Practice and Prayer: Paths to Auspicious Rebirth

Comparing Tibetan Buddhist and Protestant Views on Death and Dying

To Aid End of Life Care Providers

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Declaration:

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at any their university and that is entirely my own work.

Signed _____

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For those who seek to understand it, death is
a highly creative force. The highest spiritual
values of life can originate from the thought
and study of death.[1]

Introduction

Though common phrases like "death and taxes," "kick the bucket," and "pushing up daisies" allow us, upon occasion, to joke about death in pubic, in general, talking about this most assured fact of life, is considered tasteless if not verboten in Western society. The more "modern" we in the West have become, the less connected to the concept of death as a part of life we seem to be. The sick and elderly, rather than being cared for in their homes until death, as they were earlier in our history, are now usually housed in nursing homes and hospitals away from day to day sight, and in many American cities and towns, hearses have been replaced by full-sized, unmarked, white vans so that commuters are spared the discomforting thought of another's mortality, let alone their own. These social changes represent deeper beliefs about death which

[1] Kubler-Ross, "Quotations."

tragically affect the conversations around dying that many elderly and terminally ill patients desire but are often unable to have with their own families or caregivers.

The hospice and palliative care movements of recent years have played an almost singular role in educating the dying, family, friends, medical staff, mental health givers, and clergy on how to help people die in peace and dignity (rather than in fear and pain) and on how to assist the dying in their last weeks and hours. However, most of the literature on palliative care focuses on non-religious aspects of the dying process, such as the material taken from the classic writings of Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.

All the great religions speak of some sort of continuation after death, a teaching that infuses believers with a sacred or transcendent meaning affecting the way they relate to life, illness, and death, but many professional caregivers are unaware of the various spiritual traditions that the dying and their family bring to the end-of-life environment. An individual's core religious beliefs will critically inform his or her experience of the dying process. Significant client questions might include: Should life be prolonged at all cost? Will all of my blood and body parts be retained for burial? Will a priest be on hand for last rites? How long will by body remain untouched after death? If caregivers do not have an understanding of where these questions are coming from, they may have difficulty relating empathetically and with sufficient attention to their charge's very real end-of-life concerns, some of which may, according to the client's belief system, determine whether he or she will go to heaven, have a favorable rebirth, or show proper respect to the ancestors he or she may soon join.

A recent study published in the Archives of Surgery[2] found that 57.4% of the American public believes that divine intervention could save a person even when doctors believe treatment is futile. Religious beliefs like these may not only affect the relationship a client has with his or her caregivers, they may also affect the quality of the dying process. Therefore, it may be helpful for caregivers to educate themselves about the belief systems of their clients as well as to delve more deeply into their own spiritual tradition's beliefs about death in order to better interact and support their clients.

With this in mind, the paper was developed primarily as an example of an educational tool for spiritual and physical caregivers. The paper compares mainstream Tibetan Buddhist beliefs around death and dying with mainstream Protestant beliefs.

Tibetan Buddhism is one of three main Buddhist traditions being practiced in the U.S. by Westerners, and mainstream Protestantism makes up almost twenty percent of the total American population[3]. Both traditions will be looked at based on how they are taught to and practiced by westernized American adults (as opposed to first or second generation immigrants). In most sections, suggestions are offered regarding how these beliefs might impact the client's experience of dying, and how knowledge of the client's tradition might aid the caregiver in providing a deeper level of empathy and service. Within each religion, there exists a wide variety of traditions. Within Protestantism, one could find United Methodists, Evangelical Lutherans, and Episcopalians to name just three of many denominations, each of which could be subdivided further. Within Tibetan Buddhism, there are four main schools being taught in the United States: Nyingma,

[2] Jacobs, "Trauma Death Views."
[3] Pew Research, "The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey."

Kagyu, Gelug, and Sakya, each with its own sub-schools. The information provided in this paper is based on the beliefs and teachings that are considered to be pan-Protestant or pan-Tibetan Buddhist according to most of the Western adherents of these traditions in the United States.

The first two chapters of the paper will look at the beliefs about death from a mix of historical, exegetic, theological, and contextual perspectives in each of the two religions. Though the average adherent often knows little of the theory behind his or her spiritual beliefs, the theology is what shapes the spiritual teacher's instructions to his or her followers. After a brief comparison of the two belief systems in chapter three, chapters four and five explore some of the current teachings about death and dying commonly given by Tibetan Buddhist teachers and Protestant ministers. Chapter six explores some of the spiritual practices the faithful are instructed to perform in order to prepare for death during their lifetime, at the time of death, and even after death, along side an investigation of how family, friends, and/or ministers/teachers can support the dying during these three critical times. Finally, chapter seven briefly suggests how beliefs or practices in each system might be adapted so as to be of service to clients of the other tradition. In this way, caregivers of one religion may be able to take practices which form the cornerstones of their own spiritual support system, and adapt them to be of benefit to those in other traditions, as long as proselytizing is not a factor. Though understanding Protestantism, Tibetan Buddhism, or other spiritual traditions practiced by clients may not significantly change end-of-life care, a brief introduction may cause caregivers to investigate their own beliefs more deeply and allow them a glimpse into the traditions that inform their clients' attitudes toward the meaning of life and death.

Chapter One: Tibetan Buddhist Beliefs about Death

Of all footprints, that of the elephant is
supreme. Of all mindfulness meditations,
that on death is supreme.[4]

1.1 Brief Introduction to Impermanence, the Four Noble Truths, the Three Poisons, and Buddha Nature.

In Buddhism, death is not an enemy or something to dread or be afraid of; rather, it is a natural part of the life cycle leading once again to birth, or in some cases to liberation from cyclic existence. The acceptance of death is also an acceptance of the life process which is impermanent and ever-changing, one of the three marks of existence mentioned in more detail later. One can just look around to see that everything changes: seasons, governments, mountains, thoughts, bodies, health. In Buddhism, to deny the inevitability of change, including one's death, would mean that one is living in a state of attachment to life, aversion to death, and ignorance of the way things are – what Buddhism calls the three poisons (attachment/desire, aversion/hatred, ignorance/delusion). While the average person in the West might claim that these are not poisons, but natural reactions toward the threat of loss of self, in Buddhism, these poisons are the root of all dissatisfaction and suffering. By ridding oneself of the poisons, liberation is attained.

[4] In the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*.

Before going further, some definitions of terms will be attempted, but in all religions, discussion of the ultimate nature of reality is said to be beyond the ken of human concepts and language. The historical Buddha's teachings began with the Four Noble Truths which are the cornerstone of virtually all Buddhist traditions. The first is the truth that life is bound up in dissatisfaction and suffering; the second is the truth that dissatisfaction comes from craving and attachment, which could be expanded to include all three poisons. But the third truth is that there is a path out of suffering, and the fourth elaborates on that path. In Tibetan Buddhism the cause of dissatisfaction or suffering is not knowing the true nature of things due to the three poisons. The path out of suffering is the one leading to enlightenment/liberation/Buddhahood. But what do the terms enlightenment, liberation, Buddhahood, "seeing things as they really are", and awakening mean? For that matter, what do terms like True Nature, Buddha Nature, Nirvana and Suchness mean? Though what these terms point to is said to be beyond ordinary concepts and definitions, teachers and scholars, over two millennia, have used copious words to try to define these terms. As with everything else, the definitions vary somewhat from tradition to tradition. But for this paper, True Nature, Buddha Nature, Ultimate Truth, Absolute Truth, Buddhahood and any other terms alluding to the ultimate state of being refer to that which is said to be unborn and undying, ultimate reality, the fundamental nature of unconditioned "Mind" which is free of attachment, aversion, and delusion. Terms such as enlightenment and liberation refer to the coming into awareness of ones' True Nature which one is never truly separate from, just ignorant of. It must be noted, however, that expressions like "unborn and undying", "Mind", and "True Nature, which one is never separate from" are attempts to use language to describe that which is said to

be beyond description; they do not signify anything that might be considered permanent like a soul or God. Additionally, these attempts at definitions refer to beliefs in Tibetan Buddhism; other Buddhist traditions might use different terminology depending on the philosophy of a particular school.

But what do impermanence, the Four Noble Truths, and True Nature have to do with death and dying? Reflecting on death can be a constant reminder of impermanence; thus, knowing that everything changes, can make it easer to let go of worldly attachments (back to the three poisons) and focus on the path to full awareness of one's own Buddha Nature for the sake of all sentient beings. Tibetan Buddhism caries on the Mahayana tradition of the bodhisattva, a being who, out of compassion, either achieves enlightenment or forgoes full enlightenment (depending on the tradition), and vows to keep being reborn in order to help shepherd all other sentient beings toward enlightenment, but in many Tibetan Buddhist traditions, vowing to attain full Buddhahood is seen as the ultimate vehicle for helping all beings end suffering and cyclic existence. According to tradition, those who have practiced with deep awareness of impermanence and death may, in rare cases, become enlightened during this lifetime or during a period shortly after death.

But for the majority of people who will not be liberated in this lifetime, practices preparing them for death allow them to live full, happy, compassionate lives and generate the virtue and good karma (action) so that if they have not attained enlightenment, they can at the very least, be reborn as a human once more to work towards liberation for the sake of all beings. It is said that the odds of being born a human being (as apposed to an

insect for example) with the faculties and opportunities to understand the Buddhist teachings, are the same as the odds that a blind sea turtle, who comes to the surface for air once every hundred years, would surface in the center of an ox yoke which has been floating freely in the vastness of the ocean. For some Buddhists, this analogy alone is incentive enough to practice in this life time in order to have a fortuitous rebirth after death.

Since the time of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, Buddhism has focused on the importance of reflecting on death. Death was one of the realizations that shocked the prince, who was to become the historical Buddha, into understanding the total futility of worldly concerns involving desire, aversion, and indifference. The Buddha even used his own death as a lesson to his followers to wake up to the truth that *everything*, including the human life of the one known as the Buddha, is impermanent, and death is an inescapable fact of life. Even today, in the United States, where the culture is very squeamish about death, it is uncommon to attend a Tibetan Buddhist teaching and not hear the teacher turn the students' attention to meditations on impermanence and death in order to remind students of the truth of the transitory nature of life and the need to retrain their thinking about life, death, and True Nature while there is still time.

In Tibetan Buddhism, there is nothing inherently wrong with having happiness, spouses, homes, health spas, etc. The problems arise, as mentioned before, when craving, aversion, and delusion come into play. Until the time one if freed from these "poisons" and attains full liberation from cyclic existence, death will continue to lead into rebirth, which again will lead to dying and death. Shakyamuni Buddha did not teach a creation

story, but according to Buddhism, dissatisfaction and cyclic existence have existed since "beginningless" time, and will continue until all sentient beings have become liberated from this impermanent, illusory existence. Though birth and death are illusions in the ultimate sense, we humans, seeing only the relative world, are generally very attached to existence; however, in Buddhism, each new life and death, though subject to the first two noble truths, is an opportunity to become closer to knowing one's inherent Buddha Nature.

1.1.1 The End of Life Client

Some end-of-life caretakers may feel concern that a Buddhist client has not come to terms with the reality of death because she seems unusually relaxed and accepting of the situation, but it may be that through long practice during her life, the client, though perhaps sad at the thought of leaving behind grieving family and friends, accepts that life, as well as death, is impermanent. The client may rest in the belief that through practice during this life, the compassionate lessons from her teacher, and instructions on the post-dying process, she will be reborn into another precious human life in order to continue practicing the Dharma (Buddhist teachings). If however, a Buddhist client is grieving his impending death, it might not be considered a skillful time to remind him that he should remember that life and death are impermanent and illusory; instead, in addition to compassionate listening, the caregiver may talk with the client about what Buddhist teachings he has practiced and ask how his experiences with the teachings might best support him through this transition.

But before specific life/death preparation practices are described, more information is needed regarding Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and how it relates to death.

1.2 Non-Self and Karma

As mentioned before, Buddhist teachings say that everything is impermanent including oneself. Practitioners are taught to realize that, in addition to what we conventionally call death, a form of death occurs in each moment as what we think of as "I" arises and dissolves. Buddhist teacher and scholar, Dzogchen Ponlop explains, "Within this flux, we can clearly see the process of death; the dissolving of fleeting thoughts, the fading of vibrant emotions, the quick alternation of our perceptions – a sound, a touch is there and then gone."[5] But with each next moment we are "reborn" with new thoughts, emotions, and experiences which will also shift, and fade. But despite having an intellectual understanding of not having a permanent self, we still have the experience of having had the same body for years as well as the same memories, so what is the relative self, and when Buddhism talks about rebirth, what is reborn?

In Buddhism, the "self" is not a single, solid entity, but is made up of a collection of parts called the five aggregates or five *skandhas*: form, sensation/feelings, perception/cognition, mental formation/volition, and consciousness. The first aggregate, form, relates to the concept of body and refers to all matter, which in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is made up of five elements: earth, fire, water, air, space. The other four aggregates relate to the concept of mind. Sensation/feelings refer to the sensing of an object as positive, negative, or neutral (the three poisons). At this point, a sense of duality

[5] Dzogchen Ponlop, *Mind Beyond Death,* 4.

begins. Perception/cognition refers to the recognition and naming of the object or sensation. Mental formations/volition is the aggregate connected to thinking about and having an opinion or story line about the object or sensation. This is the point where karma (positive or negative) begins to accumulate. The fifth aggregate, consciousness, then refers to the base of experience and the states of mind.[6]

At death the aggregates making up a sense of self dissolve, but the karma generated remains, unless one has become enlightened. At rebirth, the five aggregates once again come together, along with the previous karma, often known as the karmic mind-stream or karmic consciousness, to form what is then misapprehended once again as a solid, separate self. But in Buddhism, there is no independent "thing", no self, no soul to be reborn, resurrected, or reincarnated in another body. Lama Yeshe, a Tibetan Buddhist teacher and author, explains this concept in the following way:

> Some religions, like Hinduism or Christianity, talk of an eternal soul, but that's a misconception. They have no understanding of the characteristic nature of the soul. Impermanent means changing every moment. How could there be a permanent, never-changing soul? It's impossible. If you accept the existence of the permanent soul, you have to accept the existence of a permanent human being. It's impossible for there to be a permanent human being; where is that person?[7]

So what continues if there is no self or soul that is reborn? It is karmic causes and effects that stream from one life to the next. Nothing has a totally independent origin.

[6] Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World*, 78.
[7] Yeshe, "The Moment of Death."

Everything comes into existence based on a series of codependent causes and effects which were themselves based on prior codependent causes. According to Buddhism, karmic codependent causes began with ignorance of the ultimate nature of everything, and are perpetuated from life to life because of ignorance. The passing of the karmic-consciousness from one life to the next is not the reincarnation of a soul, but is said to be more like a flame passed from one candle to the next (the elements making up the "candle" are the five aggregates which have come together with the flame of karmic consciousness). So even though many writings, including this one, use the term, "rebirth", from the Tibetan Buddhist point of view, there is no real "self" being reborn, as there was no real self that died. But the main purpose of Buddhist practice is not to focus on rebirth as much as to recognize one's True Nature and thus extinguish the flame of karmic consciousness.

But what is karma and how is it generated? In the West, karma is often associated with fate, determinism, or punishment, but karma refers to the natural law of cause and effect,[8] and consists of both good and bad karma. It begins when the sense of a self, separate from an "other", develops as the aggregates come together. Karma is created through the three poisons of craving, aversion, and delusion, and "everything that appears in life results from karma created by the way the mind perceives and interacts with mental objects – concepts, feelings, sensations, and all phenomena that appear in our mental awareness."[9]

[8] Thondup, *Peaceful Death, Joyful Rebirth*, 29.
[9] Thondup, *Peaceful Death, Joyful Rebirth*, 30.

Enlightenment is a cessation of grasping, aversion, and ignorance and thus of karmic cause and effect. Even if the karmic mind stream that continues from life to life is perceived as a lasting soul because it might be said to have existed for hundreds of thousands of years, at the time of enlightenment, the karmic mind stream ceases to exist as does cyclic existence (In the case of a Buddha or bodhisattva returning to help other beings, existence in the relative world is a choice[10], and no karma is accrued).

To put it in more human – and humane sounding - terms, teacher and author, Sogyal Rinpoche, explains,

> Realization of the nature of mind, which you could call our innermost essence, that truth which we all search for, is the key to understanding life and death. For what happens at the moment of death is that the ordinary mind and its delusions die, and in that gap, the boundless sky-like nature of our mind is uncovered. This essential nature of mind is the background to the whole of life and death, like the sky, which folds the whole universe in its embrace.[11]

1.2.1 The End of Life Client

What all of this means for the Buddhist practitioner is that the self is not self-existing, and there is no permanent, eternal soul. However, caregivers may encounter some Asian Buddhists who do refer to a soul, especially those who practice a type of Buddhism called Pure Land, and some Western Buddhists may talk about having a soul

[10] Lethcoe, "The Bodhisattva Ideal in the Asta," 265.
[11] Sogyal, *The Tibetan Book of Living*, 12.

due to their original theistic upbringing. In these cases, of course, there is no need to question their Buddhist philosophy, especially if the idea of a soul provides a sense of peace and continuity which helps them during their end-of-life transition.

