

Consciousness Transference at the Time of Death

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Coming Home to the Pureland

Phowa or the transference of consciousness at the time of death is the sixth yoga of the Tibetan 12th century scholar Naropa. A practice in the Bon religion, phowa is a powerful practice involving intention, psychophysical preparation, visualization, and breath that can be done for oneself or another at the time of death. I prefer to strengthen phowa practice by doing a series of psychophysical practices as outlined by Naropa. The physical preparation done when training to do phowa helps the practitioner to purify and gather the energy necessary to do the practice effectively.

I first learned Phowa practice from the late Venerable Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche. He felt that it was profoundly important to teach this practice to health care professionals since the practice can directly benefit the deceased. He also felt that it is one of the most powerful practices you and I can learn as it brings us to liberation to the Pureland at the moment of death. Later, my Nepalese student, a Bon practitioner, Tempa Dukte Lama, reviewed the practice with me, and we began to teach it to others from the Buddhist as well as the Bon perspective.

The detailed practice itself is accessible and powerful. If done with commitment by a practitioner, signs can appear, like a small swelling or itching at the crown. Even clear fluid or blood has appeared at the crown of those who practice vigorously. Although some people find this practice unusual, many teachers of Tibetan Buddhism and the Bon religion feel that it is an important offering to those who are dying or have died. They teach that most of us will not be able to sustain our liberated state when we die, and Phowa can intervene in our disturbed state of mind and bring us to a state of radiance and bliss known as the Pureland.

Practitioners also have said that after the cessation of the mental function, our energy gathers at the heart and can move out of one of the nine apertures of the body. The reason why we practice

Phowa is to develop the habit that the consciousness will move through the top of the head into the so-called Pureland. It is believed that this practice can make it possible for an individual to realize a pure state of being in death. I have done Phowa practice for two decades, and my sense is that this is a beneficial practice to learn for ourselves and to do on behalf of others.

The practice involves a number of elements. First you cultivate commitment and an altruistic heart. Then you do the preparatory physical practices. Then resting in meditation, you visualize the elements of the practice. Then you enter the practice fully. You complete the practice by dedicating the merit of your efforts to the well being of others.

You begin by examining your inner most request that all beings may be freed from suffering. You recognize the futility of your self-centeredness and promise to cherish others. You want with all your heart to help others be peaceful and happy. You then prepare to do the physical practices that will purify and energize the body. During the course of these practices, you give special attention to your breath.

*Meditation: Phowa Practice**Physical Preparatory Practices*

1) You sit in meditation posture, with your spine straight and your legs crossed. Your hands are on your knees. You now raise your right hand, and close your left nostril with your middle finger, while gazing left. Breathe in slowly through your right nostril. Now, you close your right nostril by pressing your thumb against it, and breathe out slowly through your left nostril, throwing the breath at the end of the exhalation. You move your eyes to the right and gaze. Now inhale slowly through your left nostril. You press your middle finger against your left nostril and breathe out slowly through your right nostril, throwing the breath at the end of the exhalation. You now gaze forward, and breathe in and out slowly through both nostrils, throwing the breath at the end of the exhalation. Note: women do this pattern but from right to left. Do this nine times and then relax.

2) You sit in meditation posture with your spine straight and your legs crossed. Your hands are on your knees and your fingers are wrapped around your thumbs, making a fist. Rest your fists vertically on your knees, letting your elbows be straight. Bring your awareness to your breath. You breathe into the abdomen slowly and deeply. Now fill your upper lungs. Finally, you take three final sips of air, and imagine that you are packing air into your central channel. Silently, you swallow and press down the saliva into your throat as you swallow. You now bring your awareness to your pelvic floor and squeeze and lift all of the muscles in the pelvic area. You feel as though you are putting further pressure on the wind in your central channel. You retain your breath for as long as possible. While doing this, let your awareness be in the area just below your navel. You release your breath through both nostrils, throwing it at the end of the exhalation. You do this nine times, and then relax in meditation.

3) You sit in the same position as described above with your hands in fists on your knees and your spine straight. Bring your awareness to your breath. Now gently take hold of your right toe with your right hand, and your left toe with your left hand. Let your body drop forward. You inhale as your torso begins to circle clockwise with the body is moving up. You exhale as your torso circles down. Do this three times, synchronizing your breath with your body. Now you do the same in a counterclockwise direction. With your spine straight, beginning with your in breath, you move your torso slowly from left to right, stretching your upper body. Now you move your torso from right to left beginning with your inbreath, stretching your upper body.

You do this three times. You now snap your solar plexus back and forth three times, inhaling and exhaling vigorously through your nose, throwing your breath on the exhalation. After doing this nine times, you rest in meditation.

4) You sit in the same posture as described above with hands in fists on your knees and your spine straight.

You tense all of the muscles in your body and inhale as you raise your arms directly in front of your chest, stretching out your arms to their full length in front of you. You exhale. On your inhalation, you slowly move both of your arms so they are pointing left, with your hands still in fists. On your exhalation, you slowly slide your right hand across the upper part of your chest to your right shoulder, touching your shoulder with your fingertips, as you bring your left fist to your heart area. Now, with strong inhalations and exhalations through the nose, you vigorously snap your left elbow against your rib cage three times.

