



# The process of dying according to Tibetan Buddhism

Extracts from *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche, pp. 251-257

*The description of the death process in the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism is of interest because it details how each of the five aggregates (skandhas) dissolves at death. Death is therefore the ultimate demonstration that the person is nothing other than the five aggregates functioning together.*

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

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

The Tantric Buddhist tradition of Tibet offers an explanation of the body that is quite different from the one most of us are used to. This is of a psycho-physical system, which consists of a dynamic network of subtle channels, "winds" or inner air, and essences. These are called, respectively: *nadi*, *prana*, and *bindu* in Sanskrit; and *tsa*, *lung*, and *tiklé* in Tibetan. We are familiar with something similar in the meridians and *ch'i* energy of Chinese medicine and acupuncture. (...)

Once we have a physical body, we also have what are known as the five *skandhas*—the aggregates that compose our whole mental and physical existence. They are the constituents of our experience, the support for the grasping of ego, and also the basis for the suffering of *samsara*. They are: form, feeling, perception, intellect, and consciousness, also translated as: form, sensation, recognition, formation, and consciousness. The five *skandhas* represent the constant structure of the human psychology as well as its pattern of evolution and the pattern of the evolution of the world. The *skandhas* are also related to blockages of different types—spiritual ones, material ones, and emotional ones. They are examined in great depth in Buddhist psychology.

All of these components will dissolve when we die. The process of dying is a complex and interdependent one, in which groups of related aspects of our body and mind disintegrate simultaneously. As the winds disappear, the bodily functions and the senses fail. The energy centers collapse, and without their supporting winds the elements dissolve in sequence from the grossest to the subtlest. The result is that



each stage of the dissolution has its physical and psychological effect on the dying person, and is reflected by external, physical signs as well as inner experiences.

Friends sometimes ask me: Can people like us see these external signs in a friend or relative who is dying? My students who care for the dying have told me that some of these physical signs described below are observed in hospices and hospitals. However, the stages of the outer dissolution may take place extremely quickly and not very obviously, and generally people caring for the dying in the modern world are not looking for them. Often nurses in busy hospitals rely on their intuition and many other factors, such as the behavior of doctors or members of the patient's family, or the state of mind of the dying person, to predict when someone might be dying. They also observe, but not at all in a systematic way, some physical signs, such as the change in skin color, a certain smell sometimes remarked on, and a noticeable change in breathing. Modern drugs, however, may well mask the signs that Tibetan teachings indicate, and there is as yet surprisingly little research in the West on this most important topic. Doesn't this show how little the process of dying is understood or respected?

## **The Outer Dissolution: The Senses and the Elements**

The outer dissolution is when the senses and elements dissolve. How exactly will we experience this when we die?

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

The next four phases follow the dissolution of the elements.

### **Earth**

Our body begins to lose all its strength. We are drained of any energy. We cannot get up, stay upright, or hold anything. We can no longer support our head. We feel as though we are falling, sinking underground, or being crushed by a great weight. Some traditional texts say that it is as if a huge mountain were being pressed down upon us, and we were being squashed by it. We feel heavy and uncomfortable in any position. We may ask to be pulled up, to have our pillows made higher, or for the bedcovers to be taken off. Our complexion fades and a pallor sets in. Our cheeks sink, and dark stains appear on our teeth. It becomes harder to open and close our eyes. As the aggregate of form is dissolving, we become weak and frail. Our mind is agitated and delirious, but then sinks into drowsiness.

These are signs that the *earth* element is withdrawing into the water element. This means that the wind related to the earth element is becoming less capable of providing a base for consciousness, and the ability



of the water element is more manifest. So the "secret sign" that appears in the mind is a vision of a shimmering mirage.

## Water

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

The *water* element is dissolving into fire, which is taking over in its ability to support consciousness. So the "secret sign" is a vision of a haze with swirling wisps of smoke.

## Fire

Our mouth and nose dry up completely. All the warmth of our body begins to seep away, usually from the feet and hands toward the heart. Perhaps a steamy heat rises from the crown of our head. Our breath is cold as it passes through our mouth and nose. No longer can we drink or digest anything. The aggregate of perception is dissolving, and our mind swings alternately between clarity and confusion. We cannot remember the names of our family or friends, or even recognize who they are. It becomes more and more difficult to perceive anything outside of us as sound and sight are confused.

Kalu Rinpoche writes: "For the individual dying, the inner experience is of being consumed in a flame, being in the middle of a roaring blaze, or perhaps the whole world being consumed in a holocaust of fire."

The *fire* element is dissolving into air, and becoming less able to function as a base for consciousness, while the ability of the air element to do so is more apparent. So the secret sign is of shimmering red sparks dancing above an open fire, like fireflies.

## Air

It becomes harder and harder to breathe. The air seems to be escaping through our throat. We begin to rasp and pant. Our inbreaths become short and labored, and our outbreaths become longer. Our eyes roll upward, and we are totally immobile. As the aggregate of intellect is dissolving, the mind becomes bewildered, unaware of the outside world. Everything becomes a blur. Our last feeling of contact with our physical environment is slipping away.

We begin to hallucinate and have visions: If there has been a lot of negativity in our lives, we may see terrifying forms. Haunting and dreadful moments of our lives are replayed, and we may even try to cry out in terror. If we have led lives of kindness and compassion, we may experience blissful, heavenly visions, and



"meet" loving friends or enlightened beings. For those who have led good lives, there is peace in death instead of fear.

Kalu Rinpoche writes: "The internal experience for the dying individual is of a great wind sweeping away the whole world, including the dying person, an incredible maelstrom of wind, consuming the entire universe."

What is happening is that the *air* element is dissolving into consciousness. The winds have all united in the "life supporting wind" in the heart. So the "secret sign" is described as a vision of a flaming torch or lamp, with a red glow.

Our inbreaths continue to be more shallow, and our outbreaths longer. At this point blood gathers and enters the "channel of life" in the center of our heart. Three drops of blood collect, one after the other, causing three long, final outbreaths. Then, suddenly, our breathing ceases.

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

## Questions

1. What are the stages of dissolution immediately before death?
2. In your view, does this description of the death process confirm and reinforce the Buddhist theory of the five aggregates?
3. Research how this Buddhist account of death relates to the modern medical understanding of death.