Most Western Tibetan Buddhists who adhere more to doctrine *will* most likely be comfortable with the concept of non-self within the context of the Middle Way, a philosophy taught by the historical Buddha, which teaches that beliefs which are eternalistic or nihilistic are extremes, and thus wrongly held views.[12]. However, caregivers may also encounter Western Buddhists who have eschewed one of the prophetic religions for Buddhism, but having learned that there is no eternal soul or self in Buddhism, may express feelings of confusion, doubt, and fear especially near the end of their life, leading to a sense of nihilism despite the Middle Way teachings. Once again, for the caregiver, listening to the client talk through her fears may be the most helpful course to take, but if the client remains stuck in fear and doubt, ask her about what she has been taught regarding death and dying in her tradition, what practices have sustained her through difficult times in the past, and perhaps even what things she has done in her life that have generated good karma, potentially leading to a positive rebirth - if she believes in rebirth, which some Western Buddhist do not. For some clients, focusing on the next life may be helpful (even if technically Buddhism teaches that it is not the same "self" will which will be "reborn"), and talking about the positive aspects of the client's current life in a "life review" can not only be validating for a client, but also give her a feeling that her story will some how remain after she is gone. Though concepts like these do not reflect the Buddhist ideas of no-self and impermanence, at the end of a client's

[12] Walpola, *What the Buddha Taught,* 66.

life, supporting her current paradigm, especially if it is helpful to her, is generally considered more respectful than trying to force her into a more dogmatic way of thinking.

For other clients, the ideas of no-self, impermanence and karma can feel vary freeing. A client may feel that devoted practice and positive actions in the world have generated much positive karma so that the "self" in the next life will be even closer to enlightenment and will be even better able to help suffering beings. An understanding of no fixed, eternal self may also allow the client to relax – there is nothing more to cling to or avoid. During the last stages of life, because of beliefs in karma, the client may also intensify her practice, if that is physically and mentally possible, in order to relax the grip of the three poisons even further, leading to the possibility of enlightenment during the post-death process – this will be discussed in the following section.

But caretakers should not be surprised if Buddhists, like other clients, go through cycles of acceptance and fear, pain and relaxation, grasping and aversion as they knowingly approach death. However, knowledge of clients' beliefs and practices will be of on-going benefit while supporting them through the process of dying.

1.3 Bardos and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

Traditionally one way to support a Tibetan practitioner through the death process has been to read texts on dying to the dying. These texts would often have been read or at least heard by the dying person during his or her lifetime as part of the training in death during life. This training is meant to remind people both of the preciousness of life and of how practicing during life will make for a death leading to enlightenment, or at least to an

auspicious rebirth where practices in letting go of attachments, aversions, and delusions could continue. According to Tibetologist, Glenn Mullin, there are thousands of texts in Tibetan on the subject of death, all of which can generally can be divided among seven categories including: instruction for death meditation during life, inspirational poetry, accounts of the deaths of great practitioners, divination methods for prophesying untimely death, longevity practice, consciousness transference practice instructions, and texts for the benefit of the deceased person.[13]

The text commonly known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (*Bardo Thötröl* in Tibetan, which translates as *Liberation through Hearing*), would fall into the final category, although it is usually read or heard by the deceased during his lifetime so that he will know what to expect during the death transition. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is said to have been written in the eighth century by Padmasambhava, often called the second Buddha by followers of the Nyingma School (there are four main extant schools of Buddhism; teachings from all of them are available in the United States). But the texts making up this "book" were not "discovered" until the early fourteenth century.[14]

The Tibetan Book of the Dead, used by all schools, but mostly practiced by Nyingma practitioners, was first introduced to the United States in the 1950's, thus it is known by most Western Tibetan Buddhists. This set of texts seems to describe the most detailed death process of any of the extant religions, but the Tibetan Buddhist teachings, as mentioned before, are not simply used to explain a set of processes. Knowing the stages of death and what to expect between death and rebirth prepares practitioners to use

[13] Mullin, *Living in the Face of Death*, 38-39.
[14] Neumaier-Dargyay, "Buddhism," 96.

the process of death and rebirth as a means of realizing their True Nature and thus becoming liberated from dissatisfaction and suffering so that they can help all other beings end their cyclic existences. As Tibetan Buddhist scholar, Francesca Fremantle, says, all of the teachings and practices are "concerned with these two basic principles: understanding the nature of suffering and becoming free from it. This is the message of *Liberation Through Hearing* [*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*], just as it is of all Buddhist scriptures."[15] Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Fremantle's spiritual teacher and founder of the international Shambhala Organization, adds, "The book is not based on death as such, but on a completely different concept of death. It is a 'Book of Space'. Space contains birth and death; space creates the environment in which to behave, breathe, and act; it is the fundamental environment which provides the inspiration for this book."[16]

"Space" also contains the concept of *bardos*. In Tibetan Buddhism there is the concept that all of life (and death) consists of bardos. The term means gaps or intermediate states; each moment to moment is a bardo.[17] Generally, however, Tibetan Buddhist teachers talk of six (or four) main bardos. The first three are often mentioned together: birth to death, sleep to dream, self to nothingness. This set comprises the "Natural Bardo of This Life". In a sense, this is the most important bardo, because it is during the interval of life that one can practice the Buddhist teachings of liberation and can prepare for the process of death and rebirth. Next is the period before death called the "Painful Bardo of Dying." Though pain at death may be physical, the pain referred to in

[15] Fremantle, *Luminous Emptiness*, 22.
[16] Fremantle, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 2.
[17] Dzogchen Ponlop. "Are You Ready for Death?" 25.

this bardo is due to attachment to life and fear of death.[18] If one has practiced well and is at peace, this bardo does not have to be painful. The "Painful Bardo of Dying" culminates in the first post-life opportunity to end cyclic existence by realizing True Nature which dawns as life ends. This dawning is called "ground luminosity" or "clear light" An advanced practitioner will recognize his or her Buddha Nature in this moment and be liberated, but for most people, who are still grasping on to old fears and habits, clear light passes like the blink of an eye,[19] and the deceased will find him or herself in the next bardo called "The Luminous Bardo of Dharmata" followed by the "Karmic Bardo of Becoming" leading to rebirth. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* focuses particularly on the last two bardos.

If one has not experienced liberation at the moment of clear light, which arises at the end of the bardo of dying, when the physical body has died and subtle consciousness has dissolved, then another opportunity arrives for the experienced practitioner during the four phases of the bardo of Dharmata – the "nature of reality". At this point, the mind stream of the person has left the physical body and taken on what is called a "mental body". *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* describes this bardo in terms of six psychological states or realms of existence: anger/aversion, desire/grasping, ignorance/delusion, passion, jealousy, and pride. These are known as the six poisons (the three main poisons mentioned earlier, plus three others). These are the primary emotions keeping us from realizing our Buddha Nature. In the bardo of Dharmata, these psychological states manifest as bright, colorful, blinding lights and deafening sounds as well as peaceful and

[18] Dzogchen Ponlop, *Mind Beyond Death*, 121.
[19] Sogyal, *The Tibetan Book of Living*, 261.

wrathful deities (or as other visions depending on one's culture and spiritual tradition).[20] One can be liberated in the bardo of Becoming, but liberation gets ever harder as one is swept around by the wild winds of thoughts and emotions. But *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* not only details the dying and post-death process; it is a commentary about daily life preceding death. The visions of lights and deities and confusion in the bardos are creations of our own mind just like everything we see or think while awake or dreaming in the human realm.[21] This is why practice during life is so vital. If we can not see dreams as illusory during dreaming or life as illusory during life, then we are not likely to see the bardo of Dharmata as illusory either.

Because of delusion, the bardo of Dharmata is also said to pass quickly, and the deceased finds him or herself in the bardo of Becoming, which, according to tradition, usually lasts from seven to forty-nine days culminating in a rebirth. The deceased in this realm often does not know that she is dead and will continue acting out habitual patterns while traveling wherever the mind takes the body, moment to moment. According to Sogyal Rinpoche, author of the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*,

> Our restless, solitary wandering through the bardo world is as frantic as a nightmare, and just as in a dream, we believe we have a physical body and that we really exist. Yet all the experiences of this bardo arise only from our mind, created by our karma and habits returning.[22]

[20] Sogyal, *The Tibetan Book of Living*, 284.
[21] Fremantle, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 4.
[22] Sogyal, *The Tibetan Book of Living*, 290.

However, even at this late stage, there is the possibility of enlightenment if the deceased is finally able to discover his or her True Nature through deep remembrance of the teacher and teachings, but this is often hard enough to do during "life" let alone in death, so most people are reborn. In Buddhism, it is said that there are six realms of rebirth based on the state of karmic consciousness and on which of the six poisons one was most closely aligned to. The animal realm and human realm are just two of the possibilities, but the human realm is considered the most auspicious one because it is the easiest one (in this universe anyway) to become enlightened in.

Throughout *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the dead person is exhorted to wake up and be aware so that he or she may be liberated, or at least have his or her karmic consciousness transmigrate to a fortunate human rebirth, but it is also telling the living to wake up while they can in the natural bardo of living and thus end suffering from impermanence and dissatisfaction in this very moment.

1.3.1 The End of Life Client

Many, if not most, Western Buddhist students who believe in rebirth may find comfort in the idea that their death is not a final ending nor an eternal sentence to a heaven or hell based on one lifetime's efforts. Belief in rebirth may give the client hope that he will have another opportunity to try to get things "right," and he may even be reunited with loved ones, albeit in different bodies, with whom he has karmic connections. Even thought the Buddhist practitioner may know on an intellectual level that there is no solid self or soul that will continue after rebirth, often on an internal level, there is still a belief in continuity – an example of grasping at a self which will hinder

enlightenment, but may make the last days and moments leading to death more relaxed and peaceful. However, if the client has not conducted himself well in life, he may show concern for rebirth in a "lower realm". Rather than negating the client's concerns with platitudes, the caregiver might ask the client what practices he has been taught that he could undertake to generate positive karma. If the client is too ill to focus on practice, he might be able to mentally call on his teacher or practice deity[23] and feel the warmth of loving kindness beaming into him as a form of purification.

Some clients may ask that the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* be read to them while they are still alive so that they can visualize and prepare for the various bardos; in this case, they may also ask that various sections of the book be read aloud to them when they are in their bardo body during the forty-nine days after their death. In many cases, the deceased's body will not be present at all for the post-death readings, unless the client has died at home and remains there for a period of time after death (in the Tibetan tradition the body should not be moved until it is obvious that the most subtle level of consciousness has left the body).

1.4 The Death Process

As stated earlier, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead,* in addition to giving teachings on the path to enlightenment, describes the dying and death process in detail, as do other Tibetan texts. Every person is considered to have three main levels of consciousness[24] which dissolve from gross to most subtle at the time of death:

[23] More information on practice deities in section 4.2.2.
[24] Different teachings list different levels and kinds of consciousness, for example Yogachara lists eight consciousnesses, but for the dying process three broad levels will be discussed.

1. The gross level which corresponds to the body and the five senses.
2. The subtle level which is related to the brain and focuses on the cognition of mental constructs and objects.
3. The subtle-most level of innate, unconditional consciousness - Buddha Mind.[25]

The description, in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead,* of the dissolution processes of the gross level is actually similar to Western clinical descriptions even though the Tibetan process is written in terms of the five elements: earth, water, fire, air, and space.[26] [27] But such a direct correlation would not be surprising since most of it is based on human observation which would be similar across cultures and times. No time frame is given for the different stages since people go through the dying process at different rates.

As death becomes imminent, a client who is still aware, may request a reduction or cessation in any medications that may impede awareness, since the ability to meditate or do other Buddhist practices during the dying process may be important to the client. The client may also want to be as conscious as possible so as to be aware of the stages of dissolution, mentioned below, in order to do certain practices at the precise time, or to recognize clear light. Additionally, in conjunction with the physical comfort measures also mentioned below, in the Tibetan tradition, it is considered important for the client to be at peace, with a calm mind, at the time of death, so that he or she will be more likely to recognize that the visions that arise are just manifestations of the mind - like dreams; thus, the client will either become liberated from cyclic existence or have a favorable rebirth. This is unlikely to happen if the client dies in fear, anger, or remorse.

[25] Kramer, *The Sacred Art of Dying*, 71.
[26] Coberly, *Sacred Passage*, 95-96.
[27] *Mission Hospice Volunteer Training Manual*, Section 9.

Family members may not understand how someone who is dying could be accepting of death and resting peacefully. For some family members, this sort of attitude might imply that the person does not care about the family's needs and grief, or that the person is just giving up without a fight. In some cases, disruptive family members may need to be asked to leave so that a person's last minutes may be spent in peace. Conversely, the client may know he "should" feel at peace and unafraid, but he is stressed either by family members or by the impending unknown. In these cases, chaplains or counselors may want to work with family members so that in the best case they can support their loved one, or, if not, perhaps they could give the loved one a little time to himself. The client may also need to talk with a care provider about his fears. In such a case, ask him about his beliefs and the practices that have brought him comfort in the past. Encourage him to do practices if he is able; otherwise, it might help him to listen to recordings of his teacher or of chants he is familiar with.

1.4.1 Dissolution of the Gross Level and the End of Life Client

As the dying process begins, the five elements, said to make up the aggregate of form (the gross level of consciousness), begin to dissolve into each other. The first element, earth, which is associated with solid body parts, dissolves into the water element. At this point, the body becomes weak and may feel heavy to the client. The client will lose interest in food and water if that has not already occurred. Normal vision begins to dim, and visions, invisible to others, may appear. At this point, the caregivers can focus on comforting the client and supporting those in grief. Next the water element, which is related to the body's fluids (e.g. blood, sweat, tears, urine) and linked to the

second aggregate (feelings/sensations) dissolves into the fire element. The client's bodily fluids begin to dry up; the mouth becomes dry and filmy, sweat may turn into a chill before a fever ensues. At this stage, the mind becomes hazy (if it has not before), and the client may think he or she actually sees a smoky haze. At the same time hearing also begins to diminish, and irritability may increase. For dryness, caregivers can swab the client's mouth with water and put saline drops in the eyes. Otherwise, there is little to do but keep the client comfortable and warm (if chilled) and support the family. Next, the fire element, associated with the aggregate of perception/cognition as well as with the physical metabolism, dissolves into the air element. The warmth of the body fades and digestion fails. The sense of smell diminishes and breathing becomes more difficult. The mind may fluctuate between being aware and disoriented, and concern about day to day family life diminishes. In addition to seeing a smoky haze, sparks of light may appear in the client's field of vision. At this stage, the client's body will no longer be able to modulate body temperature, so additional attention to comfort may be needed; additionally, oxygen may be required to ease breathing. At the next state of gross level dissolution, the air element, related to the aggregate of volition/mental formation as well as to the bodily function of respiration, dissolves into the space element. The "death rattle" may begin at this point, and taste, as well as any remaining senses, totally fails. Visions may arise, but the dying person is no longer aware of what is going on around him or her. Breathing becomes more difficult and then stops. This is the end of the gross level of consciousness.

During this period, assure the family and friends that the death rattle is normal and is not uncomfortable for their loved one. Ideally, before the client has died, she

would have told family members and caregivers which post-death traditions she wanted family and caregivers to follow if possible. The following are traditional Tibetan procedures a family might practice[28]:

- Leave the body untouched for at least several hours if not days to make sure that the subtle-most consciousness has dissolved so as not to disturb the practitioner's meditative state, if she is in one, thus causing her to miss opportunities for enlightenment. However, leaving the body untouched may be very difficult to do unless the person died at home. It may help alleviate any fear or guilt around moving the body to know that most people's most subtle consciousness leaves the body rather quickly, unless they are very advanced practitioners, and if they are advanced practitioners, they should still be able to maintain their meditative state, throughout disruptions.
- Along with the first point, it is also traditionally considered inadvisable to touch the person right after death because that may lead the mind to the wrong "doors" culminating in a less than auspicious birth. If the body needs to be touched, or the family wants to give their final hugs, they should do so as close to the top of the head as possible which is considered a gate to higher rebirth. Again, a Western client may not have developed a belief in these traditions.
- Another tradition that may be difficult for some family members is that, to the best of their abilities, family and friends should not cry, speak loudly, or remark negatively about the deceased, because according to tradition, it is believed that after death, the deceased's sense of hearing is magnified, but the person will not

[28] Zopa, *Three Articles on How to Help the Dying*, 28.

know that he or she is dead and may be emotionally affected by hearing loved ones' tears and grief. If the deceased, in his or her bardo body, becomes more agitated than he or she would normally be, that could lead the person into a less auspicious rebirth.

- If the deceased was close to his or her teacher, call the teacher so that she or he can do practices for the deceased either in person or from a distance.
- Following the person's death, the family, friends, and perhaps other caregivers may do practices for the deceased according to the deceased's wishes, and or according to each person's traditions. Just as crying and negative speech could be considered detrimental to the after-death experience, prayers and practices are encouraged since the deceased may hear them and be reminded of the teachings and instructions for recognizing True Nature or at least a positive rebirth.

