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Advice on Dying

Dalai Lama

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author and Editor

Also by the Dalai Lama

Praise

Title Page

Epigraph

Foreword by Jeffrey Hopkins, Ph.D.

1. Awareness of Death
2. Liberation from Fear
3. Preparing to Die
4. Removing Obstacles to a Favorable Death
5. Gaining Favorable Conditions for the Time of Death
6. Meditating While Dying
7. The Inner Structure
8. The Clear Light of Death
9. Reacting to the Intermediate State
10. Taking a Positive Rebirth
11. Daily Reflection on the Poem

Appendix: Outline of the Poem and Summary Advice

Selected Readings

Copyright

About the Book

In this empowering and positive book, His Holiness cautions us not to waste our lives in procrastination. Our death is certain. By meditating on impermanence, and on the indefiniteness of the time of our death, we will bring vigour and sparkle into our everyday world – and also prepare ourselves for the inevitable, and crucially important, moment of dying.

With wise guidance and spiritual vision, the Dalai Lama offers new inspiration on a subject that we, in the West, have long ignored to our detriment. It is only by taming our minds and fully facing the end of our lives, that we can fully live in the present moment.

About the Author and Editor

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, was born in 1935 to a peasant family in northeastern Tibet. The world's foremost Buddhist leader, he travels extensively, speaking eloquently in favour of ecumenical understanding, kindness and compassion, respect for the environment and, above all, world peace.

Jeffrey Hopkins, Ph.D., served for a decade as the interpreter to the Dalai Lama. A Buddhist scholar and the author of more than twenty-five books, he is professor of Tibetan and Buddhist studies at the University of Virginia.

Books by the Dalai Lama also available from Rider

The Good Heart

The Dalai Lama's Book of Wisdom

The Little Book of Wisdom

The Dalai Lama's Book of Daily Meditations

The Little Book of Buddhism

Stages of Meditation

How to Practise

‘A gentle work that encourages you to reconsider the perspective you hold, not only on death but on life . . . remarkably uplifting.’ *Glasgow Herald*

‘A Buddhist approach that may help Christian readers to reflect on their own views’ *Church Times*

‘With practical guidance and spiritual vision the Dalai Lama brings new inspiration to a subject that we, in the West, have long ignored. The book suggests that by facing the end of our lives, we can fully live in the present.’ *Yours magazine*

Advice on Dying

And Living a Better Life

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Translated and Edited by Jeffrey Hopkins



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Everyone dies, but no one is dead.

—TIBETAN SAYING

Foreword

Tibet is known for profound insights into the depths of the mind. A repository for Buddhist teachings, Tibet has long maintained traditions of practice and instruction centered on manifesting these deep states of mind and making use of them for spiritual progress. I began my own instruction in these systems at a Tibetan and Mongolian monastery in New Jersey at the end of 1962. While living at the monastery for nearly five years, I learned the Tibetan language, meditated, and studied a broad range of topics. This allowed me, upon return to the monastery in the summer of 1968, to appreciate the magnificent expositions of subjects—large and small—by an aged lama, Kensur Ngawang Lekden, who had been the abbot of a Tantra monastery in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, when the Communist Chinese invaded in 1959. In the course of his teachings, the lama spoke several times of a profound book about death that he had with him. He explained that the book was most helpful in approaching death because it described in detail the deepening mental states through which the dying person passes and how to prepare for them. He added that we pass through these states each and every day when we go to sleep or end a dream, as well as during fainting, sneezing, or orgasm.

I was fascinated.

From the lama's brief references to the contents of this book, I could see that our usual level of consciousness was superficial compared to these deeper states. Wanting to learn more, I asked him to teach me the text, but he put it off. Eventually, in 1971, I left on a Fulbright fellowship to study for a few months with one of the lama's Tibetan students, who was teaching in Germany at the University of

Hamburg. There I stayed in what was actually a large closet. A friend of the Tibetan scholar had built a narrow bed above the window in the closet, with a small ladder up to it and a tiny desk under it. One night fairly early in my stay, the lama appeared to me in a thrilling dream in the shining form of his six-year-old self without the pockmarks he had on his adult face. Standing on my chest, he announced, "I will be back." I knew then he had died.

I proceeded to India, where I stayed for over a year, attending two series of teachings by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, having long discussions with him in many audiences, receiving private teachings, translating a text he had written on the topic of dependent-arising and emptiness, and interpreting for a group of students who had asked for an audience. Upon returning to the United States, I went directly to the monastery in New Jersey, intent on going through Lama Kensur Ngawang Lekden's effects to find the book about dying.

