



Painting: Dying  
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## **SUBLIME CONTINUUM: A Tibetan Perspective of Conscious Living, Dying, & Rebirth**

by  
Dr. Joel & Michelle Levey

In this short essay we would like to bring our colleagues' attention to two remarkable texts on the art and science of conscious living and dying: Sogyal Rinpoche's monumental *Tibetan Book of Living & Dying*<sup>1</sup>, and Professor Robert Thurman's lucid new translation and commentary on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*<sup>2</sup>. Especially for people who have been inspired, but perhaps misled, by early, incomplete and inaccurate translations of Tibetan, and so called "Tibetan", teachings, these two books provide an authentic, inspiring, comprehensive, heart-opening and mind expanding glimpse of a profound tradition of conscious living and dying. If you are interested in subtle energies, working with the dying, or conscious living and dying these books will be life-long companions. This paper was initially written for publication in the Bridges Newsletter for the International Society for the Study of Subtle Energies and Energy Medicine (ISSSEEM) and for workshops for the Institute for Noetic Sciences (IONS).

### **TIBETAN TRADITION**

For the Tibetans, the ultimate authorities on conscious living and dying are the *tulkus*, literally "Buddha Emanations", who are recognized as "reincarnate" lamas. The *tulkus* have consciously passed through the dissolution process of death, and out of compassion return to teach others the way through and beyond death. Among these remarkable people are the lineages of the 14 Dalai Lamas, the 17 Karmapas and several thousand others recognized as *tulkus*. In recent years, traveling lamas have recognized numerous Western born *tulkus*.<sup>3</sup> The honorific title "rinpoche" indicates that this person has been recognized as a *tulku*.

With the tragic invasion of Tibet by China in 1959, and the ongoing holocaust of the Tibetan culture since that time, more than 6 million Tibetans have been killed. Nearly 10,000 monastic universities and their extensive research libraries have been destroyed. Yet, as a result, and as prophesied over 1,000 years ago, the vast treasury of these profound inner science teachings has come with the lamas to the West, and has seeded modern culture with this wisdom at a pivotal time in history.

### **DEATH AS ANNIHILATION DOES NOT EXIST**

To begin, from the Buddhist standpoint, death in the sense of utter annihilation is an impossibility. A person who dies is no more regarded as having been annihilated than a person who has simply stepped out of one room and into another. Though one may wander unconsciously, compulsively driven by habit from room to room, moment to moment, or life to life, at the most fundamental level of every living being is a sublime continuum of consciousness or presence. It is this continuum that allows the possibilities of conscious living and dying.

### **THE FOUR BARDOS - BETWEEN STATES OF EXISTENCE**

As Sogyal Rinpoche explains, from the Tibetan Buddhist point of view, we can divide our entire existence into four continuously interlinked realities. Classically these realities are called the four *bardos*, or between. Bardo is a Tibetan word translated as, *bar* = "in between", *do* "suspended/thrown", and literally refers to the zones of being between different critical thresholds of existence.

**THE FOUR “BETWEENS” OR BARDOS CHART 1**

THE BETWEEN	RANGE/ SCOPE
1) The natural bardo of this life	Between conception and the onset of death
2) The painful bardo of dying	Between life and culmination of the 8 dissolutions leading to Clear Light
3) The luminous bardo of dharmata	Between end of subtle dissolutions and arising as an “intermediate state being”
4) The karmic bardo of becoming	Between the dharmata and moment of conception

Because of the vastness and all-comprehensiveness of the bardo teachings, both Rinpoche’s book and Thurman’s are carefully structured to guide the reader stage by stage through the potentials of living life and death in a compassionate and fully conscious way. They invite us to look deeply into the realities of our life as a means to prepare ourselves to both live and die with wisdom, confidence, dignity, and without regret. Both books offer a wealth of practical advice for assisting others through the process of dying. Let’s look more closely at each of these bardos.

