

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

**ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600**

UMI[®]

Sacred healing, health and death in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition

Kathleen Anne MacDonald

**Faculty of Religious Studies
McGill University
Montreal, Quebec**

**October 2001
Final Copy**

**A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment
of the requirements of a degree of Master of Arts**

©Kathleen Anne MacDonald 2001



**National Library
of Canada**

**Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services**

**385 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada**

**Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada**

**Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques**

**385, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada**

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-75241-0

Canada

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----------|
| ABSTRACT | Page i |
| RÉSUMÉ | Page ii |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | Page iii |
| INTRODUCTION | Page 1 |
| CHAPTER I | |
| DEATH, HEALING AND HEALTH | |
| Death | Page 5 |
| Western Healing | Page 8 |
| Eastern Healing | Page 13 |
| Taoist Tradition | Page 17 |
| Indian Traditions | Page 19 |
| Chapter Summary | Page 29 |
| CHAPTER II | |
| HEALING AND DEATH IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM | Page 30 |
| Buddhism and Healing | Page 32 |
| Tibetan Buddhism and Healing | Page 36 |
| Mind and Body Connection | Page 37 |
| The Preliminaries | Page 40 |
| Vajrayāna Buddhism | Page 41 |
| Anuttarayoga Tantra | Page 45 |
| Chakras and Subtle Physiology | Page 48 |
| Dying and Death in Tibetan Buddhism | Page 54 |
| Chapter Summary | Page 61 |
| CHAPTER III | |
| BARDO TEACHINGS AND HEALING AFTER DEATH | Page 65 |
| Bardo Teachings | Page 69 |
| Bardo Thödrol | Page 70 |
| Chönyi Bardo | Page 73 |
| Sidpa Bardo | Page 75 |
| Rebirth | Page 78 |
| Root Verses | Page 80 |
| Phowa | Page 81 |
| Tibetan Buddhism and Suicide | Page 87 |
| Care for the Dying | Page 90 |
| Chapter Summary | Page 91 |
| THESIS CONCLUSION | Page 93 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | Page 95 |

ABSTRACT

The Tibetan Buddhist approach to healing, health and death is rooted in the sacred. Its teachings and techniques create a road map guiding the practitioner through the process of purification called sacred healing. It encompasses foundational Buddhist teachings, sacred Buddhist medicine, and the esoteric healing pathways found in tantra and yoga, which together constitute a detailed and technical guide to healing. The mind is central to all aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. The ability to focus the mind through meditation during life enables the practitioner to prepare for death by experiencing the subtle aspects of the body and mind through the chakras. Both Tibetan spiritual teachers and doctors practise healing and help practitioners learn to focus their minds in preparation for death. The moment of death presents the greatest opportunity for attaining sacred health, but healing can also occur after death. The objective of this thesis is to present the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of sacred healing in relation to life, death, the bardos and suicide through its texts, teachings and techniques.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans l'approche bouddhique tibétaine de la guérison, la santé et la mort sont enracinées dans le sacré. Les enseignements et les techniques sont des points de repère guidant le pratiquant à travers le processus de purification. Ces points de repère incluent les enseignements bouddhiques fondateurs, la médecine sacrée bouddhique et les chemins ésotériques de guérison trouvés dans le tantrisme et dans le yoga, créant ainsi une approche détaillée et technique de la guérison. La capacité à centrer l'esprit par la pratique de la méditation permet au pratiquant de découvrir les aspects subtils du corps et de ses *chakras* et cela, en préparation pour l'expérience de la mort. Les maîtres spirituels et les médecins tibétains guérissent et dirigent l'esprit vers la guérison sacrée. Le moment de la mort présente la meilleure opportunité d'atteindre la santé sacrée, mais la guérison peut également se produire après la mort. L'objectif de ce mémoire est d'introduire la compréhension bouddhique tibétaine de la guérison sacrée, plus spécifiquement en relation avec la vie, la mort, les *bardos* et le suicide. Cela sera abordé à travers les textes sacrés, les enseignements, les techniques du bouddhisme tibétain.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the help and guidance I received from many people and sources. To each of them I am eternally grateful. In particular, I would like to express my profound gratitude to Edward, who has nurtured, supported and guided me toward sacred understanding throughout this thesis and this lifetime. To each of the many people who permitted me to be part of their dying, death, and grief, and for the wisdom that they shared with me, thank you. Mern granted me the courage to continue with this thesis by compassionately allowing me to be part of her life as her disease progressed. In the final moments of her life, she granted me the honour and privilege of accompanying her toward a graceful death. I thank my family for surrounding me with medicine and Chi-la's presence. Support from my teachers was constant and I thank them for their unwavering guidance and protection throughout this healing journey. During the research and writing of this thesis I had the patience of my advisor, Professor Richard Hayes, and without his ability to motivate me, it may not have come to fruition. I am also grateful to Marian Scott and her attention to detail in editing the thesis. May all beings find peace and happiness. May they heal toward death.



INTRODUCTION

The sacred themes of healing, health and death are woven through each of the world's spiritual traditions. Each tradition contains its own road map to guide people on the journey through life, death, and the afterlife. These pathways all contain texts, sounds, and prayers used to guide followers toward a sacred source. However, the directions provided for the journey, and the signposts along these pathways, can vary greatly from one tradition to another.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, healing can occur at every moment of the cycle of life, dying, death, and the process of reincarnation. The goal of its teachings and techniques is to help followers remove the layers or filters that separate them from their true nature, and to guide them back toward the sacred source, called the Buddha-nature. The steps taken along this journey are called healing, and when the destination is reached, health is attained. The Tibetan Buddhist tradition views healing, health, and death from a sacred perspective from which death is understood to be sacred health, and life to be illness. Its sacred teachings, understandings, and techniques are the medicine used in sacred healing.

This thesis will explore the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of the sacred themes of healing, health and death. The Tibetan Buddhist teachings on sacred healing are complex and technical and emphasize that the moment of death is the greatest opportunity for achieving Buddha-nature. Healing occurs through the experience of meditation and various other techniques used to focus the mind. It is by training the mind that the

practitioner experiences the subtle aspects of both mind and body that promote healing and help him or her prepare for death and the bardos. Both Tibetan Buddhist spiritual teachers, called lamas, and their doctors are healers who guide followers toward the Buddha-nature. They diagnose, treat and heal practitioners through the subtle aspects of the mind and body that converge in energy centres called the chakras.

The first chapter of this thesis will examine the themes of healing, health and death from both the profane and sacred points of view. The theme of healing that infuses many religious traditions will be illustrated by a brief overview of several western and eastern healing traditions. In particular, the eastern overview will introduce the Indian spiritual traditions and their practices of Tantra, Kundalini Yoga and Ayurvedic medicine, which helped shape the healing tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. The second chapter will focus on the concept of healing pathways in Tibetan Buddhism. It will begin with an overview of the Buddhist themes of healing and death before discussing these themes from the specific perspective of Tibetan Buddhism. Next, we shall explore Vajrayāna Buddhism, tantra, yoga, and its sacred medicine, all of which laid the foundation for the Tibetan view of healing, health and death. The third and final chapter will examine Tibetan Buddhist teachings on the opportunities for healing after death. It will discuss the sacred body of teachings known collectively as the “bardo teachings.” These are sacred texts and techniques used to guide the mind toward the healing opportunities at the moment of death and during the process of rebecoming in the bardos. In particular, we shall focus on the bardo teachings in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and in a tantric yoga practice for the transference of consciousness from the *Six Yogas of Naropa*, called phowa. These teachings and techniques emphasize the importance of the dying person’s state of mind at

the moment of death and how it affects subsequent opportunities for sacred healing. Finally, the act of taking one's own life will also be discussed in relation to phowa and sacred healing.

The mind, then, is central to the themes of sacred healing, health and death in Tibetan Buddhism, which abounds in teachings and techniques to develop mental discipline. Tibetan spiritual teachers and doctors guide practitioners and patients toward the sacred. Life is devoted to disciplining the mind in preparation for death. In order to understand this Tibetan perspective, it is first necessary to explore its spiritual teachings and their implications for sacred healing and the mind. Thus, the thesis will begin with a general overview of sacred healing in different spiritual traditions before examining the Buddhist perspective. Finally, we shall focus on the teachings specific to Tibetan Buddhism.

The Tibetan understanding of health, healing, and death differs in many ways from the Western approach to those issues. This thesis aims to bridge distances and promote understanding by introducing the reader to the Tibetan healing tradition. In particular, it is hoped that this work may be of use to caregivers of followers of Tibetan Buddhism who are ill or dying by helping them to understand the Tibetan Buddhist approach to healing and health. This thesis by no means is a definitive account of Tibetan Buddhism. It seeks simply to distil teachings and understandings from this profoundly compassionate, deep and rich spiritual tradition. This thesis will describe both practices and techniques common to all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and those specific to certain branches of this spiritual tradition, although the emphasis will be on the former. For example, while the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is specific to the Nyingma tradition, related bardo teachings can

be found in each of the other traditions. Similarly, while the phowa meditation presented in the third chapter originates from a master associated with the Kagyu tradition, it is taught and practised in other Tibetan Buddhist schools.

On a technical note, Tibetan, Sanskrit and other foreign transliterated words and terms have been used throughout the thesis. On first reference, with the exception of the Introduction and the Abstract, they are italicized and may be followed by an indication of the language, meaning and transliteration in parentheses. Thereafter, they appear as regular type, with the appropriate diacritical marks. Book titles are written in italics in the text and underlined in the bibliography. As the thesis touches upon several of the world's traditions, the symbols B.C.E. (before the common era) and C.E. (common era) are used to designate chronology instead of the Christian symbols B.C. and A.D. The use of the words western and eastern written in lower-case letters do not represent geographic locations, but classifications of thoughts and ideas. Geographic references will use upper-case letters. When phrases such as "western religions" or eastern spiritual traditions" appear, they represent the conventional academic classification of the study of religion. Any errors, inadequacies, and misunderstandings found herein are entirely my own.



CHAPTER I

✦ *Death, Health and Healing*

Let us deprive death of its strangeness,
 let us frequent it, let us get used to it;
 let us have nothing more often in mind than death.
 We do not know where death awaits us,
 so let us wait for it everywhere.
 To practice death is to practice freedom.
 A person who has learned how to die,
 has unlearned how to be a slave.

(Montaigne 95)

✦ *Death*

Death is a universal experience for all living beings. Everything that is born must eventually die. Death, whether or not one is conscious of it, touches, colours, and shapes all life. Death can be understood on many different levels and interpreted in many different ways. Views of death have changed and evolved throughout time and can vary with people, events and religion. However, ways of understanding death can generally be divided into two categories, the sacred and the profane. Between each of these labels lie endless combinations and permutations. It is therefore important at the outset to understand what is meant by the words profane and sacred and how they relate to the concepts of death, health and healing.

Teachings on healing, health and death exist in all religions. In order to understand how death is perceived in different spiritual traditions, we shall begin this chapter with a brief discussion of the concepts of sacred death and profane death. We shall then survey how western and eastern spiritual traditions view the universal journey toward death, before focusing specifically on the Tibetan Buddhist perspective.

The sacred and profane views of death can be compared to two bookends at either end of the spectrum of views of death. The religious scholar Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) defines the profane as anything earthly, and the sacred is as that which does not involve anything worldly. The sacred transcends time and space, is eternal and “manifests itself as something wholly different from the profane” (Eliade 1987, 11). The sacred includes both the points of transition from the profane to the sacred, and that part of the sacred which is beyond the limits of discovery by the profane. In other words, one steps across a threshold from the profane to the sacred, beyond which the profane world no longer offers any guidelines for trying to describe the sacred. Eliade uses the metaphor of entering a church where the exterior world represents the profane and the entrance inside the church is the threshold into the sacred (Ibid. 25-26). Each of the world’s spiritual traditions aims to bring followers to the threshold of the sacred and to help them to cross it. The moment of death creates the opportunity to cross this threshold into the sacred, as all manner of suffering, dialogue, thoughts, desires, and activities cease, and the dying person is able to identify those things as part of the profane. In this sense, the transition from life to death can be regarded as the most important point of contact with the sacred. When death is understood from the profane viewpoint it implies the loss of life and of all

earthly attachments, whereas from the sacred perspective it becomes the threshold into the divine.

From the profane perspective, death is the enemy, to be avoided at all costs and by whatever means necessary. It takes away all that a person has accumulated during life, including loved ones, friends, wealth, home, and reputation. These are the things that people spend their lives acquiring or creating and often believe define them. From a profane perspective, death is seen in a purely negative light. All definitions of death in the profane world are based on the physical body. Death occurs in and to the physical body, separating a person from everything to which he or she has become attached during life.

The profane view of death dominates Western medical practice. Medical care and training in the West are based on the idea of healing the part of the physical body that is ill in order to prolong life. The inability to heal or cure illness is tantamount to failure. The scientific, medical interpretation of death, whose language deals exclusively with the physical body, shapes Western attitudes toward death. According to this interpretation, death occurs when the physical body and its systems and components cease to function. The modern medical definition of death does not include the concept of the “soul,” which is relegated to the realm of religion. The legal definition of death in Western medicine serves partly to protect professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and law-enforcement officials. *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary* states that death is “the cessation of life; [the] permanent cessation of all vital bodily functions. For legal and medical purposes, the following definition of death has been proposed – the irreversible cessation of all the following: (1) total cerebral function, (2) spontaneous function of the respiratory

system, and (3) spontaneous function of the circulatory system.” It goes on to describe and define various types of death, such as brain death, crib death, foetal death and functional death. Essentially, this medical definition states that a person is considered dead when the brain stops functioning, breathing ceases, and the essential fluids, such as blood, stop circulating in the body. It is worth noting that this work acknowledges that the definition of death it offers is “proposed” and continues to evolve. The Western definition continues to give rise to debate and to evolve in response to ethical issues. In summary, this medical definition is rooted in the physical body and does not take into account that humans could be more than just a physical body, nor does it address what happens to the dying person after death.

*“Death is the experience of the light.
Prayer is the rehearsal for death.”*

(Barrett 65)

✚ Western Healing

For the most part, health is viewed in the West as healing of the physical body. If a person falls ill, he or she is often treated with physical means such as medicine and surgery. Patients suffering from mental-health problems may also be treated with non-physical therapies that may or may not include medication. The Western approach is based on the view that in order to cure disease you must treat the various components of the physical body. However, despite the prevalence of this widespread physically based understanding

of health and dying in the West, historic and modern spiritual traditions within Christianity, Judaism and Islam offer a sacred perspective. Western spiritual traditions continue to influence, indirectly and directly, how people in the West view and understand healing, health and death.

From the sacred perspective, many spiritual traditions view death as the ultimate teacher. Their teachings, often mystical or esoteric in nature, often regard death as merely the beginning of another stage in the journey of the soul. This latter view of death is found to varying degrees in each of the world's spiritual traditions. "All spiritual and religious traditions agree on some type of existence beyond this life, and all of them prepare us for that future" (Kalu Rinpoche 1997, 47). Two examples of mystical movements within western religions that regard death as a healing opportunity are Islam's Sufism and Judaism's Kabbalah tradition. The Kabbalists teach that the task of life is to restore the soul to God through meditation and prayer "aimed at the attainment of *Ruach HaKodesh*" (Kaplan 21). Sufis strive for "absorption of the self in God" (Chidester 210) through meditation, prayer and the physical movement of dance. Within the Christian tradition, the Eastern Orthodox Church teaches followers to recite the Jesus Prayer to prepare for the union with God at death.

Healing plays a central role in the Jewish faith. Prayer and ritual play an important role in this healing. For example, the rabbi and family recite specific prayers for those who are ill, dying or who have died. "The objective of these prayers is to relieve pain and provide comfort," said Rabbi Michael Wolff of the Jewish Synagogue Service of Montreal in an interview with the author of this thesis. This comfort is for both the person who is ill, and

for his or her family and friends. In Judaism death is viewed not as an enemy but rather as “part of God’s original design for human life” (Chidester 183). It is associated with a detailed sequence of prayers and rituals. At the moment of death the soul separates from the physical body and “hovers [over the body] until it is buried,” Rabbi Wolff said. After burial the body returns to the Earth and the soul returns to God. The Jewish understanding of the after-death experience varies greatly. In some traditions there is simply no discussion of it while in others there is a detailed doctrine of the resurrection of the dead.

Healing in Christianity is based on faith, compassion, and the wish to alleviate the suffering of others. It takes on various forms in the Christian tradition such as offerings, prayers, and rituals. Jesus Christ himself was seen as a prophet, teacher and healer. As stated in the Gospels “he healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, exorcised the possessed, [and] forgave sinners” (Kramer 139). *The Book of Common* states that “He healeth those that are broken in heart; and giveth medicine to heal their sickness” (147:1). The healing practice of the laying on of hands as a form of healing continues in some Christian traditions. “Jesus commonly laid his hands on the sufferer when healing” (*A Handbook of Living Religions* 93). Healing in Christianity occurs both on the physical and spiritual levels. In the Christian tradition, death is a time for faith, prayer and reflection. At death the soul separates from the physical body and is then judged by God. Punishment for past deeds may take the form of suffering in purgatory or hell “until their consciences were cleansed and their souls could ascend to heaven” (Chidester 245). Upon entry into heaven the soul would be ready for resurrection when the second coming of Christ occurred. There are many different rituals associated with death in Christianity, but each of them is founded on compassion and forgiveness as a form of spiritual healing.

