



## **Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche**

### **Bardo Teachings**

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#### **Introduction**

I am going to discuss the bardo. Although we often speak of six bardos, here I'm only going to discuss four. These four bardos cover the whole of existence, but when we use the word *bardo*, which means 'in-between,' we are usually referring to the time between death and birth. Some people may think that learning about what happens after we die while we are still alive is a waste of time. But it's extremely important to know what will happen when we die. If, while still alive, we study what is going to happen when we die, then we will be prepared to deal with the appearances that arise in the bardo.

Other people may be so attached to life that they have not given the bardo any thought. They may even think they will not experience the bardo. Obviously, this is a big mistake. It's very important to train for the bardo while still alive, because we can be 100% certain that we will experience it, and preparing for it will ensure that we will meet its challenge skilfully.

Yet other people may have the impression that they do not particularly need to train for the bardo, that if they practice Dharma they will be fine. Or they might think that the bardo is something scary, something bad, and so they don't want to think about it. But both these approaches are wrong. The appearances of the bardo are fleeting, so we need to train in them

before they appear in order to utilize them. If we develop the capability to deal with them while alive, then we will recognize even the bad and scary things we encounter in that state as fleeting appearances. This will stop us from being afraid. If we train to recognize appearances, we may even be able to attain the ultimate *siddhi* ('accomplishment') in the bardo. Even if we do not attain this ultimate goal, we will at least be able to take a good birth.

Lord Buddha and the great practitioners who appeared after him have given us instructions on how to deal with the bardo. They explained the appearances that will arise and the way we should apply ourselves when they do. Having these instructions means that when the time comes, we can follow them and by recognizing what is happening to us, we can ensure we have a good birth and not a bad one. If we don't have this knowledge and haven't put it into practice, we may become confused by the imagery we experience in the bardo and fall into a bad realm, where we will experience a great deal of suffering. If we are familiar with what we are going to experience, however, we will know how to steer ourselves towards a good birth. This is why it's very important to listen to and reflect on these teachings. By doing this, we will remember them throughout our lifetimes and be prepared for death.

When we teach people about the bardo, it's important to remember that not everyone will be 100% sure about the existence of future lives. Some of you will be 100% sure and therefore understand the importance of studying these teachings. As one of these people, you may think that these are the Buddha's teachings, which he taught in both the Sutras and again in the Tantras and which were taught by other masters. So you are absolutely certain of their validity. But it's also possible that some of you are not 100% sure about this. You are not absolutely sure that there will be future lives and a bardo between this life and the next. Still, even if you are one of these people, it is still important to study the bardo. If there is any chance that there is a bardo, then it is a good idea to prepare for it. It's unlikely that anyone is 100% certain that there are no future lives; this kind of certainty is hard to come by. If you could be 100% certain about the non-existence of future lives, you wouldn't need to learn about the bardo or put the instructions into practice. But if you are not completely certain, if you think there is even a slim chance that there is a bardo, it would be a good idea to develop some understanding of what is going to happen when you experience it. This way, if you are 100% certain that there is a bardo, you will want to hear these teachings and put them into practice. And even if you aren't 100% sure, you will still want to hear these teachings and put them into practice – just in case.

### **The Natural Bardo of this Life**

The first bardo we will discuss is the natural bardo of this life. What does this mean? It refers to the life that we are experiencing right now. This is not usually what we think of when we hear the word *bardo*, is it? But it is in this life – between birth and death – that we can train for the bardo between lives.

The bardo of this life begins the moment we are born. From the moment we are born, when we emerge from our mother's womb, we begin to experience all the confused appearances that constitute the bardo of this life. This bardo, however, also grants us the opportunity to train for the next bardo, and if we train according to the teachings, we will make it through the next bardo

without any difficulties and perhaps even liberate ourselves from suffering. If we put in the effort now, we will be rewarded by a lack of suffering in the next bardo.

We can do this in one of three ways, depending on what sort of person we are. It's said that there are three types of people: those who are excellent, those who are superior, and those who are ordinary. Excellent people don't need any particular instructions on the bardo; they are already great meditators and have great realizations and understanding, i.e., they have realized the deity. These qualities mean that they do not need to be particularly instructed as to what to do in the bardo. But ordinary people are not like this; ordinary people even lose themselves in the course of daily life. They are plagued by ignorance, so they are very attached to the appearances of this life. This attachment, in turn, creates other negative emotions and more confused appearances. Ordinary people like us hang on to ideas like "me," "you," and "other." We hang on to ideas about the self. We hang on to what are called "the eight worldly concerns" that keep us from the path. They are: attachment to gain, to pleasure, to praise, to fame, and aversion to loss, to pain, to blame, and to a bad reputation. Caught up by our grasping to these ideas, a year will pass by, then two, then three, then four. Before we know it, our life has passed by in a cycle of confusion and grasping.

This way, to train ourselves during the natural bardo of this life is to follow Lord Buddha's instructions. He explained how to do this in both Sutras and Tantras, and great teachers and practitioners have written commentaries on these instructions through the ages. To train ourselves well, we need to listen to these instructions and contemplate them so that we fully understand their meaning. Usually, this means going over and over them; studying and reflecting on the Sutras and Tantras and all the oral instructions. The purpose of doing this is not merely to become learned, praised, or famous. Rather, through this process of listening and contemplating, we allow our mind to gradually rest and settle into its natural state. Yet, even this is not enough. It isn't enough to just listen to and reflect these teachings – we need to put them into practice. As the great practitioners of the past showed us, we need to abandon all the misdeeds of our body, speech, and mind. We need to stop doing anything that will create problems for us. What is more, we need to start doing good deeds - physically, verbally, and mentally. By refraining from misdeeds and engaging in good deeds, we will be putting these instructions into practice. Not only will we have developed knowledge from listening to and contemplating them, but we will also know how these instructions work practically. Ordinary people, people like us, need to put into practice instructions like those of Shantideva's *"The Way of the Bodhisattva."* Here it is recommended that we approach everything with mindfulness, awareness, and carefulness. If we put this advice into practice, our days will not be lost in a chorus of negative emotions and thoughts.

