

A Practical Guide to Death and Dying

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... so few know the art of dying. For dying, like living, is an art and if only most of us mastered the art of dying as much as we seek to master the art of living, there would be many more happy deaths. The fact of the matter, how-ever, is that the art of living is not different from the art of dying; in fact, the one flows into the other, and cannot be separated one from the other. He who has mastered the art of living has already mastered the art of dying; to such, death holds no terrors.

M.V. Kamath, Philosophy of Death and Dying

The Difference between Death and Dying. Death is a *biological process*, a function of the body. Dying is a *psychological process*, a function of the mind.

As a biological process, death is part of the wisdom of the body. It is given by nature to every living thing and occurs without their having to learn anything or do anything. As Ecclesiastes said, "To every thing there is a season ... a time to be born and a time to die. . ." The laws of physiology which produced the organism are the same laws which terminate it, and even though the termination may appear inexplicable or absurd, death is an undeniable "fact of life."

Only humans are afraid to die. All other organisms expire without fear. That's not to say they don't straggle to live if they find themselves in life-threatening circumstances. The rabbit flees the fox, the fish fights the hook, the bayed panther slashes at the hunter, the bird tries to escape the snare. But these actions are instinctive and unpremeditated. Among animals, there is no gnawing anxiety in advance of death.

There is a special reason for this. Animals don't have a sense of time with which to anticipate their future demise. They live strictly in the present, the here-and-now. Nor do animals have a sense of self — an ego — which can be mentally projected into future circumstances. It is, therefore, psychologically impossible for animals to fear the loss of their life as humans do. Just as it instinctively fights to live in life-threatening circumstances, when an animal reaches the end of old age, it instinctively goes off by itself or die or allows itself to be killed, without fighting the circumstances and without fear.

Animals live in the simple present; humans do not. Animals have no self-image or self-identity; humans do. And that is the crux of the problem. That is the difference between death and dying. That is the source of human suffering and misery. "Will you realize once for all," said the Greek philosopher Epictetus, "that it is not death that is the source of all man's evils, and of a mean and cowardly spirit, but rather the fear of death? Against this fear then I would have you discipline yourself."

The Scientific Evidence for Life After Death.

Evidence suggests that death can be compared to the change of state H₂O undergoes when water turns to steam. The real importance of the evidence for life after death is that it can affect the quality and style of your life here and now.

Let's look at the evidence for life after death. This evidence is what lends credence to the ancient idea of soul. The evidence falls into eight major categories. Each category is derived independently of the others. The eight categories are: (1) Mediumship; (2) Apparitions of the dead; (3) Out-of-body experiences; (4) Reincarnation memories; (5) Spirit photographs and spirit voice recordings; (6) Possession cases; (7) Deathbed observations; (8) Near-death experiences.

Mediumship.

Mediumship has been investigated since the beginning of psychic research in the information coming through, apparently from the deceased themselves.

Apparitions of the Dead.

Apparitions of the dead is the official term for ghosts. Apparitions are real, although apparently nonphysical. They are seen fully clothed; they often appear in conjunction with material objects (such as holding something); they have been known to move physical objects; and they have been seen reflected in mirrors. Thus they appear to occupy real space while nevertheless being nonmaterial.

Out-of-Body Experiences.

The older terms for out-of-body experiences are astral projection and astral travel. They all refer to an experience of seeming to be in a place separate from one's physical body while fully and normally conscious. The experience can be either spontaneous or induced and is frequently associated with crisis situations in its spontaneous form. OBEs are a universal human phenomenon, having been experienced in every time and culture. The effect on a person who has an OBE is almost always a conviction of survival after death.

Reincarnation Memories.

Reincarnation means that a human soul comes back to earth in a human body, either because it hasn't fully learned the lessons it is supposed to or because, in the case of a highly spiritual person, it has a special task to perform in helping others.

Spirit Photographs and Spirit Voices.

Spirit photography has been occurring since 1861, and now more than two dozen people in half a dozen countries have claimed to obtain pictures of a variety of types of images that seem to be permanently visible proof of an afterlife.

Possession Cases.

When the word *possession* is mentioned, most people probably think of *The Exorcist* and cackling demons. There are a number of interesting cases indicative of demonic possession, but there are others — the ones we're concerned with here — that appear to be due to the spirit of a deceased human rather than a nonhuman entity.

Deathbed Observations.

Dr. Karlis Osis of the American Society for Psychical Research conducted several studies of the dying, based on observations made by almost 1800 doctors and nurses present during the last hours of terminal patients who were conscious to the end.

Osis went on to specify the findings of this monumental study, which is the first truly scientific examination of this category of survival evidence. I will quote from my interview:

“We found that the dying went through some startling experiences — experiences that were not due to the patients' medical condition. For one thing, there were frequent instances of elevation in mood. I mean that the patients became happier at the very time when the doctor was usually saying conditions were desperate. They died with feelings of serenity, peace, elation, and religious emotions. And this mood change was not due to any medication, sedation, lack of oxygen to the brain, or the nature of the illness. The patients died a “good death” in strange contrast to the usual gloom and misery commonly expected before expiration.”

Another remarkable thing that terminal patients experienced was deathbed visions. These visions were of two kinds: one was where they would see a person or a religious apparition — a hallucination that no one else could see. An invisible visitor would come into the hospital and the patient would talk with it. Usually, it was a close relative or friend, but it might also be a religious or mythological figure such as Jesus or Krishna. The doctors and nurses knew of these apparitions only because the patient talked about them.

The other kind of visionary experience was where the patient saw surroundings as if it were another place, another reality.

You could call these scenes non-human nature. Again, only the dying saw them. In almost every case, whether it was a figure or a landscape, the visions were of a positive sort. The hell- and-brimstone sort of place simply didn't appear.

In these studies care was taken to see if the hallucinations were due to expectation, wish fulfilment, belief, worry, mood, or some normal factor, including, as mentioned, the patient's medical condition. Osis and Haraldsson found that these were not the cause. The experiences were generally the same in both cultures, and show that the information from the dying is consistent across cultures with the idea of life after death.

Near-Death Experiences.

Near-Death experiences refer to an experience in which a person is clinically dead but is somehow resuscitated. All vital signs are missing in the person — no breath, no heartbeat, no

brainwaves. There have been many such cases recorded, with some people dead for up to half an hour. Of interest to us here is a special subgroup — those who claim to have been conscious throughout their death experience and who remembered what went on.

A typical case would be someone who dies on the operating table. While the doctors are frantically working and telling the nurses and other staff to do things, the “dead” person experiences himself as being outside his body, floating in the air near the ceiling, invisibly observing the hearing with clear perception. The best-known source of information on near-death experiences is Moody’s *Life After Life*.

The Meaning of Life After Death.

All the world’s major religions and spiritual traditions, from ancient times to the present, maintain that human existence does not end with death. Some see consciousness reuniting with a cosmic intelligence or universal soul. And some see both happening through a continued process of spiritual evolution.

The foundation of these traditions is the mystical experience. That is, an experience in which knowledge of our cosmic origin and destiny is obtained directly through insight or revelation or enlightenment, rather than through intellectual analysis or philosophic reasoning. One of the best-known writers on mystical experience was the Canadian psychiatrist, R.M. Bucke. In his classic book, *Cosmic Consciousness*, he noted that hundreds of historical figures who had experienced cosmic consciousness were unanimous in saying that with mystical illumination the fear of death which haunts so many people “falls off like an old cloak.” He adds that this is not a result of reasoning — the fear simply vanishes. It vanishes because they saw that death was an illusion, something they’d been tricked into thinking or conditioned into believing by the world. The enlightened person knows that the universe is not a dead machine, not a lifeless mechanical process, not a threatening conspiracy to swallow up people into annihilation. Rather, Bucke remarks, the universe is a “living presence” and the enlightened person experiences this directly, thereby knowing that existence continues beyond what is called death.

