyone to the characteristics that we impute. We do that constantly. “Oh, this person is this way.” All the characteristics that we impute to beings do not belong to them, they are imputed. True Purity lacks characteristics. Nothing is set, it is always new, it is always fresh. It is not, “Oh, I know what she is going to do.” No, we do not. Everything is ever new, because True Being is not ruled by karma, by conditioned tendencies. Much more so in the case of the Buddhas and Great Bodhisattvas. We cannot pin them down because they aren’t following any role, any preconceived method.

They are spontaneously manifesting their nature in the way that is necessary in that time, in that place, for those circumstances. We cannot predict, “That is what he does, that is how she is.” No, their characteristics aren’t fixed. That is the meaning of *Signlessness*.

*“True Purity is Wishlessness.”* Everything is spontaneous. *Wishlessness* means there is no willfulness involved; it is spontaneous. True Purity is spontaneous. It is not willfully programmed and planned; that is True Purity.

*“True Being is Boundless Life.”* ‘Being’ is a verb, not an entity. Words, denominating, do not portray and with difficulty approach. The basis of everything is uncompounded, a self-originating expanse, vast and inexpressible, beyond the names ‘samsara’ and ‘nirvana.’

What does it mean to have Boundless Life (Amitayus) and Boundless Light (Amitabha)? Boundless Life is the illimitable ability to adapt, to generate skillful means, the unlimited intelligence to recognize the Dharma and its meaning for ourselves. And Boundless Light is the ability to see the equality of all sentient beings. The reason why Amideva (Amitabha, Amitayus) is so precious to us is that the Name itself embodies Right View. Interdependence (wisdom) and equality (compassion) are Boundless Life and Light.

*“True Bliss is Infinite Aspiration. True Bliss is Infallible Skill. True Bliss is Irresistible Power.”* What is *True Bliss*? It is perfect aspiration, perfect skill, perfect power. We have a little bit of an inkling of this in our ordinary life. When we want to help, even the desire to help —to alleviate the suffering, to increase happiness— even formulating that desire makes us happy, right? Haven’t we experienced that? Now if we also know how to do it —not only do we want to help, but we know how to do it, we have the skill to do it— that increases our happiness.

And if we not only have the aspiration and the skill, but also the power to do it, then we are really happy. So, removing all limitations —that is why we say *True Bliss* is perfect aspiration: when our desire is to help everyone, when we have all the skill to do it, and all the power to do it.

*“True Permanence is Incessant Activity.”* *True Permanence* is incessant activity for the benefit of all sentient beings. It is not to remain as we are, or become one best moment of our earthly life and keep it forever. True Permanence is incessant enlightened activity. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas never take a break. Why? Because it is joyful, it is bliss; it is not work for them. It is spontaneous manifestation of

their nature. It does not entail effort. It is how and who they are. It is like swans gliding across the surface of a lake —their movement is easy, graceful, natural, enjoyable for them.

*“True Permanence is Inseparable Qualities.” Inseparable Qualities* are the qualities of Buddha Nature. They are never lost. Buddhas do not have to remind themselves of needing to cultivate their compassion, kindness, rejoicing, and equanimity. They never lose their qualities. They never veer away from their nature. That is the manifestation of *True Permanence*.

Characteristics are different from qualities. Compassion is a quality, and those are inseparable. Characteristics are mutable and born of comparison, e.g., big, small, wrathful, kind. A Buddha or Bodhisattva can be peaceful or wrathful, as necessary. It is skillful, it depends on who needs what. My Lama gave me an example: if a small child we love is about to cross the street without looking, we might yell at the child in a very harsh tone, not out of hatred or anger, but because that will stop the child. We haven't changed our mind toward the child. The Buddhas are like that. We cannot predict how they are going to do things because *they* do not predict, they just adjust to place, time, and circumstance. They just know, and the knowing is spontaneous. It is not planned, conceived, or rehearsed.

*“True Permanence is Inalterable Essence.”* The primordial basis of all is permanent. Individuals are not permanent. Only the fundamental essence, the ground of all, is permanent.

That is **True Purity, True Being, True Bliss, True Permanence**. In this construction, **OM** means perfect being or manifestation; **AH** means perfect speech or energy, and **HUM** means perfect mind, pure mind. The construction **OM AH HUM** basically reflects the reality of a Buddha: True Purity, True Being, True Bliss, True Permanence. When we say **OM AH HUM** at the end of our prayers, we are invoking True Purity, True Being, True Bliss, True Permanence as our nature.

How do we return *from* the Pure Land? We manifest all-consoling forms of Compassion, all-accomplishing forms of Bliss, and all-pervading Forms of Truth. All Buddhas show three types of Form: *Nirmanakaya* (form of compassion), *Sambhogakaya* (form of bliss or glory), and *Dharmakaya* (form of truth). Forms of Compassion are said to be all-consoling. The forms of Bliss or Glory are all-accomplishing. The forms of Truth are all-pervading. There is no limit to the forms a Buddha can manifest. Again, according to place, time, and circumstance, what is necessary manifests.

My teacher used to say that a Buddha can choose to manifest in the physical form of a bridge if that is what is necessary, and would not think about it twice. Ordinary beings cannot manifest as inanimate objects, but Buddhas can. In fact, in a famous prayer of Shantideva he says, “May I be a ship, a bridge, a raft; may I be medicine, may I be food and drink...” They do not hesitate. Whatever is necessary, that they can be. They manifest in whatever form is beneficial.

What do they do? They proclaim the Holy Name. This is not a religious thing. They proclaim the Holy Name to remind sentient beings of *their own* Buddha Nature. That is their major function. They do not force anyone. They remind sentient beings of their own Buddha Nature, and they remind us that all beings have it, even when they may be very good at hiding it.

Where do we do this manifesting? We proclaim it in the three worlds. This is the world is the world of desire, one of the three worlds. The other two are the world of form and the world without form. The world of form is a world we can rationally conceive of, but we have no direct experience of it. The world without form is beyond our capacity to even formulate any conception. To say “the three worlds” means

what we have experienced, what we can imagine, and what we cannot even imagine. Those are the three worlds. We remind sentient beings of their Buddha Nature — we proclaim the Holy Name — in the world of desire, the world of form, and the world without form.

In sanctifying the three worlds, Amideva does not cleanse, but rather “makes whole.” Buddha Nature enables us to bring whatever we experience onto the path. If we undergo some experience, let us use it for the good of others. Whatever we experience, pleasing or not, is a means whereby all beings can progress further toward awakening. We accept – rather than act out – the conditioned projections of our senses, and the incipient reactions and emotions stirred. We understand the nature of appearances, and do not act on what is distorted and divisive, but instead model and share kindness, togetherness, and concern. This is to serve whatever arises.

*If happy, dedicate your joy to all, and may benefit and bliss pervade the sky! If sad, take the misery of all upon yourself, and may the ocean of suffering dry up! — Panchen Sakya Shri*

We bring our happiness and suffering onto the path; we bring all of reality onto the path. In this way every moment is an opportunity to bring forth gratitude, equanimity, and devotion to others. Every situation can be dedicated to freeing beings from affliction, to manifest their goodness fully. Every moment we either turn to the path or away from it. And we proclaim the Holy Name in the three times. We remind ourselves and others in the past, the present, and the future.

There are three general categories of being. The first is those not familiar with the Dharma at all, the externalists (sometimes called the confused) and the lost. The lost actively oppose the Dharma; the confused simply either do not know it or do not understand it. The second category is the salvationists and detractors. Those are people who understand and accept the Dharma partially, but either accept it only for their own personal benefit (the salvationists) or get lost in philosophical distinctions and deny karma and rebirth (the detractors). In that way they detract from the purpose of that which they claim to accept. Dolpopa called them *tarkikas*, a Sanskrit word that means philosophical disputants; basically, people who love to argue. The third category is Mahasattvas and Bodhisattvas, the great noble beings. We are not reminding them of their Buddha Nature for *their* benefit, we are actually rejoicing in their recognition of Buddha Nature.

