

Essential Phowa Practice for Others

In the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition, Phowa is considered the most valuable and effective practice for death. The word Phowa means transference or ejection of consciousness into the state of truth. Its success relies on invoking the presence of a Buddha (a fully enlightened being), combined with our receptivity and devotion, and the familiarity which comes from having done the practice repeatedly throughout our life.

Phowa is a powerful practice for the moment of death. If the dying person is interested, you can share the Essential Phowa practice with them, finding ways to adapt it to their own spiritual beliefs. Even though you can do the Essential Phowa practice throughout life, its special power becomes apparent when you practice it just at the moment of death. You may want to practice the Essential Phowa practice each time you visit the dying person. The most important time to practice is right at the moment of death, or as soon as you are informed of the person's death. If you cannot be physically present when your loved one dies, then visualize yourself practicing by their side at the place of their death.

As people come very near death, their mind and heart become less contained by their body and more atmospheric; it feels as if their mind is filling the entire room. Any strong thoughts or emotions we bring into the space surrounding the dying person have a powerful effect on their state of mind, for better or worse. If we have inspired ourselves with meditation before entering a dying person's room, or if we have strongly invoked the presence of a Buddha or Divine Being to whom we

continue to pray, this can have a tremendously positive influence on the dying person's state of mind.

A beginner can effectively do the Essential Phowa practice for a dying person. Just at the moment of death, after the consciousness of the dying person "faints into darkness", she will awaken into the luminous expanse of truth. Our practice of Essential Phowa for the dying person is a skillful guidance to help them unite with the true nature of mind which will be dawning in their awareness at that time.

If done repeatedly, with strong compassion and devotion, the Essential Phowa can help the dying on their journey toward liberation. Any practice or prayers we do for the dying will help, at the very least, to help purify their negative karma or relieve them from the suffering and turmoil of their death and enable them to die peacefully.

Even if you are not an advanced practitioner, your practicing the Essential Phowa cannot in any way harm an ill or dying person. On a spiritual level, it will help them, even if you can't see or measure the benefit tangibly.

You can do the Essential Phowa for someone who is ill or dying, in the same way as for yourself, except that you visualize a Buddha or Divine Presence above the head of the other person. Visualize the Presence pouring rays of light onto him or her, purifying and transforming their whole being. Then visualize that the other person, now fully purified, dissolves into light and merges indistinguishably with the enlightened presence.

DO THE PRACTICE

We need to be very sensitive to the needs of the dying person. The most important thing is to keep the mind of the person calm and possibly happy. Nothing should be done (including certain spiritual practices) if this causes the person to be annoyed or irritated. There is a common conception that it is good to read “The Tibetan Book of the Dead” to the dying person, but if he or she is not familiar with the particular deities and practices contained in it, then this is not likely to prove very beneficial.

Because the death process is so important, it is best not to disturb the dying person with noise or shows of emotion. Expressing attachment and clinging to the dying person can disturb the mind and therefore the dying process, so it is more helpful to mentally let the person go, to encourage them to move on to the next life without fear. It is important not to deny death or to push it away, just to be with the dying person as fully and openly as possible, trying to have an open and deep sharing of the person’s fear, pain, joy, love, etc.

SUDDEN DEATH

When someone has just died suddenly and you do not have much time, such as at the scene of an accident, then you can do an abbreviated form of the Essential Phowa. As you stay by his or her side, invoke strongly the radiant presence of Buddha or Divine Being. Visualize the compassionate radiance emanating from this Presence filling the space surrounding both of you with protection and blessings.

Consider that the consciousness of the newly deceased person takes the form of a small sphere of light and visualize it quickly flying out from his or her body, like a shooting star, and dissolving in the heart of the Divine Presence. In dedicating the practice, pray that the person may be free from any of the suffering or turmoil of their death, and released into the luminosity and all-pervading space of the true nature of their mind, in order to benefit all beings, especially those he or she is leaving behind. Afterward, you can do the complete Essential Phowa practice again for the person over the following days and weeks.

From "Facing Death and Finding Hope", Longaker and Rigpa Fellowship and "The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying", Sogyal Rinpoche