

# Practical issues Surrounding Death and Dying

"When the last hour is at hand, you will stand at a crossroad. If you have prepared in advance, you will be ready to move on with great ease and confidence, like an eagle soaring into the sky"

Tulku Thondup Rinpoche

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[Once you have gathered (or while you are gathering), I recommend using a binder or some organized file with copies of all documents, to include a place listing all of your accounts, passwords, house and car information, deeds, etc. then make pertinent copies and keep in manila envelopes and/or distribute to appropriate family members, executors, organizations to whom you are leaving a legacy, MPOA, POA,etc. Your healthcare providers should have copies of your advance directives.]

## **General Preparedness questions to consider:**

*ARE YOU PREPARED FOR AN ACCIDENT, SERIOUS ILLNESS, DYING, DEATH?*

### **Emergency Care**

Do you have your emergency contacts in your wallet, car? How could a stranger be of help, at a store, church?

What is your hospital: do you have copies of driver's license, medical card?

What friends or family should be contacted right away if you were seriously sick/hurt?

What is your pillar/circle of love? Could they be gathered easily and quickly?

Would your partner or nearest contact know how to get a hold of your dearest friends?

How could someone help if your partner or nearest loved one were out of town?

Do you keep your documents in one place? Do others know where it is?

Other thoughts?

### **Medical Care**

If you were incapacitated, do you have an advocate? Do you have a medical care directive?

Does your advocate know how you feel about medicine, doctors, hospitals?

Do you have wishes, preferences that would be important to you in the hospital?

How do you feel about life sustaining measures?

Do you have your medications, medical history in a list, in one easy to find place?

### **Spirituality/Emotional Care**

Do you have a spiritual will?

Do you have favorite practices, prayers, music that would be comforting to you?

Do you have personal wishes about how you would like to die if you could participate?

How do you feel about a life review: do you have incomplete business?

Would you like to write letters? Do a legacy video?

If you were to die suddenly, is there anything you feel is unresolved, would you have regret?

### **Memorial Care**

Would you like to help write your obituary?

Have you expressed your wishes around organ donation? Are you registered? Body after death?

Have you made arrangements?

Have you prearranged your funeral instructions?

Do you have wishes around death care? How do you feel about embalment, viewings, etc.?

Would you like to be buried or cremated? Do green choices interest you?

### **Legal Care**

Do you have the 4 documents: POA, Medical Care directive, Will and Trust?

Have you written down preference around your personal items and who you would like them to go to?

Does your partner/closest contact have access to your bank accounts?

Are your beneficiaries current and on all accounts?

Have you reflected on insurance and have the protection you desire for your loved ones?

## Advance Directives

*Advance Directives* are written instructions for caregivers that specify what actions should be taken if a person is no longer able to make decisions due to illness. These, as well as your living will should be readily available and with you and your medical POA as you enter any health care facility, once you are potentially facing the end of life.

### LEGAL DOCUMENTS:

--**POLST** -**P**ortable **O**rders for **L**ife-**S**ustaining **T**reatment.

*This is important if you do not want to have invasive care when you face likely irreversible or terminal events. Be sure you fully understand the meaning of it when you discuss it with your provider. It can be reversed or revoked by you at any time.*

You can request this form through your primary care provider. They will ask you questions about your level of care/intervention wishes in the event of a cardiopulmonary arrest, and or unconscious state that may require intervention to sustain life.

This form will then be signed and registered with the state of Oregon, 'Oregon Polst registry', associated with an identifying number.

EMT or other first responder can check this registry and know your wishes.

Without this form and registry, if EMT is called to a scene where you are unconscious, legally they must perform CPR, potentially to intubation and mechanical ventilation, if they have no legal documentation of your wishes to be treated otherwise.

The form also covers the medical interventions you want or don't want if you are breathing and have a pulse, but unable to verbalize your wishes: this might include comfort care only to limited treatment to full treatment, up to and including hospital, Intensive care etc.

A copy of this form and/or your polst registry number should be readily visible, available: often on the kitchen refrigerator. I have a label affixed to my cell phone, as well as a magnetic tag on my refrigerator. (These tools come from the state for your use once you are registered.)

