

*The Wisdom of Impermanence*

Twenty One Essays by Jason Espada

## Preface

We read, and sometimes write to remember. Some subjects are so important we need to return to them again and again so that their lessons sink in, and really have an effect on our lives. This is how it is with reflections on impermanence, change, and death. The more time and creativity we bring to this subject, the better- as they say in the Buddhist teachings, this is one of the most powerful themes for transforming our attitudes, and bringing depth and meaning to our being here.

A few months ago, my friend Ben invited me to share some reflections on *the wisdom of impermanence*, which I did. I had forgotten he phrased it like that, and then last night, I found myself writing out a few thoughts with that title, and this is the twelfth entry in this collection.

Thinking that perhaps these writings will be useful for others, here are 20 essays written down between 2009 and 2021.

May they offer encouragement

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## Depending on uncertainty

In this uncertain world, so many of the things we do are attempts to make our lives feel safe from change. We may think that with the right job or relationship, or going down this street instead of that one will give us the security we want. And it's true, to some extent. But we're overlooking one basic fact here, and that is the unpredictability of our lives.

Every day here on earth, people die at all ages, from any number of causes, known or unknown. Friends or jobs change without our wanting them to, and our own health has its ups and downs. No one expects these things, and few take them into account. There's even sometimes a superstitious feeling people can have that even thinking about changes we don't want would invite them into our lives. I'm taking a different approach to uncertainty though, and I'd like to say why, because I know we would need some motivation to even want to change our habitual thinking.

Not only do we set ourselves up for shock and disappointment by not seeing how things change - conditions, circumstances, people, our own body - but we also fail to really appreciate what's right about our lives while we are here. Not appreciating our own life, our friends and family, our living in this beautiful world, we don't enjoy them as we could, don't share as much as we can, and then when things change, we mourn the loss of the unique, marvelous opportunity we had, that has passed us by.

## Living with a depth of gratitude, awake

If there is a race between the feelings of loss and grief and those of deep appreciation, wonder, delight and thankfulness for our lives here together, I want those extraordinary feelings of gratitude to win out.

We don't have the choice here of making conditions, family and friends stay forever. How then will we deal with separation? How can we hold the

inevitability of that, and what's more, that we don't know when this will happen? Is there anything we can do to not be overwhelmed by the fear and sadness?

What we can do is have our thinking straight, to start with, about the nature of our being here together, that it is just for a time only. Then, with this awareness, we can love each other with a love that is fully alive. Only the fullness of love is greater than this fear and sadness. This is the best gift we can give, and there is something enduring about it for us all.

I heard the expression, 'unbenumbed' that I think really does describe the sense of being awake to what we have now, to our friendships that are such a gift, to our precious family, and to our lives in this great world of ours. That some people are bored, or dissatisfied, jaded, numb, taking things for granted, irritable and discontent, only tells me they haven't opened to where we are and what we have now. This life has a lot that is hard in it, but there is also so much beauty, and wonder to it; there so many who are living inspiring lives – the more we look, the more we find, and there are so many great things waiting to be born!

### Two ways of relating to uncertainty

The way most people try to fashion a sense of security is actually the opposite of what real security is here in this world. I have the image of leaning on a walking stick – if it's not a strong support, when it breaks, we fall, and feel betrayed by it. Depending on things that change is like this. It's a flawed method.

I have another image, of actually *depending* on the uncertainty of our lives here – of leaning on it, of relying on it, of keeping this awareness - seeing clearly all that could change today, or tomorrow, or this hour or the next. Surprisingly, really acknowledging this truth feels like a stronger support – it is secure, in another way. It's a refuge in the relative truth of how things are here. Relying on this, we're not caught off guard, or so thrown when

things do change. We don't feel betrayed or singled out by the universe. We're also prompted to look for what has lasting value.

There's a story about Ajaan Chah pointing to a cup on the table in front of him, and saying, *'When I look, I see this cup here as already broken – and therefore, I enjoy it immensely!'*

Because of this, not holding back, real life comes to be

The main advantage to keeping transience in mind though is that we can be unhindered from moving towards living the life we want for ourselves. I've thought that remembering impermanence is 'a mid-wife for love', in the sense that it helps to bring to birth in us what we most want to give. This is what brings fulfillment – not so much the accomplishment of our aims, but very clearly knowing what we want to do, and going in that direction.

Because tomorrow is uncertain, however imperfect we feel our work may still be, we have to do our best with what we have now. To me, surprisingly, this feels complete, every day, every step of the way.

Recognizing the uncertainty of our lives here, without assuming anything, without taking anything for granted, cuts hesitation, pettiness, and distraction from what's really meaningful and important to us. It brings clarity and a magnanimous mind. It empowers us with focus and drive. That is what I mean here by depending on uncertainty.

It is like a support also, in that, when we let up on this remembrance, then we can lose those great benefits, at least for a time. They say, if we don't think about impermanence in the morning, we waste the morning; if we don't think about it in the afternoon, we waste the afternoon, and if we don't recall it in the evening, we'll waste the evening.

A reflection from the Pali says:

*'The days and nights are relentlessly passing. How well am I spending my time?'*

Don't lose a moment!

So I want to urge people not to rely on false support of believing that things are predictable, safe and secure where they are inherently not so, and instead to use this very awareness of uncertainty to cherish their life here, and the lives of their loved ones, and this world, and without hesitation, doubt, or fear, to do the work that is most meaningful for them. The only true, regrettable loss would be to have had this opportunity, and to have not taken it.

*My friends, enjoy each day, and every hour, of your unique and precious life!  
Live it to the full!*

Given that life is uncertain, how do you want to live your life?

It would be one thing if we had unlimited time here. We could afford to spend hour and days, months and years distracting ourselves with meaningless activities; or, we could let ourselves get annoyed by every perceived slight, and carry it with us wherever we go, for years; we could even put off what is most important to us – it would be no problem. But our time here has a limit. Day follows day, weeks, months, and then years go by. The truth is, we only get to live this life once, and time passes quickly.

Maybe we have known this intellectually, superficially, or even had some deeper, momentary experience of it, but then we forget about it, or suppress it. Our situation here is actually even more compelling than just being limited, *because we also don't know how long any of us have here on earth.* Maybe that's frightening to think about, or it evokes such sadness, and resistance, but it's crucial to get past that.

Realizing the fact that our lives, such as they are now, don't go on forever, and, what's more, that we don't know how much time we have really shows us what is essential to do *now*, without waiting. We don't have time to waste, or to hold grudges, or to put off what has the most meaning for us. We don't know if the person we see this morning, who ignored us, will still be here tomorrow, next week, or next month, or next year. Given that, how do we want to respond to them? How do we want to hold them in our thoughts?

And see this too: we also don't know for sure if we'll be here on this earth next month, or in one year, or five years. It's important to see this for more than just a moment. It needs to become a stable, insight-knowledge that guides our lives, and encourages us to bring out the best we have to give.

The effect of this can be great. If we were generous before, it becomes an abundant generosity, one that is so much freer, more complete, and more

joyful; if we had a measure of fearlessness to us, it becomes bold, powerful, and unconquerable; and if we had the thought before to help others, and felt empowered by that, now this motivation becomes fully clear and effective in our lives.

Seeing that there's no time to lose awakens our love. It brings out all our gifts. We can say that the awareness of impermanence is a midwife of love. This realization brings with it great gratitude, love and care for our family, friends, and all those we share this life with. It is truly an awakening, a revolution of values; it helps us to see the most fulfilling way to live here, and it brings courage and energy, and that is why I would urge you to think this over carefully, and to keep it in mind, my friends.

By contrast, when we don't remember the impermanent nature of our lives, and of the lives of those around us, then we can say we sleep, or that we walk in a fog, not sure of where we are or where we're going, not seeing those to the left or the right, ahead or behind us. Don't most people here live that way? What a loss! I'm sure that not seeing this one truth accounts for so much of the small mindedness and neglect here of what has real value.

Love does not arise in the world without causes and conditions. We have it in us to care for one another, to forgive, to be generous, to delight in one another, but, if we're not careful, we may sleep, and miss all of these. Love comes fully alive when it really sees the truth of our being here together – that there is no time to waste, not an hour, not even a minute. To see and embrace our lives fully we need this insight. Then, much of what we may have struggled to do before happens on its own. This is an active understanding that creates a life of genuine fulfillment here.

## A Midwife for Love

### Combining metta and the reflection on impermanence

Taken separately, both metta, the step by step development of loving kindness, and regular reflections on impermanence have the potential to bring us a keen sense of the preciousness of life, a kind of fearlessness, and greater generosity. When they are combined though, their power is increased even more.

I've not heard this talked about elsewhere, although I'm sure people do it. Perhaps in the course of their lives people are reminded of the transience and uncertainty of our time here. Then, naturally, metta flows more abundantly. What I'd like to suggest here is that we don't wait until 'life happens to us', but that we consciously and regularly choose to combine these two meditations. If we do this, we can find an increased depth, clarity, and vigor to our practice.

I know people avoid the meditation on impermanence. It can elicit so much fear, and anticipated sadness, but this is just the initial response to these reflections, the 'first gate', if you will, and if we stop there, we'll never know the benefits of clearly seeing this truth.

Recognizing that our lives here, like this, is for this one time only, and that none of us knows now long we have here, this cuts so much pettiness, and hesitation; it has us completely give what we have, holding nothing back, and it has the potential to really awaken our gratitude and wonder at being alive.

When we bring metta loving kindness meditation together with the awareness this aspect of the nature of our living here, the pure feeling flows more easily, and abundantly. We recognize that we have no time to lose, to small mindedness, or to holding on to any unforgiveness.

Recalling impermanence awakens generosity, such that metta really shines forth from us powerfully.

There's a passage in the book, 'A Monk in the World', by Wayne Teasdale, where he describes a home-sanctuary made by a married couple with children. He describe how one man's young son would often join him during his hour of prayer and meditation, climb onto his lap, and sleep peacefully during that time.

I can only relate to this from remembering the young children I taught for a number of years in Taiwan. With this image of a young child resting on my lap during meditation, when I cultivate metta, I know something of what all parents and guardians wish for their children. The feeling is very pure, abundant, and perfectly clear.

