

## 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<sup>1</sup>

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, 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

reason, 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.

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.

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.

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 *lū*, which means "something you leave behind," like baggage. Each time we say "lū," 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 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:

*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.<sup>2</sup>*

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?<sup>3</sup>*

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

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 Gyaltzen, 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 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.<sup>4</sup>*

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 . . ." <sup>5</sup> 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?'" <sup>6</sup>

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 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 . . . our whole life seems to be disintegrating . . . our husband or wife suddenly leaves us without warning. The

earth is still there; the sky is still there. Of course, even the earth trembles now and again, just to remind us we cannot take anything for granted . . .

Even Buddha died. His death was a teaching, to shock the naive, the indolent, and complacent, to wake us up to the truth that everything is impermanent and death an inescapable fact of life. As he was approaching death, the Buddha said:

*Of all footprints  
That of the elephant is supreme;  
Of all mindfulness meditations  
That on death is supreme.<sup>7</sup>*

Whenever we lose our perspective, or fall prey to laziness, reflecting on death and impermanence shakes us back into the truth:

*What is born will die,  
What has been gathered will be dispersed,  
What has been accumulated will be exhausted,  
What has been built up will collapse,  
And what has been high will be brought low.*

The whole universe, scientists now tell us, is nothing but change, activity, and process—a totality of flux that is the ground of all things:

*Every subatomic interaction consists of the annihilation of the original particles and the creation of new subatomic particles. The subatomic world is a continual dance of creation and annihilation, of mass changing into energy and energy changing to mass. Transient forms sparkle in and out of existence, creating a never-ending, forever newly created reality.<sup>8</sup>*

What is our life but this dance of transient forms? Isn't everything always changing: the leaves on the trees in the park, the light in your room as you read this, the seasons, the weather, the time of day, the people passing you in the street? And what about us? Doesn't everything we have done in the past seem like a dream now? The friends we grew up with, the childhood haunts, those views and opinions we once held with such single-minded passion: We have left them all behind. Now, at this moment, reading this book seems vividly real to you. Even this page will soon be only a memory.

The cells of our body are dying, the neurons in our brain are decaying, even the expression on our face is always changing,

depending on our mood. What we call our basic character is only a "mindstream," nothing more. Today we feel good because things are going well; tomorrow we feel the opposite. Where did that good feeling go? New influences took us over as circumstances changed: We are impermanent, the influences are impermanent, and there is nothing solid or lasting anywhere that we can point to.

What could be more unpredictable than our thoughts and emotions: do you have any idea what you are going to think or feel next? Our mind, in fact, is as empty, as impermanent, and as transient as a dream. Look at a thought: It comes, it stays, and it goes. The past is past, the future not yet risen, and even the present thought, as we experience it, becomes the past.

*The only thing we really have is nowness, is now.*

Sometimes when I teach these things, a person will come up to me afterward and say: "All this seems obvious! I've always known it. Tell me something new." I say to him or her: "Have you actually understood, and realized, the truth of impermanence? Have you so integrated it with your every thought, breath, and movement that your life has been transformed? Ask yourself these two questions: Do I remember at every moment that I am dying, and everyone and everything else is, and so treat all beings at all times with compassion? Has my understanding of death and impermanence become so keen and so urgent that I am devoting every second to the pursuit of enlightenment? If you can answer 'yes' to both of these, then you have really understood impermanence."