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THE TIBETAN BOOK OF LIVING AND DYING

Sogyal Rinpoche

THE SPIRITUAL CLASSIC
AND INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

30TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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THE TIBETAN BOOK OF LIVING AND DYING

Sogyal Rinpoche

The Spiritual Classic
& International Bestseller

30th Anniversary Edition

Edited by
PATRICK GAFFNEY AND ANDREW HARVEY

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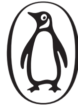

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I WOULD LIKE TO DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO *Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö, Dudjom Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, Khyentse Sangyum Khandro Tsering Chödrön, and all my beloved masters, who have been the inspiration of my life.*

May this book be a guide to liberation, read by the living, and to the dying, and for the dead.

May it help all who read it and spur them on their journey to enlightenment!

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Contents

Foreword, by His Holiness the Dalai Lama ix
Introduction to the 30th Anniversary Edition xi
Preface xvii

PART ONE: LIVING
1. In the Mirror of Death 3
2. Impermanence 15
3. Reflection and Change 28
4. The Nature of Mind 42
5. Bringing the Mind Home 57
6. Evolution, Karma, and Rebirth 86
7. Bardos and Other Realities 106
8. This Life: The Natural Bardo 115
9. The Spiritual Path 131
10. The Innermost Essence 154

PART TWO: DYING
11. Heart Advice on Helping the Dying 177
12. Compassion: The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel 191
13. Spiritual Help for the Dying 213
14. The Practices for Dying 227
15. The Process of Dying 248

PART THREE: DEATH AND REBIRTH
16. The Ground 263
17. Intrinsic Radiance 278
18. The Bardo of Becoming 291
19. Helping After Death 303
20. The Near-Death Experience: A Staircase to Heaven? 323

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PART FOUR: CONCLUSION

21. The Universal Process 343
22. Servants of Peace 360

Appendix 1: My Teachers 371
Appendix 2: Questions About Death 378
Appendix 3: Two Stories 385
Appendix 4: Two Mantras 393

Notes 399
Selected Bibliography 415
Acknowledgments 421
Index 427

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Foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama

IN THIS TIMELY BOOK, Sogyal Rinpoche focuses on how to understand the true meaning of life, how to accept death, and how to help the dying, and the dead.

Death is a natural part of life, which we will all surely have to face sooner or later. To my mind, there are two ways we can deal with it while we are alive. We can either choose to ignore it or we can confront the prospect of our own death and, by thinking clearly about it, try to minimize the suffering that it can bring. However, in neither of these ways can we actually overcome it.

As a Buddhist, I view death as a normal process, a reality that I accept will occur as long as I remain in this earthly existence. Knowing that I cannot escape it, I see no point in worrying about it. I tend to think of death as being like changing your clothes when they are old and worn out, rather than as some final end. Yet death is unpredictable: We do not know when or how it will take place. So it is only sensible to take certain precautions before it actually happens.

Naturally, most of us would like to die a peaceful death, but it is also clear that we cannot hope to die peacefully if our lives have been full of violence, or if our minds have mostly been agitated by emotions like anger, attachment, or fear. So if we wish to die well, we must learn how to live well: Hoping for a peaceful death, we must cultivate peace in our mind, and in our way of life.

As you will read here, from the Buddhist point of view, the actual experience of death is very important. Although how or where we will be reborn is generally dependent on karmic forces, our state of mind at the time of death can influence the quality of our next rebirth. So at the moment of death, in spite of the great variety of karmas we have accumulated, if we make a special effort to generate a virtuous state of mind, we may strengthen and activate a virtuous karma, and so bring about a happy rebirth.

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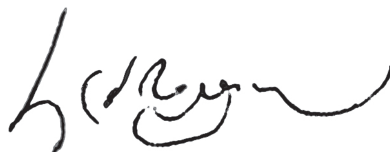
The actual point of death is also when the most profound and beneficial inner experiences can come about. Through repeated acquaintance with the processes of death in meditation, an accomplished meditator can use his or her actual death to gain great spiritual realization. This is why experienced practitioners engage in meditative practices as they pass away. An indication of their attainment is that often their bodies do not begin to decay until long after they are clinically dead.

No less significant than preparing for our own death is helping others to die well. As a newborn baby each of us was helpless and, without the care and kindness we received then, we would not have survived. Because the dying also are unable to help themselves, we should relieve them of discomfort and anxiety, and assist them, as far as we can, to die with composure.

Here the most important point is to avoid anything which will cause the dying person's mind to become more disturbed than it may already be. Our prime aim in helping a dying person is to put them at ease, and there are many ways of doing this. A dying person who is familiar with spiritual practice may be encouraged and inspired if they are reminded of it, but even kindly reassurance on our part can engender a peaceful, relaxed attitude in the dying person's mind.

Death and Dying provide a meeting point between the Tibetan Buddhist and modern scientific traditions. I believe both have a great deal to contribute to each other on the level of understanding and of practical benefit. Sogyal Rinpoche is especially well placed to facilitate this meeting; having been born and brought up in the Tibetan tradition, he has received instructions from some of our greatest Lamas. Having also benefitted from a modern education and lived and worked as a teacher for many years in the West, he has become well acquainted with Western ways of thought.

This book offers readers not just a theoretical account of death and dying, but also practical measures for understanding, and for preparing themselves and others in a calm and fulfilling way.



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June 2, 1992 The Dalai Lama

Introduction to the 30th Anniversary Edition

IT WAS DIFFICULT TO KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* was first published in 1992. The book set out to present a complete vision of life and death from the point of view of the Buddhist tradition of Tibet. It was a time when people were questioning whether there was more to life than material progress, and they were seeking answers to deeper, spiritual questions. But this was still uncharted territory, especially given the overriding fear of addressing the whole subject of death.

As it happened, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* was received with astonishing enthusiasm and interest, and as one of the coeditors, I watched with amazement as news of the book spread by word of mouth and it began to grow increasingly popular. We never suspected it would have such an impact. As time went by, it became clear that many people were getting enormous support and solace from the book. This we came to know through the innumerable and often intensely moving letters and messages they sent over the years describing how the book had helped them. There were those who found it gave them a deep inspiration or a clear sense of direction and meaning. There were many who said it had transformed the death of a loved one or helped them at other critical moments in their lives, for example struggling with grief or depression; or facing their own death at home, in hospital, or a hospice; or even on death row. Some told of how they had read the book two or three times all the way through and still return to it at moments of crisis. Others kept it by their bedside and used it to dip into repeatedly for guidance and inspiration.

In various places, medical and educational institutions adopted the book for their training courses and made use of its methods and practices. One award-winning palliative care

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doctor said: "these tools gave me a way to offer help to those who were suffering in ways that I couldn't address medically." A woman in Chennai, India, was so affected by the book that she opened a medical foundation for the terminally ill. In the United States, a man happened to be reading the chapters on death when his son was shot dead while delivering a pizza. Joining together with the father of the teenage gunman, he created a foundation for teaching nonviolence in schools. And now the book is available in eighty countries in thirty-four languages (with Tibetan soon to be added), and three million copies have been printed—maybe four million, if China is taken into account. But it is impossible to estimate exactly how many people *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* has touched over the years as copies have been passed on to friends, family members, colleagues, or complete strangers, or left in different places for others to discover.

