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Tibetan Tantric Buddhism: Envisioning Death

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INTRODUCTION

As the saying goes: ‘out of sight, out of mind,’ death is something easily forgotten when not staring you in the face. Our imagination is a significant aspect to our personality and perspective, but how important is imagination to our spiritual lives? Tantric Buddhism upholds the belief that the sum of all life and its process encompasses four stages: life, dying & death, the intermediate, and rebirth. In each of these stages, our perceptions and imaginings directly affect our actions and behavior, whether in following dharma or choosing a realm in rebirth. To start from the beginning, death is a key element within every sect of Buddhism. Through the awareness of death, the Buddha realized the ultimate futility of worldly concerns and pleasures. Only after seeing the “four sights” (a sick person, an old person, a corpse, and a person who relinquished the world) did the Buddha leave his family to find an escape from the world of suffering, death and decay. (Bonney 2010) According to the Buddhist belief, not only did he escape samsara (realm of suffering) but attempts to aid the rest of suffering beings in joining his liberated status, hence, the bodhisattvas and dharma protectors (David Turberfield). However, while we inhabit the six realms of samsara, death appears to be an insoluble problem for us because it is the ultimate cessation of all of our worldly desires, passions, belongings and
seemingly existence. Despite our presupposition, Buddhists believe that
death is merely a small event in life, so we should not be overly worried
about how our current life will end. As with situations we face in life, the
feelings we generate toward our experiences depend on how we view our
situation. Once we visualize the process of death and know the rules to
dying happy, our fear of dying should cease (DT and Sonam). Knowing how
to process the idea of death is half the battle. Visualizing your impending
death prepares you for the rest of it.

**STORY OF THE WHEEL OF LIFE**

One of the central pictures in Buddhism concerning life and death is
Kalchakra, the Wheel of Life. One version of the story is retold as follows:
there once was a king named Bimbisara in India who was nearly at the point
of enlightenment, but he was unwilling to give up his kingdom in order to
follow Buddhism. As a result of this king’s problem with attachment, Buddha
ordered someone to paint the Wheel of Life to give to the king as a present;
each aspect of the picture was specifically directed by the Buddha. When it
was finished, he sent it to the king who, upon looking at it, achieved
enlightenment (David Turberfield). Following the story, the Wheel of Life
then was painted in monasteries for monks and worshipers to analyze, and
to this day it is one of the most prominently painted Tibetan Buddhist
Thangka or wall paintings (Bodhanada 2010). The Wheel of Life incorporates the all the major concepts concerning our existence and those of the other five realms, including the image of our actions having specific kinds of consequences (karma). In any of the six realms of samsara, we are captives to death (as seen by Yama, lord of the dead embracing the realms within the wheel), and only by not undergoing the process of rebirth can we escape Yama’s grasp. The Wheel of Life relates all the events of life and death in a concise, logical manner, helping the viewer put his or her life into perspective as well. There’s nothing quite like thinking about how everything you have thought or done may affect you when you die.

Those wishing for a brighter future often try to start accumulating some good merit and purify the bad.

**ORIGIN OF BUDDHISM IN TIBET**

Foundationally, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism claims its roots from one of the mainstream branches of Buddhism called Mahayana. Every sect of Buddhism has similar basic beliefs, but as with the case in Tibet, it mixes with other beliefs and contains additional, not-traditional practices. As for the history of Tibet’s experience with Buddhism, Buddhism originated in India during the fifth and sixth centuries and later spread to Tibet by the seventh century. (Lieberman 2003) Buddhism actually arrived in Tibet in two
waves; the first wave was during the reign of King Songtsen Gampo in 641 AD. The King himself was converted by his two Buddhist wives from China and Nepal, but the Tibetan people are a fierce people and, likewise, fiercely like keeping their traditions. The king made Buddhism the state religion and established Buddhist temples throughout the region; however, Buddhism did not take root deeply during this time because the indigenous Bon religion was still widely practiced (ReligionFacts2 2004-2010). During that time and to this day, Bon is essentially the shamanistic practice of the indigenous folk with divination and exorcism as central points. (Lieberman 2003) This mixture currently appears with the additional deities, spirit summoning, and other less than traditional Buddhist concepts within Tibetan Tantric Buddhism.

Then, later in history, the second and more influential wave arrived with the tantric mystic Padmasambhava in 774 AD; he came to Tibet at the invitation of King Trisong Detson. After the arrival of this mystic, the local Bon religion was merged with Buddhist beliefs to create what we know presently as Tibetan Tantric Buddhism*. Another element of Bon religion that remains a prevailing thought in Tantric Buddhism is protection against ambivalent or hostile powers and ensuring the safety of the living against the powers of the dead. (ReligionFacts2 2004-2010) This aspect appears through the images of the dharma-protectors who protect the dharma (teachings of the Buddha (Stcherbatsky 2003)) and the followers of dharma
(Lama Tashi). Since the Tibetans did not need to discard their former beliefs, this merger deepened the roots of Buddhism in the Tibet, and the most devout Tantric Buddhists do not distinguish the ancient beliefs from their modern version of Buddhism.

Since the overall goal of Buddhism is to attain enlightenment, no conflict seems to appear from merging the beliefs. The most apt definition for Tantric practice is to say that it is a short-cut method for achieving enlightenment; there are many rituals, many of which are kept secret from laymen, but for any practitioner of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, he or she attempts to reach the state of enlightenment in an accelerated amount of time, perhaps in one lifetime. (Lieberman 2003) The key to this practice is meditation and visualization; the mind is our most crucial tool for us since it is the only part of us that transcends death.

