



## Mind of Clear Light: And Living a Better Life

By His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Jeffrey Hopkins Ph.D.

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"Everyone dies, but no one is dead," goes the Tibetan saying. It is with these words that *Advice on Dying* takes flight. Using a seventeenth-century poem written by a prominent scholar-practitioner, His Holiness the Dalai Lama draws from a wide range of traditions and beliefs to explore the stages we all go through when we die, which are the very same stages we experience in life when we go to sleep, faint, or reach orgasm (Shakespeare's "little death").

The stages are described so vividly that we can imagine the process of traveling deeper into the mind, on the ultimate journey of transformation. In this way, His Holiness shows us how to prepare for that time and, in doing so, how to enrich our time on earth, die without fear or upset, and influence the stage between this life and the next so that we may gain the best possible incarnation. As always, the ultimate goal is to advance along the path to enlightenment. *Advice on Dying* is an essential tool for attaining that eternal bliss.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **About the Author**

Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, is the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. He frequently describes himself as a simple Buddhist monk. Born in northeastern Tibet in 1935, he was as a toddler recognized as the incarnation of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and brought to Tibet's capital, Lhasa. In 1950, Mao Zedong's Communist forces made their first incursions into eastern Tibet, shortly after which the young Dalai Lama assumed the political leadership of his country. He passed his scholastic examinations with honors at the Great Prayer Festival in Lhasa in 1959, the same year Chinese forces occupied the city, forcing His Holiness to escape to India. There he set up the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala, working to secure the welfare of the more than 100,000 Tibetan exiles and prevent the destruction of Tibetan culture. In his capacity as a spiritual and political leader, he has traveled to more than sixty-two countries on six continents and met with presidents, popes, and leading scientists to foster dialogue and create a better world. In recognition of his tireless work for the nonviolent liberation of Tibet, the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. In 2012, he relinquished political authority in his exile government and turned it over to democratically elected representatives.

His Holiness frequently states that his life is guided by three major commitments: the promotion of basic human values or secular ethics in the interest of human happiness, the fostering of interreligious harmony, and securing the welfare of the Tibetan people, focusing on the survival of their identity, culture, and religion. As a superior scholar trained in the classical texts of the Nalanda tradition of Indian Buddhism, he is able to distill the central tenets of Buddhist philosophy in clear and inspiring language, his gift for pedagogy imbued with his infectious joy. Connecting scientists with Buddhist scholars, he helps unite contemplative and modern modes of investigation, bringing ancient tools and insights to bear on the acute problems facing the contemporary world. His efforts to foster dialogue among leaders of the world's faiths envision a future where people of different beliefs can share the planet in harmony. Wisdom Publications is proud to be the premier publisher of the Dalai Lama's more serious and in-depth works.

**Jeffrey Hopkins, Ph.D.**, served for a decade as the interpreter for the Dalai Lama. A Buddhist scholar and the author of more than thirty-five books and translations, he is emeritus professor of Tibetan and Buddhist studies at the University of Virginia, where he founded the largest academic program of Tibetan Buddhist studies in the West.

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### **Chapter One: Awareness of Death**

Just as when weaving

One reaches the end

With fine threads woven throughout,

So is the life of humans.

-- Buddha

It is crucial to be mindful of death -- to contemplate that you will not remain long in this life. If you are not aware of death, you will fail to take advantage of this special human life that you have already attained. It is meaningful since, based on it, important effects can be accomplished.

Analysis of death is not for the sake of becoming fearful but to appreciate this precious lifetime during which you can perform many important practices. Rather than being frightened, you need to reflect that when death comes, you will lose this good opportunity for practice. In this way contemplation of death will bring more energy to your practice.

You need to accept that death comes in the normal course of life. As Buddha said:

A place to stay untouched by death

Does not exist.

It does not exist in space, it does not exist in the ocean,

Nor if you stay in the middle of a mountain.

If you accept that death is part of life, then when it actually does come, you may face it more easily.

When people know deep inside that death will come but deliberately avoid thinking about it, that does not fit the situation and is counterproductive. The same is true when old age is not accepted as part of life but taken to be unwanted and deliberately avoided in thought. This leads to being mentally unprepared; then when old age inevitably occurs, it is very difficult.