1.4.2 Subtle and Subtle-Most Levels of Dissolution and the End of Life Client

While Western medicine would view the person as dead after the body ceases to function, in the Tibetan tradition, the subtle levels of consciousness have not yet left the body, so it is not considered completely dead. However, in most people, the next stages leading to final dissolution do not take long. The various levels of subtle mind dissolve into each other. At this time signs arrive which are significant to spiritual practices such as Phowa (also known as transference of consciousness. This and other practices will be described in a later section). Finally, one awakens, in the subtle-most level of consciousness, to the clear light state which is the "awakening of the most subtle

consciousness to the essential body of Buddha which is beyond form."[29] If one recognizes the clear light, he or she can be liberated in that moment. If not, next comes the bardo of Dharmata. For most beings, these two opportunities for liberation happen in a flash. A great yogi may be able to remain in a meditative state for three days after physical death before the consciousness exits the body. Most people, however, fall into a swoon for about three days and then become a "bardo body" also known as a "mental body".

> Most bardo bodies exist in a state of confusion and may not realize that they have experienced death. According to *The [Tibetan] Book of the Dead*, upon awakening, the feeling is similar to awakening from sleep. Confusion becomes fear in the face of visions, phantasms, realities perceived as dreams, dreams as realities. Landslides, fires, hurricanes, shades, and apparitions terrify the bardo body (or consciousness) as long as it is still attached to life.[30]

The bardo of Becoming generally lasts seven to forty-nine days; by that time, if one's true nature has not been recognized, a new body has to be taken. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* gives advice for recognizing a womb that will lead to a good "rebirth". But throughout the forty-nine days, a teacher or person close to the deceased could read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to remind the bardo body of its teacher and the teachings so that it realizes that everything it sees and hears is a product of the mind. "Wake up! Wake up!" is the ultimate message of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

[29] Kramer, *The Sacred Art of Dying*, 72.
[30] Kramer, *The Sacred Art of Dying*, 72.

So once again, death meditation is not about spending one's life focused on morbid thoughts of death, nor does Tibetan Buddhism have a soteriological belief in the denial of one's current life because it is just a way station or incubator until the time of ultimate salvation. In Tibetan Buddhism, with practices to eliminate ignorance, grasping, and aversion, one could see the True Nature of everything in one's current lifetime not in some other realm or incarnation. Meditations and teachings on death help reduce the "three poisons" and remind practitioners that this life is short, so if their Buddha Nature is to be realized before death, they have to practice like "their hair is on fire" as one saying goes. But even if, due to delusion, liberation is not attained, there are more opportunities during the transitions from one life to the next, as well as in the next life. There is no eternity in heaven or hell, all bardos are impermanent, and opportunities for realization continually arise. For many practitioners, this is a hopeful belief system, for while death may still not be easy, especially having to say goodbye to loved ones, there is the belief that there will be another chance in the next life to try once again to attain full liberation.[31]

1.5 Summary

"In Buddhism, the acceptance of death influences not only the experience of dying but the experience of living. The Buddhist view holds life and death to be a continuum."[32] Tibetan Buddhism is unique in that it has developed practices to prepare one for the death process in order to enhance the life process and pave the way for uncovering one's Buddha Nature. Its teachings also contain detailed descriptions of the

[31] Even though, technically it will not be that particular person or soul being reborn.
[32] Halifax, "The Great Matter of Life and Death," 21.

dying process, which, at least to a degree, reflect current medical observations. The teachings also remind practitioners that that if prepared, they can become liberated during the intermediate stage between death and rebirth or at least control which realm they will be reborn into. Sogyal Rinpoche summarizes the Tibetan view that one needs to prepare for death by saying,

> The teachings make it clear that if all we know of mind is that aspect of mind that dissolves when we die, we will be left with no idea of what continues - no knowledge of the new dimension of the deeper reality of the nature of mind. So it is vital for us all to familiarize ourselves with the nature of mind while we are still alive. Only then will we be prepared when it reveals itself spontaneously and powerfully at the moment of death; be able to recognize it 'as naturally,' the teachings say, 'as a child running into its mother's lap'; and by remaining in that state, finally be liberated.[33]

[33] Sogyal, *The Tibetan Book of Living*, 12.

Chapter Two: Protestant Beliefs about Death

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this? (John 11:25-26)

2.1 Introduction

Unlike most Buddhists, most Protestants "take seriously the reality of temporal, historical existence as the embodiment of personal being. [They] view the human self as created and subject to the conditions of mortal existence [and] seek continuity of personal existence through a relationship to God in both life and death."[34] But the Protestant views about death itself have changed significantly during the transition into modernity and Western individualism. Rites of preparation for death, which comforted the dying with community and ritual and taught that death was a "membrane" linking two worlds, have been stripped away without being replaced by other similar traditions.[35]

Death is not a focus of modern Protestantism. Dying is considered a part of life which cannot be separated from the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Theologian Ray Anderson says that in

[34] Anderson, *Theology, Death, and Dying*, 9.
[35] Paxton, "Christian Death Rites."

> …the actual experience of physical death, one is freed from the power of death to destroy our life. This is held to be true because it is a consequence of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is what Christians believe to be the answer to death, and in holding this belief, they can feel set free from the power of death as a final event of meaninglessness and despair.[36]

But as will be shown in this section of the paper, there is no single theology or mythology that all Protestants agree upon, except perhaps that death is the ultimate mystery.

2.2 Protestantism as an Historical Religion

Christianity is a prophetic, historical religion; Jesus Christ is the prophet, and liberation is looked for within history. History tells believers about God's promise of salvation, and his[37] plan for human beings - and thus for each person's purpose in life. It also shows various people's relationship to God over time, which may inform future relationships with Him.[38] In the case of death, it is the historical life and death of Jesus Christ that holds all of the meaning of that event, for God bound the life, death, and after-life to the life story of His own son. This act declared that there was meaning to each individual person's death unlike the main teachings of Judaism at that time in which an individual's relationship with God occurred only during his or her lifetime. Through the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christians understand that history and

[36]Anderson, *Theology, Death, and Dying*, 4.
[37] In this paper the masculine pronouns will be used for God since that is the standard practice in mainstream Protestant traditions.
[38] Haught, *What Is Religion?* 63.

life continue beyond physical death because Christ conquered any power death had to destroy life.

2.2.1 The End of Life Client

While Protestants and Catholics share much of Christianity's history, one of the many ways that they differ is in practices around the time of death. Protestants may want to celebrate Holy Communion in their last days or moments, but there are no formal, doctrinal practices such as confession, anointings, and last rites. The lack of traditional ritual and lack of the old ways of understanding the communal nature of birth and death may be stressful for some Protestants, especially after decades of self-help proponents emphasizing the need for closure after any transition large or small. If this is the case, the caregivers could reference any of the numerous books on ritual to develop a personalized end of life ceremony for the client and his or her family and friends. In addition, the client might find that writing goodbye letters, giving valued objects away, or other preparatory activities might be helpful bridges to accepting the idea of a transition. If the client is having strong fears or anxiety around death, the caregivers might ask questions and listen for the core reasons for the distress and then help the clients address them, but it may also be fruitful to ask clients what aspects of their religious beliefs have sustained them through difficult times before. Practicing familiar songs, prayers, or contemplations might be very reassuring. However, many Protestants, though grieving over the impending separation of their loved ones, may take great comfort in knowing that God gave His only son to assure that the kingdom of heaven and eternal life are open to all who are given and accept God's grace.

2.3 Death and Sin

According to the apostle Paul, in the *New Testament* of the Christian holy book, the *Bible*, death was not part of God's original plan. In both Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes that death began through Adam's sin and that, for each individual, down through the ages, death is the punishment for original sin. If one were to believe that one's own death was God's punishment, that could coat beliefs about death with deep pain, fear and bitterness – pain and fear due to God's wrathful reaction to and punishment for original sin, and perhaps bitterness at having to experience death for something that is beyond one's control. But for most believing Christians, hope is the second chapter in the story. According to theologian, Nicolas Warner,

> Sin is the cause of death, and death is the punishment for sin. Death was introduced to the human race by Adam just as life was re-introduced to the human race by Christ who is the first fruits of those who are made alive, but he is a pledge of life for all who will follow him.[39]

However, since death was not a part of God's original design, death is still generally portrayed as an enemy, but one which will eventually be destroyed. In Romans 5:19-21, the apostle Paul says,

> For as by one man's disobedience [Adam's], many were made sinners, so also by one Man's [Jesus] righteous act, the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life….where sin abounded, grace abounded

[39] Warner, "Pastoral Counseling of Families," 26.

much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Though there are alternative theories in the Christian world,[40] the view that death was not part of God's plan and thus is evil seems to be the most predominant in the Protestant world. But regardless of whether death was the result of Adam's sin or a natural part of creation, 1 Corinthians 15:22 states, "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive." There was sin and death, but through Jesus Christ, death can be overcome.

2.3.1 The End of Life Client

However, with the exception of a few quotations like those already mentioned, there seems to be very little in the *Bible*, or in modern theological writing, about death itself: its cause, meaning, cessation, and ways to approach it. Most of the focus in modern Christianity is on the resurrection of Christ. This lack of attention paid to death may end up causing confusion, fear, anxiety, and feelings of being ill-prepared for some who have not spent much time thinking about their death. In the United States, death is often considered a taboo topic, as if talking about death will "jinx" those taking part in the conversation. If the dying client has no one to talk to about fears around death, and knows little about what his tradition says about death, then additional anxiety, depression and feelings of loneliness could ensue. Knowing some of the theology just mentioned may allow caregivers to help Protestant clients work through any questions they might have about the evils, sinfulness, and seeming unfairness of death. If, in addition to just having

[40] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 67.

a sympathetic listener, a client were to know that for most of Christianity, death was considered a normal part of life, and if he were encouraged to reflect on how death allows us to live a deeper, more meaningful life than we ever could if this life were eternal, that might allow space for discussions around the beliefs that Jesus also experienced a human life as well as a human death, and because Jesus was able to share that with the rest of humanity, the rest of humanity has the opportunity to share eternity with Jesus, but that is not possible without the transition through death. It may be that for the vast majority of the dying, just having the opportunity to talk about fears may be sufficient, but it might also be comforting for them to know that they are talking with someone who is at least somewhat conversant in what their tradition says about death.

2.4 Resurrection

For many, however, what their tradition says about life after death is much more important than what it says about death itself. The *New Testament* of the *Bible* tells how the Son of God, who is also an aspect of God Himself, died on the cross for the sins of humankind and arose three days later as a promise of salvation for those who believe in and receive the grace of God. Thus the apostle Paul is famous for rhetorically asking, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting?"[41] Jesus, Himself, is said to have summarized the resurrection by saying, in relation to his resurrection of Lazarus, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live."[42] This is the hope of Christians as they stare into the face of their own impending death.

[41] 1 Corinthians 15:54-55
[42] John 11:25-26

Though very little is actually said about the resurrection in the *Bible*, the risen Christ is what the Protestant faith is founded upon, thus there has been little focus on teachings about death in this tradition since the Middle Ages; the exception, perhaps, being around the time of Good Friday each year when Christian ministers retell the story of Jesus' crucifixion and death which lead up to the Easter Sunday events celebrating Christ's resurrection.

2.4.1 The End of Life Client

The resurrection and promise of eternal life are the crux of Christian teaching; however, rebirth into heaven is not automatic. It is based on the grace of God and one's ability to surrender to that grace. Thus some clients may still harbor fears that rather than eternity in heaven with God, they may be sentenced forever to hell. Unlike in the Catholic tradition, Protestants do not have the concept of purgatory, where those who are not evil enough for hell, yet not good enough for heaven, reside until all of their sins have been purified. The Protestant either/or belief could cause the dying and their family great anxiety. It may help to call in a minister from their tradition who is trained to council believers in the specific theology of that tradition, since some churches focus mostly on the goodness of God's grace rather than the more wrathful aspects of God, and vice versa. Additionally, various congregations may have their own ceremonies and traditions which might bring comfort to the dying. But in general, if a client is concerned about his ability to enter heaven, even though many traditions focus on God's grace rather than human action, it may relieve some of the client's anxiety to pray to God for forgiveness,

to make a confession,[43] or to make amends to people through letters, phone calls, or face to face. Knowing that these activities are understood and supported by the caregivers may help to bring a sense of peace to the dying.

2.5 The Intermediate State

The *Bible*, the basis for most Christian belief, as mentioned earlier, says little about death or resurrection, so it may come as no surprise that it also says nothing about the dying process and very little about what happens after death. The little that is written in the *Bible* has been interpreted in very contradictory manners by a wide variety of theologians through the ages. There are quotations in the *New Testament* suggesting that redemption can only be had in the resurrection of the dead, but it is not clear what is being resurrected or how. What happens to a person between death and resurrection? What happens to the body? Is the soul disembodied? Does the person go straight to heaven or hell or does the soul "sleep" somehow until the resurrection. Does the resurrection happen immediately or during the second coming of Christ?

The Bishop of Edinburgh says that according to the Biblical books: 1 Corinthians, John, and Mark, one could argue that the dead sleep 'in the Lord' until God summons them on judgment day.[44] Anderson's research concludes that some theologians believe that the soul sleeps during the intermediate state, and of those, many also believe that the evildoers are annihilated at this time. Those who are saved are given a resurrection body during final judgment. He has found that yet other Christians believe that everyone sleeps

[43] Catholic style confessions are not part of the Protestant tradition, but often people, regardless of spiritual tradition, feel comforted and released by making a confession to another human being.
[44] Holloway, *Anger, Sex, Doubt and Death*, 98.

during the period between death and resurrection and then all are raised either to ascend to heaven or descend to the tortures of hell.[45] However, Martin Luther, the founder of Lutheranism, believed that between death and resurrection, the soul does not sleep. It is awake and converses with God and the angels. Other theologians believe that the soul goes straight to heaven or hell with no intermediate state.[46] And still others point to a quotation attributed to Jesus in John 21:22-23 for yet another possibility, "If I will that he remain [on earth] until I come, what is that to you?

But regardless of what happens, much of what is written seems to describe the intermediate state, if there is one, in terms of one's relationship to God outside of linear time, and thus outside of conventional understanding. The desire to understand this period is perhaps a fruitless one, since the apostle Paul apparently did not consider the in-between time a question to expound on.

2.5.1 The End of Life Client

Thus for clients who want to know what happens right after death, little can be said outside of a clinical description of a decomposing body. But Protestants are often taught to trust in the mystery of God and the love of Christ, so reminding them of these beliefs may be enough to comfort the client; if not, a sympathetic ear may suffice as the client tries to work out his or her own beliefs on the matter.

[45] Anderson, *Theology, Death, and Dying*, 117.
[46] Anderson, *Theology, Death, and Dying*, 118.

2.6 Resurrection Body

Not only is the *Bible* unclear about the intermediate state between death and resurrection, it is also not clear about what survives or how - only that death is not the end. Various theologians have suggested the following possibilities: a resurrection body occurs at the moment of death; the resurrection of the body does not occur at the moment of death; the worldly body becomes raised; a body "not made with hands" is given to the dead; people are disembodied in the intermediate state and a body does not exist until resurrection; people receive a temporary spiritual body until the resurrection, at which time they will receive a resurrection body; people are asleep, unconscious though near Christ; people are disembodied spirits awaiting the arrival of a spiritual body at the time of resurrection, or the soul, not the body, goes directly to heaven (or hell).[47]

Bodily resurrection was already prevalent in Israel at the time of Jesus. Ancient Judaism had no soul/body divide, but the early Greek Christians believed in a soul separate from the body. Despite millennia of debate, this issue has never been fully reconciled in Christianity, and, as mentioned earlier, issues around death and the happenings after death were never taken far in the teachings. For those who believe that what continues after death is an immortal soul, there is not a problem of an intermediate state or body – the soul continues, without interruption, from death into an eternal, disembodied realm. However Paul, in 1 Corinthians, does speak of a bodily resurrection of some kind – "So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption…It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body,"[48] but

[47] Warner, "Pastoral Counseling of Families," 31.
[48] I Corinthians 15:42-44.

when the chapter is looked at as a whole, Paul's true meaning in his teaching about the resurrection body remains ambiguous. It seems that his focus was more on reassuring believers that there will be a bodily resurrection than on explaining the specifics. Theologian Nicholas Warner speaks for the American Protestants whose beliefs follow more from the ancient Jewish teachings when he says, "The underlying doctrine of the wholeness of man is an essential one for the understanding of a Christian response to death, either one's own death, or the death of a family member."[49] Indeed, there seems to be much concern in the literature about the continuation of the whole person through death, but this seems mainly connected to the preservation of a personal identity which is generally taken as inseparable from the body. However, at the same time, starting from childhood, Protestant children are often told that the soul of a departed loved one is in heaven with Jesus, and one of the most common Protestant bedtime prayers for children contains the line, "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

The question of a resurrection body is a thorny one for theologians; however, rather than trying to figure out the details of God's plan, the main focus of day-to-day ministers and parishioners has generally been to set aside that which is mystery and focus instead on faith in the promise and goodness of God regardless of what happens after the moment of death.