--**Healthcare Advance directives** - A printable PDF of the document legally recognized in the state of Oregon can be downloaded from this site: <https://www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/ABOUT/Documents/Advance-Directive.pdf>

It covers:

1. appointing a healthcare representative for when you are unable to express your needs/preferences yourself.
  2. your specific healthcare instructions--things you want done if indicated and things you don't want done to you.
  3. In the event of fatal progressive illness, it includes life support/tube feeding questions.
- It needs to be signed by 2 witnesses. It can be revoked by you at any time.

### Extras:

1. I added an addendum to these advance directives to cover my wishes for care in the event of **dementia**. A printable pdf of the dementia directive can be found at this site: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a0128cf8fd4d22ca11a405d/t/5f9202eee780d71b5005366d/1603404559093/dementia-directive.pdf>

2. I also included an attachment indicating preferences related to general care during the process of dying, as well as care of the body after death.

*This might be the place to include the after death plans, such as burial/cremation/aquafication/green burial/home burial/body donation to science/funeral/service wishes and/or, for example, you might like your ashes spread at SCOL, with some spiritual ritual or service there, or a ritual or service at your home, or other site and you have specific preferences for chanting, songs or any other rituals.*

**--Last Will and Testament**—Time to let go of everything! It is possible to accomplish without a lawyer and can be done using a fairly simple online template if your financial/family affairs are relatively uncomplicated.

I personally used *No/lo* online and with their printed book. It was very thorough and user-friendly, walking me through the process. Much less expensive than a lawyer. At the time, the printed book with detailed information and online access for completing forms, etc. was about \$70.

Notarization of the document is apparently not required, but, depending upon your situation (ie, anticipating the possibility of someone contesting the will), it might be desirable.

It does require signature of yourself and at least two witnesses, who would have no conflict of interest (ie not beneficiaries).

Most people may require a lawyer to help sort through more complex legal/financial issues, and to avoid probate where possible.

While we complete this before death, it is not implemented until after death, so it is best to include some mention or notification of people/institutions to whom you are making donations; identifying your executor, etc. along with your advance directives to facilitate communication.

### **--POWER OF ATTORNEY (POA)**

A power of attorney is a legal document that gives someone you choose the power to act in your place. In case you ever become mentally incapacitated, you'll need what are known as "durable" powers of attorney for medical care and finances. A durable power of attorney simply means that the document stays in effect if you become incapacitated and unable to handle matters on your own.

With a valid power of attorney, the trusted person you name will be legally permitted to take care of important matters for you -- for example, paying your bills, managing your investments, or directing your medical care -- if you are unable to do so yourself.

Taking the time to make these documents is well worth the small effort it will take. If you haven't made durable powers of attorney and something happens to you, your loved ones may have to go to court to get the authority to handle your affairs.

To cover all of the issues that matter to you, you'll probably need two separate documents: one that addresses health care issues and another to take care of your finances.

### **-Medical Power of Attorney - MPOA**

When you make a medical power of attorney -- more commonly called a "durable power of attorney for health care" -- you name a trusted person to oversee your medical care and make health care decisions for you if you are unable to do so.

Your health care agent will work with doctors and other health care providers to make sure you get the kind of medical care you wish to receive. When arranging your care, your agent is legally bound to follow your treatment preferences to the extent that he or she knows about them. They should have all of your of your advance directives and/or other written health care instructions.

Oregon forms combine a durable power of attorney for health care and health care declaration into a single form, which is your "advance health care directive."

## **-Durable or General POA**

This would be a trusted person who will manage all your assets when You are no longer able to do so. They would have authorization to act on your behalf when you are not available or able to. Invaluable!

Your agent can handle mundane tasks such as sorting through your mail and depositing your Social Security checks, as well as more complex jobs like watching over your retirement accounts and other investments, or filing your tax returns. Your agent doesn't have to be a financial expert; just someone you trust completely who has a good dose of common sense. If necessary, your agent can hire professionals (paying them out of your assets) to help out.

## **--OTHER, NON-LEGAL DOCUMENTS**

- **Letter of Instruction** —This is not a legal document, but can be a useful supplement to your will. It might include names and contact information of attorneys, accountants and financial advisors, other instructions for your executor; a list of your accounts, online & otherwise, passwords, etc.