* Tantric Buddhism (also called Vajrayana and derived from the Mahayana school of Buddhism) is the basis of Tibetan Buddhism. Tantric form of Buddhism is the most deviant from the beliefs of the common origin. (Lieberman 2003) In the 10 century AD, Buddhism nearly was extinguished in India by invading Muslims (Richards 1999). Therefore, Though Tantric Buddhism was originally Indian, it was preserved primarily through Tibetan Buddhism, and is often used synonymously.
PHILOSOPHY OF DEATH

IMPERMANENCE

Meditation and Visualization require a focal point, and this focus is that of death or more broadly referred to as impermanence, the primary philosophy of Buddhism. This term’s meaning is precisely how it sounds, nothing is permanent. Our death is like a guest moving to a new guesthouse; since we only stay in the guesthouse a short while, why do we need to buy so many things to furnish our temporary home (Norbu)? Money, possessions, people, life, and everything of this world—all are fleeting and subject to destruction. The most important aspects to life are spiritual things rather than material. Passing of time is a classic example of impermanence and death, for a moment comes and goes so quickly only to be replaced by a successive moment (Powers 1995). Watching the passing of time reflects on the brevity of our current existence to be replaced by another. The only certainty we have is that all matters are uncertain. The strongest message of impermanence is to remember that you are subject to death whether or not you choose to think about it (Sogyal 1992).

Denial of death is no more effective than an ostrich hiding from predators by sticking his head in the sand. Looking at the big picture, ignoring the reality of death only creates future problems for those around you as well as yourself. In regards to others, in living like you are immortal,
It’s easily to overlook the well-being of others or how your actions impact your surroundings. In looking at your own situation, when death comes for you, only then will you realize if you have used your time wisely or wasted your life for meaningless possession and titles. If you never learned to live well, then you will not know how to die well. For as a day’s worth of good labor produces a happy sleep, a life’s worth of good living provides for a happy death (Norbu). As a result of our impermanent state of being, we should feel a need for urgency to put dharma (the teachings of Buddha) into practice, take time to meditate, and always be a benefit others (Powers 1995). People who understand the nature of life and death spend their lives trying to make the world a better place because they realize that their current existence is much smaller in comparison to everything else. Those who fail to acknowledge this relationship fear the prospect of aging and death.

With our status in the world, human beings have a position both of greatness and smallness. The greatness comes from every person’s individual life and the accomplishments of one lifetime; the smallness comes from mortality and finite lifespan. In light of this circumstance, life on the grander scale is a worthier entity to serve than a individual life (Song 2007) Thus, meditating on life’s impermanence not only prepares you to handle your inevitable death but stimulates a mind of love and compassion for suffering because not everyone understands how to cope with this world
of suffering (Sogyal 1992). Meditating on death is not supposed to be morbid or gruesome by any means, for the purpose of focusing on life’s impermanence is to help people distinguish important and unimportant matters in their lives. Since Tantric Buddhism more closely traces back to India, the belief in rebirth further encourages building up good karma in the current life to positively affect the next rebirth or achievement of enlightenment or liberation. (Q1)

Within Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, several objects and places serve as constant reminders of the imminence of death; Thangka paintings, images of skulls, burial places, and certain ritual objects made from human or animal bones each provide tangible images of death’s reality. One purpose of these reminders emphasizes that even though this very moment you may not feel susceptible to death’s power, you never know what the next moment holds in store for you or those you love. Do not fear the unknown; just prepare for it. (Sogyal 1992)

CHARNEL GROUNDS

On the physical level, one of the best ways to envision death is to actually look at dead things. Charnel grounds are a type of burial ground where bodies are left to decompose in open graves, exposed to all the elements and animals. To Tantric Buddhists this is a location and medium
of sacredness, for symbolically speaking, it is a place where you can commit to things as they are. Tibetan Tantric Buddhism uses symbols of this place in ritual texts and mandalas to create a distinctly tantric spirituality. The following poem captures the essence of the Charnel ground environment:

“Now the bird of the tombs, the swine of the tombs, the poisonous snake,
and the jackals of many different colors,
and the wolves and crows and other beasts of this kind,
devour the corpses without number, fresh and decomposed,
the bloody sea of flesh and bones,
and the men’s dried-out heads, with others still humid or broken down.
Beasts of prey tear the remain, while others devour them;
Some fling themselves on the flesh, while other moan,
Some tear out the eyes, while others gnaw the feet,
Some pulverize the bones, seize the flesh, and tear out the Entrails” (Simmer-Brown 2007).

In contrast to this rather descriptive, unpleasant imagery, charnel grounds are depicted in tantric texts as a great place for simplicity, a place where you can abandon the tendencies of self-cherishment. Tantric mandalas especially use the representations of charnel grounds for the
purpose of reflection and meditation.** For instance, in India the Buddha advised that in order to gain a true grasp of death, monks should go to these places to mediate life’s impermanence and human being’s inevitable death. Unfortunately, sometimes on seeing and meditating at the sights, monks were driven to such despair that they committed suicide, which would automatically send them to be reborn in the lower realms. After that happened, Buddha made the physical act of going to the charnel grounds to meditate optional (Simmer-Brown 2007). Meditating on death is not supposed to stimulate fear but a freedom from the fear of death*. Breaking away from the abstract idealism, activity at the charnel grounds are some of the most gruesome and horrific sights human beings can behold, for not only do fresh and putrid corpses intermingle strewn across the ground but birds and beasts (and some say that demons) scavenge the area for human flesh. Besides demons and animals, dakinis inhabit the charnel grounds; these female spirits not only haunt the area but are the figurees depicted wearing the bone ornaments, holding the chopper, and drinking warm blood from kapalas. The images of the chopper and kapala (skull cup) are symbols of wisdom, both the cutting quality and becoming intoxicated quality (Simmer-Brown 2007: 131). Dakinis themselves are inherently good despite their appearance and on occasion may give dharma lessons to visitors of the burial ground (David Turberfield). As a result from all the types of activity occurring in this place, the imagery of the charnel grounds has a lasting
impact on Tantric Buddhism practices and the seeming obsession with death. Like with the bone ornaments in which the dakinis adorn themselves, many other ritual artifacts fashioned from human bone come from the charnel ground.