What readers understood was the universal message of the book, which is free of any intention to convert. Indeed, some said that it strengthened their faith in their own religion, while for those with no particular faith, it gave them a renewed purpose in life. For others, it served as an introduction to the spiritual path, and they took up meditation or found their way to Buddhist practice and sought out genuine teachers. *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* also served to demystify and dispel many misconceptions so that family members were less likely to look askance at their children or brothers or sisters who took an interest in meditation or Buddhism.

The teachings of Tibetan Buddhism have been called one of the last ancient wisdom traditions on earth. They are extraordinarily profound and relevant because they transmit a special understanding of the mind or, to be more precise, the knowledge of our true nature—the innermost, essential nature of the mind. In practice, they empower us to thrive in the world with kindness, compassion, resilience, and equanimity. These crucial instructions have been handed down meticulously over centuries from masters to their students, handed down as a lived experience of wisdom in an unbroken line to the present day. What this book contains then is the heart essence of this oral lineage, and these are the very same teachings that Sogyal Rinpoche received from his teachers. As a result, this book is full of the blessings of the lineage, and from the viewpoint of the tradition, this must be the ultimate source of whatever impact or benefit it has had.

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So you could see *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, in a very real sense, as a spokesperson for the lineage, as well as a tribute to the kindness and generosity of generations of great masters and practitioners. For it is the sound of their voices and their wisdom that we can hear in these pages speaking to us with all the immediacy of a living teacher. When this book was being written, it was still possible to ask questions of the greatest masters of the last century and to include their answers. You will meet them here. Now their generation is gone.

When he was asked about his vision for the book, Sogyal Rinpoche replied: "to help inspire a quiet revolution in the way we look at death and care for the dying, and so the whole way we look at life and care for the living." Looking back now, we can see that *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* has helped many people to live and die more peacefully and with less fear. Of course, over the last twenty-five years, the way we look at death has changed, and public awareness has been heightened about the many aspects of end-of-life care. There are grassroots movements like "death cafés," as well as websites, organizations, books, guides, mainstream tv programs, and documentaries, all moving us towards that all-important conversation about death. Palliative care and hospice have also expanded, seeking to bring together doctors, patients, and families in compassionate care for the dying. What has been discovered is the singular importance of helping people talk about dying and framing their wishes for their care, as well as how vital it is that doctors are trained in speaking about death. While a lot has changed, much remains to be done, for example, in educating people young and old alike about these issues, in developing more integrated care, and in keeping the original spirit of hospice alive.

As is shown in this book, the kind of death we have is so important, and what is central to the needs of a dying person is a deeper spiritual dimension and whatever can give their life meaning and connection. One direct outcome of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* has been an education and training program called Spiritual Care, which is designed to offer healthcare workers, volunteers, and the public training inspired by the wisdom and compassion of the Buddhist approach to living and dying, and especially, end-of-life care. So far, forty thousand healthcare workers have attended courses and trainings, and purpose-built care centers have been constructed in Ireland and Germany.

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The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying has played a part in challenging attitudes about death and helping open up issues about care for the dying, and it may have even contributed to the widening interest in meditation, compassion, and interdependence that has unfolded over the last two and a half decades. However, its greatest contribution will always be to reveal the timeless nature of Tibet's wisdom tradition and to show that these teachings, endangered in their homeland, can continue to benefit the world, now and long into the future. How wonderful it would be if they could be more easily accessible to people everywhere, young and old. After all, spiritual understanding and development are without a doubt a sheer necessity for the survival of humanity. That is why this book represents a call to action, with its resounding appeal for "servants of peace"—for more and more individuals who will carry these values of wisdom and compassion into everyday life and the struggles of the world.

We cannot escape the fact that the world today is facing many new and disturbing challenges. As we all know, in many places isolation, depression, and mental illness are on the rise, and our refusal to acknowledge the interdependent nature of things is fueling the destruction of nature and the planet. So, if we needed to be aware of these teachings a quarter of a century ago, that urgency is ever more pressing today because they hand us a vision of a world where people can find freedom from ignorance, despair, cynicism, and greed, from a lack of meaning and self-worth, and from the fear of death and life itself. They offer a real pathway and tools for change. And what a change it would be if we looked at living and dying as one whole, if we saw death not as a tragedy but an opportunity for transformation, and if we saw life as infused with meaning, inspired by active compassion and an awareness of the mind's inner nature. That would definitely resemble the revolution invoked by the author of this book.

One last word, which comes from the experience of some readers of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*: They have found that if you have a question that is playing on your mind, and you just keep it quietly in your heart as you read, you may just find that some intuition, insight, or understanding is revealed. And it may reveal itself even more, the more you keep on reading.

Sogyal Rinpoche was a prolific teacher who traveled tirelessly, bringing his message to audiences across the world. He

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was an inspirational and charismatic figure, who could also be challenging and provocative. In August 2019, following two years' treatment for cancer, Sogyal Rinpoche passed away at his retreat in Thailand. Regrettably, a number of complaints were made against Sogyal Rinpoche and Rigpa during his later years. Rigpa's response can be found on page 440.

The composition of this book was a journey that spanned several years, involving countless hours of research, discussions, writing, readings, rewriting, and so on. I consider it to be one of the most fertile and creative periods of my life, engaged in work of intense passion and care, and an incredibly uplifting experience. I am humbled to have played some small part in its writing and remain deeply grateful today to Sogyal Rinpoche and all my teachers for granting me this inestimable opportunity.

—Patrick Gaffney

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Preface

I WAS BORN IN TIBET, and I was six months old when I entered the monastery of my master Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö, in the province of Kham. In Tibet we have a unique tradition of finding the reincarnations of great masters who have passed away. They are chosen young and given a special education to train them to become the teachers of the future. I was given the name Sogyal, even though it was only later that my master recognized me as the incarnation of Tertön Sogyal, a renowned mystic who was one of his own teachers and a master of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama.

My master, Jamyang Khyentse, was tall for a Tibetan, and he always seemed to stand a good head above others in a crowd. He had silver hair, cut very short, and kind eyes that glowed with humor. His ears were long, like those of the Buddha. But what you noticed most about him was his presence. His glance and bearing told you that he was a wise and holy man. He had a rich, deep, enchanting voice, and when he taught his head would tilt slightly backward and the teaching would flow from him in a stream of eloquence and poetry. And for all the respect and even awe he commanded, there was humility in everything he did.

Jamyang Khyentse is the ground of my life, and the inspiration of this book. He was the incarnation of a master who had transformed the practice of Buddhism in our country. In Tibet it was never enough simply to have the name of an incarnation, you always had to earn respect, through your learning and through your spiritual practice. My master spent years in retreat, and many miraculous stories are told about him. He had profound knowledge and spiritual realization, and I came to discover that he was like an encyclopedia of wisdom, and knew the answer to any question you might ask him. There were many spiritual traditions in Tibet, but

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Jamyang Khyentse was acclaimed as the authority on them all. He was, for everyone who knew or heard about him, the embodiment of Tibetan Buddhism, a living proof of how someone who had realized the teachings and completed their practice would be.

I have heard that my master said that I would help continue his work, and certainly he always treated me like his own son. I feel that what I have been able to achieve now in my work, and the audience I have been able to reach, is a ripening of the blessing he gave me.

All my earliest memories are of him. He was the environment in which I grew up, and his influence dominated my childhood. He was like a father to me. He would grant me anything I asked. His spiritual consort, Khandro Tsering Chödrön, who was also my aunt, used to say: "Don't disturb Rinpoche, he might be busy,"[1] but I would always want to be there next to him, and he was happy to have me with him.