{I have letters to my children (executors, POAs) and my brother (MPOA)}

- **Living Will** — This is NOT a legal document, like the Oregon Advance directives, but it could provide helpful information, using different templates, of which there are many, that you may feel express your wishes more clearly or with more detail. There are many templates. One example: The *Aging with dignity* site has developed the "Five wishes" template, helpful for making clear how you wish to be treated as you approach the end of your life. This can help your providers, family and caretakers to be on the 'same page' pertaining to your wishes.

At this time, Oregon is one of the few states that requires additional documentation for it to carry legal weight. (Oregon Advance Directives)

- **Proof of ownership** - This would be an informal document, essentially a list of what you own: homes, stocks, bank accounts, loans, debts, vehicles, savings bonds, etc. to help assure assets won't be overlooked

- **Spiritual or Dharma Will** - This is the opportunity to express your deepest wishes. How you would like to be 'cared for' by your dharma friends when you are dying; what ceremonies, mantras, prayers you would like to be said, perhaps before, during and after death. if you wish your body to remain in place for 3 days; how it would be cared for, etc. this might include where you would like your ashes (if you are cremated) and what ceremony you might like with that. ie some folks have had their ashes left at SCOL. it might also include your spiritual aspirations; your legacy to KCC, if included in your will.

- **Ethical Will** - not a formal document, but more a philosophical legacy. a reflection back on your life; sharing your deeper views *behind* the legal documents; leaves 'intangible' assets. suggestions might be:

*I believe the most important things in life are:*

*The values or traditions I want to pass along to my family and friends are:*

*When I am gone, I hope my family and friends will have learned this from me:  
Life has taught me these lessons:*

## Management of Body After Death

Depending upon the ultimate destination plans there are a number of options. There is a fair amount of freedom for handling bodies after death, funerals and burials. Most of which can be done by concerned parties. A professional 'funeral director' is not required.

Rules to keep in mind for Oregon include:

if the body is not going to reach its final resting place within 24 hours, either embalming or refrigeration is required.

**Embalming** is required if:

- it has been refrigerated, it has been 24 hours since death and it will be removed from refrigeration and shipped and will not reach its destination within 6 hours (unless placed in a sealed, rigid container)
- the death was due to one of certain communicable diseases and the body will be shipped (if religious customs prohibit embalming, the body may be shipped in an approved, sealed container)
- the death was due to a communicable disease and there will be a public viewing, or
- there will be a funeral service or public viewing and the body will be removed from refrigeration for longer than six hours.

**Refrigeration** (ie with dry ice) is acceptable for bodies kept in place for up to ten days. Some Shambala sanghas have 'mastered' this process and provided guidelines about how to do this. (another document)

**Burial options:** (there are many in Oregon.)

Here are a few that I know of:

1. *Body donation* -

The main option that does *not* allow for the body to remain untouched for a prolonged period of time is if the body has been donated for scientific use. In order for the body to be in a useable state, it generally must be picked up within a very short time after death, ie within 1-2 hours. There are a number of organizations with whom one can register. At the time of death, they will be notified and will provide the pick up within the designated time. Generally, they will provide cremation and send the family the ashes of the deceased after completion of their use. Economically, this is the cheapest option. There is no cost for this service.

2. *Home burial* -

It is possible to bury a body on your private property; if you own the property; get county/city approval; and disclose the presence of the body upon sale of real estate. There may be zoning restrictions, depending upon where you live. You would need to obtain the death certificate. In Oregon, a death certificate must be filed within 5 days after death.

3. *Green burial* -

This is an option to bury a body without a coffin, or with a biodegradable one; with a simple shroud or biodegradable covering. Several cemeteries offer an area designated for green burials. Depending on materials you choose, could be inexpensive or spendy, but in general the costs of green burials are said to be roughly half that of conventional ones.

4. *Alkaline hydrolysis, also known as Bio-cremation or Aquafication* -

This option uses an alkaline and water process to reduce the remains to bone fragments, considered to be much more eco-friendly than cremation, as it is virtually non-polluting.