*Tibetan Buddhists on a higher level who focus on the Chod practice especially choose to meditate in these kinds of places to perfect their control of gods and demons appearing before them. These appearances are believed to be conceptual proliferations that are out of your control. (Yangthang 1991)

**mandalas are a type of Thangka painting that contain deities and symbols based on a geometrical pattern of concentric squares and circles that present a projection of the cosmos. It is an aid to meditation that in the past was drawn on the ground and wiped away afterwards, but now, it is painted onto paper. (Stooke 1961)

RITUAL OBJECTS MADE FROM HUMAN BONE

It is true that bone objects are used in meditation and other rituals, which characterize one special element of Tantric Buddhism, but in order to explain the Tantric practices properly, first let explain the Tibetan Chod practice. Chod and tantric practice are interwoven and too closely related to distinguish clearly which rituals come from which practice, though the
focal points differ. The main idea of Chod practice is to cut through the ego and get rid of personal identity. In the practice, visualization and places you choose for meditation are crucial to creating a stronger will and developing a higher view (of the religion and the world) (Yangthang 1991). Within Chod practice, also the Tantric aspect, is the concentration of both an external and internal practice. External practice includes abandoning worldly concerns and going to places that no one else dares go to such as burial places and charnel grounds. Internal practice covers the imaginings arising from your mind. Though Chod practice contains a few elements relevant to death and dying, many of the Chod rituals and practices concentrate on interacting with demons and spirits, especially the wrathful kind in the charnel grounds (Yangthang 1991).

As a result of the shamanistic rituals and exorcisms, Chod is believed to have originated from the Bon religion in Tibet (Zanzibar Trading 2010). It may contain slightly less than mainstream Buddhist ideas, but it does incorporate both the ideas of tantra and sutra. With the Chod rituals, practitioners make use of the kangling (thigh bone trumpet), bell, and the damaru (skull cap drum). (School of Tibetan Healing Cho 2010) Other bone objects include the kapala (skull cup), bone aprons, and decorated bone ornaments. The kangling is not only made with human bone but the lower part also is supposed to be encased in human skin. In demon summoning, the lama should eat part of the skin for the trumpet blast to be powerful
enough. In death rituals, the lama walks before the corpse on the way to burial or cremation. The instrument is supposed to attract and guide the soul in the right direction. *(Wright 1904)* The skull cups (kapala) are used as libation bowls in certain Tantric rituals, where unverified rumors say spiritual leaders drink blood from the cup (Lyons 1982). In addition, the previous owners of the bones also add to the mystical powers or ritual potency within the instruments. For craniums, the greatest tantric power comes from the skull of a murder or execution victim; those dying violent deaths or illness also possess power but not as strong. Skulls of children born out of wedlock or incest, especially, are considered to contain much potency. This aspect arises from the Indian practice since they also use skulls of children born out of the forbidden union of castes. *(ReligionFacts 2004-2010)* With the kangling, the thigh bone of a murdered virgin is the most useful in summoning spirits. In a few rituals the kangling and damaru are played simultaneously with the kangling held in the left hand and damaru in the right. *(Zanzibar Trading 2010)* In Tantric Buddhism, when meditating on fierce deities or dharma protectors, lamas or other practitioners or a higher level use instruments fashioned from bone or shaped like skulls (Kumar 2004). Despite macabre qualities to the practice, remember that even though human mortality plainly is emphasized through the use of human bones, their use is not supposed to be a morbid fixation on death but a strict reminder to live your life wisely and to the fullest. In this way, constantly
encountering human remains remind us that we indeed are not immortal and should live for more than ourselves.

*This practice was not explicitly described to me by a lama since they each told me that there are many practices and beliefs I would not understand, and therefore withheld the information from me. Much of the information on specific use and the powers of the rituals were found in other articles concerning Tantric rituals, which also include Indian elements. Tibetan Tantric practice incorporates so many Indian beliefs that excluding the Indian practices would detract from the understanding of the Tibetan practice.

**MEDITATIONS ON DEATH**

Though going to burial grounds reinforces the fact of our eventual demise, it is not necessary to go to these kinds of places to meditate on death. We are surrounded by death in our everyday lives whether we realize it or not. Everything we encounter is continually moving towards death, for even the cells of our body die by the second. Holding on to transient things for happiness is plain foolishness(Powers 1995). Contemplation on our inevitable demise and impermanence is important in
Buddhism because it teaches us that life is precious. Tantric Buddhism focuses on the imminence of death and rehearsing the death process in our minds so that we fear of death will diminish. According to tradition, going to gravesites or cemeteries are encouraged to become familiar with death and the place you will eventually rest your head (Hawte 1996-2010).

Meditation on death has three rationales to why daily reflection on death is beneficial to spiritual development. The first is to consider the dangers of forgetting about death; the second considers the benefits of remaining mindful of death; the third is the actual mediation on death. The first rationale stresses that in forgetting about death, Dharma likewise easily is forgotten. In forgetting death, one of five negative consequences will occur.

The first danger being not putting dharma into practice, which means you will not follow the path to enlightenment. Observance of dharma preserves you from becoming engrossed in this life and world. The second danger is even if you remember to put dharma into practice, it will not be pure practice. Then, even if you manage a pure practice of dharma, it will lack persistent effort. If you manage to overcome all of the above listed failings but still forget about death, then you will continue to perform non-virtuous actions. Lastly, if somehow you are a perfect practitioner despite forgetting death, you still will die full of regret.

With the second rationale, always remain mindful of death. This
Mindfulness enables you to practice dharma sincerely and energetically; it is especially important at the beginning and throughout dharma practice. Mindfulness of death is the key to obtaining a happy mind at death (Gyatso 1990: 144-5)

With the first of these meditative practices, there is a nine-round death meditation that includes three roots, the nine reasonings, and the three convictions described as follows:

Three Roots: 1) Death is certain
   · there is no possible way to escape or prevent death
   · our lifespan cannot be increased and is decreasing continually. We were dying from the moment we were born.
   · death comes regardless of our preparation

Conviction: we must cultivate positive spiritual qualities and abandon negative ones.

