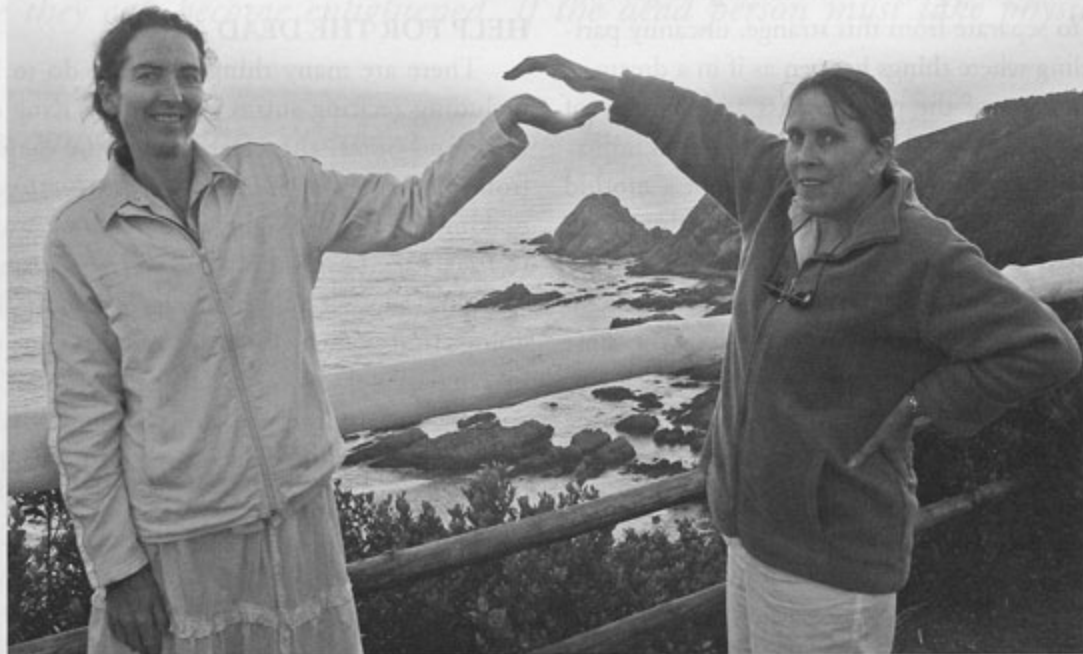


IN MEMORY OF MY SISTER PATRICIA



Patricia (right) with her sister Carol Leela Verity.

On Saturday, January 14, 2006, members of the Sat Chit Anand Buddhist Centre in South Africa decided to participate in a global recitation of the powerful Sanghata Sutra to mark the appearance of its completed English translation. It was the fifth time the group had recited this sutra. They started reciting at 12:30 P.M. At 1:00 P.M., center director Carol (Leela) Verity's eldest sister, Patricia Anne Hodgskin, had a stroke and died. This is Leela's reflection on life, karma, and sudden death.

PATRICIA WAS ON HOLIDAY with our family in the seaside town where we live. She was swimming in the lagoon with my mother when her face started tingling. She told my mom they had better get to the shore as she was feeling funny. They started swimming back, but my sister's head fell face down into the water. My mother quickly swam up to her and turned her body over. Her face was blue, her eyes were vacant and staring into space, and she wasn't breathing. My mother pulled her to the shore, and attempts

were made to resuscitate her with artificial respiration, but they failed, and she died.

For the rest of the weekend, everything dropped away, time stopped, and for a time I died with Patricia. There was an awareness of things happening, just awareness. That's all there is: emptiness and awareness, and the play of life happening around you. The director of the play is the law of karma; all the pieces come together, then move on and depart for the next scene. You don't even feel like an actor in this

play, it's just happening and you are aware of it, from a timeless place that is beyond it all. On Monday morning, I felt the wheels of samsara moving and grinding again, and the feeling of timelessness disappeared. I felt the urge to get back to my own life, to separate from this strange, uncanny part-of-the-whole feeling where things happen as if in a dream.