### **Definitive Aspiration**

This is not “just a prayer.” It is an expression of the Definitive Aspiration. We are to actually *make* the Definitive Aspiration. *“I dedicate the merits of all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, of Solitary Realizers and Disciples, of all holy and ordinary beings.”* This first phrase some people find questionable, because we are basically appropriating the merit and power of others. However, through the reality of interdependence, we can do so, because we are not separate. We have every right and ability to dedicate the merit of all sentient beings because we are not apart from them. We are not separate from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; we are not separate from the holy and ordinary beings; we are not separate from anyone. Then we dedicate our own. The dedication of merit is exhaustive.

*“That I may arise spontaneously in the Pure Land of Bliss.”* In certain realms, rebirth is spontaneous. In the human and animal realm, we are born through gestation. In the Pure Land there is no gestation period. It is said, and please understand this metaphorically, that everyone appears spontaneously on a golden lotus. A golden lotus is a symbol of wisdom, which means it is actually an act of wisdom to be born in the Pure Land. We have never left; that is our eternal abode. The Pure Land is our sphere of

activity. Buddha Nature is our essence. And the field of activity of our essence is where we've always been and always will be. That is actually where we have been while dreaming this samsaric illusion!

The terms used are not arbitrary: Buddha means Awake. We are called to awaken to our real nature. And real nature has essence, forms, qualities, activities, and abodes. To wake up is an act of wisdom. "Here you are. Why are you dreaming of that slum? *This* is it. Wake up." "I shall manifest from a golden lotus" —from wisdom— "in the Holy Presence," the holy presence of our own Buddha Nature.

*"Receive the prophecy from the lips of the Protector,"* Every Buddha-to-be receives the prophecy of enlightenment. But who is going to give you the prophecy of enlightenment? Your own Buddha Nature is the only one that can announce your enlightenment. Nobody else can.

*"Swiftly attain perfect enlightenment, and return to lead all those who suffer to great benefit."* If we can actually make this true for us, make it our *real* aspiration —our Definitive Aspiration— if this becomes true for us, then that is what we *will* do.

This is the skillful means of Vajrayana, utilizing what is our strongest human motivation, desire. We use it in our favor. Everything starts with desire. Many of us make plans to do this and that activity, this amount of work, and end up not doing it. The things one really wants to do, one does without forcing oneself. If we really want to do something, like eat or dance or watch a movie, we will do it. If we can change our desires, everything will change. That is why prayer is so important. Prayer sustains our intention. Instead of our wish being momentary, it is sustained for a *while* ~~a spell~~, a time of focused attention and intention. It helps change what it is that we want, and then, we will do it spontaneously, without thinking. Prayer sustains our attention on something we truly want. When we really want to do something, we go out and we do it. Desire is all-powerful. We live in the world of desire, *kāmadhātu*, so why not use it?

We have been lying to ourselves with, "This is going to make me happy." It is the oldest trick in the book, and we trick ourselves repeatedly. How many times have we said, "Oh this is it! This will really be fulfilling and satisfying." How has that worked out? "He is the last person I will love." "She really fulfills me." We need to call things what they are, and then maybe we'll stop wanting things that aren't beneficial and change them. Looked at in this way, "Rebirth in the Heavenly Realms" sounds pretty good, but "Indolence and Pride" does not sound so good, so maybe we do not want that, after all. Then, "I want real power" sounds good, until we stop and think, "Oh, it is jealousy and hostility," and that does not sound so good. No. Nothing will satisfy us. But we keep lying to ourselves. We keep entertaining the thought: "A little tweak here, a little tweak there, and I'll be just fine." This is what we have to give up: illusion. Because that is what keeps us here. We find this interesting. We want to know what is going on, we want the news feed turned louder; we want to look at the vehicular accident on the other side of the road. It is morbid fascination. When something is terrible, we stay tuned while complaining about it. It is morbid fascination. Meanwhile, the big accident going on is our own. We are the big wreck, in the literal sense of breaking, and we are fascinated by our own wreck. In fact, we glory in it. "Oh, no, no, no one knows what real suffering is, let *me* tell *you* what suffering is. *I, I* have suffered, *I* know suffering."

Both in the Definitive Aspiration and Prayer for Dewachen, we wish all beings, currently living or not, to "hear the Holy Name." This is the recollection of Buddha Nature, however that is achieved, which varies by culture, language, and tradition. If **OM AMIDEVA HRIH** reminds you of Buddha Nature, then that *is* hearing the Holy Name. It returns us to our wholeness, which is our Buddha Nature, so it is holy.

The Holy Name is not different from Amideva, and Amideva *is* our true nature. We cannot act as who we are unless we know who we are. As long as we think we are the Ugly Duckling, we are going to be unsuccessful, because we are trying to be what we are not. We are not ducks, we are swans. In the same way, we are never going to be successful pretending to be separate sentient beings because we are not. That is why we fail utterly and miserably, because this is not who we are. This is an invitation to recover our wholeness, to recover our True Purity, True Being, True Bliss, True Permanence. Now, whether we say **OM AMIDEVA HRIH** or **AMITUOFO**, or **AMIDAPHAT**, or **NAMU AMIDA BUTSU** does not matter.

This practice comes to us from the Buddha Shakyamuni, through Maitreya, through Nagarjuna, Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dolpopa, Taranatha, and our personal Lama. It is there, everywhere.

Most people do the Pure Land Practice in silence. Say **OM AMIDEVA HRIH** ten times after each line. It is our choice whether we say the invocation in English or Sanskrit. It is for our mind, so whatever works for us is best. It makes no difference. When a Lama leads Pure Land Practice, the verb spoken is “Purify ...”, when we are reciting at home, say, “I purify...” and “I renounce...” Otherwise it seems like it is somebody else’s job, and it is most certainly not. It is our job!

### ***Essential Practices***

There are essential practices for transferring consciousness to the Pure Land. Primary among these is the Definitive Aspiration. To make the Definitive Aspiration literally means that we recognize what is worthwhile and what is not worthwhile. So, we purify, and we renounce. Dolpopa said that the Vajrayoga, the Swift Path, is a path of abandonment, of renunciation. The Definitive Aspiration is the recognition of the need to STOP, of the need to discard all that is harming us and others.

We need to purify consciousness, because consciousness is what keeps us in the duality of subject and object. Then we need to renounce the causes of birth in all the unwanted destinies. These causes are none other than self-righteous indifference, jealousy and hostility, craving and striving, greed and miserliness, cruelty and hatred, fear and helplessness, indolence and pride, and doubt and hesitation. It is sad that we cling to these things that are not necessarily appealing to begin with, and that have consequences that are quite unbeneficial. But still we cling out of habit or just out of ignorance.

Another essential practice is reciting with a mala or a rosary. We recite **OM AMIDEVA HRIH**. It is recommended to recite at least one mala (108 repetitions) of **OM AMIDEVA HRIH** every day. It takes two minutes. If you are very slow, three minutes. If you sing it, it takes 4 to 5 minutes. Certainly, it takes less time than watching a rerun of a TV episode. So, on a daily basis, recite one (or, better yet, three) malas.

Occasionally we should recite the Pure Land Sutras, especially the Amideva Sutra, which is very short and easy to recite. We should also recite the Healing Prayer at least once a month. Reciting the Prayer for the Departed or deceased is recommended at least once a month.

The 49-Day Prayer for Dewachen is specifically for individuals who have passed away. It is a beautiful prayer, and it not only transforms us, but the departed as well. It is for single sentient beings, for a particular individual. If we want to pray for many, or everyone, we use the Prayer for the Deceased. It literally covers everyone—those in the hell realm, ghost realm, animal realm, human realm, demi-god realm, god realm, Bardo, everywhere. We use the Prayer for the Deceased for groups of people who have died, e.g., in a building collapse that you heard about on the news and want to pray for. If you are praying for multiple deceased, do multiple prayers naming one person in each, not a list of people in one prayer.