2) Time of death is uncertain
   · duration of lifespan is uncertain, for anyone can die at any age
   · death has many causes and circumstances
   · our physical bodies are weak and fragile

Conviction: start to ripen potential now, not tomorrow
3) Only Our spiritual development helps us with death

- no earthly possession can save us or come with us
- no person can save or come with us, regardless of effort
- our physical bodies are powerless to help us

Conviction: purify our dharma practice without attachment to worldly possessions (Gyatso 1990: 145; Hawte 1996-2010)

All of these facts are rather obvious but emphasizing death helps us break out of the habitual assumption that today our lives will go on as usual (Gyatso 1990: 154)

The following prescribed meditation sums up all the essential points relevant to ponder personal death:

“we meditate:

No matter where I am born, whether it be in fortunate or unfortunate status of existence, I shall definitely have to die. Whether I am born in the happiest condition of samsara or in the deepest hell I shall have to experience death. However far and wide I travel I shall never find a place where I can hide from death, even if I voyage far into space or tunnel deeply underground” (Gyatso 1990: 155).
Meditating on death does not have to be a formal ritual or done in the presence of other people. Taking time daily to ponder your own death will help you appreciate everyday you can experience life.

THANGKA PAINTINGS

If you ever take a moment to examine a few Thangka paintings, you will discover that the symbols of impermanence and death are clearly evident within the depictions of deities. Look at the especially fierce looking deities and find the five skull headdress, skull cup clutching in the left hand or perhaps the necklace of heads. These images both serve as reminders of impermanence and representations of wisdom, for example, the five skull crown shows the undifferentiated union of the Five Buddha wisdoms (Beer 2004). Like with many aspects of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, these sights are supposed to inspire living a good life and benefiting other people. Unless you understand the meaning of the objects, the depictions instill a fear of death. The images are supposed to remind the observer daily about the uncertainty of life and how soon it will end. Each Thangka is regarded as a meditation not only for the artist but for every observer. One of the most crucial aspects of Tibetan Tantric practice is visualization. Thus, the pictures in the Thangka painting aid the practitioner in a standard way of envisioning specific deities, objects of worship, and how death should be
portrayed. Painting the Thangka paintings themselves requires a degree of meditation and envisioning each piece of the whole picture. Through both painting Thangkas and simply looking at them, the ancient practices of Tantric Buddhism are preserved. By understanding a holistic outlook of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, you can understand better their perspective of death.

TANTRIC MEDITATIONS

Since Tantric practice attempts to place the goal in the present (visualizing that the future state of Buddha hood is actualized), many meditations focus on ridding ourselves of this mortal body and becoming a deity. Also, since our bodies are one of the most precious things to us, we develop a practice of distancing our attachments this body and creating identitylessness. Other objectives include offering our bodies to objects of refuge such as lamas, dakinis, dharma protectors, and meditational spirits, as well as gods and spirits to whom we owe karmic debts (Yangthang 1991). In this meditation, the practitioner invites all the buddhas and bodhisattvas to witness and benefit from the offering (David Turberfield). In some cases, we look to our Buddhist spiritual guide or chosen deity of worship during these kinds of meditations.

The mental picture of these meditations is simply envisioning yourself
take a chopper (a ritual cutting tool meant for symbolically cutting away ignorance or evil spirits*) and proceeding to dismember yourself. During this mediation, you possess a “rainbow body,” something that appears but does not really exist. The deity to look towards is considered the Wisdom body who you try to become like by taking death as the path to actualize the Wisdom body. (Khen unknown date) After finishing the process or ridding yourself of your mortal flesh, you place all of your innards and other body parts in your upturned cranium (David Turberfield). The organs in this vessel are a symbol both of impermanence and wisdom with the eyes, nose, ears, and heart visibly floating in the gore. (DT and Sonam) Then the next step in the meditative imagining is to transform the skull cup containing your impure flesh and blood into an ocean of nectar, and then to offer it to the deity of your choice. This process is repeated four to five times and offered to several different groups, including those in bardo. All the deities worshipped are supposed to be enlightened Buddhas, they have the power to take the contents of the skull cup and transform them into an ocean of nectar, thus, purifying it.

Through visualizing all these processes taking place, the practitioner undergoes something similar to a catharsis. Seeing yourself as enlightened helps advance your mental preparedness to becoming actually enlightened.(David Turberfield; Khen) This practice is also a part of the Chod ritual of offering the flesh of your body in a tantric feast. It symbolically
cuts away your reality to reveal the real reality of the mindstream, or consciousness. (Wikipedia 2010)

According to beliefs, any Buddhist can practice this type of meditation, but for Lamas and monks, this meditation ought to be a daily ritual (David Turberfield). In focusing on a specific deity (all of whom are considered an enlightened Buddha), tantric empowerments are essential. “A tantric empowerment is both an introduction and a granting of permission to engage in specific tantric practices, which are, if practiced correctly, the quickest way the achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.” (Yeshi 2006) An empowerment is opening a connection with a specific Buddha and thus coming to rely on that deity for protection and blessing. (Duldzin Buddhist Center 2010) The highest empowerment that can be received is the Kalachakra empowerment given by the Dalai Lama himself. This empowerment allows practitioners to follow the Kalachakra Tantra, and thus, meditate on the passing of time itself and everything encompassed by the wheel of life. Following this tantric practice is the fastest way to enlightenment (Yeshi 2006).