1. “The Natural Bardo of this Life” begins at the moment of conception and ends with the onset of the dissolutions of energy associated with the dying process. During this period, an ordinary person is propelled by the evolutionary momentum, or karma, of habit energy. From the Buddhist standpoint, human life provides a rare and unsurpassed opportunity for spiritual realization and development. If you learn to understand and develop the multidimensional nature of the human mind-body-energy system, the ordinary life, death and intermediate state can be profoundly transformed while you are alive, and can set the stage for full awakening at the time of death. (See Chart 2)

**THE GROSS, SUBTLE, & EXTREMELY SUBTLE MIND-BODY/ENERGY COMPLEX (ADAPTED FROM THURMAN) CHART 2**

LEVEL	BODY/ENERGY	MIND
Gross	five element material body	6 sense consciousnesses
Subtle	subtle energies, energy channels and “neural drops”	3 luminance-intuitions involved with 80 instincts
Extremely subtle (At this level the mind-body duality collapses into inseparability)	energy carrying the clear light in the indestructible drop	mind of clear light energies; or indestructible drop

2. The “Painful Bardo of Dying” begins at the onset of dissolutions associated with the process of dying and culminates in the dawning of the clear light nature of the most subtle mind-energy.

As the death process commences, the gross and subtle psychophysical energies that support the ordinary body undergo a predictable sequence of 8 dissolutions. At each stage the element/energy that served as the support diminishes in its power and the next most subtle energy faculty emerges - e.g. earth energy dissolves into water, then water dissolves into fire, etc. (See Chart 3). Acquiring a working or experiential understanding of this dissolution process provides a rich understanding of the multiple dimensions and functions of the psychophysical human energy system from its most gross to most subtle dimensions.



emanating laser-like beams of light and sound that fill all of space with communication. From yourself and all these beings, very fine shafts of light stream out linking hearts and minds. Countless luminous spheres appear within these rays which increase and then “roll up” as all the deities dissolve into you.

3) WISDOM: Third, a fine shaft of light radiates from your heart, opening an enormous field of vision as a vast mandala palace, revealing the structure of all reality as the luminous display of the five pristine wisdom energies that represent our potential of enlightenment.

4) SPONTANEOUS PRESENCE: Next the whole of reality in all of its realms and beings presents itself in one fantastic display. As Rinpoche describes it, *“The limitlessness of this vision is utterly beyond our ordinary imagination. Every possibility is presented; from wisdom and liberation, to confusion and rebirth. At this point you will find yourself endowed with powers of clairvoyance and your senses unobstructed, you will know your past and future lives, see into others’ minds, and have knowledge of all realms of existence. In an instant you will vividly recall whatever (wisdom) teachings you have heard, and even teachings you have never heard will awaken in your mind. Then this entire vision dissolves back into itself, like a tent collapsing once its ropes are cut.”*

4. If you have come this far without recognizing the sheer presence of your mind (Clear Light) and its pure radiant energy that manifests as the myriad of realms of sublime and mundane existence (Dharmata), then you enter the sidpa bardo, the “Karmic Bardo of Becoming/Possibility/ Existence”. This is described as the habit driven, or karmic route, to ordinary rebirth. Here mind is free from the stabilizing effect of being limited to a corporeal body. In this between, you inhabit a subtle mind-energy body that has five features:

- 1 It has all sense faculties.
- 2 Being spontaneously born, it has all its limbs, even if in your previous life or at the time of death these were severed.
- 3 Since it has a subtle body, it can’t be destroyed.
- 4 Through the force of karmic powers, it can, in an instant, go wherever it wants, and not even a Buddha can stop it.
- 5 Its movement is completely unobstructed, and it arrives in any place simply by thinking of it. Only the womb of its next mother can trap it.

If as a bardo being you see your old body - there is no identification with it as “my body” and there is no wish to re-enter it. Your relationship with your old body is severed completely. In this bardo, at first your body appears similar to last life with some characteristics of your future form to be. Then gradually as the time of rebirth approaches, it takes on more of a likeness for the form you will take in your next rebirth.

