

THE GREAT MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Rick Fields:  
LIVING WITH CANCER

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THE BUDDHIST REVIEW

FALL 1997 \$7.50

CANADA \$9.50

U.K. £6.00

How Do You Want to Die?



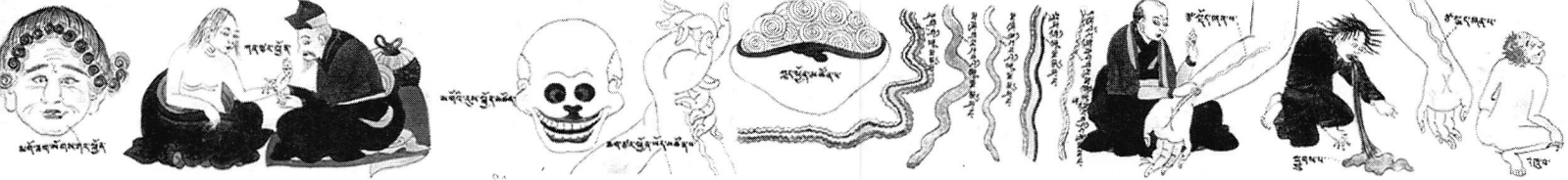
Practices & Preparation



Life After Breath







# LIVING ORGANS & DYING BODIES

*Casey Frank, a Zen student and attorney working in bioethics, maps out the trials of this terrain.*

ORGAN DONATION PRESENTS A CONFLICT for many Buddhists. On the one hand, we strive to attain the bodhisattva ideal of compassionate action whenever possible. Nine people die in this country every day waiting in vain for donors. On the other hand, according to some Buddhist teachings, death comes when the consciousness leaves the body, not with the last breath, and it is generally believed that the circumstances of clinical death and the period following it, before the consciousness is released, are critical in helping to determine one's rebirth. According to that view, it is best not to cut into the body for three days following clinical death or risk disturbing the process.

Yet in order to transplant an organ effectively, the body must be cut into quickly following the last breath—the sooner the better—thus violently disturbing the natural process of consciousness merging back into formlessness. The request by many Buddhists that their bodies not be tampered with for three days following clinical death—even though clinical death is itself an imprecise term—disqualifies them from donating organs and tissue, since those parts of the body must be harvested sooner than that.

Chan master Sheng-Yen and Zen master Tan-gen Harada Roshi have taught that even though the process of donation might be disturbing to the donor, if the donor's practice and concentration are steady, and his or her desire to help others is strong, then donating would fulfill the aspiration to help others. People so inclined react strongly to the plight of the

tens of thousands of patients waiting for donors.

Another view is that since we don't know how we will react to the process of donation during this crucial transition, it is better to avoid it. People inclined to this view often emphasize the troubling commercial aspects of donation, the high costs, and the seemingly arbitrary priorities of allocation. They may also be concerned that overeagerness could lead to organs being removed when a patient might still be revived, although I am unaware of any such case.

Brain death raises further questions. The vast majority of organ donors are brain-dead patients; the body is kept on life support, while social and medical arrangements are made for the donation. A young, healthy person who suffers a fatal head injury is a paradigmatic donor. Yet *brain death* is also an imprecise term, since the brain can show some activity even hours after the breath has stopped. We don't fully understand the relationship between consciousness and brain death.

The difficulty this presents is demonstrated by the fact that Japan legally recognized the concept of brain death only this April. Previously, transplants were extremely difficult to obtain in Japan. Until we have more knowledge or collective wisdom about this issue, people will have to decide for themselves through belief and intuition. Adopting a view of brain death *qua* death would provide a way for Buddhists to become donors while maintaining the three-day transition period. Yet, it is just as easy to speculate that the activity of the brain following the last breath is related to the activity of consciousness.

For some, another approach may help navigate the murky waters of organ donation and still provide some benefit to others. If one waited just short of twenty-four hours after cardiac death,

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**THE THIRD DAY**

“Hey, noble one! Listen without wavering! On this third day, the yellow light that is the purity of the element earth dawns. At this time, from the yellow southern Buddha-land of Shrimat, the yellow Lord Ratnasambhava appears seated on a fine horse, carrying a precious wish-granting gem. . . . The yellow light of the Equalizing wisdom . . . shines from the heart of the Ratnasambhava couple before you, penetrating your heart center, unbearable to see with your eyes. . . . At the same time, the soft blue light of the human realm shines before you, penetrating your heart in parallel with the wisdom light. At that time, under the influence of pride, you panic and are terrified by that brilliant, energetic yellow light, and you flee it. You feel a liking for that soft blue light of the human realms and you approach it. But at that time you must fearlessly recognize that brilliant yellow, piercing, dazzling clear light as wisdom. Upon it place your mind, relaxing your awareness in the experience of nothing more to do.”

**THE FIFTH DAY**

“Hey, noble one! Listen without wavering! On this fifth day, the green light that is the purity of the element wind dawns. At this time, from the green northern Buddha-land of Prakuta, the green Lord Amoghasiddhi appears seated on an eagle throne, carrying a vajra cross, in union with his consort Samayatara. . . . The green light of the All-accomplishing wisdom, purity of the creation aggregate, green, piercing, dazzling and clear, adorned with glistening drops and droplets, shines from the heart of the Amoghasiddhi couple, precisely penetrating your heart center, unbearable to see with your eye. . . . At the same time, a soft, envy-made red light of the titan realm shines upon you together with the wisdom light-ray. You enjoy and are attached to that soft red light of the titan realm and you approach it. . . . But at that time you must fearlessly recognize that brilliant green, piercing

dazzling clear light as wisdom. . . . Don’t flee it! Don’t fear it! Don’t be enticed by that soft red light of the titan realms! It is the path of destruction from the negative evolutionary actions you have committed through your powerful jealousy!”

**THE TWELFTH DAY**

“Hey, noble one! Listen without wavering! Now on this the twelfth day, the Lord Karma Heruka of the Karma-clan will manifest before you, emerging from within your own brain. He is dark green, with three faces, six arms, and four legs stretched out. . . . His Consort Buddha Karma Krodhishvari enfolds his body, her right arm embracing his neck, her left hand offering him sips of blood from her skull bowl. Thus they arise manifestly before you, standing in sexual embrace, having emerged from the north of your own brain! Do not fear them! Do not be terrified! Do not hate them! Recognize them as an image of your own awareness! They are your own Archetype Deity, so do not panic! In fact, they are really Lord Amoghasiddhi Father and Mother, so have faith in them, feel deep reverence for them, you will be liberated!

“. . . O my child! What you see and perceive, whatever terrifying visions occur, recognize them as your own visions! Recognize the clear light as the natural energy of your own awareness! If you so recognize, there is no doubt you will become a Buddha right away!

“Except insofar as they arise from the natural creativity of your own awareness, you must firmly decide that all that you see—the mild and fierce deities, the Herukas, the animal-headed angels, the rainbow lights, and the Yama deities—none is substantially, objectively existent! Once you understand that, then all the fears and terrors become liberated on the spot, you dissolve into nonduality and become a Buddha!” ▼

