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# Dying and the Deathless

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## Excerpts

*Where we go wrong in this experience of dying is to imagine that things are happening to us rather than accepting everything, both subject and object, as my experience. This experience is the display of the mind. This is transient energy and I can be with it, for I also am energy.*

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*When we move into the death process our awareness will still be there, but our personal identity will not. That's what's going to hit the buffers; that's what's going to untangle and fall apart. The thoughts, through which we know who we are, will no longer be able to quickly weave a sense of self-identity.*

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*When you knit something you can unravel it. That's what death is; it's just the unraveling of what has been knitted together. Our illusion is to imagine that it can stay together forever, or that it should stay together forever, or that it's a shame when it unravels.*

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*For people who are attached to what they did before, retirement can be very difficult. That's why in many big companies they have pre-retirement classes. The Tibetan Book of the Dead is a pre-retirement class – it's preparation for how to leave, how to go.*

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*According to The Tibetan Book of the Dead, you can be liberated through hearing as you enter the death process. Liberation is the realisation that our embodied existence is a manifestation of energy and is not a fixed home that we occupy.*

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*The Tibetan Book of the Dead is a very de-centring kind of text. One of its primary propositions is that you need to be present at the time of your death, but absent as your 'self'.*

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*If you don't plant in the springtime, in the autumn you won't have a harvest. That is the Buddha's teaching. For those of us who are no longer in the springtime of our lives, there is still time. There are things that we can plant that will grow quickly and we are very fortunate to have these precious teachings and practices.*

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According to the text we know as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, liberation can come through any of the senses, through sight, touch, smell, taste. You can also be liberated through hearing as you enter the death process. Liberation is the realisation that our embodied existence is a manifestation of energy and is not a fixed home that we occupy.

If we think of our body as a kind of house that we inhabit and death as a point where we leave our own identity, the one who we have been, then we will feel lonely and bereft and death will be very frightening. As our body starts to lose its familiar quality, we lose our capacity to take it and our familiar sense of self for granted.

When you're healthy you don't even know what health is; you're just living your life with a body that doesn't impede you in following your desire. When you become a bit sick, or feel pain in your body, you suddenly can't do things. You become conscious that the mind is standing in relation to the body and that the body and the mind are not the same. Usually we experience our embodied existence as a kind of prosthesis or extension of the mind and we expect it to be absolutely efficient as the agent of our wishes.

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is concerned with a completely different vision of life. In the mahayana buddhist tradition there are three notions of how you can arrive at a valid truth. The first is by direct perception; the second is by a valid inference. In the first case you see flames and so you know there is a fire because you can see the flames; in the second case you see smoke and you think 'there is no smoke without fire' so there must be a fire to generate the smoke. The third notion is when we rely on the words of the wise. Now that's a leap taking you right out of the field of ordinary logic, but in the tradition it is seen as valid.

This is important as the status and validity of this text is dependent on its lineage. It was spoken originally by Padmasambhava, the embodiment of all the buddhas, therefore, within the tradition, the lineage of transmission is unbroken. Its truth is taken for granted. The fact that it doesn't map onto our ordinary experience is seen as a signifier that we are pretty dumb, while the buddhas are pretty wise. So the suggestion would be to be humble, bend the knee, and take it that somebody knows more than you.

Now, this is a very difficult proposition for modern people. We tend to think that we know it all and that we no longer need to rely on beliefs held in the distant past or in far away countries. Our education and our narcissism, as pervasive forces in our culture, make it very difficult to de-centre ourselves. We think, we know what's what, that we can tell what's true. Indeed, we might even choose to believe that we are always correct as a way of staying at the centre of our world.

### Our ordinary identity: metaphor of being on a bus

Our ordinary identity is like a bus, which we've been sitting in throughout our life. Hopefully through our practice, our bus has been able to stop sometimes, and we've got off and had a look around and we realise '*I am not actually this bus*'. As we move towards death this bus is going to crash into a wall, and if we are fused with our bus we're going to have a bad time. Therefore the purpose of the practice is to realise that: I am on a bus... I sort of am a bus, and I sort of am not a bus. It is the relation of the bus to the passenger that is vital. The bus is part of the world, an experience in the flow of experience, while the one who travels on it is the experiencer. The experiencer is the ground or space within which all the forms of experience occur.