2.6.1 The End of Life Client

That faith may be enough for most Protestant clients; however, others may express real concerns about how God will be able to raise them if they have been

[49] Warner, "Pastoral Counseling of Families," 19.

cremated and have no body or whether they will spend all eternity with missing limbs or a disfigured face, or limitations due to a damaged brain. Some may wonder what happens if the brain is dead but the body is kept alive for organ donation – where does the soul reside? Some Protestant traditions do have their own teachings on this, for example, Lutherans, in general, believe in a bodily resurrection, but what that actually means is still open to debate. It may help to talk with the client about the goodness, love, and wisdom of God (if this is how they view God), and ask if they would be able to trust that whatever God's design, it is most likely a loving one. And if God was powerful enough to create the universe, he is most likely capable of finding any of his creations whether cremated, lost at sea, or dismembered in a factory accident. It might also be suggested that concerned clients pray to God for guidance and trust. Additionally, the passages in I Corinthians which talk about both a natural body and a spirit body (15:35ff) may be helpful for some to contemplate because it could be taken to suggest that one will be raised with an incorruptible spirit body separate from "the flesh of men".

2.7 The Promise and Goodness of God and Jesus Christ

The promise of the *New Testament* of the *Bible* is that through the power and goodness of God, Christ, His son, has conquered death and has promised its total defeat at the time of the final resurrection. According to Warner, what is most important in Protestantism is that "God has a sovereign plan for the life of believers which is eternal and which has broken into present human history by way of the death and resurrection of Christ."[50] Faith in God's plan and promise is what allows believers to surrender their

[50] Warner, "Pastoral Counseling of Families," 36.

lives to God in the belief that through God's grace they will receive eternal life once they have passed through death. Though, according to Christianity, death will end with the second coming of Christ. For Paul and most, if not all, Christians, Jesus' death and subsequent resurrection are the basis of God's goodness and the promise which leads to Protestants' faith.

2.7.1 The End of Life Client

For many Protestants, this faith in God's goodness and grace will be what sustains them through difficult, fearful times. Even if what is happening to them or a loved one may seem unfair and incomprehensible, the belief that God has some plan may bring some peace and acceptance. But not everyone has had their faith tested before, and others may have been taught the "hellfire/brimstone" version of God, thus believing that their suffering is God's punishment for some past wrong doing. However, even if this were true, according to Protestant theology, only God knows God's plan and for whom grace is given, so if the client can stay open to her belief in God, heaven is still available. And for those experiencing doubt, it may be helpful to note that in the *Bible*, major figures like Job and even Jesus experienced times of doubt and felt forsaken by God, but that doubt was "ok" with God; he understood. Regardless of what is happening with the client, it is important to let her talk and express her concerns about the goodness or unfairness of God rather than trying to force her into a paradigm shift that might seem healthier or more in line with mainstream Protestantism. Each client needs to go through her own process at her own pace, and a sympathetic listener may prove more beneficial than someone who seems to want to "fix" the problem.

2.8 Summary

Though Warner says, "The scriptures have much to say about death, indeed seeing death as an integral part of life,"[51] it seems that on the whole, the *Bible* says very little about death itself or how it is an integral part of life. Much of what is said about any intermediate state or body that may exist is left open to a wide range of interpretations. Theologians commonly see death as coming from Adam's sin rather than as part of God's divine plan, and death is spoken of as an enemy which was defeated through Christ's resurrection. The resurrection carries with it the promise that death will be fully conquered in the end. Perhaps because of this view of death, or lack there of, Protestants seem to focus much more on God's promise of a resurrection than on death as an "integral part of life". This promise of God's grace and modernity's focus on the here and now has virtually ended any practices related to the preparation for death or for life thereafter. Most Christian teachings today tell believers to live life fully in the present and be receptive of God's grace. The implicit teaching on death is that an awareness of it can lead one to have a full life, but "when death happens, fall silent. Death is not about this life…Death is a mystery in the end."[52]

[51] Warner, "Pastoral Counseling of Families," 7.
[52] Locke, Personal interview.

Chapter 3: Comparing the Two Views of Death and Dying

But it is the imaginative basis of human creativity that is itself put on trial when death renders a judgment on the value of symbolic expression. Is death the final undoing or the ultimate triumph of those imaginative capacities?[53]

Very often people see their own religious tradition as true and others' as being part of "imaginative capacities," until a trauma like death puts their own beliefs on trial. Ideally caregivers will explore their own beliefs so that when challenged by a crisis or challenged by a client's divergent beliefs, the caregivers will be able to respond from a confident core to the spiritual needs of the client, regardless of whether they seem to mesh well or not. This short chapter presents a brief synopsis and comparison of chapters one and two. Since the two previous chapters and those that follow address the possible reactions of believers and the support and guidance caregivers can offer in response, this chapter will focus mainly on a straight forward comparison. During the reading, caregivers may pay attention to any questions, judgments, resistance, or curiosity that come up around their own religion or that of others' and try to come to an understanding of what that may say about their own beliefs and how they would address the needs of clients.

[53] Sullivan, *Death, Afterlife, and the Soul*, xii.

Two similarities between Tibetan Buddhism and Protestantism in regard to death and dying are that the religions' founders themselves had very little to say about the topic, and for both religions, death is not a final state. Theologian, David Chidester observes, "Like the enlightenment of the Buddha, the death of Jesus illustrated a transcendence of death. Unlike the calm deathlessness promised by the Buddha, however, the Christian transcendence of death was symbolized as a victory in combat over a dangerous enemy."[54] It must be remembered, however, that Tibetan Buddhism is in many ways much more dynamic than the Buddhism of the historical Buddha's time. The "calm deathlessness" of what is now Theravadan Buddhism is not reflected in Tibetan Buddhism in terms of the dying process or in the infinite potential of enlightenment.

In Tibetan Buddhism, death is a natural part of life. Death is not overcome for the sake of continuity of a personal identity. In Buddhism, personal identity is an illusion. As Anderson says of Buddhism, "death is not a problem to be overcome for the sake of the continuity of personal identity. Rather, identity is itself a freedom from causality and connectedness which inhere in the life/death continuum."[55] Liberation is "looked for" beyond time and space, and there is no soul, nor no "self" to preserve; the only thing that continues from one life to another, if liberation is not found, is a karmic mind-stream which is not eternal because it ceases to exist when cyclic existence ends at liberation. The body is important in one's current life in the sense that it is a house to live in during one's lifetime, but the body is also considered illusory, and at death it dissolves back into its constituent elements.

[54] Chidester, *Patterns of Transcendence,* 194-195.
[55] Anderson, *Theology, Death, and Dying*, 8.

Contrary to that, in Christianity, it is paramount that personal identity be preserved in order to rest for eternity with God – or in hell as the case may be. Transcendence of death, in most Protestant belief systems, includes both the resurrection of the soul and of the body which are considered inseparable – though the type of resurrection body is in dispute. "Liberation" in Christianity is looked for in history – for it is in history that one sees the on-going relationship between God and God's people. And rather than being natural, death is generally seen as coming from original sin – Adam's fall – rather than as part of God's original plan. In fact, Christ's resurrection is seen as a promise that death will be wholly defeated in the end.

If the caregiver is not aware of these differences or of his or her own predilections for one set of beliefs, a fair amount of miscommunication could ensue. A Buddhist caregiver giver coming from a paradigm where one works to let go of a self must watch his language and analogies when talking with a dying Protestant who is talking about an eternal soul. In this case, in the client's world view, she is not clinging to something illusory which is keeping her from salvation; in fact, in her view, a self is required for salvation. The same awareness and sensitivity are needed for each of the other aspects of belief mentioned.

As was mentioned earlier, in Tibetan Buddhism, death is natural – not something sinful outside of a creator's perfect plan; however, Buddhists do believe that death leading back into cyclic existence is a result of ignorance – ignorance of one's true Buddha Nature, but there is no real judgment put on that. Once ignorance has been transformed into the "Wisdom of the Buddhas", cyclic existence will end for that karmic

mind-stream, and liberation, through recognition of one's True Nature, will be attained. Thus in the relative world of karmic cause and effect, death and life are natural consequences of ignorance,[56] and both life and death can lead to causes of liberation. Once one sees with Buddha Nature rather than through ignorance, one realizes that though a relative world is perceived, at the absolute level, there is no concept of birth/death, natural/unnatural, or good/bad.

A similarity that both Tibetan Buddhism and Protestantism share is the belief in an eventual end to death. As mentioned earlier, Christians believe the final defeat of death will happen with the second coming of Christ. While Tibetan Buddhists would not see death as something to defeat, most believe that the concept of death will end when all beings, in all realms, are liberated from cyclic existence.

Not surprisingly, these two religions differ greatly on the importance they give to death and the dying process. For Christians, resurrection after death is the focus. Though the apostle Paul suggests the possibility of an intermediate state and suggests that there is a resurrection body, his cryptic comments have lead theologians to imagine diverse possibilities and implications, and it has encouraged many ministers and congregants to focus much more on the continuance of life after death through God's promise rather than on the meaning of death itself. If there is an interim state, most theologians describe it in peaceful terms such as "sleeping in God" or talking with God and the angels while resting in a disembodied (or temporarily embodied) state – more like the "calm deathlessness" Chidester ascribed to early Buddhist awakening.

[56] Except in the cases where enlightened Buddhas and Bodhisattvas intentionally return to help sentient beings. In such cases, they are not livening in ignorance nor accruing more karma.

Tibetan Buddhism, on the other hand, places great emphasis on knowing the specific details of the stages of the dying process and of the intermediate state. This certainly does not stem from a morbid fascination with death. Practices related to death help people more fully appreciate this life and its fleeting nature. The practices also teach people to train their minds so that they become less reactive, more compassionate, and more aware of their innate Buddha Nature during the present lifetime. Additionally, the belief is that if one knows what is coming (i.e. death), one can prepare and thus use the dying process to further one's chances of liberation. If a person has not been able to become enlightened in this lifetime, he or she can attempt to realize True Nature at the point of clear light or during the bardos of Dharmata and Becoming. Failing that, there are instructions for at least attaining a fortunate rebirth in order to continue practicing the Buddhist teachings with the aim of attaining liberation for all beings. In Tibetan Buddhism, the intermediate state is far from peaceful. After a three-day swoon, the deceased "wakes up" to loud noises, lights, and fearful sights. There is no sleep or comfort, and no grace of God to look to for salvation. All of the manifestations are the creation of one's own mind, but if one has not practiced during life well enough to realize this, one is destined to be confronted by fear and confusion until finally being reborn around the forty-ninth day after death if not sooner.

It is also interesting to look at how the two religions view their beliefs about death in the context of time. Christianity looks for God's promise of eternal life with Him through history by focusing on what the prophets of the past have said and on how God has shown Himself though out history. Based on that, there is hope in the future for salvation based on God's grace - and perhaps on one's faith. Tibetan Buddhism, on the

other hand, focuses on each present moment – both the past and future are illusory. A person could know his or her True Nature and be liberated in each moment, but since ignorance generally clouds True Nature, practitioners need to practice within "relative" time in order to be liberated during their current life or during one of the other bardos; failing that, practitioners with good karma can "try again" during the next life if they are fortunate enough to be born as a human with the capacity and fortune to study the Buddhist teachings. There is no all powerful God to look to for salvation.[57] One removes the veils over one's Buddha Nature on one's own (with instructions from a qualified teacher, and perhaps, according to one's beliefs, assistance from already enlightened beings). But one does not attain liberation for one's self alone. Once liberation is realized, one is said to be able to help countless other beings on their paths to liberation.[58] The caregiver may want to consider the psychological and practical implications of working with a client who does not believe in a God, if that is the core of the caregiver's beliefs, and vise versa. How might that core difference affect interactions, communication, and standard methods for giving spiritual support?

A final comparison at this point concerns the views around teaching the faithful about death and preparation for it, which will be discussed in greater detail in the fourth chapter. In Tibetan Buddhism, focusing the practitioner on the imminence of death is central to virtually all of the teachings, not because death is evil or something to look

[57] In Tibetan Buddhism, there are deities, but they are not all-powerful creator gods in the Christian sense; they are Buddhas and bodhisattvas who have become enlightened and have committed themselves to helping other beings realize their True Nature. While most Tibetans understand these deities to exist at some relative level in addition to being aspects of their own Buddha Nature, many, though not all Westerners view the deities as archetypes of the various innate characteristics of True Nature that the practitioner wishes to develop in him or herself.
[58] Lethcoe, "The Bodhisattva Ideal in the Asta," 264.

forward to, but because life is impermanent, and death is a natural part of cyclic existence. If one practices with the knowledge that life is short, then one may get closer to seeing through the ignorance that keeps beings in cyclic existence. Additionally, it is possible for an advanced practitioner to use the dying and death experience to become liberated and, as an enlightened being, help all other sentient beings know their True Nature in ways that are beyond space and time. Thus there are myriad meditations and practices for Buddhists of all beliefs and levels of ability to diligently engage in during their life time.

Most Protestants on the other hand, believe that salvation and eternity in heaven with God (as opposed to eternity in hell) is solely based on God's grace. There seems to be the general expectation that if one is "in Christ" that God's grace will be given; though, ultimately it is God who decides to whom He will extend grace. Thus there is little one can do to prepare for death or to increase the chance of salvation except to surrender wholly to God's will. However, most Christians do believe that it is important to pray to God and to do good works in the world by helping those less fortunate than themselves.

In the end, both Christianity and Buddhism value compassion and believe that death is not the end. This knowledge alone could act as a bridge between the two spiritual beliefs especially in the case of a chaplain or medical staff of one faith caring for the dying of the other. Chaplains are instructed to follow the lead of the client and his or her family when comforting them near the end of life, but if the chaplain, or any other caregiver for that matter, can develop a deeper understanding of his or her own faith

through the study of other religions, that chaplain may be better able to understand and empathize with his or her dying client's needs and wishes.

Chapter 4: Tibetan Buddhist Teachers and Their Teachings

Rely on the message of the teacher, not on his personality; rely on the meaning, not just on the words; rely on the real meaning, not on the provisional one; rely on your wisdom mind, not on your ordinary, judgmental mind.[59]

The previous chapters focused on the "theology" and tradition around death and dying in the two religious traditions. This chapter and the next will take a look at how Tibetan Buddhist teachers and Protestant ministers are teaching and counseling their followers, and what practices believers are encouraged to undertake in preparation for death and dying.

4.1 The Tibetan Buddhist Teacher

There are four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism extant in the United States, and each of these has many subdivisions with their own lineages and teachings. Then, within each lineage, there are levels of practice based on a student's inclinations and abilities. But in virtually all cases, of primary importance to the practice and progression along the path toward enlightenment is the highly qualified, lineage-holding teacher. In the West teachers are also known by the terms *Guru* and *Lama* which also mean teacher. Some teachers are also addressed by their titles such as *Rinpoche* (precious one) or

[59] Sogyal, *The Tibetan Book of Living*, 130.

Khenpo/Geshe (these titles represent a spiritual doctorate degree which may be earned after 9-15 years of intensive study. Geshe is from the Gelug lineage; Khenpo is used in the others). But regardless of the title given to a spiritual teacher, in Tibetan Buddhism, having a spiritual guide is imperative. In the Theravadan and Mahayana traditions, teachers are considered to be like doctors or spiritual friends, but in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, the human teacher represents the awakened nature of a Buddha, the incarnated display of True Nature.[60] Even though, in Tibetan Buddhism, all beings are considered to have Buddha Nature as their essential nature, most people do not recognize this. But by feeling devotion towards one's human teacher and seeing him or her as a liberated, or nearly liberated, being, one can begin to see that same Buddha Nature in one's self. "The transition from seeing the guru as an external person to seeing him or her as a living force within us usually occurs gradually as the practitioner traverses the path."[61]

Choosing a teacher must not be taken lightly. Teachings, whether presented live, or preserved in texts, often begin with lessons on what makes a good student, and what the student should look for in a Vajrayana teacher. A student should observe a teacher, for years if necessary, to make sure that he or she has great compassion, is learned in the teachings and practices of Early Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, as well as Vajrayana Buddhism, is wise, and has attained great realization through his or her own practice of the teachings. A teacher should be indifferent to his or her own interests, focusing solely on benefiting the students. Lineage is also considered very important. If a teacher is closely connected to a reputable lineage and has permission to teach from a recognized lineage holder, then there is less chance that the teacher is a charlatan, and the student has

[60] Ray*, Secret of the Vajra World*, 174.
[61] Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World*, 174.

confidence that he or she is receiving teachings and practices that have been tested and handed down through time.

In Tibetan Buddhism, Vajrayana teachings cannot be learned from a book, but must be received through direct communication with a teacher. Students can easily go astray and let their egos drive them when working with Tibetan Buddhist practices, creating much bad karma. For this reason, the practices are often referred to as being "dangerous". A qualified teacher knows the pit falls of the path, and can guide the student towards enlightenment.

In the past, in Tibet, a student might spend years living and working with his or her teacher, but in the West today, that is often not the case. Many Tibetan teachers live overseas and can only visit periodically, and many teachers in general, Tibetan or Western, often travel widely to share the teachings with students around the world, so one teacher may have hundreds or even thousands of students. Even for those whose teachers live and have centers in the States, students often cannot leave work and families to move close by retreat centers. Instead, they have to make do with using vacation time to attend teachings. If there are several practitioners in an area, students may gather for group practices and support, and sometimes a teacher's senior students will also travel to provide students with additional teachings. Additionally, technology is now making it easier for students to remain connected to teachers through web sites, live web casts, mp3 down loads of teachings, and yahoo groups.