*the chopper comes from the Chod practice concerning identitylessness and cutting away the dualistic mind. This mind includes ignorance and the five conflicting, most specifically emotions of expectation and disappointment regarding attaining enlightenment or hope and fear of something either positive or negative. The image is transcendental wisdom cutting through
the root clinging to identity. (Yangthang 1991) Dharma protectors use the chopper to disembowel enemies to dharma and fill their libation cups with the enemies’ blood and mincemeat (Kumar 2004)

MORTUARY PRACTICES

Aside from a person’s own responsibility towards his/her death, family members and others both have the burden for reminding the dead person how to behave in realm of the dead and also disposing of the body. Fortunately, these requirements are not at the mercy of an individual’s imagination. All the death rites and rules for living are contained in certain spiritual texts. These texts give instructions such as who can touch a particular person’s dead body or even what kinds of thoughts you should think when facing the lord of the dead (Lama Tashi ; Buddhachannel 2010). This section discusses the physical factors of facing death and burial.

SIGNS OF DEATH

When someone is about to die, that person’s body exhibits a few telltale signs that death will occur in the near future, unless hastened even further by an outside influence. When looking for the signs of death, there exist two kinds: distant and close. The distant signs of death can be experienced with
or without having a particular illness. They come in three kinds of bodily, mentally, and in dreams, which if persists, means that death is imminent but not necessarily soon. Usually, these signs occur three to six months prior to death. These signs include:

· continuous hiccupping while urinating or defecating

· when blocking the ears, the inner ear no longer makes a buzzing sound

· blood does not quickly return to fingernails if pressure is applied and then released

· hiccupping during sexual intercourse

· during sexual intercourse, women release white drops instead of red or men vice versa

· for no reason, you cannot taste thing

· exhaled breath is cold instead of warm

· tongue shrinks and feels rolled or swollen

· poke out the tongue and tip can no longer be seen

· no longer can see colorful shapes in the dark after poking the eyeball

· hallucinate a sun at night

· when sitting in the sun in the morning, no longer see in our shadow streams of energy flowing from the crown of our head

· saliva no longer forms in mouth

· end of nose becomes pinched

· black marks appear on teeth
· eyeballs sink further into the hollow of eyes

(Gyatso 1990: 337)

The distant mental signs of death include:

· a change in the person’s usual temperament (i.e. a usually happy
  person dramatically becomes sad or angry)

· a dislike of objects of attachment (i.e. life, friends, etc.)

· intelligence decreases

· repeated dreams of falling from a high mountain naked, traveling South
  or across the desert (Gyatso 1990: 338).

As far as close signs of death, many physical aspects include:

· sleeping a lot more than normal and stops communicating or talking

· loss of interest in eating or drinking

· coolness of body parts to the touch (due to lack of circulatory function)

· changes in skin color (especially mottling of the hands and feet)

· rattling sounds in lungs and throat

· lose the ability to control bowels and bladder

· disorientation and restlessness

· surge of energy and alertness after a period of disorientation

· breathing pattern changes and becomes more shallow

Mental signs of closeness of death include:

· withdrawal from cares of the world

· vision-like experiences (such as talking with non-existent people)
(A Hospice Article 2010).

The sign that dying has ended appears in different stages shown by the dissolving of each of the five elements. The first element to go is the earth element; this is shown externally by the body becoming thin; internally, the person sees mirage-like appearances in the mind. Next, the water element dissolves; the external sign is that the mouth and tongue become very dry and all the liquids of the body (urine, blood, sperm, etc) decrease. The internal sign shows a smoke-like appearance in the mind. The next element to dissolve is the fire element; the external sign is reduced warmth of the body and coldness in the area around the navel. The internal sign is a sparkling-fireflies-like appearance in the mind. Then wind dissolves with the external sign being reduced power of movement due to decreasing power of the winds that flow through the channels if the body and generate gross (alert and responsive) minds. The internal sign would be seeing candle-flame-like appearance. After the person has no mindfulness, no physical movement, no heartbeat, and no movement through the channels, some believe that this is the end of dying. Once dying has ended, the indestructible drop* of the body separates and move to opposite ends of the body. The white drop descends to the tip of the sex organ, and the red drop emerges through the nostrils, signifying that death is indeed complete (Gyatso 1990: 341-2).
The Dalai Lama describes the indestructible drop as the origin of life and consciousness within the body. It is located in the heart with white on the top and red on the bottom, which sets the basis for both physical and mental health. Since it lasts until death, it is given the name indestructible drop (Zero Point 2005).

THE FIVE TYPES OF BURIALS

In regards to disposing of dead corpses (in contrast to living corpses (Sogyal 1992), there are five types of burial in Tibetan tradition: water, sky, stupa, cremation, and internment, but in a few cases there is also mummification and other types of burials taken from other practices. Water burial and sky burial are similar in nature, though possessing a few differences to the status of the person being buried. In both methods of disposal the body must be cut up (and for the sky burial bones must be smashed) to feed either the fish or vultures. (Chengdu Panorama Tour Co. Ltd. 2010) This practice is a very hands-on burial style that appears gruesome if you do not understand the Buddhist frame of mind. In the past, family members were primarily responsible for burying their relatives, up to the tiniest detail. Nowadays, even though anyone can still partake in helping burial practices, with modernization, the responsibility has moved towards a specialized few monks who have become the professional undertakers.
The use of water and sky burials is practical on two levels. The first is solely economical; in many regions of Tibet, there is not enough wood to entirely cremate an adult human corpse. The second is the idea of giving back to nature. Since in Buddhist belief all living things are interrelated, feeding the birds (or the fish) is a perfect way to show our relationship and compassion towards the rest of the living world. Since Buddhists consider the dead body to be only an empty vessel, feeding animals with the person’s dead flesh will save some small animals that maybe eaten by vultures or fish otherwise. It’s that person’s a final offering to life though already dead. In the Shangri-la region, water burial is the most appropriate due to the proximity of the Yangzi and Mekong rivers, but sky burials are also popular there (Norbu). In Li Tang, there are sky burials every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, depending on if anyone has died recently.