In this between state, the life span is at most “7 days”, though the exact metric of time is unclear. If at the end of this time you have not been reborn, you again die, passing through the bardos of dying and dharmata only to arise again in the body of the bardo being. At most, you will experience 7 cycles of 7 days in this bardo before you are reborn into a realm and circumstance that mirrors the habitual patterns of your own mind. As before, the potential for liberation exists at any point in the process if you are sufficiently conscious and prepared.

## THE REBIRTH PROCESS

In the Tibetan tradition, there is no guarantee of a “higher rebirth next time”. Depending on the mental and emotional patterns of your mind, you will be reborn in a realm somewhere on a continuum from extremely hellish to blissfully heavenly. The human realm, one of great potential, with enough suffering to prevent complacency, and enough joy to prevent hopelessness and despair, is regarded as an optimal realm for spiritual practice at the center point of the

continuum. Just as good or bad fortune waxes and wanes in this life, so do “fortunate” and “unfortunate” lifetimes come and go. As the Buddha taught, if you wish to know what your last life was like, look at the patterns of this life. If you wish to know what your next life will be like, observe the patterns of this life. The ruler of this journey is the unalterable laws of karmic predisposition and habit that can only be changed through intentional cultivation of wisdom and compassion.

According to these teachings, if you are to be born as a human being you will be drawn to the place where your parents are making love. If you are to be reborn as a male, you experience a strong desire for your mother and aversion toward your father. If your rebirth will be as a female, you desire your father and have aversion for your mother. Witnessing the passion of its parents making love, your subtle mind-energy body is drawn by the force of emotional attachment or aversion. Through the force of previous habit energy you begin to embrace the parent that you desire. As this happens, the subtle mind-energy of the bardo being is drawn in - either through the mouth of the male or the top of the head of the male, or into the woman’s womb. Next, you merge into the regenerative fluids of the parents and are unable to escape from the womb of your mother. As this happens, you again experience the onset of the subtle energy dissolutions associated with the dying process: the appearances of the white, red and dark visions, and the dawning of the clear light, all in quick succession. This is like your dream body dying as you awaken. It is here within this mind of clear light, and amidst the semen and egg, that the moment of conception occurs. Next, arising from the clear light, a reverse sequence of visions arises (dark, red, white, and so forth). This onset is the moment of rebirth. Your next life has begun.

#### **SUMMARY OF THE 4 BARDOS**

Summarizing this journey through the four bardos, Thurman reminds us that, pg 44 *“Most people traverse these dissolutions without recognizing what is happening to them, not being able to rest in the clear light, not realizing their essential freedom, happiness, and natural, and joyous boundless participation in the lives of all beings. They will mentally shoot through the void’s clear light and rise back up into gross embodiment through the eight dissolutions in reverse order. They will faint again at imminence, then rise through dark-light, radiance sunlight, and luminance moonlight into instinctually dominated consciousness, then reassociate themselves with the elements of wind, fire, water, and earth, structured by the imagery they retrieve from the evolutionary patterns encoded by their own actions in their spiritual genes ( the genes the individual brings from former lives.) These structures will remain fluid in their dreamlike existence in mental bodies in the between state, only becoming solidified at the gross physical level when they take rebirth.”*

As both Thurman and Sogyal Rinpoche lucidly explain, during the between-state time, due to the fluidity and subtlety of the bardo being’s energy embodiment, our bardo consciousness is magical in power and extremely intelligent and clairvoyant. For this reason, if a living person, especially one with a strong bond to the person who has died, holds the between-being in mind and reads aloud or mentally transmits the instructions of the Book of Natural Liberation to them, they can actually follow these lucid instructions, use them to awaken to what is happening to them, and attain profound liberation and realization.