But due to the number of students a teacher may have, and the time and distance between teachings, it may be harder for a teacher and student to be as intimately

connected (in the mundane/relative sense) as was traditionally the case in Tibet. It may not be possible for a teacher to be at a practitioner's bedside, or even to do practices for each dying follower, but in Tibetan Buddhism, though devotion to a teacher is very important, the ultimate reason for that devotion is to lead the students to an understanding of their own inherent Buddha Nature. To this end, the teachings and practices around death and dying that a teacher imparts to his or her students are of paramount importance, and the student is to practice them whether in regular contact with the teacher or not. At the time of death and after death, a teacher may be able to help a student overcome certain obstacles and remind them of the teachings, but a teacher cannot do a lifetime of practices for the student. The student must take the teachings and practice them diligently in order to reduce attachment, aversion, and delusion enough during his or her lifetime to be able to realize True Nature during the bardos of Dying, Dharmadhatu, and Becoming.

The caregiver can ask about the client's teacher and their relationship, and ask if the client wants the caregiver to contact the teacher around the time of death or shortly after to perform any practices at the bedside, or from wherever they are. Most clients should have realistic expectations about what their teacher is able to do based on their relationship, and many teachers believe that students should be as self-sufficient as possible at the time of death because, in the end, the person will ultimately pass into the coming bardos alone with no guarantees that teachers or other practitioners can be contacted.

For many American Tibetan Buddhists, as with other dying clients, just knowing that people are around to listen, regardless of their belief systems, may all that they need.

But for some, having another Buddhist teacher or practitioner to talk to could be very helpful – there are some teachings that span most of the major Buddhist traditions, but always ask the client about his or her preferences first since, even within the Tibetan tradition, practices, teachings, and philosophies can vary greatly, not to mention between Tibetan and non-Tibetan Buddhist schools.

4.2 Teachings and Practices in Preparation for Death

There are hundreds of Tibetan Buddhist practices that a teacher could transmit concerning the preparation for dying and death, which, as mentioned earlier, also prepare the student for living this life well and for discovering his or her True Nature. Several of the main categories of teachings taught to Westerners are described below. Each Tibetan Buddhist lineage may favor some practices over others or teach the practices somewhat differently, but these are the ones most mentioned in written texts and in teaching advertisements geared towards an American audience, and hence the ones caregivers' clients may be most familiar with.

4.2.1 Traditional Death Meditations

The historical Buddha said, "Of all mindfulness meditations, that on death is supreme."[62] In Tibetan Buddhism, many teachings and practices require the practitioner to reflect on death and the impermanence of life as a way to prepare for physical death as well as for dealing with the moment-by-moment deaths and rebirths throughout the day. Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche reminds students that each time they practice meditation, "it is important to sit with confidence and to arouse the intention to achieve enlightenment in

[62] Kramer, *The Sacred Art of Dying*, 43.

that very session. If you become accustomed to generating such confidence now, then at the time of death, you can manifest the same level of confidence and trust in your practice."[63]

But many practices focus specifically on the meditation of death itself. One such meditation is called *The Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind toward the Dharma.* The second of the four thoughts specifically directs one to reflect on impermanence and death, acknowledging that everything and everyone that we know now is not going to last, including ourselves. One brings to mind a friend, a job, or a mountain one likes to hike, and then imagines its decay. Jobs are lost, mountains wear down into flat lands, and cherished items become lost. This practice helps one loosen one's grasping and cherishing. Why expend time and energy holding on to things and ideas which are impermanent, including one's notions of self?

To take the practice to a more graphic level, practitioners are often encouraged to visualize their bodies decaying. One way to do this is as follows. Take a look at a photo of yourself as a young child. In your mind, visualize the impermanent nature of that child as you became a pre-teen, looking and acting very differently. Then, visualize the changes that took place between pre-teen and young adulthood; imagine the infinite moment to moment deaths and rebirths that took place to make those changes occur. From adulthood, look into the future, watching yourself age, develop wrinkles, slow down, become bent over. What is there that can be grasped onto? Youth is impermanent. As the change and decay continue in your mind, watch yourself become ill, ending up on your deathbed. What do you look like? What might you be thinking and wishing you had

[63] Dzogchen Ponlop. "Are You Ready for Death?" 31.

done in your life? Watch the last breath leave your body, then as time passes, watch the skin and the organs begin to rot; the face becomes deformed; the body becomes putrid as insects feed off of it. Still later in time, all that is left is bone and hair, and even that will dissolve into dust at some point, and all living beings who would have ever heard of you will also die, until all traces of you even in the memory of others is gone.

A practice like this teaches many lessons at once. It highlights one's preferences (health and youth) and one's aversions (watching insects crawling through one's rotting eye sockets). This type of practice allows practitioners to grow accustomed to the idea of death so that when it comes, they will not be surprised by it or fearful or repulsed by it. If one has practiced visualizing the death process, then perhaps it will seem like habit when the actual time comes. And this practice reminds the practitioners how fleeting life is. Life should be appreciated, and time should not be frittered away, but used wisely towards a path of compassion and awakening.

If a client talks about this type of practice, realize that for him this is not done out of some morbid fascination, but as a spiritual contemplation; however, around the time of a person's death it may not be wise to suggest this type of practice to him if he is not already engaged in it as it may lead to fear rather than peace. This practice is best done over a period of time so that the client has a chance to become accustomed to the practice and it effects.

4.2.2 Guru/Yidam Yoga

Yidam yoga is a primary Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist practice which helps practitioners train in experiencing the fundamental True Nature of appearances as luminous and empty rather than seeing them in the conventional, solid, dualistic form[64] of the five skandhas as experienced through the three poisons – basically what we experience as the relative world.[65] The yidam (also known as a deity) is a male or female Buddha representing one's True Nature; it is not something external but the essence of what we fundamentally are.[66] Medicine Buddha is a yidam often used for yidam practice when one is sick or dying. Guru yoga is essentially a yidam practice in that a practitioner sees his or her teacher in the form of a pure yidam representing essential Buddha Nature, and in the practice, the practitioner merges with that essential nature.

There are two primary stages to yidam practice: the creation stage and completion stage. The yidam practice is a meditation done in the form of a ritual *sadhana* (a practice based on initiation and practice texts). To start, the practitioner engages in preliminary practices to ensure that she is doing the practice with the highest intention. In the main part of the sadhana, the creation stage begins with the practitioner mentally transforming herself into the yidam (Buddha) she relates most closely to and has receive an initiation from her teacher for. Then, she sees the same yidam in front of her, representing the empty yet luminous nature of all of existence (sometimes described in terms of the illusory nature of a rainbow). Tibetan Buddhism talks about body, speech, and mind as three ways people use to develop and maintain the ego. By seeing herself as a Buddha

[64] Dzogchen Ponlop, *Mind Beyond Death*, *226*.
[65] Refer to section 1.1 & 1.2 for definitions of the five skandhas and three poisons.
[66] Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World*, 149-150.

and all of existence as Buddha Nature, she is "purifying" her conventional mind so that it sees through "Buddha Mind." Along with the visualization, the practitioner chants a mantra to "purify" speech, and makes hand gestures, called *mudras*, to "purify" the body. Purify is in quotation marks here since on the absolute level, there is nothing to purify, but on the relative level, people are said to see the world impurely.

After some time spent on the creation stage, the practitioner moves to the completion stage, where the visualization is dissolved and the mind rests in its True Nature. At more developed levels of practice, the practitioner understands that these two divisions of practice are actually inseparable since True Nature is both empty and manifesting.[67] The end of the completion stage is the end of the main practice. At this point, the practitioner sees herself arise again as the yidam and performs the concluding sections of the practice. At the close of the practice the practitioner either re-dissolves the visualization or continues her day in the mental form of the deity, seeing herself and the world in its True Nature. Guru Yoga and Yidam practice are seen as a more rapid path to enlightenment than more traditional meditative practices because they train the practitioner to let go of conventional concepts and eventually see the True Nature of existence now, in each moment. Emotions like anger, fear, and passion are not subsumed or given an antidote as in other practices, but are brought into this type of meditation to be transformed into "enlightened energy".[68]

As was mentioned, doing yidam and guru yoga practices during one's life time trains one to see True Nature in each moment. It also trains the practitioner in the concept

[67] To read more about what this means, please refer to some of the books on Tibetan Buddhism in the bibliography.
[68] Dzogchen Ponlop, *Mind Beyond Death*, 227.

of life (creation stage), death (completion stage), and rebirth (re-arising of the deity). But if one does not become fully enlightened in this lifetime, deity and guru yoga practices could still prove invaluable after death, according to the Tibetan Buddhist teachings of the bardos of Dharmata and Becoming. By personifying the concept of Buddha Nature, a practitioner may more easily relate to it and understand that Buddha Nature, the nature of the deity, and their own nature are not separate things. In the bardo of Dharmata, instead of seeing appearances as scary, external phenomena, the practitioner will realize that everything is a projection of his own mind, which is none other than the pure mind of the yidam, and he will be able to unite with all sound and appearance, thus awakening to True Nature and ending cyclic existence.[69]

For the less accomplished practitioner, yidam practice is still very important. If through remembrance and devotion to the yidam as Buddha Nature, the practitioner sees the yidam among all of the sights and sounds of the bardo of Dharmata or even in the bardo of Becoming, he may still have a chance at recognizing True Nature or at least of guiding himself, in a sense, to rebirth in the human realm to continue practicing in the next life.

If a client is performing yidam or guru yoga, and quietly saying mantras and gesturing with his hands, it may look a little odd, but he is just practicing a form of Buddhist meditation; however, many practitioners may do mantras and mudras mentally, unbeknownst to others. Though many practitioners may have had glimpses of Buddha Nature, few will be able to live 24/7 through the perspective of that nature; thus, clients could still be subject to depression, fear, and loneliness like anyone else facing death. If

[69] Sogyal, *The Tibetan Book of Living*, 285.

they talk about their yidam practice, you might ask them if there is a way that it could support them in their time of difficulty so that they could see things differently. You might also ask if their family or friends know a yidam practice that the client wants done for them as they are going through the dying process. Simplified versions of yidam practices may be performed by the uninitiated for the benefit of the dying. One of these, phowa practice, will be described next. Another version will be discussed in the section addressing ways Buddhist practices may be used to help Protestants through the dying process.

4.2.3 Phowa

Phowa practice is generally translated as "transference of consciousness practice", but the core purpose of this practice is to transfer "our consciousness from an impure, confused state into a pure and unconfused state. We are transforming consciousness and connecting with the True Nature of mind and the reality of all phenomena on the spot," according to Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche.[70] There are many different types of Phowa depending on one's lineage and level of practice. The most commonly taught Phowa, described in abbreviated form below, is connected with yidam practice and is especially good for the majority of practitioners who are not as accomplished at recognizing True Nature. For traditional, formal practice, initiation and teachings from a qualified teacher are required. As mentioned earlier, a modified Phowa, which the uninitiated may do with or for others, will be discussed in later sections of this work.

[70] Dzogchen Ponlop. "Are You Ready for Death?" 30.

After conducting preliminary practices to ensure proper motivation, the practitioner (as herself or in the form of a yidam, depending on the practice) visualizes her central channel extending straight up from the navel to an opening at the top of the head (the crown chakra). In the central channel, at the center of the chest (heart chakra), a little ball of red energy is visualized as representing consciousness. Above the crown of the head, the practitioner visualizes a Buddha, usually Amitabha Buddha, who, during practice sessions has his foot over the opening of the crown chakra, preventing the consciousness from leaving the body before its time. During the practice session, the practitioner usually utters a syllable like HRI or HIK (depending on the practice) three times. This utterance is coordinated with breathing and with the visualization of the red ball of consciousness rising up the central channel until it touches the Buddha's foot. It then drops back down to the heart chakra. This process is repeated again and again for the duration of the practice session. At the time of death, the practitioner sees Amitabha above her head, but at that time the crown chakra is left uncovered. When the gross dissolution is complete and subtle consciousness is dissolving,[71] the practitioner shoots the red ball of consciousness up through the central channel and out of the crown chakra merging with the heart of Amitabha Buddha. The practitioner's consciousness becomes one with that of the Buddha's which is nothing other than True Nature. The practitioner is to understand that there is no physical Buddha waiting for her to perform phowa (though some may in fact have this understanding), but that the practice is a reminder of the compassionate, enlightened nature that is her true essence.[72]

[71] See section 1.4 to review the death process.
[72] Dzogchen Ponlop, *Mind Beyond Death*, 151.

Phowa is also one of the primary practices that a teacher will do for a student either in person or from wherever they are at the time. A qualified teacher is said to be able to visualize the consciousness of the dying person and eject it into a realization of its True Nature. It is said that if conditions are right, even someone with very heavy negative karma can realize enlightenment, or at least a positive rebirth, but the desire for and devotion to the teachings have to be present.[73]

Phowa is said to work best if practiced well during a person's life time and if the practitioner is able to be fully aware during the dying process. Some clients who are Phowa practitioners may be concerned that they will die suddenly or be mentally disabled or unconscious at the time of death and thus unable to perform Phowa. If this is the case, ask them if they have contacted their teacher or practitioner friends to ask that Phowa be performed for them. Also assure the clients that Tibetan Buddhist teachers say that even in cases when Phowa is not possible, that the practitioners may still be able to flash on an image of their teacher or yidam as they die, and this may be enough to awaken their True Nature or at least guide them to a very positive rebirth.[74] But it may also help to remind clients that dying in fear and worry are to be avoided if possible, so rather than worrying about a future they may have little control over, they might want to do a practice that helps sustain them through difficult times and brings them a sense of peace. If the caregiver feels comfortable doing such a thing, he or she could offer to perform a modified phowa for the client at the time of death if that would help. It is said that the deceased can still hear people, so any practice which could help the client remember the Buddhist teachings could be useful.

[73] Sogyal, *The Tibetan Book of Living*, 235.
[74] Dzogchen Ponlop, *Mind Beyond Death*, 153.

4.2.4 Shitro

Shitro teachings consist of sadhanas connected to the same collection of bardo teachings as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and refer to the peaceful and wrathful deities described in the *Book of the Dead* teachings.[75] In this practice, the practitioner visualizes her body as being made up of 108 peaceful and wrathful deities, which as mentioned earlier represent one's True Nature as luminous and empty rather than as conventional, solid, and dualistic. As with other tantric sadhanas, the practitioner works with her energy, visualization, mantra, and mudra, but Shitro is considered a very powerful practice for purification of "impure vision" and healing as well as for realizing the True Nature of reality quickly. In addition to that, the Shitro sadhana has a section in the practice for purifying the negative karma of the deceased, especially if the practitioner is advanced and has a strong connection with the deceased. In this practice, the practitioner visualizes boundless light rays streaming from the deities to the dead person, which along with purification mantras, are believed to be advantageous for helping the dead realize his true enlightened state or have a positive rebirth. So this practice is done during life to benefit both the practitioner and those she knows who are dead. This is also a practice often done for a deceased practitioner by her teacher and by others who have been taught the practice and have a connection with her.

In the case of Shitro, caregivers may follow the advice given for clients of other sadhana practices.

[75] Fremantle, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, vii.

4.2.5 Tonglen

Tonglen is known as the practice of "sending and receiving." It is a practice for developing one's compassion, but it is also considered a transformational practice for both the practitioner and the recipient of the practice. The following is a simplified explanation. After preliminary practices to generate the highest positive motivation for doing Tonglen, the practitioner either looks at or visualizes someone who is suffering and allows her heart to open in compassion. The practitioner sees the suffering usually as black smoke which she then breaths in to her own heart, lessening the accumulation in the sufferer. The practitioner visualizes the black smoke as breaking open her heart in a positive way, destroying all clinging and self-cherishing, so that the heart is transformed into the heart of a Buddha. The smoke is transformed into purifying light rays which are then sent out to bathe the sufferer in peace, joy, and anything that might bring an end to the suffering. As this is happening, the practitioner visualizes the sufferer's negative karma being purified and sees him or her finding ultimate peace. This practice is often done by breathing in the smoke on the in-breath and sending out light rays on the out-breath and is continued for as long as the practitioner wishes to practice.[76] It may also be done on-the-spot in any situation where the practitioner encounters difficulty or pain.

Tonglen may easily be used for working with the dying and even with those who are going through the after-death process. Since it does not require formal initiation, anyone who is interested may learn to do it. Some practitioners may be concerned initially that breathing in the suffering of others through the black smoke could cause them to become sick themselves. If this is the case, it indicates a lack of understanding of

[76] Sogyal, "Tonglen: The Practice of Giving," 36.

the practice. There is no real sickness or suffering breathed in, and the smoke visualization is used to symbolize how the suffering and difficulties of others can open one's heart to compassion, but not a compassion that leads to a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. By visualizing the suffering as being transformed into purifying rays of light in one's heart, the situation is dynamic, transformative, and healing. The visualization is not considered to be just a mind exercise, but a tool which can help both the practitioner and the dying come closer to realizing their Buddha Nature.[77]

If the Tibetan Buddhist client knows and practices Tonglen, an interested caregiver could ask if the client could teach the practice to him. Knowing that someone is doing Tonglen for or with her, could make the client feel more relaxed and peaceful, and if both the client and caregiver are interested, it may also comfort the client to know that the caregiver and others will be practicing Tonglen for her as she goes through the dying and after-dying process.

