



Death and the Art of Dying in Tibetan Buddhism

Bokar Rinpoche

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Milarepa, the prince of yogis used to sing: The fear of death has led me to the snowcapped mountains. On the uncertainty of the moment of my death I have meditated Thus I have reached the immortal stronghold of true essence My fear has vanished into the distance.

Later, the great sufi poet, Jalal Od-Din Rumi was to say: "Our death is our wedding with eternity."

Not so long ago Sri Ramana Maharishi, the wise man of Arunachala wrote the following in one of his rare books. Those who fear death intensely only take refuge at the feet of the Supreme Lord whom neither death nor birth can impress. Dead to themselves and to all possessions, how could the thought of death arise within them? They are immortal!

We will almost certainly never be as certain as these sublime beings. At best we will have hope and at worst we will experience the anguish of nothingness.

Death who are you? What do you have in store for us? Will you end with all encompassing darkness the fleeting moments of several decades of life? Will you open a window onto other worlds, other splendors and other hells for us? From the scientist for whom awareness and brain are irremediably linked to the sage who during this lifetime has realized immortality, there are many responses.

Buddhism asserts that beings live on eternally beyond the impermanent fluctuations of this life. Death is not a definitive end but just a passage to one of the three other states: - a rebirth in the world of human beings or in another world of the cycle of conditioned existence where a constant flow of joys and suffering goes on; - the entry into a "pure land", domain of luminous manifestation as we shall see as this book unfolds; - the flowering of the ultimate nature of being as a pure, non- dual, unlimited all-knowing and all-loving consciousness, which is called Buddhahood.

It takes an entire life of labor to prepare for these achievements. Nonetheless, when time comes, there is an "art of dying", an ars moriendi as it was said in the Middle Ages. Such will be the main thrust of this work even though a general description of death had to be provided and is contained in the first chapter. The real issue, the one from where it will be pointless to divert oneself with fine theories is as follows: how can we turn our death into a positive expansion? Such was the question we asked Bokar Rinpoche and which he answered in the precise frame of Buddhism and, more particularly, within the Tibetan tradition. Another essential issue is how can we accompany those who are leaving before us and what can we offer them by way of a pleasant journey? As curious it may seem when dealing with a subject like this, this book is intended to be more practical than philosophical. May this book ensure that our last moment is also the most beautiful.

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