I would pester him with questions all the time, and he always answered me patiently. I was a naughty child; none of my tutors were able to discipline me. Whenever they tried to beat me, I would run to my master and climb up behind him, where no one would dare to go. Crouching there, I felt proud and pleased with myself; he would just laugh. Then one day, without my knowledge, my tutor pleaded with him, explaining that for my own benefit this could not go on. The next time I fled to hide, my tutor came into the room, did three prostrations to my master, and dragged me out. I remember thinking, as I was hauled out of the room, how strange it was that he did not seem to be afraid of my master.

Jamyang Khyentse used to live in the room where his previous incarnation had seen his visions and launched the renaissance of culture and spirituality that swept through eastern Tibet in the last century. It was a wonderful room, not particularly large but with a magical atmosphere, full of sacred objects, paintings, and books. They called it "the heaven of the buddhas," "the room of empowerment," and if there is one place that I remember in Tibet, it is that room. My master sat on a low seat made of wood and strips of leather, and I sat next to him. I would refuse to eat if it was not from his bowl. In the small bedroom close by, there was a veranda, but it was always quite dark, and there was always a kettle with tea bubbling away on a little stove in the corner. Usually I slept next to my master, on a small bed at the foot of his

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own. One sound I shall never forget is the clicking of the beads of his mala, his Buddhist rosary, as he whispered his prayers. When I went to sleep he would be there, sitting and practicing; and when I awoke in the morning he would already be awake and sitting and practicing again, overflowing with blessing and power. As I opened my eyes and saw him, I would be filled with a warm and cozy happiness. He had such an air of peace about him.

As I grew older, Jamyang Khyentse would make me preside over ceremonies, while he took the part of chant leader. I was witness to all the teachings and initiations that he gave to others; but rather than the details, what I remember now is the atmosphere. For me he was the Buddha, of that there was no question in my mind. And everyone else recognized it as well. When he gave initiations, his disciples were so over-awed they hardly dared look into his face. Some would see him actually in the form of his predecessor, or as different buddhas and bodhisattvas.[2] Everyone called him Rinpoche, "the Precious One," which is the title given to a master, and when he was present no other teacher would be addressed in that way. His presence was so impressive that many affectionately called him "the Primordial Buddha."[3]

Had I not met my master Jamyang Khyentse, I know I would have been an entirely different person. With his warmth and wisdom and compassion, he personified the sacred truth of the teachings and so made them practical and vibrant with life. Whenever I share that atmosphere of my master with others, they can sense the same profound feeling it aroused in me. What then did Jamyang Khyentse inspire in me? An unshakable confidence in the teachings, and a conviction in the central and dramatic importance of the master. Whatever understanding I have, I know I owe it to him. This is something I can never repay, but I can pass on to others.

Throughout my youth in Tibet I saw the kind of love Jamyang Khyentse used to radiate in the community, especially in guiding the dying and the dead. A lama in Tibet was not only a spiritual teacher but also wise man, therapist, parish priest, doctor, and spiritual healer, helping the sick and the dying. Later I was to learn the specific techniques for guiding the dying and the dead from the teachings connected with the Tibetan Book of the Dead. But the greatest lessons I ever learned about death—and life—came from watching my

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master as he guided dying people with infinite compassion, wisdom, and understanding.

I pray this book will transmit something of his great wisdom and compassion to the world, and, through it, you too, wherever you are, can come into the presence of his wisdom mind and find a living connection with him.

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PART ONE

Living

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ONE

In the Mirror of Death

MY OWN FIRST EXPERIENCE of death came when I was about seven. We were preparing to leave the eastern highlands to travel to central Tibet. Samten, one of the personal attendants of my master, was a wonderful monk who was kind to me during my childhood. He had a bright, round, chubby face, always ready to break into a smile. He was everyone's favorite in the monastery because he was so good-natured. Every day my master would give teachings and initiations and lead practices and rituals. Toward the end of the day, I would gather together my friends and act out a little theatrical performance, reenacting the morning's events. It was Samten who would always lend me the costumes my master had worn in the morning. He never refused me.

Then suddenly Samten fell ill, and it was clear he was not going to live. We had to postpone our departure. I will never forget the two weeks that followed. The rank smell of death hung like a cloud over everything, and whenever I think of that time, that smell comes back to me. The monastery was saturated with an intense awareness of death. This was not at all morbid or frightening, however; in the presence of my master, Samten's death took on a special significance. It became a teaching for us all.

Samten lay on a bed by the window in a small temple in my master's residence. I knew he was dying. From time to time I would go in and sit by him. He could not talk, and I was shocked by the change in his face, which was now so haggard and drawn. I realized that he was going to leave us and we would never see him again. I felt intensely sad and lonely.

Samten's death was not an easy one. The sound of his labored breathing followed us everywhere, and we could smell his body decaying. The monastery was overwhelmingly silent except for this breathing. Everything focused on Samten. Yet

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although there was so much suffering in Samten's prolonged dying, we could all see that deep down he had a peace and inner confidence about him. At first I could not explain this, but then I realized what it came from: his faith and his training, and the presence of our master. And though I felt sad, I knew then that if our master was there, everything would turn out all right, because he would be able to help Samten toward liberation. Later I came to know that it is the dream of any practitioner to die before his master and have the good fortune to be guided by him through death.

As Jamyang Khyentse guided Samten calmly through his dying, he introduced him to all the stages of the process he was going through, one by one. I was astonished by the precision of my master's knowledge, and by his confidence and peace. When my master was there, his peaceful confidence would reassure even the most anxious person. Now Jamyang Khyentse was revealing to us his fearlessness of death. Not that he ever treated death lightly: He often told us that he was afraid of it, and warned us against taking it naively or complacently. Yet what was it that allowed my master to face death in a way that was at once so sober and so lighthearted, so practical yet so mysteriously carefree? That question fascinated and absorbed me.

Samten's death shook me. At the age of seven, I had my first glimpse of the vast power of the tradition I was being made part of, and I began to understand the purpose of spiritual practice. Practice had given Samten an acceptance of death, as well as a clear understanding that suffering and pain can be part of a deep, natural process of purification. Practice had given my master a complete knowledge of what death is, and a precise technology for guiding individuals through it.

After Samten died we set off for Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, a tortuous three-month journey on horseback. From there we continued our pilgrimage to the sacred sites of central and southern Tibet. These are the holy places of the saints, kings, and scholars who brought Buddhism to Tibet from the seventh century onward. My master was the emanation of many masters of all traditions, and because of his reputation he was given a tumultuous reception everywhere we went.

For me that journey was extremely exciting, and has remained full of beautiful memories. Tibetans rise early, in order to make use of all the natural light. We would go to

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bed at dusk and rise before daybreak, and by first light the yaks carrying the baggage would be moving out. The tents would be struck, and the last ones to come down were the kitchen and my master's tent. A scout would go ahead to choose a good camping place, and we would stop and camp around noon for the rest of the day. I used to love to camp by a river and listen to the sound of the water, or to sit in the tent and hear the rain pattering on the roof.

We were a small party with about thirty tents in all. During the day I rode on a golden-colored horse next to my master. While we rode he gave teachings, told stories, practiced, and composed a number of practices specially for me. One day, as we drew near the sacred lake of Yamdrok Tso, and caught sight of the turquoise radiance of its waters, another Lama in our party, Lama Tseten, began to die.