There's a fragility to being a parent or guardian. One never knows what kind of world a loved one will meet, or how long we will be able to be there for them. This is a model, then, for all our relationships. We never know how long we have.

As a thought experiment – if we think that this may be the last time we see or can pray for our friend, that either we, or they may not be here as they are now, tomorrow, or next week, or next month, it awakens our very best nature. We spontaneously offer the best kinds of prayers for their happiness. And if we should be so fortunate to see and talk with them again, this kind of pure motivation is sure to find expression in our speaking, and actions.

Just as they say with the Lam-Rim, or Stages of the Path teachings, we have to have some sense of the advantages of any practice before we wholeheartedly take it up. When it comes to the meditation on loving kindness, people usually don't need much convincing. Recalling impermanence, though, is another matter. It's usually avoided if at all possible. This is only

because we haven't glimpsed the advantages of keeping this in view. Once we do, it's natural to make this a regular part of practice.

Love, naturally, without needing to be told, wants to reach perfection in us. That is what we would call its fulfillment, and even though this ideal often seems so far from where we are, when I take up the practice with the awareness of my mortality, I begin to taste that very fulfillment of love. We have to give ourselves completely. This is the only thing that makes sense to me now. This is what brings the greatest reward.

## Meditating on Impermanence as a Path to Joy

There are so many ways we can relate to the subject of impermanence and change, including death. In American culture, for the most part, people avoid talking about it with others, and even thinking about it. They go so far as to deny change and death as part of our reality here. This is a great loss as far as I'm concerned. Holding such false beliefs, people don't live fully, and the lives they do lead are then often shallow, and with distorted values.

There is a way however of holding transience, including the knowledge of our mortality that can bring not only acceptance, but actually happiness, and an exuberance to our being here together.

I know the phrase '*impermanence as a path to joy*' can sound strange. We resist thinking about it because of the anticipated or experienced sorrow of parting, and the persistent fear of the unexpected. We may not be conscious of it, but we have trained ourselves to look at our lives together this way. But what if there were another way of thinking we can learn, one that accommodated this aspect of our being here together, dispelled fear, and actually brought us joy?

Today, we are alive. If we know this within the framework of our being visitors here on earth, the meaning changes to *Today, we are alive!* Every day is a celebration. There is something miraculous about this that I can know and appreciate. I can see color, I can hear and make music, I can take the hand of my beloved. It wasn't always this way, and it won't always be this way either, and yet *Today, I am alive.* I don't know how long I will have here, and yet on this very day I can appreciate the blue sky, all this beauty, and the kindness I have received from my teachers, parents, friends, and strangers.

If you eat something and are distracted, there is a very good chance you will not taste the food. Settling into thinking about something or remembering some great good fortune allows us to taste it and be nourished by it. When we recognize that this life is a gift, joy beings to awaken.

In his teachings on death, Thich Nhat Hanh tells us that impermanence is what makes everything possible: from the growth of the food we eat, to the girl who can become a young woman. We don't call this kind of change 'death', but clearly in a way it is. We transform all the time. From political systems, to learning a new skill or way of thinking, time and our mutability is what allows for improvement. I would add, if not for impermanence, my teacher would not have gone from being a novice, to the sage that he became. Thay said that, instead of feeling it is something we should abhor, we should be saying, *'long live impermanence!'*

The objection to celebrating something like our mortality of course centers around the uncertainty of change that happens at times, the separation from loved ones that can happen suddenly, or after long anticipation and dread. Karma, genetics, and other people can be so unpredictable sometimes. How we accommodate even the uncertainty of our lives here together? Is there any way to attenuate those painful experiences? What is the radical antidote to such universal fear?

We can learn to see each day that we and our loved ones have here as nothing less than a gift. We can thoroughly realize that it is not guaranteed for even a moment. Now, imagine if we were taught this from an early age, and made that an integral part of our thinking and values. Our lives and our responses to every change would be very different. We'd be fully appreciative of what we have now, and not caught off guard or dismayed by gradual or even sudden change. We can say with a full heart, that our lives here are like this too...

There are so many advantages to having this understanding. It helps us to live deeply, with much less fear and grief, to enjoy our lives and each other fully, with appreciation and *right values*.

I imagine that if we knew a loved one was dying, and that we had just that one day to spend with them, those hours would be more precious than jewels. If we were on our way to the hospital or nursing home, and we were offered instead a dump truck full of Cartier bracelets and rings, we'd walk right past it. For a while at least, we'd see that what has true value is our being here together, celebrating and caring for each other as best we can, and nothing more than this.

We are alive today, but what about our parents, teachers and friends who have already passed on? It can have real depth and richness to say, *they lived*. We can take the great measure of the effect they have in our own heart and lives now.

Even those friendships that have changed into distance for us we can say, *yes but we did have this time together, on this remarkable earth, and wasn't that something?* This life is a gift.

...

Our being here is ephemeral, sure to end one day, and our allotted time is not at all fixed. It could stir fear to think of this, and contraction, which is the withdrawal from reality, and escapism, but it could also provoke a deep question within us, about how to best live our lives in light of this truth. *It could awaken a deep response*.

The first thing I notice when I am able to touch this truth is that I lose my pettiness. Others surely will still be caught up in valuing small things, as if we will be here forever, and as if the inconsequential is in any way important. These things don't matter at all if I have this knowledge awake in me – that I won't be here forever, and that I really don't know how long I will have – how many more years, months, days, hours and minutes. And I

also don't know how much time those I care for and the new people I meet have left. It puts my feet on solid ground to see this, and I'm not swayed by immature attitudes. It makes me patient and gentle, forgiving and generous.

The next thing that occurs to me is that this gift of a life that I have now is something to celebrate. It is unique in all the world, and in *all* of time. Something in me naturally reaches for self expression, I think, as the innate realization of this truth. We are all completely original creations, and in some way, we are made for self expression. To go against this, or to suppress it, or get caught up in small minded competition is to miss the point completely. There is joy inherent in bringing forward the unique gifts that we have, and a part of this, on some level, is knowing our mortality - that we don't have forever. We get just a few seasons, if that, when we know what we want to say, and have the means to communicate.

From time to time, I've had the feeling that all of art, or much of it, comes from joy. It is an overflowing of the spirit in us and around us. Think about it. It serves no utilitarian purpose, for example, to dance, or to add color, or to trace out letters with lovely elaborate calligraphy, but something in us *wants to* adorn this world and our being here together, and that is art. It is ephemeral, as we are, and lasting, as in – it speaks of eternal spiritual principles, and we are also that.

There is one more piece I need to at least try to say something about, when it comes to taking the realization of impermanence as a way to awaken joy in us, and that is my feeling simply that we are made to love. Loving others and this world, expands our being here. It brings fulfillment that isn't found if we are just focused on ourselves alone. Love is the expression of an insight we can base our lives on, one where we see beauty and value things rightly.

When we bring together our loving with an awareness of impermanence – that we are just here together like this for a very short and not fixed time,

after all, it brings out the very best that we have to give, the fullness of our love. In our heart, we hold nothing back, and there is real release and a deep pleasure in that.

Looking back, when we remember those times that we needed a friend and someone was there for us, we know how important it is to try to care for one another. Acting to help and to support others brings the greatest meaning and fulfillment to our lives.

The truth is just this: that we *can* care for each other here while we are together, and when we do this, the quality of our actions and words, and our love, continue on beautifully in the lives we have touched. As remarkable as it may sound, in a way, when we love we partake of something eternal.

When we see the truth about our being here – that it doesn't last forever like this, then we want to make the most of it for one another. This life that we have together right now is so precious, every day, every waking hour, every minute of it. When we feel this way, we can be sure that the realization of impermanence has become a cause of joy. That is the sign.

When I am able to foster this understanding, my prayers become bright and clear and abundant. The realization *I am alive today*, springs up in me as a celebration, and my wanting to tell you *I love you*.

## Meditation on Death

### Why meditate on death

Of all the subjects of spiritual study, that of death is one that is mostly avoided. This is a great loss, because so much good can come from it. Even with some small experience, reflecting on death can cut our pettiness, and materialism, our short sighted pleasure seeing and escapism, and empower all the good things we would do in this life. It can deepen our appreciation for the gifts we've received in the form of teachers and family, friends, education, our health and the beauty in the arts and our natural world. If we are not appreciative of these things, it's not just a loss on the intellectual level. The whole quality of our lives is diminished.

Gratitude is a heart that is awake to what we have received. If we don't see this time as brief, and not lasting, we can miss the fullness of our being here together. It can be like eating a meal without tasting the food. We can thoroughly enjoy our being together, the sight, sound, and touch of the love we share. We should be doing no less than this. But instead, without the awareness of our own death, and that of others around us, the result is small mindedness, with wrong values.

Three stages of realization - intellectual understanding, experience, and realization

In reading about the Heart Sutra recently, I came across one teaching from Bokar Rinpoche that I find very helpful in describing the process gaining and embodying insight. He said that the first stage is intellectual understanding. This is followed by personal experience of what is taught. By repeated experience, meditation that is familiarization with some truth, we come to realization, which is when a particular insight is with us all the time.

I know some people stop at the stage of experience and become proud. They think they have nothing more to learn, and their ego then takes up an identity of someone who is accomplished in that subject. What happens eventually is that the experience fades, or different conditions arise and the insight vanishes, along with whatever virtues or inner freedom was there previously.

I think this is what happens too often with even well known teachers. They may have even deep experiences that last a long time, and they may be able to speak or write about them in inspiring ways, but because they are not realized, the experience falls away. Then they are left pretending, or with their students projecting onto them the idea of a perfect teacher. Humility would have gone a long way to keep them from going off the rails, but then, being humble has never had been as profitable, financially or from the ego's point of view, as teaching in words only, with an unacknowledged distance between what they say and their level of embodying the fruits of a teaching.

Which brings me back to the meditation on death, and how it's taught and mostly studied in Buddhism. I know that for these teachings to be effective for me, I need to have the experience of what they are talking about, that we all die, that the time of death is uncertain, and so on, and I have had some experience with this over the years. It hasn't stayed with me, however, and so I'm left with a very few choices - I can go on trying to realize these teachings in much the same way as I have before, going over them point by point, reflecting on them and making connections with my own life, or I can try something different, with the same aim in mind.