#### **THE LIBERATING POWER OF FAITH, PRAYER, & DEVOTION**

As the teachings so inspiringly remind us, there is always hope for liberation. The key is prayer. The potential for liberation and full awakening that exists within the bardos of dying, dharmata, and becoming, can be activated through the power of prayer. If during life you have

cultivated a prayerful sense of communion with the sacred source, and have learned to activate this at times of distress and in dreams, then this prayerfulness is likely to arise as a natural response as you traverse the bardos associated with death. Since the mind after death is not limited by an ordinary physical body, the instant you pray to a wisdom being, the mind is liberated into the environment of that wisdom being's awareness, which is free of any suffering and complete with the qualities of perfect enlightenment. It is held that our minds are fundamentally the same as the true nature of the mind of the awakened beings, and that through the force of this interdependence and the power of prayer, we can fully awaken in an instant in the "between". Though prayer in this life may sometimes seem to produce little tangible results, its effects in the between are incomprehensively powerful.

Understanding this, you would do well to cultivate the mind-energy of faith and devotion, and to perfect prayerfulness as an integral way of life, and to practice activating it in your dreams. If this habit is so deeply instilled that it can be activated with all its liberating potential at any stage in the dying and rebirthing process you can die fearlessly.

### **RAINBOW BODY:**

#### **RADICAL PSYCHOPHYSICAL TRANSFORMATION AT THE TIME OF DEATH**

There are countless accounts of Tibetan lamas and practitioners of these yogas, resting in this most subtle state of meditation for days or even weeks. During this time there is no breath, vital sign, or signs of decay. Often the body will remain upright in meditation posture. As Sogyal Rinpoche describes, *"Accomplished practitioners can bring their lives to an extraordinary and triumphant end. As they die, they enable their body to be reabsorbed back into light essence of the elements that created it, and consequently their material body dissolves into light and then disappears completely. This is known as the "rainbow body" or "body of light," because the dissolution is often accompanied by spontaneous manifestations of light and rainbows."* ### In advanced practitioners, the gross and subtle psychophysical energies are all gradually absorbed into their most subtle state resulting in a gradual shrinking of the body until it literally dissolves into light. Only the finger nails and hair remain. During this period people in the vicinity frequently report many wonderful and anomalous phenomena including rainbow lights, the sky filled with spheres of light (tigles), celestial music, visible presence of angelic beings, showers of fragrant flower petals. For miles around, people's minds are elevated to a mystical sensitivity beholding the ordinary world as transformed into a realm of purity and light.

#### **THE DIAMOND VEHICLE: TRANSFORMING DEATH, THE BETWEEN, AND REBIRTH INTO THE THREE BUDDHA BODIES.**

In the Buddhist tradition there are three paths to enlightenment: the Path of Individual Liberation (Hinayana) ; the Path of Universal Liberation (Mahayana); and the Diamond Path of the Vajrayana or Tantrayana. Only the Vajrayana works explicitly and extensively with the subtle energy system. The goal of the Vajrayana path is to transform ordinary death, in between state, and rebirth into the realization of the Three Buddha Bodies. This can be accomplished either during life, through highly sophisticated contemplative practices, or during the between after death.

#### **Transforming Death into Truth Body**

Meditating through the 8 stages of death dissolution, the yogi realizes, then stabilizes, in the Clear Light state, and transforms the ordinary process of dying into the realization of the Truth Body, the Dharmakaya. According to Thurman, *"The Truth Body is not some absolute aloof transcendence far beyond us. It is the infinite radiance of blissful wisdom energy, beauty enjoying itself unboundedly. And it is simultaneously beauty overflowing in itself as love and goodness, enfolding all beings, who pathetically feel themselves apart and alienated in self-addictive isolation. Beings like us."*

**Transforming the Between State into the Body of Beatitude**

Arising from that meditation on the Clear Light, the yogi transforms the between state of the bardo of becoming into the radiant expanse of the Illusory Body or, Body of Beatitude, the Sambhogakaya. Here the radiant compassion of the enlightened mind manifests as infinite emanations of enlightened energy that are so vast and subtle that only high developed spiritual beings can perceive their presence.