From the point of view of mystics, death is a transition, not a termination. It is an adventure in consciousness — the beginning of a further state of development in the continuum of consciousness stretching from the inorganic world to the cosmic intelligence which created it, God.

Equally important, the experience of the mystics shows that we do not have to wait for physical death to enter into eternal life. Rather — and this is quite paradoxical — immortality is ours *already* and we can realize it *now*, in the flesh, the moment we are born again into the spirit, the living eternal spirit of the cosmos. And you can obtain this knowledge, this enlightenment, *now*, in this lifetime, and *that* is what truly and finally frees you from the deadening idea that you are only a body or — equally bad — only a pawn-like soul bound to a wheel of endless deaths and rebirths.

Dealing with the Pain of Dying.

There are, in my judgment, five principal aspects to the fear of dying. They are:

1. Fear of pain — i.e., torture to the physical body.
2. Fear of loss — i.e., both separation from loved ones and companions, and loss of one's faculties.
3. Fear of meaninglessness — i.e., not being needed and loved any more, and therefore having been a failure.
4. Fear of the unknown — i.e., journeying into the unfamiliar, often with a sense of foreboding about eternal damnation and punishment for sinful behavior.
5. Fear of nonbeing — i.e., self- annihilation or the total disappearance of your identity

The Fear of Pain.

Fear of death is not rational — it's emotional, and emotions aren't so easily changed by logic and information. These are necessary, but it also takes more emotional experience to supersede the emotions that are draining you of vitality and joy.

Consciousness research shows that humans have a marvelous capacity to modify their nervous system and, hence, their pain threshold. Yogis, for example, have demonstrated total insensibility to pain.

Another thing to consider about pain can be seen in a comment by Ramana Maharshi, a great Indian saint who died of cancer in 1950. Some disciples thought that Maharshi had, in his consciousness, separated himself from his body and hence did not feel the pain of his flesh being eaten away.

“Perhaps you don't feel the pain?” one asked.

Maharshi replied, “There is pain but there is no suffering.”

This is a very important point that Maharshi made — an important lesson for us: pain is physical, but suffering is psychological. Suffering is *fearful anticipation* of pain. Eliminate the fear and there is no suffering.

Various “mind control” courses such as Silva Mind Control and Alpha Dynamics include pain control as part of their curriculum. You should be aware, however, that these courses have had some justified criticism because the instructors are not in all cases well- qualified to lead you in the varied mental exercises they offer.

The last thing to consider in dealing with fear of pain is the easy availability of pain-relieving drugs. This is a controversial subject in some quarters.

Saying Goodbye to Your Body.

Some learn precise yogic techniques for dying painlessly, consciously and voluntarily. Swami Rama, who is perhaps the best-known yogi in America because of his remarkable feats of physiological control performed under scientific observation in various laboratories, writes:

“In the ancient yogic scriptures, it is said that there is a definite way of leaving the body. Eleven gates are described through which the *pranas* or subtle energy can exit. The yogi learns to leave through the gate called *Brahma Rundhra*, located at the fontanelle, the crown of the head. It is said that he who travels through this gate remains conscious and knows about life hereafter exactly as he knows life here.”

Lest you think this morbid, Rama explains elsewhere in the book that from the yogic point of view, death is a habit of the body, a necessary change. The dying man, he says, should be educated psychologically for this moment. Why? “The . . . change called death is itself not painful, but the fear of death creates miseries for the dying man.” Modern people, Rama writes, should explore yogic ways of gaining freedom from that fear which is called death.

A Contemporary American spiritual teacher Da Free John, in his autobiography, *The Knee of Listening*, reports how he, too, overcame the fear of death by “dying.” Like Maharshi, when his fear of death became almost overwhelming, he discovered the ancient wisdom of giving in (which is quite different from giving up) and cooperating with the process, flowing from the pressure, letting “death” take its full and natural course.

There is a saying that applies here: If you can’t change your fate, change your attitude. In other words, *accept* your death rather than deny it because that acceptance — that change of attitude — is what will free you from fear of death.

How Will You Be Remembered? — Writing Your Own Obituary.

An obituary is an objective statement of fact. It is both a death notice and a summary of the person’s life. You are now going to write your own obituary, stating the facts of your life as they are to date and — using your imagination — as you’d like them to be for the rest of your life or, perhaps, as you’re afraid they’ll be. Obituaries are usually not very long, so this isn’t a major writing assignment. But it is a major assignment in terms of *life assessment* — your values, your relations with other people, your accomplishments, success as a provider, spouse, parent, friend, and citizen.

Right now is a good time to take stock of your life. Have you been a “friend to man”? How will your spouse remember you? Your neighbors? Your work associates? Who will eulogize you, and what will be said, and will it be sincere? If you have children, what character development and values have they learned from you, consciously through your training or non-consciously through imitating your example? If you are in some kind of supervisory position in business, education, or the military, how will those under you regard your passing? In short, who will miss you and what will be the effect of your life on the world?

If death seems fearful because your life will have been meaningless, whose fault is that? Isn’t it clear that the meaning of your life is entirely in your control? It grows out of your values, your character, your relations with others, your accomplishments, your sacrifices, and your gifts of love, honesty, tolerance, sympathy, understanding, helpfulness, courage, fairness, loyalty, courtesy, cheerfulness. These are not commodities to be bought and sold. They are yours,

entirely within your control. They are the basis of meaning in your life. Without them, human existence is cruel and bleak, no matter how wealthy or famous or power you might be. Consider this as you write your own obituary. When you have finished, think deeply upon this:

“My death will be reported like this someday. Will my life have been worthwhile?”

If your obituary leaves you feeling unsatisfied, remorseful, angry, disappointed — anything less than serene and tranquil — then think deeply upon this: *It is within my power to change it by changing my life.* Don’t mistake a change in your outward circumstances, however, for the kind of change I’m talking about here. Perhaps part of your fear of dying involves guilt over a wrong you committed — say, an insult or lie. If so, you should correct it and clear your conscience. This is not only morally right, it is also in your own best interest because it will relieve you of some of the death-fear you harbor. As Dr. Bernie Siegel, author of *Love, Medicine and Miracles*, says, “Don’t wait until you’re going to die to start living.”

Practice Exercises for Learning to Die.

Learning to do any-thing well requires sustained practice and varied exercises that deepen your skill and understanding. Dying is no exception — dying well, that is.

To die daily is to *practice* your dying until fearlessness becomes as automatic as your previous fear reaction was. As the near-death experience taught those who went through it, death itself is not painful, but rather is comfortable and even blissful. It is only the fearful anticipation of pain, loss, meaninglessness, the unknown, and nonbeing that makes dying appear so awful.

Prior to beginning these, obtain a pen and notebook and keep them with you throughout your practice. You will record various experiences, memories, insights, feelings, and intentions in the notebook so that you have a permanent record of your accomplishments and your progress.

1. Death Personalization.

In a quiet, moderately-lit room or some other setting where you can write without distraction, sit comfortably with your pen and notebook. At a desk or table would be best. Allow one half-hour in which to be alone. Then read the following instructions and begin to write.

“Someday in the future you will die. Please write a brief but complete and detailed description of this event as you imagine it will actually happen. Imagine and include in your description such concrete details as your age, place, cause of death, physical surroundings, etc. Be specific about your last thoughts and feelings. Use your imagination freely, perhaps picturing the scene in your mind as you imagine it. Finally draw a picture of your burial marker and indicate your epitaph etched in stone.”

2. Follow-up on Death Personalization.

Sometime after you have completed Exercise 1, begin to consider your reactions as you wrote the description of your death. As you recall your response, record it in your notebook following

the description. Was it total anxiety or did you feel something else — mild relief, perhaps, or even a sense of transcendence at being able to view somewhat objectively what had previously seemed so fearful?