At this moment, I am sitting here with you; I am looking around at you. My body is moving as I speak and this is a quality of being alive. When we are connected with what is going on, we find ourselves moving and responding. Manifestation, the arising of something out of nothing, of something as a mode of emptiness, proceeds through participation. The moments of participation are always evanescent. We find ourselves participating, and manifestation is revealed to us by our being 'in it'. We can find ourselves present as ourselves, however the very effort of directing ourselves towards participation creates a subtle alienation as it becomes something about *me*.

I find that, as I speak, my hands move about. I don't think '*I am now going to move my hands*' but I am present with the experience of myself being myself. Who is doing this stuff which I would have to say is 'me'? Who is the 'me' who is performing my life? Is this 'me' a fundamental directive agency, or is this 'me' some kind of narrative which is swirling around the process of manifestation, not behind it, pushing it forward, but co-emergent with it.

It's by recognising the juxtaposition of the narrative of self and the performativity of self that we have the possibility of relaxing the narrative and being more directly present in the performativity. In this way we can come to see that experience is always dynamic. The basic buddhist concept of impermanence is often taken to indicate loss, uncertainty, the sadness of life as we know it. Yet actually it means dynamic, life in movement, '*things*' in movement.

What are these '*things*'? When we look more precisely we can't find any real '*thing*' that is in movement, what we have is movements, ceaseless movements, ceaseless interplay, across which we run a kind of patina of concepts, of representations in language.

### Our two modes of being: energy and awareness

We have two dimensions, energy and awareness. The first is a dimension of immediacy, of flow, of connectivity that is moving in complex patterns of self and other as I become who I am through being with you. I am speaking now in this way because I am here with you – I wouldn't be doing this if I were at home. This is 'me' with you, it's not 'me' as 'me'. But then the question would be '*Who is 'me' as 'me'?*'.

Me as 'me' is always 'me' somewhere, so the 'me-ness' of 'me' is an engagement with the other rather than some imputed internal essence. I find myself *as I am* in this situation. I didn't plan it, I didn't make it, I didn't create it, but somehow I am responsible for it. That participation involves a very close and immediate attention to the movement of our existence as it unfolds, and yet across this we have layered many different interpretations. Many of these interpretations are from our culture or our childhood and are static, deterministic, and redolent in emotion.

If we can recognise that we are constituted as movements of energy then, when we come into the time of death, we have the possibility of letting go our identifications before they start to unpack by themselves. The flow of energy is primary, given, while the interpretive narratives are secondary and contextual. Usually we are more attentive to the latter, as the changing stories we tell seem to reveal the truth of ourselves. However, at death we need to release the identification with the story and open to the immediacy of energy. This is why sudden death is so unfortunate.

The other dimension that we have is a basic presence, an awareness which has no particular form or content. It is a noetic capacity, a capacity to both know and be present with that knowledge without oneself being an object of knowledge. The mind cannot know itself.

When we start to practise meditation we spend a lot of time trying to see ourselves and to know ourselves. The breakthrough in meditation occurs when we see *'Ah, I got it wrong. All the energy that I made in trying to see myself has been useless because I have been in the wrong paradigm.'* I can see my hand, I can touch my nose, but I can't see or touch my mind. I can have a relationship with the *contents* of my mind – I can think about what I thought yesterday. I can evoke my thoughts, and play around with them, but the mind itself – the one who is present as the revealer of these thoughts, the knowing aspect of being – cannot be known.

In our lives we pulse forward into situations in which we are a particular person who knows particular things. For example, later this afternoon I'll go for the train so it's important for me to know when the trains leave. As I walk from here to the station I'll be looking at my watch and thinking about how far I am from the station and how fast I need to walk. I will be managing myself in a finite world where trains leave and you're left on the platform if you're not on time. No point arriving just as the train leaves because it's gone; you can't call it back, there's nothing you can do. Just as, if you're with someone who is dying, if they are going, they are going. There's nothing you can do.

On that level, each situation is quite finite, quite precise, just as it is. Each situation calls us forth in a specific form, one that is valid for the moment, and then redundant in the next. We can leave the cares of the week behind at the weekend and we can do something different. After a busy day at work you can put on the television and watch some nonsense for a while and during that time you leave the things which seemed so important. Alternatively you can do some meditation practice and have a bigger and deeper and better holiday from these preoccupations.

