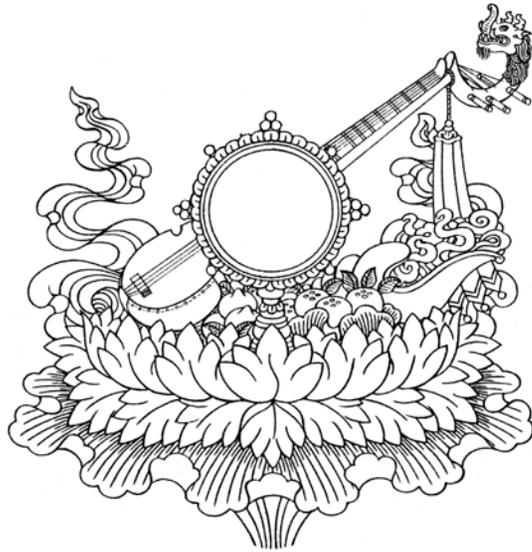




Stages of Death-Process
According to the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition

Chart 5

The 5th - 8th Cycles of Simultaneous Dissolution



<i>Factor Dissolving</i>	<i>Cause of Appearance</i>	<i>Internal sign</i>
5th Cycle		
eighty conceptions	winds in right and left channels above heart enter central channel at top of head	at first, burning butter-lamp; then, clear vacuity filled with white light
6th Cycle		
mind of white appearance	winds in right and left channels below heart enter central channel at base of spine	very clear vacuity filled with red light
7th Cycle		
mind of red increase	upper and lower winds gather at heart; then winds enter drop at heart	at first, vacuity filled with thick darkness; then as if swooning unconsciously
8th Cycle		
mind of black near-attainment	all winds dissolve into the very subtle life-bearing wind in the indestructible drop at the heart	very clear vacuity free of the white, red and black appearances - the mind of clear light of death

Colophon

The original text and charts are quotes from Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism by Lati Rinpoche and Jeffrey Hopkins, Snow Lion Publications, 1979. Since the death process and the meditation upon is crucial for all Anuttara Tantra practitioners we make this excerpt available on this website.

Chart 4

The 4th Cycle of Simultaneous Dissolution

<i>Factor Dissolving</i>	<i>External Sign</i>	<i>Internal Sign</i>
wind element	the ten winds move to heart; inhalation and exhalation ceases	appearance of a sputtering butter-lamp about to go out
aggregate of compositional factors	one cannot perform physical actions	
basic wisdom of achieving activities (our ordinary consciousness mindful of external activities, purposes and so forth)	one is no longer mindful of external worldly activities, purposes and so forth	
tongue sense	tongue becomes thick and short; root of tongue becomes blue	
tastes	one cannot experience tastes	
body sense and tangible objects	one cannot experience smoothness or roughness	

Buddhist tantra is divided into four types, corresponding to four levels of yogic ability – Action, Performance, Yoga and Highest Yoga. The supreme form, Highest Yoga Tantra, is aimed at stopping death and rebirth, as well as the intermediate state between the two, and at transforming these into Buddhahood. This is done through a series of yogas that are modelled on the processes of death, intermediate state and rebirth, until the yogi gains such control over them that he or she is no longer subject to dying.

Since these yogas are based on simulating death, it is important for the yogi to know how humans die – the stages of death and the physiological reasons behind them. The tantric description of these is based on a complicated theory of winds, or currents of energy, that serve as foundations for various levels of consciousness. Upon the serial collapse of the ability of these ‘winds’ to serve as bases of consciousness, the events of death – internal and external – unfold. Thus, the study of death for a practitioner of Highest Yoga Tantra is a study of these ‘winds’ and the consciousnesses dependent upon them.

The term ‘wind’ is found in the Buddhist medical theory of three basic humours – wind, bile and phlegm. When in balance, these three perform the functions of a healthy body; when imbalanced, they create disease and thus are called the three faults (*dosha*). Wind is the most important of the three since it directs the other two. It is defined as ‘the light (in weight) and moving’, and it performs the functions of swallowing, talking, urinating, defecating, extending and contracting the limbs and so forth. Thus, the range of meanings of ‘wind’ runs from air breathed to subtler airs or currents of energy that perform bodily functions and serve as mounts or bases of consciousness.