3. Pretend it is Your Last Hour on Earth.

Allow one hour for this exercise. Take the full sixty minutes to enter into the role of having just one hour left to live. Assume that your legal and financial affairs are in order. You will be concerned here only with the psychological and emotional aspects of this experience.

Use real force of imagination to become a person who has one hour of life left. You may choose to lie down on a couch or bed, as if you were terminally ill. In that case, dim the lights. Loosen any wearing apparel that constricts your breathing or circulation or that is uncomfortable. Remove distracting items such as watches, hair combs, wallets, and pocket change.

Use a clock which you can see to mark the hour. Have your pen and notebook handy. Or you may choose to walk around freely, using your senses to experience the life around you. In that case, no special preparation is necessary except to have your pen and notebook available. .

Enter into the situation fully. What would you want to do if you had one hour left? Who would you want to see — and why? What would you want to say, if anything? Is there any special experience that seems most appropriate or desirable in those circumstances? If so, what feelings accompany it? Love? Anger? Fear? Remorse? Humor? A desire for revenge? Compassion? Gratitude? Forgiveness?

Record your experiences when the hour is up. Read over them several days later and see how you regard this exercise.

4. Imagine Your Own Funeral.

In a darkened room, sit quietly or lie down. You may use a chair, couch, or even stretch out on the floor. Have your pen and notebook handy.

Then close your eyes and visualize yourself laid out in a casket for the wake. You may tape record the following paragraphs and play them to yourself as an aid to visualization. If so, speak the words slowly and allow long pauses in order to fully explore the situation mentally as you listen to the playback. Your hands are crossed in front of you at waist level. You have certain items of dress that have been picked out by your survivors. What are you wearing?

The lid of the casket is open, and people are beginning to file past the casket. Who comes to view you laid out? Is there anyone you are surprised to see? As the people come up to your casket, what are they saying? How do they look? Is there anyone you wish had come, but hasn't? Why hasn't he or she come?

Now the scene changes to the funeral service. A eulogy is delivered. Who delivers it? What does he or she say? After the service, your survivors approach the coffin for their final look at you. How do they appear? What are their expressions, their words, their gestures?

Then your survivors are led away to a limousine while funeral home personnel close your casket. Pallbearers place it in a hearse and drive to the gravesite, where they place it over the grave, ready to be lowered. The minister, priest, or rabbi offers some prayers. When graveside ceremonies are completed, the coffin is lowered into the ground. Your survivors drop some earth on top of the casket, and the funeral ends as they walk away. Later, cemetery personnel fill in the grave with the earth piled beside it. You are now interred.

Cease visualizing and remain quiet for several minutes as you experience your own funeral. When you want to, open your eyes, reorient yourself, stretch and get up. Then record your impressions about your interment.

5. Certify Your Own Death

By law, a certificate of death must be filled out for everyone upon their expiration. In this exercise, you are going to fill out your own death certificate. Notice that many signatures are required on the certificate — physician, medical examiner, funeral director, embalmer, registrar of vital statistics, and the informant who provided personal information about you. Thus, you will be playing all those roles, in addition to being the deceased.

As you assume each role, try to actually enter the state of mind you think likely for that person. How does your death seem to each of them? If it seems quite impersonal, are you satisfied with being considered as just another statistic? What seems important about your life that will *not* be recorded on the certificate of death?

6. Listen to Special Music

This requires that you obtain a recording of Richard Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration*. The piece lasts about twenty minutes, and you should allow another twenty minutes for possible personal response to it.

In a dimly lit room, sit quietly or lie down. Have your pen and notebook nearby so you can record your thoughts and feelings afterward.

Take a few minutes to relax and quiet your mind. Then turn on your phonograph or tape recording and resume your position. Simply listen to the music. Let it flow into you. Try to feel it throughout your being. Don't try to analyze your thoughts or feelings — just flow with the music. If emotions arise, don't suppress them. *Express* them — let them out. When the music has finished, lie still and listen to the silence for a while, allowing your consciousness to wander freely. When it feels right, get up and record in your notebook all you can remember — images that came to mind, insights you had, feelings of fear or oblivion, etc., and anything that crossed your mind as something to be accomplished, such as contacting a lawyer about your will or simply contacting a friend to share your feeling of affection for him or her.

7. Videotape Your Farewell

Because television technology is so widespread, dying people have begun to leave videotaped farewells for their families and friends. This is a uniquely modern way to do what has otherwise been done through the ages — saying goodbye to people through writing, to offer them comfort and to ensure that, if a person cannot avoid death, at least he can live on in the memories of his loved ones and of coming generations.

You, too, can use videotape to reflect upon the quality and meaning of your life and relationships in anticipation of your eventual demise. You might even specify that it be shown at your funeral — a final gesture to your survivors and friends of your love for them. Eulogies are good words spoken at a funeral when it is too late for the person being remembered to hear the words. Videotaping your own “good words” about others can be a eulogy in reverse. (Of course, you should also share your good words with the people they’re about *before* you and they die, and it’s too late for them to know of your appreciation. Why save eulogies for funerals?)

Speak from the heart. Say all you’d want them to know if you actually were dying. Recall warm memories, hopes, dreams. Ask forgiveness for wrongs you committed; offer forgiveness for wrongs done to you. Share your most intimate thoughts, and when you have completed your goodbyes, turn off the camera.

Wait several days before reviewing the tape, in order to let the experience stand on its own. Then watch the tape to evaluate it critically, not so much for its production value as for its emotional quality and its effectiveness in conveying the message you want to give to others. Repeat the exercise as appropriate.

In addition to these exercises, you should take whatever other opportunities are available to you for becoming accustomed (but not insensitive!) to death and dying. Death may be inevitable, but that’s no reason to fear it!

Meditation — The World’s Best Fear Remover.

Death has been of central consideration in all the world’s major religious and spiritual paths, and each has worked out a variety of ways with which to eliminate fear of dying. Meditation is the principal method they use. It has been called “the craft of dying.”

Meditation is a means of personal and transpersonal growth. It is a time-honored technique — probably humanity’s oldest spiritual discipline — for helping people release their potential for expanded consciousness and fuller living. Also a technique for assisting in the enlightenment process of directly knowing God or ultimate reality, meditation appears in some form in nearly every major religious tradition. The entranced yogi in a lotus posture, the Zen Buddhist sitting in zazen, the Christian contemplative kneeling in adoration of Jesus, the Sufi dervish whirling in an ecstasy-inducing state — all can be properly described as practicing meditation. Although the cultural or religious trappings may vary, meditation’s core experience is an altered state of consciousness in which your ordinary sense of “I” — the ego — is diminished, while a larger sense of self-existence-merged-with-the-cosmos comes into awareness.

When your self-centered consciousness is dissolved, your true identity shines through. This is enlightenment, cosmic consciousness, union with God. The experience is transforming. Your life changes because you realize the essential truth of what spiritual teachers, sages, and saints have said: Death as nonexistence is an illusion, there is nothing to fear, and it is only your petty little ego that generates the fear, along with the sorrow, greed, jealousy, pride, lust, and all the other sins, vices, and unfulfilling desires that make life miserable for you and for others.

Remember what Freud said: In the unconscious, every one of us is convinced of our immortality. Spiritual traditions reply to Freud: We are unconsciously convinced because, in truth, we really *are* deathless. The true self cannot die, being one with God, Brahman, the Tao, the all-creative Void. The true self is universal, cosmically conscious. There are no limits to it except the illusory one we create, called ego the false idea, which we nevertheless believe, that a separate, independent self is the essential “me” and “you.” *That* self — the ego — is indeed mortal because it has identified with a perishable body.

Meditation is a powerful means of exploring mind and spirit — the most powerful, in fact. The aim of meditation is *clarity of consciousness*. It helps you to be aware of reality *fully* so that your thoughts, feelings, and behavior are free and appropriate, not programmed by anxiety, desire, hatred, prejudice, social conventions and so forth. It does this by deautomatizing and deconditioning you.