If in meditation we attend again and again to the question 'Who is the one who is having this experience?' then, as when we work with a koan, we come to a sense of something quite ungraspable, without shape or size; we're present, yet not as something.

It's through meditation practice that we start to experience that there is an energetic pulsation between the ungraspable, unformed nature of our mind itself, our presence as a pure awareness, and the precise nature of our defined existence, being this or that, determined by our karma, our historical circumstances, and the specific form of the current moment.

The impermanence of events, the coming and going of perceptions, thoughts, feelings and all the other aspects of our experience, illuminates the ungraspability of what we take to be objects and also all that we take to be the subject. The flow of experience appears to move from past to future and from here to there, and when we get involved in the flow we find ourselves carried along by events. This way of making sense of what is going on sustains our sense of being individuals, entities that are both a part of, and apart from, the movements of life. It is the sense of having to protect ourselves from some aspects of life and of needing to depend on other aspects that can intensify the self-consciousness that makes death so daunting.

### Our capacity to stabilise a sense of self starts to dissolve

The teaching of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is that as we move towards death our capacity to stabilise the familiar, finite and yet seemingly enduring aspects of our self will start to dissolve. Our body and our mind have an interface where the subtle forms of consciousness and the subtle forms of the five elements are working together. According to the tradition our body is constituted out of five elements, space, wind, fire, water and earth, which collaborate to give us our existence. We have bones which express the element of earth, we have fire as the heat in our body, we've got water as the flow of blood, we've got wind as our breath going in and out, there are the spaces

within our body and also the space within which our body moves. We need to have space around us to be fully alive, for the experience of external space promotes the experience of internal space.

All living forms require a balance of these elements. For human beings the balance is influenced by the time of day, the kind of food we eat, the season, our age and many other factors. The mind experiences the body as an aspect of itself, and part of the quality of the mind, from this point of view, is that its energy manifests as the five elements. Our body and the whole world is experience; it's revealed through participation.

The ungraspable mind and all the stuff of the world co-exist. But, if the mind is infinite, where is the boundary between the mind and what it experiences? I could say this brass candlestick I am holding is outside of my body. I wouldn't like it inside my body. I can't think of any orifice I would like this to be in! On that level, subject and object are separate and quite rightly so. However with the experience of meditation, we need to question further whether this object really is outside my mind?

All the buddhist traditions ask this central question '*What is the nature of the mind?*' We can't speak about it directly; we sit and experience a sense of openness. In some traditions, particularly in zen, you are called upon to speak; you have to say something, but of course what you say cannot describe the experience. It's always an allusion, a metaphor, something which has a resonance, which evokes the experience in some way. Words cannot define 'it' because this 'thing' which we are, is not a 'thing'; it is outside the register of things. Language speaks of things but this is not a 'thing'. If the mind is not a 'thing', and it has no limit, where is its boundary to an object like this candlestick? If we say 'my mind is aware of this', and this candlestick is outside my mind, where is the boundary of the mind?

You might think that the mind is a kind of epiphenomena of the brain. Nowadays many people believe this. I personally do not. It may be true that the brain is central, but I choose not to know that; that is my elective ignorance! There are many scientific truths which, if I were to believe them, would diminish my life, so I am quite committed to personal myths that keep me sane! I think this is very important. There is almost no evidence for reincarnation but a great deal of buddhist philosophy would be meaningless without it. There's probably a lot of evidence for evolutionary theory, but the idea fills me with repugnance, so I choose not to believe.

All of these ideas that we have about existence are ideas arising in the mind and whether they are true or not, they are transient phenomena. Objective truths may be true, but they are only true for me in the moment that I am present with them. This is clearly a very subjectivist, mind-centred point of view but I would suggest this is what buddhism is...it is a very mind-centred view and practice. The world is made of stories and the quality of our life is greatly influenced by the quality of the stories we tell and believe. It may well be that stories that support a sense of meaning, value, and ethics are of more use than objective and objectifying truths.

If the mind is infinite and meditation is not just a way of creating hypnagogic experience, or auto-hallucination then the mind cannot be limited or stopped by phenomena. In fact all phenomena arise in the mind, moment-by-moment they arise and pass within the mind. Our meditation practice and that of all those who have engaged with this in the past, opens the way to a refined phenomenological attention which reveals the dynamic nature of lived experience.