In tantric medical theory, winds are of five types:

- 1 *Life-bearing wind*. Its seat is at the heart and in its coarse form it causes inhalation, exhalation, burping, spitting and so forth.
- 2 *Upward-moving wind*. Its seat is in the centre of the chest, operating throughout the throat and mouth; it mainly causes speech and the swallowing of food and saliva, but it also works in the joints.
- 3 *Pervasive wind*. Its seat is at the crown of the head, causing pliant movement, stretching and contracting the limbs and opening and closing the mouth and eyelids.
- 4 *Fire-dwelling wind*. Its seat is in the third stage of the stomach, and it moves throughout the internal organs – lungs, heart, liver, gall bladder and so forth – as well as through the channels in the limbs. It causes digestion of nutriment, separating refined and unrefined parts, etc.
- 5 *Downward-voiding wind*. Its seat is in the lower abdomen and it moves about in the womb or the seminal vesicle, in the urinary bladder, in the thighs and so forth. It stops and starts urination, defecation and menstruation.

Through the practice of Highest Yoga Tantra, a yogi seeks to cause these winds in their coarse and subtle forms to dissolve into the very subtle life-bearing wind at the heart. This yoga mirrors a similar process that occurs at death and involves concentration on the channels and channel-centres inside the body.

There are 72,000 such channels, the three main ones running from the forehead across the top of the head and down along the spinal column into the sexual organ. The channel-centres along these three main channels are 'wheels' (with varying numbers of spokes, or petals), which are located at the forehead, top of the head, throat, heart, solar plexus, base of the spine and sexual organ. At these wheels, the right and left channels wrap around the central one, constricting it and lessening or preventing the passage of wind.

At death, the winds that serve as the foundations of consciousness dissolve into the winds in the right and left channels. These in turn dissolve into the wind in the central channel, whereupon the constrictions are loosened, in the sense that the outer channels become deflated, thereby loosening the central channel and allowing movement of wind inside it. This induces manifestation of subtle minds, which ordinary beings fear since they feel they are being annihilated. Yogis of Highest Yoga Tantra, however, put these same states to use in the spiritual path.

At the channel-centres there are white and red drops, upon which physical and mental health are based – white predominant at the top of the head, and red at the solar plexus. These drops have their origin in a white and red drop at the 'heart', which is the size of a large mustard seed or small pea and has a white top and red bottom. It is called the indestructible drop, since it lasts until death. The very subtle life-bearing wind dwells inside it and, at death, all winds ultimately dissolve into it, whereupon the clear light of death dawns.

The physiology of death revolves around changes in the winds, channels and drops. Psychologically, due to the fact that consciousnesses of varying grossness and subtlety depend on the winds like a rider on a horse, their dissolving or loss of ability to serve as bases of consciousness induces radical changes in conscious experience.

Death begins with the sequential dissolution of the winds associated with the four elements – earth, water, fire and wind. 'Earth' refers to the hard factors of the body such as bone, and the dissolution of the wind associated with it means that that wind is no longer capable of serving as a mount or basis for consciousness. As a consequence of its dissolution, the capacity of the wind associated with 'water' – the fluid factors of the body – to act as a mount for consciousness becomes more manifest. The ceasing of this capacity in one element and its greater manifestation in another is called 'dissolution'; it is not, therefore, a case of gross earth dissolving into water.

Chart 3

The 3rd Cycle of Simultaneous Dissolution

<i>Factor Dissolving</i>	<i>External Sign</i>	<i>Internal Sign</i>
fire element	one cannot digest food or drink	appearance of fireflies or sparks within smoke
aggregate of discrimination	one is no longer mindful of affairs of close persons	
basic wisdom of analysis (our ordinary consciousness mindful of the individual names, purposes and so forth of close persons)	one can no longer remember the names of close persons	
nose sense	inhalation weak, exhalation strong and lengthy	
odors	one cannot smell	

Chart 2

The 2nd Cycle of Simultaneous Dissolution

<i>Factor Dissolving</i>	<i>External Sign</i>	<i>Internal Sign</i>
water element	saliva, sweat, urine, blood and regenerative fluid dry greatly	appearance of smoke
aggregate of feelings (pleasure, pain and neutrality)	body consciousness can no longer experience the three types of feelings that accompany sense consciousness	
basic wisdom of equality (our ordinary consciousness mindful of pleasure, pain and neutral feelings as feelings)	one is no longer mindful of the feelings accompanying the mental consciousness	
ear sense	one no longer hears external or internal sounds	
sounds	<i>ur</i> sound in ears no longer arises	

Simultaneously with the dissolution of the earth element, four other factors dissolve, accompanied by external signs (generally visible to others) and an internal sign (the inner experience of the dying person). The same is repeated in serial order for the other three elements, with corresponding external and internal signs.

