

We Must Prepare for Death

When suddenly one day one of your loved ones dies, and you don't know what to do to help, you'll feel so confused, so lost. Recently a Buddhist student of mine told me this is what happened to her when her father died unexpectedly. This made me think that knowing how to help others at the time of death is such important education to have.

As you get older, you'll definitely hear about people dying – family members will die, friends will die, even your enemies will die too! – so you will need to be prepared to help them. This just doesn't apply to people who work with the dying; everyone should learn to know how to help people when they die.

Helping our loved ones at the time of death is the best service we can offer them, our greatest gift. Why? Because death is the most important time of life: it's at death that the next rebirth is determined. By providing the right support, the right environment, you can help your loved one die peacefully, with virtuous thoughts, and thus have a good rebirth.

We need to deal with the physical needs of our loved ones at the time of death, of course, but the spiritual needs are paramount. To die with a happy mind, a peaceful mind, that is a spiritual concern. Some people are prepared for it, but most are not, because they never think about death.

Buddhist teachings explain that the best spiritual practitioners are joyful when they are dying, as if they're going home to see their family after a long absence. Less accomplished practitioners are happy and comfortable at the time of death and are fully confident that they will have a happy rebirth. And even the least accomplished practitioners die without worry or fear, death does not bother them at all.

Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism has so many powerful methods to help people before they die, while they are dying and even after death. There are two aspects to helping a dying person: (1) helping those who are facing death to find peace and (2) doing the appropriate spiritual practices at the right time.

First of all, the most important thing is to help the person prepare psychologically so that they die with a positive and happy mind. To die without anger or clinging is vital for a happy death and a good rebirth, and so that should be foremost in our thoughts when we are around a dying person. The help we give can result in a better rebirth and a swift path to attaining all realizations and eventually enlightenment. This gift is absolutely priceless, more valuable than universes full of wish-granting jewels. Secondly, there are many spiritual practices that can be done before, during and after death that can help your loved one die well and receive a perfect human rebirth or rebirth in the pure realm of a buddha. I will explain what to do at each stage.

You don't need to think, "Oh, I don't know what to do." Remember, as a Buddhist, the foundation of all your practices is refuge, relying on Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. At the time of death, for example, with strong faith, you could visualize Buddha above the head of your loved one and pray strongly that they purify all their negative karma immediately and achieve a good rebirth. Even if you don't know any other practices, other sophisticated things, this would help hugely.

As for babies, small children, people who have lost their capacity to understand because of coma or dementia – animals too – there is not much that they themselves can do. The least we can do is help them to be peaceful and thus die with a happy mind. Whether a person or animal is benefitted by many of the

practices in this book doesn't depend on the person's or the animal's understanding; just hearing the sounds of mantras, prayers, and teachings or seeing holy images will leave positive imprints on their mind, which can activate positive karmic seeds at the time of death, allowing them to receive a good rebirth. This is our precious gift to them.

But before you can help someone else at the time of death, you need to learn how to prepare for your own death. If you look at your mind and how much attachment you have, I think you will see that there is a lot of work to be done before you face death, and this is true of almost everybody. Have you freed yourself from attachment to your possessions? To your loved ones and friends? To your career and reputation? Could you separate happily from your body tomorrow? The more familiar you are with the various practices, the ways to think, how to make your mind happy, the more easily you can help others at the time of death. But if you haven't prepared for your own death and you're limited in your own knowledge of what to do at the time of death, you'll be limited in your ability to help others.

So write down what you want to practice at the time of your death, how you want to die. Write it down in your diary right now! Whether you die gradually or suddenly, you need to know this. Otherwise, when death comes or when the doctor tells you that you have cancer, you will have no time to prepare and because of attachment to this life, you'll panic. You will have no renunciation, only grasping at this life.

At the time of death, it'll be like, "You mean you didn't prepare anything? Nothing? You don't know what to do?" You won't have planned anything. You will never have thought about it. You won't have had a good, strong practice of Dharma: collecting extensive merits, purifying, meditating on the path to enlightenment, planting the seeds of the path in your mind. If it's like that at the time of death there will be no difference between somebody who doesn't know any Dharma at all and somebody who does know Dharma but didn't practice. How very, very sad that would be.

So prepare now. Write down now what you are going to practice, what you intend to do; then when the time of death comes you will be able to do it easily. That's very intelligent, I would say; that's the action of a very, very intelligent person.

But preparing for a happy death depends not just on practices at the time of death; a happy death depends on how we live our life every day, every moment. Practising patience when someone is angry with us, provokes us, or disrespects us, for example, is practical preparation for death. Practising like this every day protects us from creating negative karma, and makes death lighter, less fearful. The future depends on the present. Practising every day and preparing for the time of your death is far more important than going to the hospital to check the body, because death can happen at any time – even for healthy people. Today many people have died, healthy as well as unhealthy.

When you know how to die, fully confident that you won't be born in the lower realms, that you will definitely have a good rebirth, a good future, that death is just change, that you're leaving this old, sick body for a new, healthy one – then you will be qualified to help others who are dying. You will be able to explain things skilfully, according to their minds. You will be able to create the right conditions so that it's easy for their minds to be transformed into virtue at the time of death. You will know how to help them die with a happy mind.

And not only that: once you're familiar with what to do, you can tell others what they can do to help you at the time of your own death.

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