From the perspective of Vajrayana, putting Dharma into practice means first requesting an empowerment. In this empowerment, our potential will develop, we are inspired, we attain a degree of certainty, a degree of courage and strength that enables us to put secret Mantrayana into practice. But this empowerment by itself is not enough. We also need vajra instructions from a qualified Vajrayana master. These instructions give us the detailed know-how to engage in Vajrayana meditations. We request to be instructed, listen, and reflect on the meaning of what we have been told. Then we put the instructions into practice as well as we can. We need to try and follow the instructions 100% of the time. Even if this isn't something we may be able to do as

beginners, we need to try. This means that during the day we should keep reminding ourselves, “What is it that I need to be doing? What habits should I be forming? What do I need to give up?” This way we will stay focused. We should also try to maintain this mindfulness at night, even while asleep and dreaming. Just as we can get lost in the appearances of waking life, we can also get lost in the imagery of our dreams and let all sorts of negative emotions arise. Even when we are dreaming, we are still aware of having good and bad thoughts, so we need to keep focused on developing good ones. If we keep working at it, we will be able to stay aware and incorporate the instructions 100% of the time. To do this, we need to keep working at it and make sure we don’t get distracted or lazy.

There are other ways we can practice. We can do the common and uncommon preparatory practices, the *Ngöndro*, or we could follow the instructions of “*The Seven Points of Mind Training*.” Actually, this last set of teachings also contains a really helpful hint regarding these practices. It says, “Of the two witnesses, hold the principle one.” What this means is that there are two witnesses to our Dharma practice, ourself and other people. But if we really want to know if we have stopped doing things that will harm ourselves and others and started doing good deeds, then we have to rely on our own insight. Other people cannot see what is going on in our mind. They can’t really tell what our motives are, whether we are abandoning negative emotions or not. They cannot, but we can. We can check ourselves, examine our mind, and see what is going on. Are we getting lost in our negative emotions? Are we doing good deeds? Are we meditating? Are we doing the practices that we need to do? We practice the Dharma to benefit ourselves and to bring happiness to others, not so that someone else will think we are good. We have to rely on ourself as a witness and observe what is happening in our own mind.

It will make us very happy in a few ways if we do these practices and incorporate them in our life. For example, if we can do these meditation practices 100% of the time, we will experience great joy. Even if we can’t, we can still feel good about trying our best, are practicing mindfulness, and are being attentive and careful. On the other hand, we might find ourselves caught up in events and experiences of this life. We may wake up most mornings focusing our attention on our immediate needs and ignore the Dharma. We may lose ourselves in our confused experiences and negative emotions, but at some point, we may think, “I need to integrate the Dharma. I need to think about what I am doing. I need to develop pure intentions and generate loving kindness and compassion.” Having these thoughts occasionally is also something to feel really happy about.

Another main technique that the Buddha taught is to meditate on impermanence and death. It may seem at first glance that there is no way this will make us happy. We may ask, “How will thinking about death make me happy?” Well, in many ways it won’t, because thinking about impermanence and death is depressing. But it’s not without purpose. Thinking about this unhappy topic will lead us to an even greater happiness. We don’t think about dying and death so that we are unhappy, but we do this to develop a greater understanding of what will engender greater happiness.

There are three ways that meditating on impermanence can make us happy. To start with, it’s the condition that directs us towards the Dharma. If we are someone who has not entered the gate of the Dharma, don’t meditate, or worry about doing the right thing and not doing the wrong thing, then the thought of impermanence may get us started. Even if we have started on the path,

meditating impermanence can help keep us on track. If we lack diligence, become lazy, or lose our way, meditating on impermanence spurs us on. Remembering that things are impermanent and we are going to die gives us impetus to act. So it can help in the beginning and in the middle. But how will it help in the end? Even when we experience the results of our meditation, the thought of impermanence is still beneficial. In the end, we will be able to look back and see how helpful it was. Then we will understand that the sadness and depression we felt when we started to meditate on impermanence were temporary and spurred us on to experience true happiness.

In some way, meditation on the bardo is the same; it is initially unpleasant and depressing, but in the end it brings great results. They are also alike in that we may believe that we are not going to experience impermanence, death, or the bardo. But it's still good to prepare for them - just in case.

If we use our waking time to practice for the bardo and try to do good deeds, then when we experience impermanence and death, we will be prepared. If we practice now, if we reflect on what the instructions on the bardo mean, we will be prepared when death and the bardo happen to us. What is more, one of the instructions associated with preparing for the bardo is to get rid of our negative emotions in our daily life. Then gradually these afflictions will decrease and we will naturally tend towards goodness. It's very important to train ourselves in this way and become mindful and careful of what we are doing.

Again, I should emphasize that it's also important to use the time while we are sleeping effectively, especially our dreams. We should try to dream about doing good deeds. We should also try and stop ourselves from being overwhelmed by negative states of mind in our dreams. When we go to sleep, we should think, "Tonight I'm going to practice virtue in my dreams." Now, this wish may not result in us having positive dreams the first time we formulate it. It probably won't even work the second time we try, but gradually by articulating this wish, we are planting positive seeds that will ripen in our dreams. Focusing on our dreams in this way also helps us maintain mindfulness and carefulness in them and therefore seals us against negative emotions that may arise while we dream. By developing positive mental states in this way and forestalling negative states through mindfulness and awareness, we will gradually gain control over the appearances in our dreams. Developing this control will also enable us to see the illusory appearances of the bardo for what they are. In this way, training ourselves night and day in this life will help us attain a good birth in our future lives.

We may also take meditations from the development stage of Tantras and use them to prepare ourselves for the bardo. We may wish, for example, to visualize Noble Chenrezig or Lord Buddha in the sky in front of us. Based on this presence, we may then visualize ourselves making offerings to them or making aspirations to become like them. This type of visualization helps us appreciate them, to develop a strong bond with them, and to create merit. Alternately, we may visualize ourselves as one of the deities and gradually replace the habit of the impure appearances of our ordinary life with the pure appearances of the deity.

Whether we are visualizing the meditation deities in front of us or ourselves as them, the clarity of our visualization may be greatly affected by the conditions of the channels and winds inside our body. For some, the state of their winds and channels leads to a very clear visualization, for others

the image they are trying to focus on isn't very clear. The clarity of the image, however, isn't that important. It's important that we make a habit of remembering the deity. If the image itself is not very clear, we can focus on the deity's body; we can think about its color, its jewellery, ornaments, and implements.

