

The background of the entire cover is a photograph of a sunset or sunrise. The sun is a bright, glowing orb in the center of the frame, partially obscured by the horizon. Its light creates a long, shimmering reflection on the calm water in the foreground. The sky is a gradient of colors, from a pale yellow near the sun to a deep blue at the top. In the distance, the silhouettes of mountains and a small island are visible against the bright sky.

Through Death's Gate

A Guide to Selfless Dying

Joel Morwood

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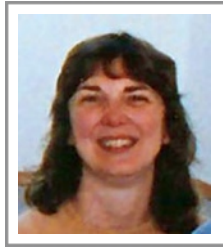
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Dedication



*To Bonnie Linn (1943–1994),
whose selfless death set a shining example for us all.*

Preface

This book was written primarily for practitioners of the Way of Selflessness who are, themselves, facing imminent death. We hope, however, that it will also benefit their friends, relatives, and fellow practitioners, as well as anyone else wishing to take full advantage of the precious opportunity for Spiritual Awakening which death presents to those who are properly prepared.

Important Notice

If you are close to death and cannot read this book in its entirety, *turn immediately* to Chapter Two, Three, and Four. These chapters describe specific meditations (to be used during the hour of your actual death) which you should *start practicing now*. Then, if you have time, go back and read the rest of the chapters in the order presented.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction: Facing Death

In reality, there is no death.

In reality, there is no death because there is no individual ‘self’ or ‘I’ who could die. In reality, there is only that Primordial Consciousness or God which, though appearing in myriad forms, is Itself empty of all forms and therefore without birth or death. This Consciousness is who I am. This Consciousness is also who you are. Thus, whether you Realize it or not, your sense of being a separate self is a delusion, and ultimately, so is the death of that ‘self’.

Until this Realization is attained, however, the delusion of self, and therefore of death, will persist. Indeed, within the world of delusion, nothing is more certain than death. Everyone who is born is, by virtue of that very fact, doomed to die.

Although we all know this to be true, rarely do we know the actual date on which our death is to take place. This ignorance allows most of us to live out our lives under a comforting but dangerous secondary delusion—namely, that death will not come to us any time soon; that it is something which will happen only in some distant future; and that, consequently, there is nothing we need do to prepare for it now. Thus, when the legendary Hindu king, Yudhishtira, was asked, “What is the greatest wonder in the world?” he replied: “All around us people die everyday and yet no one believes it will happen to them.”

For you, however, this belief has come to an end. Whether because you have been diagnosed with a terminal illness, or have reached an advanced old age (or for whatever other reason), you now know that you are definitely going to die—not on some unforeseeable date in a seemingly infinite future, but within a finite span of time. And although you may not yet know the exact hour, or the week, or even the month in which death will finally take you, such considerations are only of secondary importance. What is of primary importance is that you have been stripped of the delusion that death is a distant event which does not concern you.

To be suddenly deprived of the comfort this delusion once offered no doubt seems like a devastating thing. But for those who are willing to learn from it, having to face one’s own death can also be a blessing in disguise. This, as you may recall, was just what happened to Prince Siddhartha, the future Buddha. As a young man growing up in his father’s palace, surrounded by worldly delights, Siddhartha was utterly oblivious to the existence of such things as disease, old

age, and death. Then, one day while venturing beyond the palace walls he encountered a sick person, an elderly person, and a corpse. Realizing that this was the fate of all sentient beings, and that he, too, would someday die, the anguished Prince exclaimed,

O worldly men! How fatal is your delusion! Inevitably your body will crumble to dust, yet carelessly, unheedingly, you live on.¹

Now, the Buddha was a human being no different from you. Like you, he was born into delusion, and like you he suffered from the same anxieties and fears which delusion generates. If anything, as an over-protected child, his suffering was even greater than most people's. The only difference between the Buddha and everyone else was his willingness to accept the reality of his own impermanence. It was this simple but profound insight that transformed him from being a person concerned only with worldly happiness into a fully committed spiritual seeker intent on finding that Happiness which is beyond time and change, the only Real Happiness there is. Thus for the Buddha, coming to grips with his own mortality, although emotionally devastating, turned out to be a great blessing indeed.



And it can be for you, as well.

The important thing is not to look away from death but, like the Buddha, face it squarely and take courage. Remember that death is not something that is going to happen to you alone. Think of the vast ocean of beings who have been washed up on this life's shore before you, like so many bubbles of foam, only to be dissolved back again into the deep by death's inexorable tide. Whether insect or reptile, fish or fowl, animal or human—whether strong or weak, rich

or poor, ruler or servant, sinner or saint, wise one or fool—not one of us in the whole chain of being, stretching back to the beginning of time, has escaped this sea's relentless rhythm. Birth and death, creation and destruction, form and formlessness are all equally indispensable to that Ecstatic Cosmic Dance in which Consciousness constantly Realizes Itself in all Its Infinite possibilities.

But, although none of us can choose *not* to die, we can choose *how* to die. The real question, then, is: When the Angel of Death knocks at your door, how will you greet him? Are you going to receive him as a venerable teacher, or resist him as you would a thief in the night? Are you going to force Death to drag you off to the gallows like a condemned criminal? Or are you going to

take Death's hand willingly, as you would that of a Divine Lover who beckons you to one last dance before your present life is over and a new one dawns?

Those who choose the latter course will, in fact, find that death has a second great blessing to confer. Not only does it awaken us to the futility of all worldly pursuits, but, as Christian mystic Simone Weil wrote,

[Death] is the an instant when, for an infinitesimal fraction of time, pure truth, naked, certain, and eternal enters the soul. I may say that I have never desired any other good for myself.²

Indeed, if you think about it you will see that, as a spiritual practitioner, you have actually been trying to 'die' all along. For it is only by *dying* to your separate self that you can discover the Truth which, as Jesus said, makes us free from all suffering and death forever. And while this *spiritual death* is not the same as physical death, nevertheless, the passage through Death's Gate will bring you to the very threshold of that other Gate—the Gate of Gnosis—which leads from form to Formlessness, from the finite to the Infinite. Here, stripped naked and standing between two worlds, as it were, you will find that literally *nothing* bars the way. At this point (as we shall see) it is simply a matter of recognizing this 'nothing' for what it truly is—Pure Consciousness Itself. This is why all spiritual traditions have considered physical death to offer a supreme opportunity for attaining the ultimate "death of deaths"—provided, of course, you are properly prepared.

This book is designed to help you do just that—prepare for death. It summarizes the basic teachings found in all of the Great Traditions on how to pass through the Gate of Death as selflessly and effortlessly as possible. In particular, it contains three fundamental practices to help you transform your own death from a terrifying ordeal into what the Sufi poet, Rumi, called our "wedding with eternity." In the following chapters we will discuss these teachings and practices in more detail. First, however, it is important to get a better idea of what to expect when the hour of your death actually arrives.

Chapter One:

The Stages of Death

When a man knows God, he is free: his sorrows have an end, and birth and death are no more. When in inner union he is beyond the world of the body, then the third world, the world of the spirit is found, where the power of the All is, and man has all: for he is one with the ONE.

—[Upanishads](#) (Hindu)

What happens during and after death?

It is commonly said that we have no idea what happens after death because no one has ever returned to tell us about it. But this is not altogether true. Since the dawn of humanity there have been those who have undergone a “clinical death” (the cessation of all vital life signs) and afterwards have been revived. According to recent studies, nearly fifty percent of such people remain lucid during these episodes, and later report having had what today are called “near-death experiences” (NDEs).³ While the details of these experiences may vary according to an individual’s temperament and beliefs, certain basic patterns and motifs recur with striking frequency. These include out-of-body experiences, traveling through mist-filled tunnels, seeing visions, having encounters with dead relatives or other disembodied beings, and perceiving an intense white or golden light.

Another source of information about what happens after death comes to us from the world’s great religious traditions. Virtually all of these traditions have attested to the continuity of consciousness beyond physical death and offered some description (usually in mythic terms) of what takes place in the afterlife. As is the case with near-death experiencers (NDErs), the specifics of these mythologies vary considerably from culture to culture. But also (as with NDErs) cross cultural comparisons reveal underlying images and themes that are largely invariant from one tradition to another.

Finally, we now have available in the West a growing body of literature from those spiritual traditions which have made a specialty of cultivating meditative techniques that actually mimic the dying process. Perhaps the most sophisticated of these is the Tantric Buddhist tradition of Tibet. For more than a thousand years Tibetan Buddhists have been making increasingly refined observations of the mental states which occur during such simulated death experiences.

This is not the time or place to present a complete analysis of all the evidence concerning after-death states, which can be gleaned from these various sources. Indeed, a truly comprehensive study of the subject has (to our knowledge) yet to be undertaken. However, enough is known to make one thing quite clear: *The mystics of all traditions unanimously agree that death will offer you a “golden opportunity” for attaining that Gnostic Awakening which has been the supreme goal of your spiritual quest.*

In the Tibetan tradition, for example, death is seen to unfold in a series of stages during which the various physical and mental constituents are absorbed into each other until, finally, there is nothing left in consciousness but an apparent void. This is the critical moment. If you can Recognize that this ‘void’ is actually the “fundamental clear light,” (or, in our terms, *Pure Consciousness*), then you will achieve full Enlightenment, for, as Bokar Rinpoche explains,

Recognizing this fundamental clear light means “becoming Buddha in the absolute body at the moment of death.”⁴

The Hindu tradition gives a similar account of what happens during the death process, also culminating in a moment in which the Ultimate Nature of Reality can be Realized. Thus, in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, we find this description:

When, dear one, a person dies, his voice is absorbed into his mind; his mind into his breath; his breath into heat; and heat into formless Spirit. That is the Real. That is the essence of this whole world. That thou art.⁵

In the Jewish Kabbalist tradition, the anonymous author of the *Sefer ha-Zeruf* declares that, at the moment of death, accomplished Kabbalists attained “the essence of all apprehensions...because the interruptions and all the obstacles which are in the world left them, and the intellect returned to cleave to that light which is the [Divine] Intellect.”⁶

According to both the Christian and Islamic cosmologies, if you have led a virtuous life, you will enter into paradise following the world’s destruction at the end of time. Now on the face of it this sounds quite different from the Tibetan, Hindu, and Kabbalist conceptions which insist that the opportunity for Gnosis comes immediately after physical death has occurred. But if we read the “world’s destruction” as a mythological description of what an individual experiences during the death process, these accounts are quite compatible. From the point of view of the dying person, the progressive eradication of all phenomena from consciousness will, indeed, seem like the “end of the world.” In fact, this is precisely how Tibetan master Kalu Rinpoche describes it:

The internal experience for the dying individual is of a great wind sweeping away the whole world...an incredible maelstrom of wind, consuming the entire universe.⁷

Moreover, according to the early Christian paradigm, although faith may earn you entry into paradise, faith by itself is not sufficient for realizing the “eternal life” promised by Jesus. Eternal life actually comes through spiritual knowledge (Gnosis), for, as Saint Augustine pointed out, Jesus did not say, this is eternal life that ye *believe* in God, but rather, “This is life eternal, that they might *know* thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”⁸ Consequently, believers who failed to attain such a “Vision of God” in this life, would, according to Augustine, be granted it in the hereafter and in this way attain salvation.

An almost identical view was held by the mystics of Islam. The great Sufi philosopher Al-Ghazali, for example, insisted that upon entering paradise the true lover of God would receive a “Vision of the Divine Countenance,” which, he affirmed, is “none other than the gnosis (*ma'rifa*) already given in an inferior and more fleeting fashion to the saints in this world.”⁹

Indeed, the link between Enlightenment and death goes back to shamanic times, for as the renowned religious historian Mircea Eliade writes, “all the ecstatic experiences that determine the future shaman’s vocation involve the traditional schema of an initiation ceremony: suffering, death, resurrection.”¹⁰ But in order to understand exactly *why* death should be so universally associated with an opportunity to attain Spiritual Realization, we must try to get a more precise idea of what actually happens during the death process. Because the Tibetans have developed the greatest expertise in simulating death experiences, let us combine what they have to say about the various mental states that are likely to arise with contemporary medical descriptions of what will happen to your physical body as you enter Death’s Gate.

The Eight Stages of Death

Stage one:

As the hour of death approaches, your body will start to shut down. Usually this begins with a loss of appetite and an inability to take in fluids. It will also become increasingly difficult for you to move your arms and legs. Mentally, you will begin to lose contact with your physical environment and become increasingly drowsy. In this stage you may also begin having confusing visions or other dream-like experiences.