How does meditation do this? It creates a sort of mental distance between you and your mind’s activity in which you can observe it with detachment. Meditation also extends your awareness so that you can actually begin to see thoughts and feelings come into existence. It shows you deeper aspects of mind than you are ordinarily aware of. Thus, the experience of meditation allows you to disidentify with your thoughts and feelings. You *have* them, but you are *not* them, just as you have a car but are not your car.

“Five-Breath Meditation.” We’ll begin meditating with a very short, simple exercise. It was first suggested by Stanley Keleman.

The Five-Breath Meditation involves taking successively shorter breaths, as if the fifth one were your last and you die at that moment. The first breath is of normal duration. The second breath should be shortened to about half of the first. The third breath is even shorter — about half as long as the second. The fourth is only half that of the third. Thus, each breath is shorter in time and reduced in oxygen. As you breathe, you should mentally set the context of the experience — a context that says, “I’m dying and about to take my final breath.” On the fifth breath, breathe out and hold it. Keep about of your lungs until you feel uncomfortable. Then begin normal respiration.

While holding the fifth breath and imagining it your last, mentally observe what thoughts and feelings come to mind. Many people have surprising emotional surges. That is unguided fantasy, however, not meditation. The meditation consists in *observing* those emotions and thoughts. You watch yourself die but don’t become entangled in the drama, keeping your consciousness clear even while powerful feelings and perhaps horrifying images pop up. When it’s over, you will

have seen more deeply into your own mind and its operations. If you don't like what you see, you are then free to begin transforming it.

A Mantra Meditation.

The following meditation exercise can be quite helpful to the transformation.

Meditation eliminates the obstacles of mind that prevent clarity of consciousness and full perception of reality. Mindfulness, not mindlessness, is the mark of proper meditation. You expand awareness, not eliminate it. You extinguish egotism, revealing your true self which is one with God and is therefore deathless.

I must make two brief comments about when it's best *not* to meditate. First, do not meditate after a meal because most likely you'll only fall asleep. Second, don't try to meditate just before going to sleep. You may stay up half the night because meditation can leave you feeling wide awake and charged with energy.

To do this meditation, sit down on a chair or couch. Sit up straight but not rigid. Your hands can be folded or resting in your lap — whatever feels comfortable to you.

Sit quietly with your eyes open for a few moments, without trying to think, and then close your eyes. For perhaps a minute just sit quietly without attempting to say the mantra. Then silently say to yourself, "Thine." You can say it at whatever speed you want, and you will probably find that you experiment a bit. Try coordinating it with your breathing and say "Thine" as you breathe out. Just keep saying "Thine" silently in your mind over and over. If your attention wanders away from saying your mantra — which it's almost certain to do — that's all right. That's part of the meditation process. But as soon as you become aware that you have stopped saying your mantra you should gently and effortlessly come back to it. Start repeating, "Thine, Thine, Thine."

During the time your attention is off the mantra, all sorts of interesting thoughts, feelings, and images may come into your field of awareness. That's all right, too. Don't try to stop them forcefully. Carefully but casually observe them, without becoming entangled in them or attached to them. Whatever it may be, however, when you become aware that you're not saying the mantra, gently let those thoughts go and begin to repeat the mantra again.

When you've decided to end your meditation, simply stop saying the mantra and sit quietly for about two minutes with your eyes closed. Let your physical senses gradually restore themselves. Then slowly begin to open your eyes. Take the full two minutes to do so, counting breaths if necessary to time it.

Meditating on Death — The Eastern Craft of Dying.

There is much more to be said about meditation as a means of removing death-fear. I simply want to describe to you a bit more about two great Eastern spiritual traditions, Buddhism and Hinduism, and how they develop a tranquil mindfulness of death.

In Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, special ceremonial cups can be seen which are made from the upper portion of the skull of a deceased monk. There are also trumpets made from human thighbones which were likewise taken from the skeleton of a brother monk who died. Over doorways there may be other human bones. These skeletal remains are, from the Buddhist perspective, neither ghoulish nor foolish. They are part of a tradition which aims at cultivating awareness of death in such a way that the monks are eventually serene about the idea of their own death. The skull cups, thighbone trumpets and doorway ornaments are well-meant reminders that reinforce the monks' consciousness a familiarity and acceptance of mortality.

The principal means by which the monks gain that familiarity and acceptance is meditation — specifically, death meditation. The tradition originated with Buddha, who taught that the only permanent state is nirvana. All else is transitory, though it may take eons to pass away.

Death meditation has two main forms in the Buddhist tradition. One involves contemplation of the inevitability of death. Thus, the meditator may be instructed to imagine himself as facing an executioner or to reflect on the death of others and then infer his own mortality. The second form of death meditation may sound even more unpleasant to you, but it has already been mentioned: meditations on corpses. This is used much less than the first form but, nevertheless, it is a tradition within Buddhism for people — primarily monks — to seat themselves near corpses in various states of decay and begin to reflect upon the nature of embodiment.

This wisdom has been distilled in a centuries-old Tibetan text intended for lay people as well as monks, the *Bardo Thodol* (or *Bardo Thotrol*), commonly known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. And although the book is ostensibly written for the dead, knowledgeable commentators such as the Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Chogyam Trungpa, recently-deceased head of the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, tell us that the book is in fact about life and for the living.

First translated into English in the 1920s, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead's* fundamental teaching, Trungpa comments in his version, is “the recognition of one’s projections and the dissolutions of the sense of self in the light of reality.” Insofar as the book is for use with the dying, the instructions are to be read to them in order to help them maintain the calm, clear meditative state of awareness they cultivated throughout life, and thus to merge with the universe (*samadhi*), becoming one with the luminosity of the void of space from which all existence springs. Ideally, however, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a manual to be studied and memorized throughout life as a means of attaining enlightenment while embodied. Such a person would, at death, recite it to himself and literally dissolve his personal consciousness into the Clear Light of the Void, never again to be born or to die.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, which is a holy scripture for Hindus, contains instruction on how to die. These instructions, like *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, encourage the listener to cultivate a state of mind absorbed in ultimate reality, which Hindus call *Brahman*. Here, two excerpts:

“Whatever being a man thinks of at the last moment when he leaves his body, that alone does he attain, being ever absorbed in the thought thereof.”

The verse immediately preceding this declares:

“And whoever, at the time of death, leaving the body, goes forth remembering Me alone, he attains My being, there is no doubt about this.”

By thus closing “the doors of the senses” through yogic meditation, the mediator/dying person fixes his consciousness upon the Universal Self, his true identity, and thus enters into a state of spiritual and physical liberation (*moksha*). Like *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the *Bhagavad Gita* declares that the frame of mind in which you put yourself at the moment of death will determine the state into which you enter at death. The proper frame of mind is not attained magically, however. Rather, it is cultivated during your life through meditation and pious behavior.

Interestingly, this same view of death and dying is to be found in the medieval Christian volume *Ars Moriendi* or *The Craft of Dying*. It, too, urged that spiritual practices be made a part of the daily life of all who sought to be “at peace with their Maker” or in union with God.

Meditation in its highest form is not simply an exercise of mind which one performs in a disciplined way for a certain period of time each day. Rather, it is *continuous mindful action* in the midst of daily life. Learning and living become integrated in spontaneous practice that is actually no different from whatever you do daily, except for the state of mind with which you perform it. This is meditation in action. The meditator has so completely mastered the lessons of meditation that his entire life is a demonstration of higher consciousness which can be experienced if sincerely sought.