So, this is the first of the four bardos, the natural bardo of this life. It's important in this bardo to try to be mindful, attentive, and careful. If you have any doubts, are confused, and have questions, please ask.

### Questions & Answers

**Question:** "Rinpoche, is the teacher in the bardo with the student or is the student on his or her own?" **Translator:** "Are you talking about the bardo between lives?" **Student:** "Yes." **Thrangu Rinpoche:** Everyone has to go through the bardo, whether they are a Lama or a student. But there's no certainty that we'll go through the bardo at the same time. If we yearn for this to happen, however, and have much faith and devotion, it's possible to encounter the appearance of our Guru in the bardo.

**Next question:** "Rinpoche, I have a question with respect to training in mindfulness. I just wanted to ask how to make sure we don't accumulate negative emotions by judging people while we are trying to do this. I've heard that it's good to develop discriminating awareness, but it seems to me that a side-product of this is that it's easy to become judgemental. Could Rinpoche give us some advice of how to transform our judgements of others?" **TR:** In the teachings on mindfulness and attentiveness, the focus is not really on anything external, which includes other people. If we look at the analogies by which it is taught, we can see this quite clearly. In "*The Way of the Bodhisattva*," Shantideva tells us that if the ground is covered with stones and thorns, we have two choices, to cover the entire world with leather or to wear shoes. In the same way, if we can protect our own mind through mindfulness, awareness, and carefulness, we prevent harm from arising. It doesn't say to protect other people's minds.

**Next question:** "Rinpoche, you talked about the need to train in mindfulness during the daytime and our dreams, but sometimes we wake in the morning and realize that we weren't mindful in our dreams. What should we do about this?" **TR:** Training in dreams is a gradual process and sometimes we will have bad dreams. But if we develop the intention to have good dreams, gradually they will start happening. What we need to do is maintain our positive intentions and to keep working at it.

**Q.:** "I'm one of those people that don't remember their dreams. Do you know any technique to help me remember them?" **TR:** This could mean that either you don't remember your dreams or you aren't dreaming. In either case, the best way to deal with this is to relax a little bit, i.e., wear your mindfulness and attentiveness a little more loosely.

**Q.:** "What is the meaning of mindfulness?" **TR:** It means not forgetting goodness, i.e., constantly remembering what it is we should be doing and what we should not be doing. It means to remember as opposed to forgetting. Those with excellent mindfulness always remember what they should be doing and what they shouldn't be doing. Other people may be a little less mindful

and only remember every hour or so. Other people may only have a thought like, “Be good and compassionate. Try not to do anything harmful” once a day. Even if we only remember these things once a day, it’s still mindfulness. What we need to do is develop our mindfulness. We need to start reminding ourselves again and again what we should be doing and what is best to stop doing.

**Q.:** “In our western societies, many people are killed in car crashes or plane accidents and many of these people may not be Buddhists. Is there a particular method that we can use to help them?”

**TR:** In this situation, the best thing to do is pray, making positive aspirations on their behalf. Will this actually help in the short term? The answer is, no. But it is planting the seed of freedom and liberation. It may not help straightaway, but in the future this practice will ripen into great results.

**Q.:** “There is a tradition of reading *‘The Book of Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo’* to people who have died. I wonder how helpful this is?” **TR:** When someone has died and is in the bardo, they have miraculous powers, e.g., they are clairvoyant. This means that if we read this book to them, they will understand and experience it. This book is a pointing-out instruction for those who are in the bardo between lives.

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

We discussed the first of the four bardos, the natural bardo of life. The reason the appearance of this life is called a *bardo*, an ‘in-between state,’ is because it covers the period of time while we have this body. This body acts as a support for us. It enables us to practice for the next bardo. After preparing for it in this life, we will not be overtaken by fear and suffering when the next bardo, the state in-between lives, appears to us.

The second bardo we are going to discuss is the painful bardo of dying. The reason for this name is the particular fear, worry, and suffering that we experience as the body that we are so attached to begins to disintegrate. Our attachment to our body causes us distinct suffering as we die. Training for this experience enables us to prepare ourselves by learning what to expect. As the painful bardo of dying appears to us, we will understand what is happening and not only avoid worry but also make the most of the opportunity it presents to us.

The painful bardo of dying refers specifically to the period of time between the onset of a fatal illness and the point when we actually die. When this happens, when we have died, the dharma nature of all phenomena will appear. This is the arising of the luminous bardo of the dharmata.

There are three different types of people who experience the painful bardo of dying: those who have completely perfected their Dharma practice; those who are somewhere in the middle, they are yogis but haven’t achieved the same level of realization; and thirdly, ordinary individuals. The first type of being, those who have perfected their meditation, do not have to experience this bardo. They do not have to go through the painful process of dying but can manifest the pure lands while still connected to their bodies. The second type, the middling sort of yogi, has had some experience in the development stage of meditation, but they have not gone as far as they could go. This means that they must go through the process of dying, but they do not experience

any suffering while this happens. The third group of beings, ordinary individuals, groups together two types of people: yogis with less realization and everyday, ordinary individuals. It is for these people that these teachings are particularly pertinent. The people in this third group can use these teachings to prepare themselves for the painful bardo of death. If they know what is going to happen in this bardo – the appearances they are going to see, what the process of dying is going to be like –, they will be less afraid and therefore have to endure less. This is why we learn the process of the stages of dissolution, so that we know what is going to happen. Knowing what will happen as we die enables us to stay calm and keep our mind stable then. Having a stable mind as we experience this bardo eliminates much of the suffering usually associated with it.

The painful bardo of death is a process of dissolution. When we die, this body of ours goes through a twofold dissolution process; the external elements dissolve and the internal mind dissolves. The external elements dissolve first; the earth, water, fire, air, and consciousness of our body dies. When our bodies were first formed, it was through the combination of these elements. It was through the combining of consciousness, air, fire, water, and earth that our physical body came into being, and it is through the perpetuation of a relationship between these elements that we are alive now. Eventually, however, these elements will dissolve and our body will die. In the beginning, middle, and end, our physical existence is dependent upon the combination of these elements.