Stage two:

Your mouth will become dry and you will urinate less frequently. You may have out-of-body experiences, feel like you are entering a tunnel, and feel that you are surrounded by “mist” or “smoke” (similar to what many NDErs describe).

Stage three:

As your blood circulation slows, you may feel alternately hot, then cold. As time passes, however, your arms and legs will grow cooler and may turn a bluish-gray color. Your vision and hearing will become impaired, and, as less oxygen gets to your brain, you may grow confused and restless. It will also become increasingly difficult for you to recognize family members or friends who are present.



Internally, you may see sparks, flashing colors, or what looks like patterns of pure “energy,” which can be either fascinating or frightening, depending on your mental attitude.

Stage four:

Your breathing will become irregular, with long periods of stillness between breaths. After a while, your breath may resume a more regular pattern, but this will be shallow and mechanical in nature. Eventually, your breath will cease altogether and your heart will stop beating. Inwardly, you may see something like the last sparks of a fire that is about to be extinguished. This, of course, is the moment of actual *physical death*, but according to the Tibetans it is not the end of the dying process. There are *four more stages* which take from five to twenty minutes longer to unfold.

Stage five:

In stage five, your capacity to think conceptually will break down. As conceptions disappear, your mind will become pervaded by a white luminosity or light, which the Tibetans describe as being like “a clear autumn sky filled with moon-light.” They call this the *mind of white appearance*.

Stage six:

In the sixth stage, all traces of aggression and aversion will disappear. As this happens, the white light pervading your mind will be replaced by a red or golden luminosity which the Tibetans compare to an autumn sky “filled with intense sun-light.” They call this the *mind of red increase*.

Stage seven:

In the seventh stage, attachments and desires will vanish. Now your mind will be empty of all phenomena of any kind, and so appear to be a dark void or nothingness, like “an autumn sky without any light whatsoever.” This, the Tibetans call the *mind of black-near-attainment*, which, in our terms, is literally *Consciousness-without-an-object*. It is here at this stage that the “golden opportunity” for Gnostic Awakening will present itself because (as we have already seen) if you can Recognize that Consciousness-without-an-object is actually the “fundamental clear light” of your own mind, then you will have discovered what you *really* are—Consciousness Itself. (Since there is nothing else in this state besides Consciousness Itself, what else could you be?) It is this discovery of your True Identity that Awakens you to the eighth stage which constitutes full Enlightenment.

Stage eight:

This stage is called variously by the Tibetans *the attainment-clear light*, *the clear light of bliss*, or *the fundamental clear light of the nature of the mind*. Actually, it is not properly speaking a ‘stage’ at all, but simply a continuation of the mind of black-near-attainment, only now Recognized to be Consciousness Itself. And while this Consciousness remains momentarily empty of all phenomena, It is *not* a mere “*nothingness*” (in the sense of a vacuity). Rather, It is Realized to be simultaneously the Actual Fullness (or Ultimate Reality) which contains within Itself every possible manifestation, and that Primordial Awareness (like a “clear light”) which both projects and perceives these manifestations as apparent ‘worlds’ and ‘beings’.

This is the Realization or Gnosis which “sets you free” from suffering and death forever because It makes absolutely clear that all your experiences of being a limited, transitory entity, ‘I’, or ‘self’ (which could be subject to birth, suffering, and death) have been, from the very beginning, a delusion. Put differently, you will see that every ‘thing’ is simply a form of your True Self, or that Consciousness which is, Itself, intrinsically free of all things.

Why Gnosis is easier to attain at the moment of death

Of course, it is not necessary to wait for physical death to attain Gnosis. Actually, one may have a Gnostic Awakening at any time. This potential exists not only because Consciousness is always and everywhere the fundamental ground of all our experience, but also (and more precisely) because the whole cycle of birth and death (including a momentary glimpse of pure Consciousness) is repeated with the arising and passing of any phenomenon whatsoever. Thus, according to Bokar Rinpoche,

This process of absorption...does not occur only at [physical] death, it also happens in an extremely subtle manner when we fall asleep or when a thought is removed from our mind.¹¹

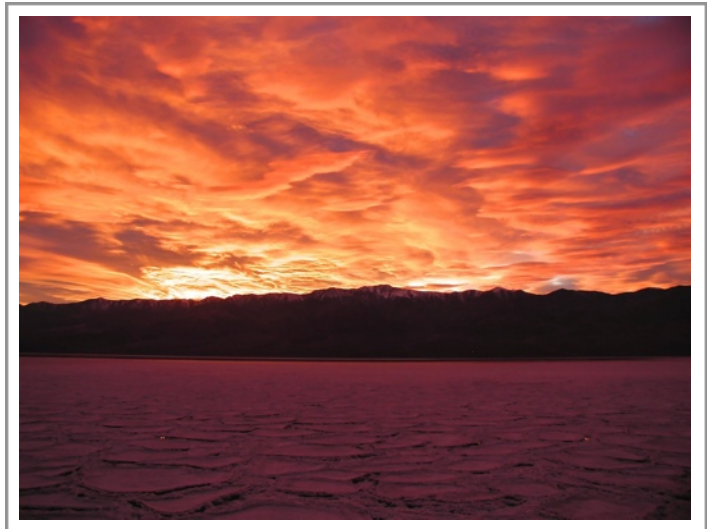
Other traditions attest to this fact as well. Listen, for example, to the modern Hindu mystic Ramana Maharshi:

The ego in its purity [i.e., the *Atman* or Divine Self] is experienced in the intervals between two states or between two thoughts. ...Its true nature is known when it is out of contact with objects or thoughts. You should realize *this interval* as the abiding, unchangeable Reality, your true Being.¹²

Likewise, fourteenth century Kabbalist Rabbi Joseph ben Shalom of Barcelona taught that,

In every transformation of reality, in every change of form, or every time the stature of a thing is altered, the *abyss of nothingness* is crossed and for a fleeting mystical moment becomes visible.¹³

The reason it is difficult to notice this *abyss of nothingness* is that, first of all, its appearance is exceedingly brief. Secondly, our attention is conditioned to focus only on *things*, but the *abyss of nothingness* is not a 'thing'. Consequently, our attention habitually ignores this *nothing* as it compulsively searches out the next phenomenon to arise. If, however, we can train our attention (via meditation) to remain stable and clear, then all that is required to "point to" this *abyss of nothingness* is an ordinary



gesture of the most mundane kind. This is why Zen students, for example, who have been ripened through practice, can attain Enlightenment simply by seeing a candle being blown out or hearing a bird cry. In the "intervals" just before and after the arising and passing of these phenomena, Consciousness-without-an-object stands for a split second unveiled in all Its nakedness.

But there are other moments in the course of our lives in which Consciousness-without-an-object reveals itself in a more dramatic fashion and for longer periods of time. One of these moments (as Bokar Rinpoche already mentioned) occurs every twenty-four hours during the transition from the waking state to sleep. Here it is not merely a single sound or sight that "dies" but the entire waking world! Accordingly, an ancient Hindu text has Shiva advising his consort, Devi, to observe carefully that moment:

At the point of sleep when sleep has not yet come and external wakefulness vanishes, at this point *being* is revealed.¹⁴

But, again, these instructions are hard to follow because as most of us fall asleep our minds are completely absorbed in reviewing past events, making future plans, or spinning fantasies, and these mental activities so preoccupy our attention that we fail to recognize Consciousness-without-an-object when it appears. Instead, we experience it as a kind of “black out”—a state of total *unconsciousness*, when, in fact, it is *Pure Consciousness*!

Finally, Consciousness-without-an-object can be experienced by practicing certain meditative techniques which lead to states of *samadhi* (as they are called in the East) or *suspension* (as they are called in the West). Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, one of the most influential of Christian mystics, gives this version of the practice:

In the diligent exercise of mystical contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, and all things sensible and intellectual, and all things in the world of being and non-being, that thou mayest arise by unknowing toward the union...with Him who transcends all being and all knowledge. For by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and all things thou mayest be borne on high, through pure and entire self-abnegation, into the superessential Radiance of the Divine Darkness.¹⁵

There are, however, two problems with this approach. First, attaining states of *samadhi* usually requires a concerted effort made over a long period of time. Consequently, this technique is usually too difficult to perfect for seekers living a householder's life. The second problem is that states of *samadhi* almost always generate an overwhelming sense of bliss. As a result, seekers who attain these states without having thoroughly practiced selflessness are in great danger of mistaking this bliss for a genuine Gnostic Awakening. When this happens, not only do they miss the point of the practice (which is not to bask in bliss but to attain Gnosis), but they fall into one of the worst delusions of all: they imagine they have been liberated, when they have not.

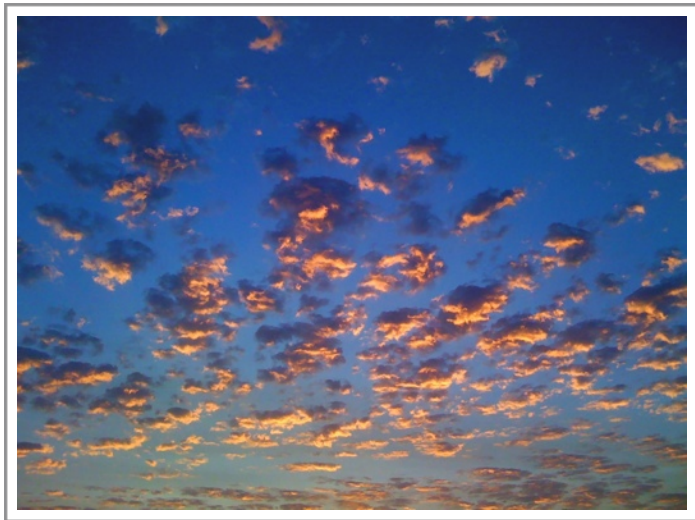
The point is that, although opportunities for Realization arise in many different situations, attaining it “in this life” is (as you no doubt know) not so easy. The primary obstacle is that we are constantly distracted by innumerable self-centered thoughts, feelings, sensations, desires, aversions, attachments, etc.—all of which seem rooted in Nature, herself. And this is precisely why death presents such a “golden opportunity” for attaining what was so hard to attain in life. As the death process unfolds, everything will be reversed. Nature (as the Tibetans say) will actually be *cooperating* with your practice by progressively removing each and every distraction from your mind, until finally there will be nothing left but Consciousness Itself. All you really have to do is wait for this Pure Consciousness to appear, and then Recognize it for what it is. Death will take care of the rest!

Here, however, a word of warning is in order. The fact that Nature will remove all your distractions at the time of death in no way negates the necessity for practicing in this life. On the

contrary, if you do not start preparing for it now, when the hour of your death actually arrives you will almost certainly be overwhelmed with pain and fear. Under such circumstances rather than being able to surrender whole-heartedly to death, your impulse will be to resist its operations with all your might. Consequently, when Consciousness-without-an-object finally does dawn, instead of recognizing what is actually happening, you will experience nothing but the onset of oblivion. Nor, unfortunately, is oblivion the end of the story as the materialists like to believe.

What lies beyond the gate of death?

Sooner or later, Consciousness will resume Its Divine Play. This is not a problem for one who has attained Gnosis, because when phenomena do arise again, they will be automatically Recognized simply as forms of Consciousness Itself, possessing not the slightest reality apart from It. However, for those who remain deluded, the forms Consciousness takes following physical death will manifest as those worlds and beings which constitute the “heavens” and “hells” described by traditional mythologies.



According to the Tibetan paradigm, for example, if you fail to Recognize that the mind of black-near-attainment is actually the fundamental clear light, you will fall into a deep sleep which lasts for three days and then awaken in what is called the *Intermediate State*. In this state, Consciousness begins to manifest as various peaceful and wrathful deities. Not recognizing these deities to be projections of your own mind, you will be terrified and try to flee from them.

The more you run, however, the more “hellish” your experiences will become, until at last you take rebirth in one of the six realms which make up Cyclic Existence or the world of delusion. Then, the whole process of birth and death will repeat itself until you finally become Enlightened. The Hindu tradition gives a similar view of what happens after physical death, comparing the soul to a “swan” circling through endless rounds of birth-death-rebirth until at last it attains Liberation.