The holy no

I'm not rejecting the traditional ways of teaching and practice to say they haven't completely worked for me. Nor am I criticizing those who study and practice in a certain framework, like that of the lam rim, or stages of the path teachings. It's just that I've found myself inured to this way of

studying and trying to gain understanding, experience and realization. It may be my own dullness at times, but there is something else here too.

I've long felt that I've needed to make the teachings my own for them to work for me, and occasionally I even advocate that others do this as well. It really comes down to what works for us, doesn't it, and most of the time I don't hear this expressed in traditional teachings. Of course, the teachings have been effective for centuries being given and practiced this way, so why on earth would anything need to change? There's even a risk we would water down the teachings, or miss something essential to change them one iota. Passing down a partial teaching or one that has been rendered ineffective because of our laziness would be inexcusable, and a great tragedy. This is our spiritual life we are talking about here, however, where no one can practice for another.

If the teachings as we have received and practiced them do not work to get us the results of realization, and inner freedom, then we are entirely within our rights to look elsewhere, or to work with teachings in whatever way is effective to that end. This is where what I call '*my holy no*' comes to the fore.

I call this 'the holy no'

There is such a thing as neurotic dissatisfaction, where nothing whatsoever would work to make us happy, whether it be in a relationship, or in our writing or art, or spiritual life. That kind of mind, perpetually unhappy, is essentially unfixable. It's never known contentment and it carries no clear sense of what it is looking for.

Marge Piercy has a poem called *The Perpetual Migration* that begins with the line, *How do we know where we are going?* Something in us knows, and so she evocatively tells us what it's like

*the seabird on its four-thousand-mile  
trek follows charts mapped on its genes.*

*The brightness, the angle, the sighting  
of the stars shines in the brain luring  
till the inner constellation matches the outer.*

Without this inner sense, making our way through life, we'd never know if our saying yes or no was leading us anywhere. But if we have a feeling for what we want, *even if it's never been seen before*, it guides us. It may seem like a lot of saying no is involved but this no is sweeter than all the yesses that were not what we wanted in our depths.

I call this 'the holy no' because it leads us to our own truth, that no one can take from us, that can't be argued or bargained away, and that stands up to every challenge. It is addition by subtraction, a gain in every way.

With that said, I can criticize traditions or methods that haven't worked completely for me, or at least set them aside. I know the complaint that is built into systems of thought and practice say I haven't tried them diligently or consistently enough, but then, they don't really know, now do they? Perhaps for some of us, we need another way to the same result (perish the thought - it's not in their purview to think this, or else the very ground would shift under their feet). Some teachers accept this freedom from their students, some do not.

I remember in Plum Village, in 1990, in a small group tea we were having with Thich Nhat Hanh, my telling him I was there for what I could learn from him, and that as soon as I had receive that I'd be going somewhere else. I didn't mean to sound belligerent but perhaps it came out that way. I got the same look the from him then that I saw him giving me a year earlier, at my first retreat with him in California, and that was a look of approval and encouragement, a look that communicated a great deal in a few seconds, and that has stayed with me lo these 28 years. He and Lama Yeshe, my two main teachers are that in part because their adhering to and transmitting their traditional teachings hasn't bound them to one way of thinking. Their compassion and intelligence gives their students the

courage to find what is effective for them.

What I know about death

I can say very briefly all I know about death because it's not very much at all. I can list those people close to me who have passed away:

My father

Dennis Gould

Frances Rath

Ivan St. John

My grandmother and grandfather on my father's side

My mother's uncle Herbie

Alfonso Texidor

Betty Foote

a young man who was a twin, hit by a car one night on his way home,  
when I was in high school  
an engineer where I worked on Spear St., here in San Francisco - also by car  
accident

Kurt Renshaw, my first classical guitar teacher

my teachers Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche,

Bokar Rinpoche,

and Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche

James (Vietnam vet, lived in the building where my mother lives; went  
blind toward the end of his life; I would shop for him sometimes...}

Christian Pieper

Jerry Mandel

Bill Marsden

David Ford

Giac Tahn (Plum Village)

Luis Garden Acosta

Raquel Cintron  
 Dave Heath  
 Gerena Valentine  
 Dan Silva  
 Richard Hackney (Fields Bookstore)

Not a long list, considering how many have died, and how death is around us every day.

I know vaguely that I will die one day, and that my mother and sister and oldest friends, Bill and Andy will too. My understanding of this though is shallow, and almost meaningless as more than words.

*What does this mean then, at present, that I will die, or that my loved ones or those I'm less close to will die?*

*It means that, even if I wanted to see them, I couldn't. It means that they will almost certainly leave unfinished work.*

Whatever I or they are doing will remain just as it is on that day, forever, with them never again adding anything more to it.

*It means grieving.* Some people are grieved for more than others, that's for sure. Some have almost no one who cares whether they live or die. Most of us have a few who will grieve for us, feel deep sadness they weren't more kind or forgiving or generous, who will miss being with us.

*It means fear,* certainly, such that most people do all they can to avoid *even thinking* about death.

I know this feeling very well- that it's too much to take in and incorporate into our lives as they are day to day.

I know also that it is a great loss not to realize the truth of impermanence,

because when I have even a little experience of reflecting on even this much, some deeper knowing can stir in me, something that recognizes this truth, that I don't have forever here, that none of us do, and that petty grievances, unforgiveness, stinginess, indulgence, and materialism as an end in itself are all meaningless.

I read recently, from Bhante Gunaratana:

*The deeper your awareness of impermanence, the easier it is to practice metta.*

Having the experience of understanding this much about death, I've long felt, radically changes my priorities, my inner landscape. That it comes and goes shows how far I am from this realization.

There are times though, because of this clarity, that I become more generous, naturally, holding nothing back; it becomes easier to practice Dharma, and to practice it purely.

*I know I need this* because there is so much I still want to do, and to give, and that I can be held back by wanting it to be somehow more perfect than it is. I procrastinate, or I am lazy, not believing enough in myself or my teachers and what they offer, not believing deeply enough in the strengths and virtues that are available and that work mostly unseen in our lives.

I know this and have seen how it can be many times over the years, when I remember even this much. I value things so much more, this day, these senses, these gifts. I also know that the feeling fades and I can and do most of the time end up with nothing of this but perhaps an abstract, ineffectual intellectual understanding. Clearly something more is needed, for me at least.

*Beyond this, death is a mystery...*

So where does this leave me? I know this is a vital subject, for cutting

materialistic values and lesser, worldly desires and motivations. I know I will waste time if I don't find a way to deepen this knowledge and integrate it into my life.

My own life is passing swiftly. I'm 61 now though I don't often take this into account, and most of the time I don't feel any great urgency to go further in my realization of teachings or to complete what I have to give. *It's a form of intelligence though to feel and think this even much today.* This is something I don't have with me often enough and so I will carefully trace out how I've arrived at these feelings, as this is an essential subject for so many reasons. As much as as possible I will try to recreate the causes that have led me this far...

The mind is such an interesting thing, isn't it? Without studying how it works or doesn't work to achieve what we want, no progress is possible. Our happiness and well being and that of others is too important to be left to chance, hence the need for more study, until we can ascertain and make use of our understanding of their causes to create the kind of life we wish for ourselves and all our loved ones.

## Accommodating Loss

*When we are able to have this one understanding, it makes us very real, very down to earth. It clarifies just what is essential about our being here - to care for each other as well as we can...*

My dear sister Nadine, my heart-friend,

Thank you so much for your message today. Please know that I am here for you. Your note made me want to write out a few words from my heart for you, with much gratitude that we can communicate about these things.

As you know, my father passed away 6 years ago, and I've had plenty of time since then to think about the significance of his life, and of being his son. Gradually, I've come to accommodate, or to hold this truth, and it has been transformative.

Before 2014, of course as a Buddhist, I'd studied and reflected on impermanence, loss, the uncertainty of our lives and opportunities here. It's only with the experience though, when we know loss personally, either through the death of someone dear to us, or some life-threatening illness that these truths really become clear.

If we're fortunate, we may hear that *'life is uncertain'* or that, *'we're only here for a short time'*, but until we know this directly, it's an idea at best. Most people don't think about this truth at all, in fact, as we can see. They do all they can to avoid it in fact, and even for those who have the words in front of them, it doesn't really penetrate. Most of us live in a fantasy world in that way, actually. This is then reflected in how we value our lives here, the opportunities it offers, as well as how we treat others.

Occasionally, on account of the strength of realization of a great teacher, like Lama Zopa Rinpoche, we can wake up, temporarily, and then our

values change for a time. We may find ourselves that day being more gentle, and generous, forgiving, grateful, patient, and attentive.

This needs to be continued, of course, but it is so different from the common way we relate to one another, and to our world that having this insight, even temporarily, makes a deep impression.

I wanted to tell you about how, after my father passed away, I found myself walking down the street, and suddenly feeling an upwelling of grief, and tears coming down my face. Eventually I wrote out a poem I would recite to myself several times a day, and that helped a great deal. Perhaps you remember. It said:

*If I start out amazed,  
everything is ok, even dying  
but if I lose the thread,  
I fall to pieces again*

*Maybe the usual is not being here,  
and what is altogether extraordinary  
is to move, to feel, to see color...*

*A hundred times a day,  
I decode the wonder of your smile,  
and wake in a grace-filled world  
This changes everything...*

It's a change in our usual thinking that comes through this experience, like a fire that opens seeds so new growth can begin. I'm sure you understand what I mean.

*You know a rainbow* is made of different elements coming together for a time *just so* - the sunlight, and the water in the air, and our own vision. Exactly like this, the music we hear and the colors we see are unique; the people we

know and what we are able to share with each other is also just for this one time only. Imagine if every rainbow we saw, and every flower and every song was completely unique and just for this one time. We are all the result of countless causes and conditions coming together in just this way at this time. Even if we wanted to re-create a person or an event, or a flower, or a song or a rainbow, it would be impossible. It's all like this, really.

I enjoyed the article you sent, by Lama Zopa. He really is insightful when it comes to these things. I found it especially useful when he brought it back to - this is the nature of our lives here, all of us.