Many people are physically old but pretend they are young. Sometimes when I meet with longtime friends, such as certain senators in countries like the United States, I greet them with, "My old friend," meaning that we have known one another for a long period, not necessarily physically old. But when I say this, some of them emphatically correct me, "We are not old! We are longtime friends." Actually, they are old -- with hairy ears, a sign of old age -- but they are uncomfortable with being old. That is foolish.

I usually think of the maximum duration of a human life as one hundred years, which, compared to the life of the planet, is very short. This brief existence should be used in such a way that it does not create pain for others. It should be committed not to destructive work but to more constructive activities -- at least to not harming others, or creating trouble for them. In this way our brief span as a tourist on this planet will be meaningful. If a tourist visits a certain place for a short period and creates more trouble, that is silly. But if as a tourist you make others happy during this short period, that is wise; when you yourself move on to your next place, you feel happy. If you create problems, even though you yourself do not encounter any difficulty during your stay, you will wonder what the use of your visit was.

Of life's one hundred years, the early portion is spent as a child and the final portion is spent in old age, often just like an animal feeding and sleeping. In between, there might be sixty or seventy years to be used meaningfully. As Buddha said:

Half of the life is taken up with sleep. Ten years are spent in childhood. Twenty years are lost in old age. Out of the remaining twenty years, sorrow, complaining, pain, and agitation eliminate much time, and hundreds of physical illnesses destroy much more.

To make life meaningful, acceptance of old age and death as parts of our life is crucial. Feeling that death is almost impossible just creates more greediness and more trouble -- sometimes even deliberate harm to others. When we take a good look at how supposedly great personages -- emperors, monarchs, and so forth -- built huge dwelling places and walls, we see that deep inside their minds was an idea that they would stay in this life forever. This self-deception results in more pain and more trouble for many people.

Even for those who do not believe in future lifetimes, contemplation of reality is productive, helpful, scientific. Because persons, minds, and all other caused phenomena change moment by moment, this opens up the possibility for positive development. If situations did not change, they would forever retain the nature of suffering. Once you know things are always changing, even if you are passing through a very difficult period, you can find comfort in knowing that the situation will not remain that way forever. So, there is no need for frustration.

Good fortune also is not permanent; consequently, there is no use for too much attachment when things are going well. An outlook of permanence ruins us: Even if you accept that there are future lives, the present becomes your preoccupation, and the future takes on little import. This ruins a good opportunity when your life is endowed with the leisure and facilities to engage in productive practices. An outlook of impermanence helps.

Being aware of impermanence calls for discipline -- taming the mind -- but this does not mean punishment, or control from the outside. Discipline does not mean prohibition; rather, it means that when there is a contradiction between long-term and short-term interests, you sacrifice the short-term for the sake of long-term benefit. This is *self-discipline*, which stems from ascertaining the cause and effect of karma. For example, for the sake of my stomach's returning to normal after my recent illness, I am avoiding sour foods and cold drink that otherwise appear to be tasty and attractive. This type of discipline means protection. In a similar way, reflection on death calls for self-discipline and self-protection, not punishment.

Human beings have all the potential to create good things, but its full utilization requires freedom, liberty. Totalitarianism stifles this growth. In a complementary way, individualism means that you do not expect something from the outside or that you are waiting for orders; rather, you yourself create the initiative. Therefore, Buddha frequently called for "individual liberation," meaning self-liberation, not through an organization. Each individual must create her or his own positive future. Freedom and individualism require self-discipline. If these are exploited for the sake of afflictive emotions, there are negative consequences. Freedom and self-discipline must work together.

### **Broadening Your Perspective**

From a Buddhist perspective, the highest of all aims is to achieve Buddhahood in order to be capable of helping a vast number of sentient beings; however, a medium level of achievement can liberate you from the painful round of birth, aging, sickness, and death; a lower, but still valuable level of achievement is the improvement of your future lives. From the gradual improvement of your lives liberation can be attained, and based on this, eventually Buddhahood can be attained. First, your perspective extends to include future lives; then by thoroughly understanding your own plight, your perspective deepens to include all of the round of suffering from one life to another, called cyclic existence or samsara. Finally this understanding can be extended to others, through the compassionate wish that all sentient beings be freed from suffering and the

causes of suffering. This compassion drives you to aspire to Buddhahood.