The death of Lama Tseten proved another strong teaching for me. He was the tutor to my master's spiritual wife, Khandro Tsering Chödrön. She was regarded by many as Tibet's foremost woman practitioner, a hidden master who for me was an embodiment of devotion, teaching through the simplicity of her loving presence. Lama Tseten was an immensely human and grandfatherly character. He was over sixty, quite tall and with gray hair, and exuded an effortless gentleness. He was also a highly accomplished practitioner of meditation, and just to be near him used to give me a sense of peace and serenity. Sometimes he would scold me, and I would be afraid of him; but for all his occasional sternness, he never lost his warmth.

Lama Tseten died in an extraordinary way. Although there was a monastery close by, he refused to go there, saying he did not want to leave a corpse for them to clear up. So we camped and pitched our tents in a circle as usual. Khandro was nursing and caring for Lama Tseten, as he was her tutor. She and I were the only two people in his tent when he suddenly called her over. He had an endearing way of calling her "A-mi," meaning "my child" in his local dialect. "A-mi," he said tenderly, "come here. It's happening now. I've no further advice for you. You are fine as you are: I am happy with you. Serve your master just as you have been doing."

Immediately she turned to run out of the tent, but he caught her by the sleeve. "Where are you going?" he asked. "I'm going to call Rinpoche," she replied.

"Don't bother him, there's no need," he smiled. "With the master, there's no such thing as distance." With that, he just

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gazed up into the sky and passed away. Khandro released herself from his grip and rushed out to call my master. I sat there, unable to move.

I was amazed that anyone who was staring into the face of death could have that kind of confidence. Lama Tseten could have had his Lama there in person to help him—something anyone else would have longed for—but he had no need. I understand why now: He had already realized the presence of the master within himself. Jamyang Khyentse was there with him always, in his mind and heart; never for one moment did he feel any separation.

Khandro did go to fetch Jamyang Khyentse.[1] I shall never forget how he stooped to enter the tent. He gave one look at Lama Tseten's face, and then, peering into his eyes, began to chuckle. He always used to call him "La Gen," "old Lama"; it was a sign of his affection. "La Gen," he said, "don't stay in that state!" He could see, I now understand, that Lama Tseten was doing one particular practice of meditation in which the practitioner merges the nature of his mind with the space of truth and can remain in that state for many days as he dies. "La Gen, we are travelers. We're pilgrims. We don't have the time to wait that long. Come on. I'll guide you."

Transfixed, I watched what happened next, and if I hadn't seen it myself I would never have believed it. *Lama Tseten came back to life.* Then my master sat by his side and took him through the *phowa,* the practice for guiding the consciousness at the moment before death. There are many ways of doing this practice, and the one he used then culminated with the master uttering the syllable "A" three times. As my master declared the first "A," we could hear Lama Tseten accompanying him quite audibly. The second time his voice was less distinct, and the third time it was silent; he had gone.

The death of Samten taught me the purpose of spiritual practice; Lama Tseten's death taught me that it is not unusual for practitioners of his caliber to conceal their remarkable qualities during their lifetime. Sometimes, in fact, they show them only once, at the moment of death. I understood, even as a child, that there was a striking difference between the death of Samten and that of Lama Tseten, and I realized that it was the difference between the death of a good monk who had practiced in his life and that of a much more realized practitioner. Samten died in an ordinary way and in pain, yet with the confidence of faith; Lama Tseten's death was a display of spiritual mastery.

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Soon after Lama Tseten's funeral, we moved up into the monastery of Yamdrok. As usual, I slept next to my master in his room, and I remember that night watching the shadows of the butter lamps flickering on the wall. While everyone else slept soundly, I lay awake and cried the whole night long. I understood that night that death is real, and that I too would have to die. As I lay there, thinking about death and about my own death, through all my sadness a profound sense of acceptance began slowly to emerge, and with it a resolve to dedicate my life to spiritual practice.

So I began to face death and its implications very young. I could never have imagined then how many kinds of death there were to follow, one heaped upon another. The death that was the tragic loss of my country, Tibet, after the Chinese occupation. The death that is exile. The death of losing everything my family and I possessed. My family, Lakar Tsang, had been among the wealthiest in Tibet. Since the fourteenth century it had been famous as one of the most important benefactors of Buddhism, supporting the teaching of Buddha and helping the great masters with their work.[2]

The most shattering death of all was yet to come—that of my master Jamyang Khyentse. Losing him I felt I had lost the ground of my existence. It was in 1959, the year of the fall of Tibet. For the Tibetans, my master's death was a second devastating blow. And for Tibet, it marked the end of an era.

DEATH IN THE MODERN WORLD

When I first came to the West, I was shocked by the contrast between the attitudes to death I had been brought up with and those I now found. For all its technological achievements, modern Western society has no real understanding of death or what happens in death or after death.

I learned that people today are taught to deny death, and taught that it means nothing but annihilation and loss. That means that most of the world lives either in denial of death or in terror of it. Even talking about death is considered morbid, and many people believe that simply mentioning death is to risk wishing it upon ourselves.

Others look on death with a naive, thoughtless cheerfulness, thinking that for some unknown reason death will work out all right for them, and that it is nothing to worry about. When I think of them, I am reminded of what one Tibetan master says: "People often make the mistake of being frivo-

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lous about death and think, 'Oh well, death happens to everybody. It's not a big deal, it's natural. I'll be fine.' That's a nice theory until one is dying."[3]

Of these two attitudes toward death, one views death as something to scurry away from and the other as something that will just take care of itself. How far they both are from understanding death's true significance!

All the greatest spiritual traditions of the world, including of course Christianity, have told us clearly that death is not the end. They have all handed down a vision of some sort of life to come, which infuses this life that we are leading now with sacred meaning. But despite their teachings, modern society is largely a spiritual desert where the majority imagine that *this life* is all that there is. Without any real or authentic faith in an afterlife, most people live lives deprived of any ultimate meaning.

I have come to realize that the disastrous effects of the denial of death go far beyond the individual: They affect the whole planet. Believing fundamentally that this life is the only one, modern people have developed no long-term vision. So there is nothing to restrain them from plundering the planet for their own immediate ends and from living in a selfish way that could prove fatal for the future. How many more warnings do we need, like this one from the former Brazilian Minister for the Environment, responsible for the Amazon rain forest?

> *Modern industrial society is a fanatical religion. We are demolishing, poisoning, destroying all life-systems on the planet. We are signing IOUs our children will not be able to pay . . . We are acting as if we were the last generation on the planet. Without a radical change in heart, in mind, in vision, the earth will end up like Venus, charred and dead.*[4]

Fear of death and ignorance of the afterlife are fueling that destruction of our environment that is threatening all of our lives. So isn't it all the more disturbing that people are not taught what death is, or how to die? Or given any hope in what lies after death, and so what really lies behind life? Could it be more ironic that young people are so highly educated in every subject except the one that holds the key to the entire meaning of life, and perhaps to our very survival?

It has often intrigued me how some Buddhist masters I know ask one simple question of people who approach them

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for teaching: Do you believe in a life after this one? They are not being asked whether they believe in it as a philosophical proposition, but whether they feel it deeply in their heart. The master knows that if people believe in a life after this one, their whole outlook on life will be different, and they will have a distinct sense of personal responsibility and morality. What the masters must suspect is that there is a danger that people who have no strong belief in a life after this one will create a society fixated on short-term results, without much thought for the consequences of their actions. Could this be the major reason why we have created a brutal world like the one in which we are now living, a world with little real compassion?

