

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
San Antonio, Texas

Key Practices of the Path:

A Condensed Lam Rim Overview for Western Students and Practitioners

The Initial Scope—Meditation 2, Part 2:

“The Benefits of Remembering Death”

The following is based on teachings by the Tibetan master Tsongkhapa from *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment (Lam Rim Chen Mo)* and the renowned Tibetan teacher Pabongka Rinpoche from *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, as well as teachings given by Ven. Thubten Chodron at Dharma Friendship Foundation in Seattle, Washington. Prepared and compiled by Christopher Moroney.

“This life is as impermanent as a water bubble. Remember how quickly it decays and death comes.”

—Lama Tsongkhapa, from “The Foundation of All Good Qualities”

We are studying and meditating on the gradual stages of the path to enlightenment—or the initial-, intermediate-, and great-scopes of *Lam Rim* topics—that were introduced to Tibet by the Indian Buddhist master Atisha, and further developed by the great Tibetan monk and philosopher, Tsongkhapa.

Review of part 1 of the second initial-scope *Lam Rim* topic, “Impermanence, Death, and Dharma”

In the first part of the second meditation topic of the initial-scope of the *Lam Rim* we talked about the error we make by misconceiving the impermanence of our life as if it was permanent. We’re always thinking, “I won’t die today, I won’t die today,” and we continually think this way until the very moment of our death. When the day comes that we die, it will be a day that we call “today”.

When we don’t think about death, we pursue the interests of this life—money, material possessions, gratifying relationships, reputation, and sense pleasures. If we have any kind of Dharma practice, we don’t practice regularly or properly because we’re mainly concerned with our present worldly pleasure. We don’t want to face death—we don’t want to face the reality of it. And so we make death fearful by pushing it out of our mind. The Dharma approach to death is to face it honestly. It puts us in touch with reality and gives energy and meaning to our Dharma practice. Remembering death gives us a framework with which we can look at our life, appreciate it, and take full advantage of the opportunities we have.

We talked about **six disadvantages** of not remembering death:

1. *If we don’t think about death, we won’t remember the Dharma*

If we don’t remember death, we get completely caught up in the demands and activities of this life. We don’t think about our impermanence and the fact that we’re going to leave this life. Without properly thinking about this fact, we don’t think about the necessity of the Dharma. And if we don’t think the Dharma is necessary, we have very little motivation to remember it.

2. *Even if we remember the Dharma, we won’t practice it*

Because we’re always thinking, “I won’t die today” we’re forever putting off our Dharma practice and don’t feel any urgency about it. In the meantime, while we are not practicing Dharma, our human life is running out.

3. *Even if we practice, we won’t practice properly*

Because we don’t remember death, even if we do practice we won’t do so purely because our mind mixes our Dharma practice with the eight worldly dharmas, a.k.a the eight worldly concerns. These are: 1-2. Attachment to having material things and aversion to not having them; 3-4. Attachment to praise and aversion to blame; 5-6. Attachment to having a good reputation and aversion to having a bad one; and 7-8. Attachment to pleasant sensations and aversion to unpleasant sensations. With these eight worldly

dharmas, the essential point to remember is that the problem doesn't lie with having material things, or being praised, or having a good reputation, or experiencing pleasant sensations. The problem lies in the mind's habitual *attachment* to having these things and the mind's habitual *aversion* to experiencing the opposite of these things.

4. *Even if we remember the Dharma, we won't practice it consistently*

Even if we remember the Dharma, if we don't remember death our practice will lack consistency and conviction because we haven't been thinking seriously enough about our own mortality. This explains why we so often have an on again, off again approach to our practice.

5. *By not remembering death, we get involved in a lot of negative actions*

When we don't remember death, our craving for the things of this life increases. We develop attachment, hostility, and ignorance. We don't think of the long-term consequences of our negative actions. As we become more involved in negative actions, our mind becomes more obscured, it gets harder to practice, and we get more confused.

6. *At the time of death, we die with regrets*

When we're dying, we'll look back on our life and we'll ask ourselves, "What have I done? How has my life been meaningful?" If we haven't remembered our death throughout our life, we'll see that we've spent our time either pursuing our own interests or being resentful that we weren't able to pursue them because of our circumstances. We won't have brought the Dharma into all of our life circumstances because we didn't practice consistently or purely. We'll realize that we haven't made the Dharma part of our mind-stream and we'll have difficulty relaxing our mind and making it peaceful before we die.

When we remember our death, we're energized and motivated to realize our own potential. It gives us a way of looking at our life so we can live more peacefully now, and prepare for our future lives. We come to see the benefit of Dharma practice, because when we die, it's our Dharma practice that comes with us. Our habitual training in good qualities creates a propensity in our consciousness that lets those good qualities continue on into a future life. It's the good karma we create by practicing Dharma that is going to influence what happens to us in our future lives. Remembering death helps us see the value of Dharma and set our priorities. We won't get so wrapped up in seemingly important things that seem important only because we're looking very narrow-mindedly through the lense of our happiness now. Now we move on to the second part of this second initial-scope meditation topic.