You have to be concerned with deeper aspects of life that affect future lives before understanding the full nature of suffering and cyclic existence. This understanding of suffering, in turn, is required for the full development of compassion. Similarly, we Tibetans are seeking to achieve a measure of self-rule in Tibet in order to be of service to the beings in our homeland, but we are also striving to establish ourselves in a refugee situation in India. The accomplishment of the former, greater purpose depends upon our accomplishing the latter, temporary aim.

### **Disadvantages of Not Being Mindful of Death**

It is beneficial to be aware that you will die. Why? If you are not aware of death, you will not be mindful of your practice, but will just spend your life meaninglessly, not examining what sorts of attitudes and actions perpetuate suffering and which ones bring about happiness.

If you are not mindful that you might die soon, you will fall under the sway of a false sense of permanence "I'll die later on, later on." Then, when the time comes, even if you try to accomplish something worthwhile, you will not have the energy. Many Tibetans enter a monastery at a young age and study texts about spiritual practice, but when the time comes to really practice, the capacity to do so is somehow lacking. This is because they do not have a true understanding of impermanence.

If, having thought about how to practice, you make a decision that you absolutely have to do so in retreat for several months or even for many years, you have been motivated by your knowledge of impermanence. But if that urgency is not maintained by contemplating the ravages of impermanence again and again, your practice will peter out. This is why some people stay in retreat for years but experience no imprint on their lives afterward. Contemplating impermanence not only motivates your practice, but also fuels it.

If you have a strong sense of the certainty of death and of the uncertainty of its arrival, you will be motivated from within. It will be as if a friend is cautioning, "Be careful, be earnest, another day is passing."

You might even leave home for the monastic life. If you did, you would be given a new name and new clothing. You would also have fewer busy activities; you would have to change your attitude, directing your attention to deeper purposes. If, however, you continued busying yourself with the superficial affairs of the moment -- delicious food, good clothing, better shelter, pleasant conversation, many friends and acquaintances, and even making an enemy if someone does something you do not like and then quarreling and fighting -- you would be no better off than you were before you entered the monastery, and perhaps even worse. Remember, it is not sufficient to withdraw from these superficial activities out of embarrassment or fear of what your friends who are also on the path might think; the change must come from within. This is true for monks and nuns as well as lay people who take up practice.

Perhaps you are beset by a sense of permanence, by thinking that you will not die soon and that while you are still alive, you need especially good food, clothing, and conversation. Out of desire for the wondrous effects of the present, even if they are of little meaning in the long run, you are ready to employ all sorts of shameless exaggerations and devices to get what you want -- making loans at high interest, looking down on your friends, starting court proceedings -- all for the sake of more than adequate provisions.

Since you have given your life over to such activities, money becomes more attractive than study, and even if you attempt practice, you do not pay much attention to it. If a page falls out of a book, you might hesitate

to retrieve it, but if some money falls to the ground, there is no question. If you encounter those who have really devoted their lives to deeper pursuits, you might think well of that devotion, but that would be all; whereas if you see someone dressed in finery, displaying his or her wealth, you would wish for it, lust after it, hope for it -- with more and more attachment. Ultimately, you will do anything to get it.

Once you are intent on the fineries of this life, your afflictive emotions increase, which in turn necessarily bring about more bad deeds. These counter-productive emotions only lead to trouble, making yourself and those around you uncomfortable. Even if you briefly learn how to practice the stages of the path to enlightenment, you acquire more and more material things and get involved with more and more people to the point where you are, so to speak, practicing the superficialities of this life, meditatively cultivating desire for friends and hatred for enemies and trying to figure out ways to fulfill these afflictive emotions. At that point, even if you hear about real, beneficial practice, you are apt to feel, "Yes, that is so, but..." One "but" after another. Indeed, you have become accustomed to afflictive emotions throughout your beginningless cyclic existence, but now you have added on the very practice of superficiality. This makes the situation even worse, turning you away from what will really help.

Driven by such lust, you will find no comfort. You are not making others happy -- and certainly not yourself. As you become more self-centered -- "*my* this, *my* that," "*my* body, *my* wealth" -- anyone who interferes immediately becomes an object of anger. Although you make much out of "*my* friends" and "*my* relatives," they cannot help you at birth or at death; you come here alone, and you have to leave alone. If on the day of your death a friend could accompany you, attachment would be worthwhile, but it cannot be so. When you are reborn in a totally unfamiliar situation, if your friend from the last lifetime could be of some help, that too would be something to consider, but it is not to be had. Yet, in between birth and death, for several decades it is "*my* friend," "*my* sister," "*my* brother." This misplaced emphasis does not help at all, except to create more bewilderment, lust, and hatred.