The length of the prayer recitation is proportionate to the normal life span of the being. For a dog or cat, say the prayer for 7 days. For a turtle, you might need 60 days. For an insect, one day. The 49-Day Prayer can also be done for someone who has been dead for many years. They are somewhere, and will benefit. Another beautiful and quite extensive prayer for the deceased is Dolpopa's Prayer for Dewachen.

10x10 is a very helpful practice. The practice of 10x10 is to recite **OM AMIDEVA HRIH** ten times, at ten different times of the day. Indeed, much more than having a single practice period in the morning or evening, the practice of 10x10 will keep you in mindfulness of your Buddha Nature the entire day. It takes one minute, but it keeps you in mindfulness throughout the day. We get so distracted during the day that even if we have a solid practice at the beginning or end of the day, the rest of the day often reverts to old habits, auto-pilot, and auto-react. Our Lamas recommend that we do it on waking up, on getting ready for the day, before each meal, at mid-day, mid-afternoon, and before going to bed. Choose times that are important to you.

Other times which aren't planned —for instance, when we see an animal dead on the road— are occasions for reciting **OM AMIDEVA HRIH** ten times. We are doing it specifically for them. Whenever we encounter someone suffering, that is an opportunity to recite. There is so much suffering. We will find plenty of opportunities to recite. Find opportunities during the day, because in reality, by the fact of interdependence, it makes very little difference whether we are reciting for ourselves or for another. There is ultimately no separation.

Do not recite in the head; move the recitation to the heart. Chant from the chest. From the head, the recitation agitates the mind. Know that there are different ways of chanting. If you lose concentration, chant faster. If agitated, chant slower. You can chant in either a low voice or a high voice.

Concentrate for a while on Pure Land Practice, and then when you return to the Three Gates Meditation, you will experience that they merge. They are actually designed that way. The Pure Land Practice fits exactly into our Three Gates Meditation. All our practices are modular.

When we begin Three Gates, we align body, breath, and mind. Notice there are eight periods of silence in this: one after the body's aligning, three as we align the breath, and four for the mind. There are eight consciousnesses that we purify in Pure Land Practice; we do the eight gazes in Three Gates Meditation. In Pure Land Practice we do eight renunciations; in Three Gates Meditation we hum in the low tone focused on the forehead, that stands for **OM**, the high tone focuses on the throat and stands for **AH**, and the natural tone focused on the heart stands for **HUM**. In Pure Land Practice we have three statements starting with **OM**, three starting with **AH**, and three with **HUM**. Finally, in Three Gates Meditation we rest in the Empty Luminosity. That is the entire section of the Return in Pure Land Practice. Resting in the empty luminosity, that is returning. It fits perfectly into the practice.

If we learn this, every time we meditate is an opportunity to do the Pure Land Practice. Every single time. Pure Land Practice is more direct than Three Gates Meditation. The reason we do not begin with this practice is that it is more difficult. The Buddha said so himself. When He spoke of the Pure Land, He said, "This is the most difficult teaching" —not because it is complex, but because people just cannot accept it. We have to introduce it very skillfully and slowly, because otherwise it sounds too much like something we can take lightly and say lightly.

These practices are very few, very straightforward, very simple, and very powerful. Remember, if we have trouble with the text, we recite it in our native tongue. The whole purpose of practicing is transforming our minds, abandoning the mind of separation, and recovering our True Nature. It does not have to involve doing anything peculiar. It is not meant to be difficult.

### **Our Teachers Speak of the Pure Land**

Here is a brief review of the salient points that our Lamas have labored to transmit to us about this path, this gate of the Pure Land. We begin with a statement by Amideva — at the time the Bodhisattva Dharmakara — as transmitted to us by the Buddha Shakyamuni in the Sukhavativyuha Sutra, sometimes called the longer Sukhavati Sutra:

*If, when I attain Buddhahood, sentient beings of the ten directions who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me, wish to be reborn in my Land, and recite my Name, even ten times, should fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.*

This is the form that aspirations usually take. Basically, He is placing conditions on his own Enlightenment. The great Bodhisattvas, this is what they do: “This *must* happen, or I refuse Buddhahood.” This vow (which for the Japanese is the 18<sup>th</sup>, for the Chinese, the 19<sup>th</sup> vow), is known as the Great Promise, or the Fundamental Vow. It encapsulates all that is necessary to avoid the Bardo, to leave samsara, to attain to a field of Buddha Activity in which there is no retrogression, in which there is swift progress towards Enlightenment.

What are the conditions? “*Sincerely and joyfully entrust*” ourselves. In other words, develop serene trust in the promise and in the reality of Buddha Nature. “Wish to be reborn in my Land” means to direct all our aspirations, direct all our wishes for this, instead of wishing for the latest iPhone and all that stuff we waste our wishes on. Just wish for this — everything else either comes or does not come, and it actually depends on previous karma, it does not depend on what we want. How many things have we wanted, and how many things have we gotten? And how many things we haven’t wanted, and we’ve gotten them? It is better to wish for what is truly important.

And “*recite my Name, even ten times.*” This means to remember our own Buddha Nature, at the very least, ten times. Why ten times? It is not a magic number. Simply enough times to actually make a dent in our mindstream. Most of our thoughts go by so very quickly that to establish an impression we need to recall at least ten times. It does not have to be only ten times. The more that we recall, that we recollect, that we remember our Buddha Nature, the better it is.

The Buddha Shakyamuni himself spoke extensively about the Pure Land Gate. He did this not only in the three **Pure Land Sutras** but in other sutras as well, such as the *Mahanama Sutra*, the *Sarakani Sutra*, the *Contemplation Sutra*, and the *Sukhavativyuha Sutra*. This is a well-documented teaching of the Buddha Shakyamuni. He says:

*The most difficult of all difficulties is to hear this teaching and accept it with serene trust.  
Nothing surpasses this difficulty.*

It is not a teaching for those who are incapable of other practices; it is a teaching for those who are capable of understanding and putting into practice the most direct, the swiftest of all paths: basically to accept reality as it is. But how difficult that seems! Just accept. We are so used to, “I am this little thing, I am limited, I am sinful, unworthy” — all this stuff that we have told ourselves. Isn’t that very prevalent, that people think they do not deserve happiness, that they do not deserve anything good? These may be extreme cases, but basically that is us. “Enlightenment is for special ones, for special beings only.”

Among Tibetan Buddhists, they call *tulkus* (reborn Lamas) and other teachers *Rinpoche*, meaning “Precious One,” and in the Tibetan community many people referred to my Lama as Rinpoche. He would always reply “You are Rinpoche too. You are also precious.” Everybody has the same nature. It is not that there are special people. There are no special people. The Buddha Shakyamuni was not special. None of the great Lamas were special. If anything, we living humans are special and not in a good sense: we are not recognizing our true nature.

The Buddha also said in the *Sukhavativyuha Sutra*:

*As the Tathagata, I regard beings of the three worlds with boundless great compassion. The reason for my appearance is to reveal teachings of the Way and save multitudes of beings by endowing them with real benefit.*

Now, if we have any idea of the motivation of the Buddha’s teaching, it is worthwhile to contemplate this, and worthwhile to also contemplate a little of the history of Buddha Shakyamuni. He chose to live very humbly in order to share with us the way out of suffering.

Motivation is very important. He did not do it for fame. He could have been more famous (at least during his earthly lifespan) remaining where he was, with more luxury, more pleasure, but he chose not to do so. His motivation was to help us. All his teachings have that purpose. He is famous for saying, “I only teach suffering and the cessation of suffering.” So, this teaching that He himself claims is the most difficult of all was given precisely to end suffering in the swiftest and most direct way.

Maitreya takes on this teaching of the **Pure Land Gate** by explaining what Buddha Nature is and what the characteristics of Buddha Nature are. We aren’t talking about some savior that is going to come and solve all our problems. We are talking about manifesting that which is inherent to each and every one of us. He says very clearly:

*Suchness is approached in different ways by ordinary beings, the deeply realized, and the completely enlightened. Hence, the seers of the truth have taught that all beings have Buddha Nature.*

The level of manifestation is different, but all have exactly the same nature.

