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KARMA

We talk a lot about it, but how many of us know what it is? Our panel of Buddhist experts tells us what karma is and how it works (It's really about freedom)

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MANY BUDDHISTS, ONE BUDDHADHARMA

Preparing to Die

Death is a journey into the unknown, but like any journey it goes better if you're prepared. **Andrew Holecek** offers meditations and teachings from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition to help you prepare for the end of life—and what comes next.

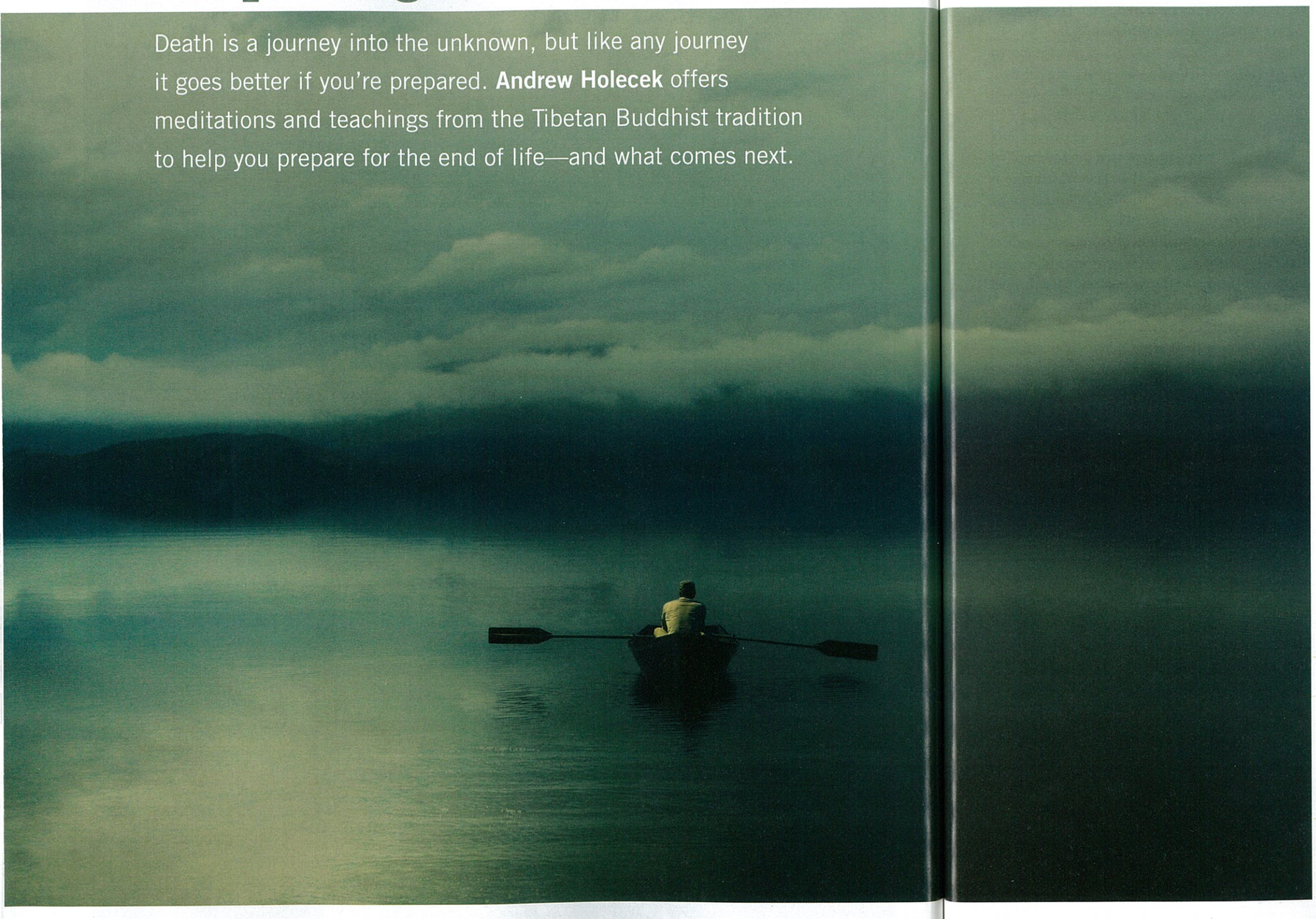

PHOTO | ALPER YESILTAS

Death is one of the most precious experiences in life. It is literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The karma that brought us into this life is exhausted, leaving a temporarily clean slate, and the karma that will propel us into our next life has not yet crystallized. This leaves us in a unique "no-man's-land," a netherworld the Tibetans call *bardo*, where all kinds of possibilities can materialize. At this special time, with the help of skillful friends, we can make rapid spiritual progress and directly influence where we will take rebirth. We can even attain enlightenment.

Buddhist masters proclaim that because of this karmic gap, there are more opportunities for enlightenment in death than in life. Robert Thurman, a translator of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, says, "The time of the between [bardo]... is the best time to attempt consciously to affect the causal process of evolution for the better. Our evolutionary momentum is temporarily fluid during the between, so we can gain or lose a lot of ground during its crises."

But even for spiritual practitioners, death remains a dreaded event. We dread it because we don't know much about it. We do not look forward to death because we don't know what to look forward to. For most of us, death is still the great unknown. It is the ultimate blackout, something to be avoided at all costs. So we have a choice. We can either curse the darkness or turn on the light.

Death is not the time for hesitation or confusion. It is the time for confident and compassionate action. Lama Zopa Rinpoche says, "This is when people *must* do something for the person who has died; this is the most crucial time for the person." *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* says, "This is the dividing line where buddhas and sentient beings are separated. It is said of this moment: in an instant, they are separated; in an instant, complete enlightenment."