**Transforming Rebirth into the Emanation Body**

Ordinary rebirth is purified and transformed when the between state has been stopped forever by the attainment of the Illusory Body. The Illusory Body enters the old physical aggregates of the meditators’ body in a manner similar to an intermediate being taking birth in the mother’s womb. Here, wisdom consciousness arises in the form of the Emanation Body of the Buddha. This Emanation Body is the materially tangible form of the Enlightened Mind that we can perceive and contact with our ordinary senses. It is inseparable from the omniscient mind-energy fields of the Wisdom Truth Body and the Body of Beatitude.

**Sleep, Dreams, & Waking:  
The Training Ground for Conscious Dying**

**THE THREE BUDDHA BODIES & THEIR ANALOGUES**

TRUTH BODY	BEATIFIC BODY	EMANATION BODY
Death Sleep state	Between Dream-state	Life Waking State
Is like the infinity of space pervaded by omniscient presence.	Is like the boundless radiance of a compassionate sun	Is like the form of the sun which is inseparable from its rays and space.

If you wish to die consciously, our teachers advise cultivating lucid awareness during deep sleep. If you wish to be aware in deep sleep, then learn to be lucidly aware in your dreams. And if you want to be lucid in your dreaming, cultivate mindfulness in your daily life. If you want to recognize the radiant display of the mind in the bardos, then regard all of the experiences of your waking life as being dream-like and ephemeral.

- Going to sleep is similar to the bardo of dying, where the elements and thought processes dissolve, opening into the experience of the Ground Luminosity.
- Dreaming is akin to the bardo of becoming, the intermediate state where you have a clairvoyant and highly mobile “mental body”.
- Between the bardo of dying and the bardo of becoming is a very special state of luminosity or Clear Light, the “bardo of dharmata”. This bardo corresponds to the period after falling asleep and before dreams begin.

As the lamas remind us, the state of your mind in sleep and dreams indicates how your mind will react in the corresponding bardo states. Training in Tibetan dream yogas and related meditation practices helps you to use the daily rhythms of waking, sleeping, and dreaming as a training ground for conscious dying.

**TRANSFERENCE OF CONSCIOUSNESS AT THE TIME OF DEATH**

In the Tibetan tradition, practices of “phowa”, the transference of consciousness at the time of death are widely practiced. Phowa can be practiced by a person at the time of his/her own death,



or by others who are assisting the dying to direct their consciousness onto a beneficial trajectory at the time of death.

Sogyal Rinpoche presents a very special version of the phowa practice as a healing meditation for the living, the dying, and those who have died. The first step is to quiet and calm your mind. Then invoke before you the radiant presence of any spiritual figure towards whom you feel heartfelt devotion and faith. From your heart pray to this loving, compassionate presence for blessings, spiritual strength, purification, protection, the blessings to die a good death, to realize liberation or enlightenment in the dying process. Next, imagine that this presence of light is so moved by your heartfelt prayer that he or she smiles with love and radiates love and compassion as streams of light from his or her heart. As these absorb into you, allow yourself to feel purified of any negative karma, destructive emotional energy, obscurations of mind, or blockages in the subtle energy system that may lead to suffering in the future. See and feel yourself immersed in pure loving light. Then, allow yourself to dissolve completely into light. Next, imagine your consciousness as a sphere of light at your heart, which flashes out from you like a shooting star, and flies into the heart of the spiritual presence in front of you merging inseparably with this blissful presence of light. Remain in that state of unification with this presence for as long as possible.

To actually use this practice at the time of death, timing is critical. The point when it is to be done is when the outer respiration has ceased, and the inner breathing still continues. To accomplish this successfully, it is safest to perform the phowa practice during the dissolution stages, and to repeat the practice several times.

This same practice can be used to assist others at the time of their death. To do this the principle is the same, the only difference being that you visualize the spiritual presence above the head of the dying person, imagine them being purified, dissolving into light and merging into this spiritual presence. If possible, do this practice throughout a loved one's illness and especially as they are breathing their last breath, or as soon as the breathing stops and before the body is touched or moved. If you are unable to be physically with a person, the practice can still be effective from a distance, or even after a person has died. We have heard the lamas teach that it can be effective to do this practice at the place a person has died, and every seventh day after a person has died for 7 weeks.