In the Middle Ages, the friars of the Dominican and Franciscan orders provided spiritual guidance to lay people faced with ever-present death and impermanence. These two orders of the Roman Catholic Church were entrusted with the role of teaching followers about the practical and spiritual aspects of death and illness. Their teachings were written down in great detail in an eschatological text called *Ars Moriendi*, (Latin, *The Art of Dying*). This manual provided specific instructions on accepting and going through the process of dying. The aim of the dying manuals was to “create the right disposition and the right attitude in the dying person” (Grof 26). Many medieval monks took a vow of silence and entered into isolated retreats. Despite the vow of silence, they were permitted to utter the phrase “*memento mori*” to themselves or to other monks in passing. *Memento mori* translates from the Latin as “remember dying” and was a reminder to each of them that death could occur at any moment. It was a constant reminder to remain focused and centred on the spiritual path and its teachings. This phrase is still used today by those religious orders as mental reminders of the urgency of approaching the sacred. Monks participate collectively and as individuals in meditation, chanting and fasting. Today there are still reclusive orders whose members choose to withdraw from the profane world in search of the sacred. Thus, for hundreds of years, the Dominican and Franciscan orders have led followers to accept death as the ultimate form of sacred healing.

One of the earliest Christian sects, the Gnostics, sought union with God through various means that are being rediscovered and revived within the Christian faith today. One of the most notable aspects of this early Christian movement was the initial test of surviving isolation in a harsh physical environment. This was accomplished through intense

meditation, prayer, and the repetition of sacred words. Some eastern spiritual traditions refer to these sacred sounds as mantras. To become a Desert Father and part of this small community, followers would be sent out into the harsh deserts of Egypt with a limited amount of food and water. Within days they would run out of food and water and, with no protection from the intense heat and cold of the Egyptian desert, they faced death. Only through the spiritual sustenance they received from prayer, meditation and an unwavering wish to be one with God were they able to survive these harsh conditions. Communities of Desert Fathers appeared about 300 years after the death of Christ. One notable person in this early community was Evagrius Ponticus, born in 347 C.E. He explains the importance of prayer in preparation for death as follows: "If while still in your body you wish to serve God like the incorporeal beings, strive to have in your heart a secret, unceasing prayer. For in this way your soul will come near to resembling the angels even before death" (Willoughby 27). Father Laurence Freeman is a modern-day Benedictine monk who teaches and lectures on various sacred topics, including the Gnostics and the importance of their Christian teachings on mantra and meditation. He states that early Desert Fathers' teachings "about the pure, unconceptual experience of meditation and what that experience does to us in terms of the overall healing process in life," (Ibid 29) are more closely related to Buddhism than to Christian teachings. This early tradition of prayer and meditation used by the Gnostics to move closer to God closely parallels the Buddhist belief in sacred healing, which we shall examine later in this thesis.

Another example from the western mystical tradition is the German Roman Catholic abbess Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179). She has been acknowledged as a mystic, poet,

physician and prophetess but has never been canonized. She recorded her visions and prophecies in *Scivias (The One Who Knows the Way of the Lord)* and was a prolific composer whose sacred music was performed by the sisters of the abbey of Rupertsberg. The Catholic Church accepted Hildegard's experiences and writings as being ecstatic communications with God. Her visions and experiences also included detailed descriptions of various "chambers" within the physical body. Hildegard's descriptions of the body's chambers contain the same general concepts of light, sound, and energy found in various eastern spiritual interpretations of *śakra(s)* (Sanskrit, energy centres in the body, pronounced chakra and written as such hereafter), which are an integral part of the process of sacred healing in Buddhism. (This topic will be explored from the Tibetan Buddhist perspective in Chapter II.)

"One's attitude toward death is central to any healing process."

(Chögyam Trungpa 177)

✦ *Eastern Healing*

As we have seen, healing is usually regarded in the West as the curing or easing of symptoms of disease. However, a loving and compassionate healing tradition is central to many western religions, as is the concept of spiritual healing as purification and preparation for death. In many eastern spiritual traditions, healing is often regarded as a

process of transformation toward the sacred nature. The art of healing involves the purifying processes used to remove earthly attachments and realize the true nature. In Tibetan Buddhism this true nature is called the Buddha-nature, also expressed as the forgotten seed of enlightenment present in every living being. In the remainder of this chapter we shall examine how certain traditions laid the foundation for the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of healing and health. Thus, the brief survey of eastern healing traditions that follows will serve as a general introduction to the Tibetan views of sacred healing, health and death.

Just as the theme of death permeates the world's spiritual traditions, so too do the themes of sacred healing and health. Healing, within each tradition, is regarded as a series of steps taken to regain health, or as a path travelled to return to a state of wholeness. In many eastern traditions, healing is a process by which there is a shedding or removal of everything that separates sentient beings from sacred health. Through the healing process a person moves closer toward becoming one with his or her true source. While the steps taken for healing may vary from one spiritual tradition to another, all consider the final goal or destination to be a return to the sacred source.

In eastern spiritual traditions, death is rooted in the sacred. It is understood as an opportunity to return and reunite with the sacred. Life is used to prepare for death and to move toward the sacred source by such means as prayer, meditation, sound, and physical movements. In the Buddhist tradition, death involves the breakdown of two components – body and mind – followed by their separation. The moment of death occurs when the mind separates from the physical body. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, this occurs after

the various levels of the body shut down. These are described in great detail in both Tibetan Buddhism's medical and sacred texts. Tibetan Buddhists believe that during the stages of death the true nature withdraws its energies from the physical body. Although the bodily functions appear to be ceasing, what is really occurring is that the invigorating energy found each in chakra is withdrawing from the body. When all of this energy has been withdrawn, the mind becomes open, clear, and aware, and the Buddha-nature is revealed. Thus, whereas Western medicine sees death as the cessation of life, eastern spiritual traditions, including Tibetan Buddhism, view it as a return to sacred health.

Within the eastern spiritual traditions, there is a concept of reincarnation. Reincarnation means returning to the a physical body in the form of a human, animal or higher being. This view also exists in the some of the esoteric forms of western religions. From the sacred perspective, the moment a person enters the human body at conception is considered a return to ill health, but never as positive health. This belief is rooted in the concept of reincarnation, the endless cycle of dying and rebirth. The process of reincarnation can understood as an essential part of the quest for sacred health in that the purpose of returning to the human body is to eliminate, one by one, the reasons or attachments that require a person to return to the body repeatedly. Once these have been removed, sacred health or oneness with the sacred is acquired and it is no longer necessary to be drawn back into the physical body. Healing during life occurs with the "scraping off" of the ego. This can be compared to a process of shearing off layers, or to sandpaper smoothing and shaping wood. These layers of ego create filters that colour and influence our understanding of death. In Tibetan Buddhism these layers are called veils of obscuration, caused by traces of cause and effect or *karma* (Sanskrit). These layers form

due to physical, verbal, and mental reactions. Unless the veils are removed and purified, people remain imprisoned in the endless cycle of rebirth and suffering .

Most eastern traditions emphasize the importance of the teacher-student relationship. This is the process by which a student dedicates his or her life to a specific spiritual path and to a teacher, called a guru, lama, swami, or master, who is in theory the embodiment of the sacred teachings. These “realized” teachers, meaning that they live and teach in direct contact with the sacred, are connected to all previous teachers through a lineage. Students must prove their dedication to pursuing sacred healing and healing before being accepted by a spiritual master, who then takes complete responsibility for guiding and protecting the student.

The themes of sacred health and healing in eastern spiritual traditions focus not only on the physical body but also on its connection to the sacred aspects of the universe. For example, the art of healing is believed in many traditions to have originated from sacred sources such as deities sent down to Earth to heal physical ailments. In the various tantric traditions, the physical body is viewed as a reflection of the sacred universe and illness as result of misalignment in the universe. Thus, in eastern spiritual traditions, healing is intimately connected with the sacred. We shall now survey several eastern healing traditions before examining the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of sacred health, healing and death.

✦ *Taoist Tradition*

The mystical teachings of Taoism have left an indelible imprint on China and the Chinese people, and largely shape the Chinese understanding and interpretation of sacred healing and health. Although it is difficult to put Taoism into words, its basic theme is that everything is interdependent and mutually interactive. From this perspective everything is connected to the sacred original source called the Tao or the “unborn”. The interconnectedness of all things lends itself to the view that the physical body is also a reflection of the sacred. From Taoism comes the idea that the physical body is composed of many centres, connected by a complicated mapping of a flow of energy called “*ch'i*.” Ch'i cannot be seen by the naked eye or touched with our senses. A person must be trained in Taoist meditation, healing and physical activities to be able to visualize and feel the movement of this energy. Taoist meditation on these energy centres can begin at any point in the body. By being able to visualize and move this energy around, a person can purify the body and open the pathway to the sacred. The same holds true for the Chinese interpretation of health, which is based on the Taoist model of the body. When the flow of ch'i is slowed or obstructed, disease or illness results. Physical movements or exercises were also developed to correct any problems connected to the flow of energy in the body. These include various martial arts (of which some schools have their origins in Buddhism) originating in China. Specifically, the practices of *tai ch'i* and *ch'i kung* trace their origins to Taoism. It is important to note that although the Chinese healing arts of medicine and movement are rooted in the sacred tradition called Taoism, those who practice them now are not necessarily connected to Taoism.

Within the Chinese context, *The Secret of the Golden Flower* provides a good example of the understanding of sacred healing from a combination of esoteric Buddhism and Taoist meditation, yoga, and psychology. The sacred is described as being the “unborn” and created in another dimension. The whole and perfect sphere of the egg, or the pearl, also represents the sacred. C.G. Jung (1875-1961), the eminent Swiss psychiatrist, hailed these teachings as the connection between eastern and western psychology in terms of the collective unconscious. Taoism and its interpretation of the universe form the foundation for the Chinese approach to the body and healing. Everything in the universe is interdependent and mutually interactive. What is outside is reflected within. The body is the temple of the divine. The sacred exists within the physical body and people must remember the sacred source. Taoist teachings are transmitted strictly from the master to the student. Taoism maps out the body as containing numerous energy centres called meridians. These are the Taoist equivalent of the energy centres in Buddhism. Students are taught to recognize, traverse, and purify these centres through meditation, physical activities such as the tai ch’i and ch’i kung and traditional medicine. Acupuncture is based on the belief that the insertion of thin needles into these energy centres removes obstacles from the channels that regulate and change the flow of energy called “ch’i”. When energy is blocked or not flowing properly, illness results. The notion of ch’i corresponds to chakras and its pathways, called “(nāḍī[s])” (Sanskrit), which are the subtle energetic channels. In Taoism, the body is considered to have a greater number of energy centres than in other eastern traditions such as Hinduism. Healing and transformation can begin at any one of these points when guided by an accomplished master. Thus, in Chinese Taoism, sacred healing is based on the movement of energy in the physical body,

and sacred health is based on restoring and maintaining the flow of energy through the body by means of various movements and meditations.

✦ *Indian Traditions*

The pathways to sacred health are also found in the long and rich spiritual history of India. Four of the major world religions emerged from this country: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. India has a long and richly textured history of philosophy and spirituality that is not always fully understood by the West. One case in point is how people in the West view and practice yoga as the means to better physical health and beauty through *āsana(s)* (Sanskrit, postures) and *prāṇayāma* (Sanskrit, breathing techniques). The origins of yoga are deeply rooted in the paths of spirituality and purification leading toward sacred health. The Sanskrit word for religion or philosophy is *darśana*. It has two meanings: the first is seeing or realization and the second is the path or discipline leading to this realization. In Hinduism, religion and philosophy are inseparable. An aspirant must follow both a moral and spiritual path in order to purify the body and mind to achieve the ultimate goal of the realization or reunion of the individual with the universe; this process is the path of sacred healing leading to sacred health. Yoga is a tradition found throughout the history of Hinduism and forms one of its six *darśana(s)*. It has many schools and branches, each with particularities which have continued to evolve over time. They all share the common ground of being based on “the technology of ecstasy, of self-transcendence” (Feurerstein 11), which are the techniques used to guide a practitioner toward union with the sacred.

The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit root “*yuj*,” meaning to join together or unite. “Yoga represents the union of the individual self, or *atman*, with the supreme universal Self, or *Paramatman*” (Swami Rama 5). The yoga teachings were systematized into Patanjali’s *Yoga Sūtra* that continue to form the guidelines for purification for all yoga paths through the pillars of its ethical rules. These are considered to be the ten commitments or preliminaries for the actual practice of yoga and form the foundation for all spiritual paths. The five general rules or restraints are called *yama* and the five more specific rules or observances are called *niyama* in Sanskrit. There are many levels and dimensions to these commitments. On the profane level, they are interpreted as laws of behaviour but on the sacred level, they are the energy that is used to understand and experience the sacred. They form the basic characteristics of the sacred soul, for without these realizations one cannot “see that everybody is created by God” (Angus 33). *Yama* means to take care of the external interferences, whereas *niyama* are the internal remembrances. Together they form the foundation for further steps such as *āsana*, the yoga postures, and *prāṇayāma*, the science of breathing. These, in turn, may be followed by further realizations. These include *pratyāhāra*, the turning inward through the withdrawal of the senses from distractions of the external world; *dhāraṇā*, concentration; *dhyāna*, one-pointed mind; and finally the ultimate goal of *samādhi*, where one becomes one with the divine self and transcends all imperfections and limitations. This last rung on the ladder is considered to be the realization of sacred health during life. Thus, the path of yoga illustrates the sacred path of healing and health by gradually turning the mind inward through physical movement, breathing, and meditation.

Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtra* (\cong 150 before the common era [B.C.E.]) remains the source text of Classical Yoga (yoga-darśana) and much of what people in the West understand and experience as yoga and the Hindu tradition of sacred healing. But is it also important to note that there were other important and influential texts and practices that pre- and post-dated this influential text. One of the earliest Upaniṣadic works dealing explicitly with yoga was the *Katha* or *Kathaka Upaniṣad* (\cong 400 - 450 B.C.E). Its subject is transcending death during life through the story of a male adolescent who requests and insists upon teachings and instructions for supreme realization from *Yama*, the Lord of Death. Nachiketa, the youth in the tale, is taught that the path toward immortality or sacred health is as dangerous as trying to walk upon a razor's edge. Somerset Maugham used the image in the title and subject of his novel *The Razor's Edge*, which addresses the difficult balance between the sacred and the profane described in the *Kathaka Upaniṣad*. Following the teaching of the preliminary ethical practices and the turning inward of the mind, the sacred nature of the body through sound and light are revealed to Nachiketa. The *Upaniṣad* teach that successful completion of the yogic practices lead to immortality or sacred health. These texts teach that, "If we can attain self-realization before the destruction of the body, the purpose of life is fulfilled. If not, we remain caught in the cycle of transmigration and continue going from one body to another. That is the greatest loss." (Tigunait 1998, 158). In the *Upaniṣad*, the ātman dwells within the lotus of the heart in what is called the *anāhata chakra*. Anāhata is a Sanskrit word meaning "that which is not hurt". More specifically, it is the threshold where *yogis* and *yoginis* (Sanskrit, tantric adepts, male and female respectively) "experience divine bliss" (Swami Rama

146) in deeper states of meditation, as described in the following excerpt from the *Katha Upaniṣad*:

When all the desires that surge in the heart
Are renounced, the mortal becomes immortal.
When all of the knots that strangle the heart
Are loosened, the mortal becomes immortal.
This sums up the teaching of the scripture.

From the heart there radiate a hundred
And one vital tracks. One of them rises
Up to the crown of the head. This way leads
To immortality, the others to death.

(Trans. by Eknath Easwaran 265)

The anāhata chakra is located in what we understand as the region of the heart. This energy centre plays an important role at the moment of death in Tibetan Buddhism. It is the starting point during life of the movement of energy in the ascent toward the *sahasrāra* chakra, located on the crown of the head. The ability to practice this yoga through the control and movement of energy in the body is a mystical union with the highest state of consciousness and the sacred. One who has mastered this yoga is able to transcend death during life or at the moment of death.

Within the vast array of sacred Indian traditions, both *Tantra* and *Ayurvedic* medicines figure predominantly in the influencing and shaping of Tibetan Buddhism and its sacred arts of health and healing. It was through the evolution of tantra, and in particular its incorporation and further exploration of the practice of *Kuṇḍalinī* Yoga, that the sacred mapping of the physical body reached new heights. This mapping incorporated yoga and

meditations of the chakras and their many pathways. These sacred insights into the physical body as a vehicle to gain enlightenment during life, and in particular at the moment of death, influenced Ayurveda. Thus, it is important to have a general overview of Indian Tantra, Kuṇḍalinī Yoga, and Ayurvedic medicine in order to deepen our understanding of the sacred Tibetan Buddhist understanding of sacred health and healing.

The tantra that evolved in India had a far-reaching impact on the traditions of sacred healing and health in both Indian and Tibetan philosophies. The exact origin of Indian Tantra is difficult to trace, as it was originally an oral tradition that was not based in any one location. Tantric teachers accepted very few students. These students would be dispersed after the death of their teacher. One of the only ways to retrace the history of tantra is through its teachers as written accounts of tantra, called “Tantras”, did not appear in India until the middle of the first millennium C.E. (common era). In summary, the isolated and decentralised teaching system of Tantra makes it very difficult to reconstitute its early history.