5. *Direct cremation* -

This option is less expensive than standard cremation, as it does not include a formal funeral or prefuneral events and the body is generally cremated in a simple container, rather than a casket.

there are no body preparations. You can engage the services of a crematory directly, rather than through a funeral home.

6. *Conventional burial* - Generally the more expensive, but there are countless options, easily accessed with online search.

## Death and Dying Annotated Bibliography -

### **Books:**

Anyen Rinpoche. *Dying with confidence: A Tibetan Buddhist Guide to preparing for Death.* Good, concise, practical ideas for spiritual preparation for dying. Includes prayers, brief Phowa practices. Takes you through the signs of death, the Bardos, etc. 2010. 170 pages.

Bokar Rinpoche. *Death and the Art of dying in Tibetan Buddhism.* Pithy, clear description of the Bardo of death, along with how to practice with them. Simple practices to use while approaching death and dying. 1993. 120 pages.

Brach, Tara Ph.D. *Radical Acceptance: Embracing your life with the Heart of a Buddha.* Some very nice guided meditations to lead us to full acceptance of who we are and where we are in healing. Warm and clear—lots of personal stories. 2003. 328 pages

Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche. *Life in Relation to Death.* Very brief, practical and profound instructions for preparing for death. 2000. 84 pages.

Dzogchen Pphonlop Rinpoche. *Mind Beyond Death.* This is a clear and detailed description of and teachings about the entire path of the 6 Bardos—from the Bardo of Birth through this life through the Bardo of becoming. Rich; full of heart and wisdom; and all the details in well-organized format. 2007. 295 pages.

Halifax, Joan. *Being with Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness in the Presence of Death.* A 'must read'! So much wisdom and great stories from her many years of being with the dying. Many beautiful meditation exercises. Practical advice for living and dying and a wonderful spaciousness for being with whatever arises. 2009. 195 pages.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama. *Mind of clear Light: Advice on Dying and Living a Better Life.* His Holiness "shares the ways in which active contemplation of the deep nature of the mind—clear light—and its manifestation throughout our life and at death can reveal to us how to live....meaningfully". 2003. 215 pages.

Holecek, Andrew. *Preparing to Die: Practical Advice and Spiritual Wisdom from the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition.* A useful guidebook. Chock full of spiritual wisdom, teachings, practices and practical guidelines, checklists for virtually every issue related to death and dying and beyond. 2013. 395 pages.

Hookham, Lama Shenpen. *There's More to Dying than Death: a Buddhist Perspective.* Practical, down to earth discussion of issues surrounding death and dying. Advice for planning one's own death; helping others; spiritual will ideas, sample funeral services, simple Phowa practice. 2006. 182 pages

Lief, Judith. *Making Friends with Death: A Buddhist Guide to Encountering Mortality.* Clear, practical, gentle exploration/cultivation of personal relationship to dying, death & healing others.

Longaker, Christine. *Facing Death and Finding Hope: A guide to the Emotional and Spiritual Care of the Dying.* "An extraordinarily wise and helpful book. Christine offers a manual filled with the treasures and courage she discovered: profound meditation, compassionate forgiveness, and the heart's riches in the face of death." 1997. 246 pages.

Ostaseski, Frank. *The Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully.* "These Five Invitations show us how to wake up fully to our lives. They can be understood as best practices for anyone coping with loss or navigating any sort of transition or crisis; they guide us toward appreciating life's

preciousness. Awareness of death can be a valuable companion on the road to living well, forging a rich and meaningful life, and letting go of regret." 2017. 282 pages.

Ringu Tulku Rinpoche. *From Milk to Yogurt: A Recipe for Living and Dying*. Very brief, easy read—looking at interdependence, rebirth, the ‘continuous flow’, death and dying from the Buddhist view; clear and simple conceptually. The Q & A’s address common questions of westerners. 2013. 61 pages.

Sogyal Rinpoche. *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. The ultimate guide--clear and definitive--"on how to live in light of the greatest teacher of all---Death." 1992. 366 pages

Venerable Lama Karma Samten Gyatso. *Living with Death & Dying: Teachings on the Six Bardos*. Using the main verses of the six Bardos, he gives concise, clear teachings from the bardo of birth to the bardo of becoming—essentially a brief summary the whole path! 2002. 72 pages.