Reverse this procedure. You do this nine times, and then rest in meditation.

5) You sit in meditation with your knees on the floor instead of crossed legs. Your spine is straight. Your hands are resting on your knees. You turn your palms upward and curl them like hooks. You press the thumb into the first knuckle of the middle finger, with the fingers pressed around the thumb. On your inhalation, you raise your arms slowly and with tension directly above your head. Your hooked hands are facing behind you. On your exhalation, you change the direction of your hands so they face forward, and you lower your arms and hands, bringing them all the way to your knees. Do this practice nine times, and then rest in meditation.

6) You sit in a kneeling meditation posture with the spine straight. You slowly bend your body over, putting your hands flat on the floor. You lower your head between your arms on your out breath. Now you slowly, with intensity and on your in breath, you raise your head as you straighten your spine. Your hands are still flat on the floor. As you bring your head back down, forcefully expel all the air in your lungs with the sound of "Hah." Do this nine times.

7) You now stand and shake out your entire body, starting with your feet. Flex your finger joints by pulling at your fingers. Shake your whole body loose. Massage any part of your body that feels stiff or congested.

The Core Practice

Now sit in meditation posture.

Visualize a luminous being who is the embodiment of purity and enlightenment. This presence embodies love, compassion, truth and goodness. This being is sitting in front of you. Focus your awareness, with complete commitment on this being. See in this one's eyes the expression of kindness. See light streaming from this one's heart in the colors of the rainbow. This light streams into your heart. Feel this being connect with you in an open and compassionate way. Feel yourself being filled with the radiance of this being. Feel this radiance concentrating in the place of the heart. This radiance is not only bliss and love but also has the capacity to purify you, to heal you. You feel at this very moment that you are completely immersed in the light of this loving being.

Feeling the vast compassion of this one sitting across from you, you can offer this prayer:

*“Through your kindness, blessing and help,
and through the strength of the light
that is streaming from you,
may all of my harmful actions of the past
and my unhappiness in this and other lifetimes be purified.
May I be fully forgiven for any harm that I have caused others.
May I realize this practice and die a good and peaceful death.
May I be able to help others through the triumph of my death.”*

This being now dissolves completely into the radiance in its heart and flows as light into your heart.

Now, above your head visualize a being that embodies luminosity and purity. It is this being whom you will enter at the moment of your death.

Next, in front of your spine, you visualize a blue channel the width of your little finger. This channel goes from the crown of your head to just below your navel. On either side of this central channel, you visualize two smaller channels that are to the right and left of the blue central channel. If you are a man, white channel is to the right of the central channel and the red channel is to the left of the central channel. If you are a woman, the white channel is on your left and the red channel is on the right.

Visualize the white and the red channels connecting with your nostrils. When you inhale, visualize air moving into these two channels which open to the base of the central channel. You now breathe in deeply and hold your breath, swallow, and raise your pelvic muscles as you did in the second physical practice. As you do this, visualize air being

forced out of the bottoms of the white and the red channels into the base of the central channel. You now visualize a white drop in your crown center just above the central channel. The drop is the size of a pea and luminous white. This is the male essence that transforms from anger into clarity when it descends into the heart center.

You visualize a red drop above your genitals and just below the central channel. The drop is the size of a pea and blood red. This is the female essence that transforms from desire into bliss when it ascends into the heart center.

Drawing in your breath deeply, you visualize the white male drop being propelled by the psychic wind from the crown down through the blue central channel to the heart center, and the red female drop propelled upward by the psychic wind from the genital area through the blue central channel to the heart. Both drops meet in the heart and surround your consciousness that has gathered into the center of the heart at the time of death. The consciousness element is the size of a pearl. It is transparent, like a bubble, and shimmers with colors of the rainbow.

You now gather all of your breath. With forceful intention and energy, visualizing the combined male and female essences and your consciousness as a shimmering rainbow drop at the heart, you propel this drop through the blue central channel to the throat area with seven pushes of energy and breath using the syllable “hik.” With another seven “hiks,” push the drop to the crown, and with the next seven “hiks,” push it into the heart of the luminous being above you. At the moment of death, you accomplish the practice by moving the luminous drop directly from your own heart into the heart of the pure being abiding above you.

Next in the practice, visualize the white drop descending from your head, moving the essence of your mind into your heart center. With the descending of the white drop, you see an immaculate autumn sky filled with brilliant sunlight. Imagine the red drop ascending from your pelvic area, the essence of your life energy to the heart. As this red drop is ascending, you visualize a vast and clear copper-red autumn sunset.

Visualize them encircling the drop that is your consciousness at the center of your heart. See it as a luminescent pearl. With a forceful exhalation and the sound of “Hik” propel this transparent pearl through the blue central channel to your throat, then in the next sequence to your crown, and in the third sequence of seven “hiks,” out of the top of your head and into the heart of the enlightened being whom you have visualized.

Do this practice of the projection of your consciousness 21 times.

Now allow your mind to be very relaxed and open. Let go of the visualization of projecting the drop, allowing your mind to become very spacious. Identify with this clear, still, open state of mind.

Dedicate the merit of this practice to all beings.