The Benefits of Remembering Death

Lama Tsongkhapa writes in *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path*:

...the thought that you will not die is the source of all deterioration, and the remedy for this is mindfulness of death, the source of all that is excellent. Consequently, you should not think that this is a practice for those who do not have some other profound teaching to cultivate in meditation. Nor should you think that although this is something worthy of meditation, you should cultivate it just a little at the beginning of the meditation session because it is not suitable for continuous practice. Rather, be certain from the depths of your heart that it is necessary in the beginning, middle, and end, and then cultivate it in meditation.

The six advantages of remembering death

1. It is most beneficial

As the Buddha said in the *Great Final Nirvana Sutra*:

Among all harvests, the autumn harvest is supreme. Among all tracks, the track of the elephant is supreme. Among all ideas, the idea of impermanence and death is supreme because with it you

eliminate all the attachment, ignorance, and pride of the three realms [of cyclic existence: the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm].

In other words, we'll practice the Dharma flawlessly when we remember death. Because we'll want to achieve a good rebirth after we die, we'll practice generosity, ethics, patience, and so on. Remembering death will keep us engaged and energized through the whole *Lam Rim*—through the initial-scope, the intermediate-scope, and the great-scope, right up to our complete enlightenment.

Many of the great Tibetan adepts would hold cups made of skulls and trumpets made of human bones to keep the awareness of death and impermanence present in their minds. The written rules and procedures of the Buddhist monastics, called the vinaya, tell of keeping drawings of skeletons in bathhouses and other gathering places for the same reason. Past masters have said if we don't recall death and impermanence when we arise in the morning, we'll devote the morning to this life; if we don't recall death and impermanence at noon, we'll devote the afternoon to this life, and if we devote ourselves to this life, whatever we do won't be Dharma.

2. It is most powerful

If we recall death and impermanence, it is said we will destroy all attachment, aversion, and ignorance. We will have great power to complete the two accumulations of merit and wisdom. The spiritual masters say it is like a hammer that destroys all our delusions and wrong actions in one stroke.

3. It is important at the beginning

If we remember death at the beginning of our Dharma studies, it acts as a cause for us to make a start on the Dharma path. It motivates us to get going and begin practicing. When we can logically see that our negative actions based on the three poisons of attachment, aversion, and ignorance are the causes for our present unhappiness and suffering, we'll want to turn our life situation around while we have the opportunity to do it.

4. It is important in the meantime

While we are progressing on the path, remembering death acts as a condition that stimulates us to work steadily and energetically at the Dharma. When we remember death, we'll familiarize ourselves with the Dharma by taking on a meditation practice, and we'll bring the Dharma teachings and concepts into our daily circumstances, activities, and tasks. We'll understand that our positive habitual thoughts, words, and actions will create a strong karmic propensity in our mind-stream that will ensure a beneficial rebirth for us in the future.

5. It is important at the end

At the end of the path, remembering death will bring our Dharma practice through to completion with the achievement of enlightenment for the benefit of all beings.

6. We will die happily and gladly

At death, we'll have the confidence that comes from having practiced the Dharma continually and without error. It will be a strong habitual propensity in our mind-stream that will see us through to a fortunate rebirth. It is said that the best Dharma practitioners are happy to die, the medium ones die gracefully, and the least have no regrets. They'll feel, "I managed to practice Dharma well; it will be easy for me to die now."

The actual way to remember death

The following nine-point meditation on death consists of instructions taken from Lama Tsongkhapa's works, Pabongka Rinpoche's teachings, and the insightful teachings given by Ven. Thubten Chodron that

are specifically geared toward students of Buddhism in the West. It contains special points drawn from these teachers' own experiences.

The nine-point meditation on death

This nine-point meditation has three main points, or headings. Three reasons are then given for each main point, making nine points of meditation in all. The three main points are: (1) death is certain; (2) the time of death is uncertain; (3) nothing can help at the time of death except the Dharma.

The first main point: Death is certain

Reason 1: Death will inevitably come, and no circumstance can prevent it

Inevitably, all of us are going to die. No matter what sort of body we have, no matter where we go, no matter what we try to do and how hard we try to do it, we cannot stop death. We can easily see this from our own observation and experience. The Buddha's final teaching centered on impermanence in order to show that this meditation is fundamental. He said:

All conditioned phenomena are impermanent.

This is the last teaching of the Tathagata.

[Note: a Tathagata is one who has transcended cyclic existence].