In Christianity and Islam, of course, there is no concept of “rebirth.” Exoterically, it is believed that you end up either in Heaven or in Hell for all eternity. There have been mystics in both traditions, however, who have dissented from this orthodox doctrine. The early Christian theologian, Origen, for example, taught that in the end, all things (including even the devil) will

be restored to God, while the Sufi “Shaykh of shaykhs,” Ibn ‘Arabi, wrote that, because the *Qur’an* tells us that God’s mercy precedes his wrath, “all creatures must eventually find happiness.”

In any case, it is axiomatic among mystics the world over that so long as you fail to attain Gnosis (whether in this life or the next) you will continue to experience states that will seem pleasant (heavenly) or unpleasant (hellish) according to the spiritual qualities you have cultivated in this life. Thus, Bokar Rinpoche says,

Even if we do not believe that hell exists, if we have committed negative deeds, that will cause hell to manifest; our mind will produce the false appearances causing immense suffering when the time is right. That is what hell is about.¹⁶

And, Al-Ghazali writes this about those who doubt that unbelievers will be tormented by snakes in the afterlife (as Islamic tradition describes):

They do not understand that these snakes have their abode within the unbeliever’s spirit, and that they existed in him even before he died, for they were his own evil qualities symbolized, such as jealousy, hatred, hypocrisy, pride, deceit, etc.¹⁷

In other words, in death as in life, it is we ourselves who create our own happiness or suffering. Therefore, in order to avoid suffering and be able to seize the “golden opportunity” death will present, it is imperative that you start preparing for it now. In the next three chapters we shall discuss three practices (versions of which are found in most of the Great Traditions) specifically designed to help you make a smooth passage through Death’s Gate.

Chapter Two: The Death Prayer

*Take no pride in the body.
It will soon mingle with dust.
This life is like the sporting of sparrows.
It will end with the onset of night.
I have chosen the Indestructible for my refuge,
Him whom the snake of death
Can not devour.*

—[Mira Bai](#) (Hindu)

Next to the appearance of Consciousness-without-an-object, the most important moment in the dying process comes at the end of the fourth stage with physical death. At this time your mind will be particularly vulnerable so that whatever last thoughts you have before conceptions cease will make a deep impression. Thus, if you die thinking only about yourself, your sense of ‘self’ will be much stronger in the after-death states. This, in turn, will tend to make everything you see seem “alien” and “fearful.” If, on the other hand, you die with your thoughts focused not on yourself but on the Divine, then everything you see in the after-death states will tend to appear as a manifestation of the Divine, and your experiences will be imbued with beauty, joy, and bliss.

The easiest way to take your attention off yourself and focus it on the Divine is to engage in a practice of devotion. This is why virtually all traditions have encouraged those who are passing through Death’s Gate to do so with a prayer on their lips and reverence in their hearts. In Islam, for example, it is recommended that a person who is dying repeat the two testimonies of Islamic Faith: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His messenger.” A favorite death-prayer for Medieval Christians was addressed to the Virgin Mary: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death.” In Judaism, to die saying the *Shema*—“Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One”—is considered to be of great benefit. Mahayana

Buddhists often die praying to the Buddha of Compassion, while many American Indians have personal “death songs” to be used specifically when the time comes to leave this world.

As a practitioner of the Way of Selflessness, you should already have a *death prayer* which you have practiced in preparation for your departure from this life. If not, here are some instructions for composing one. You should do this right away so that you can practice it as much as possible in the time you have left.

Instructions for Composing a Death Prayer

Step one: Choose an object of worship

Consciousness Itself has no form of its own. Rather it is that Field of Primordial Awareness in which all forms themselves continually appear and disappear. Consequently, Pure Consciousness can never appear as an object *in* consciousness. And yet, because Consciousness is the ever present ground of all forms, any form has the potential to act as a kind of “window” onto Pure Consciousness. When this potential is realized in any particular object (either by an individual or a whole community), that object becomes sacred. Historically, this process of sacralization has given rise to a great array of Divine Symbols, Images, Archetypes, and Holy Names, which can serve as focal points for devotion.

The first thing to do, then, is to choose such a Sacred Object to be the focal point of your own death prayer. This can be a simple name, like “God,” or “Truth,” or “The Mystery.” It can also be an archetypal figure representing some particular quality of Consciousness—for example, *compassion* manifesting as Krishna, Christ, or Quan-Yin; or *wisdom* in the form of Sophia, Athena, or Khadir. If you are good at visualization, you may want to choose the image of one of humanity’s great spiritual teachers like Buddha or Lao Tzu, Teresa of Avila or Mira Bai. Or, you can take as your object that sense of the Divine *Presence* permeating the whole field of awareness. (This latter choice, however, is not recommended unless you have already practiced meditations which allow you to experience this *Presence* more or less at will.)



Step two: Compose a prayer

Next choose or compose a short prayer of no more than a few phrases with which to address your Sacred Object. It might, for instance, be something as simple as, “O God of my heart, I surrender all to you.” Make sure your prayer contains the word “surrender” or some equivalent. There are two reasons for this. First, “surrender” expresses the essence of the state of selflessness which you are trying to achieve. Second, as you approach the hour of your death, you may find that it becomes too difficult to say even a one-sentence prayer in its entirety. If this happens, you’ll want to compress the intention of the whole prayer into a single word. “Surrender” says it all.

Step three: Concentration

Close your eyes and focus your attention on the area of your heart. Feel your Sacred Object taking shape there. Fix your attention single-pointedly on your Object, while patiently ignoring all other objects, images, memories, or thoughts that may arise. Slowly, begin to address the Object with the words of your prayer. Try to feel the power and significance of each word as you say it.

Step four: Stabilization

After a while, gently relax your attention (without letting it get carried off by distractions) until your heart grows warm and peaceful. Be careful not to let your prayer become mechanical but continue saying it with as much devotion as you can genuinely muster. There may be times when you feel your heart spontaneously “catching fire” and burning with love. If this happens, fine, but don’t try to force any extraordinary feelings. The sincerity of your intention is far more important than whatever emotional fireworks you may experience.

Step five: Inner surrender

As you continue praying, start to turn your whole life over to the Divine in whatever Form you have conceived It. Abandon all worries, anxieties, and fears—whether they concern the things of this world or the next. Think of yourself as a passenger on an airplane who has no choice but to place his or her life in the hands of the pilot. In your situation you are actually much safer because, while human pilots are fallible, the guidance of Consciousness Itself is truly infallible—if you are open to receiving it unconditionally. Remember the testimony of the Mystics of all traditions: *Ultimately, the world is Good. Ultimately, nothing can harm you.*

Step six: Praying without words

Imagine that it has become too difficult for you to say the words of your prayer. Drop everything but the one word, “surrender.” Merge this one word with your Sacred Object. Then,

drop even this word and simply remain with your intention to surrender yourself totally to the Divine, just like a child relaxing in the arms of its mother.

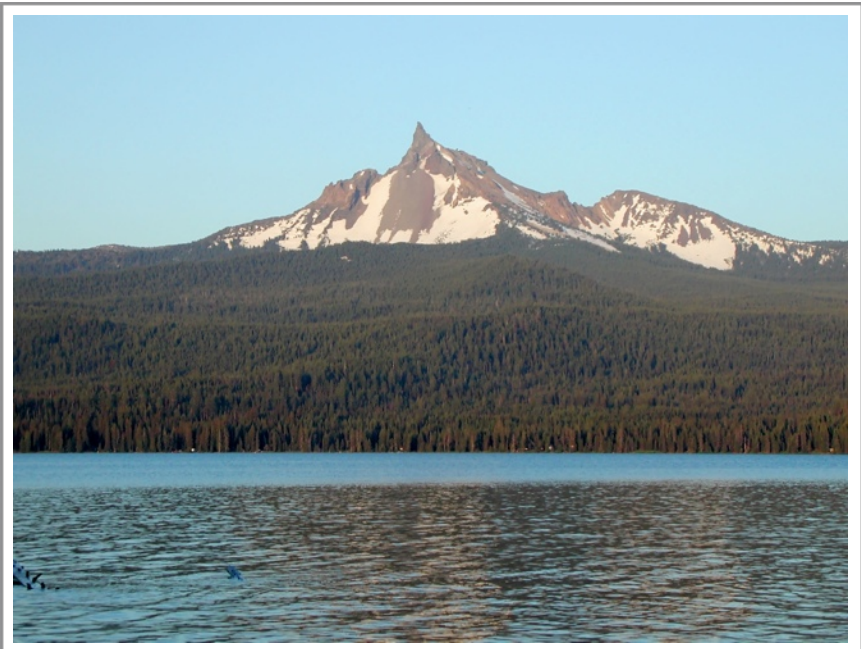
Every day you should set aside some time for formally practicing your death prayer. This can be done either sitting up or lying down. It is especially important to practice your prayer while you are falling asleep, whether at night or when taking naps. This is because (as we have already seen) the states you pass through as you enter sleep are quite similar to those you will encounter at the time of death.

You can also pray informally whenever you have a few moments alone. Be careful, however, not to strain yourself with too much effort. Ideally, your heart, as the Sufis say, “should steal the prayer from your tongue.” If this happens, the prayer will start to generate itself spontaneously, and there will be nothing for you to do except pay attention to it. In general what is required for success in this practice is gentle persistence and deep faith.

The Fruit of Practicing a Death Prayer

As already mentioned, saying a death prayer while passing through Death’s Gate will insure that your thoughts are focused on the Divine. This, in turn, will help transform frightening experiences into blissful ones. But there is another, more significant benefit to be gained from this practice. Even though you may not recognize Consciousness-without-an-object in the seventh stage, if you are truly open to the Divine, then you will continue to receive Guidance in the after-death state which can ultimately lead to a Gnostic Awakening.

In the previous chapter we saw how this is expressed mythologically in both the Christian and Islamic traditions as a promise that those with strong faith will be granted a saving “Vision of God” once they have reached paradise. But the same motif is found in other traditions as well. For instance, the Hindu *Katha Upanishad* recounts the story of a youth named



Nachiketas who, after being killed by his father as a sacrifice, enters the nether world and is there taught the secret of final Liberation by Yama, the King of Death himself. Likewise, in the Buddhist traditions of Tibet and China, it is said that those who die while praying to Amitabha or Quan-Yin (male and female forms of the Buddha of Compassion) will be reborn in a “Land of Bliss” where they will have an opportunity to hear dharma teachings profound enough to make Enlightenment virtually inevitable.

If such tales arouse your skepticism, remember that the “paradisaical realms” do not, from the Mystics’ point of view, represent physical places, but rather altered states of consciousness, produced by one’s own psycho-spiritual conditioning. What these mythologies point to, then, is actually a fact of spiritual life well attested to in all cultures—namely, that devotional practices can generate visionary states in which Consciousness appears to devotees in Archetypal forms to provide guidance that can lead to Full Awakening.¹⁸

Conclusion

The death prayer is relatively easy to learn and to practice. This makes it especially suited for beginners, or for those who have been negligent in maintaining their meditative disciplines. But even if you are an experienced practitioner and intend to engage in a more advanced type of practice at the time of your death, it is still a good idea to have memorized and rehearsed a death prayer beforehand. For some people the passage through Death’s Gate goes quite smoothly; for others, it can be very traumatic. Therefore, you would be foolish to rely solely on some advanced practice which may become too difficult to maintain when death finally carries you away. If that happens, you should abandon whatever practice you are doing and take up the death prayer in its stead.

Chapter Three:

The Practice of Perfect Sacrifice

To overcome the attitude of seeking the bliss of peace for yourself, you should train for a long time in love, compassion and the altruistic mind of enlightenment—which has love and compassion as its root.

—[Tsongkapa](#) (Buddhist)

A more difficult but more powerful practice than the death prayer is the practice of *perfect sacrifice*, which is the giving up of one's own life for the sake of others. This practice is universally venerated because it epitomizes a virtue fundamental to all spiritual paths—*compassionate action*.