Dying the Good Death — The Final Hours of Saints and Heroes

In 1963 an extraordinary East Indian spiritual teacher named Govindananda died at age 137. He had lived an incredibly strenuous life, actually journeying around the world by foot. Many heads of state were his friends, yet he lived humbly in a small jungle hut. When he became aware that it was time to die, he spoke quietly to a few disciples with him, gave a final blessing — “Live right life, worship God” — lay down, rested his head on his right palm in his usual sleeping position, and simply stopped breathing.

One of the remarkable things about saintly people is that even their deaths are often acts of inspiration and love. After showing us how to live — selflessly and in service to others — they show us how to die — fearlessly and with dignity, strong in faith to the end.

Gautama Buddha, well into his eighties, continued teaching and preaching to the end. When he felt himself dying, he told his faithful disciple Ananda, who began to weep. The Buddha admonished him, “Have I not already, on former occasions, told you that it is the very nature of things that we must separate from them and leave them? The foolish man conceives the idea of ‘self [personal self or ego], the wise man sees there is no ground on which to build it!”

Disciples gathered around the Buddha and he delivered his Dying Sermon. He ended his farewell address with these words, “Behold now, brethren, I exhort you by saying: Decay is inherent in all

component things, but the truth will remain forever! Work out your salvation with diligence.” Those were his last words. Then the Buddha fell into deep meditation and entered nirvana.

St. Francis of Assisi, as his life neared its end, was taken to the palace of the Bishop of Assisi. A doctor was fetched to treat him. St. Francis, wanting to know how long he had to live, asked the doctor, who avoided a direct answer for some time but finally said that the disease was incurable and that he might die soon. St. Francis, overjoyed, raised his hands and cried, “Welcome, Sister Death!” He bade farewell to his friends and friars, and dictated some letters. A few days later, near to death, he asked the doctor to announce the arrival of Sister Death. “She will open for me the door of life,” he explained. Then, following his instructions, the Franciscan brothers spread a coarse cloth on the ground, placed their mentor on it, and sprinkled him with dust and ashes. St. Francis was heard to mutter faintly the 142nd psalm. After that, he struggled to sing his own “Canticle of the Creatures,” which contains these lines.

*And Death is our sister, we
praise Thee for Death,
Who releases the soul to the
light of Thy gaze;
And dying we cry with the last
of our breath
Our thanks and our praise.*

But St. Francis’ voice failed at that moment. He died singing the praise of death.

In his book *The Wheel of Death*, the Zen Buddhist teacher Philip Kapleau tells us that many Zen masters actually anticipated their “final” hour, meeting it with equilibrium and even laughter, sometimes sitting in the full cross-legged lotus posture or even, more rarely, standing on their heads. In fact, Kapleau says, the Zen masters were so intimately involved with the *whole* of existence — meaning they experienced life and death as an unbroken continuum — that they found overinvolvement with any of its parts, death included, to be a misplaced concern. “Why do you want to know what will happen to you after you die?” the Zen masters told inquiring disciples. “Find out who you are now!”

Kapleau describes the death of Roshi (meaning “teacher”) Yamamoto. Almost blind at the age of 86 and no longer able to teach or work in the monastery, this Zen master decided it was time to die, so he stopped eating. When asked by his monks why he refused food, he replied that he had outlived his usefulness and was only a bother to everybody. They told him, apparently out of love for the old man, “If you die now when it is so cold, [it was January] everybody will be uncomfortable at your funeral and you will be an even greater nuisance, so please eat.” Yamamoto thereupon resumed eating, but, Kapleau reports, when the weather warmed again he stopped, and not long after quietly toppled over and died.

Two other stories from *The Wheel of Death* are worth consideration here. The first concerns Master Et-sugen. Shortly before he died, Etsugen called his monks together. It was December 1. “I’ve decided to die on the eighth of this month,” he told them. “That’s the day of the Buddha’s

enlightenment. If you have any questions left about the Teaching, you'd better ask them before then." The master continued with his regular duties during the next few days. Some of the monks therefore thought he was having a little fun at their expense. Most, however, were struck with grief at the imminent loss of their teacher.

On the evening of December 7, Etsugen assembled the monks and taught them for the last time about Buddha's enlightenment. Then he arranged his affairs and went into his room. At dawn, he took a bath, put on his ceremonial robes and, sitting erect in lotus posture, composed a death poem. Then, shutting his eyes, and still sitting, he died.

The death of the Sixth Patriarch of Zen is equally moving. On the eighth day of the seventh month, Kapleau tells us, the master said to his monks, "Gather round me. I have decided to leave this world in the eighth month."

When the monks heard this they wept openly.

"For whom are you crying?" the master asked. "Are you worrying about me because you think I don't know where I'm going? If I didn't know, I wouldn't be able to leave you this way. What you're really crying about is that *you* don't know where I'm going. If you actually knew, you couldn't possibly cry because [you would be aware that] the True-nature is without birth or death, without going or coming."

Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson, during their research into postmortem survival in India, found an extraordinary case of a yogi who, like Govindananda, died the good death. As they report it in *At the Hour of Death*:

A faculty member of a medical school in Benares described the death of his grandfather, who had practiced yoga. He was a philanthropist, having helped many persons in his vicinity, and was very religious. People came to him for a general uplift. In his case, the rise in mood [elevation of feelings] started forty-eight hours before death, which the doctor described as perfect consciousness with tranquility. He seemed to have a premonition of death, for which there were no sufficient medical reasons. He ordered a load of wood for the funeral pyre, sent a telegram to his son, and on the last day at four o'clock, asked the family members to eat something, since he would die at five thirty, and in accordance with Hindu custom, nobody would then be permitted to eat. The premonition came true, and he died at five thirty-five. He had performed Hindu purification procedures in order to prepare for death. He didn't show the slightest anxiety and was seen counseling relatives who were crying. He said to the weeping people, "You should be happy because I am going." He was perfectly unafraid, and tranquil. He described, step by step, how the body was dying. He told how his legs were becoming stiff and could be pricked without his feeling it, and how limb after limb was becoming numb and no longer a part of "the eternal self."

Growing Old Gracefully: The Phenix Society.

I'm associated with the Phenix Society. I became part of it fourteen years ago because, after writing about it as a journalist, I sincerely felt it was doing valuable work in helping people to find meaning and direction in life. That includes dealing with the fear of dying. The Phenix Society was born in 1973 when a handful of southern Connecticut residents began to meet regularly in search of a positive approach to aging. They were all older people who'd been through a wide variety of life's shocks. Hobbies and weekly bridge games for the senior citizens' center weren't enough to satisfy them. They vaguely sensed there was a better way, but it wasn't until one of them read a passage in Carl Jung's *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* that the answer stood out clearly. Jung wrote:

“A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species to which he belongs. We cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning.”

That program is the all-too-com- mon scramble for wealth, fame, status, power, sexual conquest, perhaps marriage with kids and a nice home — the usual game plans for youth. But sooner or later those game plans lose their luster. This generally happens between the ages of 35 and 50, statistically speaking — the time called midlife. Hence the term “midlife crisis,” when apathy and depression can set in, with a loss of physical and mental vitality. “Old Mortality” starts to grin at you, and the Big Fear becomes prominent.

What's the answer? The development of wisdom. That alone is the intelligent way to deal with midlife crisis, as well as those later-life passages of pre-retirement stress, post-retirement doldrums, and that most profound transition of all, death.

The founders of the Phenix Society sensed vaguely what Jung said explicitly: If you try to live the second half of life the way you live the first, you end up mentally bankrupt, if not an alcoholic or a suicide. Pursuit of the usual materialistic goals and superficial values is simply unfulfilling for someone who has seen below the glitter. The buffeting these people had experienced was enough to deepen their perceptions beyond surface phenomena. So their weekly gatherings centered on the search for revitalized sense of purpose, direction and fulfillment. The format they developed was based on reading, discussion, and meditation. Their goal was wisdom and serenity.

Thus, the Phenix Society was born — “Phenix” because it is the immemorial symbol of renewal.