"All conditioned phenomena are impermanent" means that any phenomena that arise due to causes and conditions are by nature impermanent, transient, and are changing from moment to moment. They come together, change, disintegrate, come apart, and transform due to causes and conditions. The Buddha demonstrated this as his last teaching by himself leaving his body, showing that even the Buddha is impermanent.

Reason 2: Nothing is being added to your lifespan and it is always being subtracted from

The next reason that death is certain is that each moment brings us closer and closer to death. From the moment of our conception, we are on a track that will inevitably end in our death. We don't get even a moment's rest in this. As it is written in the *Sayings of the Buddha*:

Suppose one stretches out a string
And a child follows it bit by bit;
The child will eventually come to its end.
So it is with people's lives.

Those up for slaughter
Get closer to their executioner
With every step they take.
So it is with people's lives.

Just as sheep being led to slaughter get closer to death with every step they take, at no time, once we are born, do we deviate from the direction of our death. We don't like to think of it in those terms, but just the same, we've already used up much of our lifespan, and there is no telling how much of it is left. We use up our breaths, minutes, hours, days, months, and years; the day is coming nearer when we will die. Our so-called time to go can come suddenly, so we shouldn't be complacent and think, "I will not die today." Even when we're sleeping, all comfy and cozy, we're still heading inevitably toward death.

Reason 3: You will definitely die before getting round to practicing the Dharma

The third reason that death is certain, especially in how it impacts our Dharma practice, is that relatively speaking, life is extremely short. It's definitely possible we could die before we get around to practicing the Dharma. Say we live for sixty years—many people do. If we sleep for eight hours each night, twenty years of our life is used up just doing that! The other forty years are interrupted by the amount of time we spend eating, cleaning, getting an education, working, shopping, maintaining ourselves, maintaining our stuff and property, and so on. This leaves maybe seven years or so to devote to Dharma practice? But things keep coming up—holidays, entertaining, watching movies, taking trips, playing games, going on vacations, naps. Despite our many intentions to practice, it seems every year goes by in a blur of responsibilities and distractions as we get closer to death. Gungtang Rinpoche said:

Perhaps twenty years of being unaware of practice,
Perhaps twenty years of “Going to, going to” practice,
Perhaps another ten years of “Never did, never did” practice;
That's the story of an empty and wasted human life.

There's a story the teachers tell in this context about an old man who said, “This is the story of my wasted life: the first twenty years were spent playing and getting an education. The second twenty years I spent working and supporting my family. And the third twenty years, I'm too old to practice. All I can do now is recite prayers for my next rebirth.”

If we have this idea of, “Later, later—I'll practice the Dharma after I've done all these other things,” that may not necessarily happen. We're *always* in the middle of doing something else. We won't have completed everything we're doing when death comes. We have to really be aware of this: death is certain—it's inevitable. We have no choice but to come to the conclusion that, because death is inevitable, there's no way to get around it. Therefore, we should practice the Dharma, we should transform our minds. Why? So that this certain, inevitable thing can be a pleasant experience. So that we can use our life wisely to face the greatest challenge of our life.

The second main point: The time of death is uncertain

Reason 1: The lifespan of people is not fixed

We may recognize that death is certain, and that it's important to practice Dharma. But we may still have this idea that we'll get to it later: “I'm too tired this morning, I'll wake up early tomorrow morning and meditate.” “I've got too much to do today—I'll attend a Dharma teaching another time.” “I know there are Dharma teachings online, but I really want to watch this movie right now. I'll watch some teachings later.” “I know I should read these writings on emptiness by Nagarjuna, but they're so complicated and the language is so hard to understand. I'll look at this new-agey book with nice photos instead—it makes me feel good. I'll get back to Nagarjuna later.” We're always going to do it later.

And so with this second heading, we begin to think about the fact that the time of death is uncertain. We're not really sure how long we're going to live. We always want to postpone our practice until later, but in actual fact, we're never certain we're going to have time later for practice. Why? Because the time of death is uncertain, and the first reason is because the lifespan of people is not fixed.

If you think of when you got up this morning, and then you think of right now—many people who were alive this morning are now dead. Probably the majority of people who were alive this morning and are dead now, didn't think when they woke up this morning, “I'm going to die today.” Even someone who's sick in the hospital—they usually wake up in the morning and think, “I'm going to live today. I'm not going to die.” But death happens all the time.

Most of us don't think that we'll *never* die, but until we are dying, we always have the thought, “I'll die someday, but not this year.” We may think we have reasons for feeling this way. Some of us may think, “I won't die yet, because I'm young.” But being young is no guarantee. Death can happen at any age: many

children die young, and their parents have to bury them. We have friends whose nine-year-old son died in their arms from a congenital heart disease. Many people younger than us have already died. Some die as soon as they are born. Some die while they're still in the womb. I remember when I was five years old, my mother had a miscarriage several months into her fourth pregnancy.