From this point of view our body is revelation, this room is revelation and our experience of each other is revelation. We are so used to subsuming the nature of this revelation inside the discourse of entities that its dynamic quality is often lost to us. Yet when we open to it we find that our mind is

empty, open and has no limit. We see that everything that arises is arising from the mind, in the mind, as the mind. The five elements are the radiant qualities of the mind.

### Death - a movement of relaxing into the ground openness of dharmadhatu

In this context the word mind refers not to the sum total of our mental contents, nor to the consciousness that makes sense of these contents, but to awareness itself, the infinite presence revealed as words fall away. *Infinite* indicates that presence has no limit, no boundaries; everything which occurs, whether seemingly internal or external is, in its actuality for us, nothing but experience. This is indivisible. Duality is an illusion, for all aspects of experience arise together in an infinite field. This field is referred to as *dharmadhatu* in Indian buddhist texts, a term which indicates the realm of phenomena experienced as the radiance of emptiness rather than as a multitude of separate entities. All that arises, as both subject and object, is integrated in the ground openness.

This has huge implications for how we experience death. If we are able to awaken to our inseparability from spacious openness then death is a movement of relaxing back into the ground out of which we have arisen, a ground from which we have never been apart. Ignorance, attachments, and all the structures that arise from them are themselves forms of illusion and have never created even an iota of truly existing entity. Letting go of all that we know ourselves to be does not lead to annihilation but to the spacious dawning of the empty radiance of our unborn awareness as new modes of playful experience arise. Before death occurs meditation can help us to radically alter how we experience our embodiment so that entering the death process is one of ease.

The sense that 'I live in my body' often brings with it the feeling that I am a small, fragile, uncertain person. As a vulnerable person I need my body to keep me safe and yet sometimes my body gets filled up with emotions and then I don't know what to do. The body-mind split wasn't created by Descartes. It is our own way of experiencing the body as something we have, something we use, which creates the alienation. When the mind as subject, separates from the body as object, this duality persists in all our experience. Many religions, including some buddhist schools, speak of the mind or soul being freed from the body at death. As long as we are alive we are tied to the body and if we see it as a 'thing' that reinforces our sense of being a small vulnerable thing in a world of things. Wanting ourselves to be 'good' things, we pamper our bodies and satisfy our desires and this binds us into the ongoing work of accepting and rejecting the various events which occur.

Of course the capacity for choice is not just a burden, for we are able to examine the possibilities, reflect on likely outcomes, and make further choices as we deal with the outcomes of our own and others actions.

This freedom to act does not occur in any of the other five realms of existence described in Tibetan buddhism. The key issue in terms of practice is our motivation when we make choices. Are we acting from a self-cherishing position, a self-absorbed foreclosure that diminishes our sense of others so that they become merely a means to fulfill our own ends? Or are we able to open to an altruistic view that allows concern for all that lives? Our basic orientation has a huge impact on the choices that we make.

We can gain a great deal of self-definition and self-satisfaction from taking on the necessary roles of our life, being parents, being children, performing jobs. Having a clear function in the world affirms our sense of self and so redundancy or retirement from work can be a great crisis. People often become depressed or even die shortly after retirement because their personal identity was merged with their role at work. Their sense of who they are was built on their status in an organization, on having people know who they were, but at retirement these props vanish. Such social identities are

real and yet are 'in the manner of a dream'. When we take the dream to be real we close the door to awakening from the dream and are condemned to suffer all the reversals of fortune that mark a human life.

From the point of view of reincarnation we have been born many, many times in the past, we will be born many, many times in the future. Everyone who we encounter has been our mother in a past life; we have been their child in a past life. If you have your own children they have been your parents in a past life – that is to say they are only *contingently* your children. They are not really your children, they are beings who have buddha-nature which has not yet awakened... and when they awaken to that they will be buddhas. For the time being they are hanging out as your kids and – because they are not enlightened – they cause a lot of trouble; what else would you expect? This is how life goes on.

### Miss-taking contingent situations to be our true existence

Our problem is that due to the power of ignorance, due to our attachment, we take these contingent situations as our true existence. We are happy when we meet our friends, we become anxious when we come close to our enemies or to people we think don't like us. Our lives are a roller-coaster of emotions evoked by the various interactions which arise...over which we have very little control.