The Tibetan Tantric teachings originated from, and are deeply influenced by, its Indian sources. The Indian Tantric Period was from 800 C.E. to 1500 C.E. This time span coincided with the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet from India, which began during the 7th century and lasted for several centuries. Some Tibetan students travelled to India to seek out Buddhist teachers, and occasionally Indian teachers travelled to Tibet to teach. Today, Tibetan teachers and students continue to trace their various lineages to Indian Buddhist teachers. As Buddhism all but disappeared from India, their teachings, texts, and practices were preserved as a living spiritual tradition in Tibet. It was during the period

when Tibet was absorbing Buddhism that the Tantric tradition in India evolved to new heights. Tantra coloured and flavoured the Buddhist teachings brought back to Tibet.

The course of Tantra in India was easier to trace by the turn of the first post-Christian millennium, when it flourished across the Indian sub-continent. It spread and touched the spiritual lives of Hindus, Buddhists, and Jainas. The word “tantra” comes from the Sanskrit root “*tan*,” meaning to weave, expand, or to spread. All schools of Tantra share a common awareness and respect for the feminine principle called *śakti*, represented as the Goddess or *devī* in the form of *Kālī*, *Pārvatī*, *Rādhā* or hundreds of other female goddesses. Tantra is based on the general premise that all aspects and experiences of daily life should be the means to recognize the self and everything else in the universe as being sacred or pure consciousness. Every aspect of life is used to move into meditation in order to bring the student into the sacred. This includes sexual thoughts. Sexual images are often found in tantric art and are often misinterpreted on a profane level by Westerners, including early Christian missionaries. There are only a few schools of tantra, referred to as “left-hand Tantra,” which use physical sexual acts in order to bring the practitioner closer to the sacred. In general, tantric teachings emphasize that the body is not a hindrance, but a precious vehicle that “contains all the necessary equipment for reaching enlightenment in one lifetime” (Lama Yeshe 117). Furthermore, the human body is considered sacred and within it is reflected the cosmos. Rajmani Tigunait, a contemporary Indian pandit teaching in the United States, states that, “[Tantrism] at a spiritual level consists of a set of techniques for gaining access to the multilevel forces within the human body as well as the cosmos” (Tigunait 1998, 27). Not only is the body considered sacred in tantra but it is also the vehicle that has the potential to move the practitioner

toward sacred healing and health. The tantric meditations and techniques created a detailed understanding and experience of the gross physical and subtle body. The gross body is the physical body, composed of flesh, blood and bones. The subtle body is composed of energy, light and sound and is experienced and understood in deep meditation. Tantra teaches that the physical body has thousands of channels (*nāḍī[s]*) through which flow energy winds (*prāṇa*) and drops (*bindu*), around and through chakras. The axial channel (*suṣumnā*) running parallel to the spine is entwined by the *īḍā* and *piṅgalā* *nāḍī[s]*. This understanding of the physical and subtle body also exists in other schools of yoga. For example, Hatha Yoga, being “an offshoot of Tantrism” (Feurerstein 277), teaches that the left side of the body is compared to the moon and the right to the sun and it is when these two elements are joined in the central channel that sacred health is possible. Tantra integrates and expands upon the various teachings modelled on the human body in the Indian context. Tantric practices focus on the movement and maintenance of the flow of energy from the *īḍā*, the lunar force on the left body axis; and the *piṅgalā*, the flow of the solar force of the right into the axial channel (*suṣumnā*) as experienced at the moment of death. In order to attain the goal of sacred healing, Tantric spiritual teachers instruct about the healing qualities of sound, sight, and colour through seven chakras running from the base of the spine to the top of the head. The movement toward sacred health is attained in tantra through the balance, purification and opening of these energy centres. The highest goal of tantra is to gain complete knowledge of the body and the dormant forces that correspond to the cosmos. This is achieved through direct experience with sound (*mantra*), form, colour, rituals, spiritual practices (*sādhana[s]*), and shape (*yantra*). These internal journeys of exploration resulted in the

development of tantric systems of sacred healing found in medicine, astrology and alchemy. Thus, Indian Tantrism is a sacred tradition that places great emphasis on recognizing the sacred in this profane world and experiencing it through the physical and subtle body.

Kuṇḍalinī Yoga plays a central role in tantra and also trains adepts to achieve sacred health and healing. Kuṇḍalinī emphasizes the ability to recognize and control the upward movement of energy through the chakras. Kuṇḍalinī Yoga is an integral part of tantric training. The goal of this yoga is to understand, experience and master the energy pathways and chakras of the physical body, ascending toward union with the sacred. “*Kuṇḍali/kuṇḍalinī-śakti*” literally means “coiled power” or “serpent power” and the practice of Kuṇḍalinī Yoga is dedicated to awakening this power. The kuṇḍalinī-śakti lies dormant in the lowest chakra and the goal of both Tantra and Hatha Yoga is to ascend the kuṇḍalinī to the highest chakra at the crown of the head. The image that is often taught is that kuṇḍali is a sleeping serpent curled three times around the lowest energy centre, roughly located near the genitals, and is normally in a state of dormancy. Once the prāṇa (Sanskrit, vital energy) is recognized and controlled, the dormant kuṇḍalinī energy is aroused. The energy from the two vertically intertwined pathways which intersect at each chakra moves into the central channel, piercing the knots that block the flow of vital energy. When these are all ascended, then there is the union of the universal consciousness of *Śakti* (feminine aspect of the divine) and *Śiva* (transcendental male force). The practice of Kuṇḍalinī is closely associated with the symbolism and worship of the feminine aspect of the Divine in India. The body is viewed as a microcosm of the universe and a reflection

of the sacred. “Kundalini-Yoga is the mature product of a long history of psychospiritual experimentation, and it presupposed the discovery of the body as a manifestation or “temple” of the Divine” (Ibid. 266). It is a powerful and esoteric form of yoga used to break through the blockages created in the chakras. These blockages are created by our own thoughts, words and deeds and are carried over from life to life. The goal of sacred healing in Kuṇḍalinī Yoga is to clear these blockages and reunite the practitioner with sacred wholeness and health.

Tantra and Kuṇḍalinī Yoga both shaped and influenced the Indian system of holistic and sacred medicine called Ayurveda. This system, in turn, became the foundation for the sacred Tibetan healing tradition. “Yoga is the science of union with the Divine, with Truth; Tantra is the most direct method of controlling the energy that creates the ultimate union of Truth; and Ayurveda is the science of life” (Lad 18-19). He further illustrates that the relationship between the three is compared to “an interdependent trinity of life” (Ibid. 19). Ayurveda combines not only the well-being of the physical body but also that of the mind and soul. Ayurveda is a Sanskrit word derived from the root “*ayus*,” or life, and “*vid*,” meaning knowledge. It literally means “the science of long life,” which can be interpreted from a sacred or profane view. From the sacred view, it is a sacred healing system that can restore the body and mind back to sacred health in order to progress on the spiritual path during life. This sacred interpretation of Ayurveda greatly shaped and influenced the Tibetans’ understanding of sacred healing and health. From the profane perspective, Ayurveda offers physical healing in order to promote longer life.

Ayurveda is a sacred science that, according to Indian mythology, originated with the god Brahma. This knowledge was later passed on to a human, who in turn taught others. The earliest written accounts of Ayurveda date back to 1500 B.C.E. in the *Rig Veda*. The *Veda(s)* are the titles given to several ancient Hindu books of knowledge divinely revealed to the *rshi(s)* (rishis, prophet-poets or Vedic seers of the mantra or hymn of the *Veda*) of India. The *Rig Veda* is the oldest hymnody of the *Veda(s)* and considered to be the most sacred Hindu scripture. Further and more detailed development of Ayurveda occurs in the *Atharva Veda* (800 B.C.E.), which deals with sickness and healing and is the earliest source of therapeutic prescriptions. The period that follows is commonly known as a classical period in Ayurveda (800 B.C.E. to the early common era) and is considered to be the height of Ayurvedic medicine. It was during these centuries that Tibet was exposed to Buddhism through Indian teachers. In earlier times, prayer accompanied every Ayurvedic medical treatment, and diagnosis was based on inspection, while prognosis was based mainly on divination and dreams. Despite the obvious roots in the sacred and divine, Ayurveda also had a strong scientific basis, which is illustrated by its advanced knowledge of science and surgery. Until the first century C.E., medical teaching was based on oral traditions, after which detailed texts appeared. Thus, Ayurveda is a healing tradition with ancient and sacred origins.

✦ *Chapter Summary*

In summary, the themes of healing, health and death are common threads woven through all of the world's spiritual traditions. Each teaches followers that death offers an opportunity to develop understanding, meaning and direction in their lives. While each spiritual tradition has its own understanding of the steps needed to move toward the sacred, the final goal of healing transformation remains the same.

Through this very brief overview of western and eastern spiritual traditions we have seen that the themes of death and healing are presented from quite different perspectives; yet certain parallels exist. Every religion presents a variation on the theme of shedding profane attachments that separate humans from the sacred. These are the steps taken to move away from the profane toward the sacred. We have also seen how the threads from many eastern spiritual traditions are woven into the tapestry that is Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism has a unique approach to sacred healing and health, yet has parallels with both Christian and Chinese Taoist traditions. It was shaped and influenced by several traditions that originated in India: Buddhism, Tantra, Kuṇḍalinī Yoga, and Ayurvedic medicine. Each of those traditions teaches adepts to seek sacred healing in preparation for death.



CHAPTER II

✠ *Healing and Death in Tibetan Buddhism*

“The practice of Dharma is the means for remedying the mental and emotional obscurations that produce all harm and prevent sacred health.”

(Clifford, 131)

As discussed in the previous chapter, the themes of healing and death are found throughout the world's spiritual traditions. In Buddhism, these themes are common threads varying only in colour and design from one form of Buddhism to another. The following chapter will continue to explore the themes of healing and death as reflected in the Buddhist teachings in general, as well as from the unique perspective of Tibetan Buddhism. As previously noted, Buddhism is deeply rooted in healing and the movement toward the sacred Buddha-nature. This is the movement away from suffering in life by the acceptance of death. It is through meditation that the mind is trained and healing begins. Meditation is used to heal during life and to prepare for dying, death and reincarnation. In contrast to the Western medical perspective, which views death as the enemy, Buddhism is based on the understanding that living is the disease and dying makes possible a return to sacred health. The cure is found in the Buddha's teachings. This understanding is the foundation of all schools of Buddhism. The Tibetan sacred path of healing may be helpful in a non-Buddhist context to those who care for the dying or for anyone who knows someone who is contemplating suicide. Approaching someone who is

dying with compassion is a universal act. Some practices from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition can reach across cultures to help those who are dying or contemplating suicide as well as anyone caring for a dying person. This chapter will first explore the sacred Buddhist healing tradition in relation to death, as a general introduction to Tibetan Buddhism and its theme of sacred healing.

The remainder of this chapter will explore how the Tibetan Buddhist themes of healing, health and death help followers to accept death and seek sacred healing during life. Tibetan Buddhism boasts a vast collection of oral and written teachings, often esoteric, on these themes. The Indian origins of these topics have been touched upon in the previous chapter. As noted, Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes the importance of training the mind through meditation and regards the body as a vehicle for the journey toward healing. In particular, this is reflected in its practice of sacred medicine and the tantric yogas.

The view of the physical body as a pathway to the sacred is foreign to most Westerners, as Tibetan Buddhism has only recently been introduced to the West. *Vajrayāna* Buddhism was the last form of Buddhism to evolve and was preserved mainly by Tibet's geographic and cultural isolation. Tibetan Buddhist teachings did not flow into the West until after the second Chinese invasion in 1959. At that time, many of its spiritual teachers and leaders, such as the Dalai Lama, fled to India and later came to the West. One of the earliest introductions of tantric yoga to the West was about thirty years ago by the Venerable Kalu Rinpoche, a highly realized Tibetan spiritual teacher. Thus the teachings conveyed in this chapter are new to the West and may be foreign to many people.

The Tibetan Buddhist teachings on the pathways of healing are detailed and technical. Sacred healing is part of the “Tibetan science of death” (Thurman 45). Much of the Tibetan Buddhist approach to healing derives from tantra. This “Tantra is a very technical, *internally* technical, system of development” (Lama Yeshe 99) that must be experienced to be understood. Tantric Buddhist teachings encompass yoga, medicine, and physiology. They reflect the importance placed on the concomitant healing of the mind and body. Tibetan Buddhism views these technical details as clinical information used to diagnose and heal the patient. In order to understanding sacred healing from the Tibetan Buddhist perspective, one must examine its various components and how they relate to each other. The remainder of this thesis will explore the detailed Tibetan teachings on health and death.

✦ *Buddhism and Healing*

The path of Buddhism can be regarded as a spiritual journey from ill health to healing. The Buddhist journey is guided and supported by the Three Precious Jewels, which are the enlightened beings (Tibetan, *sang rgyas*; Sanskrit, *buddha*), the teachings of the Buddha (Tibetan, *chos*; Sanskrit, *dharma*) and the community of spiritual practitioners (Tibetan, *dge 'dun*; Sanskrit, *saṅgha*). The transformation process toward the sacred occurs through various techniques of mental training. These may include meditation, prayer, sacred sounds called *mantra(s)*, studying sacred texts (“sūtra[s]” and “Tantra[s]”), and physical movements. Each of these methods leads the practitioner toward the sacred

source. If the path of sacred healing is not completed during one lifetime then the person will be reincarnated. The cycle of dying and rebirth continues until a person has let go of all of his or her profane attachments and attained sacred health. Life, then, becomes an opportunity to prepare for death by moving through healing, and ultimately attaining sacred health during life, at the moment of death, or in the afterlife.

The importance of the role of healing in Buddhism is highlighted in the image of the Buddha as healer. All Buddhist schools and traditions portray the Buddha as a healing physician. His teachings are the medicine to cure disease. The theme of health pervades Tibetan Buddhism and the sacred art of healing known as Tibetan medicine. The medical analogy in Buddhism is illustrated in a well-known Buddhist tale called *The Mustard Seed Parable*. It is the sacred healing journey of a young woman named Kisa Gotami, whose only infant son dies. After her son's death, she is overcome by grief and loss and wanders blindly to find someone who can reverse her son's death. She eventually meets the Buddha, who instructs her by saying; "You did well, Gotami, in coming hither for medicine. Go, enter the city, make rounds of the entire city, beginning at the beginning, and in whatever house no one has ever died, from that house fetch tiny grains of mustard seed" (Burt 45). Unable to find such a home, she moves toward healing by accepting her son's death. She continues on this path and becomes a disciple of the Buddha and achieves a state of sacred health through the spiritual attainment of an *arhat* (Sanskrit), meaning one who conquers conflicting emotions.

The themes of healing and death are present in the first and final teachings of the Buddha. Traditionally it is taught that Prince Siddhārtha Gautama (\cong 6th or 5th century B.C.E.)

sought to understand suffering in the profane life, marked by impermanence, illness, old age and death. As a wandering ascetic, the prince became a follower of several Indian spiritual traditions, none of which provided him with the answers he sought. He finally found healing near modern-day Bodh-Gaya, where he made a solemn vow to meditate until he attained enlightenment. This occurred when he experienced the “complete elimination of all negative aspects of (his) mind and perfection of all positive qualities” (McDonald 214). He shared this experience in his first teaching, called *The Four Noble Truths*, which established Buddhism as a spiritual path. These truths are taught to reflect the Buddhist sacred views of disease, healing and health although “they express the medical analogy in distinctly different ways, each appropriate to the varying philosophical views” (Clifford 24). The first truth is analogous to illness, followed by the cause and the cure. The last truth is the pathway toward sacred health. This last of the Four Noble Truths, called the Eightfold Path, contains the common Buddhist preliminary spiritual disciplines. At the profane level, they teach correct speech, thought, and morality, followed by various levels of meditative absorption involving various levels of concentration and analytical techniques. On the sacred level, these practices create the potential for a glimpse or experience of the energies found in the sacred. They are the basis or foundation used to understand and experience the sacred. Throughout the Buddha’s life, his teachings emphasized the movement away from the transitory and unsatisfactory life toward the sacred self. This is reflected in his final words before passing into *parinirvāṇa*, when he said to his disciples, “Monks, all compounded things are subject to decay and disintegration. Work out your own salvation with diligence.” (*Mahāparinibbana-sutta* trans. Rhys Davids 173). This theme of movement away from

life in the transitory, profane world toward the Buddha-nature is woven into all aspects of Buddhist teaching.

Although all Buddhist traditions share the same foundational themes of awakening, transformation and healing, they differ in the techniques used to move toward this sacred goal. The various traditions evolved over a long time in response to people, cultures, and places as Buddhism spread around Asia. Before Buddhism was introduced to Tibet, it underwent well over one thousand years of changes and adaptation. The earliest form of Buddhism is commonly, although pejoratively, known as *Hīnayāna* and today survives in the form of the school of *Theravāda*, which prevails in South East Asia. Henceforth, it will be referred to as Early Buddhism. Its focus is the movement toward the sacred. The steps in this journey involve a solitary meditative life, involving many vows and strict self-discipline. The solitary seeker is embodied in the arhat. The first form of Early Buddhism was called *Śrāvakayāna* (Sanskrit, The Hearer Vehicle), which refers to “one who attains any of the four stages of Holiness...only after having ‘heard’... [the Dharma] from the Buddha.” (Sangharakshita 239). The *Mahāyāna* was the next form of Buddhism to develop. It focuses on compassion and the liberation of all sentient beings embodied in the *bodhisattva*. A bodhisattva is being who is reborn hundreds of thousands of times out of compassion of the suffering of others. Mahāyāna encompasses both the monastic and the lay population and added the belief in multiple Buddhas. Today, Mahāyāna Buddhism is found mainly in parts of Asia, including China, Korea, and Japan.