Some of us think, "I won't die, because I'm not ill." But being healthy is no guarantee. People may be ill and confined to their beds but don't die, while many healthy people die sudden deaths. In the past year alone, I've seen numerous news videos from all over the world of soccer players, tennis players, football players—athletes in peak physical condition—dropping dead right on the playing field from unknown causes.

People go to work, thinking they're going to come home, and they don't make it home. Some people die in the middle of a meal, without ever having had the slightest reason to think they would die before they had finished eating.

Some people die in completely unexpected ways. We knew a bright, funny, energetic woman who came to the River City Cluster of Dog Shows here in San Antonio, where Covita and I ran the official dog show t-shirt booth. Every year this lady would march up to the booth with three or four poodles on leashes, and with a lot of flamboyance and enthusiasm, she'd purchase t-shirts for herself and all the dogs. Well, one year she didn't show up. Everyone was wondering where she was. She was always such a regular presence at that show. They found her dead in her hotel bathtub, after having had a heart attack. The poodles were okay. So how can we be so sure that we *won't* die tomorrow?

Other than preparing a will and perhaps arranging for our burial plans, we make very little preparation for the death that we're sure to experience. It's not certain that we'll live to an old age, yet we make all kinds of plans for an enjoyable retirement.

We can't even be sure who among us sitting here right now will die first. We're not going to get a text message someday that says, "Ding: Time's up! Get ready to die now." Death will all of a sudden come to us, and we'll just have to leave whatever we are doing. Grasping at permanence tricks us into thinking we have many years left, but the day will come: "Time's up! Get ready to die now."

People die at every age. This innate feeling inside of us that "I have forever" or "It will happen later" is a complete hallucination, because there is no guarantee. Absolutely none. It's really helpful to think very deeply about this. Because then, each day when we wake up, we'll feel like our life is a very precious treasure. We're still alive. We'll think, "I want to make my life useful, I want to make it meaningful."

Reason 2: There are more chances of dying and less of remaining alive

The next reason that the time of death is uncertain, is that there are many more chances of dying than there are of remaining alive. This sounds strange, but think about it this way: if we lie down, and we don't move—we don't do anything. Eventually, we're going to die, aren't we? Our bodies don't stay alive by themselves. We have to feed them. We have to protect them from the elements. We have to give them medicine. We have to exert a lot of effort to keep the body alive.

If we didn't exert any effort, the body would just automatically die. It's so much easier to die than to stay alive. Our whole life requires so much effort just to stay alive.

And then, so many of the things that we create to contribute to our quality of life and well-being can actually become the cause of our death. This is again why there are so many more chances of dying than staying alive. For instance, we make cars to make our life easier, but over one and a quarter million people are killed on the road each year. We make houses to protect us from the elements and wild animals, but houses can collapse in earthquakes and mudslides, killing their inhabitants. We create all sorts of modern appliances to make our life easier, and we electrocute ourselves with them.

Even the food we eat is supposed to keep us alive, but people can swallow their food the wrong way, get it stuck in their windpipe, choke on it, and die. Food poisoning can strike anybody at any time and can result in death. Our life force is like a candle in the wind. As Nagarjuna says:

We live surrounded by the factors of death, like an oil lamp in a draft.

Reason 3: The body is extremely fragile

The third reason that the time of death is uncertain, is that our bodies are extremely fragile. We feel big and strong now maybe, but we've all observed how one little virus that we can't even see with our eyes can kill us. So many small things can kill this big body. Little insects—scorpions and spiders, and little animals—poisonous frogs and snakes, can kill this body. The skin is very easy to break. The bones aren't that difficult to break either. One treacherous fall from a ladder can do it. When I was little, my best friend's father was killed when he fell from a ladder while painting their house. We have to be extremely mindful of the fragility of our own body.

It's helpful when we're doing this meditation, to think about this in terms of ourselves. To think about how so many things that are supposed to be conducive for life can become the cause of our death. To recognize that we're always in the middle of doing something, but that's no guarantee we're not going to die. Everybody who's dying is always in the middle of doing something. We often think, "I can't die now, I've got too much work to do,"—but when will we ever finish our work? There's nothing that can actually give us a sense of security, or to put off the feeling of death.

When we understand the first main point of this meditation, that death is certain, we'll want to practice the Dharma. When we understand the second main point, that the time of death is uncertain, we'll get the feeling, "I want to practice the Dharma now." It's not enough to say, "I'll get to it later." We'll think, "I really want make this an important thing in my life now, because I may not have tomorrow to practice." As Lama Zopa says, "Your future rebirth can come before tomorrow!" And yet we spend so much time planning for tomorrow and for the rest of our life. How much time do we spend preparing for our future rebirth? This meditation helps bring us back to the present. We become wise and alert while we're alive, we take some control of our life, and we stop letting ourselves run on autopilot.