Death reminds us of the preciousness and fragility of human life. The teachings instruct us to meditate on impermanence and death on a daily basis. This is not a morbid instruction because increased awareness of death also brings increased awareness of the preciousness of life and we stop taking life for granted. Death is a wake-up call to live life to its fullest, now and until you die. Then, when the time comes to leave everything behind, you will have no regrets.

Some weeks previously, Patricia had had surgery. (One of the risks of surgery is a blood clot.) Also some weeks prior, Patricia had a water skiing accident in Mauritius, which may have caused internal bleeding and a blood clot. She died of a stroke, a blood clot in her brain, which resulted in instant death. Her death provides a very real example of emptiness, and of cause and effect.

We are making karma every instant, with our actions of body, speech, and mind. We don't know what the effects of our actions will be in the future, as only enlightened beings have the omniscient vision to see the workings of the law of karma. The empowering factor about karma is that we do have the power to influence and determine what is due to us. We can purify past karma, and we can create the causes for future positive karma. We do this by trying to engage in positive actions of body, speech, and mind, and by practicing morality and ethical behavior.

When Patricia died, my youngest sister, Lindsey, happened to be in Bodhgaya, India, a spiritually special and very holy place where the Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. Lindsey printed out a photograph of Patricia, called her name, and walked around the temple, stupa, and sacred Bodhi tree with her. She asked Patricia, "How could you die so suddenly without saying goodbye, and without fulfilling your promise to come to India with me?" Just then, a single Bodhi leaf fell at her feet. There was no

wind, and no leaves were falling to the ground. Lindsey said she felt Patricia's presence with her. Patricia might never have got to India in the flesh, but she got there in spirit.

HELP FOR THE DEAD

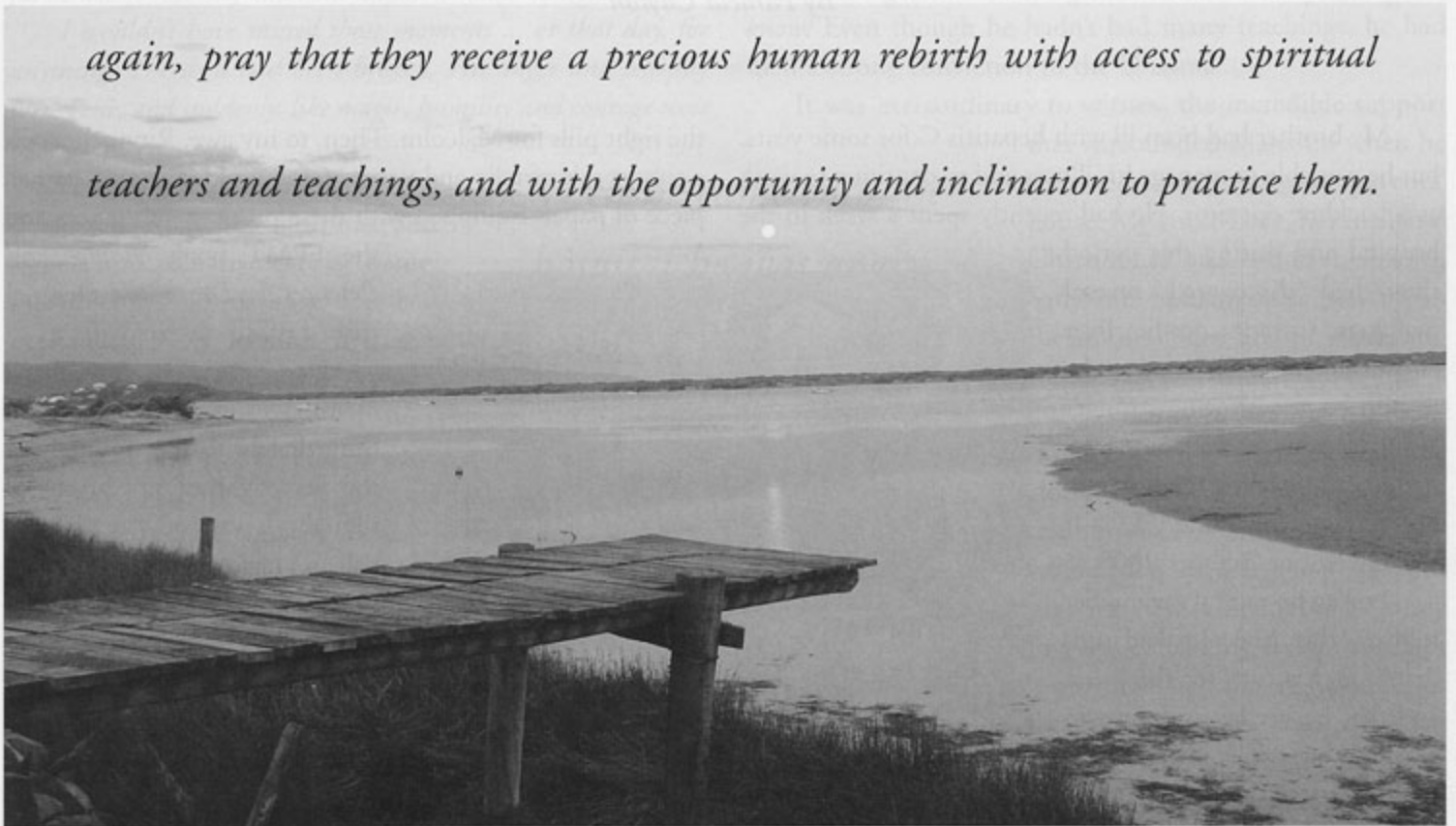
There are many things one can do to help the dead, including reciting sutras such as the King of Prayers, the Diamond Sutra, the Heart Sutra, the dedication chapter from Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*; making offerings of light, flowers, food, water bowls, etc., to the Three Jewels on behalf of the dead person; doing a weekend Vajrasattva/Chenrezig/Medicine Buddha retreat; doing tong-len meditation; meditating on emptiness; making thangkas or statues; publishing Dharma books; and making offerings to churches and charities – helping poor people, sick people, animals, and sponsoring animal liberation.