Perhaps the best known example of perfect sacrifice in the West is the crucifixion of Jesus, who said this of his own death: “No man has greater love than this, that he lay down his life for another.” But the practice of perfect sacrifice is by no means confined to the Christian tradition. In virtually all sacred societies, dying for the sake of others is considered to be of great spiritual benefit. This is reflected, for instance, in the death prayer of the warriors of the Lakota Indian Fox Society who pledged themselves to surrender their own lives in defense of the tribe's women and children. Thus, when they went into battle they sang this:

I am a Fox.
I am supposed to die.
If there is anything difficult,
If there is anything dangerous,
That is mine to do.¹⁹

Most of us, of course, are not granted the opportunity to die in such a noble fashion, and you may wonder how your own death can possibly benefit anyone at all. But consider that when your body decays, eventually its molecules will return to the food chain providing nourishment for a host of other living creatures. What's more, in the greater scheme of things your death is absolutely essential in order to make room for future generations. Imagine a world where people were born but no one ever died. It would be like a symphony in which every note had a beginning but no end, resembling more an endless scream than a beautiful piece of music.

From a spiritual point of view, however, the real power of any practice derives not from whatever physical results it may or may not produce, but from the degree of loving compassion which motivates it. As the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart said,

God has no regard for what your works are, but for what your love and devotion and intention in the works are.²⁰

In other words, it is not necessary that your death actually benefit anyone else for it to be an expression of perfect sacrifice. It is enough that you die with such an intention fully enthroned in your mind and heart.



To help cultivate such an intention, Buddhists have developed a meditative practice they call “sending and taking.” Although this meditation can be done at any time, it is considered especially effective when performed at the hour of one’s death. As Bokar Rinpoche explains, it begins with the dying person establishing a compassionate intention by thinking as follows:

At the time of death all beings experience suffering and anguish. ...Today it is my turn to experience this suffering and anguish. Well! I hope there is enough to experience as I do not want others to suffer! I agree to take on the suffering of all beings who are dying within my suffering.²¹

This resolve is followed by a visualization practice which is coordinated with the breath. What follows are some instructions (based on this Buddhist technique) for converting your own death into a precious opportunity for practicing perfect sacrifice. However, because the degree of compassion required for fully entering into this practice usually takes a long time to cultivate, and because the moment of death is so critical, you should not make perfect sacrifice your primary death practice unless you already have experienced firsthand the deep joy that comes from selflessly serving others. If this is not the case with you (and be honest!), then choose a death prayer for your main practice (as described in Chapter Two), and use perfect sacrifice as an auxiliary practice.

Instructions for Practicing Perfect Sacrifice

Step one: Ponder death’s universality

Allow yourself to feel deeply your own pain and suffering. Realize that, although this pain and suffering is happening to you at this particular time, it is in no way *personal*. Everyone must die just as you are dying. Everyone must suffer just as you are suffering. And everyone fears it, just

as you fear it. This is what connects you to all beings at the most profound level of embodied existence. Only by undergoing death yourself can you truly understand the suffering of others.

Step two: Pay attention to others

Pay close attention to friends and relatives who come to visit you. How do they act? Are they nervous? Embarrassed? Frightened? Shocked? Do they seem at a loss for words; or do they talk too much? Do they often burst into tears just looking at you? Observe how their own fears of death are reflected in how they react to you. Open your heart to them, and think how wonderful it would be if you could relieve them of all their fears and suffering.

Step three: Resolve to free all beings from death forever

The only way to become “free of death forever” is through a Gnostic Awakening. Obviously one who is already Awake is in the best position to help others attain this goal. For the sake of all suffering beings, then, resolve to cooperate with your own death in order to Wake Up. (Truly, it is the simplest thing in the world. All you have to do is let go of your ‘self’!) When you are Awake there will be no limit to the help you can give others—even after death.



In the meantime, be generous in communicating your current experiences to your family and friends. Tell them about whatever feelings you may be having, whether of dread or joy, sadness or delight. Share with them your confusion as well as your wisdom, your questions as well as your insights. This will not only help to alleviate their own fears, but will also provide them with a living example of how to face death in an honest and open manner.

Step four: Visualize taking on the suffering of other beings

Start practicing perfect sacrifice by visualizing that, in addition to whatever suffering you are currently experiencing, you take on the suffering of other beings as well. Then, visualize them as relieved of their suffering and glowing with happiness.

At first, choose specific people to use in your visualizations—for instance, a family member who is particularly upset over your dying. Imagine that you feel his or her agony and grief. Then imagine that, by taking this agony and grief into yourself, the person is relieved of it. Later, extend your visualization to include other people, even ones you have never met.

In the after-death state you may well encounter apparitional beings. Some may appear as beneficent angels, gods, or goddesses. Others may appear as frightening demons, ghosts, or wrathful deities. Try to conjure up images of what they might look like, and then embrace them all with a heart overflowing with love and compassion.

Step five: Coordinate your visualizations with your breath

Note: This is only necessary for those who intend to make perfect sacrifice their primary death practice.

Visualize taking on the suffering of other beings as you inhale. Visualize spreading relief and happiness to other beings as you exhale. At first, just practice sending out relief and happiness while you are exhaling (without worrying about taking on suffering as you inhale). Then, practice taking on the suffering of others while you inhale (without worrying about spreading happiness as you exhale). After you get used to this, start alternating the two phases of the practice more rapidly until your visualizations are coordinated with each inhalation and each exhalation.

The purpose of coordinating your visualizations with your breath is that, when the hour of death arrives, your mind may become too weak to engage in actual visualizations. However, if you have practiced coordinating the visualizations with your inhalations and exhalations beforehand, then the act of breathing itself will carry your intention to sacrifice yourself for the sake of others, and you will die with this resolve in mind.

The Fruit of Practicing Perfect Sacrifice

To speak of the “fruit” of the practice of perfect sacrifice is somewhat contradictory, because the essence of the practice is not to desire any benefit for oneself. Even Gnosis should only be desired for the sake of helping others, nor should you prefer to have blissful experiences over frightening ones. Instead, you should abandon all concern with “fruits” and, in fact, be willing to enter hell itself if it will relieve others of their suffering. This ultimate gesture of selflessness was beautifully expressed by a Sufi named Abo'l-Hasan Nuri who used to pray,

O Lord...if you must fill hell with people, You are certainly able to fill it and all its levels
with me alone and send everyone else to heaven.²²

Paradoxically, however, such a total disinterest in one's own welfare inevitably produces a condition close to absolute selflessness. If you enter Death's Gate in this state, then when you reach the seventh stage, and encounter Consciousness-without-an-object, it will be relatively easy to Realize that This is what you truly are, and thus attain Gnosis.

But even if you do not attain Gnosis at this stage, if you carry your selfless intention into the intermediate state, it will automatically transform all environments and all beings into a Play of

Divine Forms. Here, again you will be able to attain Gnosis simply by Recognizing that this Play is itself nothing but a manifestation of your own mind or Consciousness Itself.

Conclusion

It is important to reiterate that only advanced seekers should choose perfect sacrifice as their primary death practice. But never forget that the Way of Selflessness depends as much on cultivating compassion as it does on recognizing the true nature of phenomena. Both are necessary to the attainment of Full Enlightenment. This is because, without the selflessness that comes from cultivating compassion, your own sense of being a separate 'self' will circumscribe whatever insights you do manage to have. Thus, whether or not you choose perfect sacrifice as your primary death practice, the more selfless compassion you can generate for others between now and the hour of your death, the greater your chances of Awakening forever as you pass through its Gate.

Chapter Four:

Effortless Contemplation

It is like rain falling from the heavens into a river or spring; there is nothing but water there and it is impossible to divide or separate the water belonging to the river from that which fell from the heavens. Or it is as if a tiny streamlet enters the sea, from which it will find no way of separating itself, or as if in a room there were two large windows through which the light streamed in: it enters in different places but it all becomes one.

—[Teresa of Avila](#) (Christian)

The most difficult practice to undertake at the time of death is effortless contemplation. Essentially, effortless contemplation is a practice of inquiry. Actually, one could say that it is the *ultimate* practice of inquiry. As the name suggests, however, it does not involve any form of intellectual probing, philosophical analysis, or even mental concentration. Quite the opposite—which is why effortless contemplation is not only difficult to practice but also to describe. In fact, most explanations end up sounding quite paradoxical. For example, the great Taoist sage Lao Tzu writes about it this way:

Seeking knowledge one does more every day;
Seeking the Way one does less every day.
One does less and less until at last one does nothing.
When one does nothing, there is nothing that is left undone.²³

Some people think effortless contemplation is peculiar to Taoism, but, of course, it is found in other mystical traditions as well. Thus, Ramana Maharshi advises the advanced seeker to: “Make no effort either to work or to renounce; your effort is the bondage.”²⁴ Likewise, Meister Eckhart says this of the Godhead:

The more one seeks You, the less one finds You. You should so seek Him that you find Him nowhere. If you do not seek Him, then you will find Him.²⁵

Perhaps the Dzogchen texts of Tibetan Buddhism give the most elaborate expositions of effortless contemplation. Here is one example from Longchenpa’s *The Jewel Ship*:

Listen, great being, understand in this way:
The way things appear are one in their
pure fact of being.
Do not make any corrections here.
This king, uncontrived sameness,
Is the conceptless deep experience of the
fundamental dimension of reality.
Simply stay with that...
When meditating on pure, unborn reality
What appears is neither concretized nor
latched onto...
Just relax in the reality of this blissful
self-generating pristine awareness.²⁶



In the Tibetan tradition, to die in such a state is called “dying while remaining in the nature of mind” and is considered the most desirable practice for passing through Death’s Gate. Thus Bokar Rinpoche writes,

By far the best way to die is to remain without distraction within the essence of mind, which is the nature of the mind beyond illusion.²⁷

It must be emphasized, however, that “remaining in the nature of the mind beyond illusion” does not mean just lying around lost in a stupor of fantasies and daydreams. Although it is, indeed, effortless, the kind of *total* abandonment of striving which characterizes this practice is actually very hard to achieve, for as Simone Weil observes: “There is an easiness in salvation which is more difficult to us than all our efforts.”²⁸ The key is that you must (as Bokar Rinpoche said) be able to engage in effortless contemplation “without distraction.” Consequently, *effortless contemplation should only be undertaken by advanced practitioners*—i.e., those who have attained meditative stabilization and have extensive training in this type of practice.

The following set of instructions, then, is not meant to introduce newcomers to effortless contemplation but only to act as a series of reminders for those who have had prior experience with this practice.

Instructions for Practicing Effortless Contemplation

Step one: Preliminaries

1. If you are able to, sit in your normal meditation posture. If your illness prevents this, or makes it too difficult, assume the most comfortable position you can.
2. Focus on your breath or some other meditation object to stabilize your attention.

3. After a few minutes, cease to focus on any particular object and practice “choiceless awareness,” simply observing whatever objects arise and pass in Consciousness. Notice the following about each object:
 - It is impermanent.
 - It has no existence apart from Consciousness Itself.
 - Being a form of Consciousness, it is transparent to It.

Step two: Being reminded

Note: You can either read the following reminders yourself, or have someone read them to you. In either case, they should be read slowly, giving you a chance to contemplate each one before going on to the next.

1. Without fixing your attention on anything, just consider:

Is there consciousness of sights?
Is there consciousness of sounds?
Is there consciousness of sensations?
Is there consciousness of feelings?
Is there consciousness of thoughts?

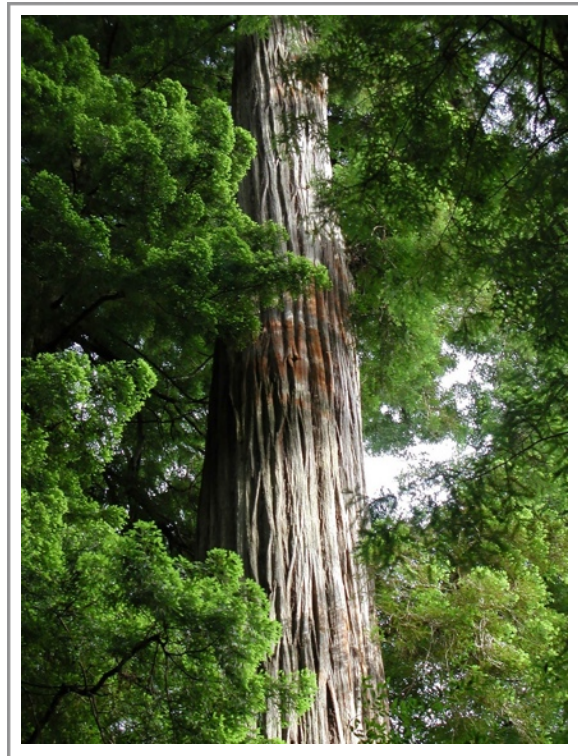
This very Consciousness, which is here right now, *is* that eternal, self-luminous Reality you have been striving to Realize all along. Since this Consciousness is already here, your striving is unnecessary.