### **Books specifically about Bardo:**

Chogyi Nyima Rinpoche. *The Bardo Guidebook*. Concise discussion of ‘how to die’; straightforward discussion of the Bardos. 163 pages

Dzogchen, Ponlop. *Mind Beyond Death*. (see notation above)

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. *Bardo: Interval of Possibility*. Commentary on "Aspiration for the Bardo" by Chogyi Wangchuk. Very readable, practical, down-to-earth discussion of bardo and the bardos associated with dying, death and after death. 2007. 126pp

Lama Lodu. *Bardo Teachings: The Way of Death and Rebirth*. Precise and vivid description of dying, the intermediate state after death and rebirth, with instructions of how to traverse. Forward by Kalu Rinpoche, who instructed Lama Lodu to give these teachings in 1978, which until then had been considered secret. 2010. 72 pp.

### **Websites:**

Ringu Tulku Rinpoche. [livinganddyinginpeace.org](http://livinganddyinginpeace.org). Website with talks relative to: “dying in a graceful and joyful way - the practice that we need to work on.”

[agingwithdignity.org](http://agingwithdignity.org) - Home of the “Five Wishes” document of advance directives. Guides you to the Oregon legal advance directive document that must accompany to make it “legal” in Oregon (one of the few states that require this additional document).

[theconversationproject.org](http://theconversationproject.org) - document/template to help to you with opening and ongoing conversations about dying with your family and friends.

[oeonline.org](http://oeonline.org) - green burials in Oregon

### **DVDs:**

*Dying Wish*. A dying doctor's decision to stop eating and drinking and die with grace. "An extraordinary, beautifully made film of courageous physician facing his final days with the help of a loving family and supportive hospice team. It is thought provoking and reassuring."

*How to Die in Oregon*. "...this documentary...gently enters the lives of the terminally ill as they consider whether--and when--to end their lives by lethal overdose. At the heart of the film are the patients themselves, their families and friends, as they grapple with the legal option they are allowed in Oregon...."

### **Meditation Practices for Death and Dying** (before, during and at the time of death)

These are a couple of meditation/contemplation practices I have tried and found to have depth and power for me. I imagine gaining familiarity with them could be very helpful in feeling prepared for the events of dying and for helping with others who are dying.



## **The Essential Phowa Practice**

From: *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche

*[PLEASE NOTE: This is not to be confused with the formal, traditional Tibetan practice of Phowa, done for others at the time of death by a person specially skilled in the method of transfer of consciousness. This is a simple visualization that can be a useful practice tool for ourselves and our friends and family, both to practice before and at the time of death. It is "non-denominational" and can be used no matter your religious beliefs.]*

“The most valuable and powerful of all practices I have found in caring for the dying, one which I have seen an astonishing number of people take to with enthusiasm, is a practice from the Tibetan tradition called *phowa* (pronounced “po-wa”), which means transference of consciousness.

Phowa for dying people has been performed by friends, relatives, or masters, quite simply and naturally, all over the modern world—in Australia, America, and Europe. Thousands of people have been given the chance to die serenely because of its power. It gives me joy to make the *heart* of the phowa practice now available to anyone who wishes to use it.

I want to emphasize that this is a practice that anyone at all can do. It is simple, but it is also the most essential practice we can do to prepare for our own death, and it is the main practice I teach my students for helping their dying friend and relatives, and their loved ones who have already died.

### *Practice One*

First make sure you are comfortable, and assume the meditative posture. If you are doing this practice as you are coming close to death, just sit as comfortably as you are able, or practice lying down.

Then bring your mind home, release, and relax completely.

1. In the sky in front of you, invoke the embodiment of whatever truth you believe in, in the form of radiant light. Choose whichever divine being or saint you feel close to. If you are a Buddhist, invoke a Buddha with whom you feel an intimate connection. If you are a practicing Christian, feel with all your heart the vivid, immediate presence of God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus, or the Virgin Mary. If you don't feel linked with any particular spiritual figure, simply imagine a form of pure golden light in the sky before you. The important point is that you consider the being you are visualizing or whose presence you feel, is the embodiment of the truth, wisdom, and compassion of all the Buddha's, saints, masters, and enlightened beings. Don't worry if you cannot visualize them very clearly, just fill your heart with their presence and trust that they are there.