From the point of view of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* we can be fully present in the moments that arise without being sealed in them. We gain access to this by recognising the open dimension of our existence as the field within which the dynamic flow of energy manifests as the ever-changing constellations of subject and object.

So, you can be a parent, you can be a lover, you can be an employee, you can be fully in your lived situation and yet not be trapped by it – being in the world, as part of the world, but not defined by it. This is a tradition which is not about renunciation. It is different from the theravadan tradition where the view is that samsara is a dangerous place that you need to get out of. Rather this tradition asserts that samsara and nirvana are two possibilities that are always moving together. Moment by moment we can maintain the fine tuning of our attention so that the openness, which is the quality of nirvana, and the precision, which is the quality of samsara, can be brought together. When they are united, being in the world with its ordinary constraints is not such a big thing. In this way tears are emptiness, heartbreak is emptiness, depression is emptiness, loneliness is emptiness, happiness is emptiness, eating a lot is emptiness, good red wine is emptiness. Then central point is to see that *everything* is inseparable from emptiness.

We often try to deny the existence of the things we don't like. We want to empty them out of any existence at all so that we are not troubled by them. This is not the Buddhist understanding of emptiness but rather an unhelpful nihilism. If we could get rid of the things we don't like and leave only things we do like, we think we would be very happy. However this hope simply intensifies our experience of being trapped in a situation where we are at the mercy of things which arise for us. Rather, seeing that everything which arises is a momentary, transitory experience, we should practice the '*great welcome*' – great hospitality to everything that occurs. There are many guests to come, so it's a case of – 'welcome moment... be seated... goodbye', 'welcome moment... be seated...goodbye'; 'happy to see you come and now it's your time to go.' Each moment is like this. We don't need to try to block the moment as it comes for it has only a short stay visa.

## Easy come, easy go: the five elements start unpacking

Our problem is that we are very busy trying to be in charge. We try to block some things from coming, hang on to others and quickly push out others. On the basis of our habits and prejudices we discriminate between the various experiences that occur for us. But you don't have to push anything out of your mind because it will go by itself; likewise you can't hang on to anything in your mind because it will go. We don't control what comes into our mind and we don't really control what goes out of our mind; what we can do is just say 'hello, goodbye; hello, goodbye; hello, goodbye.' We can get more used to doing that by practicing throughout life: welcoming everything and letting everything go; welcoming the good and the bad; letting go of the good and the bad. This is impartiality; this is to see everything as one taste. The more we practise this, our movement towards death becomes much easier because we have a sense of 'easy come, easy go'. What is going is what was always going anyway. What is going was never mine.

We talk of 'my body' and of course, I need to clean my teeth, nobody else is going to come along and clean them for me. I need to take care of my body and yet, in what real sense is it *my* body? I don't have much power over it. People adjust themselves all the time, trying to correct their cholesterol level or making other micro-adjustments in the hope of finding a balance, but basically the body has a life of its own. We don't know if we'll suddenly have a stroke, nobody can know these things. All sorts of events suddenly erupt. The illusion of mastery over phenomena is disastrous for us personally, and disastrous for the planet. This is our big problem, people think that they can control things and make them happen the way they want. Done without any tenderness this is a great illusion; brute force and coercion always provokes a conflictual response.

The *Bardo Thodal*, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, provides a description of the death process. As we move towards death the five elements start to unpack; the earth element dissolves into the water, the water into the fire, the fire into the wind and finally the wind into space. The wind is seen as the vehicle of our subtle consciousness; it arrives at the moment of conception when the male and female aspects come together and it's held in our body till we die. The female is represented by the egg cell, it's seen as a red element, and the sperm is seen as a white element. The red and the white come together and then separate, and between their separate locations in the body you have the movement of the wind, the vitality of our life.

In the yogic philosophy there is the notion of a central channel in the body, by the spine, up and down which all the winds can move. The vital wind becomes extended out through our body, through subtle channels and this leads to the motility of our body. It's the movement of the wind through these channels which allows our body to move and for sensations and feelings to occur. Our channels tend to get knotted leading to habitual tight reactions in our body and habitual displays of emotion or repression of emotion. This is all the quality of the wind; the wind is where consciousness abides.