2. Abandon all concepts *about* your experience and simply observe:

See how appearances arise in Consciousness.
Since, whatever appears is already present,
how can it be avoided?

See how appearances pass in Consciousness.
Since whatever has passed is no longer present,
how can it be grasped?

See how everything appears without the least obstruction.
Since nothing obstructs appearances,
there are no obstacles to be removed.



See how everything passes without the least hindrance.
Since everything is self-liberating,
there is nothing to be set free.

Relax into this effortless contemplation
of how things actually are.

3. Without making any adjustments, continue to observe:

Although you say, “forms arise in Consciousness,”
can you really separate Consciousness from its forms?
Is not Consciousness like an ocean, and forms its waves?

Because Consciousness and forms are ultimately inseparable,
duality never existed: How then can it be transcended?

Although you say “I am aware of such-and-such an object,”
can you truly distinguish between your self and the object?
Where does ‘self’ end and the ‘object’ begin?

Because subject and object are, in reality, indistinguishable,
delusion never originated. How then can it be dispelled?

4. Look! Reality is staring you right in the face:

5. You say, you cannot eliminate your ‘self’
but there is no ‘self’ to eliminate.

You say, you have not attained “Enlightenment,”
but there is not the slightest thing to attain.

You say, “I am ignorant of my true identity,”
but how can this be? What else is there,
besides this infinite, eternal, non-dual
field of Consciousness-and-form which is already present,
right here and now... and now... and now...

Therefore, surrender all desire for attainment
and just be what you are: Consciousness Itself!

Step three: Practicing without formal reminders

Once you have gotten used to contemplating in this way, it is sufficient to remember these three basic rules:

- Do not grasp anything;
- Do not reject anything;
- Be whatever is.

This applies particularly to situations where you experience states of exceptional clarity, or have feelings of great bliss, or profound insights. Such experiences will generate thoughts like: “Ah, this is Gnosis! Now, I am definitely Enlightened!” But as clarity gives way to confusion, bliss to frustration, and profound insights to mental chatter, you will think: “Now, I have lost my Enlightenment and become deluded once again. How depressing!” When this happens you must remember that Enlightenment is not a ‘place’ in which to settle, nor is Gnosis a ‘state’ that needs to be maintained. All experiences, all feelings, all states—whether sacred or mundane—are by their very nature transient and ephemeral. Without making any attempt either to hold on to them or push them away, simply remain identified with Consciousness Itself, and continue to practice effortlessly.

Step four: Practicing informally

If you intend to make effortless contemplation your primary death practice, you should practice it not only formally (during set times of the day), but you should also try to integrate it with all your other activities—eating, drinking, laughing, crying, talking, reading, going to the bathroom, etc. Even when you are dozing or sound asleep, identify with the Boundless Space of Consciousness Itself, and allow all things, images, and feelings to arise and pass effortlessly within It.

The Fruit of Practicing Effortless Contemplation

By practicing effortless contemplation you will develop a Realization that the self is (as the Buddhists say) “empty of any inherent existence.” Thus, while objects continue to appear in Consciousness, the delusion that they are being experienced by some ‘one’ will temporarily subside. This state of profound selflessness, or *Consciousness-without-a-subject*, is often a prelude to Full Awakening. What is missing is the complementary Realization that not only does the ‘self’ lack any inherent existence, but so do objects. Consequently, as long as objects still seem to exist in their own right, there is no Gnosis. However, if you can remain in a state of *Consciousness-without-a-subject* as you pass through Death’s Gate, then, when *Consciousness-without-an-object* finally dawns in the seventh stage, you will Realize that the now vanished objects were,

themselves, only imaginary projections of this objectless Consciousness. Furthermore, you will Realize that your own Consciousness-without-a-subject is, in fact, indistinguishable from (and thus identical to) Consciousness-without-an-object. In other words, you will directly and simultaneously apprehend not only the True Nature of your ‘self’, but also the True Nature of all ‘objects’ and all ‘worlds’—which is to say, *Consciousness-without-an-object-and-without-a-subject*. This is Enlightenment, the end of the path.

Conclusion

As was already said, effortless contemplation is the most difficult of all death practices and therefore should only be relied upon at the time of actual death by advanced practitioners. However, even if you are only an intermediate or beginning practitioner, it is a good idea to have some familiarity with it. The reason is that the crisis of death may, itself, spontaneously generate effortless contemplation. If this happens there is a danger that you will not recognize what is occurring because effortless contemplation does not *feel* like a practice at all. Consequently, you may think “this is too easy to be right” and try to resume your death prayer or practice of self-sacrifice. However, if the state of effortless contemplation you find yourself in is genuine, this would be a serious mistake.

But how can you tell if it *is* genuine? Ask yourself if you are thoroughly detached from, yet at the same time, totally identified with everything that is happening? In spite of pain, fear, and any other difficulties, do you nevertheless feel an unshakable peace permeating the entire field of Consciousness? Most importantly, are you Perfectly Happy? If so, stop worrying about whether or not you are practicing correctly. Drop any images you may have about what Gnosis is supposed to be and just allow the Grace of this Happiness to carry you where it will; for truly you are now beyond all striving and non-striving, and there is literally nothing more for ‘you’ to do.

Chapter Five:

Dealing with Fear and Doubt

*“I am the murderer of joy,” said the Angel of Death,
“The widower of wives, the orphaner of children.”
“Why always run yourself down?” said Rabi’a
“Why not say instead:
‘I am he who brings friend and Friend together?’”*

—[Rabi’a](#) (Sufi)

Two of the greatest obstacles you are likely to encounter as a spiritual practitioner facing death are fear and doubt. But these are only ‘obstacles’ to those who view them as such. If, instead of trying to run away from fear and doubt, you take them as “precious opportunities for spiritual practice,” fear can be transformed into love, and doubt into certainty. To see how this is possible, let us take a closer look at each.

Fear

Perhaps you have seen a painting or a statue portraying the Buddha in the hour of his death. Calm and serene, he is usually shown reclining in the Lion Posture (lying on his right side with his right hand placed under his chin and his left arm lying along his left leg). His eyes are gently closed and there is the hint of a sublime smile playing across his lips which bears witness to his attainment of that “peace that passes all understanding.” Indeed, this archetype of spiritual death is one of the most powerful to be found in all the Great Traditions. Above all it speaks to us of our own inherent potential for transcending the whole realm of delusion and its suffering.

Having seen such a representation, however, you may think that, as a spiritual practitioner, you too should be able to die in a similar fashion—that a truly “spiritual” person would not experience any fear, anxiety, or despair, but, like the Buddha, be able to face death with

unwavering tranquility, while radiating love and compassion to all who come within range. Perhaps you are even making an effort (consciously or unconsciously) to live up to this image only to find that you cannot, that fear and other ‘negative’ emotions arise again and again to destroy your dreamed-of equanimity. The problem, however, lies not in the emotions themselves, but in your refusal to accept them.



This is well illustrated by another, equally powerful archetype of spiritual death: that of Christ on the cross—especially when he is depicted in that moment of supreme agony, crying out, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” Now, these two images—the peacefully reclining Buddha and the crucified Christ—appear completely contradictory. How can they be reconciled? In fact, they are two sides of the same coin. The archetype of the Buddha expresses that aspect of Consciousness which transcends

all things, while the Christ archetype expresses that aspect which is immanent in all things—including suffering itself. When taken together, then, these complementary images of death contain one of the most profound teachings of the entire spiritual path: *we attain to the Peace of the Buddha not by avoiding the Crucifixion of Christ but by embracing it.*

But how can this be accomplished in practice?

First, be scrupulous about keeping the precept of *honesty*: “Not to deceive yourself or others by word or deed.” In particular, you must not deceive yourself by pretending that you do not feel fear when, in fact, you do. Instead of denying fear, fix your attention on it and notice that the fear is not ‘you’, but simply an object arising in Consciousness. Feel yourself to be the “space of awareness” in which this object arises, the “womb” that gives it, and all things, birth.

Second, practice *compassion*. Embrace your fear as you would a frightened child, and ask what it is afraid of. It will answer that it is afraid of death. Why? Because death, being totally without form, is an inconceivable Mystery. But notice that the “Mystery of Death” is identical to the Mystery of God: both are Formless. Thus, the fear of death and the fear of God are really one and the same fear! By tracing the fear of death to its source in the fear of the Unknown, you have actually touched the Unknown that is God. Realize this!

Finally, allow your fear to spontaneously *transform* itself into love. This does not require any effort. While continuing to embrace fear, simply focus your attention on the Mystery of God-in-

Death and let go of all images of your 'self'. Notice, that when all your self-images are stripped away, what is left of your 'fear' is nothing but a current of pure energy. The reason you experience this energy as 'suffering' has nothing to do with the energy itself, but with the fact that it is trapped inside the boundaries of your imagined 'self'. By allowing these boundaries to dissolve, you will discover that the energy of 'fear' actually carries within it an extraordinary strength and clarity. And if you now surrender to this current of pure energy, you will experience for yourself what the great Hasidic Master Eleazar of Worms meant when he wrote this:

When the soul thinks deeply about the fear of God, then the flame of heartfelt love bursts in it and the exultation of innermost joy fills the heart.²⁹

Doubt

Like fear, doubt is only an 'obstacle' for those who do not know what to do with it. In fact, the courage to doubt is an indispensable prerequisite for the spiritual quest. This is because, if you do not dare question those fundamental concepts about the nature of reality that you have inherited from your culture, these concepts will forever stand as a barrier between you and a *trans*-conceptual Gnosis of Reality as it truly is. Thus, it is only through doubting that you can ever arrive at the Truth. But when doubt calls into question the validity of the quest itself—that is, when you doubt whether it is worth asking such questions as, "Who am I?" and "What is this world?" and so stop engaging in those practices that will help you discover the answers—then it can, indeed, present a formidable obstacle.

This tends to happen whenever we are faced with the prospect of having to abandon the "known" in favor of venturing deeper into the Unknown. Finding that its conventional stock of knowledge can no longer be relied upon as it enters new, uncharted regions, the ego rebels and tries to flee back to the security of that familiar world it internalized as a child. This reaction often becomes particularly acute during periods of crisis because successfully navigating through most crises usually demands that we make a greater leap into the Unknown than we ever imagined would be necessary.

Needless to say, your own impending death represents this kind of crisis in the extreme. Consequently, you may find yourself from time to time being plagued by such doubts as: "Perhaps all this mysticism is nonsense after all. Perhaps death is the end of everything. Why bother with all these spiritual practices?"

The occurrence of such doubts is common and, in most cases, no great cause for concern. If they appear in your mind, do not try to suppress them, for they will only return in stronger form later. The first thing to do is notice that these doubts are just *thoughts* and, as such, have no

substance and thus no power to bind you. Then, simply allow them to pass away (as you would any other distraction) and return to whatever you were doing.

If your doubts persist, the next thing to do is to take the doubts themselves as objects of meditation and follow Lao Tzu's instructions:

The myriad phenomena all rise together
And, by watching them, I see where they return.
They arise in great numbers
And each returns to its root.
Returning to one's root is called stillness.
Being still, you return to your true destiny.
In returning to one's true destiny,
one knows the Constant,
And knowing the Constant, one becomes Wise.³⁰

In other words, you should ignore the *content* of your thoughts and view them simply as “phenomena” arising in Consciousness. Then, by watching to see where these thought-phenomena come from and where they go, you will discover that they come from and return to that “space of awareness” which is beyond all thought whatsoever. If you now simply remain in this space, you will see that there is no need to “get rid” of thoughts of any kind: they arise and vanish all by themselves.

If you are a beginning practitioner, however, you may not yet be able to achieve this degree of detachment from your own thought processes. Then you must confront your doubts more directly and at a deeper level.

The easiest way to transform doubt into certainty is through *faith*. It must be remembered, however, that from the mystics' point of view, “faith” does not mean static belief in any codified dogma. Rather it means temporarily placing your trust in the guidance of a teacher (or teachings) who will eventually lead you *beyond* faith to your own insights and, ultimately, to your own Gnosis. This is similar to the kind of faith one places in any instructor—say, a mathematician or music teacher—in order to learn a particular subject or skill. Then, as one's education progresses, one begins to acquire one's own understanding or proficiency, so that gradually faith is replaced by knowledge and expertise.