Our introductory brochure describes the Phenix Society as “a friendship association of men and women who seek to improve the quality of their lives. The philosophical and spiritual requirements of the second half of life are its central concerns.” What do we mean by “quality”? We mean the same exuberant sense of purpose, direction, and fulfillment that most people have in younger years as they pursue the usual materialistic goals. But this time the goals are based on higher values — such as growth to cosmic consciousness, a sense of responsibility for planetary management, and an intelligent preparation for death.

The handbook we use, *The Club of Life*, written by founder Jerome Ellison, describes twelve “conditions of being” which we've found to be useful guidelines for assisting members in their

progress to joyful, creative victory over aging. The first condition reads: "We admit that death is closer for us who are in the second half of our lives than it is for the average person; that in this respect we are different from the majority of people." Death may be closer, but, we add, we no longer fear it. Or at least we are taking positive steps to deal with the fear. We recognize that it's one thing to discuss death intellectually as a remote, impersonal event, but it's quite another to accept death unemotionally when it's your own under examination. The Phenix approach provides *experiential* means for overcoming fear of dying.

First, there is the weekly meeting where open discussion encourages people to voice their fears and face them. This sharing of secret fears is not simply "letting it all hang out." For there are other members who have already dealt with that fear, to some degree, and who have hard-won wisdom to offer in response to the sharing. Thus, the weekly meetings are times of friendship when we give and receive, care as well as share, profiting from the experience of others. It is educational as well as cathartic.

"Death, that awful and mysterious thing we had heard about all our lives as a terrible but distant threat, is now near, actually reaching out its cold feelers to claim our bodies. And we cannot escape. What will come will come to us as it comes to everybody."

This admission and frank discussion of death-fear has the positive effect of an affirmation of life. The handbook describes what early Phenix Clubbers found:

"Instead of telling ourselves we weren't showing any marked effects of aging, we began to own up to the fact that we were. Instead of pretending that we weren't really going to die very soon, we began to concede that our time was not so far off. Instead of pretending that we were just the same as the younger elements of the population, we began to accept the circumstance that in important ways we were different. Instead of rating youth as the "prime" of life, we cast aside the youth cult and its propaganda, in which we had been immersed all our lives, seeing youth as only one of several transitory phases of a complete life cycle and age as the culmination that gives both youth and age their meaning and fulfillment. Instead of fearing death as an ignoble end, we began to see that meeting it with serenity, courage, resourcefulness, and skill provides that crowning challenge of the fully lived life."

And now some amazing things began to happen. As the energy we had been pouring into denial mechanisms was released, new resources of mental, physical and emotional vigor came pouring into us. We were almost "ourselves" again. As we directed our imaginative powers away from morbidity, they took hold of the problems of the last third of life with surprising skill. Answers to formerly unanswerable problems began to appear, sometimes with unexpected ease. Were our physical and mental power diminished? Very well, we'd put to the best possible use whatever was left of them. Were we going to die before long? Then we'd better pull ourselves together to do a good job of it. As we began to look around with open eyes, we found worlds of resources opening to us we had never known existed.

Why, the last third of life might be a really splendid thing! With a new will, we began to explore life's new possibilities.

In addition to a weekly discussion, members are encouraged to pursue a reading program at home on their own. Not all of it focuses on death, of course, but there is a solid list of titles that we recommend for use in exploring your attitude toward death and in examining the evidence of postmortem survival.

Last of all, there is meditation. The Twelve Conditions state that meditation is an integral part of the Phenix approach to living harmoniously and creatively.

The Phenix Society's approach, then, is based on reading, discussion, and meditation. We say that the courage to face death — your own death — is indeed teachable. Nor is it courage based on false hopes. It springs from the very fabric of ultimate reality. Death- fear can be allayed intellectually, emotionally, experientially. As Phenix Society members, we aim to grow to cosmic consciousness in the company of supportive friends who look on death as a great adventure. And although the original intent of the organization was to meet the needs of people in the last third of life, we've found that young people are also seeking to travel in our company, so we've welcomed them. Thus, there is no age limit. Such wisdom as we have is there for everyone, and freely shared.

Planning Intelligently for Your Demise.

A number of books offer pragmatic advice on what preparations should be made and how far in advance they should be carried out. Your will, for example, should be made even when you are young, and it should be reviewed every five or ten years. A will is a contract with death. Because of that, many people avoid making one, but you should face the situation squarely. If you die intestate without a will — state and federal taxes can take a much larger bite of your property than you'd like, leaving less of an estate for your spouse, family, friends, and favorite charities. Wills can also be used to leave instructions about funeral proceedings.

Some people buy a cemetery plot at an early age because they realize that, like almost everything else, the price will continue to rise. Not only is it possible to plan your own funeral, you can also pay for it before you die.

“Everyone should sit down with their spouse and their children and talk about the funeral arrangements they want.” The best thing is to put your desires in writing, make several copies, and distribute them to everyone who will be involved, from the family to the funeral home.

The best publication I've found on these and related matters is *A Manual of Death Education and Simple Burial* by Ernest Morgan. Since its first edition in 1962 it has sold several hundred thousand copies. A review of it in *The Whole Earth Catalog* says that in 64 pages it quietly tells you how to avoid “the ghastly system of converting human leftovers into products packaged as ‘funerals.’ In simple language backed by intelligent sympathy, it suggests ways to surround the *act* of passage with appropriate *rites* of passage that offer real meaning to people in need of meaning.”

There are four parts to the manual: Death Education, About Funeral and Memorial Societies, Simple Burial and Cremation, and How the Dead Can Help the Living. Each is packed with the most practical and far-sighted advice you can ever hope to find on this subject.

A useful “Checklist of Things to Be Done” when death occurs is also to be found in Part III. I am reproducing it in full here to help you in considering all aspects of your own death, and especially in preparing intelligently for it.

Checklist of Things to Be Done When a Death Occurs. Assuming that the family belongs to a memorial society and that the matters above [i.e., discussed in the manual] have been taken care of, there still remain numerous details, many of which can be taken care of by friends though others require the attention of the family. Scratch off the items in the following checklist which do not apply; check the others as they are taken care of:

- Decide on time and place of funeral or memorial service(s).
- Make list of immediate family, close friends and employer or business colleagues. Notify each by phone.
- If flowers are to be omitted, decide an appropriate memorial to which gifts may be made. (As a church, library, school or some charity.)
- Write obituary. Include age, place of birth, cause of death, occupation, college degrees, memberships held, military service, outstanding work, list of survivors in immediate family. Give time and place of services. Deliver in person, or phone, to newspapers.
- Notify insurance companies, including automobile insurance for immediate cancellation and available refund. Arrange for members of family or closer friends to take turns answering door or phone, keeping careful record of calls. Arrange appropriate child care. Coordinate the supplying of food for the next days. Consider special needs of the household, as for cleaning, etc., which might be done by friends. Arrange hospitality for visiting relatives and friends. Select pall bearers and notify. Notify lawyer and executor. Plan for disposition of flowers after funeral (hospital or rest home?) Prepare copy for printed notice if one is wanted.
Prepare list of persons to receive acknowledgments. Check carefully all life and casualty insurance and death benefits, including Social Security, credit union, trade union, fraternal, military, etc. Check also on income for survivors from these sources. Check promptly on all debts and installment payments. Consult with creditors and ask for more time before the payments are due. If deceased was living alone, notify utilities and landlord and tell post office where to send mail.

The last part of *A Manual of Death Education and Simple Burial* tells how the dead can help the living. “If we truly accept our own mortality and genuinely identify ourselves with humanity, we will gladly help in every way we can,” it states, noting that many lives can be saved, and health and sight restored to thousands, through the intelligent “salvaging” of organs and tissues. In addition, medical and dental training requires thousands of bodies each year for anatomical study by future doctors and dentists. Last of all, medical research needs cooperation in the form of permission for autopsies and the bequeathal of special parts, such as earphones of people with hearing difficulties.