*Ordinary beings go in the wrong direction. Those who see the truth revert from this, and the Tathagatas face it just as it is, unerringly and without conceptual complication.*

*Buddha Nature is True Purity because its nature is pure, and all karmic impurities have been removed. It is True Being because all discursive thought on “self” or “non-self” has been absolutely quelled. It is True Bliss through recognizing the five aggregates, which are of a mental nature, and also their causes’ demise. It is True Permanence since the non-difference of samsara and nirvana has been realized. —Mahayana Uttara Tantra Shastra*

Samsara and nirvana are not the same, and not different. You find that statement throughout the scriptures, but people tend to misunderstand, “Oh, samsara is nirvana too.” That is not what it means. Samsara and nirvana are not the same, since samsara is suffering, and nirvana is the cessation of suffering. Then why is it said they are not different? How do you establish difference? By comparison. Samsara is illusion, nirvana is reality. There is no comparison. They cannot be said to be different, as there is nothing to compare. Samsara actually does not exist. This does not mean they are the same thing. They aren’t the same because they are essentially different. One is true and the other is false. They are non-different precisely because one of them is false and does not substantially exist, and so comparison and difference cannot be established.



Arya Nagarjuna is mostly known for some of his more philosophical writings on emptiness. He also wrote extensively about Buddha Nature, about the development of Bodhisattvas, and about Dharmadhatu, which is Supreme Reality. He is the one who actually begins to establish that there is an easy path and a difficult path. He says:

*There are innumerable modes of entry into the Buddha's teaching just as there are in the world difficult and easy paths —traveling on foot by land is full of hardship and traveling in a boat by sea is pleasant— so it is among the paths of the Bodhisattvas. Some exert themselves diligently, while others quickly enter non-Retrogression by the easy practice based on serene trust.*

If anything, the hard difficult practices are a concession to those who cannot understand the reality of Buddha Nature. If they cannot understand it, the Buddha very kindly says, “Do this until you build enough confidence in your own worthiness, in your own goodness so that you can begin to manifest your Buddha Nature, begin to manifest Enlightenment.”

Nagarjuna also stated in the *Dasabhumika-vibhasa-sastra*:



*There are two paths by which Bodhisattvas reach the stage of non-retrogression: the path of difficult practice and the path of easy practice.*

*The path of difficult practice is attempting to reach the stage of non-retrogression through self-effort in the age of the five corruptions when no Buddha dwells in the world. [...] The path of difficult practice is, therefore, like an overland journey, painstakingly made on foot.*

*The path of easy practice is aspiring to be born in the Pure Land through faith in Amideva and attaining birth by the power of His Vows. In the Pure Land, we are sustained by the Buddha's Power and join those who are rightly established in the Mahayana path. [...] The path of easy practice is, therefore, like a pleasant journey on water, serenely made by boat.*

Vasubandhu carried on after his brother, and much more extensively, and wrote a treatise on birth in the Pure Land. We will not go into all of it here, but he speaks of Five Gates of Practice. These are the Gate of Reverence, the Gate of Invocation, the Gate of Aspiration, the Gate of Contemplation, and the Gate of Merit Transference. What is important to understand is that these are some of the most serious and intellectual teachers in the history of Buddhism. These very Lamas are telling us that the Pure Land is the direct path.

I am somewhat mortified when people say, “Pure Land practices are for homemakers,” hinting it is for people who take care of simple things and do not deeply read or study. My Lama would say, “Yes, for them and for everyone else, because no one should be excluded.” It is arrogance to say Enlightenment is only for those who do complex sadhanas. If it is not available to everyone, there is something wrong. It is part of human pride and arrogance: “Not everybody can do this; only I know the special, secret teaching that will allow *me* and no one else to become enlightened.” So yes, it is for everyone, including the homemaker and the laborer. Why not? It is for everyone.

Our great teacher Dolpopa wrote extensively, but little is translated. His works were banned for 400 years, from the time of the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, and only relatively recently has there been an effort to translate his very extensive work. He wrote many prayers of aspiration for Dewachen, and his residence at Jonang was called Dewachen. On his last night on this plane, he told his disciples he was going to Dewachen, and they thought he was going to his residence, but he was going to the real Dewachen.

He wrote many, many texts about the Pure Land. There is an interesting statement in one:

*Whichever beings in this world hear my name,  
may they arise in the Pure Land without regressing for a single lifetime.*

Based on these statements and other evidence, our Lineage considers Dolpopa to be the emanation of the Buddha Amideva. Dolpopa is always pictured with Amideva above his head.

Jetsun Taranatha, another of our great teachers, focused on the philosophical underpinnings of these practices. He wrote a short polemical work on *Essence of Other Emptiness*. Other Emptiness is the definition of ultimate reality, the Thoroughly Established Nature. Ultimate reality is True Purity, True Being, True Bliss, True Permanence. In this work, he concludes:

*We will come to the non-conceptual Buddha Nature and gradually meet its face. Hence, all whatsoever meditative cultivations of the path are for the sake of encountering the Thoroughly Established Nature.*

This is the secret. All the practices of Buddhism, all the 84,000 gates, all the methods, all the techniques, their only intent is for us to encounter the Thoroughly Established Nature, our Buddha Nature. That is the only purpose. There is no other. Taranatha lays it out very clearly: the purpose of all practices is to meet our Buddha Nature face to face. There is no other purpose.

If we can do it directly, why beat around the bush? It is already there. We can go back to that allegory that Buddha Shakyamuni and many other teachers have used of a very poor, destitute man living in a hovel that is built right over a buried treasure. We could comment that this man needs to go out and find a job and work hard for a promotion, save some of his income, invest it well, and hire a financial advisor — or we could tell him just to dig a hole in the floor of the hovel because it is right there! Some people will not believe it if we tell them, “Dig a hole, it is right here.” For them, we acquiesce and say, “Okay, we will find a job for you to work hard at; we will keep you busy, at least not harming yourself and others.”

My own Lama mentioned the Pure Land constantly, and in one of his short writings that we still have, we find:

*When dying, seek rebirth in the Pure Land, generate serene trust, make the definitive aspiration, and recite OM AMIDEVA HRIH. Superior to all methods for relinquishing “me” and “mine” is to dedicate all merit to the welfare of others. —Tashi Norbu Rinpoche, Heart Advice*  
*The teaching on the Pure Land is so simple you cannot understand it, so good you cannot accept it, so deep you cannot fathom it, so close you cannot see it. —Tashi Norbu Rinpoche*

Isn't that our story? This is our great self-defeat — that what is most evident to all our teachers, beginning with the Buddha Shakyamuni, remains a secret for us: that which is the closest of all, our own nature.

We can and should make a consistent effort to not only accept the teachings provisionally, but develop serene trust. We can do that through experience. It does not require blind faith. Asanga and Maitreya described ten ways to approach the reality of Buddha Nature. It is not something to accept on faith; it is observable. We can have experience of it, and we can become reasonably convinced of its reality.

We need to cultivate that. Some people are fortunate, they resonate with the teaching and just know it is true, but if we have any doubts, there is so much available to develop this serene trust. As long as we have doubts about what is our nature, we will continue to turn around in samsara. We will continue to beg while having a treasure right under our feet.

Please, please, make up your mind about what is truly important, what is your nature, and recognize that it is not difficult. We have been made to believe that unless we can shoot rays from our forehead, and emanate auras, and smell like sandalwood, that we cannot possibly attain Enlightenment. Enlightenment is our natural state. It is this separate existence that is unnatural.

We must disabuse ourselves of the wrong view that only the very exalted reach or attain Enlightenment. All sentient beings have Buddha Nature. All will attain complete, perfect Enlightenment. When the sun sets in the West it does not die, but continues to shine beyond the purview of our sight. So it is with life. It does not end in death, but endures beyond the limited perspective of our current experience.

May all beings manifest perfection! May all cultivate relentless effort, love, compassion, and joy!