Of course, the only way to be rid of all spiritual doubts is to finally “taste for yourself,” for, as the great Hindu mystic Anandamayi Ma declared, “Truth, THAT which IS, has to be made one's own.”³¹ But this, in turn, can only be accomplished through conducting your own search. By making inquiry and engaging in the appropriate practices, you too can eventually find that absolute and unshakable Certainty which comes with Enlightenment.

Thus, if you allow doubts to become a rationalization for lethargy and inaction, then they will certainly stop you dead in your tracks. On the other hand, if your doubts inspire you to find out the truth for yourself, then they will actually become a powerful motivation for pursuing the

path. Here, for example, is how another great mystic, Lallehwari, described the kinds of doubts she grappled with at the beginning of her own journey:

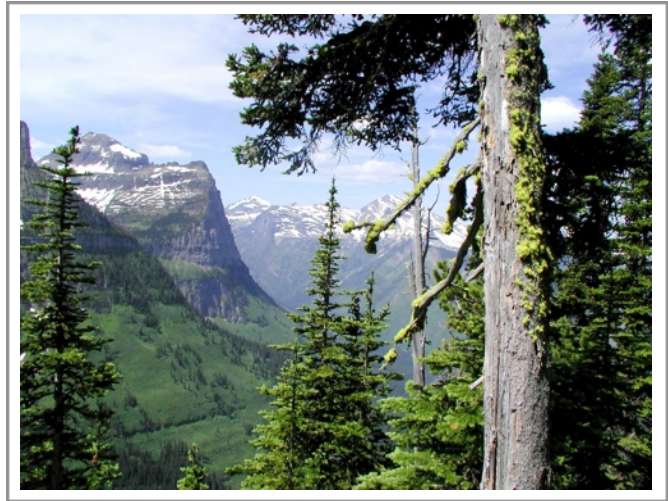
Where have I come from?
What road have I traveled?
Which way am I going?
I don't know the way,
yet here I stand
with courage and determination,
hoping to grasp the knowledge of the Truth.³²

And here is how she described her journey's end:

As my faith and love grew,
the darkness of the world diminished.
Within and without,
light began to shine.
Lalli lost herself in that light...
When the sun of knowledge rose,
the dew of ignorance disappeared.
When I realized my oneness
with the name of God,
my "I"-ness was obliterated
and Lalli found peace.³³

And here is what she has to say to you:

Are you awake?
Then stride forth.
Walk fast and complete your journey.³⁴



To summarize, then, the real difference between a spiritual and a worldly person facing death has nothing to do with whether or not they experience fear and doubt, but rather with how they *react to* these experiences. While the worldly person is normally overwhelmed by so-called “negative” thoughts and emotions (and thus becomes further lost in delusion), the spiritual practitioner learns how to transform *all* thoughts and feelings (positive or negative) into precious opportunities for spiritual practice.

Chapter Six:

Other Preparations for Death

People often make the mistake of being frivolous about death and think, “Oh well, death happens to everybody. It’s not a big deal, it’s natural. I’ll be fine.” That’s a nice theory until one is dying.

—[Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche](#) (Tibetan Buddhist)

Choosing a Spiritual Guide

Just as a midwife can help a woman in the process of giving birth, so a spiritual guide can help you navigate through the difficult process of dying. If your spiritual teacher is able to be with you in person at the hour of your death, then he or she is the obvious choice for the role. If not, ask a family member or friend to serve you in this capacity.

The person you choose to be your guide should be someone whose spiritual wisdom you respect, who can assist you with your practices, and in whom you can confide when fears and doubts arise. Most importantly, he or she should know something about the stages of death outlined in this book and be available to act as your “bedside coach” during your actual passage through Death’s Gate. This is important because if you become



lost in altered states, or frightened by visions, your guide can remind you of where you are and reassure you as to the illusory nature of these experiences. He or she can also answer questions about what's happening to you, read from appropriate spiritual texts, and prompt you to maintain your death practice as you enter the final stages. After physical death has occurred, your spiritual guide should remain with your body for at least twenty minutes, gently instructing you to be attentive to the various mental appearances which will manifest, and to identify with Consciousness-without-an-object when it appears.

Once you have chosen a spiritual guide, be sure to introduce him or her to your family and friends. Let them know that you intend to die in a spiritual manner and inform them of the role your guide will play at the hour of your death. If they are not thoroughly apprised of the situation, some members of your family may become disturbed by your guide's presence. This can cause unnecessary tensions and quarreling at a time when an atmosphere of harmony and tranquility will be all important.

Choosing a Practical Affairs Coordinator

It is vital that you, as a spiritual seeker, set aside time to engage in spiritual practices or simply to be alone with God. For most people this will not be too much of a problem. However, if you have a lot of unfinished business to take care of, or a large family and many friends who want to visit you, setting aside time for yourself may become quite difficult. If you find yourself in this situation, then, in addition to a spiritual guide, you may also want to ask a trusted family member or friend to act as a kind of practical affairs coordinator—someone who can help you pay bills, buy groceries, make doctor appointments, have prescriptions filled, arrange to get you legal documents, tell friends when you are and are not available for visits, and play host to them when they do stop by. In short, a practical affairs coordinator should be a combination business manager and social secretary.

Some people—particularly those who have prided themselves on being “independent” most of their lives—may feel guilty about asking someone else to shoulder such responsibilities. If this is true of you, then, whether or not you have an “official” practical affairs coordinator, allowing others to tend to your needs will give you a good opportunity to practice the virtue of humility. A large part of self-surrender involves giving up our attachment to the illusion that we are, or ever have been, truly autonomous beings.

From the beginning, our bodily existence has depended utterly on the sacrifice of others—whether these others were our parents who raised and supported us as children, the plants and animals that have sacrificed themselves so that we could live, or even the oxygen in the atmosphere, which has given itself freely for us to breathe. Indeed, no one stands alone, for the

very boundaries that we imagine separate us from each other and the world are also what bind us together into that single vast tapestry of Consciousness-in-form. Consequently, the more you can acknowledge how much your bodily existence depends on others now, the easier it will be for you to relinquish this existence when the moment of death comes.

Moreover, in allowing others to serve you, you will also be serving them in at least two ways. First, you will be providing them with a “precious opportunity” to practice charity and compassion. This is a highly personal gift which those who care for you will remember and cherish for the rest of their lives. Second, as someone who is dying, you will be acting as a mirror in which they can contemplate their own mortality and the necessity for deepening their own spiritual practice while there is still time. To inspire someone to spiritual practice is perhaps the greatest service one human being can perform for another.

Reconciliation and Restitution

It is important to die with a clear conscience. Start by making a list of those people you have harmed or mistreated, or who have harmed or mistreated you. Do not try to remember every little incident. (Make a single but heartfelt prayer asking forgiveness for all minor offenses you have committed and forgiving those who have committed minor offenses against you.) Confine your list to those people whom you have harmed or injured in a major way and vice versa.

If some of these people are still alive, you should try to contact them personally or write a letter expressing sorrow for any grief you have caused them, and forgiving them for whatever grief they have caused you. If you have actually stolen from someone, or cheated them out of what was rightfully theirs and can make restitution, it will be of great spiritual benefit to do so. Provisions for such restitution, for instance, can be incorporated into your will. If you cannot afford to make restitution, you should still confess your offense and ask their forgiveness.

If you have lost touch with any of the people on your list, or they have already died, you can still ask for and confer forgiveness by means of meditative prayer. Recall to mind each offense as vividly as possible, along with whatever painful feelings of remorse or resentment it arouses. Notice that both remorse and resentment feel painful because the energy of these feelings is directed toward yourself. By re-directing this energy outward, you can transform remorse into repentance or resentment into forgiveness as the situation requires. Once you have done this, release the memory of what happened and do not dwell on it again. Self-pity and obsessive guilt are never signs of true selflessness. If you find yourself wallowing in these kinds of emotions, again notice that they all revolve around an image of your ‘self’. Let go of this image and allow the feelings associated with it to dissolve. Then turn your attention to the present and whatever tasks are at hand.

Last Will and Testament

From a spiritual perspective, no one actually “owns” anything. Although the concept of *ownership* is socially and legally necessary, in reality, it is a fiction. As a spiritual practitioner, in order not to be deluded in this regard, you have tried to view all your material possessions as being “on loan” to you from the Divine—which, in turn, means that you have also had a responsibility to use them wisely and compassionately. This includes taking responsibility for their disposal at the time of your death.

The traditional way to dispose of possessions at the time of death is to leave a *last will and testament*. If you have not already done so, you should have one drawn up as soon as possible. It is important, however, to remember that the laws which govern such documents vary from state to state and country to country. For example, they may have to be written in a certain format, be signed by a certain number of witnesses, or be notarized by a notary public in order to be legally binding. Thus, a simple handwritten note is not likely to suffice in a court of law. To be sure that your *last will and testament* is legal, consult a lawyer. If you cannot afford one, at least find out what the laws are pertaining to these documents in your jurisdiction. You should also be aware that in some situations it may be advisable to make other arrangements, such as establishing survivorship title to your property, or setting up trusts. In order to determine which is best for you, consult a professional financial advisor or lawyer.

In addition to fulfilling your responsibilities regarding possessions, taking an active interest in their disposal will also give you an opportunity to practice detachment from them. Thus, even if you have already drawn up a *last will and testament* (or made other arrangements), you should take the time to mentally review all the things you own, say a prayer expressing your gratitude for the way in which each has served you during this life, and then make a conscious decision to relinquish it forever. By so doing, you will prepare yourself to leave this world in the same condition in which you entered it—naked and free of all things.

Documents Pertaining to Your Health Care

If your ability to make decisions about your own medical treatment becomes impaired (as, for instance, if you fall into a coma), it is usually the policy of doctors and other health care professionals (in the United States, at least) to make every effort to keep you alive for as long as possible, even if there is virtually no chance of your condition ever improving. If you do not wish such aggressive and often costly measures to be taken on your behalf, it is not enough to simply communicate this verbally to family members or friends. Because doctors and other health care professionals can be held liable for failing to keep you alive, they may have no choice but to

disregard whatever your family and friends say unless it is backed up by written documentation. For this reason, it is important to draw up a *living will* and/or *power of attorney for health care*, as well as to ask your doctor to issue a *Do Not Resuscitate* order (DNR) to be given to all your health-care providers.

A *living will* gives specific instructions about what kinds of treatment you wish withheld when death becomes imminent. By signing a *power of attorney for health care* you legally empower a relative or friend to make these decisions for you should you become incapacitated. A DNR must be signed by your doctor. It informs nurses, ambulance paramedics, and other physicians that you do not wish to be resuscitated when your life signs begin to fail.

Because not all states recognize such documents as legally binding, you must again find out what the laws are in your area. Moreover, as with *last wills and testaments*, documents relating to your health care usually have to be drawn up in a specified manner to carry legal weight. In states which do recognize the legality of such documents, standardized forms can often be obtained from your doctor's office, an area hospital, a Hospice organization, or your local library. Filling them out is a relatively simple matter and well worth the effort, both for your own sake and the sake of your relatives and friends who will be trying to see that your wishes are honored.

Dying at Home

Until the turn of the twentieth century the vast majority of human beings died at home, in their own beds, surrounded by family and friends. In many places in the world they still do, but not in the United States. In the United States today, most people die in hospitals or nursing homes. This has come about partly because it is assumed that such institutions can provide better care for the dying person. With the advent



of the Hospice movement in recent years, however, the advantages of dying at home versus dying in an institution have been undergoing a radical re-evaluation. Aside from questions about “death with dignity,” and the quality of emotional support that family and friends can provide in a home

environment (as opposed to the more technologically advanced but less personal care available in a hospital), there are good spiritual reasons for choosing to die at home:

1. There is little doubt that, all else being equal, dying at home will provide a better environment for engaging in your spiritual practices. Instead of having to follow a hospital's routine, for example, you will have more freedom to set up your own daily schedule, thus allowing for more periods of uninterrupted meditation, reading, reflection, and prayer.
2. Most people find it easier to relax at home with their own families than in a hospital run by a professional staff, no matter how sensitive the staff tries to be. This is usually true not only for the dying person, but also for friends and loved ones who come to visit. Thus, the surroundings in a home are usually more tranquil than in an institution, and as a spiritual practitioner you will certainly want to die in as tranquil an environment as possible. This is because the more tranquil your environment, the more peaceful will be your own frame of mind and the easier it will be to concentrate on your spiritual practices when the hour of your death arrives.
3. By dying at home you will also give your family and friends a greater opportunity to experience the reality of death and to understand that it is the inevitable end of all embodied life. This will not only help them come to terms with their own mortality, but seeing you die in a spiritual manner may inspire them to strive to do the same.