4.2.6 Prayer

Since Buddhism is a belief system which does not contain an all-powerful creator God, it may surprise some to find that there is prayer in Buddhism. The 2008 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life study found that 45% of the American Buddhists surveyed (from a variety of traditions) reported that they prayed daily (compared with 53% of mainstream Christians).[78] Though the survey did not define what prayer meant for different respondents, most Tibetan Buddhist practices contain some form of supplication or prayer. According to scholar and Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Reginald Ray, culturally

[77] Sogyal, "Tonglen: The Practice of Giving," 36.
[78] Pew Research, "The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey."

Tibetan Buddhists are taught to view ritual prayer as a means to invoke, supplicate, and communicate with awakened beings in order to receive their blessings.[79] Some American Tibetan Buddhist may also relate to departed teachers and yidams in this way, because it may feel more concrete to them than trying to relate directly to an ineffable concept like True Nature. If a client prays to her teacher or to a Buddha, believing them to be true benefactors, the caregiver should not be surprised or question the client's Buddhist credentials. There are many ways to practice Buddhism, and in difficult times, it is not unusual for people to want to turn to something that feels more real or concrete than an archetype of one's Buddha Nature. But one still might wonder why non-theistic Buddhists would use prayerful language in their practices. In her journal article on Buddhist prayer, Rita Gross explains,

> These [practices] are a 'skillful method,' something designed to propel the practitioner into recognition of reality as quickly as possible…We tend to take things, including ourselves, for granted and see them as mundane, meaningless, and not sacred. These [prayers] stir in us the confidence that such is not the case. They serve as a call, over and over, to awaken to the splendid sacredness of the world and ourselves.[80]

Whether the client is praying to what he considers an outside source (at least at the relative level) for support, guidance or purification, or whether he is praying as a means of inner-transformation, the act of prayer may be one topic that could serve as a bridge of understanding between a Tibetan Buddhist client and caregivers of other

[79] Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World, 71.*
[80] Gross, "Meditation and Prayer," 84.

spiritual traditions. If the client believes in the transformative nature of prayer, the caregiver could talk to him about praying during difficult times, and may ask the client if he would like to be prayed for even if it is done from the viewpoint of another tradition. However, since the majority of American Tibetan Buddhist came to Buddhism from Christianity or Judaism, the caregiver could easily encounter practitioners who may react negatively to prayer as a theistic, other-power concept. If the client says the prayers in the sadhanas that he practices, he may simply view them as part of the traditional practice, which taken as a whole, will help him discover his Buddha Nature. If the caregiver encounters a reaction against prayer; then, that can just be taken as a signal to discover another way to connect with the client.

4.2.7 Reading Texts

The one final practice that will be described here, which is often taught to a practitioner by her teacher, is, as mentioned earlier, to read and meditate on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead,* or another text related to meditations on death and dying. This practice should be done during the practitioner's lifetime in order to prepare her for the after-life bardos, but it is also a practice that can be done by the teacher, friends, or the caregivers after the person has died in order to help guide her through the next bardos and remind her of the teachings she has received during her life. This may help her awaken to her Buddha Nature, whether during life or in the bardos of Dharmata and Becoming.

4.3 Summary

In Tibetan Buddhism, there are hundreds of practices which could be done to train a practitioner to prepare for life, death, and after-life while on the path to letting go of attachment, aversion, and delusion in order to realize the True Nature of everything. Most of these practices require some sort of initiation and instruction from a qualified teacher before a student can usefully undertake the practice. Teachers begin many teachings by reminding students to prepare for death throughout life, not for morbid purposes, but to remind the students of the importance of the short life they have and to prepare for a positive rebirth if they have not realized Buddha Nature sufficiently enough to end cyclic rebirth. In addition to teaching students practices related to the bardo process, some teachers may also perform certain practices like Phowa and Shitro to assist students in the bardos.

A caregiver does not need to have intimate knowledge of the practices, but he should be aware enough so that he does not jump to pre-conceived conclusions regarding what may at first seem like unusual practices, such as chanting, performing mudras, or making references to deities, yidams, or Buddhas. The caregiver may also want to make sure that any needed arrangements have been made to contact the teacher and/or other practitioners around the time of death. Other than that, the primary role of the caregiver would be to provide services in a way that he would to any other client, offering compassionate listening and guiding the client towards activities that have sustained her through difficult times.

Chapter 5: Ministers and Their Teachings

"We are not, after all, the 'living'
ministering to the 'dying'. We are living
persons, who will die, ministering to living
persons who will die sooner."[81]

Just as there are many different schools and traditions in Tibetan Buddhism, there are also many different denominations within mainstream Protestantism, and even significant differences in beliefs and preaching styles within those denominations. However, the sections below will look at some of the pan-Protestant roles of the minister and his or her teachings.

5.1 The Protestant Minister

The Protestant minister is generally someone who has been ordained by his or her denomination and is authorized to teach and provide guidance according to the tradition's beliefs. Ministers also perform ceremonies such as marriages, baptisms, and funerals. Services are usually provided in a church setting, but some ministers also serve as chaplains in less traditional communities such as those in hospitals, prisons, or homeless shelters. Protestant Ministers may also be called by the terms pastor, preacher, reverend, or in some denominations, priest. The role of minister is generally said to be based on the roles of the teachers of the gospels in the *New Testament* of the *Bible*, but what that role actually looks like varies among denominations. In some churches, the minister is given

[81] Bane, *Death and Ministry*, vii.

the role of representing Christ on Earth, an intermediary between God and humans (more similar to that of a Catholic priest). In other traditions, the minister is one who has more training in ministry and theology than the rest of the congregants, but is generally considered an equal member of the congregation, each of whom can be "Christ" for the others.[82] This variation in status may not affect caregivers in any way, but it may allow for an understanding in the reactions, relationships, and power various Protestant clients give to their ministers. Rather than assuming that varying levels of respect or expectation towards clergy are wholly based on the client's personality and experiences, it may be useful for the caregiver to be aware that the relationship between clergy and parishioner are partially formed by the theological roles given by denomination to the clergy.

Ministers' duties are often divided among the administrative tasks of running a church, planning for church services, presiding over ceremonies and other functions, and working with individuals and families on life issues informed by faith. But generally, teachings on death and dying are not paramount in most churches, partly because the topic has not been a central theological concern in the West in the twentieth century, for reasons mentioned in chapter two. Much of what has been written has been in reaction to the influence of Ancient Greek philosophical thought, existentialism, and modern psychology.[83] Donald Bane's book, *Death and Ministry: Pastoral Care of the Dying and the Bereaved*, is one of the very few books for ministers which actually lays out clergy roles in relation to death and dying.

[82] Bregman, *Death in the Midst of Life*, 141.
[83] Bregman, *Death in the Midst of Life*, 113.

Bane sees the first role as that of the classical teaching function, clarifying the nature of human life and death in relation to God and Christian theology. But Bane sees a woeful lack of education in many churches around death. To highlight this, he includes the following reprimand to ministers, "If the clergyman is suddenly overcome with the feeling of tongue-tied irrelevancy when he enters a sickroom, he gets exactly what he deserves if he has not worked out the problem of the meaning of death with his congregation with a series of sermons or with a series of work sessions with lay groups."[84]

Bane's second role for ministers regarding death is that of being the counselor. After having received teachings on death, the parishioner may, at the time of death, need counseling on the spiritual formation of his or her conscience. Third is the role of listener. Bane notes that Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' research has shown that listening is one of the most beneficial roles someone can play when sitting with the dying. And his final role for ministers of the dying is that of servant or advocate for their needs.[85]

But one of the major debates today, among those theologians and ministers discussing death, is exactly how one should minister to the dying. The majority of "counseling the dying" literature and seminary classes available to ministers today are centered around modern psychology and what some have dubbed "Elizabeth Kubler-Ross for Pastors."[86] Ministers are generally taught how to understand the stages of grief, how to by a sympathetic listener, and how to use therapeutic counseling techniques to help the dying and her family to come to terms with the situation. However, there are strong

[84] Bane, *Death and Ministry*, 154.
[85] Bane, *Death and Ministry,* 154-156.
[86] Bregman, *Death in the Midst of Life*, 144.

detractors of this pervasive movement, saying it is theologically empty and makes the minister no different from a counselor or social worker. Yet those who seek to root Protestant ministry-to-the-dying in theological teachings often find that they have to go back in time to find much commentary. They then find that the messages have been varied and are often scary and depressing, stressing the "'awe and intimacy' of death over any task of emotional adjustment to it," as Professor of Religion, Lucy Bregman puts it.[87] Bregman concludes, in her article on death in Christianity,

> What is clear is that so long as much of the pastoral care literature either avoids the call for 'theological council' or embraces past resources rather unselectively, a question such as this will remain obscured. And the dilemma of death's role within the totality of faith will probably not be profoundly addressed.[88]

But one piece of advice, that most references for ministers do stress, is that in whatever manner the minister counsels parishioners about death, she must first deeply examine her own attitudes and reactions to death and loss.[89]

What do these theological debates mean for the Protestant who is dying and for his caregivers? First, if he has stayed with one tradition most of his life and not read theological journals and texts, he may not even be aware that a debate exists among the professionals. He will just know the relationship he has with his minister, whether he sees his minister as an equal congregant or a special representative of Christ. And, he will

[87] Bregman, *Death in the Midst of Life*, 195.
[88] Bregman, *Death in the Midst of Life*, 147.
[89] Bane, *Death and Ministry*, vii.

know what he has been taught about death, the resurrection, God's grace, and life after death. One of the main reasons for including the disparities among denominations is to educate the caregivers about the diverse sets of beliefs their Protestant clients might have around death and about the various ways ministers may present themselves to the caregivers and the clients.

If a client has strong ties to a particular church, he may want the minister and other congregants to visit him, unless there are unresolved feelings which might make it difficult to talk with his minister or other members of the church. One common feeling among clients is that of guilt over having caused their own sickness due to sinful acts or neglect of their spiritual life. They might feel that if they had loved God enough, either they would not have brought the illness on themselves, or God would not be punishing them in this manner. Another common emotion, which might cause the client to reject visits from his own church, is anger towards God for the punishment of sickness whether the client feels he deserves it or not. In some cases, the client may react by rejecting his spiritual tradition all together.

As in many cases when working with the dying, listening may be the best medicine, at least initially. Often the client may not have felt safe questioning her beliefs in front of the minister or other believers for fear of censure or isolation or out of concern for sowing decent. The caregiver could ask the client about her beliefs in order to establish a basic understanding of the tradition. The caregiver might then ask what aspects of the client's spiritual beliefs have carried her through difficult times in the past and which beliefs she might find solace in now. If the client is willing, the caregiver

could also offer to pray for or with the client to find a way to see the situation differently, perhaps through a heart of love rather than anger or fear. The client might also find comfort in the sections of the *Bible* which focus on the love, forgiveness, and grace of God. But in cases where there are deep theological concerns, with the client's approval, a minister within a similar Protestant tradition, who is not associated with the client's church, could be called in to address the client's concerns. Suggestions similar to those already mentioned could also be employed to address concerns of Protestants who are not affiliated with a particular church. Again, if listening, talking, reading, and praying are not enough to answer the client's theological questions around God, death, and dying, a minister who has similar beliefs in these areas could be called in to visit.

5.2 Teachings and Practices in Preparation for Death

As mentioned in the previous sections on contemporary Protestantism, there does not seem to be an abundance of religious teachings on death and dying, and it is rare for ministers to talk about death from the pulpit, if at all. Death might be addressed in some churches in association with Easter and the resurrection of Christ. But often ministers teach that God's grace is the only way that one can be saved and have eternal life with God, based on the teachings of the Apostle Paul, who taught that hope lies in God alone, both in life and in death. "Just as we are saved by grace and given our ultimate safety and security freely, through no human effort or achievement, so our destiny beyond death is something that comes freely from the gracious power of God, and not from any undying element in our own character."[90]

[90] Holloway, *Anger, Sex, Doubt and Death*, 102.

The teaching that salvation lies in God's grace alone, means that from a theological point of view there is nothing a person can do to ensure that he receives God's grace and spends his eternal life in heaven rather than hell. Catholics generally believe that faith alone is not enough, that one must perform good works on earth to be worthy of God's grace, but, though Protestants are often taught to act Christ-like in the world as an outward expression of God's love within them, most believe that God's grace alone is the only path to salvation, and that faith in that is enough.[91]

For some clients, this teaching may make the transition from this life an easy one because they believe in God's love and accept Christ as their savior; thus they have faith that they will receive God's grace. But other Protestant's may feel fear and concern at the time of their death. In Protestantism, unlike Catholicism, there is no last holy confession or no last rights to purify one of sins, and there is no purgatory to which one can go if they are not bad enough for hell, but not purified enough for heaven. In Protestantism, a person goes one way or the other. The inability to do anything to get God's grace may be very disturbing for some people, especially if they feel their illness is a form of punishment for sinful behavior. These feelings of fear could make for a difficult end of life experience, especially if their denomination stressed God's justice over God's love. Once again, non-judgmental listening while the client speaks of his anxiety may be the most helpful act a caregiver can do. Just the act of talking about emotions can reduce stress. As mentioned earlier, the caregiver can also support the client in finding biblical passages that focus on God's love and grace. Supporting the client in praying to God for

[91] Ngai, Personal interview.

love and understanding may also help bring some sense of peace as well as a sense of doing something, rather than feeling so helpless.

5.2.1 Prayer

Prayer is the primary practice taught in Protestant Christianity, but if one's salvation is based solely on God's grace alone, the client and caregiver may question the point and power of prayer especially around the time of death. Indeed, this has also been a question for ministers and theologians.

One minister, in his book on ministering to the dying, said that he was strongly taken aback when he was asked to pray for the salvation of the dying and the dead. He writes, "I could not see how you could pray for the dead without diluting considerably the Gospel of salvation by faith alone…. You are thereby 'assisting' Jesus with the work of salvation."[92] But he saw that people derived comfort from prayers for the dying or dead, so he would pray not for the deceased's salvation, but to express the love and sadness the loved ones felt, so say goodbye, and to entrust the deceased to God's love.

Another minister expressed prayer at the time of death this way,

> You should use prayer to connect with God; however, salvation is through God's grace alone. Prayer is not to get something from God, but to have a relationship with God and then bring that relationship out into the world.

[92] Mitton,. *Healing Death's Wounds*, 12.

If you are in Christ, your sins are forgiven and, after death, the spirit is reborn.[93]

Yet despite what theologians and ministers say, for the lay Protestant, prayer is the primary practice for communicating with God even at the end of life. Throughout the *New Testament*, believers are commanded to pray (1 Thess 5:17) and taught that prayer is the way to talk with God (Matt 7:7-11), and in John 14:13-14, Jesus says, "Whatever you ask in My name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it." With statements like this from the *Bible*, it would not be surprising to find people praying for their own salvation, or that of a loved one, despite the teachings from the pulpit.

Additionally, there are many uses of prayer mentioned in the *Bible*, other than petitioning for God's grace, which could bring the dying and bereaved comfort and support. In the *Bible*, there are prayers of petition for one's self and others, but also prayers of worship, praise, gratitude, confession, repentance, and connection. There are also social, community building aspects to prayer. Praying with another may allow the dying to feel less isolated and more connected to the living as well as with God. Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." (Matt 18:20).

With this in mind, the caregiver may wish to offer prayers to the dying, pray with them, or even sit with them as they pray. As mentioned earlier, just being silent with a person in prayer is a form of intimate contact which may bring more depth and meaning

[93] Ngai, Personal interview.

to a visit than surface chatter ever could. Some clients may derive the greatest solace from ritual prayer. This type of prayer may be imbued with deep meaning for the client, not because of the words, but because of the ritual act of saying it in community, with a minister, or before bed, day after day over the years. Two of the most commonly requested prayers are the *Lord's Prayer* and *Psalm 23*.

Requests for extemporariness prayer may make some caregivers uncomfortable if they are not used to creating prayers on the spot. Though there is no one right or wrong way to compose a prayer, and the style may vary among denominations, one common formula is offered here for caregiver reference (it can be modified as needed):

1. Preliminary Questions: Ask the client

    - To whom does she pray? This will let you know if she prays to a masculine God, a Holy Spirit, a divine being, a female deity, etc.
    - For what or whom does she want to pray? Do not assume that you know what the client wants to ask for. Rather than healing, she may want peace of mind, or want her children to reconcile before her death.
    - Is there a special prayer you want to hear? If there is a ritual prayer that you do not know, you could ask the client to each it to you.
    - Would you like to hold hands? Many clients are starved for touch, or enjoy the sense of physical communion during prayer, but always ask because just as many may be uncomfortable with the idea.

2. Greet the Higher Power (e.g. Dear God, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Father, etc. This is based on the client's answer to the preliminary questions).
3. Name the person or people present (e.g. "James and I are here in the hospital"; "The Smith family is gathered at the bedside of their father.")
4. Express the concerns based on the preliminary questioning. (e.g. "As she prepares for surgery, her family is concerned for her health and safety.")
5. Make the request based on the preliminary questioning. (e.g. "Please be with John as he goes through this last round of chemo. Give him strength, hope, and courage as he continues his struggle with cancer.)