Sometimes I think that the most affluent and powerful countries of the developed world are like the realm of the gods described in the Buddhist teachings. The gods are said to live lives of fabulous luxury, reveling in every conceivable pleasure, without a thought for the spiritual dimension of life. All seems to go well until death draws near and unexpected signs of decay appear. Then the gods' wives and lovers no longer dare approach them, but throw flowers to them from a distance, with casual prayers that they be reborn again as gods. None of their memories of happiness or comfort can shelter them now from the suffering they face; they only make it more savage. So the dying gods are left to die alone in misery.

The fate of the gods reminds me of the way the elderly, the sick, and the dying are treated today. Our society is obsessed with youth, sex, and power, and we shun old age and decay. Isn't it terrifying that we discard old people when their working life is finished and they are no longer useful? Isn't it disturbing that we cast them into old people's homes, where they die lonely and abandoned?

Isn't it time also that we took another look at how we sometimes treat those suffering with terminal illnesses like cancer and AIDS? I know a number of people who have died from AIDS, and I have seen how often they were treated as outcasts, even by their friends, and how the stigma attached to the disease reduced them to despair, and made them feel their life was disgusting and had in the eyes of the world already ended.

Even when a person we know or love is dying, so often people find they are given almost no idea of how to help them; and when they are dead, we are not encouraged to give any thought to the future of the dead person, how he or

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she will continue, or how we could go on helping him or her. In fact, any attempt to think along these lines risks being dismissed as nonsensical and ridiculous.

What all of this is showing us, with painful clarity, is that now more than ever before we need a fundamental change in our attitude toward death and dying.

Happily, attitudes are beginning to change. The hospice movement, for example, is doing marvelous work in giving practical and emotional care. Yet practical and emotional care are not enough; people who are dying need love and care, but they also need something even more profound. They need to discover a real meaning to death, and to life. Without that, how can we give them ultimate comfort? Helping the dying, then, must include the possibility of spiritual care, because it is only with spiritual knowledge that we can truly face, and understand, death.

I have been heartened by the way in which in recent years the whole subject of death and dying has been opened up in the West by pioneers such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Raymond Moody. Looking deeply into the way that we care for the dying, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross showed that with unconditional love, and a more enlightened attitude, dying can be a peaceful, even transformative experience. The scientific studies of the many different aspects of the near-death experience that followed the brave work of Raymond Moody have held out to humanity a vivid and strong hope that life does not end with death, and there is indeed a "life after life."

Some, unfortunately, did not really understand the full meaning of these revelations about death and dying. They went to the extreme of glamorizing death, and I have heard of tragic cases of young people who committed suicide because they believed death was beautiful and an escape from the depression of their lives. But whether we fear death and refuse to face it, or whether we romanticize it, death is trivialized. Both despair and euphoria about death are an evasion. Death is neither depressing nor exciting; it is simply a fact of life.

How sad it is that most of us only begin to appreciate our life when we are on the point of dying. I often think of the words of the great Buddhist master Padmasambhava: "Those who believe they have plenty of time get ready only at the time of death. Then they are ravaged by regret. But isn't it far too late?" What more chilling commentary on the modern world could there be than that most people die unprepared for death, as they have lived, unprepared for life?

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THE JOURNEY THROUGH LIFE AND DEATH

According to the wisdom of Buddha, we *can* actually use our lives to prepare for death. We do not have to wait for the painful death of someone close to us or the shock of terminal illness to force us into looking at our lives. Nor are we condemned to go out empty-handed at death to meet the unknown. We can begin, here and now, to find meaning in our lives. We can make of every moment an opportunity to change and to prepare—wholeheartedly, precisely, and with peace of mind—for death and eternity.

In the Buddhist approach, life and death are seen as one whole, where death is the beginning of another chapter of life. Death is a mirror in which the entire meaning of life is reflected.

This view is central to the teachings of the most ancient school of Tibetan Buddhism. Many of you will have heard of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead.* What I am seeking to do in this book is to explain and expand the *Tibetan Book of the Dead,* to cover not only death but life as well, and to fill out in detail the whole teaching of which the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is only a part. In this wonderful teaching, we find the whole of life and death presented together as a series of constantly changing transitional realities known as *bardos.* The word "bardo" is commonly used to denote the intermediate state between death and rebirth, but in reality bardos *are occurring continuously throughout both life and death,* and are junctures when the possibility of liberation, or enlightenment, is heightened.

The bardos are particularly powerful opportunities for liberation because there are, the teachings show us, certain moments that are much more powerful than others and much more charged with potential, when whatever you do has a crucial and far-reaching effect. I think of a bardo as being like a moment when you step toward the edge of a precipice; such a moment, for example, is when a master introduces a disciple to the essential, original, and innermost nature of his or her mind. The greatest and most charged of these moments, however, is the moment of death.

So from the Tibetan Buddhist point of view, we can divide our entire existence into four continuously interlinked realities: (1) life, (2) dying and death, (3) after death, and (4) rebirth. These are known as the four bardos: (1) the natural bardo of this life, (2) the painful bardo of dying, (3) the luminous bardo of *dharmata,* and (4) the karmic bardo of becoming.

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Because of the vastness and all-comprehensiveness of the bardo teachings, this book has been carefully structured. You will be guided, stage by stage, through the unfolding vision of the journey through life and death. Our exploration necessarily begins with a direct reflection on what death means and the many facets of the truth of impermanence—the kind of reflection that can enable us to make rich use of this life while we still have time, and ensure that when we die it will be without remorse or self-recrimination at having wasted our lives. As Tibet's famous poet saint, Milarepa, said: "My religion is to live—and die—without regret."

Contemplating deeply on the secret message of impermanence—what lies in fact beyond impermanence and death—leads directly to the heart of the ancient and powerful Tibetan teachings: the introduction to the essential "nature of mind." Realization of the nature of mind, which you could call our innermost essence, that truth we all search for, is the key to understanding life and death. For what happens at the moment of death is that the ordinary mind and its delusions die, and in that gap the boundless sky-like nature of our mind is uncovered. This essential nature of mind is the background to the whole of life and death, like the sky, which folds the whole universe in its embrace.

The teachings make it clear that if all we know of mind is the aspect of mind that dissolves when we die, we will be left with no idea of what continues, no knowledge of the new dimension of the deeper reality of the nature of mind. So it is vital for us all to familiarize ourselves with the nature of mind while we are still alive. Only then will we be prepared when it reveals itself spontaneously and powerfully at the moment of death; be able to recognize it "as naturally," the teachings say, "as a child running into its mother's lap"; and by remaining in that state, finally be liberated.

A description of the nature of mind leads naturally into a complete instruction on meditation, for meditation is the only way we can repeatedly uncover and gradually realize and stabilize that nature of mind. An explanation will then be given of the nature of human evolution, rebirth, and *karma,* so as to provide you with the fullest possible meaning and context of our path through life and death.

By this point you will have enough knowledge to be able to enter confidently the heart of the book: a comprehensive account, drawn from many different sources, of all of the four bardos and of all of the different stages of death and

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dying. Instruction, practical advice, and spiritual practices are set out in detail for helping both ourselves and others through life, through dying, through death, and after death. The book then concludes with a vision of how the bardo teachings can help us understand the deepest nature of the human mind, and of the universe.