It reminded me of the story, maybe you've heard, of Kisi Gotami, from the Buddha's time, that Ani Tenzin Palmo tells sometimes:

Kisi Gotami lost her young son, and was grief stricken. No one could console her, it seemed, and so, out of compassion they sent her to see the Buddha, who was known to the community as the wisest person. Carrying the body of her child, Kisi Gotami went to the Buddha and asked him for help, to restore the life of her child. The Buddha said, yes, he could help her, and that what she had to do was to bring him a few mustard seeds from a house where no one had died. She went from house to house, and though everyone had mustard seed, and would have gladly given them to her, in every house, someone had passed away. Finally, Kisi Gotami understood this is the way it is here, and went to the Buddha, and asked to be ordained.

What's interesting to me when I hear and think about this story is that the Buddha could have tried to convince her rationally, or give her just some idea, but instead he invited her to walk and to investigate, and to see for herself how it was. Then the message, the understanding would awaken for her. How very skillful he was.

When we know something clearly, our whole life changes

The usual thought we have is one of permanence of our lives here, not that this life is impermanent; it is of certainty, and not of uncertainty. The result is that we don't appreciate our lives or each other deeply enough. The Eight Worldly Dharmas seem to be the focus of most people's lives, surely - {concern with material gain and loss, avoiding pain and seeking pleasure, wanting praise and not criticism, and wanting a good reputation and not a bad one, or obscurity}

Knowledge of impermanence changes all that. It allows for the flowering of love, while we are here, for fulfillment, and even joy, as strange as that might sound until we ourselves experience it.

If this life, being here with you and with my family and all these precious ones everywhere involves being born, aging, sickness and death even, then so be it. I am willing to go through *all this*, no question, if that's what it takes to care for you and my loved ones. The Eight Worldly Dharmas are for those who don't know the meaning, and the preciousness of this life, and the opportunities it affords for liberation and enlightenment for others, and the great purpose of our being here together. Dharma-wisdom conquers all such materialistic values.

Knowing this time is unique and precious, and as brief as a flash of lightning, as fragile as a water bubble, we take care, and are deeply appreciative, and we can even celebrate our time here together.

You may have heard the story of Ajahn Chah, who held up a cup and said,

*I see this cup as already broken, therefore I enjoy it completely.*

To have this opportunity to give, to love and to support and to care for each other, knowing our time together is temporary, this puts *everything* in perspective. It gives us a true perspective, one that is actually in line with

the truth, and so we don't struggle so much, being concerned with things such as aging, or reputation, or accumulating possessions.

Finding our way to traditions and teachers - *Em Ah Ho! How wondrous!*

To meet the Dharma, the teachings of an enlightened being, is really something extraordinary, and something to celebrate each time we take refuge, or read a teaching, or meditate, or pray. With appreciation, we're sure to connect with the Teachings and accomplished teachers again and again, until we have completed the Path. I may not know too many things, but this much I am sure of.

Dedicating the Merit of our practice

There are different readings on the value of prayer, as you know, and of creating and dedicating the merit, or positive energy we have to others. It is only because people's minds are so different that we have these different opinions as to whether such a thing is even possible. But look and see for yourself how it is.

My own feeling is that we receive and benefit from and share the result of our teachers' practice and realization. This much is very clear to me. There are blessings that we receive and share, and time and distance are no barrier, but these are subtle truths, and not evident to the material minded.

You know, this mind of ours is able to conjure up such limited and concrete conceptions, of ourselves, of others and our world, and it usually blocks seeing how we actually exist, the profundity of our lives here. That practice you have heard of, in meditation, of seeing ourselves and others and this world *as being made of light* helps to know how it really is between us. We receive and give light, as kindness, and understanding, and encouragement. This is actually the way it is, without anything at all obstructing it. So it makes sense to me to generate as much positive energy as we can, and to dedicate it to the benefit of all our loved ones, and all

beings. Our lives here are so precious, each one of us, and we do all need nurturing support and care. This is the nature of our lives here.

To accommodate loss now means to me to include in my thinking and values the truth of each precious life, as being here for just a limited and uncertain length of time, and also this life of mine as well, with all its freedoms and opportunities as also being impermanent. *I can anticipate this and include it in my thinking now*, and when I do, I want to take full advantage of this precious opportunity. I want to make the best use of it. My appreciation for each day and each hour of this life grows, and my dedication to using it as well as I can also increases.

Maybe you have heard it said that because this mind of ours is not physical, it can be developed limitlessly. I like this idea very much because what we may have thought of as our potential then has more room to grow. We have to find out for ourselves just what we are capable of while we are here, of just what we can be for one another.

*May all beings everywhere  
be well cared for well by everyone they meet  
May they all come to understand this life,  
and celebrate others, and their own lives here*

*May we all meet enlightened teachers  
and be guided by them in all our lifetimes  
until we too become capable of benefitting others  
wherever they are and whatever their needs*

*May we all mature beautifully on the Path  
May all sorrow and fear be dispelled  
and may we all awaken to the depth and beauty  
and purpose of our lives*

## The Great Benefits of Meditating on Death

For most people, thoughts of death bring up instinctual fear, and sadness, anticipating loss, or remembering loved ones who are no longer here. We need a lot of encouragement to turn and face this truth about our life here. We also need a great deal of courage. But when we first hear about and then experience some of the benefits of enlarging our view to include mortality, the energy comes to take up this profound subject.

Without question, an intuitive knowledge of death cuts pettiness, which by itself is something very practical. It improves our time here. Without energy going to resentment, or to worrying about what others think, or to materialistic values, we find we have a clear mind and a strong heart to accomplish worthwhile aims.

It only takes a short time thinking about death, or being touched by it in our circle, to change our priorities; we go from over valuing small things to knowing what is truly important, universally and eternally about our being here on earth.

The problem then is, our insight doesn't 'stick'. We don't remember death and so we fall again into laziness, and small mindedness, and disengagement with this wondrous life we share. How to remedy this? How to take up the great task of remembering what is essential while we are here?

I look to those teachers who I feel have realized impermanence - such as Lama Zopa Rinpoche, and try, again and again to fathom how he has come to embody this knowledge.

He says that every day we should think, *I'm definitely going to die today*- and it clears up so many problems, to think this way. After doing this so many days, and then not dying, of course, we may think we're fooling ourselves, and become inured to the purpose of cultivating this thought. That's not

the point though. It is to directly challenge the habitual assumption almost all of us have that we will certainly not die today, and that none of our loved ones or co-workers or acquaintances will die either.

Part of what is fascinating about meditations on impermanence is the uncertainty of the exact hour of any of our death. Taking this up fully is bound to make us more alive, and more sensitive to this day, and this hour, and the preciousness of all our loved ones.

We go on missing out on the significance of our lives here, as long as this misconception of permanence remains a part of our habitual ways of thinking. We don't allow for this possibility of death to enter our thoughts because it is too scary to think about; we exclude death from our plans, and from our valuing things now, this moment. We live with persistent false ideas, that things last here, and this brings everything down to a low, mundane level, where indifference, exploitation, and selfishness are the default actions.

What would it be like to walk around for a day with this thought, that today may be my last day? Would I not be more gracious, gentle, forgiving, generous, attentive, and appreciative?

It's interesting to watch the presence or absence of an insight or an understanding, and what conditions remembrance. Surely repetition plays a part in incorporating whatever understanding we have, but there is more to it, I'm sure. A certain sensitivity combined with a courageous willingness to be present is the ground where this understanding can take root.

Lama Zopa has said that low energy or lack of enthusiasm comes from not having meditated enough on death, and I read today in Geshe Sopa's book that the knowledge of death can propel us on the path, to wisdom, liberation and beneficial action. It is surely a power we can harness to accomplish all our noble aims, if only we will take it up.

Seeing impermanence on some level allows us to see all appearances as shimmering and ephemeral- as in - cloud like. As long as the conditions are here for them to remain, we share this world.

We take things to be so concrete, but this is only the character of our concepts, and not what is actually here. Buildings, monuments, libraries, books, people, families, traditions, all these things are here only briefly. They are momentary, infinitely precious and momentary.

My prayers continue on, in mysterious ways. My wishes for you and for you and for you continue on. May you be blessed in every way...

## Two Amazing Possibilities

I find myself alternating between seeing this life and death in one of two ways, both generally and when it comes to Dharma practice. One way I've been thinking about this whole experience here is that - this is it. There is no before or after this, and this one lifetime is all I will have.

I am keenly aware that all Eastern Traditions, and Western Religions too posit a life after this one, and in fact much of their teaching is an exhortation to make the best use of our life here, in preparation for what will come next. I can relate to this, but only theoretically. For the most part, I have few intimations, and no recollection of past lives, and no foresight into any future.

That this is all I know has always felt like it's the result of my own limited senses. But it is my own view I am intent on keeping and basing my spiritual practice upon. I don't fully know what to make of propensities, or affinities other than to say they feel like they began before this one lifetime, but that's as far as I can go with it, at this point.

It is remarkable to think that this life is all there is, to then look on the natural world, to listen to music, to think of loved ones, and of what people have done, and are doing here.

If we are in this world just briefly, I want to appreciate all this to the full, and care for others as well as I can. In whatever way is possible, I want to leave some gifts behind that others can take up and use to good effect. I know it is possible to gain some insight - understanding and to share that with those I am connected with now, and with future generations because this is how teachings and traditions have come to me. They are our most precious inheritance.

To be able to connect with a tradition and incomparable teachers, and to learn from them and share their love and wisdom is fulfillment itself, the only way I can repay even the smallest part of their generosity and care.

When I think that this life is all there is, it makes it easier to let go of petty concerns, and to value things rightly. I can cherish this moment, on this day, and this opportunity for as long as it lasts.

So much of the Buddhist Traditions I'm studying take the other view, that life continues in some way, that I have to at least consider that perspective, even if it's not something I can identify in my own experience. Perhaps I can make my way there gradually, but I could never substitute my own experience for an idea, no matter how much I would like it to be true.

