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As a Man Lives, So Shall He Die

Jesus said, “Look to the Living One as long as you live, otherwise you might die and then try to see the Living One, and you will be unable to see.” — Gospel of Thomas, v. 59

A void. Without periphery, circumference or centre. Stillness. Eternal immutability. Absolute potentiality. And then, a glimmer. The barest flickering of light, subtle as the touch of a moth’s wing in the night. The flickering strengthens into a point of perfect clear light, shining and scintillating like a newly formed pearl in perfect repose. Suddenly, the point expands into a sphere of light, infinitely incalculably vast. The sphere resonates and crackles with uncontainable power. It has no edge, and no-one could chart its dimensions. Slowly, imperceptibly at first, the white purity of the sphere is marred by coloured beams of light that begins to refract within it. The beams join together, and the sphere is split, divided, fractured. Again and again colour resolves itself out of the infinity of white light, cutting the sphere into ever smaller portions. Each portion begin to differentiate, taking on different shadings and qualities. The frantic apportioning of this reality-being into finite, contracted, limited pieces finally ceases. With a vibration something like a soundless scream, or the groaning of ancient machinery activated after centuries, the vast, now multi-coloured mandala swings into motion. Slowly at first then faster and faster it spins, until it has become of infinite whirling dance of being. Each part of the sphere interacts in a complex relationship with every other part, spinning and dancing around each other, touching then moving away. As each sphere-fraction moves on its course, every so often it reaches the centre of the mandala and occupies the still point, the pivot of existence, before spinning on to another cycle. If you look very closely, you might be able to see that some of these pieces of the sphere, at the moment of stillness at the centre, become pure white, stark and void like space, immaculate and clear naked awareness. Then they dissolve.



DEATH! At the head of many I go, and I go in the midst of many. What may be your work that today must be done through me? What opportunities do you offer? O Lord Yama, what teachings can only you impart to me? How will you show me who and what I am? Where do I come from, and where will I go? What is the nature of consciousness?



death (**dèth**) *noun*. A moment of transition, the most dramatic of a series of such moments, which are characterised by an opportunity for change (see *life*).

life (**lif**) *noun*. Thoughts and actions, strung together in a great chain of being, their causal interconnectedness punctuated by moments of stillness and choice, characterized by an opportunity for change.



The Asian religious traditions offer us a compelling vision of the transition we call death. The moment of death itself — that is, the moment when consciousness departs from the physical body — is considered the greatest opportunity for liberation, or release from the cycle of *samsara*. The manner in which consciousness continues (whether rebirth or liberation occurs) is thus shaped by the moment of death and how it is experienced. And the manner in which the moment of death is experienced is determined by how one has lived one's life up to that moment. These three concepts make up the core message that the Asian religious traditions offer us concerning death.



I. The opportunity for liberation at the time of death

“Whoever at the time of death leaves his body remembering Me alone, rejoins My being — of that there can be no doubt!” — *Bhagavad Gita* 8.5

There can hardly be a clearer articulation of this principle than Krishna's in the *Song of the Lord*. From early Upanishadic times, the principle of “As a man thinks, so he becomes” had been expounded in South Asian philosophy. As that philosophy developed, the idea that thoughts (or states of consciousness) experienced in liminal or transitional modes had greatly magnified power gained wide credence. One such transitional state is meditation, which is experienced between states of normal waking consciousness. Another is death and the states experienced between it and rebirth.

These ideas about the power of the ‘between’ states made their way into Tibet in the 8th century, as part of the influx of the Buddhist religion. Tibetan Buddhism was also highly influenced by a system developed by its neighbour to the west, the non-dual Shaivism of Kashmir.