The last form of Buddhism to develop, which flowed from India into Tibet more than one thousand years after the death of the Buddha, was called Vajrayāna, *Mantrayāna*, or *Tantrayāna*. Tibetan Buddhism is an umbrella term used to refer to all the various paths and levels of practice found in this spiritual tradition. From the Tibetan perspective, Tibetan Buddhism encompasses the teachings from Early Buddhism, Mahāyāna, the tantric path and techniques or yogas. It is based on renunciation, vows, and stabilizing meditation techniques from Early Buddhism. It also includes the compassionate motivation of the bodhisattva principle and practice of the Six *Pāramitā(s)*, or transcendental actions from the Mahāyāna tradition. Tibetan Buddhism at the level of the Vajrayāna also encompasses the esoteric aspects found in the Tantras. Each of the four major Tibetan Buddhist schools, the *Nyingma*, *Kagyu*, *Sakya* and *Gelug*, share the understanding that a practitioner must have a strong foundation in the fundamental Buddhist teachings. This is accomplished through the development of “a full renounced mind, and enlightened motive of bodhicitta and a correct view of emptiness” (Lama Yeshe & Lama Zopa Rinpoche 119) before entering the path of the Vajrayāna. There are many levels of exoteric and esoteric teachings in Tibetan Buddhism, whose followers believe in the possibility of swift liberation in a single lifetime.

✦ *Tibetan Buddhism and Healing*

Tibetan Buddhism also features intricate patterns from Buddhist Dharma teachings, which are in turn coloured by tantra, yoga, and sacred medicine. Each of these Tibetan sources contains teachings, practices, and techniques to train both mind and body in the journey toward the Buddha-nature. Healing plays a central and important role in Tibetan Buddhism. The Tibetan word for Dharma is “chos,” which comes from the verb ‘*chös*, meaning to heal or cure. The path of healing in Tibetan Buddhism is traversed through the practice of the Dharma under the guidance of spiritual teachers (Tibetan, *bla ma*, pronounced lama). In Tibetan Buddhism healing is the movement away from the suffering of ignorance and profane attachments. In this context, ignorance does not refer to stupidity but rather to the state of not knowing or being unaware. Healing becomes the purification of the mind and body through the transformation of every thought, word, and deed into the body, speech and mind of the Threefold Buddha Body (Sanskrit, *trikāya*). Tantra and sacred medicine both view the body as a reflection of the universe and the sacred. The physical body becomes the pathway to sacred healing through the movement of energy, sound, and colour in the body’s chakras. These play an important role in all the techniques, yogas, and medical practices used in Tibetan Buddhism. In Tibetan Buddhism the word “chos” encapsulates the practices and understandings of the Dharma, tantra, yoga, and medicine, which open the pathways to health.

✦ *Mind and Body Connection*

*“When positive or joyous feelings and attitudes
pass through each organ and circulate through our whole system,
our physical and chemical energies are transformed and balanced.”*

(Tarthang Tulku 60)

The healing connection between the body, and the disciplining and training of the mind, plays an important role in Tibetan Buddhism. Vajrayāna begins with the follower's outward behaviour and the withdrawal of the senses from the distractions found in the external world. This process begins with moral discipline through the avoidance of all negative and harmful acts against oneself and others. This includes avoiding acts such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and gossip. The next step involves the turning inward and disciplining of the mind through meditation in order to learn focus and concentration. In Tibetan Buddhism, it begins with training to calm the mind and develop concentration (Tibetan, *zhi gnas*; Sanskrit, *śamatha*) and progresses toward analytical meditation (Tibetan, *lhag mthong*; Sanskrit, *vipaśyana*). Sacred healing begins when the veils of obscuration are lifted and purified by the training of the mind, revealing the subtle aspects of the mind. When the mind is in its ordinary deluded state, people experience the pain of cyclical birth, death, and rebirth, called *saṃsāra*. In Buddhism the mind can “create the experience of both happiness and suffering, and the ability to find peace lies within us” (Thondrup 17). The path to healing is found in the proper training of the mind through the medicine of the Dharma.

The physical body plays an important role in Tibetan Buddhism, as the vehicle in which sacred healing occurs. While meditation trains the mind, yoga reveals the sacred aspects of the body. In Tibetan Buddhism, yoga is understood to be the process of becoming connected to the subtle aspects of the mind and the body. It uses such techniques as meditation, sound, and movement. The tantric aspects of Tibetan Buddhism offer detailed teachings on the mind-body connection. “According to the highest yoga Tantra, our body and mind exist not only on the gross level we are normally familiar with but also on subtle levels about which most of us are completely unaware” (Lama Yeshe 111). As these veils are removed from the mind through meditation, the subtle levels of the mind are revealed and the subtler aspects of the body can be experienced. Tibetan Buddhism uses meditation techniques such as visualization, deity yoga, *maṇḍala(s)*, mantra(s), *mudrā(s)*, physical movements, and rituals. In turn, these practices reveal the body’s energy centres (Tibetan, *’khor lo*; Sanskrit *śakra*), which mirror disease, illness, death and dying. When these energy centres appear closed, blocked or cloudy, they reflect illness for a Tibetan doctor or lama. When a person is able to experience and control the energies, colours and sounds that flow through the chakras, healing can begin on the subtle level. The ability to recognize and control the movement of energy, colour and sound in the chakras is considered healing. These centres of energy and their pathways appear in varying forms in other spiritual traditions, such as Taoism.

Descriptions of chakras appeared in an early Sanskrit Buddhist sūtra, called the *Surangama Sutra*, from the 1st century C.E., and were later translated into Chinese. In it, chakras appear in the form of knots in a scarf described as “that [which] bind[s] you to ignorance and the cycle of deaths and rebirths” (*A Buddhist Bible* 215). The ability to

understand and untie these knots brings healing and a return to sacred health. “When the knots are all untied ... [then] only the beautiful handkerchief will remain in its original state of oneness [sacred health]” (Ibid. 218). Additionally, chakras are the gateway to the subtle aspects of the body, which are controlled by the mind. Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes not only training the mind but also using the body and its chakras as a pathway to sacred health. Thus, the movement toward sacred health begins with the transformation of both mind and body, unveiling their sacred aspects.

✦ *The Preliminaries*

The preliminary practices contain techniques used for the synchronous training of the body and the mind through mediation and yoga. These techniques are aspects of Tibetan Buddhist training found in all its schools. “[T]he Four Foundations (the preliminaries) were practiced by all Tibetan sects. They were practised in basically the same way by all the sects, with certain substitutions which reflected the interests of each sect” (Kalu Rinpoche in “The Torch of Certainty” 11). The preliminaries are the basic steps in which a teacher would instruct his students in this experiential approach. In addition to these preliminary practices, empowerments and vows are also undertaken before and after entering the Vajrayāna tantric path. Empowerments are ritual initiations given by qualified lamas which give a student permission to participate at various levels of meditation, visualization, and mantra associated with a specific deity. The preliminary practices begin with “The Four Common Preliminary Practices,” which are meditations on the precious opportunities of human existence, death, impermanence, karma, and life’s

unsatisfactory nature. These reflections use the impermanence and pain found in the external world to turn the attention inward and toward healing. These preliminaries are often practised at the same time as “The Four Uncommon Preliminary Practices,” which progressively purify and fine-tune followers’ internal awareness of the sacred. It progresses from awakening the physical body to the more subtle aspects of the mind. This involves increasingly subtle awareness of the chakras and the connection they create between the gross and subtle aspects of the mind and body. “The Four Uncommon Preliminary Practices” is the completion of one hundred thousand prostrations with the refuge vow to align the physical body and generate *bodhicitta*. The refuge vow is the act of taking refuge in the Buddha (the fully enlightened teacher), the Dharma (the path leading toward the sacred) and the sangha (the spiritual community). Visualization used during prostration mirrors the dying process. These physical movements involve the entire body and the realignment of the chakras. Prostrations and refuge vows are followed by one hundred thousand *Vajrasattva* meditation practices to further purify physical and mental negativities. The third part of this practice is one hundred thousand maṇḍala, or mental and physical offerings to accumulate merit. The final aspect is called the Guru Yoga, which is also completed one hundred thousand times to receive blessings for further practices from the lama. The practice of these preliminaries progressively purifies and transforms the body and mind. Some practitioners complete this cycle of preliminary practices several times during one lifetime. These are part of a purification process that begins at the outer level and moves inward. The preliminary practices move the practitioner toward healing by the synchronous refining of both the mind and the body on the tantric path of Tibetan Buddhism.

✦ *Vajrayāna Buddhism*

The Tantra approach of Vajrayāna Buddhism includes a vast collection of techniques for healing, and detailed teachings used in preparation for dying. Vajrayāna encompasses “the sutra approach of the Mahāyāna and the Tantra approach of the Vajrayāna but with different time scales” (Kalu Rinpoche 1995, 55). From the Tibetan Buddhist understanding, Vajrayāna encompasses the foundational Buddhist teachings found in the sutras as well as esoteric aspects of Buddhism from the Tantras. The Sanskrit word “*vajra*” means “diamond” or “indestructible vehicle”. The vajra mind, also called the extremely subtle mind, is understood to be the essence that passes from life to life. It is the Buddha-nature. In tantric physiology, it resides at the level of the heart chakra in the form of an indestructible drop or essence. This innate Buddha-nature is said to be like a diamond that is indestructible, pure, and empty, but luminous. The tantric aspects of Vajrayāna Buddhism begin with the understanding that all humans possess the vajra mind, body, and speech, but that these have become obscured.

[B]ecause Vajrayana sees everything as sacred, all appearance is a form of divinity, all sound is the sound of mantra, and all thought and awareness is the divine play of transcending awareness...The potential for that sacredness exists within our present framework of the five skandhas [aggregates]. Acknowledging psycho-physical aggregates [chakras] of an individual as the potential of the Buddhas...is to recognize that, in Tantra, the potential for that transformation exists within our present situation.

(Kalu Rinpoche 1986, 124-25)

This transformation is revealed and experienced through various techniques used to transform all internal and external events and things into the sacred. “Tantric practices challenge practitioners immediately to see all things and all experiences as intrinsically

pure and innately perfect” (Shaw 24). The basis for this is the purification of the gross (profane) levels of the body, speech, and mind into their subtle (sacred) aspects through the practice of yoga. “Part of the Tantric methodology of deconstructing the ordinary self is to replace it with a divine self” (Ibid. 204). This technique involves the gradual transformation of the ordinary self into a deity through deity yoga. Tantric Buddhism is a path of sacred healing with abundant teachings for the transformation of the mind, speech, and body into their vajra or sacred aspects.

The tantra approach to Vajrayāna is an intensive and difficult path leading toward Buddha-nature that requires a realized spiritual guide. This aspect of Tibetan Buddhism is considered to be the quick and direct path toward health that has the potential of being realized in a single lifetime or a maximum of sixteen lifetimes for both women and men. Its written and oral teachings and images are highly esoteric in nature and are therefore often easily misinterpreted and misunderstood. For example, there are numerous traditional Tibetan scroll paintings, *thangka(s)*, (Tibetan, *thang ka*) and statues of male and female deities who appear to be in sexual union. On the profane level this is a sexual image but on the sacred level this image represents the union of wisdom and compassion. The written and oral teachings are presented in obscure language used to deliberately conceal their meaning. This so-called “twilight language” (Sanskrit, *saṃdhā-bhāṣā*) (Buckness and Stuart-Fox 12) contains symbols, words, and images which may have up to four contextual levels of meaning, ranging from the profane to the sacred level. The sacred texts, which explain spiritual healing and its requirements, are written in symbols and formulas in word combinations such as mantras, and in visual combinations such as maṇḍala(s). Lama Anagarika Govinda writes about the twilight language extensively in

Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism, as does Eliade in *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*. Each of the Tibetan Buddhist schools has both shared and unique techniques, texts and approaches to tantra. Entry into the tantric aspect of the path is an intensive and serious commitment and must be authorized and closely guided by a realized spiritual teacher. Lamas are male and female teachers from both the monastic and the lay life. One of the most renowned Tibetan yoginīs was Machig Labdrön (1055-1153 C.E.), who was the founder of the *Mahamudra Chöd* tradition. Chöd is a Vajrayāna practice used to cut through attachments, emotional afflictions, and the fear of death through yogic techniques and by making offerings to the beings that have not yet been reincarnated. All lamas are understood to represent the living presence of the Buddha and the lineage of teachers. During initiations given by the lamas, students are given permission to participate in levels of practice reflecting each student's degree of understanding. At the more advanced levels are the tantric aspects of the Vajrayāna. These techniques and classifications vary from school to school but share the common goal of attaining sacred health. Often, the practitioner does not have direct contact with the lama unless problems or unresolved questions occur. The lama can be called upon when there is pain and confusion and ultimately to guide a practitioner at the moment of death. A Tantric master is necessary because the Vajrayāna aspect of the path "requires a fearless confrontation of every aspect of the psyche, including primal levels of anger, desire, and fear" (Shaw 25). The tantra aspect of the Vajrayāna is understood to be a "quick path" through sacred healing. Due to its esoteric nature, this path of sacred healing is traversed through the practice of the Dharma under the close guidance of spiritual teachers. Thus, Tibetan spiritual teachers are healers and supportive guides on the journey toward sacred health.

✦ *Anuttarayoga Tantra*

In Tibetan Buddhism, the Highest Yoga Tantra teachings, techniques, and sacred texts contain the most detailed and explicit teachings on healing and death. This level of teaching and practice involves detailed technical information that is used to diagnose and alter the body's biochemistry in order to heal the self and others. This highest level of Vajrayāna teachings is called *Anuttarayoga Tantra*, also known in another classification system as the three levels of *Mahāyoga*, *Amṃyoga*, and *Atiyoga* Tantras. These teachings are presented orally as well as in sacred texts such as the body of literature commonly called *bar do* (Tibetan, literally “gap” or “in between”) teachings, generally known in the West as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. In Tibetan Buddhism, the word bardo often denotes the stages of rebecoming after death but also encompasses all the junctures when healing is possible. The bardo teachings also include the spiritual yogas called the *Six Doctrines of Naropa*. These six yogas are used in each of the six bardos to experience energy, light and sounds in the chakras and to prepare for and control the dying process. Of particular interest is the phowa (Tibetan, *'pho ba*, pronounced po-wa) yoga practised at the moment of dying. These bardo teachings will be explored in some detail in the following chapter in relation to healing. Anuttarayoga Tantra contains a vast amount of esoteric tantric techniques used in the various bardos to prepare for death, mirror the dying process, and heal after death.

Central to all tantric Buddhism is the practice of deity yoga. At the lower levels it consists of making offerings and connections with a specific deity while at the highest level it

involves transforming oneself into that deity. This is done through the creation and completion stages of meditation. In the creation stage, the practitioner visualizes sights and sounds, and sees him or herself and other beings as the deity. This creation stage has the effect of transforming, opening and purifying the chakras. It could also be viewed as the diagnosis stage in the sacred medical analogy. During the completion stage, the central channel is opened, with the dissolution and ascendance of the deity into the heart chakra. The completion stage of Anuttarayoga Tantra creates the pathway for healing.

The chakras play a central role in sacred healing and death in both Anuttarayoga Tantra and Tibetan Buddhist medicine. The subtle physiology, with its chakras and the practice of sacred healing, is pivotal to both aspects of Tibetan Dharma. The movement of energy, light, and sound through the chakras reflects healing or illness and death or life. Realized yogis and yoginīs are able to open and close the chakras through the training of the mind in meditation, breath, and visualization. Realized spiritual teachers and Tibetan doctors are able to see, diagnose, and heal people through the chakras. Chakras that are cloudy or blocked reflect ill health and when completely closed they mirror the dying process. Tantric practices transform the body through meditation, which leads to the ability to identify with a pure form. The pathway to this enlightened form is through the discovery and experience of the chakras. Tantrayāna pays considerable attention to the control of vital energy into and out of various chakras in the body, and the purification of lower forms of energy into higher forms. Advanced tantric practitioners are able to close the chakras to mirror, experience and prepare for death.

In Tibetan Tantric Buddhist medicine, healing is a combination of medicines, herbs and various treatments used in conjunction with Dharma teachings. The purpose of this healing is to transform, open and purify any chakras that are blocked or clouded. Diagnosis and treatment in Tantric medicine occurs simultaneously on both the profane and sacred levels. It involves a combination of theory, application, and experiential understanding. In the practice of healing in Tibetan Buddhist medicine, techniques are not merely techniques but are used to trigger and remove aspects of our consciousness, layer by layer. While on the surface Tibetan Buddhist doctors may appear to diagnose illness by examining the pulse, tongue, or urine, these are actually techniques used to locate and pinpoint disease through the chakras. Tibetan doctors use these biochemical indicators in relation to the movement of light, energy, and sound in the vajra body. Treatments vary and may include the use of medications and techniques such as herbs, acupuncture, massage and environmental changes, in conjunction with meditation, visualization, and prayer, in order to transform and heal both the physical and vajra body. Tibetan doctors use the technical details found in sacred healing as a Western doctor would use clinical information. Thus, Tibetan Buddhist medicine operates on two levels: on the profane level it includes physical examination and medications to treat the physical ailments, while on the sacred level, the doctor uses his or her sacred, technical knowledge to move the patient toward sacred health.