The actual process of the Sky burial (or celestial burial) is an intriguing phenomenon. The ceremony includes the monks saying mantras while proceeding to cut up the body with knives so the birds can devour the corpse more quickly and easily. While the monks work on the body, Vultures and crows either wait on the surrounding hill-tops or if they are famished, hover over the body until the monks allow them to eat. Once all the meat is gone, the monks then smash up the bones with rocks or sledgehammers, mix it with zanba (Tibetan bread made from barley flour
and yak butter tea) to feed the birds. (World Lingo 2010) The birds are believed to be dakinis, the spirits of burial places who either are appeased after consuming human flesh or considered to carry the person’s consciousness with them away from earth. Tibetans are encouraged to witness this type of burial to reinforce the idea of impermanence (China Daily 2010).

The water burial is a derivative of the sky burial but in places where sky burial is more common, it does not have the same respect; it is the method used for people with no family, beggars, and poor people. The burial does not have any special ceremonies besides dismembering the body by the river and throwing the part into it. Sometimes the whole body is thrown in without dismemberment. In places where water burial is the most common type of method practiced, it has the same kind of dignity as the sky burial with monks coming to chant while the family watches. (Chengdu Panorama Tour Co. Ltd. 2010)

Cremation or fire burials are reputed as burials for only the rich or senior monks. This is the case for places without much wood, but in for the Deng and Sherpa people, incineration is the most prominent funerary practice because of an abundance of trees. The ceremonies are similar to that of the sky burial and water burials (the more dignified one)(Tao 2003). With the common people, their spines are broken to permit double binding in a crouched position before cremation, but the nobles’ and monks’ are left
intact. (Wylie 1964-1965) In disposing of the ashes, the common people’s ashes can be spread over the mountain summit or riverside. For the more senior monks’ ashes, they are mixed with earth, made into statues, and sealed in stupas for consecration (Tibet Radio 2010).

Internment is used for bodies not fit for sky or water burials, usually people who died from disease or in some cases of natural death. In ancient times, this method was used for kings (Wylie 1964-1965).

Stupa burial is the noblest of the funerary rituals in Tibet. Only high lamas, such as the Dalai Lama and Panchan Lama, and Living Buddhas are buried in this fashion. This is actually a type of mummification since the embalmed corpse is dehydrated and wrapped with rare herbs and spices. Then, it is brought to the stupa for preservation and worship. The type of stupa the in which the Lama resides depends on his ranking, whether he will stay in a stupa made of gold, other precious metals, wood, or earth. (Tibet Trip 1998-2010) The body is dehydrated in one of three manners: applying potions to the body and then salting it, burying it in sand for three years, or by baking it in a specific manner (including pre-treatment and removing the bowels (Chengdu Panorama Tour Co. Ltd. 2010).

Other types of mummification (primarily dessication) are used only in specific cases in Tibet. In Lhasa, if an infant dies in its first year, either it will be put into a weighted box and thrown into the river or it will be desiccated and then cremated. The method of desiccation is to suspend the
corpse in a clay pot from the ceiling of the parents’ home for about eight to nine months. No salt is used; it’s only air dried. Once mummified, the corpse is cremated, pot thrown away, and the ashes mixed with clay and made into cone-shaped objects or stamped with picture of deities, and finally, placed on mountain ledges near Lhasa (Wylie 1964-1965).

Other burials include tree burial or cliff burial; each kind of method is fairly self-explanatory and just as symbolic of impermanence as the other methods.

Burial is not just a physical practice but also involves a spiritual belief. Tibetan burials following along with the mystical books of the Katz and Natz say that people should be buried in the manner associated with their birth. Whether these astrological factors abide by Tibetan Tantric Buddhist beliefs is another story, so one reason that many people are buried in the most convenient fashion may indicate that Buddhists do not place a high value on astrology in their faith. Despite the existence of these books, sky burial is considered to be the best burial, so it is the most common practice for Tibetans (Norbu).
IN THE INBETWEEN

END PROCESS OF DYING

During the dying process, the minds of death are important to the potentialities of entering the in-between. There are two types of the minds of death; they are gross and subtle minds. With the gross mind, you are capable of sensation and thought, but you lose your control with subtle minds (Gyatso 1990: 340-1).

After death is complete, the consciousness of a person enters Bardo, the dream-like intermediate state between death and rebirth (Gyatso 1990: 243). People commonly believe that the consciousness of a person resides in this area for up to forty-nine days (Norbu). Many Tibetan Buddhists also believe that they can assist the dead by accumulating spiritual merit, so during this time, friends, family, and lamas chant mantras as well as read religious texts to guide the in-transit consciousness to a happy human rebirth. Since the dead can see the thoughts of the people left behind, it is important for the family to maintain positive thoughts to help influence the dead to also think positively. Helping the dead through Bardo gives the practitioner personal experience with navigating through the realm, and thus, it prepares the still living person for death as well (Yangthang 1991).
BARDO THODAL

Though no one can enter this in-between state without first dying, Tibetans have a specific manual for navigating the tests and appearances within this realm; In the West it is referred to as the Tibetan Book of the Dead, but its actual names is Bardo Thodol, meaning the “Great Liberation through hearing during the intermediate state” (Yangthang 1991). Though this book concerns death and the intermediary state before rebirth, it is something that should be read and understood during and for life. The book itself “offers a lyrical insight into the Tibetan Buddhist cosmology and its teachings on the nature of mind and consciousness, death and reincarnation” (DearDeath 1998-2007). Bardo Thodol should be read aloud to the deceased, and it teaches that once consciousness leaves the body, it creates its own experienced reality much like a dream (Buddhachannel 2010).