    - At this point, the caregiver may also add other concerns that have been raised during visits (e.g. Please help Juan find the strength and will to continue his physical therapy despite the discomfort).
    - However, be very careful about requesting things not asked for in some way (do not assume what the client wants or needs), and be cautious about making healing requests that are unlikely to come to fruition, thus making it look like God refused the request. (e.g. Please cure Grace of cancer so that she can go home and raise her children).

6. Express belief in the power of God and in the power of the prayer (e.g. We come to you in our faith and belief in your power.)
7. Offer an opportunity for others to offer additional words – either spoken or silent. (e.g. Now, we take a moment for all present to express their prayers.)
8. Express gratitude (e.g. Thank you for listening to our prayers.)

9. Conclude prayer (e.g. Amen; In Jesus name, amen; Blessed be; etc.)

Since, the promise of eternal life after this one is considered to be wholly in God's hands and not something to be worked on or prayed for, it may be feel difficult for the caregiver to know exactly what to say regarding the impending death itself during a prayer. There are many prayer books on the market with customizable prayers, but the following are lines taken from the book, *Pastoral Prayers for the Hospital Visit*[94]:

- "We commend ourselves to your grace and care in this hour."
- "You are the Creator who gave us life in the beginning….And now, in this time of our greatest human fragileness, you remain our faithful companion."
- "We know that our lives have bounds and that our days are numbered. We know that, in your goodness, you have destined us all to return to your home of safekeeping and peace."
- "Now, into your faithful love and mercy, we commend your daughter [/son]. Just as you stand with us in the hour of our death, we pray that we may stand with you in the hour of the resurrection that you have brought in Christ."

Even if the caregiver does not believe in a God or Higher Power, he may think in terms of what brings comfort and support to the client. The prayer would not be for the caregiver, but a skillful means for assisting the client in her faith during what for many people is a difficult time. As the caregiver says the prayer, he may just send wishes of peace to the client, but use the specific words that the client can relates to. The caregiver may even say, our traditions are different, so I will pray with you, and you can tell me if

[94] Phillips, *Pastoral Prayers*, 24.

you would like me to say something different next time. But if prayer makes the caregiver too uncomfortable, offering to bring a minister or another caregiver in to pray, would show care and understanding, and still meet the client's needs.

5.2.2 Other Practices

Some Protestant churches are bringing back rituals from their tradition's past, like anointing with oil. Other rituals are done in the churches for all members, but may also be performed outside of the church for parishioners who cannot attend services. These are generally only done by the client's minister, or perhaps a chaplain on duty. They are mentioned here in case a client requests these rituals, and to give the caregiver some context in case she should encounter them. More information on these rituals can be found in books like *Pastoral Prayers for the Hospital Visit*.[95]

5.2.2.1 Accepting Christ

This ritual might be done if a person were to convert to Christianity or wants to recommit herself after having left Protestantism for sometime. In most cases, the ritual is simple consisting of an invitation and prayer. It may conclude with an anointing with oil (described later) and/or a small, religious token to remind the person of her new commitment to Christ.

[95] Phillips, *Pastoral Prayers,* 72-78.

5.2.2.2 Baptism

Baptism is a ritual washing away of sins before being admitted as a full member of the Christian family, in imitation of Jesus' baptism. It is also often considered as being a necessity for one's salvation. Baptism may be done in a non-traditional setting if it is unlikely that the person will have the opportunity to be baptized in a church. While the majority of denominations allow for baptisms starting at birth, some require that the person be old enough to accept Christ as their savior of their own accord.

The ritual itself usually consists of an invitation, a renunciation of sins, a profession of faith, a prayer, and the sprinkling of water on the head or a full body immersion. At that time the minister usually says something akin to "I now baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen." In some cases, this may be followed by an anointing with oil.

5.2.2.3 Holy Communion

In 1 Cor. 11:23-26, the Apostle Paul tells of how, at the Last Supper, Jesus instructed his disciples to take bread and "eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me….This cup [of wine] is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." Paul adds, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till he comes." This ritual of partaking in bread and wine is a sacrament invoking the presence of Christ (either literally or symbolically depending on the tradition), asking for God's blessing,

reaffirming one's commitment as a Christian, and strengthening the bond of the community.

Because the bread and wine (or grape juice) needed for the ritual will already have been consecrated, a lay person may perform this ceremony if no clergy person is available. But traditionally, communion may only be taken by baptized Christians. It generally begins with a prayer requesting God's blessing, followed by the *Lord's Prayer*. The bread and wine are offered to those taking communion, and everyone is reminded of Christ's sacrifice of his body and blood for Christians' salvation. If the dying person cannot eat or drink, it is enough to touch the substances to his lips, or offer them symbolically. The ritual is concluded with a short hymn of praise. Protestant Holy Communion is not required for salvation at the time of death as it is in the Catholic Church, but clients may request it as a comforting ritual which brings them into communion with Christ, and reminds them of the bond with their spiritual community.

5.2.2.4 Anointing with Oil

The anointing of oil is a reminder of Christ's healing power through his death and resurrection. If possible, olive oil should be used. Everyone present may participate if they wish to. As with the previous rituals, this one begins with an invitation and a prayer. The oil is prayed over, reminding participants of how Jesus and his apostles used oil and faith in the Holy Spirit to heal others. The minister or other officiate, places a little oil, in the shape of a cross on the foreheads of the participants, saying, "Receive this blessing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. The ritual is then concluded with a closing prayer.

These rituals bring a person into the Christian fold and serve as a reminder of the believer's faith and commitment, and of the promise of God through Christ. But none of these is necessary at the time of death for someone who is already a Christian, nor will they help a Christian win salvation.

5.3 Summary

There is a fair amount of variation among Protestants in their teachings and rituals, but perhaps the main thing to keep in mind is that most contemporary Protestant traditions do not talk about death much and there is no consensus on what should be taught regarding the subject, so some clients may express fear and concern around the dying process, but others may trust in the grace of God. In either case, prayer is the primary practice that all Protestants share, and additional practices may be requested. As one theologian remarked, when asked about teachings around death in Protestantism, "Christians do not dwell on death; death is not the final word. There is hope."[96]

A comparison of the teachings and practices taught by Buddhist teachers and Protestant ministers will be addressed in the various sections in chapter six.

[96] Locke, Personal interview.

Chapter 6: Before, During, and After Death: What the Believer and His or Her Support Team Can Do

So often in the modern world when someone
dies, one of the deepest sources of anguish for
those left behind to mourn is their conviction
that there is nothing they can now do to help
their loved one who has gone…[97]

These next sections look at what the believer and his or her support team can do before, during, and after death. Much of the following material has been introduced in previous sections, albeit in a different manner, so rather than separating the faith traditions into their own subsections, this chapter will take a more comparative approach.

6.1 What a Believer Can Do to Before, During, and After Death

As mentioned previously, a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner is encouraged by her teacher and the teachings to practice diligently throughout her lifetime in order to discover her True Nature in this lifetime or to lay the groundwork for an auspicious rebirth after the bardo of Becoming. The practitioner has myriad practices to choose from including meditations on death itself, transference of consciousness through Phowa, and the use of mantras, mudras, and visualizations during sadhana practices. In addition, Tibetan Buddhist practitioners have the guidance of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to

[97] Sogyal, *The Tibetan Book of Living*, 299.

instruct them on what to expect from the dying experience and to remind them to wake up – that all of their experiences are illusions arising from their own minds.

But Tibetan Buddhist practitioners are not supposed to end their practices when the time of death arrives. At the time of death, two things count: "whatever we have done in our lives, and what state of mind we are in at that moment."[98] One of the reasons for practicing well and living well during one's life is so that at the time of death there are few fears or regrets. As the death process begins, the practitioner should dedicate all of her compassion and positive actions in life towards the desire for all sentient beings to have happiness and enter the path towards enlightenment. She should also pray that she realize her True Nature or be reborn in whatever place would be most beneficial to other sentient beings. If the practitioner is accomplished enough, she can rest in True Nature as much as possible through practices like Guru Yoga. Additionally, a practitioner could practice what Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Lama Yeshe calls the "Five Powers":1) practice detachment from one's body, family, and possessions, 2) make vows of positive intentions for helping others in the next life, 3) realize beyond a doubt that any problems in life were caused by the self-cherishing ego, 4) recite prayers to never be separate from one's teachers or teachings, 5) rely on one's training to die peacefully like a Buddha.[99]

After death, the Tibetan Buddhist practitioner is still expected to use her years of training to practice in the bardo of Dharmata and the bardo of Becoming. If she cannot rest in True Nature, she should at least remember that all sights and sounds are coming

[98] Sogyal, *The Tibetan Book of Living*, 223.
[99] Zopa. "Lama Zopa Rinpoche's Advice Book."

from her own mind. The famous, historical teacher, whom some Tibetans consider the second Buddha of this time, instructed,

> All the peaceful and wrathful forms are the natural forms of your mind. All sounds are your own sounds…have no doubt about that. If you do feel doubt, you will be thrown into samsara [cyclic existence]. Having resolved this to be self-display, if you rest wide awake in luminous emptiness, then simply in that you will…become enlightened. Even if you are cast into samsara you will not go there [you will not see it as samsara].[100]

If in the bardos, the practitioner cannot realize that everything is really a projection of her mind, she should at least try to recall her teacher, a mantra, or her meditational yidam for support. Again, these recollections are none other than mind-projections, but they may help stabilize the practitioner's mind causing her to either become enlightened or to have a positive rebirth.

For the practitioner, having a plan of action that progresses from this life through to the next life could be very comforting, especially if she has experienced the practices as having a positive effect on her life, and if she has a belief in reincarnation (not all American Buddhists do). Then even if her practice is not strong, she will have the belief that the next life (or expression of the karmic consciousness), will be such that she will be able to continue to practice. But some practitioners may still feel scared and uncertain, especially if their practice is not strong; they do not believe in rebirth; they have led a negative life, or their family is reacting to the death in an unhelpful manner. In such

[100] Ñaṅ-ral Ñi-ma-'od-zer, *Dakini Teachings, 154.*

cases, in addition to listening to the client, the caregiver can ask the client what practices have given her support in the past. Suggesting that the client visualized being bathed in the comforting light of her teacher or meditation deity may bring a sense of calm and focus. Additionally, doing Tonglen with and for the client, or saying prayers or mantras with her may help the client reconnect with her practice rather than focusing on fears for her family, her possible suffering, and the unknown. Talking to the client about the Five Powers may also help her regain a sense of balance and develop a spiritual plan of action.

Unlike Tibetan Buddhism, Protestantism is not generally considered a practice oriented tradition. Protestants are in essence told that, from a religious standpoint, there is nothing one can do to prepare for death, or life after death, since the outcome rests on God's grace. But their tradition reminds them that "even as Jesus brought the terror of his own death within his relation to God as an affirmation of his life, so we too can bring our death, when it appears, within the relation we have to God in Christ."[101] So a Protestant's understanding of the death and resurrection of Christ may be reflected in the way he relates to his own death. If a client has concerns about his own death, about death being evil, or about how the resurrection relates to his current situation, he may just need to talk and voice his concerns while working out the meaning of the scriptures himself, but if a deeper discussion is requested, it may be beneficial for the client to have a minister from his own tradition to talk with, since each denominations has its own way of approaching the subject.

[101] Anderson, *Theology, Death, and Dying*, 129.

Though there are no death practices in a similar vein to those of Buddhist meditations, during their lives, Protestants are exhorted to accept Christ as their savior, become closer to God through prayer, and help those in need during their lifetime as Christ did. Prayer is a significant practice as was discussed in chapter five. It is a life-long practice for many Christians, allowing them to communicate with God, and it is a practice which would be encouraged up until the point of death if possible; however, as mentioned previously, the prayers would not affect whether one received God's grace. For some though, it could affect how open they were to receiving God's grace. For some Protestants this is an important distinction. God may extend His grace, but if the recipient is not open to receiving the grace, through the acceptance of Christ as Savior, then in some traditions, the recipient may not be able to enter into heaven, thus going to hell.

This may be of grave concern to some clients. They may wonder, not only if they have received God's grace, but if they have been open to receiving it. Again, for many, this angst may be temporary, requiring only a sympathetic ear and some prayer; for others though, ministerial intervention and assurance from the client's tradition may be required.

Another practice for many Protestants is reading the *Bible*. It not only teaches them about God's Word, it may provide comfort in the form of Christ's teachings, and it may make them feel more connected to their congregation, which is important since isolation is often an issue for the dying. *Bible* passages may also elicit comforting memories of other times the *Bible* has been read. The caregiver may direct the client to passages mentioned in earlier chapters and to *Old Testament* verses such as Psalm 13:5

which says, “But I have trusted in thy steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation.” Or Isaiah 26:10, “Thy dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!”

These practices of prayer and biblical readings during a person’s life time, while not ensuring salvation, may bring a client closer to God, thus brining him comfort and hope at the time of death. In Protestantism, however, there are no practices that the deceased can do at the exact time of death or after death. Whether the person goes straight to heaven or hell, or waits in some kind of transitional state until a later judgment day, the person’s fate is solely in the hands of God. For some Protestants this inability to act or control may be disconcerting; for others, the act of surrender may bring comfort. Either way, the caregivers may support the client through the coming transition by listening, and if requested, through prayer and scripture reading.

Though Christians are taught to surrender to the grace of God while Tibetan Buddhists are taught to take charge of their own “salvation,”[102] faith in the teachings is important to both Tibetan Buddhism and Protestantism. Even though Buddhists are taught to try the teachings out for themselves rather than taking someone’s word for their efficacy, faith is required regarding the post-life bardos. Both traditions also turn to prayers and sacred texts for comfort as well as for teachings, and clients of these belief systems may all benefit from caregivers who are good listeners, open minded to variations in traditions, and willing to meet the clients where they are in their practices and beliefs. Caregivers may offer to say prayers, read texts, and participate in ritual acts

[102] This is true even for those who believe that there are deities who can help them along the path.

which will help ease the client's transition out of this life as he continues along the path of his spiritual journey.

6.2 What a Believer's Teacher/Minister Can Do Before, During, and After Death

As discussed earlier, Tibetan Buddhist teachers invariably instruct practitioners to meditate on and do practices to prepare for death. Christian ministers, however, rarely speak of death to the living. Their teachings focus on accepting Jesus Christ as one's savior. God's grace, which is not given according to a person's desires or actions, is the only path to salvation.

However, both traditions believe that a person should die free from conflicts and without harboring guilt. Both Tibetan Buddhist teachers and Protestant ministers would strongly recommend reconciling any conflicts and coming to closure on any issues that stand in the way of inner peace. Both would also be open to hearing any last confessions from their followers, though that would be more for the peace of the person him or herself rather than a requirement in order to be saved as it is often seen to be in the Catholic church.

At the time of death, if a Protestant minister is present, he or she will listen to and try to comfort the parishioner as much as possible. They may pray together, read from the *Bible*, and talk about spiritual issues, but the main resources for counseling the dying available to ministers seems to be non-sectarian listening and counseling techniques described in books on palliative care. According to current Protestant beliefs, after one accepts Jesus as Lord and Savior, there is not much preparation that needs to be done; the parishioner's soul's salvation is in God's hands alone.

In Tibetan Buddhism, historically the teacher often played a major role at the time of a student's death. Today in the West, however, many teachers travel much of the year and have hundreds or thousands of students, so often Westerners are taught what to do on their own or with the support of their spiritual community. However, the students are reminded that they can always connect with their teacher through a practice called Guru Yoga and by resting in the nature of their mind if they are at that point in their ability to practice. Quite often, even if a teacher is not nearby at the time of death, if notified, he or she will do practices for the student.

Traditionally, a Tibetan Buddhist teacher will give comfort and help a student release any last attachments to this life and remind her how important it is to be relaxed, happy, and ready for death. The student is told to practice to whatever extent is possible. If Phowa (transference of consciousness) was practiced well during life, the student will be reminded to do this at the time of death. The teacher often will also do Phowa for the student right at the time of death. The teacher may also do the purification practice called Shitro and/or read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to the deceased during the 49 days that the mental body of the dead person could be in the bardos of Dharmata and Becoming. This is done in order to remind the practitioner that he can be liberated if he realizes that all he is experiencing is the product of his own mind. It is also said that if called, a teacher who is a master of the teachings, can help guide a student in the bardo of Becoming to liberation or a fortunate rebirth.

The Tibetan Buddhist teacher may also remind the relatives and friends of the deceased not to cry excessively or speak harshly or longingly for the person right after

death since it is believed that the dead person's senses are magnified after death and that hearing and seeing his or her loved one's cry and argue could confuse the dead person and strengthen his or her attachments to the life that must be left. Attachments and negative feelings just prior to and after death are said to greatly affect the type of rebirth a person is likely to have.

Regardless of the differences in practice and advice, ministers and Tibetan Buddhist teachers are often very important people at the time of their parishioner's death. Their presence, whether in person or in memory, may remind the dying person that despite any fear and uncertainty, he has already been provided with the spiritual advice needed to support and sustain himself through a potentially difficult time.

If the spiritual teacher cannot visit in person, the caregiver may ask if the client would like someone to contact his minister or Buddhist teacher. A phone call or email may go along way towards making the client feel close to the teachings of his tradition. If personal contact is not possible, books or recordings of the spiritual leader's teachings, if available, may not only give support, but give the caregiver another opening to discuss with the client how his beliefs can support him through his end life transition.