The decision to die at home, however, should not be made lightly. Although it is not usually the case, the nature of your illness may be such that adequate management of pain and other symptoms is not feasible outside of a hospital setting. This is something you should discuss with your doctor. You must also take into consideration how your family and friends feel. Caring for you will require a heavy expenditure of time and energy which they may not be able to afford. Equally important, they must have a genuine desire to be participants in your death. If they consent to your wishes merely out of a sense of duty, you could well find the situation at home becoming far more stressful than it would have been in a hospital. Thus, you must not only try to get them to be honest with you, you must be both honest and compassionate in your assessment of them. Some people in our society have been so sheltered from death that they simply aren't emotionally prepared to cope with the sight of someone they love dying before their very eyes.

If, on the other hand, it is medically feasible and you have the support of your family and friends, then dying at home may be easier than you might at first think. This is especially true if there is a Hospice in your area. Most Hospice organizations are staffed by trained personnel who are emotionally and spiritually committed to making dying at home a viable option in our society once again. Often, they can provide a wide range of medical and social home-care services for both you and your family, including help with such things as the administration of medication, psychological counseling, arranging for a death certificate, planning funeral services, etc. Moreover, Hospice costs are covered by Medicare, most health insurance plans, and private

donations, so that lack of money is never an obstacle to receiving their assistance. Therefore, if dying at home seems the right choice for you, seeking help from a Hospice organization should be one of your top priorities.

Pain and Pain-Management

Depending on the type of illness you have, death may be accompanied by a considerable amount of physical pain. This pain can usually be controlled by a variety of pain-killing drugs. However, many of these drugs also produce states of drowsiness, confusion, and sleep—all of which may interfere with your ability to engage in spiritual practice. Because as a spiritual practitioner you want to die in as lucid a mental state as possible, you might be tempted to abstain from all pain medication. But if the pain itself becomes so excruciating that you can no longer focus on your practice, then there will be little to gain by such abstinence. In addition (again depending on your illness), chemical changes naturally occurring in your body may produce drowsiness, confusion, and sleep even if no medication is taken. Thus, mere abstention from drugs will not necessarily guarantee the lucidity you desire.

There are two things you can do to ameliorate this problem. The first is to use pain medication with discretion, trying to establish a happy medium between physical comfort and mental clarity. The second is to rehearse your death practice whenever you take a nap or go to sleep at night. With sufficient practice, you can actually learn to meditate or pray in any state of consciousness, even while dreaming. The more you can develop this ability now, the easier it will be to maintain lucidity in the hour of your death, no matter what chemical alterations take place in your body or how much pain medication you have to take.

Planning for the Hour of Your Death

There are many occasions in life for which we plan in great detail—births, initiations, graduations, weddings, even dinner parties. But rarely, in our modern culture, do we make the same kind of preparations for our deaths, and yet there is no more important or sacramental event. One reason that we give so little thought to our deaths is that we are not always granted the opportunity to anticipate it. You, however, have such an opportunity, and you should make the most of it.

Here are a few of the things to consider about the kind of environment you may want to establish as you make your final passage through Death's Gate—especially if you intend to die at home:

1. Would you like to have an “open house” with as many of your friends and relatives present as can make it? Or would you rather just invite members of your immediate family? Perhaps, again, you would prefer to be alone with only your spiritual guide in attendance.
2. Do you want any spiritual texts read as death approaches? If so, which ones and in what order?
3. Would you like music played? If so, what pieces?
4. Do you want any representations of your favorite spiritual teachers placed where you can see them—say, a picture or statue of Quan-Yin or the Buddha, Mira Bai, or Christ?

Even if you are not sure how you will feel about such “accessories” when death comes, you should still ask your spiritual guide in advance to have them available. That way you can avoid any last minute confusion or frantic searching about for the desired items. The more you plan now, the more the outward course of your death will proceed smoothly, and the less there will be to distract you from your inner practice.

Disposing of Your Body

From a spiritual point of view, your body (like your material possessions) does not ultimately “belong” to you, but is only held “on loan,” to be used as wisely and compassionately as possible during this life. Thus, just as it is important to make arrangements for the disposal of your material possessions, so it is important to make known your wishes for the disposal of your body after your death. In this regard, there are two major things to consider: *viewing of your corpse* and its *final disposal*.



Viewing of your corpse

It will be of great spiritual benefit for others to have a chance to view your corpse after you are dead, not only in order to say a last farewell, but more importantly to be able to contemplate the impermanence of all bodily existence. To this end you should request that your body be placed on display somewhere accessible to your family, friends, and fellow practitioners, from one

to three days. (In some states there are legal restraints on how long a cadaver can be left unburied without embalming or refrigeration, so check the laws in your area.) Your corpse should not be dressed up beyond the requirements of modesty, nor should any cosmetic attempts be made to disguise the fact that you are quite dead and even beginning to decay. Otherwise, the spiritual purpose of the viewing will be undermined.

Final disposal

The two most common methods for disposing of corpses are burial and cremation. As to which is best, there is no consensus in the Great Traditions. Indeed, from an Absolute perspective, it makes little difference, since your body has no reality in its own right, but is merely a transient manifestation of Consciousness Itself. The one thing you should specifically avoid, however, is any method of burial designed to preserve your body indefinitely (as, for instance, interment in a stainless-steel casket). Remember that you, yourself, have been able to live only through the sacrifice of other life-forms. Since you have feasted on their bodies all these years, it would be both uncharitable and unjust to now deprive them of the opportunity to feast on your body—whether this be directly, through offering your flesh as a banquet for worms and bacteria, or indirectly, by recycling it as bones and ashes that will fertilize the soil.

The Funeral Service

The funeral service fulfills many functions, most of which are social in nature. Thus, it is at once a rite that publicly confirms your death, an occasion for communal grieving, and a ceremony of closure for loved ones who must carry on without you. But it also provides an opportunity for others to assess the way you lived and to learn what they can from it. If you wish to participate in this assessment by communicating whatever insights you have gained from life, you can do so in a variety of ways. You might, for example, ask that a favorite passage from a spiritual text, an essay, or a poem be read at the service; or you might write one yourself. You might also request that a certain piece of music be played, a song sung, or that your spiritual teacher say a few words on your behalf. Keep in mind, however, that the funeral service will not be held primarily for your benefit but for the benefit of your family and friends. In talking it over with them, be attentive to their needs and considerate of their wishes.

Chapter Seven:

Guidance for the Guide

*Let me respectfully remind you
Life and Death are of supreme importance.
Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost.
Let us strive to Awaken, Awaken.
Take heed, do not squander your life.*

—An evening prayer (Zen Buddhism)

To be asked by someone who is dying to serve as their spiritual guide is both an honor and a privilege. It is an honor because it means that that person has such a high regard for your spiritual counsel that they are willing to entrust themselves to you during the most critical time of their life—the passage through Death's Gate. It is a privilege because guiding someone through this passage can be a profound spiritual experience for you, the guide, as well. Always remember, however, that the honor and privilege which attach to this office call, in turn, for deep humility and an acute sense of gratitude. Indeed, you should take humility and gratitude to be your guiding virtues in the performance of this work. Guard against becoming puffed-up with your own self-importance, and do not neglect to give continuing thanks for being summoned to such a sacred service.

The Period Preceding the Actual Hour of Death

Depending on the dying person's illness, this period may last for days, weeks, or months. You should arrange to visit the dying person on a regular basis, perhaps once or twice a week—more if need be. During this time you should begin to familiarize yourself with the mystical literature concerning death, so that you will be in a better position to answer questions, give advice, or recommend some text he or she might want to read. You should also take up your own death

practice while you serve as a spiritual guide. If you and the dying person are both engaged in the same practice, this will help forge a bond of true spiritual empathy between you.



Your primary job during this period, however, is to be a good listener.

Let the dying person set the agenda for your conversations. If you suspect the person is reluctant to talk freely about his or her feelings, you can try to initiate a discussion by openly and honestly expressing your own. If the person still doesn't respond, don't press the issue. Let it go until your next

meeting. Sometimes powerful emotions take awhile to percolate to the surface. If, on the other hand, the dying person is eager to talk, you must listen with great compassion and be willing to enter fully into whatever experiences he or she wishes to communicate. Keep in mind Paul's admonition to the Romans:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind, one with another.³⁵

You must also be prepared for surprises. The period just prior to death represents a last opportunity for someone to confess misdeeds, make restitution, and otherwise clear their conscience. Consequently, you may be shocked by some secret the dying person chooses to reveal. If this happens, abandon all judgments and offer reassurances that whatever is said will be held in the strictest confidence. The trust that a dying person places in you as a spiritual guide is *sacred* and *must never be betrayed under any circumstances*.

Finally, do not forget your sense of humor. There will be many occasions when sharing a good joke will express greater compassion and provide more spiritual benefit than quoting a thousand scriptures. It was not without reason that Christendom's most celebrated poet, Dante, called the journey to God a "*Divine Comedy*."

The Hour Before Death

As a spiritual guide you must be ready, day or night, to go immediately to the dying person when the hour of death draws near. At that time your main task will be to coach the person through the eight stages of death, periodically reminding them to maintain their spiritual practice throughout the process. It is important to remember, however, that no one will have exactly the same experiences in exactly the same order, nor will the “stages” always be as clearly distinguishable as the outline given in Chapter Two of this book might suggest. Therefore, you must pay close attention to the person who is dying and take your cues as to what is happening directly from him or her.

For example, the dying person might suddenly sit up and wave away some frightening apparition that is invisible to you. If this happens, don't get alarmed. Simply remind the person that whatever they are seeing is only imaginary and has no power to cause harm. At other times, the person may drift off into a kind of twilight sleep, filled with troubling dreams. Again, remind him or her that such dreams have no reality in themselves and there is nothing ultimately to be afraid of. On the other hand, if the person seems to be sleeping peacefully, do not disturb them with verbal instructions, but continue to communicate silently in the form of heart-felt prayers.

Sometimes, a dying person will make what may seem to be unintelligible comments about the position of objects or people in the room. Listen carefully. He or she may be having an out-of-body experience and be viewing the whole scene from an entirely different perspective. Ask if this is, indeed, the case. If it is, reassure the dying person that such experiences are perfectly normal and encourage them to enjoy it. Whatever happens be flexible, fitting your response to the way the person's death actually unfolds, rather than to any preconceptions you have about how it should unfold. Above all, periodically remind the dying person to continue their death practice throughout all the stages, even after physical death has occurred. *Never assume the dying person can no longer hear you. Hearing is the last of the senses to be lost.*

Although your primary responsibility is to the person who is dying, you must also be sensitive to the feelings of any relatives and friends who may be present. Encourage them to come sit by the bed and hold the dying person's hand, while quietly saying good-bye, expressing their love, or that “it's okay to let go.” Violent displays of emotion, however, should be discouraged as they can upset the dying person and be a distraction to his or her spiritual practice. You must also be prepared to counsel and console friends and relatives who may turn to you in their grief even if they, themselves, are not practitioners of the Way of Selflessness.

The Moment of Death

The most prominent outward signs of physical death are the cessation of breathing, heartbeat, and pulse. They may also include the release of bowels and bladder, enlargement of the pupils of the eyes, fixed staring, and a slackness of the jaw. When these signs appear, stay calm. Remember, a death that has been planned for is *not an emergency*. (Do *not* call 911, as the paramedics who respond will try to revive the deceased, despite his or her wishes to the contrary.) If there is a physician, nurse, or Hospice worker present, ask them to confirm that death has occurred. If not, don't worry. Nothing needs to be done immediately and, in fact, it is best if the dead person is left resting peacefully where they are for at least fifteen to twenty minutes after physical death. During this period, you should ask family members and friends to pray or meditate quietly while you sit by the deceased's side, softly reminding him or her of what happens in the final stages of the passage through Death's Gate. For instance, you might say something like this:

Dear (deceased's name):

You are now dead but your journey is not yet over, so do not become distracted. Pay close attention, for soon the last obstacles to Gnosis will be removed.