2. Then focus your mind, heart, and soul on the presence you have invoked, and pray:

*Through your blessing, grace, and guidance, through the power of the light that streams from you:*

*May all my negative karma, destructive emotions, obscurations, and blockages be purified and removed,*

*May I know myself forgiven for all the harm I may have thought and done,*

*May I accomplish this profound practice of phowa, and die a good and peaceful death,*

*And through the triumph of my death, may I be able to benefit all other beings, living or dead.*

3. Now imagine that the presence of light you have invoked is so moved by your sincere and heartfelt prayer that he or she responds with a loving smile and sends out love and compassion in a stream of rays of light from his or her heart. As these touch and penetrate you, they cleanse and purify all your negative karma, destructive emotions, and obscurations, which are the causes of suffering. You see and feel that you are totally immersed in light.

4. You are now completely purified and completely healed by the light streaming from the presence. Consider that your very body, itself created by karma, now dissolves completely into light.

5. The body of light you are now soars up into the sky and merges, inseparably, with the blissful presence of light.

6. Remain in that state of oneness with the presence for as long as possible.

### *Practice Two*

1. To do this practice even more simply, begin as before by resting quietly, and then invoke the presence of the embodiment of truth.

2. Imagine your consciousness as a sphere of light at your heart, which flashes out from you like a shooting star, and lies into the heart of the presence in front of you.

3. It dissolves and merges with the presence.

Through this practice you are investing your mind in the wisdom mind of the Buddha or enlightened being, which is the same as surrendering your soul into the nature of God. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche says this is like casting a pebble into a lake; think of it plummeting down into the water, deeper and deeper. Imagine that through the blessing your mind is transformed into the wisdom mind of this enlightened presence.

### *Practice Three*

The most essential way to do the practice is this: Simple merge your mind with the wisdom mind of the pure presence. Consider: "My mind and the mind of the Buddha are one."

Choose whichever one of these versions of the phowa feels more comfortable, of has the most appeal for you at any particular moment. Sometimes the most powerful practices can be the most simple. But whichever one you choose, remember that it is essential to take the time now to become familiar with this practice. How else will you have the confidence to do it for yourself or others at the moment of death?"....

"In fact, you should be so familiar with the practice of phowa that it becomes a natural reflex, your second nature. If you have seen the film *Gandhi*, you will know that when he was shot, his immediate response was to call out: "Ram...Ram!" Which is, in the Hindu tradition, the sacred name of God. Remember that we will never know how we will die, or if we will be given the time to recall any kind of practice at all".... "Either we are familiar with the phowa or we are not. There is a simple way to gauge this: just look at your reactions when you are in a critical situation or in a moment of crisis, such as an earthquake, or in a nightmare. Do you respond with the practice or don't you? And if you do, how stable and confident is your practice?".....

### USING THE ESSENTIAL PHOWA PRACTICE TO HELP THE DYING

How can we use this practice to help someone who is dying?

The principle and the sequence of the practice are exactly the same; the only difference is that you visualize the Buddha or spiritual figure above the head of the dying person:

Imagine that the rays of light pour down onto the dying person, purifying his or her whole being, and then he or she dissolves into light and merges into the spiritual presence.

Do this practice throughout your loved one's illness, and especially"...when the person is breathing their last breath, or as soon as possible after breathing stops and before the body is touched or disturbed in any way. If the dying person knows you are going to do this practice for them, and knows what it is, it can be a great source of inspiration and comfort.

Sit quietly with the dying person, and offer a candle or light in front of a picture or statue of Buddha or Christ or the Virgin Mary. Then do the practice for them. You can be doing the practice quietly, and the person need not even know about it; on the other hand, if he or she is open to it, as sometimes dying people are, share the practice and explain how to do it.

People often ask me: 'If my dying relative or friend is a practicing Christian and I am a Buddhist, is there any conflict?' How could there be? I tell them: you are invoking the truth, and Christ and Buddha are both compassionate manifestations of truth, appearing in different ways to help beings."....