The moment of death, like that of birth, is our time of greatest need. The beginning and the end of life are characterized by vulnerability, bewilderment, and rich opportunity. In both cases we are stepping into new territory—the world of the living or the world of the dead. The person who is dying, and his or her caretakers, have an opportunity to create the conditions that will make the best of this priceless event.

Tibetan Buddhism is not the only Buddhist tradition that teaches the bardos, but it offers the most complete set of instruction for the bardos. The central orienting view in the Tibetan world is that of the three death bardos: the painful bardo of dying, the luminous bardo of dharmata, and the karmic bardo of becoming. The painful bardo of dying begins with the onset of a disease or condition that ends in death. In the case of sudden death, this bardo occurs in a flash. It is called "painful" because it hurts to let go. The luminous bardo of dharmata begins at the end of the bardo

of dying. For most of us, it passes by unrecognized. *Dharmata* means "suchness" and refers to the nature of reality, the enlightened state. It is fantastically brilliant, hence "luminous." It is so bright that it blinds us and we faint. We then wake up dazed in the karmic bardo of becoming. Suchness is gone, and confusion rearises as karma returns to blow us into our next life.

While the Tibetan Buddhist tradition offers many helpful guidelines, they are not meant to restrict the sacred experience of death. The map is never the territory. Even though death and rebirth are described in extraordinary detail by the Tibetans, dying is never as tidy as the written word. It is important for the dying, and their caregivers, to study and prepare. But preparation only goes so far. Fixating on the idea of a "good death" can paradoxically prevent one. If we think that our death will follow a prescribed order, and that perfect preparation leads to a perfect death, we will constrict the wonder of a mysterious process.

Surrender is more important than control. A good death is defined by a complete openness to whatever arises. So don't measure your death against any other, and don't feel you have to die a certain way. Let your life, and your death, be your own. There are certain things in life that we just do our own way.

The vast literature about conscious dying is therefore both a blessing and a curse. At a certain point we have to leap into death with a beginner's mind and a spirit of adventure. Visions of the perfect death create expectations, a model that we feel we have to match. If experience doesn't match expectation, we might panic: "This isn't how it's supposed to be." "I didn't plan on it ending this way." Death is about letting go. That includes letting go of any expectations. The danger in learning too much about death is that we end up prepackaging the experience, forcing reality into the straightjacket of our concepts.