At the point of death, as these elements start to collapse the person becomes less available to those around them. The skin tension starts to collapse, there is the release of urine and so on, dribbling; and then there is a cooling of the body. Then the pattern of breathing alters – and then they are gone. Although the breath, the outer form of the five elements, is moving off forever, the consciousness, the more subtle connective link between the mind and these outer elements, continues inside the body.

The closing down of the life system occurs gradually, which is why in this tradition you shouldn't move someone's body for at least three days after they die. Every time you move the body you are more likely to send the consciousness off on a journey that it is not optimally prepared for.

We should sit quietly with the newly dead person and gently remind them of the practice they have done in their life, helping them to let go and open to what is to come. The clearer the consciousness becomes, the more it separates out from the habitual responses and resonances and expectations of this life.

Finally our consciousness releases from its subtle base and merges into space, which is its own real nature. The consciousness of our sense organs and our mental, reflective, mental consciousness all have a pure open awareness as their root nature. They are modalities of this awareness, and now these differentiated forms of consciousness relax back into open awareness. You can experience this in your zen sitting. Before you sit you may have been quite busy, helping in the kitchen, doing things, chatting, and so on. Then you sit, and gradually it all calms down and the senses become quiescent and something else is revealed – this is what happens at the time of death.

### The sequence of opportunities for liberation in the bardo

As consciousness dissolves in space there is a great unconsciousness, everything goes black and then there is light. This light is the naturally arising light of the nature of the mind. It is called the light of the dharmata, of actuality. If we recognize that this light is my light, that it is the natural radiance of my mind, we will not be frightened by it.

However most people, because they have been living in a very dualistic way, see it as a light that is coming towards them. They may experience it as either inspiring or terrifying. It can be difficult to stay present with it because it seems much bigger than we are which may confirm a dualistic sense that 'I am small and vulnerable'. In fear of being overwhelmed, we turn away. And then it's gone.

After that, according to the tradition, one starts to experience the presence of buddhas; they come quite quickly. A whole range of buddhas appear: forty-two peaceful buddhas and fifty-eight wrathful buddhas. As the peaceful buddhas arise it's very delightful; they are very beautiful, you hear sweet sounds. However, if you experience them as being so wonderful that you shrink away in awe, you miss your chance to merge with them. Then they pass, and so that door closes.

After that the wrathful buddhas come; there are very loud sounds, very big frightening crazy sounds, flames, lightning flashes, very terrifying. If you know the practice then you know that these are buddhas. They are shouting. If you are in the tradition, they shout the name that you gained when you had the initiation into the practice. If you remember your name, they say 'You're one of us, you're alright son, come with us!' If you don't remember your name or if you get frightened, they are gone. During this period you are in a kind of 'mind body', a hallucinated body, which is similar to the shape of your present body.

Then the situation starts to change and you find yourself with the body of your next life, moving in what feels like a sort of tunnel. Gradually, you come to a situation where you get wound into a new form of existence. If you are going to come into a human birth you would see a couple having sex and you would be drawn towards them by the intensity of emotion evoked in you by their sexual desire. If you are going to be born male you would be particularly aroused by the vagina, if you are going to be born female you are going to be particularly aroused by the sight of the penis, and you get drawn towards these. As the couple copulates and fertilisation takes place, the consciousness merges into that point of fusion and the birth of the body starts again.

Where we go wrong in this experience is to imagine that things are happening to us rather than accepting everything, both subject and object, as our experience. Whether there is nothing at all, or bright lights, or peaceful beautiful forms, or wrathful terrifying forms, or sex...whatever it is, this experience is the display of the mind. This is transient energy and I can be with it, for I also am energy. If we practice in this way then we don't block out the object, subject and object arise together held in the great non-dual completion and life is accepted just as it is.

### What's wrong with being complacent?

Of course, most of the time we've lived our ordinary lives in terms of pushing and pulling – making decisions, making choices, feeling 'I am who I am because I decide how I live my life.' We go to the supermarket, we buy our familiar requirements. I know what I like to eat, I know what I like to wear, I have my friends, my life... We tell ourselves '*Life's not so bad. When I was young it was a bit difficult but now, somehow, it's not so bad...*' Nonsense! This is bad news.

