

What Will Happen to Me As I Die?

A Tibetan Buddhist Perspective ^[1]

Your state of mind as you die has an enormous effect on whether you will experience happiness or suffering in your next life. So it is important to learn from the masters what will happen as we die.

When ordinary people die they are out of control. Because they have not trained themselves during life, they are overwhelmed by the experience of death and bewildered as their bodily elements go out of balance and cease functioning harmoniously.

It seems to them that they are in the middle of a violent earthquake and it is therefore very difficult, if not impossible, for them to remain calmly aware of what is happening. Yet for someone who is prepared, those same visions that cause panic in others can bring an extraordinary peace.

The process of dying is a complex and interdependent one, in which groups of related aspects of our body and mind disintegrate simultaneously. The result is that each stage of the dissolution has its physical and psychological effect on the dying person, and is reflected by external, physical signs as well as inner experiences.

From Lama Thubten Yeshe and Sogyal Rinpoche

Introduction

The process of dying is explained in considerable detail in the different Tibetan teachings. Essentially it consists of two phases of dissolution: an outer dissolution, when the senses and elements dissolve, and an inner dissolution of the gross and subtle thought states and emotions. But first we need to understand the components of our mind, which disintegrate at death.



Our whole existence is determined by the elements: earth (the hard substances of the body), water (fluids of the body), fire (heat), air or 'wind' (subtle energy, movement) and space.

Through them our body is formed and maintained and when they dissolve, we die. We are familiar with the outer elements, which condition the way in which we live, but what is interesting is how these outer elements interact with the inner elements within our own physical body. And the potential and quality of these five elements also exist within our mind. Mind's ability to serve as the ground for all experience is the quality of earth; its continuity and adaptability is water; its clarity and capacity to perceive is fire; and its unlimited emptiness is space.

All of these components will dissolve when we die. The process of dying is a complex and interdependent one, in which groups of related aspects of our body and mind disintegrate simultaneously. The result is that each stage of the dissolution has its physical and psychological effect on the dying person, and is reflected by external, physical signs as well as inner experiences.

The Position for Dying

Lie down on the right side, taking the position of the “sleeping lion”, which is the posture in which the Buddha died. The left hand rests on the left thigh; the right hand is placed under the chin, closing the right nostril. The legs are stretched out and very slightly bent. On the right side of the body are certain channels that encourage the karmic wind of delusion. Lying on them and closing the right nostril blocks these channels and facilitates a person’s recognition of the luminosity when it dawns at death.

The Outer Dissolution: the Senses and the Elements

<i>The Five Aggregates</i>
The five aggregates comprise our whole mental and physical existence as follows:
1. Form
2. Feeling (sensation)
3. Perception (recognition, discrimination)
4. Intellect (mental formations, compositional factors)
5. Consciousness

The first thing we may be aware of is when our senses cease to function. If people around our bed are talking there will come a point when we can hear the sound of their voices but cannot make out the words. This means that the ear consciousness has ceased to function. We look at an object in front of us, and we can only see its outline, not its details. This means that the eye consciousness has failed. And the same happens with our faculties of smell, taste and touch. When the senses are no longer fully experienced, it marks the first phase of the dissolution process. The next four phases follow the dissolution of the elements.

Earth

Our body begins to lose all its strength. We are drained of any energy. We cannot get up, stay upright, or hold anything. We can no longer support our head. We feel as though we are falling, sinking underground, or crushed underneath a great weight. We feel heavy and uncomfortable in any position. We may ask to be pulled up, to have the pillows made higher, or for the bed-covers to be taken off. Our complexion fades and a pallor sets in. Our cheeks sink, and dark stains appear on our teeth. It becomes harder to open and close our eyes. As the aggregate of form is dissolving, we become weak and frail. Our mind is agitated and delirious but then sinks into drowsiness. These are the signs that the earth element is withdrawing into the water element. The “secret sign” that appears in the mind is that of a shimmering mirage.

Water

We begin to lose control of our bodily fluids. Our nose begins to run and we dribble. There can be a discharge from the eyes and maybe we become incontinent. We cannot move our tongue. Our eyes become dry in their sockets. Our lips are drawn and bloodless and our mouth and throat sticky and clogged. The nostrils cave in and we become very thirsty. We tremble and twitch. The smell of death begins to hang over us. As the aggregate of feeling is dissolving, bodily sensations dwindle, alternating between pain and pleasure, hot and cold. Our mind becomes hazy, frustrated, irritable and nervous. Some sources say that we feel as if we were drowning in an ocean or being swept away by a huge river. The water element is dissolving into fire, which is taking over in its ability to support consciousness. The secret sign is a vision of a haze with swirling wisps of smoke.

Fire

Our mouth and nose dry up completely. All the warmth of our body begins to seep away, usually from the feet and hands towards the heart. Our breath is cold as it passes through our mouth and nose. No longer can we drink or digest anything. The aggregate of perception is dissolving, and our mind swings alternately between clarity and confusion. We cannot remember the names of our family or friends, or even recognize who they are. It becomes more and more difficult to perceive anything outside of us as sound and sight are confused. Kalu Rinpoche writes, "For the dying individual, the inner experience is of being consumed in a flame, being in the middle of a roaring blaze or perhaps the whole world being consumed in a holocaust of fire." The fire element is dissolving into air, and becoming less able to function as a base for consciousness, while the ability of the air element to do so is more apparent. So the secret sign is of shimmering red sparks dancing above an open fire, like fireflies.