The best approach is that of the middle way. Learn as much as you can. Study, practice, and prepare. Then drop everything and let this natural process occur naturally. Throw away the map and fearlessly enter the territory. It's like preparing for a big trip. We want to pack properly, review our checklists, and ensure that we have enough money and gas. But when the trip starts, we just enjoy it. We don't worry about doing it perfectly. Some of our greatest travel adventures happen when we take a wrong turn or get lost. Having thoroughly prepared, we relax in knowing we have everything we need.

Practices to Prepare You for Death

Shamatha Meditation

Two central themes are repeated throughout *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The first theme is "Do not be distracted." This relates to *shamatha*, calm abiding meditation, which is the ability to rest your mind on whatever is happening. The stability gained through shamatha enables you to face any experience with confidence. In life, and especially in death, distraction is a big deal. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote, "Distraction is the only thing that consoles us for our miseries, and yet it is itself the greatest of our miseries." Shamatha removes the misery.

Shamatha is a fundamental form of mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness is a powerful preparation because as mindfulness matures into its more advanced levels, it does not disintegrate at death. If we cultivate proficiency in this one practice alone, it will act as a spiritual lifeline that we can hold on to during the bardos, and that will guide us through their perilous straits.

One of the best preparations for death is learning to accept it and to be fully present for it. Being fully present is the essence of mindfulness, which is developed through shamatha. Because death isn't comfortable, it's difficult to be with. As Woody Allen said, "I'm not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens." Most of us aren't there for our deaths and therefore make it more difficult. To get a feel for this, recall how hard it is to be fully present when you're sick. Most of us just want out.

Even for an advanced practitioner, it can hurt when the life force separates from the body. Resistance to this hurt, to death, or to any unwanted event is what creates suffering. We can prepare to embrace the discomfort of death

Fixating on the idea of a "good death" can paradoxically prevent one.

by embracing every moment with mindfulness now. Replace opposition with equanimity. As Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche says, when we are a dying person, we should be a dying person fully. Don't try to be a living person when living is not what's happening.

Mindfulness is initially cultivated by practicing shamatha with form, or referential shamatha. This type of shamatha uses the reference of the body, the breath, or an object to steady the mind. The idea is to use a stable form—while we still have one—as a way to stabilize the mind. When physical stability disappears at death, mental stability becomes our primary refuge.

When we die, the anchor of the body is cut away and the mind is set free. If we're not prepared for this freedom, we may panic. Imagine being tossed out of a rocket into outer space. The ensuing freak-out impels us to grasp at anything that can reestablish a sense of ground. Like catching ourselves just before taking a bad spill on a patch of ice, we reflexively reach out to grab on to anything that keeps us from falling. This grasping reflex can spur us to take on an unfortunate form—and therefore an unfortunate rebirth.

The fruition of shamatha is the ability to rest your mind on any object for as long as you wish, and to do so without distraction. Wherever you plop your awareness it stays there, like a beanbag hitting the ground.

Shamatha with form develops into formless shamatha. This is the ability to rest your mind on whatever arises, not just a specified form. You take off the training wheels and ride smoothly on top of anything.

Formless, or nonreferential, shamatha is important because when the body drops away at death, we no longer have any stable forms upon which to place our mindfulness. There's nothing steady to refer to. At this groundless point, instead of mentally thrashing about trying to find a form to grasp, formless shamatha allows us to rest on any experience without being swept away. It's not a problem if we don't have a body to come back to. We simply place our mind on whatever is happening and gain stability from that. Formless shamatha is a lifesaver that keeps us from drowning in a bewildering ocean of experience.

The simplicity of mindfulness belies its profundity. It is the gateway to immortality. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present."