The third main point: Nothing can help at the time of death except the Dharma

Reason 1: Wealth cannot help

The third main point is that nothing but the Dharma can help us at the time of death. This point really strikes at the heart of the matter. For example, the first reason: our wealth cannot help us. We spend our whole life trying so hard to get money, trying to get material security, trying to get possessions—buying clothes, getting houses, cars, and other comforts. Yet at the time we die, does any of it come with us? Do any of our possessions come with us? Does any of our money come with us? None of it! Yet we spend our whole life working for it. And we have nothing to show at the end of our life, except perhaps the negative karma we've created in the process of seeking after all these material possessions—negative karma created by cheating other people, or by clinging and being miserly, or by taking things that belong to other people, or by getting angry at other people who damage our possessions.

All this stuff that we've worked so hard to get and to hold on to, comes to nothing at the time of death. And worse than that, our family and relatives often fight over who gets it. You may be lying on your deathbed, and family members are asking you to sign this and that. Who's going to get this, who's going to get that. It's incredible what happens in families sometimes when somebody dies. People fight over who gets the jewelry and who gets the stocks and bonds. Can you imagine working your whole life to get material possessions for you and your family, and all your kids or your brothers and sisters are fighting over them while you're trying to die? Or worse, you've made a will ahead of time and your spouse or child tries to make you change it on your deathbed? I've personally known someone who actually did that. They brought a notary public into the room where the person was dying and had them change their will.

Wealth does absolutely nothing for us at the time of death. When we're dead, it doesn't matter whether we died on a soft comfortable bed, or whether we died in the gutter. It really doesn't matter after we're

dead. It doesn't help us to accumulate wealth with a clinging, grasping mind, thinking that we need so many things because the world says we do. We buy expensive plots at the cemetery. We preorder them. We preorder our expensive gravestone. It's quite a business—I've seen it in action. How does that help us at the time of our death?

Ven. Thubten Chodron talks about a Chinese custom of burning paper money to send wealth with their relatives on to the next world. They won't burn real money, of course. So they spend real money to buy paper money. And they burn bunches of paper money and paper houses and all this stuff to send on to their relatives. Do you think these things ever get there? Do you think it helps the person who's died?

We do need a certain amount of wealth to live, and to stay alive; we have to be practical. But the mind that is obsessed with it and accumulates it, or the mind that can't share and can't give, or the mind that creates negative karma by lying, stealing, cheating, or whatever, in order to have possessions—those kinds of minds are really useless to us when we die.

Reason 2: Friends and relatives cannot help

Our friends and relatives can't help us when we die, either. We put so much emphasis on attachment, clinging to friends and relatives, depending on them, needing them. Another person can become so much a part of our own ego-identity, that we don't know who we are if we separate from them. We think we can't live without that person. And yet at the time of death, we do separate, and they can't come with us. No matter how much they love us, they can't stop us from dying. Even if the whole world loves us, and everyone is praying, "Please live, please live," they can't do anything to stop us from dying.

When we have the mind of clinging attachment, we'll very easily put off Dharma practice to have the kinds of relationships and experiences that our ego thinks it really needs to be happy. This self-grasping mind distracts us from what's truly valuable. It thinks, "If I can only make this relationship work, I'll be happy. I'll be fulfilled." But we're never fulfilled. When we die and the person we think we can't live without stays behind, then what?

No matter how popular we are, no matter how good our reputation is, how much people love us, or how many friends we have, at the time we die, we die. It's over. They can't stop it. And if we've created a lot of negative karma because of the attachment we have to our clinging, needy relationships with other people, then even though those people can't come with us at death, all that negative karma does, and it stays with us in our mind-stream. If we've lied to protect our loved ones; if we've slandered other people to protect our loved ones; if we've criticized and blamed and yelled and screamed at other people because they harmed our loved ones—we can create negative karma. We cheat other people to get more things for the person we love. We even kill to protect the person we love. We generate so much negative karma in the name of "love," which is actually very often a lot of attachment mixed with some love. And then at the time we die, there's nothing to do but separate. There's no choice.

It's not that we should give away all of our wealth and give up all our relationships. That's not the point. The point is if we cling to the wealth, if we cling to friends and relatives, problems will arise. Because with the clinging, we develop wrong motivations. That leads to negative actions. With the clinging, we neglect our Dharma practice and try to get all of our happiness out of our friends and relatives and possessions. The problem is the clinging, needy mind. The solution isn't to give up the relationships and possessions. The solution is to give up the clinging and the attachment. We have to really recognize what wealth can and cannot do for us, and what our friends and relatives can and cannot do for us.