*Jonang Tashi Nyima Palzangpo*



## AMIDEVA SUTRA

Skt: *Sukhavativyuhasutra*

Tib: *dewachen gyi kopé do*

Annotated by Tashi Nyima

Thus, have I heard<sup>10</sup>: At one time, the Buddha Shakyamuni was at the Jetavana Garden in Shravasti<sup>11</sup>. As many as twelve hundred and fifty humans assembled, and they were especially eminent monks. They were all illustrious practitioners who had eliminated their delusions and were of great renown. Among them, the elders Shariputra<sup>12</sup>, Maha Maudgalyayana<sup>13</sup>, Maha Kashyapa<sup>14</sup>, Maha Katyayana<sup>15</sup>, Maha Kausthila<sup>16</sup>, Revata<sup>17</sup>, Suddhi Panthaka<sup>18</sup>, Nanda<sup>19</sup>, Ananda<sup>20</sup>, Rahula<sup>21</sup>, Gavampati<sup>22</sup>, Pindola Bharadvaja<sup>23</sup>, Kalodayin<sup>24</sup>, Maha Kapphina<sup>25</sup>, Vakkula<sup>26</sup>, and Aniruddha<sup>27</sup>, were outstanding disciples.

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<sup>10</sup> *evam mayam shrutam* Formula that introduces all canonical *sutra* texts

<sup>11</sup> Jetavana was the second monastery donated to the Buddha, after the Veluvana Vihara in Rajagriha

<sup>12</sup> Foremost in wisdom

<sup>13</sup> Foremost in power

<sup>14</sup> Foremost in austerity

<sup>15</sup> Foremost in preaching

<sup>16</sup> Foremost in debate

<sup>17</sup> Foremost in equanimity

<sup>18</sup> Foremost in practice

<sup>19</sup> Foremost instructor of nuns

<sup>20</sup> Foremost in clear memory

<sup>21</sup> The Buddha's son; foremost in desire to learn

<sup>22</sup> Foremost field of merit in the higher realms

<sup>23</sup> Foremost field of merit in this Saha world

<sup>24</sup> Foremost teacher of the Dharma

<sup>25</sup> Foremost in knowledge of ancillary sciences

<sup>26</sup> Foremost in longevity

<sup>27</sup> Foremost in divine vision

Many Great Bodhisattvas were also present —the most excellent among them were Dharma Prince Manjushri<sup>28</sup>, Ajita Maitreya<sup>29</sup>, and the Bodhisattvas Gandhahastin<sup>30</sup> and Nityodyukta<sup>31</sup>. In addition, innumerable celestial deities such as Indra<sup>32</sup> had gathered.

Then the Buddha Shakyamuni explained to the venerable Shariputra<sup>33</sup>: "To the far west<sup>34</sup> of this world of delusion, beyond as many as ten trillion Pure Lands, there's another Land called Ultimate Bliss<sup>35</sup>, presided by a Buddha whose name is Amideva<sup>36</sup>, who is there even now teaching the Dharma. Do you know why that Pure Land is called Ultimate Bliss? It is because the people who live there never experience suffering<sup>37</sup>; they are mantled in multitude forms of happiness. For that reason it is called Ultimate Bliss.

"That Pure Land is adorned with seven railings<sup>38</sup>, with seven rows of gauze curtains with diminutive bells<sup>39</sup>, and surrounded by seven rows of trees<sup>40</sup>. All are set with four kinds of jewels<sup>41</sup>, which adorn the Land throughout. For that reason this world is called Ultimate Bliss.

"Again, in that world there are lotus ponds<sup>42</sup> whose shores are decorated with seven kinds of jewels<sup>43</sup>. The ponds brim with waters of eight good qualities<sup>44</sup>, and the floor of the ponds is lined with sand of gold<sup>45</sup>. The ponds are surrounded by steps<sup>46</sup> on their four sides made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, and crystal. Above are pavilions<sup>47</sup> lavishly adorned with the seven jewels of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, coral, red pearls, and agate. There are lotuses blooming in the

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<sup>28</sup> Bodhisattva of Wisdom

<sup>29</sup> The next Buddha who will appear in this Saha world

<sup>30</sup> Bodhisattva associated with the Perfection of Wisdom sutras

<sup>31</sup> Bodhisattva associated with the Perfection of Wisdom sutras

<sup>32</sup> King of the *devas*, the celestial beings

<sup>33</sup> "If a person, rightly saying it of anyone, were to say, 'He is the Blessed One's son, his offspring —born of his mouth, born of the Dharma, created by the Dharma, his heir in the Dharma, not his heir in material things,' he would be rightly saying it of Shariputra." —Buddha Shakyamuni, *Anupada Sutra*

<sup>34</sup> Direction of the setting sun, death, and the decline of wisdom in the Dharma Ending Age

<sup>35</sup> Skt. *Sukhavati*, Tib. *Dewachen*

<sup>36</sup> Infinite Splendor

<sup>37</sup> Suffering of suffering, suffering of change, suffering of conditioned existence

<sup>38</sup> Seven Railings that prevent birth in the hell, ghost, animal, human, and celestial realms, as well as in the temporary nirvana of Hearers and Solitary Realizers

<sup>39</sup> Seven Riches: hearing, trust, discipline, meditation, devotion, abnegation, humility Seven Purities: precepts, heart, views, discernment, judgment, understanding, and extinction of faults.

<sup>40</sup> Seven Purities: precepts, intention, views, discernment, judgment, understanding, extinction of faults

<sup>41</sup> Four Immeasurables: love, compassion, equanimity, and rejoicing in the merit of others.

<sup>42</sup> Lotus Ponds are environments for spontaneous birth. (Birth can be of four types: from the womb, from an egg, by mitosis, or spontaneous.) The lotus pond is also a symbol of the accumulation of merit and wisdom.

<sup>43</sup> Seven Degrees of Enlightenment: discerning true from false; zeal for the Dharma; delight in the Dharma; abandonment of all coarseness; power of remembrance; singleness of mind; and renunciation of lower states.

<sup>44</sup> Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right thought; right speech; right conduct; right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; and right meditation.

<sup>45</sup> Buddha Nature, the Pure Ground, the Basis of All

<sup>46</sup> Four Right Efforts: discarding the wrong that has already arisen; avoiding the wrong that has yet to arise; developing the good that has yet to arise; and augmenting the good that has arisen.

<sup>47</sup> Seven Characteristics of the True Teacher: capacity to establish trust; wit and eloquence; profundity of teaching; ability to remove faults and encourage qualities; extensive learning and experience; clarity of awareness; and freedom to appear and disappear, as needed.

ponds<sup>48</sup>, and their flowers are as large as the wheel of a cart. The blue flowers emit a blue light; the yellow flowers emit a yellow light; the red flowers emit a red light; and the white flowers emit a white light. Each of the lotus flowers glows, weaving an harmonic scene while emitting a subtle fragrance. This Land of Ultimate Bliss is an ideal environment so that whatever one lays eyes upon will bring about awakening.

“In Amideva’s Land of Ultimate Bliss, there is always heavenly music playing<sup>49</sup>. Moreover, the ground is made of gold<sup>50</sup>, and flower petals float down from the skies six times every day<sup>51</sup>. Early every morning, the people there gather the petals into their flower baskets and travel to ten trillion Pure Lands to offer them in worship to the Buddhas<sup>52</sup>. Having become mealtime during this activity, they return in an instant to Ultimate Bliss, take their meal and then practice mindfulness by walking<sup>53</sup>. Shariputra, the Land of Ultimate Bliss is an ideal environment to follow the Buddha’s path and awaken to enlightenment.

“Furthermore, in the Land of Ultimate Bliss there are various birds of brilliant coloring, such as white egrets, peacocks, parrots, *sharikas*, *kalavinkas*, and *jivamjivakas*<sup>54</sup>. The birds sing six times a day in exquisite voices. Their very singing expresses Amideva’s teachings, such as the Five Roots of Goodness<sup>55</sup>, the Five Powers<sup>56</sup>, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment<sup>57</sup>, and the Noble Eightfold Path<sup>58</sup>. When the people of the Land of Ultimate Bliss hear the bird’s voices, all of their thoughts are dedicated to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha<sup>59</sup>.