This complacency is not a good idea, because complacency implies that there is something to rest on. This takes us right back to the basic teaching on attachment. Why do we need to attach to something? Why are we adrift, floating around, needing to attach? What is this attachment? What are these things we attach to?

The one who attaches is one who will die – this body will die, 'James' will die. I know a lot about my life. Of course I don't know everything because there are many things I choose not to know, but I know a lot about me and all of that will be gone; it won't exist. All my books, all my notes, all of these things that mean so much to me now, won't mean very much then. If you take a whole pile of books to a secondhand bookstore you'll get very little money but for me they are like treasure, like gold. As for these other special little things, what is it that makes them so special? They are shining because I polish them...and what do I polish them with? My life energy! I put my libido, my sense of self, my reality into the objects around me and everything gleams. When you use old-fashioned metal polish to make things shine you also use elbow grease. The elbow grease we use on the objects which are important to us is 'ego attachment'.

All these things are meaningful for me because I make them meaningful. My world then becomes a reflection of my inner constellation – what therapists would call object relations. This is really bad news as you go towards death.

All of these phenomena are impermanent yet we feel we have to have them. Actually we do have to protect our lives. You have to remember to lock your door; you have to remember to check your bank statements because of identity fraud. There's a lot of hassle in holding a life together and if you don't do that you can screw up – and when you screw up it gets worse. It doesn't really help your dharma practice to have lots of problems arising from being delinquent in your life.

The question then is...how to stay present in our life with precision, with the details, and at the same time be relaxed and open? This requires abiding in the on-going pulsation of emptiness and form, form and emptiness. In the tantric tradition, visualisation of deities is a means to harmonise with that pulsation. In other buddhist traditions which don't have these elaborated systems, the same principle applies. Impermanence points to the importance of not making something, some method, special. Everything is transient so walk lightly in this world.

We live now in a time of fun, when people can make millions of pounds just by being silly in public. We like silliness because silliness isn't challenging. If silly people can be rich then maybe I'll become rich just by being silly too. I don't need to make any effort, how lovely! This is our pampered,

western world as we actually encounter it. But the Buddha said that even when *you* are happy, other people are suffering. Have these other people got nothing to do with you? Remember winter will come, bad times will come, sickness will come to you, death will come to you. When we remember this we are displaced from our complacency. Yes, even in the middle of summer, winter is there; even in the middle of winter summer is also there. That's the absolutely important balancing; not to be too enthusiastic, not to be too anxiously avoidant. No object can rescue us from the flow of time.

Impermanence means that we have already had to leave who we were yesterday. Yesterday is gone. Breakfast is gone, the beginning of the talk is gone – there's ten minutes left, everything is moving all the time. The practice of staying in that flow means that we are always loosening the investment we make in the fantasy of 'I, me, myself' continuing in a substantial, graspable, reliable form. When we attend to impermanence we attend to life as it is; we experience ourselves as dynamic and energetic and therefore, when we move into the death process, what we are experiencing is just a new kind of energetic display. Of course the experiences may be unfamiliar, and of course it will be troubling because we are not very sure how to be. We have been practising doing one thing for a long time, that is to say just being ourselves. Now we need to practice something quite different.

Just as, if you work for a long time in one factory or office, say for forty years, when you come to retire, you are going to feel confused. You don't have to get up in the morning; you don't have to do many things which you used to, but now there are many other possibilities. However, for the people who are attached to what they did before, retirement is very difficult. That's why in many big companies they have pre-retirement classes. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a pre-retirement class – it's preparation for how to leave, how to go.

### The experiences when you die are different from those when you are alive

The experiences which occur when you die will be different from those of being alive; life and death are not the same. You will still be there but not as you. Now you may think you are the company secretary or the district nurse... but when you retire you won't be the company secretary or district nurse. If you are the district nurse called Jane, you'll still be Jane but you won't be the district nurse.

When we move into the death process our awareness will still be there, but our personal identity will not. That's what's going to hit the buffers; that's what's going to untangle and fall apart. The thoughts, through which we know who we are, will no longer be able to quickly weave a sense of self-identity. This is why the western zen retreat is very important – it provides a situation where people can engage again and again with these issues. They can see that their ordinary sense of self is constructed through the weaving of many strands of narrative. The keystone, the lynchpin, of that structure being the sense that 'I believe what I'm saying about myself, and I can make you believe it too'. In the western zen retreat when you're telling somebody who you are, and they are just looking at you accepting what you are saying without confirming it, that keystone is gradually being removed. Then it all starts to unravel and you think '*Whoa! In a sense all that I am saying is true, but it's ashes, it's shadows, it's smoke and mirrors; its true but it's like a dream*'.