Very often, when we're involved in clinging relationships, when it comes time to die, the other person who is also clinging to us, becomes immobilized. If the Dharma, or something similar to it, has never been at the center of our relationship, they'll be incapable of helping us through the death process. Instead they'll sit by our side, crying and grasping our hand, saying, "Please don't die. How am I ever going to make it without you? I can't live without you!" How could we possibly die peacefully if there's a crying person in the room clinging to us, and we're clinging to them.

Friendships are very important. Being affectionate with other people is very important. But we really have to keep Dharma as the focus of our friendship and affection, so that we can accept our Dharma friend's death. We want to have the clarity of mind to be able to help each other at death time, and to encourage each other in the Dharma—to remind each other to take refuge and to make prayers, and cultivate altruism and think of emptiness at the time of death. Then our friendships become really meaningful, really important, and very worthwhile.

Reason 3: Even your body cannot help

At the time of death, even our body can't help us. The body that's been our most intimate possession and companion since the time we were born. Sometimes we haven't been with our wealth, and we haven't always been with our friends and relatives. But our body—our most cherished possession—we spend so much time taking such good care of it. We feed it, we exercise it, give it vitamins and medicines, we worry about it, fret over it, pamper it, and we feed it some more, we cut our hair, we grow our hair, we style our hair, we color our hair, we clean our fingernails, polish our toenails, and trim our beard. We get nose jobs, eye jobs, face lifts, silicone injections, cosmetic surgery, tummy tucks and lap bands. So much attention to our body! We decorate it, glorify it, and try to make it smell really good—and then we feed it again. And what does it do for us at the end of the day? It dies!

It's like sand through our fingers—there's nothing there to hold on to. We spend our whole life attached to this body, creating so much negative karma centered around this body. We fight wars to protect our body, and to protect our wealth. We kill, steal and slander to protect our body, friends and relatives, and our wealth, but at the end of the day, they all stay behind. And we go somewhere else, without any of them. So what's the use of all the attachment and creating all that negative karma? What's the purpose? It doesn't make any sense.

The mind that clings to this body, that doesn't want to let the body go—that's what makes death so terrifying. Because we have this primal fear, "If I don't have this body, who will I be? If I don't have this ego-identity, if I'm not a certain race or gender or nationality, who am I going to be?" That clinging mind is what makes death so fearful. Because at death, it's so clear we have to separate from our body. If we can work during our life to get rid of this clinging to the body, clinging to our ego-identity, then, when we die, it could be so easy and so pleasant. It would help us out a lot while we're alive in this life as well.

We should really contemplate this. Sit down and spend some time thinking over these three points, these three reasons why nothing can help us at the time of death except the Dharma. We should ask ourselves, "How much time do I spend accumulating wealth and possessions? What kind of negative karma do I create in relationship to this wealth and these possessions? Can these things be of any benefit to me when I die?" And then do the same with your friends and relatives: "How much do I cling to my friends and relatives? How attached to them am I? Is there anyone I feel I couldn't live without? Is there any negative karma I've created in relation to them?" Think about this very, very deeply. And do the same with your body: "How much time do I spend thinking about my body, feeding my body, looking at it, pampering it, cleaning it, fussing over it, worrying about it? What kind of negative karma am I creating in relation to my body by how I think about it, and what I do with it? Can my body be of any benefit to me when I die?"

We'll come to see that Dharma practice is the only meaningful thing for us at the time we die. Because when we die, we leave everything else other than our mental transformation behind. In other words, if we spend our life cultivating loving-kindness, that goes with us. We die peacefully. We have a strong imprint of loving-kindness. We get to the next life, and it becomes very easy to meditate on loving-kindness again because it has become a propensity in our mind-stream.

When we spend our life really trying to act constructively towards others, then all the imprints of those actions come with us to the next life. All that good karma, all that positive potential – that's our real wealth. That's what makes us feel mentally and spiritually rich, and that all can come with us. All the mind training, the different attitudes we try to develop, the different aspects of our mind that we try to

increase, to really make them blossom. All that work we do now makes it so much easier for those same attitudes to arise again in future lives. Any positive mental transformation comes with us. And not only does it come with us, but it is also what makes us happy now, happy when we're dying, and happy in future lives. We can see quite directly, that if we spend our time, let's say, developing loving-kindness rather than worrying about how we look, we're going to be a lot happier now, a lot happier when we're dying and a lot happier in our future lives.

Impermanence and death

We've been talking about death and the transient nature of life. Transience or impermanence was the Buddha's first teaching and also his last. The first thing he taught was the fact that everything is changing from moment to moment, that nothing remains static or stable. And he demonstrated this as his last teaching by leaving his body, showing that even the Buddha is impermanent.