It does feel like some things continue, and I'm reminded of a thought I had many years ago - to the effect that - that to understand birth and death I would need to know the the nature of consciousness and the structure of reality. For some reason, for me, this seemed to put off ultimate questions, in a way that I could then work with teachings. I try not to assume too much about birth and death before these deep subjects can be thoroughly understood.

I can say a lot now about what is here, and what can be found, accessed, and made use of in our lives, to help ourselves and others. Ultimate questions are the greater context in which all this is held. We can use a provisional understanding, until we gain whatever greater clarity and wisdom there is.

When I hold this life in the paradigm of the second astounding possibility, that this life continues, it feels like it opens up in some other ways, as I'm identifying now with what goes on from life to life, what is woven, and enduring through it all. I would have this life flourish in ways that continually benefit myself and my family and all others. Is this not in some ways the same as I wish and intend now?

I'm not sure about linear descriptions of life after life, since I don't fully understand time yet; nor am I comfortable with assuming the forms of life I'm seeing now will be what follows. It feels more like there are many more possibilities than are usually talked about. Consciousness is like this. It can create many forms, many worlds.

Getting hung up on one person or place or event, as I was recently, I was taken far from this place, and brought back. It may have been a dream, or a vision, lasting only seconds, but in just that brief time all my tension and anxiety vanished. What surprises me most about taking the largest perspective I can about my life here and then returning to the particulars, of my relationships here, is that the same imperative remains, which is simply to love.

Whether I am here just this once, or this life goes on in some ways, just this matters.

Teachings on karma say that the results of our actions can sometimes come only after much time has passed, in one view, perhaps after many lifetimes. This is bound to surely make a person more careful to avoid even the slightest negativity and to cultivate as much good as we can.

Where this meets and matches up with the thoughts and motivations and actions of someone who only sees this one life is that the quality of my care can be the same. Whether this life goes on in the common way I think is being referred to or not, still I want to do all I can to help others get free from suffering and attain peace. That much is *exactly* the same for me.

They say such a project takes great periods of time, and I don't know, to be honest. I can tell some things do take time, but what is variable here, I can't say. The urgency to relieve suffering is the same, the inherent potential we have is the same, and the blessings of our compassionate teachers is the same as well.

I've had to sketch this much out because it's been a part of my thinking for some time now. Both of these possibilities hold this one life of mine and each life I encounter as precious. Both awaken the best I have to offer, for now and for the future. Thinking this through at least places me on the solid ground of honesty about my own limitations at present, with gratitude, and with my eyes open to knowing more fully, in accord with the truth.

## Death and Parking Tickets

As I write this, the wife and brother of a friend are upstairs, on death watch, not wanting to leave his side during his last hours. Another friend is praying for her father, who is also transitioning. At the very same time here, believe it or not, people are still caught up in pettiness, or distracting themselves, not taking hold of the gift of life, while they can.

There is nothing like the finality of death to stop immature attitudes, pride, and small thinking. There is nothing gentle about it. It totally crushes pettiness and confusion about what is important in life; It removes laziness; And it is uncompromising, and complete in its working. The only problem is that we don't let that truth in.

### Distinguishing the meaning-full from the meaning-less

There is this scale we can use, if we choose to see things differently than is commonly taught and accepted in this culture at this time. *We can weigh our lives as they are now and what we take seriously on one side, and death on the other.* This shows with stark clarity when we are living from the heart, with depth and integrity, and when we are not taking our own lives here seriously enough.

Believe it or not, some people think it's perfectly reasonable to get upset over completely meaningless things like a game, or getting a parking ticket, or feeling they are not liked, or attractive enough; So what? Some people think the greatest thing in the world would be praise and acclaim, or getting some money for what they do. What madness! This kind of thinking utterly falls apart in the face of death, if only we have the courage, and the compassion for ourselves and others to face it squarely, head on.

We may think we are not up to it, and that may be true for the moment - but that won't stop the nature of things here.

Not only is death our common lot, every one of us, but no one knows how long any person has here. One aspiration prayer says that we should *live as though we were at the threshold of death*. Very few expect death, or train themselves along the lines that Lama Zopa encourages us, to think that *This is my last day here...* or to at least recognize that it may be so for us, and for others...

Seeing even this much puts things in perspective, appreciating our lives here. It is enough to make us considerate, gentle, respectful, generous and forgiving. We clearly know what is important, and what is not. When those traits are absent, it's a sure sign there is no realization happening for a person, no matter how educated or intelligent they may otherwise seem to be.

There's a phrase from Lama Tsong Khapa's teachings that I choose to translate as '*to realize the purpose of this life*'. For everyone, unique as we all are, naturally, this will be different. What realizing the purpose of our lives here on earth has in common for us all, from what I can tell, is twofold: The first is that, when we find our own purpose, and do our best to live that life, there is peace that comes from it, and a feeling of wholeness. There is the feeling of fullness, and satisfaction; and the second common characteristic is that when we live out our truth, then everyone benefits.

I'm thinking especially of my teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, as I write this. He is one of the best examples I can come up with of a person who has fully realized his Noble purpose here on earth. To me, he is the most perfect version of himself, and he affirms and supports the unique and precious nature of us all.

He is like the most perfect pine tree imaginable. A pine tree needs to do nothing more than to *be* a pine tree, and all of us benefit from that. It does not feel the need to compare itself to the flowers, or to the mountains, or the rivers, or to try to be like them; each have their own way. In fact, *it's only by fully being what it is made to be that everything else around it can be itself*.

When we live cut off from our own purpose, there's no joy to it, really. Competition, envy, smallness of character, and isolation are the signs of a closed up human life, one that, somehow, hasn't blossomed as it should. It's tragic in a way, because we all have this precious opportunity while we are here to do something truly meaningful with our lives, for ourselves and for one another. In fact, we don't know what we are capable of until we take up this challenge.

As it is now, it feels like most people are not yet equipped to face death - either their own, or that of their loved ones, neighbors and friends. For the most part, in these times, I know that we are not supported in this way of thinking. We simply have not yet developed that kind of courage and strength of mind. Part of the reason for this is our modern materialistic culture, to be sure. I mean, how do you sell more and more unnecessary stuff to people who are aware of mortality? I think that it would be next to impossible.

There is another way though, for those willing to take it, and who see the value of deeper living, and that is to readily take up the contemplations of mortality. When we do this, in a way, it changes *everything* for us. From that point forward, we seek to live fully, and we have the energy to do so. From there, naturally, we will look for teachers that hold nothing back, and who themselves show the way to greater understanding.

*May we all realize our purpose here on earth,  
Care for our precious life, and all our loved ones in the best of ways,  
and courageously find freedom, and fulfillment*

When it comes to birth and death - how exactly would you like things to be?

I find myself after all these years gradually coming to terms with death, and all that is revealed through its agency. From inevitable separation from loved ones, and all we hold dear, to the uncertainty of the time of our, and their leaving this form, and this world, the other aspects of this reality need to be brought forward, to assuage the suffering that attends thoughts of loss and dying itself.

If we were the authors of this creation - I wonder, how would we want it to be? I know that *most of us would not choose that we were never born*. This life has value, even with all its trials, and all that is difficult about it.

What a miracle that we are here! We were not born in *another* time, or *another* place, but in this time, and this place, where there are things such as the warm night sky, daffodils, and Mozart; kinship, and heroic actions uplifting all of us, even when they are not seen, and not talked about.

*Another choice we may wander upon is - keeping things one way for all time*. I remember my mother once saying she would have liked to have stayed 30 years old- that was a great time for her - not too young, not too old, with a family, and some means. But then, I had just been born, and if not for time and aging, I and my brother and sister would not have grown up, and we would not have known each other and had adventures through the years.

Thich Nhat Hanh said that, rather than deploring time and change, we should be saying '*Long live impermanence!*' - as it allows the young girl to grow into a fine young woman, educated, creative, and loving; it allows each season's harvest to ripen, and to feed and sustain us; it allows for change into new ways of being. Keeping things the same always goes against *all* this learning, and growing, new experiences, and maturation.

We may think then that the option of *living here, in these forms, for a very very long time* is an ideal we could hold. But think about that too - at what point would these bodies become only a hindrance, rather than the basis for any enjoyment at all? At 110 years? at 150? No one that I know of reaches that age, but for the sake of reaching some conclusion about what we can embrace as ideal, I offer this for reflection. At some point, I think we'd agree, the usefulness of these forms has a limit.

What would I want for myself, and for my loved ones then?

Given that none of the above options, not being born, living at one age for all time, and living longer and longer in these forms - none of these matches what we'd want for ourselves or others, then what other choices do we have?

We can live here with an awareness of the preciousness of this life, appreciating each day, each hour, our unique experiences, and the richness we are all heirs to;

We can hold the thought of others tenderly, knowing that we are just here together like this for a short, and uncertain length of time; forgiving, generous, gentle, celebratory, supportive, and devoted to one another;

There are some things that matter more to me now, so much so that everything else recedes: Following clear teachings, we can come to life here, freed of depression, freed of small views, and we can help each other on the way. By comparison to what is pursued and exalted by soulless, commercial interest, by petty egos and arrogant folk, stepping into the world of saints and sages and workers brings the most satisfaction, and quiet joy.

Once we know what we are here for, living and even death and dying is much easier.

We are born into a mystery, live surrounded by sacred wonders and brilliant, beautiful lives; for this time, however long it lasts, we are woven, part of one another. If we are awake to this much, life is a joy. Each day, there are treasures to be known, and shared with all our family, and with all the world.

## Taking Stock

If I were to die today, - not an impossibility, I should realize- what would feel unfinished? What would I take with me? What would I regret? What would I feel most grateful for?

What have I given too much importance to?, and what have I not spent enough time with?

This life is passing swiftly, laden with mysteries and wonders to be seen; it is not guaranteed, though we pretend it is out of fear, out of not being ready, out of the non acceptance of this truth of our all our being here, all of us, 'companions in birth and death'.

Does this not make my heart soften towards those who, like me, have wasted precious time? those who have not yet found a deeply meaningful purpose?

A human being like myself is not just a dumb consumer, shades drawn, windows boarded up as the days and nights, seasons and years and decades go by, and so much goes unseen, and not responded to in the least.

Many times, it's as though we are asleep, or dead to at all, even while we are here and alive.