Writing of these transitions in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Sogyal Rinpoche says of the uncertainty of life:

“if you look more deeply at it, you will see that its very nature creates gaps, spaces in which profound chances and opportunities for transformation are continuously flowering -- if, that is, they can be seen and seized. . . . the bardo teachings tell us that there are moments when the mind is far freer than usual, moments far more powerful than others, which carry a far stronger karmic charge and implication. The supreme one of these is the moment of death. For at that moment the body is left behind, and we are offered the greatest possible opportunity for liberation.” (105-6)

The moment of choice. The space between the breaths. The gap between the thoughts. These transitions (or ‘bardos’) arise naturally again and again. Why do the liminal states offer such an opportunity for change? What is so special about them? In the absence of the movements of the mental faculties, a still space of pure contentless consciousness arises. This still point is a place of absolute potentiality. It is a clean slate, an opportunity to shift one’s state of consciousness. By such a shift, you remake your experience of reality itself. Da Avabhasa explains this principle, saying,

“[The] egoic point of view generally does not realise that this apparently manifested existence is simply a phenomenon of mind, a psychic event. . . . all of cosmic Nature is a psycho-physical phenomenon, and psyche, or mind, is as much a part of what you are seeing as the ‘thingness’ of it. We are in an infinite expanse of mind.” (142)

Therefore, by seizing the opportunity immanently present in the bardo states, we can, by the power of the mind, reshape the nature of reality itself — or our experience of it, which amounts to the same thing.

How can this shift be accomplished? The various techniques include prolonging the moment of stillness as long as possible; placing a divine object of limitless potential with the field of awareness (such as a mantra); and conscious renunciation of negative qualities and surrender to a divine principle or Presence.

Now when the bardo of dying dawns upon me,
I will abandon all grasping, yearning, and attachment,
Enter unwavering the experience of the clarity of the teaching,
And eject my consciousness into the unborn space of inner awareness;
As I leave this created body of flesh and blood,
I will know it to be impermanent illusion!

This passage from the *Great Book of Natural Liberation through Hearing in the Between* (aka ‘The Tibetan Book of the Dead’) emphasises the technique of renunciation of limiting qualities at the moment of death. Another key technique, emphasised by Da Avabhasa, is surrender. Surrender is the dynamic process of letting go of the limited or egoic self, and dissolving it into Cosmic Consciousness. Surrender is an act of offering of our small selves, our limited notions, to the Divine. Paradoxically, this act of surrender expands our awareness and makes us feel more free than we ever have before. It is the act of dissolving our identity into the purno’ham vimarsha, the perfect I-consciousness. This is pure consciousness of being, where “I” is not followed by conditional concepts, like “I am a man” or “I am a student” but rather is perfect unconditional awareness of being.

According to the Asian religious traditions, utilising the practice of surrender at the moment of death allows to unite with divine consciousness, rather than continuing on to another rebirth. Da Avabhasa says,

“Whenever [death] occurs, if you will surrender into God in love, through the process, or Yoga, of death, you may, in the event of death, transcend many or even all of the human limitations that would require future embodiment . . . and evolution in the scale of limitations. The death process is so profound and inclusive of all that is Man that

right participation in the event can even bring about . . . the ultimate states of transcendental and Divine Self-Realisation.” (164)

Why is the moment of death such a profound opportunity for liberation? Why has it been called the easiest and quickest way to attain God? There seems to be a proportional relationship between the dramatic impact of an event precipitating a transitional bardo mode and the opportunity for spiritual growth accompanying it. One of the most difficult questions that confronts a spiritual person is ‘what is function or purpose of suffering?’ In this context, we can regard times of suffering as a divine gift at least as compassionate and benevolent as times of joy. The times of difficulty, suffering, and trauma offer us our most profound opportunity for transformative self-change. Rinpoche discusses this idea in his example of coming home to find you’ve been robbed, and all your possessions are gone. The initial shock of the traumatic event subsides into a thought-free state, which he recommends prolonging as long as possible, in order to “catch a glimpse of the deathless nature of the enlightened mind”. (105)

Even more difficult events, such as the death of a loved one, offer us an equally greater opportunity to transcend mundane reality and touch a higher order of being. Have you ever noticed how, after a brush with death such as a car crash, your consciousness seems to be in an expanded state of clarity? This is one such opportunity, if we could only realise it.