When friends are overemphasized, enemies also come to be overemphasized. When you are born, you do not know anyone and no one knows you. Even though all of us equally want happiness and do not want suffering, you like the faces of some people and think, "These are *my* friends," and dislike the faces of others and think, "These are *my* enemies." You affix identities and nicknames to them and end up practicing the generation of desire for the former and the generation of hatred for the latter. What value is there in this? None. The problem is that so much energy is being expended on concern for a level no deeper than the superficial affairs of this life. The profound loses out to the trivial.

If you have not practiced and on your dying day you are surrounded by sobbing friends and others involved in your affairs, instead of having someone who reminds you of virtuous practice, this will only bring trouble, and you will have brought it on yourself. Where does the fault lie? In not being mindful of impermanence.

### **Advantages of Being Mindful of Impermanence**

However, if you do not wait until the end for the knowledge that you will die to sink in, and you realistically assess your situation now, you will not be overwhelmed by superficial, temporary purposes. You will not neglect what matters in the long run. It is better to decide from the very beginning that you will die and investigate what is worthwhile. If you keep in mind how quickly this life disappears, you will value your time and do what is valuable. With a strong sense of the imminence of death, you will feel the need to engage in spiritual practice, improving your mind, and will not waste your time in various distractions ranging from eating and drinking to endless talk about war, romance, and gossip.

All beings want happiness and do not want suffering. We use many levels of techniques for removing

unwanted suffering in its superficial and deep forms, but it is mostly humans who engage in techniques in the earlier part of their lives to avoid suffering later on. Both those who do and do not practice religion seek over the course of their lives to lessen some sufferings and to remove others, sometimes even taking on pain as a means to overcome greater suffering and gain a measure of happiness.

Everyone tries to remove superficial pain, but there is another class of techniques concerned with removing suffering on a deeper level -- aiming at a minimum to diminish suffering in future lives and, beyond that, even to remove all forms of suffering for oneself as well as for all beings. Spiritual practice is of this deeper type.

These techniques involve an adjustment of attitude; thus, spiritual practice basically means to adjust your thought well. In Sanskrit it is called *dharma*, which means "that which holds." This means that by adjusting counterproductive attitudes, you are freed from a level of suffering and thus *held back* from that particular suffering. Spiritual practice protects, or holds back, yourself and others from misery.

From first understanding your own situation in cyclic existence and seeking to hold yourself back from suffering, you extend your realization to other beings and develop compassion, which means to dedicate yourself to holding others back from suffering. It makes practical sense for you, just one being, to opt for taking care of many, but also, by concentrating on the welfare of others, you yourself will be happier. Compassion diminishes fright about your own pain and increases inner strength. It gives you a sense of empowerment, of being able to accomplish your tasks. It lends encouragement.

Let me give you a small example. Recently, when I was in Bodh Gaya, I fell ill from a chronic intestinal infection. On the way to the hospital, the pain in my abdomen was severe, and I was sweating a great deal. The car was passing through the area of Vulture Peak (Buddha taught here) where the villagers are extremely poor. In general, Bihar State is poor, but that particular area is even more so. I did not even see children going to or coming from school. Just poverty. And sickness. I have a very clear memory of a small boy with polio, who had rusty metal braces on his legs and metal crutches up to his armpits. It was obvious that he had no one to look after him. I was very moved. A little later on, there was an old man at a tea stop, wearing only a dirty piece of cloth, fallen to the ground, left to lie there with no one to take care of him.

Later, at the hospital, my thoughts kept circling on what I had seen, reflecting on how sad it was that here I had people to take care of me but those poor people had no one. That is where my thoughts went, rather than to my own suffering. Though sweat was pouring out of my body, my concern was elsewhere.

In this way, though my body underwent a lot of pain (a hole had opened in my intestinal wall) that prevented sleep, my mind did not suffer any fear or discomfort. It would only have made the situation worse if I had concentrated on my own problems. This is an example from my small experience of how an attitude of compassion helps even oneself, suppressing some degree of physical pain and keeping away mental distress, despite the fact that others might not be directly helped.

Compassion strengthens your outlook, and with that courage you are more relaxed. When your perspective includes the suffering of limitless beings, your own suffering looks comparatively small.

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