“Shariputra, do not assume that these were born as birds as a result of misdeeds in former lives. This is because in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, the three unfortunate realms<sup>60</sup> of hell, hungry ghosts, and animals do not exist. You will not even hear the names<sup>61</sup> of these three realms in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. How could it be said that one could fall into one of these unfortunate realms, when they do not in fact exist? Amideva manifested these birds so that they would transmit these teachings with their songs.

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<sup>48</sup> Four Benefits: freedom from affliction; pure conduct; accomplishment of what is to be done; and freedom from further conditioned existence.

<sup>49</sup> The sound of the Dharma is pleasing and uplifting.

<sup>50</sup> The essence of the Pure Land is non-different from the Buddha Nature of sentient beings.

<sup>51</sup> Six Periods of Practice: morning, noon, afternoon, dusk, night, and dawn.

<sup>52</sup> Flowers are symbolic of wisdom.

<sup>53</sup> Fourfold practice of reciting the Holy Name while standing, sitting, walking, and lying down.

<sup>54</sup> Different types of teachers: one who introduces the Dharma; one who gives Refuge; one who gives the Holy Name; one who gives higher vows and commitments; one who gives monastic orders; and the Root Teacher.

<sup>55</sup> Faith, vigor, memory, absorption, and wisdom.

<sup>56</sup> Faith, vigor, memory, absorption, and wisdom —as above, but in excellent degree.

<sup>57</sup> Critical examination of theories, energetic progress, joyful mentality, pliancy in body and mind, mindfulness in all activities, concentration, and equanimity under favorable or unfavorable circumstances.

<sup>58</sup> Right view, right thought, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right attention, and right concentration.

<sup>59</sup> The Three Jewels

<sup>60</sup> There are six realms in samsara. Three are considered ‘higher’: the realms of gods, demigods, and humans. Three are considered ‘lower’: the realms of animals, ghosts, and hell beings. In fact, all six are unfortunate.

<sup>61</sup> Since there is no suffering, there is no motivation to mention these unfortunate realms in the Pure Land.

“Shariputra, in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, a pleasant breeze wafts<sup>62</sup>, swaying the rows of trees colored with various jewels and waving the gauze curtains with little bells, stirring an exquisite melody.<sup>63</sup> This is just as though hundreds of thousands of musical instruments were being played in unison.<sup>64</sup>

“For all who hear this melody, their devotion to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha is spontaneously deepened. Shariputra, in this way the Land of Ultimate Bliss is an ideal environment so that whatever one hears will bring about awakening.

“Shariputra, why do you suppose this Buddha Amideva<sup>65</sup> is (also) called Amitabha<sup>66</sup>? Shariputra, this Buddha emits immeasurable light, shedding light upon all the worlds of the ten directions without obstruction<sup>67</sup>. For that reason this Buddha is called Amitabha, the Buddha of Boundless Light. Also, Shariputra, the lifespan of this Buddha and those in the Land of Ultimate Bliss is immeasurably long of incalculable eons<sup>68</sup>. For that reason this Buddha is (also) called Amitayus<sup>69</sup>, the Buddha of Boundless Life.

“Shariputra, from the day Amideva achieved enlightenment until the present day, an eternity of ten eons has already passed<sup>70</sup>. In addition, Shariputra, this Buddha has an immeasurable number of disciples<sup>71</sup>, practitioners who have eliminated their passions, whose numbers are incalculable. So are the numbers of the Bodhisattvas<sup>72</sup> also incalculable. Shariputra, in this way the Land of Ultimate Bliss is an ideal environment for sentient beings to achieve enlightenment<sup>73</sup>.

“Moreover, Shariputra, all sentient beings born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss will never veer from the path on their way to enlightenment<sup>74</sup>. Most have the virtue of becoming a Buddha in their very next life<sup>75</sup>. Their numbers are so vast as to be unknowable by calculation, and can only be explained in terms of counting for immeasurable incalculable eons.

"Shariputra, those sentient beings who now hear of this Pure Land should aspire to achieve birth in this Land of Ultimate Bliss because there they can join these virtuous beings. However, Shariputra, those that aspire to be born in this Land cannot rely merely on the meager roots of

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<sup>62</sup> The absence of harsh or intense contact between the senses and the sense objects.

<sup>63</sup> Without intense sense contact, one can hear the Dharma.

<sup>64</sup> The Oneness of the Dharma: properly understood, apparent differences in the various progressive levels of the teaching are reconciled in non-conceptual wisdom.

<sup>65</sup> *Amita* = Boundless, *Deva* = Splendor, Brightness: Boundless Radiance

<sup>66</sup> *Amita* = Boundless, *Abha* = Light

<sup>67</sup> His illuminating action is unimpeded –nothing can prevent Him from conferring liberation and enlightenment.

<sup>68</sup> Amideva’s salvific action is unending.

<sup>69</sup> *Amita* = Boundless, *Ayus* = Life

<sup>70</sup> Confirmation that His Vows have been accomplished; otherwise, Amideva would not be a Buddha, but a Bodhisattva.

<sup>71</sup> Followers of the Sravaka-yana, the vehicle of the hearers (Hinayana).

<sup>72</sup> Followers of the Bodhisattva-yana, the vehicle of the Bodhisattvas (Mahayana).

<sup>73</sup> The support of a magnificent Sangha is available.

<sup>74</sup> Non-retrogression is assured.

<sup>75</sup> The exceptions are voluntary. Certain Bodhisattvas vow to refuse Buddhahood until all sentient beings attain full enlightenment.

goodness<sup>76</sup> acquired through self-powered spiritual practices<sup>77</sup> or the effects of their own virtuous merit<sup>78</sup>.

“Shariputra, should good men and good women hear of the teaching of Amideva and assiduously recite the Holy Name for one day, two days, three, four, five, six, or seven days, or more<sup>79</sup>, then at the end of their lives, Amideva will appear before their very eyes with his entourage of Bodhisattvas and saintly disciples from the Land of Ultimate Bliss<sup>80</sup>. For that reason, in their last moment they will be without anxiety, and Amideva will welcome and escort them forthwith to be born in his Land of Ultimate Bliss<sup>81</sup>.

“Shariputra, I clearly see the benefit of this —that Amideva’s Promise is without fail— and therefore explain to you that sentient beings hearing this teaching should aspire to be born in Amideva’s Pure Land to assuredly attain Birth there.

“As I have now praised the sublime virtue of Amideva, who established the recitation of his Holy Name<sup>82</sup> for birth, there are Buddhas to the east, to the south, to the west, to the north, in the lower regions, and in the upper regions, as numerous as the sands of the Ganges River<sup>83</sup>, each from his own Land has extended his vast tongue<sup>84</sup> encompassing a trillion world systems<sup>85</sup>, pronouncing these Words of Truth<sup>86</sup>: ‘All of you should accept the *Sutra of All the Buddhas Who Praise the Inconceivable Virtue of Amideva*.’

“Why do you think this discourse was given the appellation the *Sutra of All the Buddhas Who Praise the Inconceivable Virtue of Amideva*? If good men and good women hear the name of this sutra and the name of Amideva praised by all the Buddhas, these good men and good women will be protected by all the Buddhas and all will attain supreme perfect enlightenment<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> In the path of the Bodhisattvas, the accumulation of merit and wisdom is undertaken for several eons.

<sup>77</sup> Austerities and practices performed independently of reliance on Amideva.

<sup>78</sup> Ordinary beings cannot attain the required qualifications for entering the Pure Land on their own, but must rely on Amideva’s transference of merit and wisdom.

<sup>79</sup> The power of Amideva’s Promises is not limited or conditioned by the quantity of human effort.

<sup>80</sup> Amideva’s activities are described as ‘welcoming and escorting’ sentient beings to the Pure Land at the moment of death, and ‘embracing and holding fast’ during the current lifetime.

<sup>81</sup> Amideva declares that we should settle our birth first.