Death is the most traumatic and dramatic event of our lives. Thus, it offers us the greatest opportunity to attain and merge with divine consciousness. The tradition of Buddhist Tantric yoga offers us a technical explanation of the reason for this. This explanation presupposes a psycho-physical system of *nadis* and *pranas*. The *pranas* (or vital winds) that circulate through all but one of the *nadis* are impure and activate negative thought patterns. However, the central channel (or *sushumna nadi*) is the location of the clear light of consciousness. At the moment of death, the ‘knots’ or energy blockages in the *nadis* are released, and the *pranas* flow into the central channel, and enlightenment is momentarily experienced.

The experiential manifestation of this phenomenon consists of entering into the divine presence at the moment of death. This presence is identified in Tibetan Buddhism as the ‘Clear Light’ or the ‘Ground Luminosity’. It is analogous to the concept of ‘unmanifest Brahman’ in the Hindu tradition. According to the *Book of Natural Liberation*, after leaving the body, the individual enters into that ocean of consciousness, which is identified with the higher Self of the individual. This is the chance, the moment to attain supreme truth. To do this, Da Avabhasa says you need to

“surrender your egoic self through feeling into Ecstatic Love-Communion with the Self-Existing and Self-Radiant Divine Being in Whom all conditionally manifested beings and experiences and worlds arise and change and disappear.” (54)

As Rinpoche says, “The dawning of the Ground Luminosity, or Clear Light, at the moment of death is the great opportunity for liberation.” (260)



II. Rebirth is shaped by the moment of death

“A mortal ripens like grain, and like grain is born again.” — Katha Upanishad

“O Kaunteya, whatever being a person thinks of at the last moment when he leaves his body, that alone does he become.” — Bhagavad Gita 8.6

Even if liberation is not attained at the moment of death, the attitude towards and approach to the practice of dying is still vitally important, because whatever thoughts do occupy the mind at the end shape the nature of the continuance of individuated consciousness. Again, Krishna is our guide, as he articulates this concept with startling clarity (above). Rinpoche corroborates this, saying,

“the last thought and emotion that we have before we die has an extremely powerful determining effect on our immediate future. . . . That last thought or emotion we have can be magnified out of all proportion and flood our whole perception.” (224)

It may seem like an easy thing to simply focus on a mantra or a picture of your favourite image of the divine and thereby maintain positive thoughts. However, as the death-point approaches, two qualities (if uncontrolled) rise more and more forcibly, dominating the consciousness with irresistible power: fear and desire.

Most people fear the end death represents, because they want more: more time, more love, more pleasure, more attention, more food and drink, more, more, more! This grasping greed can easily consume the mind at the moment of death. And the benevolent universe grants our wishes. These desires are what keep us bound to the wheel of samsara (the cycle of death and rebirth). We take birth once again, to get just what we longed for at the end of the previous incarnation. However, in our delusion at that moment, we forgot the suffering and pain which necessarily accompanies the pursuit of desires in this world. But it is too late - we are trapped in another life. And so it will go until finally the desire for divine transcendence decisively outweighs the desire for worldly fulfilment.

The Asian religious tradition affirms that even though we come into the presence of the divine immediately after death (in the luminous dharmata bardo), most of us are totally unprepared for its sheer power, vastness, depth, and dazzling brilliance often compared to ‘the light of a million suns’. In fact, words are inadequate to describe That. Most of contraction, even though there is no longer a basis for such reaction.

So how do we avoid such a reaction? How do we utilise the moment of death to attain the highest?