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Padmasambhava agree. They taught the four ways to relate to the experience of time, emphasizing the fourth moment. The first three moments relate to the conventional experiences of past, present, and future. The fourth moment is timeless, and therefore immortal. It's beyond the first three. The fourth moment is the immediate experience of the bardo of dharmata, which transcends time and space. We don't have to die to experience the deathless dharmata. It lies quietly between each thought—not just between each life.

Even though it transcends the first three moments, the only way to enter the fourth moment is through the inlet of the present. Nowness, in other words, is the funnel into eternity. B.K.S. Iyengar, the modern yoga master, says, "The yogi learns to forget the past and takes no thought for the morrow. He lives in the eternal present."

If you can't see this in the gap between your thoughts, you can get a feel for it when you're immersed in an activity. If you're one hundred percent present, whether it's playing with your kids, being at a great concert, or engrossed in work, time seems to stand still. You may come out of such an experience, look at the clock, and be startled by how much time has flown by.

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This is a concordant experience of the fourth moment—the entry into the realm where time, and therefore you, disappear.

These magical states, akin to what psychologists call the state of "flow" and athletes refer to as the "zone," don't have to be accidental. The zone of the fourth moment can be cultivated by training the mind to be present. In this regard, as Zen teacher Baker Roshi puts it, mindfulness makes you "accident prone." The more you practice mindfulness, the more you stumble into the zone. Those who achieve shamatha can rest their minds in meditative absorption, or *samadhi*, and taste immortality. They have tripped into the deathless zone of total presence.

Despite the complexity of the bardos, the meditations that prepare us for them don't need to be complex. Simplicity and relaxation are two key instructions for the bardos. Don't underestimate the power of mindfulness. The Indian master Naropa said, "Since the consciousness [in the bardo] has no support, it is difficult to stabilize mindful intention. But if one can maintain mindfulness, traversing the path will be trouble-free. Meditating for one session in that intermediate state may be liberating."

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Vipashyana Meditation

The second main theme in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is that "recognition and liberation are simultaneous." This relates to *vipashyana*, the practice of insight meditation. Shamatha pacifies the mind; vipashyana allows us to see it. By seeing our mind more clearly, we're able to recognize how it works. This helps us relate to it skillfully. In the bardos we're "forced" to relate to our mind, simply because there's nothing else. Outer world is gone, body is gone, so mind becomes reality. Through insight meditation we discover that whatever arises in the bardos is just the display of our mind. That recognition sets us free.

Just as recognizing that we're dreaming while still in a dream (lucid dreaming) frees us from the suffering of the dream, recognizing that we're in the bardos frees us from the suffering of the bardos. Before we became lucid, the dream tossed us to and fro like Styrofoam bobbing on turbulent waters. But once we wake up to the dream—while still being in it—the tables are suddenly turned. We now have complete control over an experience that just controlled us. Whether in dream or death, this level of recognition and ensuing liberation is cultivated with *vipashyana*, or "clear seeing."

Instead of taking the terrifying visions of the bardo to be real and getting caught in the resulting nightmare, we can wake up in the bardos. We do this by recognizing all the appearances to be the display of our own mind. This recognition is exercised in meditation. The meditation instruction is to label whatever distracts us as "thinking." For example, a thought pops up of needing to buy some milk. We mentally say, "thinking," which is recognizing that we have strayed, then return to our meditation. Our clear seeing melts the distracting thought on contact. Labeling and liberation are simultaneous.

Unrecognized thought is the daytime equivalent of falling asleep. Each discursive thought is a mini-daydream. Drifting into mindless thinking is how we end up sleepwalking through life—and therefore death. Saying "thinking " in our meditation is therefore the same as saying, "Wake up!" We wake up and come back to reality—not to our dreamy visions (thoughts) about it. If we can wake up during the day and be mindful, we will be able to wake up in the bardo after we die. This is what it means to become a buddha, an "awakened one." And this is the fruition of shamatha-vipashyana.