Tantric medicine is founded on compassion for the suffering of others. Doctors visualize themselves as the Medicine Buddha while treating patients. Tibetan doctors are often highly realized monks and nuns who have trained extensively in both Dharma and Tantric medicine. In the past, monastic training was completed along with the medical studies.

“Generally it was said to take thirty years to master [Tantric] medicine” (Clifford 63). Chakras play an important role in health and healing. Tibetan medicine embryology teaches that within eight weeks of gestation all of the major chakras, beginning at the navel area and progressing upward to the crown of the head, have been formed, along with their subtle psychic nerves. Tibetan medicine and Anuttarayoga Tantra both understand and use the subtle body and its chakras to manipulate and open these energy centres to heal and/or prepare for death during life. Both recognize that sacred healing can be self-generated or be guided by a lama with whom the practitioner has a spiritual connection. Practitioners who do not feel that they have stabilized their practice at the moment of death or who are in great pain can call upon their teacher, whether near or far, for healing during these moments. Those who are dying are often told to remember their lamas and the teachings they received during life to guide them through this transition. Both Tibetan medicine and Anuttarayoga Tantra share the teachings on the subtle physiology and its chakras. These pathways to sacred health contribute greatly to sacred healing in Tibet, which is also known as the “Land of the Healing Art”.

✦ *Chakras and Subtle Physiology*

The principles of physiology found in Tibetan Buddhism are based on tantric yoga and its teachings on the subtle body. These detailed technical descriptions are an integral part of the Tibetan Buddhist approach to sacred healing and health. Chakras are central to the flow of light, sound, and energy throughout the subtle body in its sacred and purified forms. Each of the three main components of the subtle or vajra body is recognized as a part of the system of energy that holds the physical body together during life. As these components are disturbed and collapse during the process of dying they create the potential for the realization of the Threefold Buddha Body. In order to help the reader understand the Tibetan approach to the dying process and its potential for healing, we shall describe the vajra body.

The Tibetan subtle mapping of the body reflects the sacred and is based on three main components: channels, energy winds, and drops. “The subtle vajra body is pervaded by thousands of channels [72,000] (*nadi*) through which flow the energy winds (*prana*) and drops (*bindu*)” (Lama Yeshe 111), which are all connected to or flow through the chakras. In Tibetan these are respectively called *tsa* (*rtsa*), *lung* (*rlung*), and *thig-le*. The movement of energy winds and essences (drops) through a network of subtle channels (psychic nerves) map the sacred energy body. In Tibetan Buddhism, the purification of these three main components of the subtle body is related to the realization of the Threefold Buddha Body. These are three levels of expression of the reality of the Buddha-nature. Some higher tantras use a classification system with a different number of

buddha bodies. The Threefold Buddha Body is the truth body (Tibetan, *chös kyi sku*; Sanskrit, *dharmakāya*), the enjoyment body (Tibetan, *longs sku*; Sanskrit, *sambhogakāya*), and the emanation body (Tibetan, *sprul sku*; Sanskrit, *nirmāṇakāya*). Threefold Buddha Body is the healing realization of the Buddha's mind, speech, and body. In the subtle or mystic physiology, this transformation is related to purification of the three principal components. When the subtle channels are purified they correspond to the emanation body. The purification of the energy winds corresponds to the enjoyment body, while the transformation of the thig-les or drops into their purified form corresponds with the truth body. Additionally, the truth body is an enlightened being's unobstructed mind while the enjoyment body is how these beings appear to highly realized beings, such as bodhisattvas. The enjoyment body is the form in which these enlightened beings appear to ordinary beings. Thus, if very advanced practitioners of Anuttarayoga Tantra are able to experience the purification of the subtle channels, energy winds and/or drops during life, they are prepared for the dying process. Those who are able to realize and maintain these transformations during life attain various levels of sacred healing. The purification of the subtle body and its three components through the various methods found in Tibetan Buddhist Tantra transforms the physical body and all that surrounds it into the sacred.

In the Tantric Buddhist tradition of Tibet the subtle physiology of the vajra body is based on a psycho-physical system. Its energy pathways are similar to, but not exactly the same as, the meridian system found in Chinese acupuncture. The subtle body is mapped from the movement of a radiant form of energy that is different from, yet sometimes compared to, the physical anatomy found in Western medicine. For example, although the channels

roughly correspond to the physical nerves and veins, they differ in path and purpose. Tantric physiology is based on a psycho-physical system that “cannot be perceived by the physical senses” and “belongs to another plane of existence which we normally access only in dream states or after death” (Frawley, 22). At the moment of death the inner winds draw into the central channel and all dualistic thought patterns cease, creating the potential to move toward the sacred. This is a universal experience, but few people recognize it or are able to maintain it at the moment of death. During life, on a coarser level, the inner winds are automatically drawn into the central channel when one sleeps, faints, sneezes and experiences sexual orgasm. Most people do not recognize these events on the level of subtle physiology. The channels support the winds and these, in turn, support the mind. The thig-le, or drops, are found throughout the body in the channels. The red essence is found at the level of the navel and the white essence at the crown of the head. At the moment of death they converge at the level of the heart. There are three principal channels: the central channel (Tibetan, *dbu ma*) running roughly parallel to the spine, and the right (Tibetan, *ro ma*) and left channels (Tibetan, *rkyang ma*), which run on either side of the central one. The right and left channels coil around the central one, creating knots. This resembles the Western medical symbol of the image of the snake coiled around the staff, called the caduceus, or wand of Hermes. Thousands of other channels flow through these knots and radiate to all parts of the body. These points of intersection are called chakras and can number five, six, or seven in the Tibetan system. In Tibetan tantric physiology chakras “rise vertically from the base of the spine to the crown of the head, each radiation gaining in strength and power as it goes” (Govinda 1991, 186). For the most part, they are understood to be five wheels or lotuses at the level of the brain, throat, heart, navel and genital regions. The two remaining centres are

located at the tip of the sexual organ and the crown of the head. Subtle Tibetan tantric physiology is a complex system of channels, energy winds and drops that create a bridge linking the solid form of matter called the physical body, and the radiant form of energy called the subtle body. Each of these components runs through or resides in the energy centres called chakras.

The number of chakras and their details vary depending on the medical and tantric system involved. These are revealed through various practices of visualization according to “the specific inner sensibilities [one] is trying to unfold” (Thurman 38). It should be noted that a great deal of confusion and misinformation exists on the subject of chakras. To begin with, despite technical similarities between the Buddhist and the Hindu systems of chakras, they are different systems. The difference lies mainly in the chakras’ function. The Buddhist system focuses on “that which flows through them, with their dynamic functions” (Govinda, 1990, 134), that is, the energy, colours, and sounds, and for that reason is much less adamant than the Hindu system. The Hindu system is more static in that it always teaches that there are seven chakras, each of which is associated with and represented by specific symbols, colours, seed sounds, deities, elements, and animal symbols. These give the chakras a more “static” and “objective content” (Ibid) than the Tibetan system. Another major difference between the two systems is that in the Hindu teachings each teacher gives each student a different chakra to focus on for his or her practice. This creates a different experience for the students. In the Tibetan chakra system, certain colours, symbols and sounds are associated with each chakra, which usually are five in number but may be seven, but these change with teachers, practices, and students. The emphasis is on the discovery of these energy centres and learning to

control the flow of energy through them. In the Tibetan system, it is understood that the chakra above controls the one below, and that one should start with the chakra located between the eyes, as it controls every other chakra below it. It is important to keep in mind that the differences between the Tibetan and Hindu chakra systems affects the understanding and experience of the energies found in the chakras.

The chakra located at the level of the heart plays an important role in the Tibetan tantric understanding and experience of healing. The development of awareness of the heart chakra during life is essential to the experience of sacred health, both during life and at the moment of death. In the Tibetan medical system, this energy centre “is synonymous with the mind as consciousness, mental clarity, and sense of self-identity arise from the heart centre” (Clifford 133). In the Tibetan medical system, many psychiatric diseases are rooted in the heart chakra and this is where sacred healing often begins. During life, the heart chakra is the home of the very subtle mind that follows sentient beings from one life to another until they attain sacred health. After death, it is revealed to be the abode of forty-two peaceful deities. Each ascending chakra contains the energy of, controls, and absorbs those below it. The heart chakra is the gateway to the sacred aspects of the physical body and mind. It is the midpoint between the profane and sacred energies. The chakras below the heart level represent that which connects beings with the present life and the cycles of rebirth. Those above the heart level are the energy centres that move beings closer to their sacred source. The heart chakra is the most difficult and complex of the knot to untangle. Whereas each of the other chakras has a two-fold knot created by a single crossing of the right and left channels, the heart chakra is formed by three overlapping loops, creating a six-fold knot. Once this chakra is loosened, so, too, are the

subtle aspects of the body and mind. Each chakra is associated with and corresponds to one of the five aggregates (Tibetan, *phung po*; Sanskrit, *skandha[s]*), which include form, feeling, perceptions/discrimination, conditioning/motivational factors and consciousness. When purified they are experienced in the form of five cosmic elements: earth, water, fire, air and ether. Once these aggregates and elements are purified they are transformed into the Five Buddha Families and their environments called maṇḍalas. Each of these Buddha Families is comprised of a male Buddha, representing one of the purified aggregates, and a female Buddha, representing one of the purified elements. These sacred aspects of the chakras are visualized and experienced through various tantric yogas, thus preparing the practitioner for their appearance and dissolution during the dying process, and creating an opportunity to move toward sacred healing and health during both life and death. In Tibetan Buddhism, the heart chakra is the key to the entrance to the sacred aspects of mind and body. The ability to untie this knot at the heart centre is the gateway to the understanding and experience of the sacred aspects of mind and body.

✦ *Dying and Death in Tibetan Buddhism*

“The science of death is the foundation of the art of dying,
just as the science of medicine is the foundation of the art of healing.”

(Thurman 45)

The physiological process of dying is universal for all people, whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or belonging to any other tradition. As noted in Chapter I, in Western medicine, the physiological process of dying is often seen in purely physical terms but it is interpreted in a very different way in religious teachings. As noted above, Western medicine usually regards death as the end of life. However, from the sacred perspective, the moment when the energies leave the body is a new beginning, for this is the moment when the dying person crosses the threshold into the sacred. This section will discuss the detailed and technical Tibetan teachings on the dying process.

During the dying process, the physical body stops working due to the simultaneous breakdown of its subtle energies. Thus, when discussing the dying process in Tibetan Buddhism, it is necessary to also include an account of the vajra body and the corresponding external and internal signs. This understanding may provide caregivers with new insights into the dying process. The stages leading up to the moment of death are part of the painful bardo of dying, or the *chikai* bardo (Tibetan, '*chi kha*' *bar do*) in Tibetan teachings. They are described as painful because most people are not prepared for the experience of death, and the process of dying creates great pain and suffering for

themselves and those close to them. Both the Nyingma and Kagyu lineages have extensive bardos teachings, classified into four to six different bardos respectively. From the moment of conception until the chikai bardo, sentient beings experience what is called the natural bardo of this life, called the *kye ne* bardo (Tibetan, *skye gnas shi bar do*). When people sleep, they enter the bardo of the dream state, called *milam* bardo (Tibetan, *rmi lam bar do*). During times of deep concentration they enter the bardo of meditation, the *samten* bardo (Tibetan, *bstam gtan bar do*). During each of these bardos, there are opportunities to progress toward sacred healing. A person enters into the chikai bardo at the moment the body and mind can no longer continue to heal. Entry into this bardo can be due to the fruition of karma, which may include old age and disease. It can also be due to an untimely death, as in the case of a sudden or violent death such as an accident or suicide. Dying is a process that involves both the subtle physiology of the body and physical signs indicating the dissolution of the body's elements. "[T]he dying process indicates that the elements that compose one's physical body and one's psycho-physical experience of the body is breaking down" (Kalu Rinpoche 1994, 73). It encompasses many simultaneous changes and dissolutions involving the transformation from the gross or coarser aspects toward the subtler aspects of mind and body. The purpose of these tantric techniques is to experience and understand the dying process during life by piercing through the chakras and untangling each of their knots in order to purify the energy winds and reveal the sacred nature of thig-les. The techniques and yogas found in the Highest Yoga Tantra mirror both the dying process and death. As a result a tantric practitioner can enter into the chikai bardo and move toward sacred healing. The bardo of dying does not have to be a frightening experience and through preparation, teaching, and practice it can become an opportunity for healing and health.

The Tibetan Buddhist tradition describes the dying process in great detail. It involves the view that the dying person is separating from his or her coarser, more profane aspects and becoming more refined as he or she moves back toward his or her sacred origins. Tibetan Buddhism teaches that this is a universal process involving both the gross outer physical signs and symptoms and the subtle inner transformations precipitated by the disturbance of the five energy winds. At the moment of death another wind manifests itself. This is called the wind of karma and becoming. When this wind manifests, it interferes with the other energy winds. The first wind to be extinguished is located at the level of the navel chakra, which regulates the absorption of nourishment. The result is that there is no longer any need for food, nor can it be absorbed. The next wind to leave is the life-bearing wind located in the heart chakra, which results in emotional distress. The next wind affects the loss of control over the lower abdominal functions, often resulting in incontinence. The fourth energy wind to be disturbed is called the "upward-moving wind," which causes short, laboured breathing and difficulty swallowing. In the end, the "pervasive wind" is affected, creating uncomfortable physical feelings such as difficulty moving limbs. The disturbance of and extinguishing of the five main energy winds is clearly manifested on the physical level and indicates to both the person dying and those around him or her that the dying person's physical health is ebbing away. These outward signs may be familiar to those who have cared for or have been present during the dying process. To understand that this is a normal part of the process can be comforting for the caregiver and/or the person who is dying.

May your eyes mingle with the sun.
 May your breath be merged with the winds.
 May the waters of your being mingle with the oceans.
 May the ashes become one with the soil.
 May you go to the heavens or to the earth,
 Whatever your direction may be.

(The Veda(s), Quoted in To Die Well 127)

During the dying process there is not only an outer dissolution but also a simultaneous inner dissolution with both objective and subjective signs. The disturbance of the five energy winds causes the destruction of their subtle channels and dissolution of the body's principal elements. The order in which these elements dissolve goes from the grossest to the most subtle. The earth element is associated with the solidity of the body and the chakra located near the genital region. The elements and their connected chakras vary and these classifications are based on the fivefold chakra system taught by Lama Govinda. The dissolution of the body's elements during the dying process begins with the dissolution of earth into the water element, resulting in the body becoming very heavy, making it difficult to sit up. On the subjective level, the person experiences the frightening feeling of being crushed by a great weight, "as though a mountain were sitting on one's chest" (Kalu Rinpoche 1994, 74). The second stage is the reabsorption of the water element into the next most subtle element of fire. The water element is associated with the blood and other fluids, and the navel chakra. The objective signs at this stage include the inability to control bodily fluids such as saliva, urine and mucous. The inner signs include the "feeling of being carried away by a torrent...and hear[ing] the sound of a violent waterfall" (Ibid. 1997, 57). The fire element is then absorbed into the air element, resulting in the outward sign of gradual loss of bodily warmth from all

extremities, moving from the tips of the fingers and toes toward the heart region, which, if touched at the right moment, would feel feverish. On the inner level it is “as though the body was being subjected to incredible heat” (Ibid. 74). The fire element is associated with biological warmth and the heart chakra. The element of air is associated with respiration and the throat chakra. The air element represents the orifices of the body, and the spatial separation of the organs, and is connected to the throat chakra. Finally, the most subtle element, space or consciousness, associated with the crown chakra, controls breath and maintains the respiratory process. During the final dissolution of air into the element of space or consciousness, the dying person’s breathing becomes very uneven. It becomes rapid, short, and sharp, with periods of intermittent rest and difficulty in inhaling. This breathing pattern is sometimes referred to as the “death rattle” or Cheyne-Stokes breathing in Western medical terms. “The subjective experience is one of being caught in a maelstrom of air” (Ibid). This subjective experience ends when respiration ceases, indicating that all the elements have broken down and been absorbed into consciousness itself. This would be considered the moment of death in Western medicine but not in Tibetan Tantra and its medicine. The bardo of dying is an experience of changes in the body and mind at both the gross and subtle levels. This transformation can be extremely traumatic and terrifying for someone who is not prepared. Once again, the outward manifestations of the dissolution of the elements during the dying process are universal observations. The Tibetan view simply correlates these outward signs with the breakdown of the vajra body.

From the Tibetan perspective, death occurs at the moment when the mind separates from the physical body. This is the moment when the extremely subtle mind leaves the

physical body. During the dying process, the winds migrate and disappear from the chakra energy centres, eventually causing the destruction of subtle channels and the chakras. These dissolutions are reflected in both the shutting down and deterioration of the physical body, accompanied by internal signs. The further breaking apart of consciousness into emptiness is characterized by the experience of the white, red, and black luminosity involving the subtle drops. Tibetan Buddhism and its Tantric medicine both understand death to be the moment when the white and red thig-le meet at the heart centre. These are the feminine and masculine principles of the subtle body, called the white and red drops, which reside at the level of the navel and the crown of the head respectively. They are formed at the moment of conception and are also called the mother and father essences. As the white masculine essence ascends from the crown chakra toward the heart the dying person may perceive and experience a white luminosity like moonlight. All thoughts and feelings of anger and hatred dissolve at this time. Following this the red female essence ascends from the navel chakra toward the heart centre and the dying person may experience red luminosity like the light of the sun. All thoughts and feelings of desire and attachment dissipate at this time. The two essences meet at the heart chakra in an indestructible drop that is about the size of a pea. Each person's very subtle mind and wind reside in this indestructible drop. When the white and red drops meet at the level of the heart there is a moment of blackness, signifying that the two halves of the indestructible drop have opened and that the very subtle wind, supported by the very subtle mind, has left the physical body. "It is when these red and white forces meet in the heart region that death truly occurs. At this point, the physical body and the mind separate. The energy structure has broken down completely; there is no longer an avenue for that physical basis to maintain consciousness, as it is no longer part of the life

experience” (Ibid. 76). For most people, the union of the white and red drops at the heart chakra is an unconscious experience similar to blacking out or fainting. This is the moment that defines death, as consciousness leaves the body and moves through the next bardo stage.