My students often ask me: How do we know what these bardos are, and from where does the astonishing precision of the bardo teachings and their uncannily clear knowledge of each stage of dying, death, and rebirth come? The answer may seem initially difficult to understand for many readers, because the notion of mind the West now has is an extremely narrow one. Despite the major breakthroughs of recent years, especially in mind/body science and transpersonal psychology, the great majority of scientists continue to reduce the mind to no more than physical processes in the brain, which goes against the testimony of thousands of years of experience of mystics and meditators of all religions.

From what source or authority, then, can a book like this be written? The "inner science" of Buddhism is based, as one American scholar puts it, "on a thorough and comprehensive knowledge of reality, on an already assessed, depth understanding of self and environment; that is to say, on the complete enlightenment of the Buddha."[5] The source of the bardo teachings is the enlightened mind, the completely awake buddha mind, as experienced, explained, and transmitted by a long line of masters that stretches back to the Primordial Buddha. Their careful, meticulous—you could almost say scientific—explorations and formulations of their discoveries of mind over many centuries have given us the most complete picture possible of both life and death. It is this complete picture that, inspired by Jamyang Khyentse and all my other great masters, I am humbly attempting to transmit for the very first time to the West.

Over many years of contemplation and teaching and practice, and clarifying questions with my masters, I have written *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* as the quintessence of the heart-advice of all my masters, to be a new *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and a *Tibetan Book of Life.* I want it to be a manual, a guide, a work of reference, and a source of sacred inspiration. Only by going over this book and reading it again and again, I suggest, can its many layers of meaning be revealed. The

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more you use it, you will find, the more profoundly you will feel its implications, and the more you will come to realize the depth of the wisdom that is being transmitted to you through the teachings.

The bardo teachings show us precisely what will happen if we prepare for death and what will happen if we do not. The choice could not be clearer. If we refuse to accept death now, while we are still alive, we will pay dearly throughout our lives, at the moment of death, and thereafter. The effects of this refusal will ravage this life and all the lives to come. We will not be able to live our lives fully; we will remain imprisoned in the very aspect of ourselves that has to die. This ignorance will rob us of the basis of the journey to enlightenment, and trap us endlessly in the realm of illusion, the uncontrolled cycle of birth and death, that ocean of suffering that we Buddhists call *samsara.*[6]

Yet the fundamental message of the Buddhist teachings is that if we are prepared, there is tremendous hope, both in life and in death. The teachings reveal to us the possibility of an astounding and finally boundless freedom, which is ours to work for now, in life—the freedom that will also enable us to choose our death and so to choose our birth. For someone who has prepared and practiced, death comes not as a defeat but as a triumph, the crowning and most glorious moment of life.

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TWO

Impermanence

There is no place on earth where death cannot find us—even if we constantly twist our heads about in all directions as in a dubious and suspect land . . . If there were any way of sheltering from death's blows—I am not the man to recoil from it . . . But it is madness to think that you can succeed . . .

Men come and they go and they trot and they dance, and never a word about death. All well and good. Yet when death does come—to them, their wives, their children, their friends—catching them unawares and unprepared, then what storms of passion overwhelm them, what cries, what fury, what despair! . . .

To begin depriving death of its greatest advantage over us, let us adopt a way clean contrary to that common one; let us deprive death of its strangeness, let us frequent it, let us get used to it; let us have nothing more often in mind than death . . . We do not know where death awaits us: so let us wait for it everywhere. To practice death is to practice freedom. A man who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave.

MONTAIGNE[1]

WHY IS IT SO VERY HARD to practice death and to practice freedom? And why exactly are we so frightened of death that we avoid looking at it altogether? Somewhere, deep down, we know we cannot avoid facing death forever. We know, in Milarepa's words, "This thing called 'corpse' we dread so much is living with us here and now." The longer we postpone facing death, the more we ignore it, the greater the fear and insecurity that build up to haunt us. The more we try to run away from that fear, the more monstrous it becomes.

Death *is* a vast mystery, but there are two things we can say about it: *It is absolutely certain that we will die,* and *it is uncertain when or how we will die.* The only surety we have,

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then, is this uncertainty about the hour of our death, which we seize on as the excuse to postpone facing death directly. We are like children who cover their eyes in a game of hide-and-seek and think that no one can see them.

Why do we live in such terror of death? Because our instinctive desire is to live and to go on living, and death is a savage end to everything we hold familiar. We feel that when it comes we will be plunged into something quite unknown, or become someone totally different. We imagine we will find ourselves lost and bewildered, in surroundings that are terrifyingly unfamiliar. We imagine it will be like waking up alone, in a torment of anxiety, in a foreign country, with no knowledge of the land or language, no money, no contacts, no passport, no friends . . .

Perhaps the deepest reason why we are afraid of death is because we do not know who we are. We believe in a personal, unique, and separate identity; but if we dare to examine it, we find that this identity depends entirely on an endless collection of things to prop it up: our name, our "biography," our partners, family, home, job, friends, credit cards . . . It is on their fragile and transient support that we rely for our security. So when they are all taken away, will we have any idea of who we really are?

Without our familiar props, we are faced with just ourselves, a person we do not know, an unnerving stranger with whom we have been living all the time but we never really wanted to meet. Isn't that why we have tried to fill every moment of time with noise and activity, however boring or trivial, to ensure that we are never left in silence with this stranger on our own?

And doesn't this point to something fundamentally tragic about our way of life? We live under an assumed identity, in a neurotic fairy tale world with no more reality than the Mock Turtle in *Alice in Wonderland.* Hypnotized by the thrill of building, we have raised the houses of our lives on sand. This world can seem marvelously convincing until death collapses the illusion and evicts us from our hiding place. What will happen to us then if we have no clue of any deeper reality?

When we die we leave everything behind, especially this body we have cherished so much and relied upon so blindly and tried so hard to keep alive. But our minds are no more dependable than our bodies. Just look at your mind for a few minutes. You will see that it is like a flea, constantly hopping to and fro. You will see that thoughts arise without any rea-

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son, without any connection. Swept along by the chaos of every moment, we are the victims of the fickleness of our mind. If this is the only state of consciousness we are familiar with, then to rely on our minds at the moment of death is an absurd gamble.

THE GREAT DECEPTION

The birth of a man is the birth of his sorrow. The longer he lives, the more stupid he becomes, because his anxiety to avoid unavoidable death becomes more and more acute. What bitterness! He lives for what is always out of reach! His thirst for survival in the future makes him incapable of living in the present.

CHUANG TZU

After my master died, I enjoyed a close connection with Dudjom Rinpoche, one of the greatest meditation masters, mystics, and yogins of recent times. One day he was driving through France with his wife, admiring the countryside as they went along. They passed a long cemetery, which had been freshly painted and decorated with flowers. Dudjom Rinpoche's wife said, "Rinpoche, look how everything in the West is so neat and clean. Even the places where they keep corpses are spotless. In the East not even the houses that people live in are anything like as clean as this."

"Ah, yes," he replied, "that's true; this is such a civilized country. They have such marvelous houses for dead corpses. But haven't you noticed? They have such wonderful houses for the living corpses too."

Whenever I think of this story, it makes me think how hollow and futile life can be when it's founded on a false belief in continuity and permanence. When we live like that, we become, as Dudjom Rinpoche said, unconscious, living corpses.