The dying process is the reversal of the process of becoming that began our life. We began this life through our confusion. Having not realized the emptiness nature of all phenomena, confused images gradually grew clearer and clearer to us, until finally they gelled into the appearance of our life. This confusion appears very clearly to us; it is what we experience as our life. When we die, this confused apparition gradually dissolves along with the elements. The dissolution of this confusion means that the emptiness nature of all phenomena, the emptiness nature of our minds, becomes clearer and clearer until finally the luminous bardo of *dharmata* ('dharma nature') clearly appears to us. Those who have perfected their meditation recognize this bardo "like a mother meeting a child," which is to say, quickly, easily and comfortably. Those of us who do not have this realization will not recognize this luminous bardo of *dharmata*. Instead, through ignorance, we'll start to experience other confused imagery, which in turn will become more intense and clear until crystallized into our next life.

The whole process of dissolution begins at the navel centre. The structure of the elements that make up our body is influenced by the channels, winds, and *chakras* ('circular channels') within our bodies. We have five main chakras: at the crown of our head, in our throat, in our heart centre, in our navel, and in the secret place. As the chakras are supported by the body's winds, the winds' reversal causes them to dissolve. There are said to be five different types of winds that pass through these channels. The first to reverse and dissolve is the equally-abiding wind, so called because it pervades the body. When it reverses and dissolves, our body loses its heat and we are unable to digest any food. Its dissolution is followed by the dissolution of the life-supporting wind, then the downward-clearing wind, and likewise the other two winds, the upward-clearing wind and the wind that stabilizes warmth.

When these winds have dissolved, the navel chakra starts to dissolve. This is accompanied by external, internal, and secret signs. The external signs are those that can be perceived by others. If



we were to watch another person dying, we would see these signs. We could see, for example, that their face was losing its colour, that they had become pallid, and that their body was losing its strength. The internal signs are those experienced by the dying person himself or herself. The internal sign of the dissolution of this chakra, for example, is that the mind will grow unclear and the dying person will feel depressed. The secret signs are those that can be recognized by meditators. With the dissolution of this chakra, for example, the meditator would notice that the dharmata appears alternately clearly and hazily. It will be experienced like a mirage or an illusion, in and out of focus. Gradually, as the dying process progresses, the appearance of the dharmata becomes clearer and clearer.

The next chakra to dissolve is the one at the heart centre. At this point, the water element dissolves into the fire element. The external sign of this occurrence is that the nostrils and nose become very dry. Internally, the dying person will feel irritable and hesitant. The secret sign for meditators is a smoke-like appearance.

The next chakra to dissolve is the one at the throat, and its dissolution is accompanied by the dissolution of the fire element into the air element. The external sign is that the body loses its heat. The internal sign is that the dying person's mind is alternately clear and unclear. The secret sign is an appearance of red fireflies dancing about in the sky in front of us. This sign means that the dharmata can be perceived a little clearer than in the previous stages.

Next, the chakra in the secret area of our genitals dissolves. At this time, the air element dissolves into consciousness. The external sign of this is that breathing becomes very difficult. Sometimes there is a long space between inhalations, and the inhalations are forced and difficult. The internal sign is that the mind becomes very unclear and it is very difficult to perceive external forms. The secret sign is an image of a flaming torch.

At this point, the five elements have all dissolved and as they were the support for the five senses, we can also say that the senses have dissolved. The eye's sense faculty has dissolved, so we can no longer see external forms. The nose's sense faculty has dissolved, so we can no longer smell and so forth. We are no longer able to perceive the external world. Lastly, the consciousness dissolves into space and the outer dissolution is complete. This final dissolution marks the point-of-no-return. Up until this point, the process can be reversed. If the illness or injury that caused it can be treated, the dying process can be thwarted and the person can continue to live. As we move onto the process of the internal dissolution, though, there's no possibility of reversal. This internal dissolution is the dissolution of the thoughts, and after it begins we cannot be revived.

This final process of dissolution involves the white element that we received from our father, which is at the crown of our heads, and the red element that we received from our mother, which is at our navel. While we are alive, the strength of the winds within our body keeps these two elements in place, but when the winds are weakened and reverse as we die, these two elements can no longer stay apart; they begin to move towards each other. Gradually, they make their way towards each other and finally meet at the heart centre. The white element we received from our father begins this process. When it can no longer be held up, it descends slowly down towards our heart centre. As this happens, we experience the appearance of whiteness. Next, as the red element that we received from our mother can no longer be held down by these same winds, it

begins to rise up. This process is accompanied by the appearance of redness. When these two elements meet at the heart centre, blackness appears. It is through this process of dissolution that the internal thoughts start to dissolve. If we were to examine our thoughts very carefully, we would be able to classify them into 80 different types and again into three main categories that are associated with these three stages of dissolution. As the white element that we obtained from our father beings to descend to the heart centre, those states of mind associated with anger and hatred dissolve. As the red element that we obtained from our mother ascends, passionate thoughts dissolve. Finally, as the white and red elements come together in the heart centre and we experience blackness, ignorant mental stages dissolve. When this dissolution is finished, we experience the next bardo, the luminous bardo of dharmata.

So, how do we prepare for the painful bardo of dying? The first thing we need to do is to understand impermanence and become familiar with the idea that death is inevitable, but the time of death is unknown. Knowing what will happen to us when we die will also be helpful, so we should study the teachings on the bardos. As we begin to die, there are also quite a few other things we can do. To begin with, we can let go of everything that we are attached to. We should imagine ourselves offering all our worldly possessions to the Three Jewels. As we are dying, we may also find ourselves worrying about work that we haven't been able to finish, but at this stage we should forget about our unfinished business. None of these things – even our relatives and friends – can help us very much at this stage anyway. We have to leave them; we have to go beyond this life without them, so being attached to them will cause us even more suffering. If we have a close friend who understands the dying practice, has the same samaya commitments as we do, and can therefore help us, we should try and keep them near. But if our relatives and friends are crying loudly and carrying on, their presence will not help us, and we should ask them to leave. This kind of behaviour will only serve to create attachment in us and therefore cause us to experience more suffering. As we go through this process, we need to remember the instructions regarding death and try to put them into practice. We need to try and stay aware. If we are distracted, we may be pulled towards suffering and a bad birth.