Air

It becomes harder and harder to breathe. The air seems to be escaping through our throat. We begin to rasp and pant. Our in-breaths become short and laboured and our out-breaths become longer. Our eyes roll upward and we are totally immobile. As the aggregate of intellect is dissolving, the mind becomes bewildered, unaware of the outside world. Everything becomes a blur. Our last feeling of contact with our physical environment is slipping away. We begin to hallucinate and have visions. If there has been a lot of negativity in our lives we may see terrifying forms. Haunting and dreadful moments of our lives are replayed and we may even try to cry out in terror. If we have led lives of kindness and compassion, we may experience blissful, heavenly visions, and meet loving friends or enlightened beings. For those who have led good lives, there is peace in death instead of fear.

Kalu Rinpoche writes: "The internal experience for the dying individual is of a great wind sweeping away the entire world, including the dying person, an incredible maelstrom of wind, consuming the whole universe. What is happening is that the air element is dissolving into consciousness. The winds have all united in the "life supporting wind" in the heart. So the secret sign is described as a vision of a flaming torch or lamp, with a red glow. At this point blood gathers and enters the "channel of life" in the centre of our heart. Three drops of blood collect, one after the other, causing three long final out-breaths. Then, suddenly, our breathing ceases.

Just a slight warmth remains at our heart. All vital signs are gone, and this is the point where in a modern clinical situation we would be certified as "dead". But Tibetan masters talk of an internal process that still

continues. The time between the end of the breathing and the cessation of “inner respiration” is said to be about twenty minutes. But nothing is certain, and the whole process may take place very quickly.

The Inner Dissolution

In the inner dissolution, where the gross and subtle thought states and emotions dissolve, four increasingly subtle levels of consciousness are to be encountered. With the disappearance of the wind that holds it there, the white essence (“white and blissful”) inherited from our father descends from the crown of our head through the central channel towards the heart. As an outer sign, there is an experience of whiteness, like a “pure sky struck by moonlight.” As an inner sign, our awareness becomes extremely clear, and all the thought states resulting from anger, thirty-three of them in all, come to an end. This phase is known as “Appearance”.

Then our mother’s essence (“red and hot”) begins to rise through our central channel from just below the navel. The outer sign is an experience of redness, like a sun shining in a pure sky. As an inner sign, there arises a great experience of bliss, as all the thought states associated with desire, forty in all, cease to function. This stage is known as “Increase”.

When the red and white essences meet at the heart, consciousness is enclosed between them. As an outer sign, we experience blackness, like an empty sky shrouded in utter darkness. The inner experience is of a state of mind free of thoughts. The seven thought states resulting from ignorance and delusion are brought to an end. This is known as “Full Attainment”.

Then, as we become slightly conscious again, the Ground Luminosity dawns, like an immaculate sky, free of clouds, fog or mist. It is sometimes called “the mind of clear light of death”. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says: “This consciousness is the innermost subtle mind. We call it the buddha nature, the real source of all consciousness. The continuum of this mind lasts even through Buddhahood.”

<i>The Eight Stages or Dissolutions of Death</i>	
Stage or Dissolution	Inner Sign
Earth into water	Mirage
Water into fire	Smoke
Fire into air	Fireflies
Air into consciousness	Flame of a lamp
White Appearance	Vivid white mind-sky
Red Increase	Vivid red-orange mind-sky
Black Near-Attainment	Black mind-sky
Clear light mind of death	Mind of the clear light of death

The Death of the “Poisons”

What then is happening when we die? It is as if we are returning to our original state, everything dissolves, as body and mind are unravelled. The three “poisons” – ignorance, desire, anger – all die, which means that all the negative emotions, the root of samsara, actually cease, and then there is a gap. And where does this process take us? To the primordial ground of the nature of mind, in all its purity and natural simplicity. Now everything that obscured it is removed and our true nature is revealed.

The death process described above is a generalization and it can unfold differently according to the makeup of the individual. Variations can occur due to the particular illness of the dying person, and the state of the channels, winds and essences.

For practitioners there is a range of specialized practices to do at each stage of the dissolution. For example, you can transform the process of dying into the practice of guru yoga. With each stage of the outer dissolution, you generate devotion and pray to the master, visualizing him in the different energy centres. When the earth element dissolves and the sign of the mirage appears, you visualize your master at your heart centre. When the water element dissolves and the sign of smoke appears, you visualize the master in your navel centre. When the fire element dissolves and the sign of fireflies appears, you visualize the master in the forehead centre. And when the air element dissolves and the sign of the torch appears, you focus entirely on transferring your mind into the wisdom mind of the master.

^[1] Contents by Len Warren of *Pure Land of the Indestructible Buddha*, Hayagriva Buddhist Centre, 64 Banksia Terrace, Kensington 6151 Western Australia, July 2017.

Quotes from: *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche edited by Patrick Gaffney and Andrew Harvey Rider, 1992, pages 247-256