Most of us do live like that; we live according to a preordained plan. We spend our youth being educated. Then we find a job, and meet someone, marry, and have children. We buy a house, try to make a success of our business, aim for dreams like a country house or a second car. We go away on holiday with our friends. We plan for retirement. The biggest dilemmas some of us ever have to face are where to take our next holiday or whom to invite at Christmas. Our lives are monotonous, petty, and repetitive, wasted in the pursuit of the trivial, because we seem to know of nothing better.

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The pace of our lives is so hectic that the last thing we have time to think of is death. We smother our secret fears of impermanence by surrounding ourselves with more and more goods, more and more things, more and more comforts, only to find ourselves their slaves. All our time and energy is exhausted simply maintaining them. Our only aim in life soon becomes to keep everything as safe and secure as possible. When changes do happen, we find the quickest remedy, some slick and temporary solution. And so our lives drift on, unless a serious illness or disaster shakes us out of our stupor.

It is not as if we even spare much time or thought for this life either. Think of those people who work for years and then have to retire, only to find that they don't know what to do with themselves as they age and approach death. Despite all our chatter about being practical, to be practical in the West means to be ignorantly and often selfishly short-sighted. Our myopic focus on this life, and this life only, is the great deception, the source of the modern world's bleak and destructive materialism. No one talks about death and no one talks about the afterlife, because people are made to believe that such talk will only thwart our so-called "progress" in the world.

Yet if our deepest desire is truly to live and go on living, why do we blindly insist that death is the end? Why not at least try and explore the possibility that there may be a life after? Why, if we are as pragmatic as we claim, don't we begin to ask ourselves seriously: Where does our *real* future lie? After all, no one lives longer than a hundred years. And after that there stretches the whole of eternity, unaccounted for . . .

ACTIVE LAZINESS

There is an old Tibetan story that I love, called "The Father of 'As Famous as the Moon.'" A very poor man, after a great deal of hard work, had managed to accumulate a whole sack of grain. He was proud of himself, and when he got home he strung the bag up with a rope from one of the rafters of his house to keep it safe from rats and thieves. He left it hanging there, and settled down underneath it for the night as an added precaution. Lying there, his mind began to wander: "If I can sell this grain off in small quantities, that will make the biggest profit. With that I can buy some more grain, and do the same again, and before too long I'll become rich, and I'll be someone to reckon with in the community.

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Plenty of girls will be after me. I'll marry a beautiful woman, and before too long we'll have a child . . . it will have to be a son . . . what on earth are we going to call him?" Looking round the room, his gaze fell upon the little window, through which he could see the moon rising.

"What a sign!" he thought. "How auspicious! That's a really good name. I'll call him 'As Famous as the Moon.' . . ." Now while he had been carried away in his speculation, a rat had found its way up to the sack of grain and chewed through the rope. At the very moment the words "As Famous as the Moon" issued from his lips, the bag of grain dropped from the ceiling and killed him instantly. "As Famous as the Moon," of course, was never born.

How many of us, like the man in the story, are swept away by what I have come to call an "active laziness"? Naturally there are different species of laziness: Eastern and Western. The Eastern style is like the one practiced to perfection in India. It consists of hanging out all day in the sun, doing nothing, avoiding any kind of work or useful activity, drinking cups of tea, listening to Hindi film music blaring on the radio, and gossiping with friends. Western laziness is quite different. It consists of cramming our lives with compulsive activity, so that there is no time at all to confront the real issues.

If we look into our lives, we will see clearly how many unimportant tasks, so-called "responsibilities" accumulate to fill them up. One master compares them to "housekeeping in a dream." We tell ourselves we want to spend time on the important things of life, but there never *is* any time. Even simply to get up in the morning, there is so much to do: open the window, make the bed, take a shower, brush your teeth, feed the dog or cat, do last night's washing up, discover you are out of sugar or coffee, go and buy them, make breakfast—the list is endless. Then there are clothes to sort out, choose, iron, and fold up again. And what about your hair, or your makeup? Helpless, we watch our days fill up with telephone calls and petty projects, with so many responsibilities—or shouldn't we call them "irresponsibilities"?

Our lives seem to live us, to possess their own bizarre momentum, to carry us away; in the end we feel we have no choice or control over them. Of course we feel bad about this sometimes, we have nightmares and wake up in a sweat, wondering: "What am I doing with my life?" But our fears only last until breakfast time; out comes the briefcase, and back we go to where we started.

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I think of the Indian saint, Ramakrishna, who said to one of his disciples: "If you spent one-tenth of the time you devoted to distractions like chasing women or making money to spiritual practice, you would be enlightened in a few years!" There was a Tibetan master who lived around the turn of the century, a kind of Himalayan Leonardo da Vinci, called Mipham. He is said to have invented a clock, a cannon, and an airplane. But once each of them was complete, he destroyed them, saying that they would only be the cause of further distraction.

In Tibetan the word for body is *lü,* which means "something you leave behind," like baggage. Each time we say "lü," it reminds us that we are only travelers, taking temporary refuge in this life and this body. So in Tibet people did not distract themselves by spending all their time trying to make their external circumstances more comfortable. They were satisfied if they had enough to eat, clothes on their backs, and a roof over their heads. Going on as we do, obsessively trying to improve our conditions, can become an end in itself and a pointless distraction. Would anyone in their right mind think of fastidiously redecorating their hotel room every time they booked into one? I love this piece of advice from Patrul Rinpoche:

Remember the example of an old cow,
She's content to sleep in a barn.
You have to eat, sleep, and shit—
That's unavoidable—
Beyond that is none of your business.

Sometimes I think that the greatest achievement of modern culture is its brilliant selling of samsara and its barren distractions. Modern society seems to me a celebration of all the things that lead away from the truth, make truth hard to live for, and discourage people from even believing that it exists. And to think that all this springs from a civilization that claims to adore life, but actually starves it of any real meaning; that endlessly speaks of making people "happy," but in fact blocks their way to the source of real joy.

This modern samsara feeds off an anxiety and depression that it fosters and trains us all in, and carefully nurtures with a consumer machine that needs to keep us greedy to keep going. Samsara is highly organized, versatile, and sophisticated; it assaults us from every angle with its propaganda, and creates an almost impregnable environment of addiction

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around us. The more we try to escape, the more we seem to fall into the traps it is so ingenious at setting for us. As the eighteenth-century Tibetan master Jikmé Lingpa said: "Mesmerized by the sheer variety of perceptions, beings wander endlessly astray in samsara's vicious cycle."

Obsessed, then, with false hopes, dreams, and ambitions, which promise happiness but lead only to misery, we are like people crawling through an endless desert, dying of thirst. And all that this samsara holds out to us to drink is a cup of salt water, designed to make us even thirstier.

FACING DEATH

Knowing and realizing this, shouldn't we listen to Gyalsé Rinpoche when he says:

Planning for the future is like going fishing in a dry gulch;
Nothing ever works out as you wanted, so give up all your schemes and ambitions.
If you have got to think about something—
Make it the uncertainty of the hour of your death . . .

For Tibetans, the main festival of the year is the New Year, which is like Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, and your birthday all rolled into one. Patrul Rinpoche was a great master whose life was full of eccentric episodes that would bring the teaching to life. Instead of celebrating New Year's Day and wishing people a "Happy New Year" like everyone else, Patrul Rinpoche used to weep. When asked why, he said that another year had gone by, and so many people had come one year closer to death, still unprepared.

Think of what must have happened to nearly all of us one day or the other. We are strolling down the street, thinking inspiring thoughts, speculating on important matters, or just listening to our Walkman. A car suddenly races by and almost runs us over.