<sup>82</sup> In the full version (as opposed to the recitation version) of the Sutra, various Buddhas are mentioned by name. In the East: Akshobhya, Merudhvaja, Mahameru, Meruprabhasa, and Manjughosha; in the South: Chandrasuryapradipa, Yachahprabha, Maharchiskandha, Merupradipa, and Anantavirya; in the West: Amitayus, Amitalakshana, Amitadvaja, Mahaprabha, Mahanirbhava, Ratnalakshana, and Shuddharashmiprabha; in the North: Archiskandha, Vaishvanaranirghosha, Dushpradharsha, Adityasambhava, and Jaliniprabha; in the Nadir: Simha, Yachas, Yashaprabhava, Dharma, Dharmadvaja, and Dharmadhara; and in the Zenith: Brahmaghosha, Nakshatraraja, Gandhottama, Gandhaprabhasa, Maharchiskandha, Ratnakusumasampushpitagatra, Salendraraja, Ratnotpalashri, Sarvarthadarsha, and Sumerukalpa.

<sup>83</sup> Idiomatic expression that conveys the meaning of infinitude

<sup>84</sup> Idiomatic expression to convey that the act of speech is true, and thus is not obstructed by time or space

<sup>85</sup> A Buddha presides over one world-system; especially powerful Buddhas preside over millions of world systems; supremely powerful Buddhas preside over a trillion world systems. The Buddhas who validate this teaching are all supremely powerful. (power = the capacity to lead others to enlightenment)

<sup>86</sup> ‘Words of Truth’ are vehicles for the intention of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

<sup>87</sup> *Anuttara samyak sambodhi*: *anuttara* = unsurpassed; *samyak* = correct; *sambodhi* = awakening; complete illumination; the highest degree of enlightenment



without veering from the path<sup>88</sup>. For that reason, all of you take these words of mine and of all the Buddhas, accept them, and place your trust in them<sup>89</sup>.

“Those who aspired in the past, aspire now, or will aspire in the future to birth in Amideva’s Land of Ultimate Bliss<sup>90</sup>, they will all attain supreme perfect enlightenment without veering from the path. That is the reason why those good men and women who cultivate serene trust<sup>91</sup>, vow to attain that Land<sup>92</sup> and recite the Holy Name<sup>93</sup>, they shall assuredly attain that birth.

“In the same way I praise the inconceivable virtue of all the Buddhas, all the Buddhas also praise my inconceivable virtues: ‘Shakyamuni Buddha, you have accomplished this most difficult and unprecedented achievement<sup>94</sup>. While in this present world full of the five corruptions —the corruption of the age<sup>95</sup>, the corruption of views<sup>96</sup>, the corruption of morality<sup>97</sup>, the corruption of beings<sup>98</sup>, and the corruption of lifespan<sup>99</sup>— you have attained supreme perfect enlightenment, and furthermore, you have explained this teaching of the Land of Ultimate Bliss and birth there through the Holy Name<sup>100</sup>, difficult to accept, for it is beyond the common understanding of this world<sup>101</sup>, for the sake of sentient beings.’

“You should remember this. While in this present world full of the five corruptions, I have accomplished this most difficult achievement and attained supreme perfect enlightenment. For the sake of the people of this world, I have explained this teaching of the Land of Ultimate Bliss, difficult to accept, for it is beyond the common understanding of this world. For that reason, all of the Buddhas praise me for this most difficult achievement<sup>102</sup>.”

When Buddha Shakyamuni finished explaining this sutra, Shariputra and all the monks, and the inhabitants of the realms of celestial beings, humans, and others<sup>103</sup> all were filled with delight<sup>104</sup> having carefully taken each individual word and engraved it on their hearts<sup>105</sup>, and after paying homage to Buddha Shakyamuni, they departed.

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<sup>88</sup> *Avaivartika* = the stage of non-retrogression

<sup>89</sup> Reference to the three stages of Dharma realization: study, contemplation, and meditation

<sup>90</sup> The three times: past, present, and future. The Pure Land is permanent.

<sup>91</sup> Serene Trust = certainty in the Promise of Amideva, and assurance of birth in His Pure Land

<sup>92</sup> Generating the definitive aspiration for birth in the Pure Land

<sup>93</sup> *om amideva hrih* (Sanskrit: *namo amitabhaya*; Chinese: *namo amituo fo*; Korean: *namu amita bul*; Japanese: *namu amida butsu*; Vietnamese: *nammo amida phat*)

<sup>94</sup> There have been Buddhas in this Saha world prior to Shakyamuni, but none that have manifested full enlightenment during an age with these characteristics.

<sup>95</sup> Natural catastrophes; degradation of the environment; conflict between polities, communities, and individuals

<sup>96</sup> Proliferation of false views and degradation of the pure Buddha Dharma

<sup>97</sup> Disregard for rules of conduct at all social levels; decrease in religiosity

<sup>98</sup> Increased morbidity; decrease in physical strength and endurance; rise in mental illness

<sup>99</sup> Shortening of average duration of healthy life (conducive to spiritual cultivation)

<sup>100</sup> In this Saha world, the teaching on Amideva’s Promise had not been previously imparted by other Buddhas

<sup>101</sup> This teaching requires an understanding of karma, emptiness, Buddha Nature, and transference of merit.

<sup>102</sup> That is, effectively communicating the Pure Land teachings.

<sup>103</sup> The teaching on the Pure Land is not restricted to any particular group or type of sentient being.

<sup>104</sup> Serene trust in the Pure Land teachings imparts bliss “in the beginning, the middle, and the end.”

<sup>105</sup> So should we study, contemplate, and remember the Sutra, engaging in frequent contemplative recitation.



### HEALING AND LONGEVITY PRACTICE

Protector Amideva, Whose mere Name destroys untimely death,  
look upon me and all beings with Your great untiring mercy.

Confused and not realizing the great expanse of reality  
—a state without coming or going, free of signs since the beginning—  
our corrupted minds have accumulated unwholesome tendencies,  
resulting in immense suffering.

Bless me and all beings by pacifying conditions leading to untimely death,  
and arrest the degeneration of our lifespan and virtue.

Please confer long life and healing now,  
bringing together all that is beneficial in *samsara* and *nirvana*,  
and making our mental streams and depleted life forms blossom with wisdom and compassion.

May I and all beings manifest perfect health at the crown of the head.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings manifest perfect health at the forehead.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings manifest perfect health at the throat.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings manifest perfect health at the heart.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings manifest perfect health at the upper abdomen.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings manifest perfect health at the lower abdomen.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings manifest perfect health at the base of the torso.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings attain ultimate emancipation from all veils and bonds.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings forever be rid of the body of sickness  
and attain the body of enlightenment.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings become great remedies,  
annihilating the sickness of all that is unwholesome.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings perfect the remedy that relieves all illnesses  
and abide securely in the state of non-regression.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings develop the medicines of enlightenment  
and be able to extract the poison arrows of all afflictions.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings draw near to saints and sages,  
annihilate afflictions, and cultivate pure practices.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings become great physicians,  
forever eliminating all illnesses and not letting them recur.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings be indestructible trees of medicine, able to cure all sentient beings.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings attain the light of omniscience  
and remove the myriad arrows of sickness.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM**

May I and all beings be happy and peaceful.

May I and all beings be healthy and strong.

May I and all beings feel safe and protected.

May I and all beings live with ease and joy.

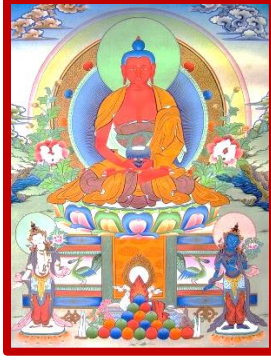
**OM AMARANI JIVANTAYE SVAHA**

I take refuge in Amideva, Well Gone and Well Come, the Victor, the Perfectly Enlightened,  
Eternal Life, Source of Eternal Life, Perfection of Eternal Life, Possessor of Eternal Life,  
Accomplisher of Eternal Life, Eternal Light, Eternal Courage, Conquering Eternal Valor,  
Field of Eternal Life, Thundering Voice of Eternal Life, Accomplisher of All Aims,  
Destroyer of all Karma and Afflictions!