Throughout the journey in Bardo, the most important thing to remember is the kind of thoughts you have despite any visions you see. The realm of Bardo is compared to a dream-like state because of entities or situations you will envision and should learn how to control, though the mind will be in a state of confusion. It is said that the person’s consciousness will encounter both wrathful and peaceful deities, including the Lord of Death himself. During these moments, the time spent on earth meditating on enlightened images in temples and other places should help the person
once again envision the images and ascend towards enlightenment. However, usually people’s bad karma drags them towards rebirth. Despite not reaching enlightenment at the beginning levels of Bardo, a consciousness can achieve enlightenment at any time, even right before entering the womb (DearDeath 1998-2007). The book offers advice about how to avoid entering the womb as well, but at this point the consciousness has been undergoing torture and seeks refuge in what it believes to be caves but is actually portals of rebirth i.e. a womb. (Buddhachannel 2010)

**STAGES OF BARDO**

Bardo is a confusing place for not only are there four Bardo stages, but even a Bardo within the Bardo (Buddhachannel 2010). The first Bardo is that of life (Norbu), but concerning the ones regarding death, the first stage comes at the moment of death as the consciousness sees the Clear Light of Ultimate Reality. If the mind can embrace this experience with love and compassion, it will become a Buddha; however, most people fail at this attempt and fall to the second Bardo. In the second Bardo, which is said to last for two weeks, the mind meets both the peaceful and wrathful deities. The first week, it sees all the peaceful ones and, depending on its reaction to their goodness, may be drawn towards heaven or hell. During the second week, it encounters the wrathful deities who threaten torture and drink
blood from human skulls, but if the mind envisions that these deities are simply peaceful ones in disguise, all will go well, and the mind can achieve a level of liberation. Otherwise, the consciousness will be drawn to the third level of Bardo. The third Bardo is the place where the mind encounters the Lord of Death. At this stage the consciousness must account for all the good and evil it has procured in the previous life. Yama, the Lord of Death, holds up the mirror of Karma in judgment. If the mind can recognize everything in this scenario as Voidness, it can achieve liberation, but if it cannot focus or cannot avoid escaping into the cave-like wombs, rebirth is inevitable. (Buddhachannel 2010)

The three Bardos within the Bardo include:

· The Bardo of the moment of death, where the external reality and idea of self dissolves

· The Bardo of supreme reality, where the visions and projections of the mind occur

· The Bardo of becoming, which causes rebirth (Buddhachannel 2010)

If the consciousness does leave the body immediately after death, then a Lama who has been guru to the person should read the Bardo Thodol to the deceased, even whispering into (but not touching) the corpse’s ear (Summum unknown date.) In folklore, transference of consciousness can include transferring the soul into another body, whether human or animal;
however, in funerary rituals, this process aids the mind of the deceased to successfully leave the body and enter the bardo leading to rebirth. (Yu 1949)

LEGENDS OF IMMORTALITY

Everything is impermanent except for the attainment of enlightenment and Buddha hood. According to Tibetan Tantric Buddhist belief, all the deities worshipped are themselves Buddhas, and every person has the ability and aspiration of becoming a Buddha as well. However, both in folklore and rumor exists the occurrence where the normal prescribed cycle of death and rebirth has a few exceptions. In folklore, the body of the deceased is magically preserved and the soul returns to the original vessel to continue the same life. (Macdonald 1931: 307) Usually, someone with knowledge in mystical arts procures a nectar or medicine for raising the dead. In a discussion with a traditional Tibetan medicine doctor, he stated that there indeed is a magic medicine, called Zuo Thar*, that cures all ills and keeps the body from decay. Other rumors deal with dark arts or obscure tantric practices; one practice is creating zombies or reanimated corpses for to do one’s bidding. Tibetan zombies are called ro-langs, animated by necromancers for occult reasons. (Wylie 1964: 69-71) this subject is unheard of to the average Buddhist.

*Zuo thar would be considered a poison in the West since the main and
most important ingredient is mercury, along with several other precious metals and gems.

EPILOGUE

In light of everything you have just read, there is one thing that I hope you glean from all these pages of chatter. Daily meditation on death in no way reflects a morbid mentality; in fact, thinking about the day when you no longer inhabit your current body is one of the healthiest mental activities you can do. The extensive practices of Tantric Buddhism seem overbearing because human beings easily forget things once they leave our presence. In Western culture, we are so far removed from the presence of death and killing that we fear it, but in their daily lives, Tibetan Buddhists cannot escape the imagery of death; thus, they can never forget impermanence. Since human beings live both in the physical world and also a mental/spiritual world, we need physical reminders to inspire and stimulate our thoughts. Tibetan Tantric Buddhism brilliantly combines aspects of both worlds by each method of mediation and reflection. To sum up the entire practice and intention of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, constantly think about what’s going to happen to you after death and adjust your actions accordingly, so you will be happy with how you live your life.
APPENDICES

References:


Interviews:
Discussion with DT and Sonam. November 9, 2010. Shangrila, China.
Thanga Center Lama(the Master). November 17, 2010. Shangrila, China.

Pictures:

Pic#1-http://www.kerismith.com/WishJarTales/thingadaymonth/impermanence.jpg
Pic#2-http://www.netdotmusic.com/Bhavachakra.jpg
Pic#3-http://www.gelu.org/bbs/attachments/month_1008/20100818_d9ee1c4b5dcb7b68d51f0LSrKW2qsef.gif
Pic# 4 http://vajratool.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/charnel-ground.jpg
Pic#5http://www.gelu.org/bbs/attachments/month_1008/20100815_64d47233d5ca76b82397JkJ1LKpWCi6J.gif.thumb.jpg
Pic#6-http://magiedubouddha.com/p_tib-os1-intl.php
Pic#7- laughingbone.blogspot.com

Relevant Pictures:
Pic#1: The meaning of Impermanence

Pic#2: Kalchakra—the Wheel of Life
Pic#3 Dancing Graveyard Guardians

Pic#4: Charnel Grounds
Pic#5: Tantric Mandala

Pic#6: Damaru (Skull cap drum)

Pic#7: Kangling (Thighbone Trumpet)
Route Itinerary of ISP

November 5-19, 2010 in Shangri-la, Yunnan Province. Stayed at the Thangka Center run by Sonam Gelek. Big Dakpa in Manila, Philippines during this time.