We should also try and maintain the meditation practices that we did during our lifetime. If we practiced Mahamudra while we lived, then as we die we should try and remember that all things are the appearance of our own mind – which is by nature emptiness-clarity – and rest our mind in the appearances we experience while dying. If we practiced *Dzogchen* ('Great Perfection'), then we should remember the constitution of the drops and channels. This is also what we should bring to mind if we are a practitioner of the six yogas. If we are familiar with development stage yogas, if we have a yidam, then we should meditate on this. If our meditation deity is Chenrezig, for example, as we die we should maintain our focus on the body of Chenrezig that abides within our body. If we haven't done any meditation practices at this level while we were alive, we should concentrate on our aspirations, asking the Three Jewels for help and visualizing ourselves making offerings to them.

At the end of the painful bardo of death, we may also choose to practice *phowa* ('transference of consciousness'). There are three aspects to the phowa practice: training in phowa, performing phowa on ourselves, and performing phowa on someone else. When we are going to do phowa for someone else, it's very important to get our timing right. The right time to do phowa is after all the elements have dissolved and all the signs of the dissolution have been completed. A sign

that this has happened is a drop appearing at the top of the head. If we were to do phowa for someone any earlier than this, we may anger those who are really attached to this life and this would not bode well for their transference of consciousness. So it's important to wait until we see all the signs of dissolution. We must make sure that the person has completely stopped breathing and that all functions have stopped.

If we are doing phowa for ourself, we can also do this in different ways, depending on what kind of person we are. If we are really good meditators, we may be able to achieve the rainbow body or otherwise transfer our consciousness at this point without any particular application of the phowa practice. Beings like this, however, sometimes demonstrate how to perform phowa as they die, even when they do not need to. Marpa Lotsawa was one such being. Even though he did not need to perform phowa, in order to demonstrate how it is done, he ejected a large white sphere from the top of his head that dissolved into space.

There are five types of phowa: the phowa of the dharma body, the phowa of the complete enjoyment body, the phowa of the emanation body, the phowa of blessings, and the phowa of cultivating pure realms. The first two are performed by people who have achieved samadhi, a high level of meditation. The rest of us ordinary beings need to practice the other three. In order to put them into effect at the time of death, we need to train in them during life.

Our mind's nature is clear awareness and our body consists of groups of particles. These two are different, yet are dependently connected through the channels, winds, and chakras. This connection is why we experience these two entities as mixed. As the external elements and internal thoughts dissolve during the dying process, however, we end up with the feeling that the mind is inside the body and we want to get out of it. There are many different doors or apertures through which the consciousness can leave the body and usually the consciousness is directed through one of them by the force of our karma. If the consciousness were to leave through the lower gates, we would take a bad birth, in a hell, or as a hungry ghost, or as an animal. If it were to leave through the upper gates, such as the eyes, nose, and so forth, we would experience a good birth as a god, demi-god, or human. Nevertheless, we would still be in samsara, and we do not want to keep being born in samsara – we are trying to free ourselves from it.

There is one door that leads out of this cycle. It is the Brahma aperture at the very top of our head. If we are able to direct our consciousness through this aperture, we will either be born in a pure realm or become a human who can continue practicing the Dharma. While we are alive, we should train ourselves to guide our consciousness out of the body through this aperture after death.

(Having explained the practice,) the next technique is the phowa of blessings. This is pretty much the same as the earlier technique, but instead of Buddha Amitabha above our head, it is our Guru.

The fifth type of phowa is the pure land phowa. In this practice, we train in generating pure appearances during the day and develop confidence in our ability to transfer ourselves to the Pure Land through dream-training at night. This means training ourselves to have dreams in which we go to the pure lands, meet the buddhas, and listen to their Dharma. If we are having bad dreams,

we try to transform them into good dreams and then, gradually, into pure land dreams. If we are able to change our dreams like this, we will develop confidence in our ability to travel to the pure lands at the time of death. Developing the ability to control our dreams in this way is a good indicator that we will be able to direct our consciousness to these states when we die. I have explained how we train in the phowa techniques while we are alive. Now I will explain how to put them into practice as we are dying.

At this time, one of the most important things we need to remember is not to lose ourselves to fear and confusion. We encounter many circumstances that could lead to confusion and fear as we die, so we need to be vigilant. We need to make sure that we cut these thoughts off before they take root. We need to be aware and not let our minds become swept away by depression or consumed by fear. When we come to the point where we should transfer our consciousness, we need to be able to think clearly, “I’m going to transfer my consciousness now. I’m going to keep control of my mind. I won’t let myself get lost in fear and confusion. I won’t lose myself in negative thoughts. I’m going to transfer my consciousness to a pure realm. If I can’t do this, I will transfer my consciousness to a new body that will act as a support for my Dharma practice.”

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

After we have experienced the painful bardo of dying that includes the dissolution of all our elements, we will experience the luminous bardo of the dharmata. As mentioned, the external elements dissolve, then whiteness appears as the thoughts associated with anger dissolve, then redness appears as the thoughts associated with passion dissolve, then blackness appears as the thoughts associated with ignorance dissolve. When this dissolution is completed, the luminous nature, the dharma space, the dharma essence of all things, naturally appears. This dharma nature is present in all phenomena spontaneously, and it appears to all sentient beings at this point.

Those who have a strong meditation practice are able to rest in the samadhi of recognizing the mind’s nature: they became intimately familiar with the mind’s nature while they were alive and recognize this experience as this very nature. For them the luminous bardo of dharmata is like the meeting of a mother and child – an instant recognition – and an exceptional relationship dawns for them.

Most of us, however, do not have this level of realization, so the dharmata only appears to us very briefly. The length of time that the dharmata appears to us is measured in meditation days, a meditation day being the amount of time that we can rest in meditation on the nature of our mind. If we can rest in this meditation for five minutes, our meditation day will be five minutes long; if we can rest in this meditation for an hour, our meditation day will be an hour long; if we can rest in this meditation for several days, our meditation day will be several days long. The appearance of the luminous bardo of the dharmata lasts for five of these meditation days. For most of us who have not trained extensively in meditation, our meditation days are very short, and five of them are still an extremely brief time. This is one of the reasons why it’s important to put in effort to recognize the nature of our mind and train in resting in this state of awareness while we are alive.