Now all thoughts are vanishing, and no new thoughts arise to take their place. Do not be afraid. You have no need of thought now. In place of thought, a White Light dawns. Relax and allow it to fill your entire mind.

Now all resentment, anger, and animosity are fading away. Again, do not be afraid. Feel how wonderful it is to be free of these forms of suffering. As resentment, anger, and animosity disappear, a Golden Light dawns. Relax and let this Golden Light penetrate into every corner of your mind.

Now, all desires, graspings, and attachments are starting to dissolve. Let them go; there is nothing to fear. Feel how peaceful it is to be free of these causes of suffering.

As desires, graspings, and attachments evaporate, so does the Golden Light. Now your mind is emptied of all objects, whatsoever, and seems to be a complete Void. But look, this Void is no mere 'nothing'. In fact, it is Consciousness Itself. Recognize this



Consciousness-without-an-object as Pure Being, the Ultimate Reality, Womb of all Worlds, Radiant with Grace and Bliss.

Now, Realize that this Pure Consciousness is not an object appearing in your mind. Rather, it is the True Nature of your mind itself. Recognize that your own mind and this Consciousness are indistinguishable.

By Realizing that this Consciousness *is* who you *truly are*, you are instantaneously freed from all delusions of 'I' and 'other', 'self' and 'world' forever. This is Enlightenment, the end of the path!³⁶

Say these instructions slowly, pausing after each point so that the deceased can fully absorb it. Repeat the entire set of instructions several times during the fifteen to twenty minute period following physical death. Of course, it is not necessary to say them verbatim. You may use your own words as long as the central points are covered.

After you have given these final instructions, invite the deceased's family members and friends to approach the bed and say their last farewells. If there is no doctor, nurse, or hospice worker present, remind whoever is responsible to inform the mortuary and/or physician that death has occurred so that a death certificate can be issued and a time arranged for removing the body after the viewing period is over.

If the deceased has had a relatively easy time passing through Death's Gate, your task as a spiritual guide is essentially complete (although again you may be called upon to counsel friends and relatives, or to say a few words at the funeral service). If, however, the person had an especially difficult time dying, you should continue giving guidance once a day in the form of a prayer, reminding the dead person that whatever he or she is experiencing is simply a manifestation of Consciousness Itself and should be Recognized as such and be embraced with love and compassion. Different traditions have different conceptions as to how long such prayers will continue to be effective, though there seems to be strong inter-cultural agreement that the "dead" remain in contact with the "living" for a minimum of three days. (In the Tibetan tradition, passage through the three "*bardos*" of death is believed to take a full forty-nine days.) One reason it is difficult to fix a time frame for the possibility of postmortem communication is that time itself varies with different states of consciousness. Thus, what constitutes a "day" for the living does not necessarily correlate with a "day" for the dead. The most prudent thing to do is continue your prayers of guidance for as long as you feel that a spiritual connection between you and the deceased still exists.

Finally, as time passes, you may discover that having served as a spiritual guide was a good deal more traumatic than you realized at the time. In the days ahead, you may experience vivid and recurrent memories of the dying person, accompanied by intense emotions of grief, sadness, or fear. If this happens to you, the first thing to do is practice detachment. This means neither wallowing in these emotions, nor trying to push them away. Allow yourself to fully experience whatever thoughts and feelings arise, but do not dwell on them when they naturally start to pass.

The second thing to do is to notice that, while these memories of death may cause you considerable suffering, they also constitute a direct experiential teaching about the transitory nature of all things. Take to heart what Black Elk, the great Lakota shaman, said:

It is good to have a reminder of death before us, for it helps us to understand the impermanence of life on this earth, and this understanding may aid us in preparing for our own death. He who is well prepared is he who knows that he is nothing compared to Wakan-Tanka, who is everything; then he knows that world which is real.³⁷

Conclusion: Knowing Beyond Words

*Seek water constantly, oh man of dry lips!
For your dry lips give witness
that in the end you will find a fountain.
The lips' dryness is a message from the water:
"If you keep on moving, without doubt you will find me."*

—[Rumi](#) (Sufi)

Before visiting a museum, it is always helpful to know something about the paintings you are going to see. Many guidebooks are written for this purpose and it is certainly worthwhile reading them. But have you ever noticed how some museum visitors spend more time thumbing through their guidebooks than actually looking at the paintings themselves? It's almost as though they deliberately want to fill their minds with facts and figures because they are afraid to simply stand before a work of art and allow the beauty it reflects to penetrate directly into their souls. And yet if a work of art is ever to be truly understood, such utter nakedness is precisely what is called for. All the rest is merely a preparation for this moment.

Like a museum guide, this book is also filled with a lot of facts and figures and there is a danger it can be misused in exactly the same way, for what is true of art is even more so of spiritual practice. This is why Bishop Ignatii wrote this of the Christian seeker in the last stages of the path:

Finally he becomes a child, as he is commanded in the Gospel, and is made a fool for Christ's sake, that is, he loses the false reason of the world, and receives from God a spiritual understanding.³⁸

Likewise, Lalleshwari advised her disciples,

Even though you have knowledge
become like a fool.
Even though you have eyes,
become blind.
Even though you have ears,
become deaf..
[For] in that state there is no knowledge,
no meditation, no Shiva or Shakti.
All that remains is That.³⁹

And Lao Tzu declared,

Unlike others, I am silent
and give no sign,
like a baby
before it has begun to smile..
My mind is that of a fool:
utterly empty!⁴⁰



The purpose of this book has been to help prepare you to receive this “spiritual understanding” and attain “That” which becomes supremely available in death, precisely because, in passing through its Gate, our minds are finally made “empty,” so that we can once again be filled with that wonder and awe known only to fools and children. Therefore, use the teachings contained in this book to orient yourself to death’s landscape, to read the signs along the way, and to focus your attention on the Divine Mystery that lies beyond.

But do not cling to these teachings like a nervous museum goer, for “where there be prophecies, they shall fail; where there be tongues, they shall cease; where there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when That which is Perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.”⁴¹ Death reveals “That which is Perfect.” In order for this revelation to take place, however, “that which is in part” must, as the Apostle Paul said, be done away with. When this happens to you, do not be alarmed. As you enter Death’s terrain it may seem at times like you are journeying through a totally foreign country. But in your heart of hearts you know this is not so. Why? Because you have already been there. Death is that Eternal Land from which you came before you were born into this world of metaphors and dreams, pleasure and pain, suffering and woe. You have only become confused and forgotten it—that’s all. But now it doesn’t matter—now none of it matters—because now you are going Home.

And yet, truly speaking, you aren’t going anywhere, because in *reality* you are, always have been, and always will be, Consciousness without end...

Peace.

About the Author



Joel Morwood is the Spiritual Director at the Center for Sacred Sciences, a non-profit organization dedicated to the study and dissemination of the teachings of the mystics from the world's major religious traditions. Joel is also the author of *Naked Through the Gate: A Spiritual Autobiography* and *The Way of Selflessness: A Practical Guide to Enlightenment Based on the Teachings of the World's Great Mystics*.

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End Notes

¹ [*The Gospel of Buddha*](#), told by Paul Carus (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1894), 13.

² [*Simone Weil, Waiting For God*](#), trans. Emma Craufurd (1951; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1973), 63.

³ For example, Kenneth Ring reports that 48% of the subjects in his study of people who almost died had vivid near-death experiences. [*Kenneth Ring, Life At Death*](#), (1980; reprint, New York: Quill, 1982), 34.

⁴ [*Bokar Rinpoche, Death and the Art of Dying in Tibetan Buddhism*](#), French trans. Francois Jacquemart, English trans. Christiane Buchet, ed. Jennifer Pessereau (San Francisco: ClearPoint Press, 1993), 19.

⁵ [*The Chandogya Upanishad*](#), 6:8:6-7—my rendering.

⁶ Moshe Idel, [*The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*](#), trans. Jonathan Chipman (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 184—my brackets.

⁷ Cited in [*Sogyal Rinpoche, The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*](#), ed. Patrick Gaffney and Andrew Harvey (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, a division of HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 253.

⁸ [*Augustine*](#), “On Free Choice” in [*The Essential Augustine*](#), 2nd ed., ed. Vernon J. Bourke (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1974), 25.

⁹ [*Al-Ghazali, The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife: Book 40 of the Revival of the Religious Sciences*](#), trans. T.J. Winter (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1989), 250 fnB.

¹⁰ [*Mircea Eliade, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*](#), trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, Bollingen series LXXVI, 1974), 33.

¹¹ [*Bokar Rinpoche, Death and the Art of Dying*](#), 20.

¹² [*Ramana Maharshi, The Spiritual Teaching of Ramana Maharshi*](#) (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1972), 69—my italics and brackets.

¹³ [*Gershom G. Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*](#) (1941; reprint, New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 217—my italics.

¹⁴ “Centering” in [*Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*](#), comp. [*Paul Reps*](#) (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc., 1957), 201. (See also my spiritual autobiography, *Naked Through the Gate*, for an account of my own Enlightenment which occurred precisely at this moment.)

¹⁵ [*Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, The Mystical Theology and the Celestial Hierarchies of Dionysius the Areopagita*](#), 2nd ed., trans. eds. of The Shrine of Wisdom (Nr. Godalming, Surrey: The Shrine of Wisdom, 1965), 9. Notice how the phrase “Radiance of the Divine Darkness” exactly parallels the Tibetan description of the mind of black-near-attainment actually being the fundamental clear light.

¹⁶ [*Bokar Rinpoche, Death and the Art of Dying*](#), 35.

- ¹⁷ [Al-Ghazali](#), *The Alchemy of Happiness*, trans. Claud Field (1964; reprint, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, October, 1983), 63.
- ¹⁸ In fact, my own Gnostic Awakening was prompted by just this kind of guidance: a critical teaching happened to pop into my head during the state between waking and sleep—See [Naked Through the Gate](#), 239.
- ¹⁹ James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, ed. Raymond J. DeMaillie and Elaine A. Jahner (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 270.
- ²⁰ [Meister Eckhart](#), *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 265.
- ²¹ [Bokar Rinpoche](#), *Death and the Art of Dying*, 73-74.
- ²² [Javad Nurbakhsh](#), *Sufism V* (New York: Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi Publications, 1991), 135.
- ²³ [Lao Tzu](#), *Tao Te Ching*, 48—my rendering.
- ²⁴ [Ramana Maharshi](#), *The Spiritual Teaching of Ramana Maharshi*, 49.
- ²⁵ [Meister Eckhart](#), *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, 192.
- ²⁶ [Longchenpa](#), *You Are the Eyes of the World*, trans. Kennard Lipman and Merrill Peterson (Novato, CA: Lotsawa, 1987), 36.
- ²⁷ [Bokar Rinpoche](#), *Death and the Art of Dying*, 74.
- ²⁸ [Simone Weil](#), *Waiting For God*, 195.
- ²⁹ [Gershom G. Scholem](#), *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 95.
- ³⁰ [Lao Tzu](#), *Tao Te Ching*, 16.
- ³¹ [Sri Anandamayi Ma](#), *Matri Vani: Vol I*, 5th ed. trans. Atmananda (Calcutta: Shree Shree Anandamayee Charitable Society, 1982), 33.
- ³² [Lalleshwari](#), *Lalleshwari: Spiritual Poems by a Great Siddha Yogini*, rendered by Swami Muktananda (South Fallsburg, NY: SYDA Foundation, 1981), 3.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 46-47.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ³⁵ *Rom.* 12:15-16.
- ³⁶ These instructions are loosely adapted from those given to the dead in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 3rd ed., trans. Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup, ed. [W.Y. Evans-Wentz](#) (1957; reprint, London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 95-96.
- ³⁷ [Black Elk](#), *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's account of the seven rites of the Oglala Sioux*, ed. Joseph Epes Brown (1953; reprint, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973), 8 fn14.
- ³⁸ Igumen Chariton of Valamo, *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*, trans. El Kadloubovsky and E.M. Palmer, ed. Timothy Ware (1966; reprint, London, Faber and Faber, 1985), 84.
- ³⁹ [Lalleshwari](#), *Lalleshwari: Spiritual Poems by a Great Siddha Yogini*, 73 and 84 combined.
- ⁴⁰ [Lao Tzu](#), *Tao Te Ching*, 20.
- ⁴¹ *I Cor.* 13:8-10.