A human, divine in nature, reduced in a way to less than animal instinct, in intelligence and caring for those around him...

*Have mercy!*

The shock of meeting death and dying is no less for being unprepared, and yet that is just a small part of the loss. What could have been has got to be the saddest, most tragic words possible to say at the conclusion of anyone's life here.

I take stock today, this hour, and see for me, it's not been all loss, and for that I'm grateful to my parents and teachers, and for having been able to do something meaningful for others. This much also I will take with me, wherever I go, if there is some continuation for me, in some way.

I know it sounds like I am blank here - going forward facing impenetrable darkness, but it's only my self honesty - that ability to say I don't know - that makes me trust when I do have some sure knowledge.

I still have aims, given more time, and these are clear to me, more so now.

I can effect other lives, I know, seeing as they weather some of the same dynamics I find in myself. I can only pray for a better day today, less encumbered, filled with the same light we've all known in better times.

Faith and the willingness to face the unknown move in me, as a catalyst, as a blessing.

## The Wisdom of Impermanence

So many people here in the USA, in the 21st century give no thought at all to inevitable change and death, either their own, or that of others. Those who are more fortunate have advance warning. Either they come close to dying, or a loved one passes away, or experiences a life threatening illness. Whether the lessons they learn then stay with them or not, for a time at least they are profoundly changed by those experiences.

Whether we see this truth about our being here together makes such a great difference in how we value our lives, and those of others. If we don't recognize our mortality, tragically, we will overvalue the small, and not appreciate what is great about our being here. We stand at the threshold then of gain or loss, of either richness or impoverishment.

I imagine this evening that there are those looking at their own lives coming to an end here; and that their looking at the mirror of dying and death gives a true account of what was done and left undone. At these times, regrets, or vividly clear gratitude arise naturally; we can be amazed by how much time was wasted, but seeing that dwelling on that now is useless, letting go also arrives at this time.

At best, *pure love arises*, for all those we knew and cared for, for all the gifts we received, for the adventures shared, even when we missed out in knowing each other - and compassion can settle these accounts before we part one last time.

Not seeing the advantages of being intimate with change and mortality, we really do waste this unique opportunity to celebrate together, and *to be of use* to one another, which is the purpose and fulfillment of our being alive. Some few people center this knowledge, as essential to living generously, and those contemplatives, I honor. They aim to carry the wisdom of death and dying with them their whole time here, and its effects are nothing short of miraculous.

Where other methods require a lot of effort to change our attitude, with *this one recognition*, so much that what was difficult before comes on its own. See if it is so:

Gentleness, forgiveness, generosity, joy and delight in beauty and in simple things; humility, devotion to our teachers, clarity, energy to accomplish our aims, and the will to connect with others- all these are there, effortlessly, when there is knowledge of our present situation here on earth.

We are born and live for a time. The length of our lives is not fixed, one and the same for everyone, and this is an uncertain place.

Embracing these truths, instead of running away from them, we come fully alive, for as long as we are here. Our life becomes a gift.

We can notice by our attitudes and actions if we have deeply rooted our understanding of change and dying. If pettiness, short sightedness, and a lack of enthusiasm are present, it's sure that we haven't actually realized the significance of the temporal nature of our lives here.

Some recoil, fearing the unknown, and the unfamiliar. We can say then that they are like a flower, or that they are like a kingdom that has not yet opened to the world. Whole lives can pass this way, and then one day, there can be an awakening.

We all need encouragement, and our whole family welcomes us to this fuller life.

We carry the gift, as remembrance.

## Garlands for Thomas

*Gone to the Ancestors.*

*Praise to the All-Illuminating Light of the World!*

I heard the translator Thomas Cleary passed away this last week. I don't know what to make of that, such a simple term, the opening of a mystery...

Perhaps we take one of two paths when meeting a mystery. The first, the one taken almost all the time, is to reduce it in our thinking to something manageable. This is done out of fear, which I understand, and out of a lack of faith in our own ability to engage what is right here.

It may be a simplification too, but it bears at least trying to say, the second possibility when meeting a mystery is humility, with joy, and reverence, an opening, more and more, that says *I want to know...*

I got to see Thomas Cleary once in the 1990's, in Berkeley, and like a lot of people who went, I just wanted to see if he was real, because he was the very definition of prolific. I would joke with people that there had to be more than one of him, 'the Thomas Clearys', so to dispel this grasping at a simplification, I and others went. He was humble and clearly not in his element, which we all knew was somewhere in a study, doing what he was made to do.

Among his many books, he translated the Avatamsaka Sutra, and if this would have been all he had accomplished, we'd rightly sing his praises for all generations. But no, this guy was a wonder.

I think he'd tell you he was inspired, as so much of his work has this uplifting, passionate, illuminating nature that can't be put into a formula, or easily understood from the outside, but it is inviting, most of all, and that was his gift.

I needed to celebrate him today, since we're all so indebted to him, especially Western Buddhists, and those connected to them.

I think he was motivated all throughout everything he did by bodhicitta, the aim to benefit all of life in the best ways possible. He arrived here, and everything else flowed naturally, and abundantly from that.

Here is one passage from the Avatamsaka that says it well:

Seeing the world of sentient beings,  
so full of afflictions,  
bodhisattvas arouse their energy,  
thinking,

*'I should rescue and liberate these beings;  
I should purify and emancipate them;*

*I should lead them,  
direct them,  
make them happy,*

*develop them,  
and cause them to reach perfect peace.'*

Thus dedicated to the salvation of all beings,  
the bodhisattva reflects thus,

*'By what means can these beings,  
fallen as they are into such misery,  
be lifted out of it?'*

and it occurs to these bodhisattvas,

*'The means to do this is nowhere else*

*but in the knowledge of liberation...'*

The bodhisattvas thus devote themselves  
to their realization of the Buddha's Way.

From The Avatamsaka Sutra - 722

To express it in Avatamsaka language, Thomas Cleary took up this task and  
opened countless doors, throughout countless realms, to countless Buddha  
Fields...

*Oh, the Celestial Music,  
and full green leaves tell of a new season,  
one never before seen*

*We who follow gather the buds that fall,  
and carry them home*

## Meeting This Life the Way It Is

The problem with talking about death in any kind of an organized way is that it doesn't match the experience, except from a distance. Where some teaching or outline may be true, as conclusions, or as something to reflect on when we can, the experience itself of going through a loved one's death or the threat to someone's life is anything *but* organized, and coherent, fitting neatly onto the pages of a book.

I have this challenge because traditional teachings are important to me, and even more important is what they point to - that we should have this awareness, and that it should influence how we live, and see each other, and how we leave this world.

The experience of being with death for most people, myself included, is one of overwhelming sadness, fear, confusion and pain. How can this be talked about in a way that doesn't leave anyone out, and that also brings the best of what we have to offer one another into these experiences?

Most people we can see live in complete denial of death, and all that is held in this truth - that we and our loved ones as will leave this world and this life as we know it. When it happens, it comes as a shock to most. It is unwanted and not accepted by some right up to the very end.

We also live for the most part without any vital sense of *the uncertainty of each of our lives here*- that they can end for all kinds of reasons, at any time, and that this can happen to any one of us. We like to think we have control. When someone dies, we ask how it happened, so that we can avoid it happening to us and those around us. It's discomfoting when we hear that we don't know how someone died.

So much of this is beyond our total control, some things, yes, we can manage, but there's a great mystery we live in the midst of here, that we

call birth and death. The world gets bigger and more compelling when I'm able to see even this much.

The times when I'm keenly aware of this truth feels like I'm waking up from some stupor, or like a light is on that I had no idea about before. Everything is seen differently- past mistakes, present sufferings and good fortune, even the future, as far as I can see. It changes what I aim for, and the clarity and strength of my motivations.

As much as I love teachings that have come down to us as a part of traditions, I have to be honest with myself and say they haven't always worked for me, as something that hits home, and turns my mind in a positive direction, or as something empowering. I can't say that it's the teaching's fault alone, of course, since some glimmer of experience or insight has come up for me, at times, even if it's been brief and lacking any real power to change my life.

No, something more is needed, and this becomes so personal at this point, that it's almost irrelevant to write about. After all, these are conclusions a person would have to come to for himself or herself for them to make any sense. But I'll say it here for my own sake. Others may also have these same sentiments, I'm sure, but it's very hard to talk about such matters, let alone share any deeper truth.

What I'm thinking is that there are different ways to see, different ways to learn and to awaken some awareness, and this is where study, personal inquiry and reflection become more like an art than an equation. It would be great if we could itemize this and then if I and everyone else could get the full benefit from insight into this truth of impermanence, but it just doesn't work that way.

Watching documentaries on death and dying, these are real people, real illness, real tears, real fear and sadness and confusion and at times amazing courage we're witness to. So much of that doesn't come across through the

abstract analysis and conclusions offered by traditions. There is this... distance.

Here, *of all places*, our heart should be awake, should be moved. *Then* we are compassionately present for our own lives, and for the lives of others, for our loved ones, and all who we are sharing this world with, near and far.

We need art and poetry to awaken some sense of these truths more fully. It's not nearly enough to just understand these things intellectually. To go just that far doesn't help ourselves or others very much at all. *We should use every means to know the truth about our lives here, and then to act on that knowledge.*

I think if teachers in the past had these resources of well made films available, they would have used them to accomplish their aims, of helping us to awaken, to be free and to reach fulfillment. This much is new for our generation, and we should take advantage of it.

Some immutable light of clear understanding is what we need when it comes to dying and death.

When we say a light is on, it does not flicker. It is steady, and we can use it to see by at night. Perhaps a better analogy than electricity here would *the light of a small fire*. When it is just starting, it needs to be fed with more material that will light. Then, once it gets going, it needs to be maintained, tended to, and increased.

I don't know how to go about this, except to say what *doesn't* catch the meaning, or doesn't last long in my mind and heart.

What to make of this- aging and the shunted away in our society, the sick and dying? What to make of uncertainty of our own lives here? and all the pain of fear and grief?

I have heard and I know firsthand how when someone we love dies or when their life is threatened, *then everything stops*. There can be chaos. There is no set time then for eating or sleeping or work, the mundane things that take up most of our time when we're not going through it.