November 20-28, 2010 traveling throughout Yunnan and Sichuan provinces

~morning of the 20th- bus from Shangri-la to Xiangcheng 72 元, left at 7:30am arrived in Xiangcheng at 5:30pm
~evening of the 20th- stayed in Xiangcheng, 25 元 a night at a nearby guesthouse right behind the bus station. Has hot showers if the day was sunny.
~morning of the 21st- no regular buses to Litang so had to get a baoche. Total fee: 700 元. Each person paid 115 元.
~Early afternoon of the 21st- stayed in Litang at the Potala Inn. 20 元 a night. No showers. Nearby monastery under construction but still pretty impressive. Lots of yaks.
~ morning of 22nd- tried to see a sky burial but no one had died. Waited an hour and a half in the snow. Since we wanted to get to Bogexiang (on the way to Batang) we had to hire a baoche. 4 and a half hours through snow and mountains. 50 元 per person, but there was a bit of a conspiracy to try and get us to pay 70 元 each.
~ 23rd- morning of the 25th- stayed in Gongri Long, a friend’s home village. Road undergoing construction so had to ride 45min.-1 hour by motorbike there and back.
~25th baoche to Litang. 60 元 per person stayed at Potala Inn again. Make sure to talk with the boss; she can be helpful in finding transportation and other things.
~26th- missed the actual sky burial because trying to find direct transportation to Shangri-la. Going rates are between 1300-1900 元. Ended up going to Daocheng with a friend of the boss (Potala Inn); they suggested buying a bus ticket from Daocheng to Shangri-la. We each paid them 40 元, 3 元 more than the bus to Daocheng.
~evening of the 26th- stayed at the Snow Café (卡瓦梅朵客栈), the nicest place in town with Internet and 24 hot water. 30 元 a night. The Laoban is really cool and likes cowboys.
~afternoon of the 27th- discovered no buses would leave from Daocheng to Shangri-la, so we hitched a ride with a baoche to Xiangcheng. total 300 元 among the three of us. Stayed in the same hotel/guesthouse. Better the second time around. It was only 20 元.
Still don’t know why it was 5 元 cheaper.
~early morning of the 28th-left the hotel at 5:15am to buy bus tickets to Shangri-la since ticket sales were closed when we arrived the day before. Ticket price 83 元 a person. Ticket office opens at 5:30am. Left for Shangri-la at precisely 6:10am. Arrived in Shangri-la at 2:30pm.

November 29th-December 2nd-stayed in Shangri-la at the Thangka Center dormitory.
~Evening of the 2nd- returned to Kunming
~3rd- end of ISP- hung out at the school dorm
Subjective Account

When I first arrived at my ISP site in Shangri-la, I was set on studying bloodletting and related things just because no one else in the program had previously studied it. However, after my first interview with a traditional Tibetan doctor, I discovered something much more interesting to me than figuring out the differences between good and bad blood. My new area of interest sparked when I asked the doctor about certain procedures for treating the dead and dying. The topic of death has so many tangents that I had to chart all the details and find out which ones fit into my new studies. Many of the other interesting topics I simply suggested for future ISPs. After talking with the Tibetan doctor, I proceeded to interview various monks and lamas; however, I really couldn’t get much specific information from them. Every single one of them mentioned that it would be impossible for me to understand Buddhism in such a short time and recommended I study seriously for a few years. Also, they told me that once I reached the higher levels in Buddhism, then I would be privy to the secret rituals regarding Tantric practice. Thus, I heavily relied on information I found on the internet, and I used this information as question materials for a few lamas. All this secret business was both intriguing and frustrating, because it was cool stuff I couldn’t access. I think the most important parts of interviewing people necessarily wasn’t getting new information each time but rather guiding my perspectives towards death with the Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. One of my pitfalls was that I wanted a completely original research topic, and I knew for certain that both Tantric Buddhism and Death Since I already had a bit of background to analyzing social impacts of death, I thought it would be wonderful to further explore this aspect of Buddhism. To them death is a much more insignificant ordeal than in Western perception. One funny thing I discovered over the span of time in Shangri-la is monks and lamas are the only Buddhists who adhere to all the beliefs about peace, and even young monks get into fights. I witnessed a spectacular snowball fight between monks in Litang, many Tibetans carry knives on their person. One Tibetan friend claimed his knife was his best friend who would protect him in tough situations. He said that if you are with a friend who is frightened in a scary situation, it only makes you more scared. But your knife only gives you courage because it will never be frightened. For the monk situation, though they in theory will let people mug them or kill them for the sake of showing the mugger compassion, they also say that self-defense is important so that the perpetrator does not incur murder on his head. There are so many subtleties towards their beliefs that it gets confusing fast. Either way, I don’t plan on ever messing around with Tibetans.

As far as the climate, people told me Shangri-la would be unbearably cold but it was much more tolerable than I expected, except for no hot water. Fortunately, there is a hot water bath house type place not too far from old town, but since I also spent a while traveling outside of Shangri-la, I didn’t take a shower for almost three weeks anyway.

I went to the local temples in Shangri-la to try and talk with monks there, but they were either too busy chanting or were extremely unknowledgeable. I was warned of this occurrence by a Tibetan acquaintance who said that there are two kinds of lamas: ones who focus only on meditation and the teacher kind who know all the books and other principles.

As far as fieldwork went, I finished in about two weeks, so I traveled with some classmates over to the Batang area—a bit troublesome to get to. I love the great outdoors, so it was fun,
but traveling is also tiresome. I recommend doing all of your traveling in the first few weeks; then, settle down and write your paper.
All in all, I think that this program was well worth the money and experience in research, for even if you don’t discover something entirely brand new, you’ll have the opportunity to grow yourself.

Future ISP’s

--Zuo thar
--Tibetan Folklore
--Indigenous Religions and affects on mainstream religion
--Bon Religion
--Life Entrustment: a Buddhist ritual
--Rhipa:Tibetan dance to scare away evil spirits
--Thamo (eight dramas)
--Instruments used in rituals
--Asian Astronomy
--Bo people and hanging graves
--Tibetan knife fighting
--Six yogas of Tibet
--Coffee in China
--A Beggar’s Life
--Construction in China.