For people like us, the ignorance that results in us not perceiving the dharmata also regenerates ignorant thoughts. This in turn leads to the generation of desirous thoughts, then angry thoughts. Through this process, the confused appearances of the mind again become clearer and clearer. There are various descriptions of these appearances in different instruction manuals, but they all agree on the appearance of the hundred peaceful and wrathful deities who reside in the body. The explicit detail with which Buddhist texts describe these deities – including elaborate descriptions of their ornaments, bodies, and so on – may cause some to wonder whether they appear to everyone or just to those who are habituated to them. As they are appearances that arise naturally out of the basic space of all phenomena, the dharmata, we can be sure that we will experience these appearances. (After having gone into detail, Thrangu Rinpoche added), they arise internally from the dharmata, appearing to all sentient beings, even the tiniest of parasites and insects. Next, the five Buddha families begin to appear.

In the luminous bardo of the dharmata, the basic nature of all phenomena – the dharma-ness, the dharma nature – appears. This dharma space appears because we have died; the process of dying has allowed it to manifest naturally. Normally, during our lives, the space of this basic nature is there, but in it subtle thoughts have arisen. And these have then led to more intense conceptualizations, negative emotions, and the confused appearances of this life, which in turn caused the five elements of earth, water, fire, air, and consciousness to arise. Through the process of dying, however, this has all dissolved. As discussed earlier, the winds and channels that supported the five elements have weakened and then dissolved into each other and as they did, the subtle thoughts also dissolved, leaving the ‘dharma space,’ the *dharmadhatu*. At this point, those who have meditated on the dharmata or dharmadhatu during their lifetimes recognize it. Most of us, however, have no direct experience of it, do not recognize it, and it passes us by. Instead, confused appearances re-arise through the force of habit. What we need to do to ensure that we recognize the dharmadhatu after we die is to develop our ability to meditate stably while we are alive.

In this tradition, we develop this ability in stages. We begin by doing the common and uncommon preliminaries. These practices take us through the gate of dharma and purify our negative emotions. After this, we move on to the ‘tranquillity’ or *shamatha*, and ‘insight’ or *vipashyana*, meditations. In these practices, we are trying to develop the ability to rest in actual samadhi. This is not something we will be able to do straightaway, because we have other very strong habits that act against this. Since beginningless time, we have been chasing after one thought or another, which in turn leads to other thoughts, and on to yet other thoughts. We are used to this chain of thoughts and we are not used to letting our mind rest peacefully. When we first sit down and start to meditate, we may have glimpses of the basic nature, but we do not have enough control over our mind to let it rest. We need to develop this insight along with the tranquillity that lets us rest in samadhi.

The Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje, explained how this happens when he said, “May the subtle and coarse waves of thoughts be naturally calmed.” Normally, thoughts arise in our mind as frequently as waves in the ocean. What we want to do is develop a meditation that is like a very calm, placid, and clear lake. There are two things that could stop us from achieving this state. To continue the analogy, one is that our meditation/lake could be disturbed by many thoughts/waves. The other is that it could be churned up and made unclear through impurities

and cloudiness. We need to gradually let our mind/lake settle and eventually it will become naturally clear and calm. The subtle thoughts and negative emotions that cloud our minds will settle down; they will rest into their nature, allowing us to experience pure mind.

When we are practicing shamatha meditation, we need to have a mind that is stable, peaceful, and relaxed. And on the basis of this tranquil meditation, we develop vipashyana. The Buddha explained the need for this insight in many different Sutras and Tantras, and his insistence was followed in later instructions by different Lamas in the oral tradition. The main thing he showed us was the innate dharma nature, the basic nature of all phenomena, which is emptiness. He also taught us that there is not just emptiness but also the Buddha nature. There is a union of emptiness and the Buddha nature. The emptiness of phenomena is not just a blank emptiness; it is the inseparability of this clarity and emptiness that we should rest in when we meditate. Some of the sutras that mention this process are: *“The Hundred Thousand Verse Prajnaparamita Sutra,”* *“The Eight Thousand Verse Prajnaparamita Sutra,”* *“The Sutra on Transcendent, Full Knowledge,”* and *“The Heart of Prajnaparamita Sutra.”* This last sutra – which says that there is no form, there is no sound, there is no smell, no taste, and so forth – is referring to the empty nature of all phenomena. It does not explain the logic that proves this perspective and is therefore difficult for ordinary individuals to understand. Through the Buddha’s inspiration and blessing, however, the great bodhisattvas, arhats, and practitioners of the listener’s vehicle were able to understand what they heard.

There are also other instances – in the Sutras, Tantras, and oral teachings – where the reasoning behind this view was explained. In the Sutras, the view was explained in some of the Prajnaparamita texts and also in the work of the great Indian masters, like the noble Nagarjuna, the great Chandrakirti, and the child of the Buddhas, Shantideva. In their writings, we find many different proofs for the emptiness nature of phenomena and by studying them, we can understand and have confidence in this. This process is called “taking inference as the path.” It means coming to an understanding that all phenomena are empty by working through the logical explanations, in the Buddha’s teachings that “form is emptiness, sound is emptiness, smell is emptiness,” and so forth. Through this understanding, we come to see phenomena as just the confused appearances of samsara, with no independent existence, nothing other than the false appearances of relativity; actually – in and of themselves – emptiness.

From amongst the different reasonings that are taught in these Sutras and treatises, the easiest to understand is that phenomena are neither single nor multiple. Take a common object like our hand, for example. The usual way we relate to our hand is as a single entity that functions as “a hand.” From the perspective of the false appearances of our everyday lives, this hand is a real thing and functions as one. If we investigate further, however, we can see that it has no actual, inherent nature. In truth, it doesn’t have any independent existence. We relate to it as “a hand,” but where is this “hand”? There is a thumb, five fingers. The thumb is not the hand; the fingers, likewise, can be individuated and are not the hand. There is no “hand” within any of the hand’s parts. The “hand” is just a confused appearance. We take the aggregate of all the different parts of the hand – all the fingers, the palm, the thumb, the skin, the bones, the flesh – and impute onto it the idea of a “hand.” This label is just something that we impose upon the collection of objects. It isn’t a real thing; it is a confused, false appearance.