*The world is turned upside down*. What wasn't visible before now is all we see, from the time we wake up until we finally fall asleep, whenever that rest comes. I think this much is universal, and they happen for us in our own unique way.

We know that *this time has its own rules*. Most people know this intuitively, and respect it. Others can't touch this truth and so they offer platitudes, being themselves unable to offer anything more. Lacking insight, but still being of good will, or being uncomfortable with staying in that place, of uncertainty and fear, friends and family members each show us what they are capable of in these times.

So much of what we do and aim to do we see now as meaningless, but how to say this for someone who has no sense of our mortality, and all that comes with meeting this truth about our own lives and all those we know and love?

Some people, a relative few, have an intuition of the importance of living well, with depth and purpose, and this is only because of some part of us being awake for time.

The other aspects of realizing this truth is that we go lighter for a while, with more strength and courage. Little things or others' actions don't reach us, and even misunderstandings fall away like leaves in autumn. Surely tenderness, forgiveness, love and compassion, and generosity have to follow.

## Solving for X

In math,  $x$  represents an unknown quantity. The challenge then when we're given an equation is to figure out the value of  $x$ , so that we can put that formula to practical use. When we do that we say we have 'solved for  $x$ '.

Living gives us many unknowns, and the most compelling of these is the subject of death. In this place and time, most people's relationship to death and dying is one of denial, or ignoring it completely. As comfortable as this may be, to not think about it, this approach isn't useful, and it has some real shortcomings. Like a shadow, fear and sadness often accompany this failure to account for death. People then lead lives without a sense of meaning, and without gratitude or much care about others. We can say in a sense they have not solved this problem.

It's important that we are able to factor death and dying into our living while we still can. Without an awareness of these truths, our lives are shallow, and not grounded. We can actually lose this opportunity to be here with each other fully, and compassionately, since we will all go through experiences of loss, and we will all need to face our own mortality at some point.

One of the most difficult aspects of incorporating death into living is that we only go through some things once, and so there is really no way to be completely prepared for our own dying, or for the unique passing on of a loved one.

What's more, we need to somehow account for *the uncertainty* about the time and circumstances of death. This can be frightening, but also, after a long while thinking about it, reflections along these lines can be liberating in a way. When done well, so that this insight is kept in mind, it effects our values. We take much less for granted, and with some things that we may have hesitated to say, or to try to do, we can more easily make an effort.

To say *we have solved this challenge* would mean the sense of fear that accompanies thoughts about death are much less, or that they are no longer present at all. It also serves then as a clarifying and motivating force for the good. We all naturally want to live our best lives while here, for as long as it lasts. If it feels like a blessing to be alive today, with these resources, and these abilities, and these dreams and visions, then this is the tangible power of assimilating the sense of the unknown.

## Wisdom Teachings and Meditations on Impermanence

### A Preface

When I was in my 30's, I was given a koan by the Abbot of a monastery in Southern Thailand, Ajahn Poh. I saw him walking one morning and decided to ask him a question that was heavy for me. As I remember it, I said,

*Ajahn, I can accept my own death, the finality of it, and that I don't know when it will come. I've made my peace with that, but what I can't accept is the thought of the death of my loved ones, especially my mother. How should I think about this so that I have peace?*

And Ajahn Poh said,

*When impermanence is seen with the fleshly eye, it is just suffering, but when impermanence is seen with the eye of Dhamma, it is the end of suffering.*

I've thought a lot about what this means over the years, asking myself *What is the view of death that brings an end to suffering?*

Although the Thai Theravada Tradition doesn't use the term 'koan', such a deep question has the same function as in zen. It engages the mind and heart, and if one follows it to the point of insight-wisdom, it leads to resolution, and to freedom.

Milarepa had the same challenge before him when he said,

*Having fear of death, I escaped to the mountains,  
where I attained the citadel of the deathless  
Now, no matter what may come,  
I have no fear*

Early on in my contemplations of this matter of death, I was able to see that there were some things I needed to clear up, or come to understand before I could address the deeper truth of impermanence and death. I remember thinking that in order to understand death, I would need to understand

the structure of being

and

the nature of perception

At that point, I was able to set aside trying to understand death straight away, but now that I have some understanding that I am satisfied with of both of these, I can address the deeper nature of our lives here, with an aim of ending the suffering that so often attends what we call death.

First, here is the briefest sketch of my thoughts on the requisites I set for myself, and that led me here. I've written about these at length in other places, for those who are interested.

The Structure of Being - Leaving One's Small Room, and Entering the Larger World

For me, the Avatamsaka Sutra teachings, and especially the practices that lead a person to experience what they say in that text make clear that we are so much more than we believe when clinging to ordinary views, of ourselves, and our world.

It is surprising to me how limited people's accounts of other lives are, how similar to this one we all know and agree on in general. Even here, there are countless worlds, and we can glimpse some of them, commune and receive benefit from them as well. This is what is talked about freely in the Avatamsaka Sutra. It is the way our lives actually are here. We are not bound by what is seen with our five senses. There is some kind of

awakening needed to enter this realm, this fuller way of being, but it's not beyond any of us, if we get good instructions, from qualified teachers, and make some efforts to learn to see.

### The Nature of Perception - The Ten Dharma Realms Are Not Outside a Single Thought

We do create the worlds we experience, collectively and personally. To see this is surprising, and liberating at the same time. We need only test out this proposition to see how far it extends. The hells, the hungry ghost and animal dispositions, as well as human and deva consciousnesses are all potentials we have, innately, and this should be known as something fundamental. Instead, most people have fixed assumptions of who they are and who others are. Not having investigated, these concrete conceptions form the basis for a limited sense of this life and our possibilities.

Where else is compassion and aspiration to fulfillment found except this deeper view of our nature here?

It is enough at times to face death with a heart full of love, saying,

*No matter how long my life is here, I'm going to use it to care for others as best I can.*

and,

*No matter how long my loved ones are here, I will cherish them fully.*

This attenuates much of the fear and pain that comes with the thought and the actuality of change and death, but it doesn't resolve the suffering, at last, in the way I believe Ajahn Poh was encouraging me to see my way to.

The essays that follow this one are my thoughts on the deeper truth of this subject.

*You Can't Step in the Same River Once* was written about 10 years ago, and it is the end result of looking at change in a way that is informed by the Middle Way teachings.

In retrospect, I can see how my intuition years ago was correct, that the simple questions I had then about death were not true questions - meaning that, in a way, they had no answers because they were based on mistaken premises. I knew that until these were cleared away, the answers wouldn't satisfy.

The second essay, *Continual Transformation*, is about truly seeing things as they are. Birth and death, as Thich Nhat Hanh said, are not true concepts - in that they don't match what is actually here. Knowing this distinction is seeing with the Dhamma Eye.

{I will include one poem following this preface, Seeing courage and joy in the colors of a butterfly's wings, and two reflections, Praise and Gratitude, and Now I understand, that I wrote for my father's memorial. I came across these again recently, and though the last two they were written years ago, they relate naturally to these themes}

Reverse engineering

We can tell if a teaching or an insight has been integrated by watching our reactions to everyday life. If we suffer, it's because we still have wrong view, or mistaken perceptions. We may know something intellectually, or even have a breakthrough experience, and directly perceive some liberating truth, but this needs to be fully known. Until then, more study, reflection, and meditation are needed.

*May all beings be liberated*

*May all beings find freedom and ease*

Seeing courage and joy  
in the colors of a butterfly's wings

Think about how it must be  
from a caterpillar's point of view

weaving a cocoon  
and then staying inside

waiting  
faithfully  
with such trust...

*even though* it had never been seen before by him  
*even though* it had never been embodied before by him

the extraordinary colors,  
and those wings  
that would unfold  
so he *could take flight*

Imagine!

A caterpillar!

Taking flight!

Who would have thought?

and,

more,

How is it we forget

that such things are possible?

So many times  
we have not seen,  
but we trust ahead of time

what will be born  
by our faith  
and courage

all the love in the world

and these colours  
the language of joy

## Praise and Thanksgiving

Praise and thanksgiving are a part of every spiritual tradition for a very good reason - they help us to touch the deepest truths of our being here. We all need to connect with something greater than ourselves, that upholds and sustains us. Especially in times of difficulty, we need to look up:

*My eyes turn to the hills,  
where I have received my help...*

Without this, our view is too small, and we don't know the resources of grace and blessings that have carried us this far, are with us now, and will continue to be with us for all time.

When we praise a brother or sister, a child, or a great and noble teacher, or what is divine in this life, in a way, we return their gift multiplied to them, and help their light to grow even more.

Recollecting what it feels like to have the good in us encouraged, and how vital that is to our flourishing, we will then be sure to go out looking for opportunities to praise and encourage others.

*Isn't the sky beautiful today?*

*Aren't the works of our brothers and sisters and spiritual ancestors in this world a wonder to behold?*

If we start here, every other kind of spiritual work, of contemplation, meditation, prayer and mantra all have energy behind them that they wouldn't otherwise have.

If we can stand back with some objectivity and take the time to appreciate our own work as well, it makes for a feeling of worth and belonging that is

not so easily swayed by changing conditions, common values, or other people's opinions.

*Praise all the good work going on in the world today, all the kindness, all the great far reaching positive motivations that our kin have; all the inventiveness, the generosity, the forgiveness, the genius... it's all here, and it's our praise that helps us to see it, and to be empowered by it!*

I understand now why they call memorial services *celebrations*. It's because the one thing that can fill the huge sense of loss of someone we love is the feeling of gratitude for the gifts we received from them.

I feel so very fortunate to have had Frank Espada as my father, friend and teacher. With his warmth, his courage, generosity, moral clarity, and humor, he enriched my life in so many ways, and he continues to inspire. In the language of Spiritual Traditions, we say *he is a blessing in my life*. He continues this day in so many ways, and, by celebrating his life, we get in touch with that truth.

In the book of James, verse, 1:17, it says that,

*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation, or shadow due to change.*

There is a treasure that endures, and that is what is here with us now.

When it comes to my father's gift, I can see how it is a blessing that continues and even unfolds further over time.