Earlier we said that in the bardos, mind (thought) becomes reality. What do you come back to if there is only mind? You come back to just that recognition. As in a lucid dream, you realize that whatever arises is merely the play of your mind. This allows you to witness whatever appears without being carried away by it. Since you no longer have a body, or any other material object to take refuge in, you take refuge in recognition (awareness) itself. From that awakened perspective, it doesn't matter what happens. It's all just the display of the mind.

Tonglen

Tonglen, which is the practice of taking in the suffering of others and giving out the goodness within ourselves, is a strong preparation for death. It is especially powerful for a dying person to practice and for others to do when someone has died. The rugged quality of this practice can match the toughness of death. The more I'm around death, the more I find myself taking refuge in tonglen.

The reason we suffer during life, or death, is because we are selfish. When we think small, every little irritation gets big. Conversely, when we think big, difficulties get small. Tonglen is about thinking and feeling big. To think big, we should first reflect upon our good fortune. We have the precious dharma to guide us through the bardos, and we have the potential to transform death into enlightenment. We are incredibly fortunate to die held by the teachings of the Buddha, the awakened one who transcended death.

Now think about the millions who are dying without being held. Imagine all those who are dying alone, under violent conditions or without physical or spiritual refuge. We can reduce our anguish by putting our death in perspective. Tonglen instills that perspective and brings greater meaning to our death.

If you take a teaspoon of salt and put it into a shot glass of water, the water is powerfully

affected. It gets super salty. If you take the same amount of salt and put it into Lake Michigan, it has virtually no effect. Tonglen transforms our mind from a shot glass into Lake Michigan. On every level, suffering is the result of the mind's inability to accommodate its experience. Lama Zopa Rinpoche says:

> Try to die with this motivation. If you die with this bodhichitta thought, your death becomes a cause of your enlightenment and a cause for the enlightenment of all sentient beings. Live your life with this precious thought . . . . As you get closer to death, you should think, "I'm experiencing death on behalf of all sentient beings." Try to die with this thought. In this way, you are dying for others. Dying with the thought of others is the best way to die.
>
> —from *Wholesome Fear*, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Kathleen McDonald

The Indian sage Shantideva said, "If you want to be miserable, think only of yourself. If you want to be happy [even in death], think only of others." Tonglen is therefore a way to practice the good heart of bodhichitta. When asked what practice he would do during death, Trungpa Rinpoche once replied, "Tonglen."

Reverse Meditations

Tonglen is part of a family of practices we could call "reverse meditations." They are called reverse because with these practices we do things that are the opposite of what we usually associate with meditation. Reverse meditations expand our sense of meditation and prepare us for death. They are based on the tenet that if you can bring unwanted experience into the sanctuary of sanity provided by meditation, you can transform that obstacle into opportunity. This approach applies to life and especially to death. If you can bring death onto the path, you can flip it into enlightenment. The most unwanted experience transforms into the most coveted experience. Tonglen is a classic reverse meditation because it takes in the darkness of others and sends out our light. This is the reverse of how ego operates.

Pain meditation is a reverse meditation that prepares us for the painful bardo of dying. In addition to the emotional pain of letting go, there is often physical pain associated with disease. To prepare for this pain, we voluntarily bring it into our experience now, on our terms.

Reverse meditations are done within the context of shamatha meditation. This provides the crucible for establishing a proper relationship to the unwanted experience. For the pain meditation, after doing shamatha for a few minutes you can bite your lip or tongue, or dig your fingernail into your thumb, and explore the sensation. Go into the pain. What is pain? What is it made of? What happens if I dissolve into it? Reverse meditations are not pleasant. But neither is death. Do them for short sessions, and remember that masochism is not the point.

While the pain may not disappear, the suffering does. Pain meditation helps us erase what Trungpa Rinpoche called "negative negativity," which is the resistance to the pain. Negative negativity is like being shot with two arrows. The first arrow hurts you physically. If you can stay with that pain and relate to it directly, it will still hurt, but not as much as when you bring in your story lines. The second arrow is the mental commentary that transforms simple pain into complex suffering.