Helping Yourself by Helping Others — Volunteer Organizations for the Dying.

The Shanti Project is a San Francisco Bay area counseling service that offers caring, on-going support to patients and families facing life-threatening illness. Completely nonprofit and volunteer-staffed, it was organized in 1975 by Dr. Charles Garfield.

Hospice, a word familiar from the Middle Ages, means “shelter for the traveler.” Originally provided by religious orders for pilgrims, these communities for sojourners broadened their mission to include care for the sick and wounded.

Today the name describes a form of treatment designed to give comfort to the terminally ill and their families.

The hospice approach honors the dying: It helps them face death without pain or fear and makes no attempt to cure or prolong life. In addition to medical care, it offers fellowship, not only to the patient, but to his family unit as well. In fact, hospice philosophy makes the *family* the primary unit of care. As one hospice member put it, a hospice adds life to your years, not years to your life.

The Institute’s goals, the article stated, include “changing attitudes toward needs of the terminally ill and their families. Hospice puts several things ahead of simply prolonging biological life, such as maximum freedom from pain, spiritual well-being — and informing the public as to the needs and how to meet them.” Another goal will be increasing the level of skills of all care-givers and enlarging their sense of values as they relate to patients and their families. To do so, courses lasting from one to five days are offered to the public.

The Elisabeth Kubler-Ross Center. No one has done more than Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross to change medical attitudes toward death. At Head Waters, Virginia, she has established her own nonprofit organization, Shanti Nilaya, which is Sanskrit for “Home of Peace.” Her passion is to educate members of the healing arts and the lay public about her conviction that death provides the key to the meaning of human existence and life itself. As she put it in the concluding chapter of *Death, The Final Stage of Growth*:

“Death is the key to the door of life. It is through accepting the finiteness of our individual existences that we are enabled to find the strength and courage to reject those extrinsic roles and expectations and to devote each day of our lives — however long they may be — to growing as fully as we are able. . . . Humankind will survive only through the commitment and involvement of individuals in their own and others’ growth and development as human beings. This means development of loving and caring relationships in which all members are as committed to the growth and happiness of the others as they are to their own. Through commitment to personal growth, individual human beings will also make their contribution to the growth and development — the evolution — of the whole species to become all that humankind can and is meant to be. Death is the key to that evolution. For only when we understand the real meaning of death to human existence will we have the courage to become what we are destined to be.”

Clear Light Society. “The practice of meditation is ultimately the *only* exercise with any degree of significance for learning to die without fear,” Patricia Shelton told me. Founder-Director of the Clear Light Society in Boston, she described the society’s work in an interview.

The Clear Light Society has both service and educational objectives. First and foremost, it exists to assist the dying, not only in months or weeks prior to death, but at the time of death itself. “The assistance a person receives at the moment of death is very crucial,” Shelton said. “It’s not just a matter of sitting there meditating with the person. We do things — quite specific things— to keep the patient in the state of what we call ‘profound relaxation, peaceful heart and clear mind.’”

What are those specific things? They are available in *Clear Light Practices for the Dying*, a unique training manual written by Shelton in which she gives exact instructions of what to do and what to say, moment by moment, as the dying person makes his or her transition.

The Society also works with the family of the dying patient. The program is designed to give emergency training to family members in the skills necessary to assist the dying relative into a peaceful state, and is tailored to the religious belief system of the family, whether Christian, Jewish, or other. No charges of any kind are made by the Society to the dying or their families. There are fees for practitioner training, but they are geared to one’s income.

The Hemlock Society. The Hemlock Society, a Los Angeles-based membership organization, believes in “active voluntary euthanasia for the terminally ill.” A brochure says it seeks to promote a climate of public opinion which is tolerant of the light of hopelessly ill people to end their own lives in a planned manner. At the same time it approves of the work of those involved in suicide prevention and does not encourage suicide for any primary emotional, traumatic, or financial reasons in the absence of terminal illness. Contrary views held by other religions and philosophies are respected by Hemlock. “The final decision to terminate life is ultimately one’s own. Hemlock believes this action, and most of all its timing, to be an extremely personal decision, whenever possible taken in concert with family, close friends and personal physician.”

Out-of-Body Experience — The Ecstasy of Astral Projection.

Out-of-body experience (OBE) is the experience in which you find your consciousness or your center of self-awareness floating in space exterior to your physical body. In the OBE condition, you are fully and normally conscious. The effect of having an OBE, parapsychologist Dr. Charles Tart tells us, is enormous. In almost all cases, the person’s reaction is approximately, “I no longer believe in survival after death — I know my consciousness will survive death because I have experienced my consciousness existing outside my physical body.” The conviction gained by OBE experiencers that they will survive death, Tart adds, has undoubtedly led to the concept of soul.

Parapsychologist D. Scott Rogo, who is himself an experienced OBE “flier,” has recently said that his research shows that many people who have the out-of-body experience later look back upon it as a “rehearsal for death” and, as such, regard it as proving the immortality of the

personality. Listen to some of the comments Rogo gathered from OBE cases, as reported in his book on the surviving of death, *The Welcoming Silence*:

“The knowledge I gained at that time assured me of a future life.”

“It makes me feel certain that there is a life after death which does not require a material handy for us to be able to see and hear, and that we shall retain our personality.”

“Death is like passing from twilight into the glories of the full midday sunshine.”

“I know that death does not end all.”

“I was always afraid to die, but not now.”

“To me there is nothing truer than ‘there is no death.’ ”

Just as reincarnation studies are proving that time is no limitation to the survival of human personality, OBE research is demonstrating that space is no limitation either. Consciousness transcends time and space. In fact, from the point of view of those who best understand the nature of consciousness — mystics and spiritual teachers — time and space are illusions derived from consciousness; specifically, from the ordinary state of consciousness which also creates the illusion of ego. This is precisely the message of the great religious traditions: we are infinite and eternal. Cosmic consciousness shows this through direct experience to be perfectly true.

You Have Died Before — Reincarnation and Past Life Therapy.

Have you lived before? If so, then you have died before. The theory of reincarnation says this is precisely the case. You have lived and died many times as an evolving soul moving through time, through history, to a fuller and larger existence, and ultimately a total reunion with the All.

Earlier, in this book, I said that reincarnation was not proven definitively, but there is a great deal of evidence suggesting its reality — evidence which cannot be explained away by any other interpretation. Psychic researchers conclude that it would be absurd to dismiss it all as simply involving coincidence because the agreement of facts is too consistent and too complex. The best-known reincarnation researcher, Dr. Ian Stevenson, has published several books describing the best cases of thousands he has collected.

Lately, some psychologists and counselors have been using hypnosis to regress people to what the people themselves feel are prior lives. The purpose of this “past life therapy” is to help the person deal with problems in his present life which apparently are due to conditions that have carried over from a past life — or even several lifetimes!

One of the most notable people in this field is a psychologist, Dr. Helen Wambach. Her evidence is so professionally marshalled that one must conclude that her subject merits further exploration. Wambach drew her data from more than 1,000 “past-life recalls” by hypnotized subjects. They provided information about their culture, technology, environment and personal history. These

“memories” coalesced into demographic, economic and cultural patterns that mirrored historic and statistical data with remarkable accuracy.

When I spoke with Wambach recently, she volunteered an additional insight that isn't in her books. It seems from her research that present life phobias, when due to an experience in a previous life or lives, are not the result simply of having had a traumatic experience in the previous life but rather of *not having resolved or integrated the trauma in that life*. “If people die with a lot of fear, confusion and resentment, she told me, “*that* is what causes a phobia in a later life.” She illustrated her point with the case of a woman who feared to go swimming. Through hypnotic regression, this phobia was traced to incidents in two previous lives in which she had drowned. Granted that those are traumatic experiences, it nevertheless seems from Wambach's research that even if the woman had not actually drowned in those lifetimes, her present life phobia could still have resulted because the flight of near-drowning had been so great in each past life and it had never been relieved or resolved.