Those of us who knew him were very fortunate, and we will surely keep his gifts with us always. I know they will continue to enrich each one of our lives, and to think about this fills me with wonder, amazement, and joy.

You can't step into the same river once

Subtle impermanence, they say, refers to moment by moment change, but even that is not complete. In reality, things are not things, and so terms like permanent and impermanent do not apply. It's all change.

It would be so much better if we had a vocabulary that consisted entirely of verbs. That would at least be more accurate, and would not be deceptive, as our current use and misuse of language is.

Language rises out of people's minds, and, on a more subtle level, we 'read' each other's minds, for better or worse, and this is what we teach our children- in English at least. 'Johnny is happy', or 'Johnny is sad'. We ingrain ideas of self that way. It would be truer to put an 'ing' onto everything, implying nothing else, without a subject, as this is how it is.

There's the saying, 'You can't step into the same river twice'. Actually, we should say that you can't step into the same river once. That's a more true expression of how things are and can function.

*'Lacking even momentariness...'*

Things are not just permanent or impermanent, they are not even things. What we see is lacking even momentariness.

We use the concept of impermanence to get unstuck from the idea we have superimposed onto life events, of permanence, but what then? The idea of impermanence also has something that needs to be seen and gotten past, and that is that there is some *thing*, some kernel or nucleus that is somewhat fixed, a 'self' that is changing. This is called reification, or solidifying things, people or events in our thinking. It can be gross or subtle, but it is with us until it is consciously unlearned.

Wisdom, in Buddhist practice, always aims to see through the false appearances to our mind. We don't discard what is actually here, but we can learn to recognize our superimpositions onto the ever-changing reality. This changes everything for us.

As long as we *don't* do this, and, on the contrary, continue to grasp at and hold onto 'selves' where they are not, on investigation, seen to exist, then the basis for all the afflictive emotions- all the fear, sadness, greed and aggression- will always be there too.

Such is the nature of appearances for the average person- they seem to exist in a way they actually do not, but we can train our mind to experience in another, reality based way.

The great master, Kalu Rinpoche said that when someone gives us some problem, we should see them as transparent, and dedicate all our merit to them. This takes care of both the conceptual level- fixating on and solidifying a sense of self and others, and it also corrects the emotional, or qualitative level, where we have likely at least withheld our goodwill, if not actually wished another harm.

To consider that 'things are not impermanent either, because there are no *things*'- that is seeing through the labels we produce, the 'mere names' that we give, and not getting caught in them. Many people get stuck here. If 'things' are impermanent, then they are born, they die, they increase, they decrease, and so on. All that is based on mistaken thinking. It doesn't match the reality that Buddhism teaches us we can see and know for ourselves.

This is what we need to directly perceive, without the intermediary of ideas about 'it is this way', or 'that way', and without borrowing conclusions arrived at by others, and substituting it for our own personal experience.

Where things begin and end, we can't say. We can't encompass that with our concepts. What we are now is also beyond what words can describe, but it is something we can experience.

Not caught, there is space and light; there is peace, profound connection, and, ultimately, there is love.

May we live with this understanding.

## Continual Transformation

Mythology can be a point of entry to understanding Buddhist Wisdom teachings. It can also illuminate something of the nature of our lives here.

Traditional Buddhist teachings say that we are without a fixed, independent self. This concept can be seen through in a number of ways, and when this is done what we are left with is an interdependent nature, one that is beyond birth and death, and is always changing.

In the language of mythology, we can say we are shape shifting, but with the exception here that there is no basic form we return to.

We can say we are always changing in appearance, and also inwardly, there being no fixed identity. In our fixation, we take hold the appearances to our mind, and then believe them to be what and who we are and who others are for all time. Our thoughts of birth and death follow on this, on account of misunderstanding.

Ordinary beings, they say, 'cycle through the six realms' of samsara, without control, whereas sages, by their right view, transcend deluded, uncontrolled rebirth.

From a Buddhist point of view, there are other distinctions we can add here. One is that there is more right here than what is seen when we fix on any one appearance.

*A person can manifest as anything*

This is redeeming to know, since we tend to see the deluded, the troubled, the lost among us and believe that's all there is to them, that they, or we are only and forever that one way.

This says: *transformation is always possible.*

A warning here is called for too, really, since a person can go from bad to worse, but the thought that they are 'only that' is easier to overcome once we've been introduced to a view that touches on this truth.

*We all have the potential for liberation and enlightenment, called Buddha Nature, and this is what we appeal to when we aim to educate, or mature someone's view and actions. This is the supreme teaching in Buddhism.*

*There is this immutable ground, and knowing this brings humility, and dedication. Anything is possible, from the experiences of the six realms to liberation, and this is why both wisdom and compassion are essential.*

When we see the appearances of birth and death, and when we meet others today, at that time, we should remember our Buddha Nature, and our *continual transformation*.

At this point, because of the possibility of suffering and freedom, we manifest as needed to help others realize their true nature, inherent freedom and potential.

*Homage to all our Noble Teachers,  
and to all who show the way*

## Epilogue

### From Essential Bardo Teachings

#### Introduction

*When we are pared back,  
what remains is prayer*

Each time I return to what are called the bardo teachings in Buddhism, I'm impressed by the fact that the instructions for all of the different states we can find ourselves in is essentially the same: to pray to our true sources of refuge for guidance, and to recognize the nature of mind. Who or what we pray to is surely such a personal matter that it can hardly be spoken of to others, even to those we are closest with, let alone in public. Suffice it to say that whatever source of strength and succor we have found in this world will be what we naturally, spontaneously appeal to in times of uncertainty, and transition, including what we call death.

For those new to what follows, a 'bardo' is an intermediate state, and generally they are thought of as four: that of this life, the process of dying, the state after death, and the state of seeking rebirth. Sometimes two more are added that happen within the first one, the intermediate state of this life - that of dream and of meditation, making six bardos.

My main sources for what follows are, Journey of Mind, by Thrangu Rinpoche, and the bardo teachings of Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche. These are highly recommended.

#### Essential Bardo Teachings

*The instructions for all six bardos is essentially the same: Generate faith and supplicate the Lama and the Three Jewels, and recognize the nature of mind.*

*Whatever aspirations we have now will continue, therefore, make aspiration prayers.*

The instructions on the bardos are meant for our liberation and enlightenment, and so any presentation that clarifies the process of our living, dream, meditation, process of dying, state after death, and that of seeking rebirth can surely be a great help to us.

Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche said,

‘All phenomena, all perceptions and all experiences encountered in any realm or bardo are of the same nature. The experience we are having in this moment is essentially no different from any form of experience anywhere.’

Since circumstances differ, it helps to understand these states, and how we can apply ourselves in each case.

During our life, before the onset of the process of dying and the other bardos, the best thing we can do is to practice the Dharma, which means to weaken unwholesome states and to increase wholesome states. This makes every place we are increasingly free of confusion and the afflictive emotions, and more pleasant and enjoyable, more peaceful and clear, and helpful to both ourselves and others.

Thrangu Rinpoche urges us to cultivate well in this life:

‘Now, whether or not you will be able to withstand the kleshas (negative emotions) (in the in-between state) depends upon your habits from this life. One of the best ways to prevent these kleshas from taking you over in the bardo is through cultivating moral discipline in this lifetime.’

If we are not yet liberated from confusion and the afflictive emotions when going through any of the bardos:

The instructions again, as before, are to remember our teacher and the Three Jewels, and to make aspiration prayers. If we have generated in this lifetime enough faith in these sources of guidance, and want primarily our own safety and well being, then naturally, out of force of habit, we will pray to them for guidance, especially when going through a transition, or time of uncertainty. Now that we have some degree of control, *now is the time* to make strong aspirations, and to develop the habit of turning to our sources of greatest benefit;

If we have determined that liberation is possible, then it is natural, both now and when we find ourselves or another in times of transition, spontaneously and with effort, to pray sincerely for guidance and protection so we can accomplish the freedom from samsara that we seek;

As Shantideva and other great masters have said, all the divisions of the Dharma are for the sake of wisdom. The historical Buddha identified ignorance that grasps at a self where there is none to be the cause of all our uncontrolled wandering in samsara, where we experience cycles of endless suffering, dissatisfaction, confusion and despair. Trying to 'fix' samsara doesn't work. As long as there is ignorance, samsara will continue, and so we are all urged to cultivate wisdom, and to put an end to uncontrolled rebirth in the six realms. At that point, the way will open to greater freedom and helpfulness.

And if we have determined that the best use of our life, lifetime after lifetime, is to dedicate ourselves to the benefit of all others, through attaining enlightenment, the state of fully developed freedom, understanding and love, then naturally we would pray for help to accomplish that aim. Again, now is the time to develop this powerful determination and reliance, with faith and devotion, and great enthusiasm.

Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche has taught that:

Among the six bardos, the first bardo of birth and living is the most important one we have to learn about. This is where we can really develop, grow strong, realize what is precious, and fully awaken to our Buddha nature so that we can easily handle the remaining bardos. Through practice and meditation we can learn to recognize what is and move through all the changes of birth and death with great confidence and joy.

He also taught

*Connect Firmly with Your Former Good Karma*

- which is a phrase I like a lot, and find very useful in this context. This is something we can all do, both in our daily practice, and in times of transition. We remember with an image, or a word, or a phrase; by recollecting a teacher, or a song, or a mantra, or a place and time, or experience we have had.

Throughout our lives and practice, we may have had this experience, of connecting with our former good karma. When we find in ourselves a sense of familiarity with virtue, or with a teaching, this is due to a prior cause, or we can say a karmic affinity. When we uncover this within ourselves, it feels like a great treasure has been revealed. It can be like finding a fresh underground stream, a source of strength and direction. All we would do is then enhanced, nourished and supported by this stream of pure, clean clear positive, creative energy.

This experience again enhances our determination now to practice well, as much as we can. We can see that it is just as our noble teachers have said:

*We can cultivate ways now which will reap untold benefits not only during this life, but also in endless future lives.*

Prayers for others in their times of transition are also essentially this - to remind them of their connections to Blessings, to Grace, the Divine, their

Noble Teachers, and Saviors. This gift of love brings assurance to us, and to those traveling on.