That, I think, is a wonderful preparation for death, and takes us right to the heart of the Buddha's teaching where we experience the weaving of the self. Of course, if you've practised knitting, you know that when you knit something you can unravel it. That's what death is; it's just the unraveling of what has been knitted together. Our illusion is to imagine that it can stay together forever, or that it *should* stay together forever, or that it's a shame when it unravels. It's the hubris of our personal vision, the inflation, where we imagine that we establish the truth. All we are doing is reassuring ourselves of the meaningfulness of the particular patterns that speak to our karma, that speak to our 'take' on the world.

## Practicing in life can prepare us for our death

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*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* can be very useful to us and if it takes your fancy you can fully enter that path. More generally it makes clear that if you haven't done any preparation in your life, death is going to be a bummer. Even if you die very nicely at home with your friends around you, that can be a bummer. In fact dying at home very nicely with your friends around you could be a very bad death, because the situation could be reassuring you that the assumptions of your life *are* important, that 'this' *is* who you are.

Crying out for the help for these 'good friends' who help to define you as something, when you are in the strange and potentially terrifying circumstances of the bardo, will not be helpful! We are born alone and we die alone, and in between we meet a lot of people. Some we hang out with for a while and some we don't.

Of course, because of dependent co-origination, who we are becomes co-emergent with the lives of others. Personal identity is not monadic, sealed and unchanging; it's not like living in an egg. My identity is partly my kids' identity, my partner's identity, my colleagues' identity, my friends' identity. I am co-constructed out of the people I meet. If we haven't done meditation practice and gone into silence and stillness, then we haven't the experience that, whilst one aspect of my existence is interwoven or co-emergent with others, there are whole other areas which are just themselves, very simple, and not dependent on complex factors. If you have no experience of that, I think it is very hard to move into death. So preparing for death through practice is absolutely vital.

To help ourselves at death we can try to make our practice strong and clear, and if we have people around us we can give them some sense of what we would like to happen when we die. Our death may happen suddenly, so we can say 'Try as much as you can not to have my body moved and also try to maintain some atmosphere of practice that I am familiar with'.

The recommendation in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is that it should be read to those who are in the death process. However that's not going to help them if they've not read it before; it will just be some weird gobbledegook. If they like something like Bach then play Bach, some music which is calming and reassuring. They are going to enter into the great silence and the more centred and the more settled both we and they are, the better.

They may be suffering, full of fear, and full of anxiety. Too damn right! From a traditional point of view if there is rebirth then it's a good idea to be worried. It would have helped if you'd been worried earlier and done something about it, but the fact that you're worried now is the taste of suffering. Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, sickness is suffering, and death is suffering. What you are experiencing is the truth of existence and there's nothing that can be done to take that away. It is sad; it is frightening; it just is like that, and if the person is not used to being with what is, if they have spent their life seeking compensations, reassurances, comfort, it is very difficult to help them.

If you're a meditation practitioner, you realise that comforting is just third grade stuff; it's not the real McCoy. You may have to do it, but it is a sadness that people die unprepared, that people have lived without much awareness, lost in the dream of twentieth century consumerist capitalism, being cosy with central heating, DVDs, and all the rest of it; asleep in this dream-like existence.

What we have achieved, in our culture, is to turn human existence into a god-like realm where we are protected all the time. We can eat any vegetable any time of the year, we can eat any fruit any time of the year, we can have orchids from the shop any time of the year... We have everything all the time. This is like life in the god realm. As we lose touch with the ordinary difficulties of life they

can seem like an accident, or an intrusion, something we want someone else to sort out and take away.

Helping others to die requires simply staying in whatever awareness practice we can, and being polite and friendly and courteous towards the other. But if the real work has not been done by them it will not bear fruit. If you don't plant in the springtime, in the autumn you won't have a harvest. That is the Buddha's teaching.

For those of us who are no longer in the springtime of our lives, there is still time. There are things that we can plant that will grow quickly and we are very fortunate to have these precious teachings and practices.