The difference between eternal and permanent, and non-eternal and impermanent

We need to be clear about the difference between eternal and permanent, and non-eternal and impermanent, because the words "permanent" and "impermanent" in English are a little bit different from the way they are used in Buddhism. The word "eternal" means it lasts forever without end. So for example, our mind-stream is an eternal phenomenon according to Buddhism. It has no beginning and it goes on without end. Something that is non-eternal would be our body, or a piece of paper, or a cup, because those things come into existence and go out of existence.

Something can be eternal and also impermanent. "Impermanent" means "changing moment to moment". So something like our mind-stream is eternal, it lasts forever, but it is also impermanent because it changes moment to moment. Just look at your own consciousness, your own mind-stream—it changes moment to moment.

"Permanent" in Buddhist parlance refers to something that does not depend upon causes and does not change from moment to moment. It isn't produced and it doesn't disintegrate. An example of this would be the fact that all functioning phenomena are empty of existing inherently. Emptiness means a void or an absence. In Buddhism, emptiness refers to the absence of an impossible way of existing. If we talk about the emptiness of a cup, for example, we're talking about the complete lack of that cup being able to exist in an impossible way. It's impossible for the cup to have an essence that exists inherently because the cup is a dependently arising phenomenon. There is no "cup entity" that exists independently of its causes and its conditions of existence.

A cup is impermanent. It comes into existence due to many causes and conditions, it changes from moment to moment and eventually goes out of existence due to many causes and conditions. The cup itself is an impermanent phenomenon. But the emptiness of the cup existing inherently is a particular fact about the cup that doesn't change from moment to moment for as long as the cup exists. Therefore, it's the *fact* of the emptiness of the cup existing inherently that is the permanent phenomenon. The cup's emptiness of inherent existence is the thing that doesn't change moment to moment, not the object labeled "cup". The object labeled "cup" very much exists as a dependently-arising phenomenon, which changes from moment to moment. And that is the case with every functioning thing in existence.

Even though the conceptual meanings of the terms "eternal" and "non-eternal", "permanence" and "impermanence", "emptiness" and "dependent arising", can all sound confusing and convoluted initially, they're really not that difficult to understand intellectually once we're clear about how Buddhism defines these terms and we've thought about them for a while.

The really big problem we have is that the cup *appears* to our senses as if it exists independently. We don't see the many causes that contribute to the cup's form; our physical senses aren't capable of observing the cup's subtle changes from moment to moment; our mind is unaware that it's giving the object it labels "cup" all the meaning it has for us. It just appears to us as a cup, sitting there, separate and independent from everything else around it, including our perception of it. This tricks us into mentally

grasping at the cup *as if* it has an identity that exists inherently and independently, which is inaccurate, impossible, and utterly mistaken. Not only do we make this impossible mistake with the cup, we make it with every other phenomenon as well, including ourselves.

Gross and subtle impermanence

Within impermanence, we can talk about gross impermanence and subtle impermanence. An example of gross impermanence is when things break—we drop a glass and it shatters. That’s gross impermanence—we can see it with our eyes. We can see something change with our eyes. Or when a sprout grows into a fully mature plant over time, that’s gross impermanence—the sprout being tiny and the plant being huge.

Subtle impermanence is, for example, when scientists talk about the movement of electrons around a nucleus. Within all the atoms and molecules, everything is moving and changing all the time, and yet we can’t see it.

Gross impermanence is obviously easier to realize and understand than subtle impermanence, because we can see it. But even with gross impermanence, we have huge mental blocks against it. We can see how strongly we grasp at the gross permanence of things because of how we can freak out when things change. When we have an antique that’s been a family heirloom for generations and it breaks, or an expensive plate that someone knocks off the table, we have the feeling, “Wait! That’s not supposed to happen. That plate can’t break! Or we feel that it’s not in the nature of great-great granny’s Wedgwood tea cup to break. Why is it breaking?” We have trouble accepting even that kind of gross impermanence.

Or when we look into the mirror and we see more gray hair and more wrinkles, we think, “That’s not supposed to happen to me, that happens to other people!” Even with that kind of gross impermanence, our mind is so obscured by ignorance that we reject it and fight against it. Let alone subtle impermanence and just the fact that nothing remains the same from moment to moment. There’s nothing to hold onto when we examine the subtle level of things.

The ignorance in our mind-stream obscures both the gross and subtle levels of impermanence, and we grasp at a lot of things as if they were permanent. Of course intellectually we say, “Yes! Yes! Everybody dies and my antiques break and the plate breaks...” We say that intellectually but...we can feel where our real grasping lies—we just can’t accept it when it happens. That shows there is a big difference between intellectually knowing something and actually integrating it in our lives so that it becomes our way of relating to the world. It shows that intellectually knowing something doesn’t do the trick of solving our problems. We have to bring it into our experiential knowing where we can really feel it.