However, the moment of death is not the end of the journey in Tibetan Buddhism. There are two remaining bardos that may be traversed by the consciousness if it continues on toward rebirth. The consciousness leaves the body at the moment of death, marking the end of the physical body and the beginning of the journey of the mind. It then encounters clear light in the bardo of dharmatā, the chönyi bardo (Tibetan, *chös nyid bar do*), which is the period of time between dying and emerging as a mental body in the next bardo. A practitioner who has trained in meditation during life and recognizes the clear light may be able to attain sacred health at that moment, thus avoiding any further stages of the bardos and rebirth. He or she may also choose to be reborn in order to help and enlighten all sentient beings. Such is the case with reincarnated spiritual teachers such as the Dalai Lama, who voluntarily and compassionately chose rebirth in order to help heal the suffering of others. For those who do not recognize the clear light and have not stabilized their meditation practice during life, this bardo flashes by in a “finger snap” (Rangdröl 53). Other opportunities for sacred healing arise in the ensuing karmic bardo of becoming, the *sidpa* bardo (Tibetan, *srid pa’ bar do*), which begins with the moment that one emerges “in a mental body until entering the womb of the next life” (Ibid. 168). The bardo of dharmatā is an opportunity to be reunited with the innate nature of phenomenon and mind, that is, sacred health. If this does not occur, the mind continues its journey

toward rebirth with the possibility of realizing further levels of sacred healing in the remaining bardo.

✦ Chapter Summary

Tibetan Buddhism contains a vast amount of esoteric teachings, techniques, and descriptions to prepare for dying, death and the process of rebecoming. The Tibetan view of these themes is based on the teachings and techniques used to guide the practitioner toward health in preparation for death. Buddhism is a tradition of sacred healing with the Dharma as the cure, life as the illness, death as the ultimate medicine and the Buddha as the sacred doctor. Buddhist teachings, understandings, and techniques are connected to this healing journey. Tibetan Buddhism builds upon these Buddhist teachings with a wealth of teachings involving both the training of the mind and the experience of the subtle body. Its spiritual teachers and doctors are guides and sacred healers. Tibetan Buddhist medicine, Tantra and yoga all contribute to the understanding and practice of the Dharma. They contain a vast amount of detailed teachings on the physical and subtle bodies. This information creates an extensive amount of technical and often esoteric details. These are viewed as the means to diagnose, treat, and heal the physical body through the subtle body during life. Examples of this are found in the tantric aspects of Vajrayāna Buddhism and, in particular, Anuttarayoga Tantric Yoga and Tibetan Tantric medicine. Tibetan Buddhism places great importance on the flow of energy, light and sound through the chakras. Chakras, in turn, are used to diagnose illness and monitor a person's health or the stages of dying. During life, practitioners accept and prepare for the

moment of death, which they regard as the universal and pivotal moment to attain sacred healing.

The Tibetan Buddhist approach to death and its understanding of sacred healing and health is a vast and fascinating topic. To explore these themes in any degree of detail is not possible in the context of this chapter, thesis, or even in a lifetime of practice and study. This chapter merely attempts to present a taste of this complex topic. It endeavours to highlight the sacred approach to healing found in Tibetan Buddhism and its tantric and medical aspects. The Tibetan Buddhist and sacred understanding of these themes is very different from that of most people in the West. This has started to change in some areas of Western medicine, with the advent of palliative care for the dying. The focus in palliative care is on making the patient as comfortable as possible when death is inevitable. Often, there comes a time when medications can no longer alleviate the patient's physical pain. It is at this time that the patient may turn toward his or her impending death. Thoughts of the sacred aspects of dying and death may begin to overshadow the physical, profane aspects. Patients who are conscious often reflect on their lives in terms specific to them. These thoughts may or may not be expressed in religious terms and are unique to the person, and to the filters that he or she has created around him or herself during life. Healing can occur at this time. Caregivers in palliative care can contribute to this healing through the art of listening. In the Tibetan model, both the spiritual teacher and the doctor are able to diagnose through the chakras and heal through the Dharma.

It is hoped this brief presentation of the sacred pathways toward health in Tibetan Buddhism will introduce the reader to a different understanding of healing, health and

death. These ancient teachings have been taught to some students in the West in order to preserve them and while there are a number of books on the subject, few realized Tibetan teachers remain or are actively teaching. Thus, these teachings are increasingly precious. The Tibetan Buddhist view of sudden or violent death must also be discussed. Death by suicide in the Tibetan Buddhist context will be explored in the following chapter.



CHAPTER III

Bardo Teachings and Healing After Death

“People fear death only because they fail to see that life and death
are not separate states but merely two stages
of one natural process—that both are present in any given moment.”

(Chuang-tzu , Quoted in “To Die Well” 59)

The previous chapter discussed the sacred healing pathways used to prepare for death in Buddhism, focusing particularly on Tibetan Buddhism. It briefly explored technical aspects of healing involving tantric teachings and yoga. Healing flows through the mind and body as followers practice meditation to develop deep concentration and stop the idle chatter, emotions, and passing thoughts that normally flood people’s minds. This allows for the direct experience of the chakras and healing in order to prepare for dying, death and the bardos that ensue.

The Tibetan tradition emphasizes preparation for death during life and teaches that healing can continue after death. Tibetan Buddhists believe that the potential for forgiveness exists in each of the bardos, including those encountered by the consciousness at death and during the process of rebecoming. Healing and the movement toward the sacred can occur with the shedding of the physical body and passage through the bardos to rebirth. These opportunities for transformation after death, up until the

moment of conception or rebirth, are presented in the body of teachings collectively referred to as the “bardo teachings”. They contain a variety of teachings used to prepare and guide followers through the bardos after death. The use of the word “bardo” usually refers to the process of dying, the moment of death, and the sights, sounds, and experiences that may be encountered between death and rebirth. From the Tibetan Buddhist perspective, the bardo teachings are understood as a scientific approach to death. They are the result of the direct experiences of Tibetan mystics. The bardo teachings emphasize the importance of the state of mind at the moment of death, which is believed to influence the journey in the ensuing bardos, the type of rebirth, and the potential for healing after life. Practitioners prepare for this moment of transformation during life through yoga, meditation and guidance from their lama. As death can come at any time, they must be able to become focused on their spiritual practice at any time and under any circumstances. One tantric yoga technique used to focus the mind, prepare for death, and move toward healing involves the transfer of consciousness called phowa. This technique can be practised during life and at the moment of death. Additionally, it can be practised on behalf of someone who has died a sudden or violent death, to help the person’s consciousness heal in the bardos. This potential for transformation is reflected by the state of the mind at the moment of death. Forgiveness and the chance to scrape off any lack of faith that remains after death are taught and practised through the bardo teachings.

According to Tibetan Buddhism, a person’s life span is determined by his or her karma. In most cases death occurs due to old age or illness, when a person’s karma has been exhausted. Signs of impending death are illustrated in both the bardo teachings and

Tibetan medical texts in the form of physical signs, dreams, and the interpretation of shadows. The Tibetan medical text, *The Four Tantras*, devotes an entire chapter to indications of approaching death. The previous chapter examined the dying process with the internal and external experiences that occur when death is timely or natural. But death can also be due to sudden, accidental, or violent circumstances. In Tibetan Buddhism, these are referred to as untimely deaths. Tibetan lamas teach that beings who die before their karma is exhausted either go through the stages of dying at very accelerated speed or completely bypass this process, thus making any movement toward healing next to impossible. A death that is sudden or violent also colours the experiences in the following bardos. Those who die in anger and fear take that state of mind into the bardo experience and it has bearing on the future rebirth. In the Tibetan tradition, prayers and meditation practices dedicated to those who have died untimely deaths are thought to help, guide and possibly heal these beings in the bardos. Thus, karma is accumulated right up to the moment of death and that which has not been worked through is carried over into to next life and influences the process of rebecoming.

Suicide describes a type of untimely death. It has many different connotations and denotations in the West. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines suicide as the act of “killing oneself intentionally.” This worldly definition is limited to a description of the event. Illness, depression, physical pain and emotional turmoil such as “overwhelming despair, fear, rage or passion” (Young 659) are among the factors that can lead people to take their own lives. This profane view does not include the state of mind leading up to or at the moment of death and how it affects the bardo experiences. In Tibetan Buddhism, the state of consciousness at the moment of death is of the utmost importance, rather than

the type of death or its circumstances. As with other eastern spiritual traditions, there is very little written directly on the subject of suicide in Tibetan Buddhism. However, there are vast and detailed teachings on the state of consciousness, training of the mind, and techniques to achieve concentration and healing. When suicide is discussed in Tibetan Buddhism, it is usually described as very negative act. This is due to the heightened negative emotions that often motivate suicide and influence the mind at death. The taking of one's life due to worldly attachments is seen as a movement away from healing and toward the profane. However, under very specific, sanctioned and rare circumstances, the taking of one's own life can part of the sacred healing process in the Tibetan tradition. The taking of one's life can have either a profane or a sacred motivation, depending on the state of mind at the moment of death.

This final chapter will briefly explore the Tibetan Buddhist understandings of healing at the moment of death and after death. This will be illustrated by various bardo teachings including specific ones in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and the yoga technique of phowa found in the *Six Doctrines of Naropa*. These are both bardo teachings from the Anuttarayoga class of Tantra that propose specific techniques for moving toward healing in each of the bardos. These teachings emphasize the importance of the state of mind at the moment of death and how it affects the potential for healing after death. The disciplining of the mind can take place during life through meditation and/or with the guidance of a lama at the moment of death and in the bardos. The act of taking one's own life will be approached in relation to healing at death and after death. We shall also discuss the profane motivation and sacred healing motivation in relation to the practice of phowa. This chapter will contain a lot of detail and will be as technical as the previous

chapter. These details once again reflect the Tibetan technical approach to healing. The chapter will continue with the Tibetan Buddhist views of healing at the moment of death and in the bardos.

✦ *Bardo Teachings*

The bardo teachings found in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition are rooted in the themes of death, sacred health and healing. These sacred written and oral teachings enhance practitioners' understanding of the sights, sounds, and experiences encountered after death, during the process of rebecoming. There are many different levels of the bardo teachings. One genre of these religious teachings is in the form of *delok* (Tibetan 'das log) biographies. These are the accounts of people, usually women, who, although appearing to be physically dead, have only temporarily left their bodies for a time. During this time, they travel through the bardos to the various realms of rebirth, often the hell realms, returning to their bodies with messages, teachings, and warnings for others. "[T]he delok autobiographies are a religious teaching for the common people" (Pommarat 501) on the topics of karma and rebirth in relation to healing during life. Deloks visit *Yama*, the Lord of Death, who decides the fate of the dead, by weighing good and bad deeds, and journey to various realms to save these beings and bring back messages to their loved ones. There are six realms for rebirth, which are described in more detail later on in this chapter.

Another body of bardo texts teaches about the signs of approaching death. These are in the form of manuals and commentaries that describe physical manifestations of the vajra body that begin the process of dissolution and closing of the chakras. They are used by lamas and doctors to foretell the moment of death. Tibetan Buddhists do not hope for death, but use the various bardo teachings to accept and prepare for this moment. Tibetans often use divination practices to predict death and longevity. Rituals are used not to avoid death, but rather to extend the life span of the practitioner in order to practice the Dharma and move closer toward the sacred before death. Both of the delok and the signs-of-death teachings contain fascinating accounts of dying, the bardos and rebirth.

✚ *Bardo Thödrol*

Another classification of sacred bardo teachings is found in the ritual and descriptive texts called the “*Bardo Thödrol*”. In English it is commonly, although incorrectly, known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Henceforth, it will be referred to as the *Bardo Thödrol*. This misnomer began with the translation by the Tibetan lama, Kazi Dawa Samdup, edited by the American anthropologist, W.H.Y. Evans-Wentz. This first translation influenced such people as Joseph Campbell (d. 1987), a respected scholar on mythology, when he wrote about the stages of death and the bardos in *The Mythic Image*. It compares the bardos to various states of consciousness corresponding to various chakras. The translation of the *Bardo Thödrol* also fascinated C. G. Jung and influenced his quest to understand the psychology of the inner self. He wrote the foreword in the form of a “Psychological Commentary” for *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, also edited

by Evans-Wentz. The *Bardo Thödrol* belongs to the Mahāyoga and Atiyoga, the Highest Yoga Tantra class of literature from the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism. *Bardo Thödrol* literally means the “liberation (‘grol) through hearing (thos) in the interim (bar do) [between one life and another]” and is more commonly translated as the *Great Book of Natural Liberation Through Understanding in the Between* from the Tibetan title of *bar do thös grol chen mo*. The *Bardo Thödrol* is a subsection of a larger text called *The Profound Teaching of the Natural Liberation Through Contemplating the Mild and Fierce Buddha Deities*. It is part of a large cycle of *terma* (Tibetan, *gter ma*) teachings. Terma is translated as “treasure” or “revealed teachings,” meaning that these texts were hidden, either to protect them or to wait for a time when the people were ready for the teachings. The *Bardo Thödrol* is attributed to Padma Sambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche, (≅ late 8th century C.E.), who formally established Buddhism in Tibet. He is said to have concealed these texts, a total of 275 folios, which were later discovered in the 14th century C.E. by a Tibetan lama named Karma Lingpa. Included within the classification of bardo teachings are other texts by various authors spanning several thousand years.

The *Bardo Thödrol* is a sacred tantric Buddhist text that is used to introduce, explain, and guide practitioners through the sights, sounds, and experiences in the bardos. They are experiential teachings based on the meditations of realized meditation masters. In pre-Buddhist Tibet, bardo teachings were also found in the Bon spiritual tradition. The *Bardo Thödrol* is quite well known in the West, but is not known or used by all Tibetan Buddhists. Nonetheless, it provides detailed and significant insights into the bardos. In

particular, it teaches and emphasizes that sacred healing is possible at every moment, in every bardo, even after death and up until return to the body at the moment of conception. In general, the bardo teachings encompass all of the bardos, including the kye ne bardo (the natural bardo of this life) but the *Bardo Thödrol* is more commonly associated with the last three bardos and their opportunities for sacred healing. These are the chikai bardo (the painful bardo of dying), the chönyi bardo (the luminous bardo of dharmatā), and the sidpa bardo (Tibetan, srid pa' bar do, "the karmic bardo of becoming/existence"). Some practitioners are introduced to the bardo teachings before death while others may have the *Bardo Thödrol* instructions read to them during the dying process to guide them through the various stages and dissolutions. It is also whispered into the ears of those who have passed the point of death, guiding them toward sacred healing throughout the bardos during the period following death. Forty-nine days is the traditional, but not fixed, period of time allotted to the process of rebecoming in Tibetan Buddhism. In order to guide the consciousness toward healing opportunities in the bardos and a favourable rebirth, lamas may perform rituals, say prayers, and read from the *Bardo Thödrol*. Family members and friends are also encouraged to dedicate their spiritual practices to the deceased during this period. The *Bardo Thödrol* is a ritual text but also provides some comfort, guidance and rituals not only for the deceased but also for those in mourning.

✦ *Chönyi Bardo*

The bardo teachings place a great deal of emphasis on the moment of death and the experience of clear light that follows. This is reflected in the *Bardo Thödrol* and its teachings on the chikai, the painful bardo of dying, and chönyi bardos, the luminous bardo of dharmata. Tibetan Buddhists may spend a lifetime preparing for these moments in the goal of attaining liberation from illness and rebirth and achieving sacred health. As part of the Highest Yoga Tantra, the teachings on the chikai bardo found in the *Bardo Thödrol* incorporate and reflect the sacred tantric physiology described in the previous chapter. It describes the dying process in terms of the outward physical signs combined with the inward signs and experiences such as the winds, energies, elements, chakras, and thig-les. The moment of death is marked by the experience of the black luminosity at the heart chakra. At this moment, “the consciousness experiences a great sense of calmness, tranquillity...known as the moment of clear light” (Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche 3). This is the luminous bardo of dharmatā, which immediately follows the moment of death. The physical body has been left behind and the consciousness has been transformed into a body of light. The physical body, attachments, emotions, or traces of karma have all been shed. Without the obstacles that tie us to *samsāra* (Tibetan, *'khor ba*), there is a precious opportunity for realizing sacred health. For most people, the chönyi bardo passes by in a split second. Very few people, including lamas, are able to stabilize their meditation practice during life to the point of being able to recognize, merge with, and become one with the Dharmakāya without the guidance of a master. A handful of realized spiritual

masters are able to purify their minds through meditation to recognize and rest in the Dharmakāya, the true nature of the mind. These realized tantric meditation masters are able to open the knots located around the heart charka (the abode of the absolute mind) through the purification of all faults committed by the mind. This is called the realization of *Mahāmudrā* (Tibetan, *phyag rgya chen po*, “great seal”) in the Kagyu tradition and *Dzogchen* (Tibetan, *rdzogs chen*, “great perfection”) in the Nyingma tradition. Those who attain this level of sacred healing are able to recognize the fundamental clear light that appears in this bardo. If they are able to rest in this “fundamental inherent nature of everything” (Sogyal Rinpoche 263) through meditation, then sacred health is realized. They have returned to their sacred origin of light and sound, also called the state of Buddhahood. Once this form of sacred healing has occurred, the consciousness no longer has to return to the cycle of rebecoming unless otherwise motivated by compassion to be reborn. This is the choice made by reincarnated lamas, called *tulkus* in Tibetan. According to the bardo teachings, the experience of the clear light is a universal experience, but the vast majority of people do not recognize it and simply go through a period of unconsciousness, only to awaken in the following bardo. In Tibetan Buddhism, the moment of death represents the greatest possible opportunity for realizing sacred health. It is a moment that marks the culmination of one’s spiritual and meditation practice and the ability to stabilize it under any circumstances. The moment of death and the appearance of the clear light represent the potential return to our sacred origin and the end to the process of rebecoming. As previously noted, if sacred health through the Dharmakāya is not realized in the chönyi bardo, then other opportunities for sacred healing exist in the following sidpa bardo.