"I have formulated this essential phowa specially from the traditional Tibetan practice for dying, and it incorporates all the most important principles."

### **Dissolution of the Elements at the end of life -Meditation**

From: *Being with Dying* by Joan Halifax

"The Tibetan buddhist description of the dissolution of the elements is a map of the dying process that allows caregivers to familiarize themselves with the physical and mental signs of dying and the experience of death itself. It is also aimed at transforming the experience of dying, death, and rebirth into the experience of enlightenment and liberation....

“The following description and practice of the dissolution of the elements arose over many centuries from the finely tuned observations of skilled meditators in Tibet. The practice confirms the observations that many professional caregivers have had of the physical, mental, and energetic changes in those who are dying. It has also been an aid, a map, and a source of inspirations to those who are actually going through or preparing to go through the experience of dying.

“This description also includes the dissolving of the aspects of our subjective experience that give us a sense of an identity: the body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and capacity to discern. These same aspects affect our experience of sickness and aging. When we have been ill, for example, we can feel the body’s heaviness and weakness, and recognize some of the signs and symptoms described in the process. Or, as we age, the force of gravity becomes more and more apparent. Our sense become less sensitive, and our grasp of the world lessens. So in both sickness and aging, we are given a taste of what we will face as we are dying.”...it is said..”that we also go through the dissolution in the case of sudden death.”

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

“A powerful way to do this practice is to lie down in the ‘sleeping-lion position,’ the position that the Buddha assumed when he was dying. Lie on your right side, legs slightly drawn up. Your left arm rests along your left side, and your right hand supports your head, with your hand holding your cheek. You may press your little finger against your right nostril to complete the posture.

“Make sure that you are comfortable, adjusting your position as needed throughout the practice.

“The top of your head is directed toward an image—real or visualized—of your choice. This could be Jesus, the Buddha, Muhammad...”—any being who represents the essence of awakening, compassion, love, and essential goodness. Your hope is that at your death your consciousness will leave through the top of your head and manifest as the essence of enlightenment. Let the breath become even and smooth. Focus your attention on your breath. Whatever comes up—resistance of concern, fear or joy, boredom or story—notice and accept it, and return gently to the breath.

“Imagine that this is an actual description of dying, of your dying. Notice what goes on as you do this practice. Let each of the feelings and sensations come up for you, pass through your mind and body, be noticed, and then released.

### **1. The Dissolution of Earth into Water and the Unbinding of the Body**

Imagine that you are in your bed at home. Friends and family are around you, though you are barely aware of them. You are somewhat agitated, and you accept this state of mind.

Your body is weak. You do not have the energy to do anything but simply be here. You are letting go as you die. Feel your body becoming heavy, pressed down by a great weight. This heaviness is dense and deep, going right to the core of your body. Your body feels as if it is dissolving, and your legs and arms don’t feel as if they belong to your body.

You feel as though you are slowly sinking in water, and deep weariness penetrates every cell of your body. Wake up as this body lets go.

Your senses are less attuned to the outside world. Your sight is dim. It is difficult to open and close your eyes. Your sensory grasp on the world is loosening. As your body slips away, the outside world is slipping away from you as well.

Your skin is pale as your blood pressure drops. The blood withdraws into the central part of your body. You are drowsy and weak, with no interest in the outside world. You sink deeper and deeper into a blurry, vague mental state. Whatever visions you see appear like blue mirages.

This is the dissolution of body and of our relationship to the physical world—these feeling of heaviness, drowsiness, being weighed down, the loss of definition, the withdrawal of color from our bodies, the loss of control, and our inability to see the form world around us.

In this state of mind and body, be awake and effortlessly present. The mind can be still and reflective as you let go. Be present as this body is dying. This body is not you. This is the dissolution of the element of earth as it sinks into water and as form unwinds into feelings.

### **2. The Dissolution of the Water Element into Fire and the Unbinding Of Feelings**

Feel your body dissolving. As you let go, your hearing is diminished, and you sink into a blurred state of mind.

Your nose is running; saliva is leaking out of your mouth. There is a watery discharge coming out of your eyes. It is difficult to hold your urine. Your skin is clammy.