Switch on the television or glance at a newspaper: You will see death everywhere. Yet did the victims of those plane crashes and car accidents expect to die? They took life for granted, as we do. How often do we hear stories of people whom we know, or even friends, who died unexpectedly? We don't even have to be ill to die: our bodies can suddenly break down and go out of order, just like our cars. We can be quite well one day, then fall sick and die the next. Milarepa sang:

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When you are strong and healthy,
You never think of sickness coming,
But it descends with sudden force
Like a stroke of lightning.

When involved in worldly things,
You never think of death's approach;
Quick it comes like thunder
Crashing round your head.[2]

We need to shake ourselves sometimes and really ask: "What if I were to die tonight? What then?" We do not know whether we will wake up tomorrow, or where. If you breathe out and you cannot breathe in again, you are dead. It's as simple as that. As a Tibetan saying goes: "Tomorrow or the next life—which comes first, we never know."

Some of the renowned contemplative masters of Tibet, when they went to bed at night, would empty their cups and leave them, upside down, by their bedside. They were never sure if they would wake up and need them in the morning. They even put their fires out at night, without bothering to keep the embers alight for the next day. Moment to moment, they lived with the possibility of imminent death.

Near Jikmé Lingpa's hermitage was a pond, which he had great difficulty crossing. Some of his disciples offered to build him a bridge, but he replied: "What's the use? Who knows if I'll even be alive to sleep here tomorrow night?"

Some masters try to wake us up to the fragility of life with even harsher images: They tell each of us to reflect on ourselves as a condemned prisoner taking our last walk from our cell, a fish struggling in the net, an animal lining up for its end in the slaughterhouse.

Others encourage their students to imagine vivid scenarios of their own death, as part of a calm and structured contemplation: the sensations, the pain, the panic, the helplessness, the grief of their loved ones, the realization of what they have or have not done with their lives.

Body lying flat on a last bed,
Voices whispering a few last words,
Mind watching a final memory glide past:
When will that drama come for you?[3]

It is important to reflect calmly, again and again, that *death is real, and comes without warning.* Don't be like the pigeon in the

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Tibetan proverb. He spends all night fussing about, making his bed, and dawn comes up before he has even had time to go to sleep. As an important twelfth-century master, Drakpa Gyaltsen, said: "Human beings spend all their lives preparing, preparing, preparing . . . Only to meet the next life unprepared."

TAKING LIFE SERIOUSLY

Perhaps it is only those who understand just how fragile life is who know how precious it is. Once when I was taking part in a conference in Britain, the participants were interviewed by the BBC. At the same time they talked to a woman who was actually dying. She was distraught with fear, because she had not really thought that death was real. Now she knew. She had just one message to those who would survive her: to take life, and death, seriously.

Taking life seriously does not mean spending our whole lives meditating as if we were living in the mountains in the Himalayas or in the old days in Tibet. In the modern world, we have to work and earn our living, but we should not get entangled in a nine-to-five existence, where we live without any view of the deeper meaning of life. Our task is to strike a balance, to find a middle way, to learn not to overstretch ourselves with extraneous activities and preoccupations, but to simplify our lives more and more. *The key to finding a happy balance in modern lives is simplicity.*

In Buddhism this is what is really meant by discipline. In Tibetan, the term for discipline is *tsul trim. Tsul* means "appropriate or just," and *trim* means "rule" or "way." So discipline is to do what is appropriate or just; that is, in an excessively complicated age, to simplify our lives.

Peace of mind will come from this. You will have more time to pursue the things of the spirit and the knowledge that only spiritual truth can bring, which can help you face death.

Sadly, this is something that few of us do. Maybe we should ask ourselves the question now: "What have I really achieved in my life?" By that I mean, how much have we really understood about life and death? I have been inspired by the reports that have appeared in the studies on the near-death experience, like the books by my friend Kenneth Ring and others. A striking number of those who survive near-fatal accidents or a near-death experience describe a "panoramic life review." With uncanny vividness and accuracy, they relive the events of their lives. Sometimes they even live through

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the effects their actions have had on others, and experience the emotions their actions have caused. One man told Kenneth Ring:

> *I realized that there are things that every person is sent to earth to realize and to learn. For instance, to share more love, to be more loving toward one another. To discover that the most important thing is human relationships and love and not materialistic things. And to realize that every single thing that you do in your life is recorded and that even though you pass it by not thinking at the time, it always comes up later.*[4]

Sometimes the life review takes place in the company of a glorious presence, a "being of light." What stands out from the various testimonies is that this meeting with the "being" reveals that the only truly serious goals in life are "learning to love other people and acquiring knowledge."

One person recounted to Raymond Moody: "When the light appeared, the first thing he said to me was, 'What have you done to show me that you've done with your life?' or something to that effect . . . All through this, he kept stressing the importance of love . . . He seemed very interested in things concerning knowledge too . . . "[5] Another man told Kenneth Ring: "I was asked—but there were no words: it was a straight mental instantaneous communication—'What had I done to benefit or advance the human race?' "[6]

Whatever we have done with our lives makes us what we are when we die. And everything, absolutely everything, counts.

AUTUMN CLOUDS

At his monastery in Nepal, my master's oldest living disciple, the great Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, had come to the end of a teaching. He was one of the foremost teachers of our time, the teacher of the Dalai Lama himself, and of many other masters who looked to him as an inexhaustible treasure-house of wisdom and compassion. We all looked up at this gentle, glowing mountain of a man, a scholar, poet, and mystic who had spent twenty-two years of his life in retreat. He paused and gazed into the distance:

"I am now seventy-eight years old, and have seen so many things during my lifetime. So many young people have died, so many people of my own age have died, so many old people

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have died. So many people that were high up have become low. So many people that were low have risen to be high up. So many countries have changed. There has been so much turmoil and tragedy, so many wars, and plagues, so much terrible destruction all over the world. And yet all these changes are no more real than a dream. When you look deeply, you realize there is nothing that is permanent and constant, nothing, not even the tiniest hair on your body. And this is not a theory, but something you can actually come to know and realize and see, even, with your very own eyes."

I ask myself often: "Why is it that everything changes?" And only one answer comes back to me: *That is how life is.* Nothing, nothing at all, has any lasting character. The Buddha said:

This existence of ours is as transient as autumn clouds.
To watch the birth and death of beings is like looking at the movements of a dance.
A lifetime is like a flash of lightning in the sky,
Rushing by, like a torrent down a steep mountain.

One of the chief reasons we have so much anguish and difficulty facing death is that we ignore the truth of impermanence. We so desperately want everything to continue as it is that we have to believe that things will always stay the same. But this is only make-believe. And as we so often discover, belief has little or nothing to do with reality. This make-believe, with its misinformation, ideas, and assumptions, is the rickety foundation on which we construct our lives. No matter how much the truth keeps interrupting, we prefer to go on trying, with hopeless bravado, to keep up our pretense.

In our minds changes always equal loss and suffering. And if they come, we try to anesthetize ourselves as far as possible. We assume, stubbornly and unquestioningly, that permanence provides security and impermanence does not. But, in fact, impermanence is like some of the people we meet in life—difficult and disturbing at first, but on deeper acquaintance far friendlier and less unnerving than we could have imagined.

Reflect on this: The realization of impermanence is paradoxically the only thing we can hold onto, perhaps our only lasting possession. It is like the sky, or the earth. No matter how much everything around us may change or collapse, they endure. Say we go through a shattering emotional crisis . . .

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