✦ *Sidpa Bardo*

Those who are not able to remember and merge with the clear light in the chönyi bardo continue on into the sidpa bardo. This is the karmic bardo of becoming in which karma brings about various projections and experiences and eventually leads to rebirth in one of the six realms. This movement toward rebirth is propelled by a person's karma. It is "an entirely automatic or blind result of our previous actions or karma, and nothing that occurs here [in the sidpa bardo] is a conscious decision on the part of the being; we are simply buffeted around by the force of karma" (Kalu Rinpoche "The Dharma", 18). Karma is a Sanskrit word that literally means "action". In Tibetan it is "*las*" and refers to "the effects of actions", "actions and their effects" (Patrul Rinpoche 418). It is based on the principle of cause and effect and encompasses all thoughts, words, and deeds. If these are not worked out or healed during this life they will be carried over into the next life. From the point of view of sacred healing, unresolved karma carries us from rebirth to rebirth and separates people from the sacred. Negative karma separates people from experiencing their true selves and health. In essence, positive actions produce happiness and negative actions produce suffering.

Upon entering the sidpa bardo, the body of light becomes a mental body. Initially it is connected and attracted to the people and places from its most recent life. After one to two weeks, this shifts toward the body and environment of the future existence. The bardo body is clairvoyant and can go anywhere and is not impeded by physical objects. In

addition to this confusion, the mental body sees, hears and experiences various projections in the sidpa bardo. Some of these are extremely frightening and are experienced with seven times the intensity found during life. These are in reality projections of the bardo body's own mind. They are the manifestation of the sacred aspects of the vajra body. For example, according to the *Bardo Thödrol*, there is the manifestation of the Five Buddha Families, representing the purified aggregates and "consequently with the five chakras of the Tibetan Buddhist map of the psychic body" (Breux 19). Furthermore, there is the appearance of the fifty-eight wrathful deities that reside in the maṇḍala at the level of the crown chakra, and the forty-two peaceful deities that reside at the heart chakra. If the mental body can remember that these are merely projections of the mind and unite with their energy, light, and/or sound, liberation or healing at the level of the Sambhogakāya is possible. If not, the mental body continues the journey toward its place of rebirth. The experience of the Sambhogakāya is associated with the purification of all faults committed by speech at the level of the throat chakra. The mental body in the sidpa bardo is propelled by karma. If it is able to remember or hear any of the bardo teachings from the *Bardo Thödrol*, there is a possibility, albeit faint, of attaining sacred health at the level of the Sambhogakāya. If the mental body is able to recognize any of the projections and experiences as being merely reflections of its own past karma and mind, then a favourable rebirth is still possible.

The moment of death becomes an opportunity to heal or create negative karma impacting on the experience in the sidpa bardo. The karma experienced in the sidpa bardo is based on how a person has been during life and at the moment of death. A modern-day Tibetan

tulku states that, "At the moment of death, there are two things that count: Whatever we have done in our lives, and what state of mind we are in at that moment" (Sogyal Rinpoche 223). It is this last thought or emotion that determines if sacred healing will occur in the bardos and, if so, to what degree. A person whose state of mind is overwhelmed with anger at death will experience that anger at seven times its intensity in the sidpa bardo. When the state of mind is stuck in worldly matters and emotions, then the death by suicide becomes the movement away from healing and the sacred. This would be the case of a male teenager, a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, who in a rage and high on drugs takes his own life because of not being understood and supported by his family after a break-up with his girlfriend. Drugs and negative emotions would cloud his state of mind and the taking of his life was motivated by the profane wish to escape the pain of this life. According to the Tibetan teachings, he would not escape this pain but encounter far worse pain and suffering in the bardos. Additionally, he would have to eventually be reborn in the human realm to heal the pain and suffering from which he was trying to escape. The act of taking one's own life in a negative and profane state of mind can wipe out an entire lifetime of positive and compassionate acts. On the other hand, the moment of death can be a very powerful chance for purifying karma, healing even someone who has repeatedly harmed others and/or him or herself during life. This negative karma can be healed by a sincere desire to be forgiven and to move toward the sacred before dying. In this case, a lama or doctor can give the person specific meditations, prayers or mantras to concentrate and focus the mind toward the sacred. The bardo experiences become a reflection of who we were during life and the state of mind at the moment of death. The emphasis is on the state of mind at the moment of death that determines the movement toward or away from sacred healing.

✦ *Rebirth*

Death, I fear not
But rebirth do I fear
As rebirth follows the way of karma

(Kyungpo Neljor (990-1139 C.E.) Quoted by Bokar Rinpoche 42)

The sidpa bardo ends at the moment of conception or rebirth into another realm. Within the Tibetan understanding of cosmology, there are six possible realms for rebirth along with pure lands associated with various Buddhas. Lower forms of rebirth include the various hells, *preta* (Sanskrit meaning ghosts), and the animal realm. The higher and more favourable places for rebirth include the human realm, the demi-god, and the god realms. It is karma that propels the bardo body into rebirth in any one of these realms. One is reborn in the hells due to the force of anger, reborn in the *preta* realm by the force of greed, and reborn in the animal realm by the force of bewilderment. Rebirth in the human realm is due to the forces of desire and attachment, rebirth in the demi-god realm due to jealousy, and rebirth in the god realms is due to pride. The opportunity for attaining rebirth as a human being is both rare and precious. “It is often compared to the incalculable chance that a blind tortoise, which rises to the surface once every hundred years, would be snared by a single golden yoke afloat on an ocean as vast as space” (Kalu Rinpoche 1994, 4). It is also an extremely precious opportunity for transformation and healing. According to Tibetan Buddhism, sacred healing is only possible through human

rebirth and the practice of the Dharma. A tantric practitioner with a stabilized meditation practice can transform the experience of rebirth into a healing process. This is done through the visualization of the future parents as male and female deities. This may result in a favourable rebirth in which there are the conditions for spiritual development or rebirth in a pure land. Those trained in Tantric Buddhism are said to be able to transform their rebirth into the enlightened experience of the *Nirmāṇakāya*, or the emanation body. The *Nirmāṇakāya* is associated with the chakra located near the centre of the forehead and the purification of all faults committed by the body. The opportunities for sacred healing are present right up to the moment before conception and rebirth with a stabilized meditation practice from life and with the guidance of a lama.

To summarize, the bardo teachings comprise a vast body of literature. Their intricacy is a reflection of the degree to which healing is considered a sacred science in both the Dharma and Tibetan medicine. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, every moment in the cycle of existence presents the opportunity to connection with the sacred. The ability to stabilize the meditation practice, coupled with the opening of the chakras during life, prepare the practitioner for death and rebecoming. The chakras are central to sacred healing and health, for it is the ability to recognize their light, sound and energy during life that prepares practitioners for the experience of the *chönyi bardo*, *chikai bardo*, and *sidpa bardo*. It is the ability to connect with one's spiritual practice at any given time and under any circumstances that guides practitioners through life, death, and rebecoming. It is taught that experiences in the bardos are merely reflections of a person's mind. The bardo teachings reflect an understanding of healing specific to Tibetan Buddhism and each spiritual tradition contains its own pathways to the sacred. Sogyal Rinpoche writes

that: “Any spiritual practice we do, since it accumulates ‘merit,’ will help prolong our lives and bring good health. A good practitioner comes to feel psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually whole, and this is both the greatest source of healing and the strongest protection against illness” (Sogyal Rinpoche 245). Thus, the bardo teachings are an essential aspect of the tantric Tibetan Buddhist medicine and healing.

✦ *Root Verses*

The “Root Verses” summarize teachings on the six bardos. These verses are part of the body of bardo teachings and contain the pith teachings used to draw beings away from the cycle of rebirth toward health. Specifically, the following verse, attributed to Padma Saṃbhava, sums up the “whole Buddhist attitude to the moment of death” (Ibid. 223) and also refers to a specific yoga practice called phowa, sometimes used to guide the consciousness at the moment of death.

Now when the bardo of the moment before death dawns upon me,
 I will abandon all grasping, yearning and attachment,
 enter undistracted into clear awareness of the teaching,
 and eject my consciousness into the space of unborn mind;
 as I leave this compound body of flesh and blood
 I will know it to be a transitory illusion.

(Padma Saṃbhava, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*
 trans. by Fremantle & Chögyam Trungpa, 98-99)

As noted in Chapter II, in Tibetan Buddhism, the moment of death occurs when the white and red essences meet at the heart chakra. This becomes the moment for letting go of

attachments, fixations, and connections to this life through the practice of meditation and/or the guidance of a lama. It is the culmination of a person's past and present, and is also pivotal for the future. Death becomes the reflection of all of a person's past habitual patterns and the state of consciousness at the moment of death. It is a very powerful moment for purifying or healing negative karma. This moment can create an opening for healing at death and in the bardos. One practice used to guide the consciousness at the moment of death is called phowa. It is mentioned in the "Root Verse" as being used at the moment of dying as the ejection of "consciousness into the space of unborn mind." At the tantric level, meditation prepares for the moment of death. In essence, then, it is the ejection of one's consciousness through the crown of the head into the heart of a Buddha or any other sacred being to become one with the sacred nature. It is a form of healing thought to ensure, at the very least, a higher rebirth, or rebirth in one of the Buddha's pure lands. If rebirth in one of the Buddha's pure lands occurs, then the bardo process is bypassed and the being becomes one with the sacred in a sacred land.

✦ *Phowa*

The practice of the phowa belongs to a classification of the bardo teachings commonly called the *Six Yogas of Naropa* (Tibetan, *nā ro chos drug*). They are attributed to Naropa (1016-1100 C.E.), from the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. The *Six Doctrines of Niguma* are essentially the same teachings except that these are attributed to his sister Niguma, a wisdom *dakinī* (Sanskrit, Tibetan *mkha''gro ma*), meaning a yoginī with a fully enlightened mind. These are advanced Anuttarayoga Tantra practices and teachings

connected to the Kagyu School but are also widely taught and practised in other Tibetan traditions. The *Six Yogas of Naropa* contains tantric teachings to guide the practitioner in each of the six bardos. Each of the six yogas involves tantric meditation training and the flow of energy through the central channel and specific chakras used to heal in life and prepare for the death experience. Phowa is strongly connected to the chönyi bardo. There are many categories of phowa practice, depending upon the capacity and training of the individual. At the highest level, the Anuttarayoga Tantra, practitioners must complete preliminary practices, take vows and attain a level of stable meditation creating the foundation for the ability to experience the chakras before practising phowa. The technique involves the visualization of the central channel and the ejection of the subtle mind from the heart chakra into the heart of the sacred being above the head. It is said that there are nine different openings through which consciousness can leave the physical body. Each orifice is connected to a future rebirth. It is only when the consciousness leaves through the crown of the head that rebirth in *Dewachen* (Tibetan *bde ba can*; Sanskrit *sukhāvatī*), the Western Paradise of *Amitābha* (the Buddha of boundless light) becomes possible. The consciousness may be attracted to a place on the physical body where it is touched and leaves through the nearest orifice. Thus, in the Tibetan tradition, it is important, if at all possible, not to touch the body for three days after death. If it is absolutely necessary to touch the body before this time, the crown of the head, the anterior fontanel, is touched first, before any other area of the body. Only a qualified and realized meditation master with the proper transmission can initiate a practitioner into the phowa practice. Qualified masters of this practice are often called upon to perform phowa for the dying. They can do this from near or far. Anyone performing phowa must first be able to verify that the person is truly near death through the use of the “science of

observing for signs or omens portending to death” (Mullin 126). These are another body of texts found in the bardo teachings that expound on the many signs and omens of impending death. Those using phowa must also be able to recognize the subjective and objective signs of the dissolution of the physical body’s elements at the time of death to ensure that it is not being practised prematurely. Under these circumstances there must also be a compassionate motivation to help the person who is dying toward a better rebirth.

Tibetan Buddhism teaches that under very specific circumstances the act of taking one’s own life can be a movement toward the sacred and healing. This can be done through the practice of phowa with the permission and close guidance of a meditation master. In the world today, there are a few spiritual masters who, having attained sacred health in this lifetime, are able to know the exact time and place of their death. They are also able to guide other lamas from near or far through the phowa practice if they must leave their bodies prematurely. The lama may find him or herself in an extreme condition in the profane world such as, cold, heat, torture, and/or imprisonment. The meditation masters are able to guide others into a meditative concentration and out of the painful profane aspects of dying, leading them back toward the sacred healing aspects of death. This early shedding of the body with specific, sacred guidance, permission, and teachings is not available to everyone. The master begins with creating a positive state of mind that wards off guilt and negative thoughts toward whoever or whatever is harming the person and moving the person into a state of total forgiveness. Once compassionate motivation reigns, the master guides the person away from profane pain by moving the mind back into a state of concentration. The act or event of taking one’s own life is no longer of

concern as the motivation is compassionate and the state of mind has been shifted into deep concentration. Thus, only under very specific circumstances, motivated and guided by compassionate healing, can the taking of one's own life be considered.

Through the use of phowa yoga, a meditation master can choose his or her time of death and also guide others through death. This is accomplished through the stabilization of tantric exploration and control of the chakras and channels, and only with permission from the sacred teachers or beings to leave their bodies. There are examples of qualified meditation masters from different spiritual traditions who were able to control the timing of their deaths. During the Vietnam War, there were several monks and nuns who sacrificed themselves by immolation. They were motivated by compassion and granted sacred permission to leave their bodies. They hoped that their deaths would bring to light the killings and atrocities being committed. The world witnessed similar acts in 1989 in Lhasa, Tibet. At that time, Tibetan monks poured gasoline over their bodies and set themselves on fire to protest and send a message to the world about the Chinese crackdown on Buddhism. These self-willed deaths are also found in other religious traditions. Within the Hindu traditions there are many techniques for "casting off the body voluntarily" (Tigunait 1997, 165). These acts "are not to be confused with the act of suicide, for unlike suicides, yogis are free from mental and psychological turmoil. They drop the body not in response to an emotional upheaval, but when they realize the purpose of having a body has been accomplished" (Ibid. 166). During the 1950's there were reports of Tibetan lamas who chose to prematurely shed their bodies through phowa yoga. At the time of the Chinese Communist invasion into Tibet, in 1959, all traces of Buddhism were being eradicated. This included the interrogation, torturing and the killing

of nuns, monks, and lay persons. Sogyal Rinpoche recounts the story of one elderly Tibetan lama who was captured and was being sent for torture and probable death. Only the Tibetan monks who accompanied him understood the spontaneous songs he sang en route and were reduced to tears. Moments before they entered the army camp there was silence and their teacher's eyes closed. Through the practice of phowa "[h]e had quietly left his body" (Sogyal Rinpoche 339-40). He was a realized spiritual teacher who recognized that his physical body could no longer help him or others in this present lifetime, so it was left behind. He was guided by meditation masters through the profane and painful aspects of dying, forgiving his captors, and focusing his mind on healing through song. There was no attachment to the physical body nor were there any negative emotions. He was able to focus his mind in meditation with the guidance of the masters and heal toward death. It is interesting note that the Tibetan word for the physical body is "*lus*", meaning "that which we leave behind". These are exceptions to the notion that choosing to die is always an uncontrolled emotional act motivated by the desire to escape or leave behind the pain and suffering of this life. With the permission and guidance of a meditation master, phowa may be used under very specific conditions to prematurely leave the body and heal toward the sacred.