Rinpoche also describes an essentialized way to do this practice: "*Simply merge your mind with the wisdom mind of pure presence. Consider: 'My mind and the mind of the Buddha are one.'*" He reminds us that "*sometimes the most powerful practices can be the most simple*", and invites us to practice this until it becomes second nature as we never know when we might need it.

## DEDICATION

Through the power of the interdependence of all living beings and their inseparability from the mind of True Reality, may the wisdom-energy generated by reading, writing or practicing what is written here help all beings realize their true nature and potentials, and live and die with greater wisdom, compassion and consciousness.

## References/Bibliography:

- 1 Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living & Dying* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).
- 2 Robert Thurman, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Liberation Through Understanding in the Between* (New York: Bantam, 1994).
- 3 Vickie McKenzie, *The Boy Lama*



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Dr. Joel & Michelle Levey have devoted their lives to exploring the disciplines that awaken extraordinary human potentials for wisdom, compassion, and collective creative intelligence in individuals, organizations, and communities. They are founders of The International Center for Corporate Culture and Organizational Health at InnerWork Technologies, Inc. - WisdomAtWork.com - a Seattle and Hawaii based firm dedicated to developing organizational cultures in which inspired leadership, collective intelligence, and change resilience can thrive. Advisors to business leaders and teams in over 200 leading organizations around the globe, their clients include: NASA, World Bank, Intel, Hewlett Packard, Boeing, Microsoft, U.S. Army Green Berets, West Point Military Academy, Clinton Global Initiative, Washington Athletic Club, MIT, and M.D. Anderson Cancer Research Centers.

Joel & Michelle serve on the clinical faculty for the University of Minnesota Medical School's Center for Spirituality and Health, the Institute for Religion and Health at University of Texas Medical Center, Indian Institute of Management, and Mahidol University in Thailand Contemplative Education and Transformational Learning graduate program. They have directed clinical programs on mindbody medicine, stress management for Group Health Cooperative of Puget Sound and Children's Medical Center in Seattle.

Nobel Laureate, the Dalai Lama, is an advisor and supporter on a number of the Leveys' projects and encouraged them in their work, writing, "You are presently engaged in work that has great prospects for bringing the inner sciences and technologies of human development and transformational learning to a very wide section of people who may not under ordinary circumstances come into contact with these teachings."

Joel & Michelle Levey have coached numerous Olympic Gold and World Class champion athletes, and designed & directed biocybernautic training for the US Army Green Berets' acclaimed "Jedi Warrior Program" which was described by West Point leaders as "the most exquisite orchestration of human technology we have ever seen," and as "the most advanced transformational leadership development program to be delivered in modern times."

Their published works include: *Wisdom at Work; Corporate Culture & Organizational Health: A Critical Analysis of How Workplace Culture Influences Business Success; Luminous Mind: Meditation and Mind Fitness; Living in Balance: A Dynamic Approach for Creating Harmony and Wholeness in a Chaotic World; Intuition at Work; Community Building in Business; Rediscovering the Soul in Business; and The New Bottom Line.* The Leveys also steward the Kohala Sanctuary, an organic farm and learning center on the Big Island of Hawaii.

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## MEDITATIONS FOR DYING

Excerpted from Joel & Michelle Levey, *The Fine Arts of Relaxation, Concentration, and Meditation: Ancient Skills for Modern Minds* (Wisdom Publications, 2003)

*We never know which will come first:  
Our next breath . . .  
or  
Our next life.  
Tibetan proverb*

In some contemplative traditions, the practice of meditation is viewed as the supreme vehicle for developing a presence of mind subtle enough so that at the time of your death you can die consciously and can thus “navigate” and make choices as to the trajectory of your consciousness. It is taught that the primary training ground for being mindfully present at the time of death is to learn to be mindfully present, or lucid, in your dreams. The training ground for being mindful of your dreams is to develop greater mindfulness in the “waking dream” of your ordinary life.