To my delight, I found it!

I read the book and requested teaching on it from two lamas. It has had a profound influence on me. It describes both the superficial and profound levels of mind so vividly that it allows one to imagine going deeper and deeper within the mind, on the ultimate journey of transformation. Knowing that this material would be valuable for many people, I asked His Holiness the Dalai Lama if he would provide commentary on another text on the same topic, a poem written by the First Panchen Lama in the seventeenth century (which also has a commentary by the author of the book on dying I had read). I suggested to the Dalai Lama that in this way a more accessible book could be made, and he agreed.

A few days later, I was called to His Holiness's inner office and sat across from him with a tape recorder. Drawing from a wide range of traditions and experiences to explain the text, His Holiness discussed in vivid detail the structure of

Buddhist depth psychology as well as the process of dying and the period after death and before the next life. He described how competent yogis manifest the profound levels of mind for spiritual transformation. He spoke movingly about the value of being mindful of death, the ways to do so, how to overcome fear while dying and also in the intermediate state between lives, and how to help others who are dying. His teachings are the heart of this book.

To give you an idea of the impact the Dalai Lama had on me that day, let me quote some notes from my book, *Cultivating Compassion*, where I am discussing meditating on the nature of reality:

The Dalai Lama advises that you do this type of meditation on someone or something that you value highly, so the experience of emptiness will not be misinterpreted as a devaluing of the subject—the value will remain high but will be seen in a different way. During a period when he was teaching me in his office in India, my experience was particularly intense. One late afternoon as I looked at him across his desk with a set of windows stretching behind him, the sun was fairly low on the horizon in Kangra Valley. Our topic was the stages of death—a profound presentation of deeper stages of the mind, on which not just death but all conscious experience is built. In Tibetan the Dalai Lama has incredible powers of speech—very fast and very clear at the same time—and brings a vast array of teachings to bear on a single topic. The scene was brilliant with the glow of the sun across a vivid orange sky—like the second stage of the four subtle minds experienced when dying. I felt as at-home as I ever could in my life. As I stepped out of his office, I was awe-struck by the snow-covered peak above Dharmasala: I began walking down to my room farther down the mountain, passing a place with a view of a mountain on the other side, too; the space between the two mountains was filled with a rainbow that formed a complete circle. It was amazing! Several days later, I was leaving after my last class with the Dalai Lama, preparing to return to the States. As I stepped near the door he said, “It is like a dream.” I said, “What?” “It’s like a dream,” he replied. Even in this most vivid and valuable period of my life, he caused me to reflect on the emptiness of this valuable experience. Emptiness does not cancel phenomena; on the contrary, it is quite compatible with effectiveness, and with value.

IMPACT OF THE TEACHINGS

The Dalai Lama's teaching is replete with detail about the actual process of dying, and also with practical advice. I gained many insights into the gradual collapse of consciousness and learned much that later turned out to be very useful.

While my father and mother were vacationing at their small winter home in Florida, my father had a stroke; he was eighty-one. I was far away in Vancouver, teaching at the University of British Columbia, so when my three brothers went to Florida to visit my ill father, I stayed in Vancouver. We were all very relieved when my father rose from his comatose state and even returned home. However, by the time I arrived a few weeks later, after my brothers had left, my father was back in the hospital, comatose again.

One day he was lying on his back and he opened his eyes. He turned and we began gently talking. At one point with a playful gleam in his eyes, he said, "You wouldn't believe what's going on in this hospital." Wondering what he meant, I happened to look up at the television at the foot of his bed. A steamy hospital soap opera was on, and I noticed that the hospital had put a small speaker on his pillow. While in his coma he had heard all those shows! After a while, I told him the source of his ideas, and later turned off his speaker, remembering the Dalai Lama's teaching that near the time of death it is most valuable to have someone remind you of virtuous thoughts.

A few days later, my father took a turn for the worse and slipped into a deep coma. Visiting one night, I found that the hospital had moved him to a different room. This time the television was blasting out a quiz show. I wanted to turn it off, but was told by the nurse that it was a favorite of the nearly deaf man in the other bed. Confounded, I sat at the foot of my father's bed wondering what to do. The TV roared a question about a ship that had sunk at sea, so I figured that at least I could engage the other man. "Do you know the name of that ship?" I shouted. When he did not move a

muscle, I realized that he was comatose, too. But my father sat up in bed and said, "The *Andrea Doria*." He was lucid, and had been listening all along!