However, the premature and negatively motivated use of phowa can have repercussions. If the consciousness is ejected prematurely and in a profane state of mind then it is considered to be death by suicide. Although phowa is part of the Annuttarayoga Tantra teachings and practices, it may also be taught to laypersons with little or no meditation experience. These are people who, toward the end of their lives, want an "insurance policy" against rebirth in the lower realms. It is used in preparation for the moment of

death to ensure healing through a better or higher rebirth. They are taught to visualize the central channel, the heart and crown chakras and the energies, lights and sounds associated with the phowa practice. At this level, the practice of this yoga is used to familiarize a practitioner with the experience of the vajra body and the state of concentrated mind at the moment of death. They are instructed never to use this practice to its full extent unless absolutely sure that they are dying. A qualified lama or Tibetan doctor usually verifies these objective and subjective signs of dying. Ejecting the consciousness through the crown chakra before one's karma is exhausted is considered to be a form of suicide for a person who is not a realized tantric practitioner. When a premature death is motivated by the desire to avoid pain and uncertainty in life and/or death, the mind is not focused on sacred healing. Phowa can be used to heal during life and for those who have already died. It could be performed by the family and friends to help and heal the consciousness of a loved one who has taken his or her own life, such as in the fictional case of the young man who committed suicide presented above. This healing level of practice is called Essential Phowa by Sogyal Rinpoche and involves the merging with any realized spiritual being or energy. By becoming one with this spiritual being one receives healing and experiences a glimpse of a meditative state of mind from this sacred source. The practice of Essential Phowa can be taught and used by anyone from any of the world's spiritual traditions. Only the enlightened image or energy above the crown of the head changes according to the needs of the practitioner. Phowa is a technique taught and used in preparation for the moment of death. It can be taught and practised according to the needs of the practitioner. The aim of phowa is to move the practitioner toward sacred health. This is done through the meditative experience of the movement of energy through the chakras. When phowa is misused to escape the suffering

rooted in the profane, it can cause premature death, creating greater suffering in the bardos and future lives. From the Tibetan Buddhist perspective, this would not be considered sacred healing and the residual karma would have to be worked through in another lifetime. Thus, phowa can be either a healing practice, or one that creates a greater distance from the sacred. Without the connection to and understanding of the sacred, phowa practised for profane motives such as emotions and attachments is not considered healing but leads rather to more suffering and karma that will have to be worked through in another or other lifetimes.

✦ *Tibetan Buddhism and Suicide*

Having briefly touched upon the Tibetan Buddhist views on the state of mind at the moment of death, and the healing potential found in the bardo teachings and techniques, we shall now broach the subject of suicide. As there is little written on this subject, we shall try to apply the Tibetan Buddhist perspective discussed above to the act of taking one's life. In general, Tibetan Buddhism views suicide as a negative act that causes pain and suffering. From the perspective of sacred healing and health, suicide is not a cure for suffering, nor does it promote healing and transformation. The taking of one's own life when the state of mind is clouded with intense negative emotions, and the intent is to escape the pain, is regarded as "an extremely negative act...that can cause serious consequences" (Bokar Rinpoche 40). According to some bardo teachings, people who commit suicide must spend what would have been the remainder of their natural life span

in the bardos “re-experienc[ing] their suicide 500 times each passing day” (Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche 5). The act of committing suicide has “consequences...even greater and far more unpleasant than the act itself” (Ibid). It can lead to rebirth in the lower realms and “close the door to further human rebirth” (Chagdud Tulku 16). Buddhism also teaches that human life is precious and rare. It is the only realm of rebirth in which the opportunity to consciously heal and move toward sacred health is possible. Suicide not only throws this opportunity away but also creates more distance from the sacred. As illustrated by the fictional case of the young male teenager, healing and movement toward the sacred cannot occur with the attachments and profane state of the mind at the moment of death often associated with suicide. The effects of suicide are far-reaching, affecting not only the person who has committed suicide but also those connected to him. As there is always the potential for healing, Tibetan Buddhism contains numerous teachings and yogas used by a lama or the family of the deceased to heal the consciousness of the person who has committed suicide. Friends and family can dedicate their spiritual practices to the deceased. Anyone who is despondent and may be contemplating taking his or her own life should be treated with compassion and told that suicide is not an escape from pain but rather creates untold suffering after death.

At the tantric level, suicide is also considered to be a very negative act. A practitioner of tantric Buddhism has the opportunity to realize sacred health in one lifetime. This understanding carries the responsibility of knowing that the physical body is a pathway and a reflection of the sacred and that any action to harm the body is a movement away from healing toward disease. From the Tibetan tantric perspective, suicide for someone who has not attained liberation but has taken the tantric vows is the equivalent of

“deicide” (Thurman 90), that is, the killing of the sacred deities in the varja body. These deities are the sacred manifestations of the lights, colours and energies associated with the various chakras and the very essence of our bodies. The only exception to this stand on self-inflicted death has been presented above in relation to the phowa practice. It must be noted that these are very rare and specific cases, and very few people are granted sacred permission to take their own lives prematurely.

According to both the bardo teachings and the tantric medical texts, beings who have committed suicide may manifest as ghosts or spirits after death. Their consciousness becomes entrapped and solidified in the inauspicious and negative energy created at the moment of dying. In such cases, lamas are called upon “to perform exorcisms to prevent the formation of a ghost – or to get rid of it” (Clifford 154). There are many practices that can be performed by those close to the person who has committed suicide. One of these includes the practice of Essential Phowa in the sending of compassion and light to purify and free the deceased from confusion in the bardos. There is no time limit on when this practice can be performed for a person who committed suicide. In Tibetan Buddhism, ghosts and demons are symbolic terms to represent the energy of “emotions normally beyond conscious control” (Ibid 148) or emotions or psychological states that have solidified. The mind of the person or spirit creates a different reality and during life they can manifest themselves in what Western medicine calls psychiatric illnesses. In Western medicine, these illnesses are often treated with medications and/or therapies. Tibetan medicine takes a different view of these forms of disease. It holds that spirits and demons may cause some illnesses and mental disorders. Treatment, then, aims to move the patient through sacred healing. The treatment depends upon the source and scope of the problem

and healing may include spiritual practices. The Tibetan main medical text, the *Gyu-Zhi*, contains five detailed chapters on medical psychiatry. These tantric medical teachings and understandings also apply to states of consciousness that can manifest after death, including in those who have died by suicide.

✦ *Care for the Dying*

The Tibetan Buddhist bardo teachings hold that the state of mind at the moment of death plays a pivotal role in determining the journey in the ensuing bardos. Buddhists believe that this instant may be the single most important opportunity to experience healing and even sacred health. At the moment of death all obstacles, hindrances, and veils are removed and the true and sacred nature is revealed. For this reason, compassionate care for the dying is of primary importance in Tibetan Buddhism. This care focuses on helping the dying remember the teachings and the state of concentration attained through meditation. The practitioner may do this alone or with the guidance of the lama. In the Tibetan tradition, a peaceful environment, filled with sacred sounds and images, prayers, and sangha members, is encouraged. It is a time for the present and not the past. Anything that removes or distracts the person who is dying from spiritual concentration is considered to be encouraging a movement back into the profane and away from healing. In the Tibetan Buddhist view, healing at death does not encompass the rehashing of past events, family issues or problems, as these are thought to only create more attachments to the past. This is in contrast to the many western spiritual traditions, which use the dying

process as a time of forgiveness for past deeds. Priests, nuns, and ministers are trained to encourage the dying to discuss past transgressions in order to be forgiven for them before death. Western traditions also emphasize care at death but with the focus being on healing before the moment of death. The compassionate care for the dying found today in the hospices in the West can trace its origins to the early Christian era. These modern-day hospices care for persons from all spiritual traditions. The hospice movement in Europe and North American evolved from the Christian tradition of visiting holy sites during the 4th century C.E. The hospice philosophy grew out of the lodgings used to welcome and support pilgrims on a journey. (Dame Cicely Saunders 28). Care for the ill and dying crosses all spiritual boundaries although the forms this care takes vary from one spiritual tradition to another.

❖ Chapter Summary

Healing is the process of approaching the sacred by recognizing and removing all obstacles which humans have created in its path. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, this potential for healing does not end at death but continues in the bardos. These tantric views are reflected in a vast body of sacred literature collectively called the bardo teachings. In particular, the *Bardo Thödrol* contains detailed and technical teachings on the sights, sounds and energies encountered in the luminous bardo of dharmatā and the karmic bardo of becoming. Through meditation and tantric yogas, the chakras can be revealed and experienced during life in preparation for the opportunities for sacred healing presented in the bardos after death. A specific tantric yoga associated with the bardo teachings is the phowa. In essence, it is the visualization and control of the sound, light and energies of the heart and crown chakras through the central channel of the vajra body. The practice of the transfer of consciousness with the correct motivation and at the appropriate time can be a sacred healing process, as when a realized meditation master guides a lama through the premature taking of his or her life. The inappropriate and untimely use of phowa is viewed as suicide in Tibetan Buddhism. Death by suicide is generally viewed as a negative act with even graver consequences after death. Suicide is viewed as a movement away from the Buddha-nature. However, the possibility for healing still exists through prayers by loved ones and specific practices such as the Essential Phowa. In Tibetan Buddhism, as with all of the world's spiritual traditions, there is always hope for growth and transformation through sacred healing.



THESIS CONCLUSION

In Tibetan Buddhism, the path of healing flows from the sacred. It is traversed through the practice of the Dharma, with the guidance of the spiritual teachers and doctors. Healing is the process of purification or transformation to the sacred or true nature, called the Buddha-nature. It is the forgotten nature of sacred health present in every living being. This true nature becomes obscured by the traces of cause and effect called karma. These traces create veils or layers at the physical, verbal and mental levels. If not purified through Dharma practice, they keep sentient beings rooted in suffering and propel them into successive rebirths. Sacred healing begins when the veils of obscuration are lifted and purified by the training of the mind. When the mind is in its ordinary deluded state, people experience the repeated pain of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. When they are able to stabilize and maintain a natural state of mind, which is characterized by the simultaneous experience of emptiness, clarity and awareness, then sacred health is attained.

Thus, the mind is central to healing, health and death in Tibetan Buddhism, and the path toward healing is rooted in the training of the mind through meditation and the medicine of the Dharma. Healing occurs when the layers separating sentient beings from sacred health are removed. Practitioners prepare during life for the healing opportunities at death. Opportunities for healing are also present in every moment of the bardos of dying, death and rebecoming. Tibetan Buddhism places particular emphasis on the state of the mind and opportunities for healing at the moment of death. At this time, the sacred nature

withdraws its energies from the physical body, revealing the Buddha-nature. The practitioner's ability to stabilize the mind at the moment of death is crucial for sacred health or healing in the bardos that follow. Tantric practitioners use yoga to experience and prepare for death and sacred healing. The act of taking one's own life is not associated with sacred healing, except in rare and specific cases.

The Tibetan Buddhist understanding of healing, health, and death is detailed and technical, encompassing the healing pathways of Buddhism, tantra, yoga, and sacred medicine. All of its teachings and techniques emphasize the importance of the mind in relation to healing opportunities during life, at death and in the bardos. They contain the potential for the realization of Buddha-nature in a single lifetime. This thesis has attempted to introduce the reader to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of healing in the hope of creating a better understanding of this vast and profoundly deep spiritual tradition, which, above all, emphasizes the training of the mind to move closer to the sacred. Healing in Tibetan Buddhism, and other spiritual traditions, emphasize compassion, purification, forgiveness, comfort and faith in the journey toward death and the sacred. May compassion and healing come to all beings.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

✦ *Articles, Chapters, Essays and Talks*

Angus M.D., Carrie. "Pearls of Wisdom, Harish Johari on Health." Yoga International, March 34 (1997), 30-35.

Barrett, Marvin. "Beyond the Curtain" Parabola, Summer 2001(26), 65-68.

Frawley, David. "Opening the Chakras: New and Old Truths." Yoga International, May/June (1993), 20-25.

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. "Dying, Death, and the Intermediate State", Trans. Ngödup Tsering Burkhar, KTD Dharma Goods. Talk given on September 16, 1981.

Pommaret, Françoise. "Returning from Hell." In Religions of Tibet in Practice. Ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997, pp. 499-510.

Saunders, Cicely (Dame). "Care of the Dying. The Last Refuge." Holistic Care, Nursing Times, (1986), 28-30.

Tigunait, Rajmani Pandit. "The Living Science of Tantra." International Yoga, 41 (1998), 22-29.

Willoughby, Deborah. "The Long Journey Home: How Mantra Found Its Way Back to Christianity." Yoga International, May 53 (2000), 26-33.

Young, Katherine K. "A Cross-Cultural Historical Case against Planned Self-Willed Death and Assisted Suicide." McGill Law Journal, 39 (1994), 657-707.

✦ *Books*

Bokar, Rinpoche. Death and the Art of Dying in Tibetan Buddhism. Trans. Christiane Buchet. San Francisco: ClearPoint Press, 1993.

Breaux, Charles. Journey Into Consciousness. The Chakras, Tantra, and Jungian Psychology. York Beach, Maine : Nicolas-Hays Inc, 1989.

Bucknell, R.S. Stuart-Fox, Martin. The Twilight Language. Explorations in Buddhist Meditation and Symbolism. Surrey UK: Curzon Press Ltd, 1996.

A Buddhist Bible. ed. Dwight Goddard. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.

Campbell, Joseph. The Mythic Image. Bollingen Series, Vol. C. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974.

Chagdud, Tulku. Gates to Buddhist Practice. Junction City, California: Padma Publishing, 1993.

Chidester, David. Patterns of Transcendence. Religion, Death and Dying. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990.

Chögyam Trungpa. The Heart of the Buddha. Ed. by Judith L. Lief. Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., 1991.

Church of England. The Book of Common Prayer. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1816.

Clifford, Terry. Tibetan Buddhist Medicine and Psychiatry, The Diamond Healing. York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1984.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English. Ed. by J.B. Sykes. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 7th ed., 1986

Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary. 27th Ed. Toronto: W.B. Saunders Company, 1988.

Easwaran, Eknath. Dialogue with Death. The Spiritual Psychology of the Katha Upanishad. Petaluma, California: Nilgiri Press, 1989.

Eliade, Mircea. Yoga: Immortality and Freedom. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973.

_____. The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1987

The Essays of Michel de Montaigne. Trans. & Ed. by M.A. Screech. London: Allen Lane, 1991.

Feurerstein, Georg. Yoga: The Technology of Ecstasy. Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1989.

Govinda, Lama Anagarika. Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism. York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1990.

_____. Buddhist Reflections. Trans. Maurice Walsh. York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1991.

Grof, Stanislav. Books of the Dead, Manuals for Living and Dying. New York, New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1994.

A Handbook of Living Religions. Ed. John R. Hinnells. London, England: Penguin Books, 1988.

Kalu Rinpoche. The Gem Ornament of Manifold Oral Instructions. Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1986.

_____. The Dharma. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986

_____. Gently Whispered. Oral Teachings by the Very Venerable Kalu Rinpoche. Station. Barrytown, New York: Hill Press, 1994.

_____. Secret Buddhism, Vajrayana Practices. Trans. Christiane Buchet. San Francisco: ClearPoint Press, 1995.

_____. Luminous Mind. The Way of the Buddha. Trans. Maria Montenegro. Boston, Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 1997.

Kaplan, Aryeh. Meditation and the Bible. York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1988.

Lad, Vasant Dr. Ayurveda. The Science of Self-Healing. Wilmont, WI: Lotus Light, 1990

Mahāparinibbana-sutta (Dialogues of the Buddha), tr. T.W. and C.A.F. Rhys Davids; London: Luzac & Co., 1959.

McDonald, Kathleen. How to Meditate. London: Wisdom Publications, 1985.

Mullin, Glenn H.. Death and Dying: The Tibetan Tradition. London: Arkana, 1986.

Patrul Rinpoche. The Words of My Perfect Teacher. Trans. by the Padmakara Translation Group. Ed. by Kerry Brown and Sima Sharma. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.

Rangdröl, Tsele Natsok. The Mirror of Mindfulness, The Cycle of the Four Bardos. Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 1989.

Reoch, Richard. To Die Well. A Holistic Approach for the Dying and Their Caregivers. London: Gaia Books Ltd., 1996

Sangharakshita. A Survey of Buddhism: Its Doctrines and Methods throughout the Ages. London: Tharpa Publications, 1987.

The Secret of the Golden Flower. Trans. Richard Wilhelm. Trans. from German by Cary F. Baynes. Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1962.

Shaw, Miranda. Passionate Enlightenment. Women in Tantric Buddhism. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994.

Sogyal Rinpoche. The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992.

Swami Rama; Ballentine, R.; Swami Ajaya. Yoga and Psychotherapy. The Evolution of Consciousness. Honesdale, Pennsylvania: Himalayan International Institute, 1976.

Swami Rama. Lectures on Yoga: Practical Lessons on Yoga. Honesdale, Pennsylvania: The Himalayan International Institute, 1979.

Swami Yatiswarananda. Meditation and Spiritual Life. Bangalore, India: Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, 1989.

Tarthang Tulku. Gesture of Balance. A Guide to Awareness, Self-healing, and Meditation. Berkeley, California: Dharma Publishing, 1977,

The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha. Ed. E.A. Burtt. New York: New American Library, 1955.

Thondup Tulku. The Healing Power of the Mind. Boston: Shambala Publications Inc., 1996.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead, The Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo. Trans. with commentary by Francesca Fremantle & Chögyam Trungpa. Boston: Shambala, 1987.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead, Liberation Through Understanding in the Between. Trans. Thurman, Robert A. F. New York: Bantam Books, 1994.

The Tibetan Book of Great Liberation. Ed. W.Y. Evans-Wentz. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.

Tigunait, Pandit Rajmani, Ph.D. From Death to Birth, Understanding Karma and Reincarnation. Honesdale, Pennsylvania: The Himalayan Institute Press, 1997.

The Torch of Certainty. Trans. Judith Hanson. Boston: Shambhala, 1994.

Yeshe, Lama & Zopa Rinpoche. Wisdom Energy, Basic Buddhist Teachings. Ed. Jonathan Landaw with Alexander Berzin. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1982.

Yeshe, Lama Thubten. Introduction to Tantra: A Vision of Totality. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1992.

