Nothing is permanent. The idea of impermanence, or mi rtag pa, is a core idea in Tibetan Buddhism. Meditating on impermanence helps individuals comprehend the transitory nature of reality, and thus prepare for death.

Grappling with this philosophical idea is the responsibility of Buddhist monks and nuns, whose lives are devoted to the practice of religion. But, as with all religious concepts, impermanence also shapes the lives and ideas of lay people.

For ordinary Tibetans, what does it mean to live impermanence? Specifically, if meditations on impermanence prepare one for death, can they also be useful for something less predictable, for the possibility of social death?

In this talk I consider the social death of the powerful, but controversial Pangdatsang family. The story of their rise and fall, and of the familial and communal repercussions of social death, offers a window into the conceptual place of impermanence in Tibetan society and beyond.

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