The purpose of meditating on impermanence

1. Bringing the intellectual understanding of impermanence into our experiential understanding

The purpose of doing this meditation on impermanence or transience is so that, at least when we are talking about gross impermanence, we bring our intellectual understanding of it into our experiential understanding of it. And similarly with subtle impermanence, we can all intellectually understand that electrons move around all the time, but we certainly don’t have an experience that gives us an actual sense of it. The purpose of this meditation is to clarify our mind so that we perceive things more accurately. If we perceive things more accurately, we are going to have less problems in our lives than if we perceive them inaccurately.

2. Cutting attachment

Grasping at permanence is one of the underlying things that causes the arising of attachment. If we grasp at things as being permanent and unchanging, then they seem as if they really exist the way they appear to us and it’s very easy to get attached to them.

For example, a relationship. Grasping at permanence is what we do with relationships. If we have a relationship with somebody, there is some part of our mind that thinks, “This is it. This is lasting forever.”

Or “This person is lasting forever.” In our mind, that’s the way we *feel*. We become very attached to that idea. Because it appears permanent to us, we cling to it. It gives us the illusion that it is something stable and secure that we can rely on because it’s always going to be there, it’s never going to change. That’s the way it appears to our mind of attachment. And so we get attached to it. We cling on to it.

And then once we have this attachment, that’s what sets us up for so much disappointment and pain because the thing that we think is permanent and unchanging, is in reality changing moment by moment. At some point, the gross impermanence of a situation becomes evident to us and then we think, “This isn’t supposed to happen. This person I love isn’t who I thought they were, or this person I love isn’t supposed to die. The relationship isn’t supposed to end. Yes, yes, I know about impermanence intellectually, but this is really not supposed to happen!”

We can see how grasping at permanence causes the attachment and then because the attachment is out of sync with reality, when the impermanent nature of the situation becomes evident, we experience a lot of pain. If we can get rid of the attachment, we can still relate to the person or the object, but when things change, we won’t freak out because we haven’t been clinging on to it as being permanent and always there. So we can see that meditating on impermanence helps us to cut attachment.

3. Cutting anger, anxiety, and depression

If we meditate on impermanence, it’s also going to help us cut our anger, anxiety, and depression, because often, when the thing we’re attached to comes to an end, we get angry, or anxious and fearful, or depressed. So if we can get rid of our attachment, we can also get rid of these afflictive emotions, because we get angry, or anxious, or depressed in direct proportion to the amount of attachment we have for something. They go together.

It’s very helpful to remember, for example, whenever we have pain or pleasure, that it is impermanent. Especially with pleasure, it’s very important to remember that at some point the pleasure will end and the happiness we experience will be like the happiness we experienced in last night’s dream. We might have had a really nice dream last night, but when we woke up, the dream was gone.

Similarly, any kind of pleasure we’ve experienced throughout our life—the happiness we experienced as a child, or even the happiness as a teenager, the happiness we experienced last night—none of it is existing and happening right now—again, it’s like last night’s dream. If we can remember that while we are experiencing pleasure, we won’t cling to the pleasure. We can still experience the pleasure and enjoy it, but we won’t cling on to it.

Similarly, when we are experiencing pain—physical or emotional, we can remember that it too has the nature of being transient, of arising and ceasing. Then our mind won’t get so tight and wound up. Very often when we get depressed, or when we go into crisis, it feels to us as if it’s going to last forever! Our problem is never going to change. It is never going to go away and we’ll be stuck, right in the middle of it forever, like being in an eternal abyss. But if we can remember that the problem is also something that comes into existence due to causes and conditions, therefore its very nature is that it changes, it is not going to last forever, then it helps us to relax a little. We don’t have so much anxiety and aversion to it.

4. Understanding emptiness

The understanding of impermanence also helps us very much to understand emptiness. It’s the preliminary to understanding emptiness. The more we see that things are changeable, the more easily we can come to understand that therefore, there is no solid essence inside of things to hold on to.

How to meditate on gross and subtle impermanence

Spending some time thinking about both subtle impermanence and gross impermanence is very helpful. For subtle impermanence, we can just think about electrons moving around and the continual moments of our consciousness. Think about time and how moments of time are just like the snapping of fingers, they’re here and they’re gone! This will give us some feeling for subtle impermanence.

When we think about gross impermanence, this is where the nine-point meditation on death is beneficial. Because we're really contemplating both the gross impermanence of our body and our lives. The nine-point meditation on death is really a very big motivator that helps us gain energy to practice because it poses the question: what is the meaning of life if at the end we die? What is really valuable in our life if at the end we leave behind our body, our wealth and our friends and relatives? If none of these come with us, then what's valuable in our lives? That helps us to put into perspective how we want to live our lives, so that our lives become very meaningful, our goals are clear and we can direct our energy in the most beneficial way.