On face value, we may accept his assertion but then go on to say, “Well, okay, there is no actual ‘hand’ here, but there are fingers and the fingers are real.” So, let us look at our fingers: there is a joint at the bottom, one in the middle, and one near the top. There is nothing in these that we could actually label “finger,” is there? The finger is just like the hand; it is imputed upon its parts. In this way, we can deconstruct smaller and smaller parts on subtler and subtler levels. Through this analysis, we can see how the true nature of these things is a lack of any “thing”; they are empty of a true nature, and the concepts we have of things as real are the confused appearances of our own imputations. Following the process of this reasoning, we can come to the point where we can say confidently about any object that we can think of and investigate, “No, there is no form, sound, smell and indeed all these things are emptiness.”

The difficulty with the process of taking inference as the path is that it can take a long time to get to this confident position. In some cases it is said to take three very uncountable eons to develop this confidence. And, besides, it isn’t something that we can experience in meditation, because it is a concept. There is, however, an exceptional method to attain this understanding and it is taught within the secret mantra Vajrayana. In this tradition were great Indian practitioners who developed an understanding of all the instructions of the Sutras and Tantras. They condensed their understanding and on its basis gave us precious instructions that allow us to look directly at the nature of phenomena. This is called “taking direct perception as the path.”

If we are going to take this path, we need an exceptional method. We could take any external phenomena as the object of our meditation – we could meditate on the mountains, palaces, houses, or any other external object -, but it would be very difficult to directly perceive the emptiness of these objects. Instead, the Indian and Tibetan Mahasiddhas taught the exceptional method of looking at the nature of our own mind.

**Question:** “Rinpoche explained the difference between the Sutra and Tantra approaches. Now, in general, the Chinese tradition is described as a Sutra tradition and more specifically there is a tradition of Zen. So, I have two questions. What is the relationship between what Rinpoche is talking about and Zen? And what are the differences between Zen and the meditations of the secret mantra Vajrayana?” **TR:** There is a tradition that refers to the Buddhism of China as Mahayana and the Buddhism of Tibet as Vajrayana, but this is a simplified distinction. The Sutras did spread widely in China, but the Vajrayana also made its way there and the practice of Zen is very similar to some aspects of the secret mantra tradition. In Tibet, there was a similar complexity. Although the Vajrayana was practiced primarily, the Sutras were also studied and practiced. This means that we cannot say that one country’s practice was simply Sutra and the other’s was purely Tantra.

Now with regards to Zen. Rinpoche says that as he has not received oral instructions on the practice of Zen, he doesn’t feel confident commenting on the differences between Zen and secret mantra Vajrayana. From what he does know, however, he says he feels pretty confident in saying that they are pretty much the same. In Tibet, the Kagyü tradition of the Great Seal, Mahamudra, and the Nyingma practice of the Great Perfection, Dzogchen, are based on a thorough understanding of the Sutras from which a certainty of emptiness arises. This certainty is then followed by the development of the meditation experiences of Mahamudra and Dzogchen. In this

way, practitioners in these traditions not only develop a confidence in emptiness but directly realize it.

There are many ways of looking at the mind conventionally: We can look at it in terms of eight consciousnesses, six consciousnesses, or the sixth mental consciousness. Whichever way we choose to describe the mind, however, when we look at it directly, we can see that its nature is emptiness, yet thoughts arise. From where do they arise? Do they have form? Shape? Color? What are they like? What is their texture? If they do not have form, then how is it that they arise? What is it they exist as? Are these thoughts things that can be proven? Are they things that we can look at and say, “Yes, that actually exists”? If we investigate in this way, we will discover that thoughts aren’t things. We can look for them everywhere, but there are no “things” to look at and no way to find them. By looking directly at the nature of our mind, we can simply and directly see its nature, its emptiness. We need to do this more than once, though. The Third Karmapa explained how this works. As he put it, we need to “look again and again at the mind, which has nothing to look at.” We meditate on the mind over and over again and as we do, we become familiar with our mind and realize that there is no mind to see. In this way, through looking again and again at the unseeable, we directly realize what cannot be realized – the emptiness nature of the mind. We do this directly and don’t try and understand it inferentially. The last line of the Third Karmapa’s stanza says, “Without delusion, may we recognize our own nature.” Whether we choose to look at this stanza as an oral instruction or an aspiration prayer, it is instructing or encouraging us to familiarize ourselves with the nature of our mind.

If we are to look again and again at the mind, we will notice changes. If we are practicing tranquillity meditation, we may find our mind stable and peaceful. At other times, we may notice that many thoughts are arising, that the mind seems to be moving. At this time, we should ask ourselves, “What is moving? Where is it going? How is it that these thoughts arise? Where do they arise from?” But if we investigate these thoughts again and again, we will come to see that their nature is also emptiness. Whether we are discussing the luminous bardo of dharmata, the nature of arising phenomena, or the nature of the mind in meditation, the meaning is the same. So by practicing to look at the nature of the mind again and again, we will recognize it when it appears in the bardo.

If we do not recognize the nature, however, the peaceful and wrathful deities will appear to us. While we are alive, they do not necessarily appear to us. The body and mind reside together. The mind has the aspects of the eight different consciousnesses and the 51 different mental factors – mental factors are coarse thoughts – and the continual acts of speech. After we die, however, the mind has the aspects of the different peaceful and wrathful deities. The eight different consciousnesses are the same as the 42 peaceful deities. These reside in the channels at our heart centre, but because of the impure appearances, we experience them as the eight consciousnesses: the all-ground consciousness, the afflictive consciousness, and the other six consciousnesses. The 51 mental factors are the same as the 51 wrathful deities. They reside in the channels at the brain centre, appear in life in their impure aspects as the mental events, and in the bardo as the 51 wrathful deities. These mental events appear very vividly to us and as they are associated with the mind centre, we feel that there is a lot of mental activity in the brain. These days, scientists sense these activities and say that the brain is the mind, but by saying this they are limiting it to the 51 mental factors. Then there are the 9 *Vidhyadharas* (‘Lineage Holders or Knowledge Holders’).



These are the same as our speech, the aspects of our speech, the things we say on a daily basis, and they reside at our throat centre. When we are alive, they appear in their impure aspect as our speech; in the bardo they appear as the 9 Vidhyadharas.