This points up all the more strongly your own need to face the fear of dying and conquer it. Reincarnation research indicates that *you'll be back*, and what you don't deal with in this life you'll have to face in another. It's best to do it here and now, sages and saints tell us. Get off the wheel of death and rebirth in *this* lifetime.

A Closer Look at Heaven and Hell.

Heaven and hell are popularly thought of as *places* in the universe, locations in space where the spirits of the dead go. To quote evangelist Billy Graham “I believe the Bible teaches that heaven is a literal place.” To a degree, this is correct. The evidence from out-of-body and near-death cases indicates a journey of the soul beyond this three-dimensional physical world into other sets of dimensions.

Many people reject the notion of heaven and hell because, they feel, it is “unscientific.” But is it? That depends on how you define science. Many scientists presume that the material world is all there is to reality because that is all they can observe. Their philosophy of existence is called scientific materialism, and they wrongly equate that with science itself.

Since the afterlife worlds are imperceptible to the normal physical senses, they are beyond the range of present scientific observation.

And if you have a basic idea about reality being limited to observations by the physical senses, then when someone claims to have made extrasensory observations, you dismiss them as nonsense because they do not conform to your idea of what's real and unreal, possible and impossible, in the universe. Consequently, from the perspective of scientific materialism, heaven and hell are simply childish fantasies. But from the perspective of someone who has enlarged his scale of observation beyond the sensory to the extrasensory, reality as scientific materialism defines it, is itself a fantasy based upon a constricted and partial awareness that filters out as much, if not more, than it lets in.

Our sense of reality, then, is a function of our state of consciousness. This is an extremely important point to grasp. Reality itself is unchanging, but our sense of reality — our understanding of how the universe is structured and operates — is dependent upon our state of awareness. Our worldview depends upon how fully we perceive and experience our existence.

Parapsychologists have a larger range of observation than strictly materialistic scientists, although their method of observation is the same. Thus, despite resistance by dogmatic scientists, the scientific case for other worlds grows stronger daily. That's not to say that science will prove heaven and hell exist, as you'll see in a moment. It *is* to say, however, that the logic of science and the power of empiric observation are helping nature to demolish the conceptual barriers in our own minds — barriers which prevent clear perception of the other worlds in reality.

Other Planes of Existence.

It was St. Paul who pointed out that the proper term is heavens—plural — not heaven. In other words, embracing and interpenetrating the three-dimensional world with which we are familiar, there are other worlds, other planes of existence, other realms of nature. As I said, science is now beginning to recognize the multi-dimensionality of the universe in which you can pass from one set of dimensions to another, as in the notion that black holes in space connect matter and antimatter universes.

One of the most useful contemporary presentations of the nature of the afterlife worlds is found in a book by Dr. George Meek. In *After We Die, What Then?* he offers what he calls “A Blueprint of Immortality,” showing, in a large multicolored diagram with accompanying text, what post-mortem existence is like.

Interpenetrating our world, he says, are the astral planes, the still- higher mental and causal planes, and finally the celestial planes. The lowest astral plane is traditionally referred to as hell, hades, or purgatory. The Bible describes it as “outer darkness, weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth. ...” This “dark, dismal, dangerous and often frightening world,” as Meek describes it, is populated with greedy, self-centered, unloving, resentful people. Often they have fierce bodily desires and lusts. They may be drug addicts, sex perverts, alcoholics, murderers, or suicides.

The intermediate and higher astral planes offer much more pleasant experiences for the dead — “wider perspectives, greater vistas, magnificent panoramas,” Meek says. Help and love are offered to souls, along with further growth opportunities for advancement to the mental and causal planes. On these levels of consciousness, there is access to all of the accumulated wisdom of the ages.

On the celestial planes, there is preliminary conscious contact with the Universal Godhead. This is the level of consciousness from which the world's saviors, sages, and avatars enter human existence.

All these planes or levels are said by esoteric, occult and spiritual tradition to have beings native to them — angels, devas, herukas, elementals, demons, unclean spirits, cherubim, seraphim,

archangels and all the other heavenly or hellish “mythological” creatures generally dismissed by materialists as fantastic nonsense. Some of these intelligences have been perceived by people during OBEs and near-death experiences as “beings of light.” Their native condition on the causal and celestial planes normally keeps them invisible to us. Likewise, on the lower planes, ghosts and apparitions are normally unseen. And on the lowest astral level, Meek tells us, creatures of non-human lines of evolution may attach themselves to the auras or astral bodies of people living on Earth. Such a “possessed” person may act abnormally, be judged insane and institutionalized, or commit suicide.

Heaven and hell, then, can be described as real places extending through the universe, but paradoxically, they are contacted right here on Earth within you. That is because heaven and hell are also psychological conditions, states of mind. As such, they are a function of your own state of consciousness, whether in the body or out of it. In other words, heaven and hell are hyperspaces, sets of dimensions that we experience as states of mind and that commingle with the familiar physical space-time framework we ordinarily call the cosmos. As psychological states, heaven and hell are indeed the conditions that prevail “between the ears,” i.e., *within* your mind. But conventional psychology, which tends to consider “mind” as confined within the body, especially within the brain, must reckon with parapsychology and parapsysics. These disciplines show that there is an extra somatic aspect to mind, that our psychological activity extends beyond the body.

To put it simply: Heaven and hell are *both* places and states of mind. Insofar as they are places, they are dimensionalities interpenetrating our physical world. Insofar as they are states of mind, they are experienced within, psychologically. You are at the center of all worlds, here and now.

Is there anything that can account for this? Yes — consciousness. Consciousness is the meeting ground for inner and outer reality, for psychology and physics. In seeking to understand the nature of heaven and hell, inner space research and outer space research come together. All that we can know about “out there” is very much conditioned upon what is “in here.” Our state of consciousness determines our understanding of reality. Those who know reality fully are those who first of all know themselves and have removed all impediments of mind and character that prevent clear perception.

How Can You Die Since You Were Never Born?

We have seen thus far that your personality survives death of the body and in all likelihood will reincarnate. But to what end? Death doesn’t automatically make a saint of a sinner, or a sage of a fool. If your previous lives and deaths have taught you nothing, your future lives and deaths will be merely stupid repetitions of the sins and errors you’ve been committing, the follies and vices you’ve been pursuing. Your contribution to human happiness and wisdom will be a great big zero, and you’ll be remembered — if at all — for your addition to the world’s confusion and misery.

Death challenges us to find the meaning of life, and with it, genuine happiness. It is nature’s way of goading us to discover our true condition, our real self — beyond the transience and ephemerality of this material world. And not only this world, but *all* worlds. In this book you

will find that death is your best friend. If your best friend challenges you, surely it must be well-intended for a single purpose — to make you happy and wise. That is the purpose of death.

For the enlightened ones, the self is no longer limited or bound. The spark of God within each of us has, in them, been fanned into the divine fire that consumes the person/personality totally on every level of being, and in the process all sense of separateness is seen to be an illusion. Upon death, the person and the personality are simply no more.

When there is no more separation, where can you go? Nowhere — which is the same as saying that you are already everywhere, even though “you” as a separate personality — whether embodied or disembodied — no longer exist. You have returned to the One which is the all, the Ground of Being from which creation in all its forms on all levels of existence springs.

Our fear of death is ultimately fear of enlightenment, of losing our sense of separate self, of merging with the All. On the deepest level of our existence, we are *already* merged, of course. But the illusion of separateness leads us to think otherwise.

To lose an illusion means only to see more clearly. That is the challenge of human existence: to see, to know, to be — as fully and truly as the god-in-hiding that we are.

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