6.3 What a Believer's Family and Friends Can Do Before, During, and After Death

Even before a sickness or diagnosis, in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, family and friends might meditate and do other group practices together, supporting each other's spiritual beliefs, but in general, the practices focus on self-cultivation rather than on practicing for another person; though, prayer for the benefit of others is common. However, once a person is ill, family and friends will generally do their best to comfort

the dying person and help make sure that she has done what is needed in order to spiritually and psychologically die without strong regrets or attachments. Family and friends who know Buddhist teachings will practice with the person up to the time of death and then continue to practice for the person after she has died. It is said that those family members or friends with the strongest ties and deepest practice are the ones who can help the deceased in the bardo of Becoming the most, but all loved ones can do practice for the person, reminding her to connect with her teacher and the teachings rather than getting swept away into rebirth. If the dying person has requested that her family follow Tibetan Buddhist traditions, then loved ones must also remember not to show strong emotions or touch the body roughly for awhile after the person has died, since some believe that could bring about attachment and negative, or at least confused, emotions in the deceased at a time when she should be focused on liberation or at least a fortunate rebirth.

A less fortunate rebirth is also a concern to Protestants, especially since their teachings say that re-birth in hell is an eternal sentence. In Protestant Christianity, it is common to pray for another person's well being and salvation even prior to any illness, and faithful Protestant family and friends generally would be concerned if they believed a loved one did not have faith in God and Christ. Thus, even before an illness, a person may be prayed for and counseled in Christian ways.

During the dying process it is important for the loved ones to comfort the dying person and help him reconcile any affairs that are interfering with a sense of peace, just as it is in the Tibetan tradition. Prayer may provide comfort, connection, and reassurance

of God's love, but once again, salvation is in God's hands alone, so technically, there is nothing friends or family can do to help the outcome of their loved one's eternal destination before or after death. That belief, of course, does nothing to diminish the value of the love, support, and comfort given to the dying person up to the time of death. And despite the tradition's teachings, many family members do pray that their loved one goes to heaven in the belief that God answers prayers, so why not this one. Additionally prayer can give comfort during grief, help the bereaved continue to feel connected to the loved one, and remind the faithful of their continued connection to and faith in God.

For the caregiver lucky enough to have a client surrounded by well-adjusted, spiritually supportive friends and family, the outside support needed by the client may be minimal. For the client, knowing that she will be prayed and practiced for by loved ones as she is dying, and even after her death in the Tibetan tradition, may be all of the non-medical/material support she needs. Family and friends may also be relied on to arrange for visits from the religious community and obtain any books or recordings needed.

However, in some cases, the family and friends end up needing caregiver support too. The caregiver must remember that in many cases decades, or generations, of family dynamics will most likely not be corrected during a time of grief and transition, but it may be that if the client's significant others are asked many of the same questions asked of the client, such as what spiritual practice or belief has sustained them through difficult times in the past, they will be reminded that they can bring that spiritual support to the loved one. In such cases, family and friends may be able to find a way to put aside

differences in order to rally support for the dying. The reminder to focus on their faith and practice may also give the bereaved strength as they go through the grieving process.

6.4 Summary

In both traditions the client's personal spiritual experience and practice, the teachings of his spiritual guides, and the love and support of family and friends play a critical role in guiding a person through the dying and death process. Out of necessity, this paper, speaks in broad generalities about each religious tradition and its followers; thus clients within a tradition may have very different experiences and expectations, as will their minister or teacher and their friends and family. But with this rough guide, caregivers should have a base from which to investigate their clients' spiritual beliefs and needs, and an introduction into how a tradition instructs its spiritual guides and believers to support the dying. Individuals will act according to their own understanding of these teachings, mixed with their life experiences and ability to deal with transition and grief, but a caregiver's basic understanding of a tradition, may help shape the atmosphere around the dying in a more healthy, supportive manner than if the client and his support group were left to work through the transition process on their own.

Chapter 7: How Each Tradition Might Inform the Other Regarding Spiritual Care During the Death Process

To be inclusive, we can learn to speak
another language, whether it is an actual
language or the language of faith.[103]

Interfaith discussions allow participants to broaden their minds in relation to other faith traditions, deepen their own belief systems through self-inquiry and the need to explain their beliefs to others, and allow people to discover a deep sense of commonality rather than focusing only on differences. But interfaith interactions can also pave the way for cross-pollination of ideas and practices. This has been occurring for millennia; no religion is pure and free from borrowing. This section will look at a few of the ways that Protestantism and Tibetan Buddhism might offer each other supportive techniques for helping believers through the dying and death process, without requiring major modifications of views.

Much has been said about how a caregiver can use a client's own beliefs to support her through the dying process, but in some cases another system's practices may also prove beneficial, especially when explained using terminology which fits the client's frame of reference. From Tibetan Buddhism, the practices of Guru Yoga, Phowa, Tonglen, and breath meditation have all been successfully used with dying Protestant clients.

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[103] Foerster, *For Praying Out Loud*, 29.

When taught or performed in a modified fashion, Guru Yoga and Phowa seem very similar, except that in Guru Yoga, there may or may not be a merging depending on who is teaching the technique. The following practice, based on instructions from *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying,*[104] is a method which could be said to incorporate both yidham practices and is suitable for people from most spiritual traditions.

1. Ask the client to get into a comfortable position, with as straight a back as possible given the client's situation. Have the client close his eyes and take three deep breaths to relax the mind and body. Guide the client to visualize the sky or space in front of himself. In that expanse, have him invoke whatever spiritual being or symbol is most meaningful for him and represents truth, wisdom, and compassion: God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Mother Mary, a dove, or just loving light. If the client cannot visualize clearly, sensing the presence of the being or symbol is fine.
2. Have the client send out a light from his heart as a greeting to the visualization.
3. Offer a prayer, or ask the client to offer a prayer. The client might ask for guidance, for any unwholesome thoughts to be purified, for forgiveness, and for his life and death to be of benefit to all other beings.
4. The client should then imagine that the spiritual being in front of him is moved by the prayer, smiles, and sends light of love and compassion back to the client. The client should feel the light bathing his whole body, cleansing all negativity, fear, stress. He rests in this loving, purifying light for as long as he desires. The practice could end at this step. The client may thank the being, and say goodbye,

[104] Fremantle, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 215-216.

or just know that the spiritual being is always there bathing him with love even when the client's mind is elsewhere. The client could be told that any time he feels alone, scared, or just wants to be bathed in a feeling of warmth and love, he can bring this visualization to mind again.

5. The process can also continue with a merging and resting in a sense of oneness. The client feels himself totally purified and filled with the light of loving kindness. Slowly he lets himself totally dissolve into the light; then, the light rises up to merge with the spiritual being, which also dissolves into light.
6. The client may remain in this state of loving oneness for as long as he desires to.

Some clients may feel embarrassed or skeptical about this practice at first, but after a time or two, they may take comfort in being able to invoke a spiritual being who baths them in love when they are feeling lonely or wake up in fear in the middle of the night.

Guru yoga and Phowa can also be used by caregivers on the client's behalf. The caregiver invokes a spiritual being who has meaning to her, but rather than visualizing herself being bathed in its light, the caregiver sees the client (and even the client's loved ones) being bathed, purified, and merging into the light of love. Even if the caregiver does not believe that the client will directly benefit by having this practice done for him, just the fact that the caregiver is acting peacefully and compassionately on the client's behalf, may affect the atmosphere in the room.

Tonglen is a type of Tibetan Buddhist compassion meditation, described in section 4.2.5, which is non-sectarian and may be easily practiced by clients and caretakers alike.

But a basic breath meditation may be a technique that many clients are already familiar with. The meditation trainings developed by John Kabbot-Zinn, for example, help clients work with pain, among other issues. It is widely taught in urban hospitals, hospices, and specialty clinics. In the simplest form of breath meditation, the client, whose spine should be as straight as possible, simply breaths in naturally while focusing on the sensations in the nose, chest, or abdomen felt while inhaling; she then exhales, mentally counting, "one". The client then inhales focusing on the breathing sensations; then exhales, counting, "two". The client can count up to ten then start over again, but most likely her mind will wander. When this happens, she gently and non-judgmentally goes back to observing her breath, restarting the count at one.

Breath meditation is found in almost all Buddhist traditions and can take on many variations. More information can be found in most books and websites discussing meditation, so no further detail will be given here, but techniques like breath meditation may help the client feel more calm and in control (or able to let go of control), and feel a reduction in pain. It might also help them find a still center where they can rest and come to terms with their death.[105]

Because the ideas around Buddhist meditation have reached much of the mainstream population through articles about the health benefits of meditation, Protestant clients may now also be open to exploring Christian Centering prayer which has its roots in the Catholic tradition. More information on that may be found in books by Thomas Keeting.

[105] Hawter, "Death and Dying in Tibetan."

Talking to the deceased is also another practice that might be accepted and helpful to Protestants. Despite the fact that their spiritual tradition says that praying for the dead's salvation is inappropriate because that would be suggesting that they had the power to influence God's grace, plan, and judgment, many Protestants may feel the need to in someway communicate with their deceased loved one as part of their grieving process. It might feel hopeful for some to know that in certain spiritual traditions, like Tibetan Buddhism, there is the strong belief that the deceased can still hear the living. According to the Tibetan tradition, for the first twenty-one days after death, most beings are still more connected to their previous life then their next one.[106] Because of this belief, family members may continue to say their goodbyes, talk to them about what is going on with grieving family and friends, and encourage them to remember their teacher and their practices. This ability to talk with the deceased and have some belief that they are being heard may be a great comfort to the grieving family, but may also help comfort the dying knowing that their family will still try to communicate with them during what might be their loneliest moments. Though talking to the dead may go against some Protestants' beliefs, the scriptures are ambiguous about what actually happens right after death. So if the dying or grieving might benefit from this practice, it may be appropriate to discuss this option with them.

One final Tibetan Buddhist belief to be discussed in this section is the appearance of the peaceful and wrathful visions that appear in the bardo of Dharmata. Even though meditations on and practices for the bardos would most likely not be appropriate for most Protestants on their death bed, many non-Tibetan Buddhists wonder if non-Tibetans also

[106] Hawter, "Death and Dying in Tibetan."

see the Tibetan yidams during the bardo of Dharmata even if they have never encountered them before. According to teachers like Sogyal Rinpoche and Bokar Rinpoche, the visions seen in the bardos are based on the imprints in people's minds. "However, if the form of phenomena changes, the substance of them stays the same. Dazzling lights and light bodies that appear are simply an expression of the nature of our mind. But this nature of the mind is one and the same for all beings."[107]

The experience of grief, while not one and the same for all beings, is still basically a universal experience for all humans. This is one area where Protestants might be able to assist Tibetan Buddhists. Tibetan Buddhism does speak frequently of compassion and ways of working with suffering. Traditionally families would be together in grief. The bereaved would have their family, teacher, neighbors, and their spiritual practices, which they had been raised with, to assist them through the grieving process. But most of the teachings, at least those translated into English, tend to focus on how to prepare for one's own death, and how to use the death of others and one's own suffering as material for practice. Little seems to be written about helping the grieving family and friends. Sogyal Rinpoche includes a few pages in his book, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, on helping the bereaved, and he is not totally alone, but teachings like the following from Lama Zopa seem to be more prevalent. He begins sympathetically with, "You feel very upset at separation, thinking you will never meet that person again, but you will definitely in the future because of the strong connection the two of you have

[107] Bokar, *Death and the Art of Dying*, 36.

established."[108] But he later continues,

> Some of your grief and suffering at having lost a loved one is not because your friend had to follow their karma, created the karma, and had to be reborn in the lower reams and suffer….This upset is due to cherishing the "I", cherishing oneself, and then losing the object of attachment. It's the self-cherishing thought in your mind that's making your upset and unhappy.

While attachment and self clinging may be the primary causes of grief, this advice may not be the most compassionate lesson to discover shortly after the death of a loved one. If an American had been raised in Tibetan Buddhism, surrounded by family and friends who had similar traditions and practices, and were around for support, the teaching above might be understood in a different context, but for an adult convert seeking support in her new tradition, this advice might seem too harsh especially in the early stages of grief.

Protestant literature on the other hand, though lacking in explanations of the dying and death processes, is abundant in advice and scriptural references for coping with grief and helping others through such difficult times. It may be up to those in the newly emerging fields of Buddhist ministry and Buddhist chaplaincy in the West to borrow from Christianity and Western psychology to create an American-Tibetan Buddhist body of compassionate literature on grieving within the Tibetan Buddhist context. And while most American Tibetan Buddhists are not isolationists, if they have rejected what might

[108] Zopa. "Lama Zopa Rinpoche's Advice Book."

be deemed as a "church-like" atmosphere for a once weekly silent meditation sitting, then the development of a spiritually based grief support network may be lacking in many Buddhist communities. The relatively recent experimentation with creating the positions of Buddhist minister and Buddhist chaplain, based primarily on Protestant models, may, over time, help to create more multifaceted Buddhist communities, offering in-depth, spiritually based grief support.

One other primary aspect of the Protestant tradition, which Western Tibetan Buddhists might consider adopting to a greater degree, is prayer. As mentioned earlier in the section on prayer as a Tibetan Buddhist practice (4.2.6), 45% of all American Buddhists say that they pray regularly, and traditionally, Asian Tibetan Buddhists pray both to other beings and to deepen an understanding of their True Nature. But it is not uncommon for Tibetan Buddhist converts from the Judeo-Christian traditions to reject prayer as a supplication to "other power;" however while growing up, converts may have learned to use prayer to attain comfort and to feel like they had a means of taking action during difficult times. For some Western Buddhists, leaving their birth tradition also meant leaving behind tools of support during difficult times. The Western Tibetan Buddhist communities may do well to educate converts on the meaning and uses of prayer in Buddhism, and how it may be claimed or re-claimed as a tool for enlightenment as well as for comfort during times of grief, fear, and stress.

Some Buddhist writers for American audiences have been accused of dumbing down Buddhism to make it seem safer and more palatable for Western consumption, and interfaith discussion groups are often encouraged to search for even tenuous similarities,

often leading to facetious comparisons of concepts like heaven to nirvana, as a way of finding common ground for inter-religious dialog. This section is not intended to make generic either tradition, but instead, it is meant to offer caregivers and clients a way to appreciate each other's spiritual traditions and perhaps allow for the addition of new tools in the caregivers tool chest.

Conclusion

We have asked the [client] to be our teacher
so that we may learn more about the final
stages of life with all its anxieties fears and
hopes.[109]

According to the Pew Forum on Religion, 86% of all Buddhists and 83% of all mainline Christians surveyed agreed with the statement, "Many religions can lead to eternal life."[110] Though much of this paper has illustrated key differences in beliefs and expectations that clients and their loved ones may have about death and the dying process based on their spiritual beliefs, the Pew study would imply that the majority of clients and caregivers would be respectful of traditions which differ from their own. However, discussions about spiritual beliefs around death and dying, especially at the end of a client's life, might be difficult to have especially if the client and caregiver come from very different traditions. Having at least some knowledge of the various religious traditions' beliefs about death could give end-of-life teams a deeper understanding of the needs of their clients, thus making the clients' passages as meaningful and fulfilling as possible.

This paper got its genesis when I, an American Tibetan Buddhist practitioner, began training as a chaplain and began working with hospice clients who had been raised in a variety of Protestant traditions. Though being listened to was often the primary need

[109] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, Preface.
[110] Pew Research, "The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey."

of the clients, I felt that I could be of even greater service to them if I had a deeper understanding of their traditions. That depth of understanding would also be greatly enhanced as I continued to explore my own spiritual tradition's beliefs around death and dying, not just from the teachings I had received, but from the tradition's texts themselves.

It is my hope that religious comparisons such as those given here will pique more caregiver's curiosity about the deeper beliefs of their own traditions as well as those of their clients. In this manner, interfaith understanding may deepen, and the caregiver may be able to more skillfully and compassionately assist the dying through the client's own spiritual belief system (which may or may not fully match that of their traditions' beliefs). If the caregivers are even more deeply grounded in their own tradition, that may help sustain them in careers that have high burnout rates; additionally they may be able to offer practices or reflections from their own traditions to clients, if the clients are open and there is no intention of conversion. Through researching this paper I was able to gain a deeper respect for both traditions and acquire a more fundamental understanding of how one's spiritual beliefs can affect how one dies, how one grieves at the death of a beloved client, and how experience of being around death can cause one to reflect on and question long held beliefs.

This paper has barely scratched the surface of topics related to death and dying between the Protestant and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, let alone those of other traditions. Future studies might explore issues such as organ donation, disposal of the body, belief in hell realms, grief support, and memorial/funeral traditions. It is hoped that this paper will

serve as a springboard for further exploration and discussion of the solitary journey from which there is no escape, but for which the send off might be made a little more joyful through compassionate understanding.

Watching a peaceful death of a human being
reminds us of a falling star; one of the
million lights in a vast sky that flares up for
a brief moment .... To be [caregiver] to a
dying patient makes us aware of the
uniqueness of each individual in this vase
sea of humanity.[111]

[111] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 276.

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