III. The moment of death is shaped by life

“How a person dies is the fruit of the way in which he has lived.” — Swami Muktānanda

Though the moment of death offers us the easiest opportunity to attain divine consciousness, it is still a near impossibility unless we have used our time in life wisely to prepare for that moment. In his book *Does Death Really Exist?*, Swami Muktananda articulates this concept:

“But how will we be able to remember Him in the face of the tremendous fear that grips us at the last moment of our life? We will be able to do it only if we have developed the habit of remembering Him long before that time. . . One who remembers God constantly in this way will attain the state of God at the time of death.” (30-31)

Thus the Asian religious tradition advises a course of spiritual practice and rigorous self-inquiry to be conducted during life. If such a discipline is not followed, then death will not be transcendent. It will be at most “a temporary release, a glimpse of high things” followed by a “gradual return to an order of phenomenal limitation”, i.e., rebirth in another limited form. (Avabhasa 142)

One the key concepts of South Asian religious philosophy is karma, the spiritual and cosmological law of cause and effect. Karma teaches that the nature of each moment of phenomenal existence is determined by the aggregation of all your past thoughts and actions, which have resolved themselves into energy patterns within your consciousness and thus created your present circumstances in all their aspects. (According to the theory of phenomenal reality as a construct of the mind which I discussed in Part I). Thus, your future circumstances are equally determined by your present thoughts and actions. There’s no easy way out! A last-minute ‘conversion’ to spiritual life shortly before death can certainly improve the circumstances of one’s subsequent embodiment (as Rinpoche asserts), but it will not wipe the slate clean. (It was this idea that ‘there ain’t no such thing as a free lunch’ that caused the development of the concept of Purgatory in Christianity).

According to the principles of karma, then, the solution to the ‘problem’ of death is to begin in this very moment the cultivation of a spiritual awareness, consisting in the Asian tradition of a real and honest inquiry into the nature of being and the relation of self to the universe. After all, as Swami Muktananda points out, “Waiting until one is dying to save oneself is like trying to dig a well when one’s house is on fire.” (28)

This tradition asserts that to be effective, this inquiry must include both the acquisition of discursive knowledge through the study of philosophical texts and sacred scriptures, as well as non-discursive knowledge/experience acquiring through practices such as meditation, contemplation, and visualisation.

Additionally, these practices will only reach full effectiveness if performed in the context of the guidance of a teacher or master of the tradition. The teacher serves the vital role of helping the student not to get tangled up in the contradictions of mere intellectual analyses when the most important aspect of one's practice is learning to internalise and directly experience the truth. In this, the aid of a master who undergone this process herself is instrumental.

Through a practice such as the one briefly outlined above, one can prepare for the final moment. To truly reach the highest goal at that time, and merge with the infinite bliss of divine consciousness,

“you should prepare for death as a process of complete surrender and release of all physical, emotional, and mental clinging to the present body-mind, its relations, and this world. . . . a complete abandonment of the present design and content of your conditional self. You should fully consent to die at the moment of death . . . Your ability to do this will be either enhanced or limited to the same degree you are able to surrender while alive in the Divine Love-Bliss-Consciousness that is God. Therefore, in order for death to be an ecstatic transition for you, you must not only study and prepare for the specific and terminal process of death itself, but while alive you must also devote yourself to an ecstatic or self-transcending way of life.” (Avabhasa 53)

Thus even this brief survey of Tibetan Buddhist and Hindu thought on the subject of death offers us compelling reasons to investigate further the wealth of information the tradition has to offer. In our society, very few people even believe it is possible to die an ecstatic death, let alone investigated how one might prepare for such an event. Some argue that the preparation might be futile, since there may be no after-death existence at all. However, this viewpoint is illogical. If there is no after-death existence, then your spiritual practice made your life more fulfilling and the process of dying itself more peaceful. And if there is existence after death, your preparation will allow you to choose how you would like to continue rather than being uncontrollably flung into the next embodiment. What do you have to lose? Nothing.

However, if you do not prepare, what an opportunity you will have lost if you find yourself going down that long, dark tunnel towards the white light. Your meeting with the Light will be all too brief before the wheel turns around again.



As a man lives, so shall he die. As a man dies, so shall he live again. It is a formula that leads to either misery or joy; a vicious cycle or blissful release. So saith the sages.

Listen!
Old age is hastening toward you.
Like your shadow, death is standing right behind you.
What existed yesterday does not exist today.
Why don't you ponder these things?

— Swami Muktānanda