

# Introduction to the Essential Phowa

By Christine Longaker

## What is Essential Phowa?

The Essential Phowa meditation, introduced in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche, is adapted from a Buddhist meditation normally used for the time of dying and death. This meditation is written in a way that anyone can relate with, whether or not they are affiliated with a faith tradition. However, it can also be used to support physical and emotional healing and to transform suffering, guilt or grief. If we have a loved one who is ill, or in pain, or facing death, we can quietly do this meditation to help bring them peace. Essential Phowa is an effective spiritual guidance for people at the moment of death, to guide their consciousness to a state of peace, clarity, and freedom.

There are recordings of two versions: Essential Phowa for Oneself, and Essential Phowa for Others.

## Why is the Essential Phowa valuable to do?

According to Buddhist teachings, what counts at the moment of our death is how we lived our life, and the state of our mind and heart in that moment. Of course, we cannot change the way someone lived, but this meditation has the power to purify a person's mind and heart while they are dying. If the dying person is confused or in a coma, we may see signs that the meditation is still having an effect on their mind and heart.

By doing the Essential Phowa regularly and observing the effect, our confidence grows in its power to benefit people at such a crucial moment. And, we come to realize that this meditation is a meaningful way of communicating heart-to-heart with others. Even visualizing a loving presence while we're working or sitting in a hospital room creates an atmosphere of peace or sacredness.

This meditation is especially effective in the first days or weeks after someone has died and, it can be offered any time afterwards, even years later.

If you have a friend or family member who is open to learning this meditation, you can share this with them. People adapt it in all sorts of ways to make it work for them. Some

people, for example, just resonate with the first part: visualizing a loving presence in the room with them.

A nun told me once that she spent the night monitoring at the bedside of a man who was comatose following a suicide attempt. All night long, she silently offered her spiritual practice for him, which is called The Jesus prayer: “Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” In the morning, the man came out of his coma and thanked her profusely. She asked him why he was thanking her. He told her,

“All night long, I kept falling into a deep abyss, and when I heard your prayer, it pulled me out.”

Doing the Essential Phowa after someone dies brings benefit for both the deceased and for the survivors. A Palliative Care director guides this meditation in a non-denominational way at the center's 6-month memorial service. She gets many grateful responses. The Medical Director introduces it this way: “Different cultures around the world have ways of offering spiritual support after someone has died, and here's a very beautiful one I would like to share with you.”

## Visualizing as a support for medical professionals

The technique of visualization can be an invaluable support for caregivers who want to embody compassionate presence. Especially when facing really difficult or challenging situations, visualizing a loving or divine presence can help you stay centered, peaceful and at ease. Dame Cicely Saunders, the founder of the modern hospice movement, said,

*“Always remember, when you are at the bedside of a dying person, you are never alone.”*

When you are serving people who are in great distress, you can visualize a loving presence and ask, *“Please help this person with your compassion and blessings. Please guide me, so I know how to help.”*

Especially, the practice of Essential Phowa can help nourish and inspire you, thus preventing burnout.

## Integrating the Essential Phowa Practice

There are two reasons the Essential Phowa can bring invaluable spiritual support to those who suffer: first, the dire circumstances the person is in, and second, the ability of an enlightened being to bring their compassion and blessings to the person for whom we are praying.

Even though an enlightened being is present as soon as we invoke them, the power of their presence and blessings is heightened by the strength of our genuine devotion. Whichever presence you choose to invoke, it's important to establish a relationship of openness, longing and respect, and to sincerely ask, from the depths of your being, for the blessings streaming from this Presence to fully enter you and awaken your wisdom nature.

After concluding your practice of Essential Phowa, resolve to sustain this Divine presence in the space above you, and consider that it's above the head of everyone you meet. Then your every action, word, or thought becomes a living prayer.

If we generate such a deep and sincere devotion in our daily practice, then when we do the Essential Phowa for a person who is suffering or dying, it will be easier to invoke this Divine Presence and bring their compassionate blessings to the person in distress.

David, an emergency-room doctor in a major city hospital, told me how stressful his job used to be, and how he was getting close to burnout. He told me, "Families panic at the time of death, call 911, and bring their loved one to the emergency room to die. When they arrive, they're not prepared in any way for what is about to happen. What I see is enormous fear, confusion, anxiety and helplessness. The way I used to deal with the situation was through detachment. Outside of doing my best for the patient, I figured there was no way I could impact their situation at all.

"Then, telling a family that their loved one has died or is dying was one of the things I hated most about my job. Often the family reacted to me with hostility and anger. The work was fearful and unpleasant for me."

David asked me: "How can I offer spiritual care for people who are dying, in the midst of a medical crisis? I am doing my best to save one person's life, but right after they die I have to rush over and work on the next patient. Even when it's not so busy, if we've failed to save a person's life, everyone just walks away from the body."

When you train in medicine, especially emergency resuscitation, you learn and repeatedly practice many lifesaving techniques, so that in a crisis situation you'll be able to act reflexively, without thinking. You can train in your spiritual practice the same way, so you're able to bring its benefits spontaneously to every situation.

Practice the Essential Phowa every day before going to work, with a compassionate intention that the meditation may truly benefit and help those who suffer. At the conclusion, dissolve your being into the Buddha, Christ, or whichever enlightened being you have invoked, and once again enter your daily activities. Then, you can bring this Divine Presence with you into the hospital or your workplace, continually praying to the Presence as you care for your patients or clients.

If you have a patient on the edge of life and death, pray fervently to the Divine Presence to help him or her. Visualize that the Divine Presence shines powerful light rays of compassion and blessing onto the person, purifying any fear or anguish in his heart and mind. Pray that, if possible, he or she may be healed and survive this crisis. If they die in spite of your medical intervention, then visualize your patient's consciousness in the form of a small sphere of light flashing out from their body like a shooting star and dissolving completely into the heart of the Divine Presence. Later, after coming home from work, you may want to do the Essential Phowa practice in a more complete way for all the patients you attended during the day.

David wrote me later to describe how his experience has changed since he began integrating his spiritual practice at work.

"Since I started doing spiritual practice in the emergency room, I've watched the person's expression in the final few minutes of life change to one of acceptance, sometimes even a gentle smile, replacing the fear and anxiety. It looks like an opening, a release. Then, when I have to go and tell a family that their loved one has died, I notice an enormous difference in their reaction. Family members often will thank me and even come up and hug me. This new experience I'm having since doing my spiritual practice in the hospital has transformed my life and my medical practice."