Though the practice of mindfulness is simple to describe, it is very profound. As you become more present to what is going on within and around you, you will discover doorways to greater freedom in every realm of your being.

In the Tibetan contemplative tradition, meditative practices for transferring consciousness at the time of death are widely practiced. These meditations, called “*phowa*”, are traditionally practiced by a person at the time of his or her own death, or by others who help the dying direct their consciousness onto a beneficial trajectory at the end of this life. *Phowa* meditation is often complemented by reflective and generative meditations that simulate the actual dying process.

Over the years we have learned many versions of these practices from Sogyal Rinpoche, Chagdud Rinpoche and other precious teachers from this tradition. The meditations that follow here are offered as healing meditations for the living and the dying, as well as for those who have already died.

The first step is to calm and quiet your mind, being mindful of your breath or using any of the calming meditations introduced earlier in this book. Then invoke before you the radiant presence of any spiritual figure towards whom you feel a heartfelt sense of devotion and faith. From your heart, pray to this loving, compassionate presence for the blessings, spiritual strength, purification, protection, and inspiration necessary to die a good death and to realize liberation or enlightenment in the dying process.

Next, imagine that this presence of light is so moved by your heartfelt prayer that he or she smiles lovingly and radiates love and compassion as streams of light from his or her heart. As these absorb into you, allow yourself to feel purified of any negative karma, destructive emotional energy, obscurations of mind, or blockages in the subtle energy system that may lead to suffering in the future. See and feel yourself immersed in pure loving light.

Then, allow yourself to dissolve completely into light. Next, imagine your consciousness as a sphere of light at your heart, which flashes out from you like a shooting star, and flies up into the heart of the radiant spiritual presence in front of you,

merging inseparably with this blissful presence of light. Remain in that state of unification with this presence for as long as possible.

Our teachers say that to have the presence of mind to actually use this practice well at the time of death, timing is critical. To accomplish this successfully, it is safest to perform the *phowa* practice during the onset of the actual process of dying, and to repeat the practice several times.

This same meditation can be used to assist others at the time of their death. To accomplish this remember that the principle is the same, the only difference being that you visualize the spiritual presence above the head of the dying persons, imagine them being purified, dissolving into light and merging into this spiritual presence. If possible, do this practice especially as they are breathing their last breath, or as soon as the breathing stops and before the body is touched or moved. If you are unable to be physically with a person, the practice can still be effective from a distance, or even after a person has died. We have heard the lamas teach that it can be effective to do this practice at the place a person has died, and every seventh day after a person has died for seven weeks.

In his inspiring book, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Sogyal Rinpoche describes an essentialized way to do this practice: “*Simply merge your mind with the wisdom mind of pure presence. Consider: ‘My mind and the mind of the Buddha are one.’*” He reminds us that “*sometimes the most powerful practices can be the most simple,*” and invites us to practice in this way until it becomes second nature--as the time of our death is uncertain, and we never know when we might need to call upon what we have learned.

Variations on this meditation practice can also be done when you hear on the news that there has been a disaster, or that many people have died in some part of the world, or even when you stop to consider the millions of lives that are lost each day in the process of slaughtering animals as food for human beings. In such moments, the following visualization meditation can be very helpful:

From the heart of the Great Being in the sky before you waves of rainbow light shine forth throughout all the world and through all dimensions, enveloping the beings who have died wherever they are, purifying their karma, and infusing them with radiant blessings. Their ordinary forms dissolve and they become brilliant spheres of light that are drawn back to dissolve into this Great Being’s heart-mind --- a realm beyond the cycles of suffering, a realm of absolute purity and bliss.

When you are doing this meditation for people who have died, it is traditionally recommended to meditate in this way during the forty-nine days after their death, and to dedicate the merit of your practice to their ongoing spiritual development and well being.

(Excerpted from Joel & Michelle Levey, *The Fine Arts of Relaxation, Concentration, and Meditation: Ancient Skills for Modern Minds* (Wisdom Publications, 2003)

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