By becoming one with the pain, there is no one to hurt. And the character of the pain changes. This practice radically alters our relationship to discomfort. It reverses it. The next time you get a headache, turn that pain into meditation. Watch the pain transform before your eyes.

Reverse meditations require diligence. We would rather sit in tranquility than plunge into pain. But to establish a healthy relationship to unwanted experiences, we have to spend time with them. It's always easier to do so on our own terms. We may think we'll be able relate to pain or death just by having read about it, but that attitude is seldom realized when we actually hurt or die.

Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche says:

> It is very difficult to transform an experience of intense suffering if we have no basis for working with pain to begin with. Therefore, it is initially necessary to work with minor pains and illness and discover how we can bring these to the path. Then, as more severe sicknesses come to us, we are able to bring those to the path as well. Eventually, we become capable

➤ *continued page 83*

PHOTO | JESSICA MAY RITA KOHUT

➤ *continued from page 60*

> of bringing even the most debilitating conditions to the path. ... If you become accustomed to looking at the experience of pain—if that looking is genuine and you can rest your mind in the pure sensation—then you will see a difference in how you experience the pain. ... When a greater sickness strikes us, we will not be hit by it in the same way. It will not be such a problem or a shock. We can face even the pain and suffering of dying with greater confidence because we are facing familiar territory instead of the unknown. When the actual moment of death arrives, we will be able to look at that pain and transform it.
>
> —from *Mind Beyond Death*, by Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche

Having done this pain meditation for years, I now relate very differently to the sting of an insect bite or a stubbed toe. Instead of my knee-jerk aversion to pain, it almost becomes spiritual. My throbbing toe reminds me to meditate, which alters the intensity of the pain. I'm beginning to bring pain onto my path.

Another reverse meditation is to *create as many thoughts as possible*. Instead of calming your mind down, whip it up. Again, start with shamatha, then make your mind as stormy as possible. Think of yesterday, think of tomorrow, visualize Paris, New York, or the pyramids. Do so as quickly as you can. Now is your chance to do what you always wanted to do on the meditation cushion: go hog wild mentally. This is particularly helpful for the karmic bardo of becoming, where the gales of karma rearise and blow us into our next life. By becoming familiar with those winds now, we'll be able to sail in stormy seas later.

Notice that you can sit quietly in the center of this voluntary cyclone and not be moved by it. You're practicing how to hold your seat in the midst of mental chaos. Don't buy into the thoughts and emotions. Just watch the upheaval. This practice expands the sense of shamatha because even though your mind is howling, you're able to maintain inner peace. As the sage Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj said, "It is disinterestedness that liberates."

Do the meditation for a minute. Rest in shamatha, then do it again. Because reverse meditations are intense, short sessions prevent resentment. Don't underestimate the power of short meditations. Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche says, "We usually view anything small as unimportant and not really worth doing. For example, if we only have five minutes to meditate, we tell ourselves, 'Oh, five minutes is nothing. It is not enough to change my life. I need to practice for at least an hour.'" But with meditation, short is sweet. It's like running. You don't start with a marathon. You start with short runs and work your way up. Short sessions repeated frequently are just as effective as longer sessions done infrequently, if not more so. And when it comes to mixing meditation and post-meditation, which is how to transform your life into meditation, short frequent sessions reign supreme.

Another meditation is to place yourself in a loud and overly stimulating environment, then work on staying centered. Flip on the television, crank up the stereo, turn on the alarm clock, and sit with the cacophony. Go to a loud and crazy place and meditate. If you have kids, this environment is already part of your life. One of Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche's sons once complained to him about how hard it is to meditate in Kathmandu because of all the noise and distraction. Rinpoche said to him, "If you can't practice under these conditions, how will you ever practice in the bardo?"

As with all reverse meditations, find the silence in the noise, the stillness in the motion. Even if you never do these meditations, just knowing about them helps you reverse your relationship to unwanted experience. The next time you're in a crazy environment, like a subway station or Times Square, you might remember these instructions and transform the mayhem into meditation.

I frequently travel to India, a land of intense chaos. Instead of getting irritated