So, while we are alive, these deities are confined to confused appearances; the peaceful deities manifest as the 8 consciousnesses in the heart, the wrathful deities manifest as the 51 mental events in the brain, and the 9 Vidhyadharas manifest as speech in our throat centres. When we are in the bardo, though, the 42 peaceful deities are no longer confined and appear as if they were external, which is to say they appear as the 42 external deities. Likewise, the 51 wrathful deities, no longer confined by impure appearances in the brain centre, appear to us as the 51 wrathful deities; and the 9 Vidhyadharas appear from our throat centre. If we recognize these deities for what they are, we can be liberated. If we don't recognize them, we will not. This means that we really need to become familiar with these deities. We should read "*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*," also called "*Great Liberation through Hearing*," and look at paintings. Then, in the future, when these deities appear, we will be able to recognize them. If we don't, we will enter the karmic bardo of becoming.

### **The Karmic Bardo of Becoming**

In the karmic bardo of becoming, we need to remember to select a good birth, despite the many appearances that arise. At some point, we may think that we have a body and at other times we will think we are formless. Sometimes our mind may be very clear – we may even have moments of clairvoyance and the ability to create miracles. At other times, we may experience frightening and scary appearances. During all of this, it's important that we do not lose ourselves to the power of these appearances, but rather recognize them for what they are, the confused appearances of our mind. If we are able to do this, we can select a good birth, one in which we can accomplish the Dharma. If we lose ourselves to these appearances, we will be lost to the power of our karma. Karma is very strong, this is true, but if during the period of this bardo we supplicate the Buddha or even remember him, the Dharma, the Sangha, our yidam, or so on, we will be able to select a good birth. This means that it's very important during this bardo to remember and supplicate the Three Jewels and to remember our Dharma practice.

To be more specific, at this point there are two methods we can employ to ensure ourselves a good birth. The first is to block bad births and the second is to select good births. We use the first of these two methods, blocking bad births, when we find ourselves being directed towards a bad birth through fear. That is to say that often in this bardo we will experience terrifying appearances and look for a means of escaping them by heading towards an unhelpful birth. If at this point we recognize these terrifying appearances as the coarse aspects of our own mind and make supplications to the Three Jewels; even just remembering the Three Jewels can stop us from taking an unhelpful birth, we can block the entry into an unfortunate birth.

At other times, we may be drawn to taking a particular birth through strong lust or strong passion. We may, for example, be drawn by lust to the image of our future parents making love, but we can block this kind of birth by recognizing that this is also confused appearance and we shouldn't lose ourselves to it. We shouldn't let our mind fall under the control of these confused appearances and the negative mental states that engage with them. Instead, we should supplicate

the Three Jewels, make aspiration prayers, and always remember the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The strength of these activities will prevent us from taking birth through negative emotions.

We cannot block all births, however, because there is no particular place to stay in the bardo. We need to choose a favourable birth and there are several different methods to do this. If we have practiced the development stage of deity practice, we can visualize ourselves as the yidam and our future parents as the yidam. This is one way of ensuring a good birth. We may also choose to meditate on emptiness, which will prevent us from taking an unfortunate birth. If we are a monk or a nun and wish to continue being a monk or a nun in a future birth, we should try and remember our vows at this time. This will help ensure that we are reborn in a situation where it is possible to become a monk or a nun. Many of you have the five lay vows. If you follow these well in this lifetime and remember them in the bardo, this can also help you to obtain a good birth.

We should also try and remember that the wondrous appearances we experience in the bardo appear through the force of karma and that they are also part of our lives now, except that we are confined to our bodies. They cannot go outside the body as they are confined to it, anchored in it. We may think of or remember another place, but even after imagining this place, the mind will return to and stay anchored in the body. In the bardo, though, as we have no physical body, appearances are not confined in this way. This means that at that time, the wondrous appearances that manifest through karma appear much more vividly to us. If we remember a place, we are there. There is no body to come back to. Instead, we may find ourselves in the next place we remember. This karmic force makes us very unstable – we can go anywhere, all over the world. If we are skilled, though, we can use this fact. We can, for instance, use it to take birth in a pure land. If at this stage of the bardo we are able to clearly visualize a pure land, the blissful realm of Amitabha, for example, we can be born there. If we use this opportunity to make the aspiration, “May I be born in the blissful realm of Amitabha” and focus on this prayer while one-pointedly visualizing his pure land, then there is a hope that we can be reborn there. We should train in this eventuality in this lifetime, training and even dreaming of his pure land again and again.

### **Conclusion**

With this, we have explained the four different bardos: the natural bardo of this life, the painful bardo of dying, the luminous bardo of the dharmata, and the karmic bardo of becoming.

It is really good that you have been able to receive these teachings and hopefully they will be of great benefit to you. It would be good to think about them over and over again. You should do these meditations and take up these practices to the best of your ability since this will bring you great benefit in the future. Please consider these instructions and review them again and again. This is my request of you. – Thank you very much.

### **Dedication Prayers**

Through this goodness may omniscience be attained  
And thereby may every enemy (mental defilement) be overcome.  
May beings be liberated from the ocean of samsara

That is troubled by waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death.

By this virtue may I quickly attain the state of Guru Buddha and then

Lead every being without exception to that very state!

May precious and supreme bodhicitta that has not been generated now be so,

And may precious bodhicitta that has already been never decline, but continuously increase!

May the life of the Glorious Lama remain steadfast and firm.

May peace and happiness fully arise for beings as limitless in number as space is vast in its extent.

Having accumulated merit and purified negativities, may I and all living beings without exception swiftly establish the levels and grounds of Buddhahood.



Photo of Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche, Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, and Ven. Chöje Lama Namse taken by Kim Fiocca in 2009 in the Dharma shop of Karma Sönam Dargye Ling, Seat of His Holiness the Gyalwa Karmapa in Canada, and kindly offered for this article by Valerie White. The teachings were transcribed by Noeleen Lam, Wendy Catran, and Ruth Gamble, edited by David Karma Choephel, and appeared in the April 2008 issue of *“Thar Lam.”* Without making alterations, typed and arranged for the Download Project of Khenpo Karma Namgyal at Karma Lekshey Ling Institute in Kathmandu, Karma Sönam Dargye Ling in Toronto, Karma Chang Chub Chöphel Ling in Heidelberg, and Karma Sherab Ling in Münster by Gaby Hollmann. Photo of peony taken and generously offered by Josef Kerklau. Copyright Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche and Karma Lekshey Ling Institute, 2009. All rights reserved. Distributed for personal use only.