

## Care of the mind

# A Tibetan Buddhist understanding of the dying process

People have different beliefs about what happens at the time of death. While some believe there is a soul that leaves the body and others believe death is a permanent end and nothing at all continues, Buddhists believe the most subtle level of mind separates from the body and continues by taking rebirth.

Tibetan Buddhist teachings offer a detailed explanation of the dying process, involving the gradual shutting down of the functions of the body, related to the four elements of earth, water, fire and air. Also occurring is the gradual withdrawal of the person's awareness to more and more subtle levels, until the very subtle consciousness or mind finally leaves the body.

### Stages 1 to 4: The dissolution of the physical elements

**Stage 1:** The earth element becomes weaker. Experiences can include feeling physically weak and unstable, sensations of falling and of being weighed down and being unable to move the eyes. An inner appearance of a mirage-like vision can appear to the mind as this is happening.

**Stage 2:** The water element becomes weaker. Experiences can include dry mouth and eyes, neutrality of mind where there is neither feeling of happiness nor unhappiness and loss of the sense of hearing. An inner smoke-like vision can arise.

**Stage 3:** The fire element becomes weaker. Experiences can include feeling cold as heat leaves the body, loss of the sense of smell, inability to recognise people and changes in the breathing pattern. The incoming breath may become short and weak while the outgoing breath may become longer and stronger. An inner fire spark-like vision can arise.

**Stage 4:** The air element becomes weaker. Experiences can include loss of voluntary movement and loss of physical feeling and taste. The tongue thickens and turns blue at the root. Breathing ceases and the heart stops beating. An inner vision like a sputtering candle going out can arise.

Up until the end of Stage 4, the mind still functions at a conceptual level and therefore positive states of mind can be enhanced. Awareness is heightened and the dying person can be easily affected by the environment around them including what others

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do, say and think. It will help them to be reminded of the positive things they have done in their life, their positive qualities and the unconditional love of family, their spiritual friends and the Buddhas or other Divine Beings.

Buddhists believe that the mind is a continuum where each moment gives rise to the next moment of mind. The state of mind during the dying process is important as it directly affects the quality of the next rebirth.

### Stages 5 to 8: Increasing subtlety of mind

After stage 4, the mind becomes more subtle and the coarse conceptual mind no longer functions.

**Stage 5:** There is an inner vision of white light as the mind absorbs to a more subtle level.

**Stage 6:** There is an inner vision of red light as the mind becomes even more subtle.

**Stage 7:** There is an inner vision of darkness as the mind absorbs further.

**Stage 8:** The very subtle mind experiences its own clear light nature – expansive, boundless, pure luminosity.

Buddhists believe that while the very subtle mind remains within, the person should be disturbed as little as possible as if they are sleeping deeply. If there is a need to touch the person at this time, the crown of the head should be touched first as this is auspicious for a positive rebirth. While there is still even a little warmth radiating from the centre of the chest (the heart centre), the mind is still in Stage 8 and the dying process is not yet fully completed. The warmth can be checked by hovering the palm of your hand over the heart centre area.

When the mind finally leaves the body the dying process is complete. The indication that this has occurred is that there is no longer any heat coming from the heart centre. A little red liquid may come from the nostril, the body slumps and seems like an empty shell.

From this point the mind continues on to take rebirth in a new form. For Buddhists death is a transition from one life to the next.

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