As fluids leave the body, the body becomes parched. Your skin is papery. Your mouth is drawn, and your lips are chapped. Your tongue is thick, sticky and heavy. Your throat is scratchy and clogged. Your nostrils seem to cave in, burning with dryness as you inhale. Your eyes feel sandy and sting. You are not passing much urine. You have a thirst that no amount of water can quench.

Let go fully into this dryness. Release the fluid element of your body, of water and of feeling.

Your mind is hazy, and you are irritable. You have ceased to experience pain, pleasure, or even indifference. You do not differentiate between physical and mental impressions. Those kinds of distinctions are not important to you now. When you look behind your eyes, you see a vision of swirling smoke. The water element is dissolving into fire. This is the end of your responsiveness to phenomena. As you let go, wake up in this vision of swirling smoke.

### **3. The dissolution of the Fire Element into Air and the Unbinding Of Perceptions**

As the fire element of your body begins to dissolve into air, your body feels cool. Heat withdraws from your feet and hands into the body's core. Your breath is cold as it passes through your mouth and nose. Your mouth, nose, and eyes dry out even more. Your ability to perceive is further diminished. The fire element is dissolving into the element of air.

You cannot smell anything. You are not hungry nor can you digest food. You cannot drink or swallow. The in-breath is less strong, and the out-breath is longer. Your mental perception alternates between lucidity and confusion. You cannot see, hear, taste, touch, or smell as the sense fields fade away. Your in-breath is short. Your out-breath is long.

You cannot remember the names of your loved ones, and you cannot recognize those around you. You have lost any sense of purpose in your life and have no interest in what is going on around you.

You may feel as though you were being consumed in a blaze of fire that rises into space. Let go into this fire as your mind releases itself. Or, you may see sparks, almost like fireflies. Wake up in this vision of shimmering sparks. This is the dissolution of the fire element into air and the Unbinding of your ability to perceive.

### **4. The Dissolution of the Wind Element into Space and the Unbinding of Mental Formations**

You have now given up any sense of volition. Accept this aimlessness free of meaning and purpose. Your in-breath is short; your out-breath is long. The mind is no longer aware of the outside world.

As the element of air dissolves, you have visions. These visions relate to who you are and how you have lived your life. You may see your family or your ancestors in a peaceful setting. You may see beautiful people, saints, or friends welcoming you. You may relive pleasant experiences from your past.

You may also have demonic visions. If you have hurt others, those whom you have injured may appear to you. Difficult moments of your life may arise to haunt you. You may even cry out in fear.

Do not identify with these visions. Simply let them be. The element of air is dissolving. You do not have to do anything. Just practice this breath of release and let go of everything.

Your tongue is thick and heavy; its root is blue. You have lost your taste for life as you lose the sense of taste. You cannot feel texture or body sensations. Your body is barely moving. The last energy of your body is withdrawing to your body's core. Whatever heat is left in your body now resides in the area of the heart. The in-breath is short, a mere sip of air. The out-breath is long and uneven. Your eyes, gazing into emptiness, roll upward. No intellect is present.

Your consciousness at this point is reduced to a smaller and smaller entity. After three rounds of respiration, your body lifts slightly to meet the breath, which does not enter. Mental functions cease altogether. Consciousness dissolves into space. The perception from the outside is that you are dead. Breathing and brain function have stopped. Know this empty state. Surrender to it. This is the element of wind dissolving into space.

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

### **5. The Inner Dissolutions**

From the crown a white drop is propelled by the inner winds downward through the central channel toward the heart. This is the male essence, and anger transforms into profound clarity. You experience an immaculate autumn sky filled with brilliant sunlight.

A red drop from the base of the spine is propelled upward through the central channel toward the heart. This is the female essence, and desire transforms into profound bliss. You experience a vast and clear copper-red autumn sky of dusk.

The white and red drops meet in the heart and surround your consciousness. The winds enter your consciousness. You are now freed from the conceptual mind. Thick darkness like a deep autumn night sky appears. You dissolve into unconsciousness.

Out of this nothingness, luminescence arises. You are one with a clear dawn sky free of sunlight, moonlight, and darkness. You are bliss and clarity. Now the clear light of presence is liberated, the mother light of your awareness. This is your ultimate great perfection.

This is the actual moment of death