Upon the inception of the fifth cycle the mind begins to dissolve, in the sense that coarser types cease and subtler ones become manifest. First, conceptuality ceases – dissolving, so to speak, into a mind of white appearance. This subtler mind, to which only a vacuity filled by white light appears, is free from coarse conceptuality but nevertheless slightly dualistic. It, in turn, dissolves into a heightened mind of red appearance, which then dissolves into a mind of black appearance. At this point all that appears is a vacuity filled by blackness, during which the person eventually becomes unconscious; in time this is cleared away, leaving a totally non-dualistic vacuity – the mind of clear light – free from the white, red and black appearances. This is death.

Since the outer breath (which is detectable moving through the nose) ceased long before, in the fourth cycle, from the tantric perspective the point of actual death is tied not to inhalation and exhalation but to the appearance of the mind of clear light. A person usually remains in this state of lucid vacuity for three days, after which (if the body has not been ravaged by great illness) the external signs of pus or blood emerging from the nose and sexual organ occur, indicating the departure of consciousness. Only at that point is it safe to remove the body for disposal; prior to that time, the consciousness is still in the body, and any violent handling of it can only disturb the end processes of death, possibly resulting in a lower rebirth.

When the clear light ceases, the consciousness passes back through the other seven stages of dissolution in reverse order:

- 1 *Clear light*
- 2 *Radiant black sky*
- 3 *Radiant red sky*
- 4 *Radiant white sky*
- 5 *Flame of a butter-lamp*
- 6 *Fireflies*
- 7 *Smoke*
- 8 *Mirage.*

As soon as this reverse process begins, the person is reborn into an intermediate state (*bar-do*) between lives, with a subtle body that can go wherever it likes, through mountains and so forth, in search of a place of rebirth.

A lifetime in the intermediate state can last from a moment to seven days, depending on whether or not a suitable birthplace is found. If one is not

found, the being undergoes a 'small death', experiencing the eight signs of death as laid out above, but very briefly. He or she then again experiences the eight signs of the reverse process and is reborn in a second intermediate state. This can happen for a total of seven rebirths in the intermediate state, making forty-nine days, during which time a place of rebirth is necessarily found.

The 'small death' that occurs between intermediate states or just prior to taking rebirth is compared to experiencing the eight signs –ranging from the appearance of mirages to the clear light – when going to sleep. Similarly also, upon dreaming, the eight signs of the reverse process are experienced prior to the dream, which ends with another experience of the eight signs of 'death' followed by the eight of the reverse process. These occur whether one is passing into another dream or awakening from sleep.

These states of increasing subtlety during death and of increasing grossness during rebirth are experienced in fainting and orgasm as well as before and after sleeping and dreaming, although not in complete form.' Thus, they not only indicate levels of subtlety on which every conscious moment is built but also describe states through which beings frequently pass without noticing them. This doctrine suggests that ordinary conscious life is concerned with only the gross or superficial, without heed of more subtle states that are the foundation of both consciousness and appearance. It is a case of not knowing either the origin of consciousness or the basis into which it returns. Ordinary beings are so identified with superficial states that the transition to the deeper involves even fear of annihilation.

In the stages of generation and completion of Highest Yoga Tantra, the uncontrolled processes of death, intermediate state and rebirth are ultimately purified. The most subtle state - that of clear light – is eventually used as a basis of compassionate appearance without regenerating grosser minds. Actual achievement of these practices is beyond those who have not cultivated compassion, realized emptiness and learned the techniques of deity yoga (the meditative appearance – of a compassionate mind realizing emptiness - as a deity). However, an accommodation of one's perspective on life to an understanding of these states is within the reach of those who wish it. It is with this use in mind that this translation is offered.

Chart 1

The 1st Cycle of Simultaneous Dissolution

<i>Factor Dissolving</i>	<i>External Sign</i>	<i>Internal Sign</i>
earth element	body becomes very thin, limbs loose; sense that body is sinking under the earth	appearance of mirages
aggregate of forms	limbs become smaller, body becomes weak and powerless	
basic mirror-like wisdom (our ordinary consciousness that clearly perceives many objects simultaneously)	sight becomes unclear and dark	
eye sense	one cannot open or close eyes	
colors and shapes	luster of body diminishes; one's strength is consumed	