**OM AMRITA TEJE HARA HUM**

All is pure as it is. We are pure as we are.

**OM AH HUM AMIDEVA AYU SIDDI HUM** (x10)



## Prayer for Dewachen

*EH MA HO* In front sits the magnificent Amideva,  
the Lord of Boundless Radiance.

On His right stands the Lord of Compassion,  
and on His left, the Lord of Powerful Means,  
surrounded by innumerable Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Limitless peace and happiness is Dewachen.

As (name of deceased) passes from this world,  
may they be born there without taking cyclic birth.

May they have the good fortune of meeting Amideva face to face.

By the power and blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas  
of the three times and the ten directions,  
may they attain this aspiration without hindrance.

I prostrate to the Buddha Amideva. I pray to Guru Rinpoche.

Beloved Root Teacher, hold her/him in your kind regard.

Gracious Teachers of the Pure Lineage, guide them on the path.

May they know that they dream while dreaming.

May they know that they die while dying.

Bless them to master the profound path of *powa*.

By the swift path of *powa*, may they journey to the Pure Land.

Bless them to be reborn in Dewachen.

According to Your wisdom, may they quickly pass from this life,

avoid the *bardo*, and immediately attain to Dewachen,

where they can rest in natural perfection,

with no more birth, disease, decay, or death;

receive the best and purest Teachings

from the best and purest Teachers;

attain complete enlightenment for the sake of all beings,

and return to dredge *samsara* to its depths.

By the blessings of the Lords of Compassion and Powerful Means,

I pray that (name of deceased) invoke the Holy Name.

May they take refuge in the Lord of Boundless Radiance  
and spontaneously arise in Dewachen.

**OM AMIDEVA HRIH** (x10)

*This prayer is recited for a period of 49 days, preferably three times each day,  
or until there are clear signs of accomplishment.*



## **A Prayer for Birth in Dewachen** *—Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltzen*

Homage to the Lord of the World!  
I prostrate to the Unsurpassable Subduer,  
the One who has Passed Beyond, the Foe Destroyer,  
the Fully and Perfectly Enlightened Buddha,  
the one of boundless life and wisdom,  
called the King of Majestic Brilliance.

As prophesied by Buddha Amideva  
who grants the perfection of longevity and immortality  
for the benefit of all migrating beings afflicted by birth, aging, sickness, and death,  
I too shall say this prayer of aspiration from previous lives:

***Whichever beings in this world hear my name,  
may they arise in the Pure Land,  
without turning back for even a single lifetime.***

As written in the Sukhavativyuha Sutra,  
through your unsurpassed power and wish to lead beings,  
I too shall go for refuge to Buddha Amideva.  
Having discarded my physical body, may I take birth in the Land of Bliss.

Through the power of completing unlimited prayers,  
whose qualities like strings of beads  
are praised by all the Buddhas of the ten directions,  
may I spontaneously arise in Dewachen.

May I spontaneously arise in Dewachen,  
where Amideva, the Leader of Beings, dwells,  
with Chenrezig, the powerful one Vajrapani,  
and many other countless Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

May I spontaneously arise in Dewachen,  
a precious land as smooth as the palms of our hands,  
encircled by golden lattices and filled with many marvelous lotuses.

May I spontaneously arise in Dewachen,  
where from the top of each lotus limitless light rays radiate,  
emanations of the Buddhas of the ten directions spreading everywhere.

May I spontaneously arise in Dewachen,  
where trees of all varieties are made of seven precious substances  
appearing colorful and in good form, delightful to behold,  
pervaded in all directions by pleasant sounds.

May I spontaneously arise in Dewachen,  
where many kinds of flocks of birds are manifestations of the Sugata,  
producing melodious sounds and praises, recalling the Protector of all beings.

May I spontaneously arise in Dewachen,  
where delightful streams endowed with sweet fragrance  
sing constant praises of the qualities of the Subduer.

May I spontaneously arise in Dewachen,  
where gods and humans with golden complexion,  
attired in beautiful clothes and decked with ornaments,  
enjoy immeasurable bliss in the practice of the Dharma.

May I spontaneously arise in Dewachen,  
where nourishment, clothing, bedding, medicine, monastic robes,  
and jeweled mansions manifest the moment one wishes for them.

May I spontaneously arise in Dewachen,  
where material offerings, such as canopies and banners,  
and whatever one desires, appear instantly  
through the power of the aspirations of the Protector.

May I spontaneously arise in Dewachen,  
where one attains supernormal powers,  
such as clairvoyance, clairaudience, retrocognition, and superior intelligence.

May I spontaneously arise in Dewachen  
and directly discern, at the moment of death,  
the prophesy granted by ninety-nine million and a thousand rejoicing Buddhas  
extending their hands in salutation.

May I spontaneously arise in Dewachen  
when I and all others are about to die, and Amideva,  
the Leader of Beings and King of Dharma,  
along with hundreds of ordained monks, appear lovingly before me and encircle me.

Having seen the Protector and his retinue,  
may there spring to my mind the highest joy,  
and with no loss of awareness, may I spontaneously arise in Dewachen.

May these aspirational prayers be fulfilled  
through the blessings of Chenrezig, King of the World,  
through powerful prayers to the source of all phenomena,  
the great force of Amideva's blessings,  
the power of whatever merit has been accumulated by all beings,  
the blessings of the Mother of Clear Light,  
and the blessings of the truth of the Three Jewels.

No sooner have I discarded this impure body,  
may I spontaneously arise in Dewachen,  
and soon after that birth,  
may I complete the ten Bodhisattva levels  
and engender emanations in all directions to serve others.





### MEMORIAL PRAYER FOR THE DECEASED

I prostrate to the Buddha Amideva. I pray to the Precious Lama.  
Beloved Root Teacher, hold all beings in your kind regard.  
Gracious Lamas of the Pure Lineage, guide us on the path.  
May we know that we dream while dreaming. May we know that we die while dying.  
Bless us to master the profound path of *powa*.  
By the swift path of *powa*, may I and all beings spontaneously arise in Dewachen.  
Limitless peace and happiness is Dewachen.  
As all sentient beings and I pass from this world, may we be born there without taking cyclic birth.  
By the power and blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas  
of the three times and the ten directions, may we attain this aspiration without hindrance.  
May all beings afflicted with self-righteous indifference spontaneously arise in Dewachen.

**OM AMIDEVA HRIH**

May all beings afflicted with jealousy and strife spontaneously arise in Dewachen.

**OM AMIDEVA HRIH**

May all beings afflicted with craving and striving spontaneously arise in Dewachen.

**OM AMIDEVA HRIH**

May all beings afflicted with greed and miserliness spontaneously arise in Dewachen.

**OM AMIDEVA HRIH**

May all beings afflicted with cruelty and hatred spontaneously arise in Dewachen.

**OM AMIDEVA HRIH**

May all beings afflicted with helplessness and fear spontaneously arise in Dewachen.

**OM AMIDEVA HRIH**

May all beings afflicted with indolence and pride spontaneously arise in Dewachen.

**OM AMIDEVA HRIH**

May all beings afflicted with doubt and hesitation spontaneously arise in Dewachen.

**OM AMIDEVA HRIH**

According to Your wisdom, may I and all beings quickly pass from this life,  
avoid the *bardo*, and immediately attain to Dewachen,  
where we can rest in natural perfection with no more birth, disease, decay, or death,  
receive the best and purest Teachings from the best and purest Teachers,  
attain complete enlightenment for the sake of all beings,  
and return to dredge *samsara* to its depths.

**OM AMIDEVA HRIH**

May all sentient beings everywhere hear the Holy Name.

May all awaken to the Boundless Radiance, and spontaneously arise in Dewachen.

**OM AMIDEVA HRIH** (x10)

No sooner have I discarded this impure body, may I spontaneously arise in Dewachen,  
and soon after that birth, may I complete all levels of enlightenment  
and generate incalculable emanations to rescue all who suffer.

**OM LOKESHVARARAJA HRIH — OM AMRITA TEJE HARA HUM — OM AH HRIH**