Pray for a good rebirth, that the person is born in a heavenly realm or pure land where they can become enlightened. If the dead person must take physical form again, pray that they receive a precious human rebirth with access to spiritual teachers and teachings, and with the opportunity and inclination to practice them.

Perform positive actions with compassion and a good heart, with the intention of benefiting others. Live a good life, practice pure morality, abstain from harming others or yourself by negative thoughts, words, and deeds. From such virtuous actions you accumulate merit which you can dedicate to the dead person. This will help you and it will help them.

As Lama Zopa Rinpoche says: "Benefit others as much as possible, with a sincere heart, in your daily life. Whether it is a small or big help to others, this will make your own life of better quality. It will make your mind healthier, and that means having a healthier body and longer life, and you will have inner peace and happiness. However much more you are able to practice positive things, and do good deeds, there will be that much less suffering for you when you pass away. There will be less of a problem or no problem, so you will have a peaceful death, a very happy ending to your life."

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The lagoon in Plettenberg Bay where Patricia died

We have faith that Patricia has gone to a better place, leaving this suffering world behind. I feel it is no coincidence that she died while we were reciting the Sanghata Sutra. Worldwide merits of the sutra recitation were dedicated and shared with her, so she had the good karma to die at a very auspicious time and receive much positive merit. We thank all those who kindly shared their merits and said prayers for my sister. We especially wish to thank Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Ven. Lhundub Damchö (Diana Finnegan) for kindly saying special prayers for my sister. ☸

Carol Leela Verity is founder and director of Sat Chit Anand Buddhist Centre, South Africa. She and her husband Maurice Barker met Lama Zopa Rinpoche at the November Course at Kopan Monastery in 2002. She has degrees in Psychology and Law and practiced as an attorney in Johannesburg. In her early 30s she resigned to follow a spiritual calling. She is writing a book on Buddhism and hosts meditations, teachings, and retreats at the center. She is ordained as a member of the Order of Interbeing, the monastic and lay sangha of Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh. Contact Sat Chit Anand Buddhist Centre at: www.satchitanand.co.za.