I turned off the TV, and we went on to have a nice conversation. He was his usual contented self. He asked for crackers and milk, which the nurse provided in a particularly tender way. We chatted for a while, and as I left, I said, "Shall I say hello to Mother?" "You bet," he replied cheerfully.

The hospital called my mother early the next morning to tell her that my father had died during the night. How relieved I was that before he died, he had come to his senses with his spirits restored. And that the TV was silent.

The hospital had left my father's body in his room, alone. I went there and, remembering not to disturb the body, sat and kept silent because I did not know his particular vocabulary of religious belief. Just by being there I felt I could support him on his journey.

A year later, my mother suffered what was probably a stroke. She dialed the home of my brother Jack and his wife, Judy. Jack was away, and when Judy answered, Mother said she felt terrible, had a headache, and kept talking in a scattered way. She said she felt faint and might be sick. Then her voice faded away. Since Mother did not hang up, Judy ran to the house next door and called the rescue squad. Subsequently, the hospital brought her back from death's door three times, each time leaving her struggling to communicate. Seeing her incoherent struggle, I remembered that the Dalai Lama had spoken of the need for friendly advice that could evoke a virtuous attitude, and approached her bedside. I knew that her special word was "spirit," so I said, "Mother, this is Jeff. Now is the time for the spirit." She immediately settled down and stopped struggling. I gently repeated, "Now is the time for the spirit." A few days later, she died peacefully.

When my cousin Bobby was diagnosed with brain cancer, he spoke at length about his illness with my brother Jack, who asked him if there was anything he would like to do while he was still active. Bobby said, "I'd like the cousins to gather and tell stories about Grandpa." My paternal grandfather was a powerful man who protected his family, farm, church, and all of his involvements in vigorous and even humorous ways. So Jack gathered us together, all fourteen of us. We all knew Bobby was dying and did not pretend otherwise, but we certainly were not morose about it either. Most of us had hilarious stories to tell, which I videotaped.

Bobby's sister, Nancy, called me and asked for advice on what to do near the time of death. "Make sure no one is weeping and moaning around him," I told her. "Make things simple. Turn off the TV. Let people come say good-bye before the end has begun."

On Bobby's next-to-last day, the family watched the video of the cousins' gathering and put it away. The next day, with everything kept simple and quiet, he died.

The Dalai Lama advises that as we near the end we need to be reminded of our practice, whatever kind it is. We cannot force on others our views, or a higher level of practice than what they can manage. When my friend Raymond knew he was dying of AIDS, he and his partner asked me what they should do. Remembering my parents' deaths and my own paralysis and near death from Lyme disease, I knew that long after we become unable to interact with others, we can have a strong, lucid interior life. During my extreme illness I internally repeated a mantra that I had recited over the course of almost thirty years. I found that despite not being able to communicate with others, I could repeat the mantra with unusual lucidity. Occasionally I would try to speak, but failed. Despite failing, I did not worry. That would have been a big mistake. I just kept repeating the mantra, which put me at ease.

Bearing in mind my own experience, I suggested to Raymond that he choose a saying that he could repeat over and over again. He chose a four-line stanza by Joseph Goldstein:

May I be filled with loving-kindness.

May I be well.

May I be peaceful and at ease.

May I be happy.

I thought his choice might be too long, but I knew it was right for Raymond, since it was what he wanted.

Raymond practiced his mantra. His partner put it into a plastic frame by his bedside, so when Raymond turned his head, he saw it and was reminded to repeat it. Later, when Raymond returned from the hospital to die, he gradually became withdrawn, losing the power of speech, then losing the ability to point with his hand, and finally losing the capacity to move at all. Yet when I went into his room, sat on the floor by his bed, and gently said, "May I be filled with loving-kindness," his face would light up and his eyes moved under his closed eyelids. It had worked!

THE FIRST PANCHEN LAMA

In this book, His Holiness the Dalai Lama draws on a vast array of Indian and Tibetan textual and oral traditions to explain a seventeen-stanza poem by the First Panchen Lama. The Dalai Lama unpacks the meaning of the stanzas, one by one, by giving a detailed presentation of the stages of death, the intermediate state between lives, and the rebirth, all the while describing their practical application in a very moving way.

The poem that is at the heart of this study was written in the seventeenth century. Its importance and relevance have been transmitted by monastics and laypersons in Tibet and