

THE
TIBETAN
BOOK OF
THE DEAD
FOR
BEGINNERS

A Guide to Living and Dying

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 **sounds true**
BOULDER, COLORADO

Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
Chapter 1	Karma—How We Live Is How We Die 9
Chapter 2	What Dies and What Gets Reborn 15
Chapter 3	Our Consciousness after Death 23
Chapter 4	Influencing Our Next Rebirth 29
Chapter 5	Start Where We Are Now 35
Chapter 6	Supporting Loved Ones as They Approach Death 45
Chapter 7	Practices as Death Approaches 57
Chapter 8	Supporting Dying Loved Ones from a Distance 65
Chapter 9	Supporting Ourselves at the End of Life 67
Chapter 10	The Time Immediately after Death 69

Chapter 11	Essential Advice for Joyful Living and Peaceful Dying	73
Appendix A	Practices to Develop Compassion and Wisdom	77
Appendix B	The Tibetan Book of the Dead—A Summary	87
Resources		91
About the Authors		93

Introduction

No one knows when our end will come. Whether we die alone or with loved ones, unexpectedly or after a long illness, after a long life or a shorter one, many people appear to be ill-prepared for the time of death.

As we wrote this book, the COVID-19 pandemic raged around the world. Millions of people have died worldwide—more than one million in the United States, where we live, with many people dying alone in hospitals without the comfort of family, friends, and loved ones by their side.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers a poignant reminder that it doesn't matter what our religion is, or our economic status, or our viewpoints on any matter. In the end, we are all the same. No one wants suffering. We are all born. We will all die.

In most contemporary Western cultures, if death is discussed at all, it comes in hushed voices. We shield ourselves and our children from any meaningful discussion of the end of life or what happens after. Death is feared, and speaking of it creates discomfort. It is rarely discussed openly.

Western medicine and technology improve our health and can be lifesavers during critical times. Unfortunately, they are sometimes used to push death away, at the cost of unnecessary emotional suffering by the patient and family.

In most contemporary Eastern cultures, senior citizens live within the community, and within the home of their family. As they age, they are respected, supported, and still a part of the community and family fabric. They live at home and die at home, in the bosom of their family and community.

Western culture today tends to hide our seniors away in nursing homes or senior living centers—where we can visit them periodically. They are left to navigate the end of their lives with professional caretakers. Families rush in for the final lap, often feeling fear, stress, great emotion, and little sense of how to accommodate or support their loved one.

Regardless of how and where we live our final years, and whether we see death coming or not, it will touch us all. But we don't have to be afraid.

How We Die

The death process is different for every one of us. There is no formula for how someone “should” die, or what a “good” death even means. Each death is unique, and what is appropriate for one person or family may not be for another. The manner in which we die and how those around us deal with it is truly unique. The following stories illustrate how differently we can all experience our death or the death of our loved ones.

INTENSIVE CARE

Mom came to the intensive care unit three weeks ago in the middle of the night. Who could have predicted or prepared for this? Small and weak, she is aware of her surroundings but unable to speak.

She becomes weaker each day. From our conversations with her over the years we know her desire was to spend her last days at home. Now Mom is surrounded with beeping machines, tubes, and medical personnel. She is hooked up to machines, without which she would certainly not live. We all know her days are numbered. We want to make sure that she dies peacefully without any physical or emotional pain. How can we do that now?

AT HOME

My husband had been keeping himself alive for years despite his prognosis—with medication, meditation, and gentle exercise. Death, once years away, had crept up on us and became only weeks away. We slowed down our daily routines and switched gears to make sure my husband would pass away in peace and quiet, surrounded by loved ones and the music and art he loved so much. One day, after we had finished a recitation of his favorite poetry, his eyes closed. We knew that wherever his spirit or consciousness went, he was happy, content, and with no regrets.

SUDDEN LOSS

Our sister always ran around at warp speed in everything she did. From when she was a toddler until her thirty-second birthday, she was determined to achieve and do everything she possibly could at breakneck speed—regardless of what was in front of her or was left in her wake. Her car accident was just an extension of how she led her life. One instant she was our sister, the live wire—and then she wasn't. We learned from the police report that she was conscious for a few hours before eventually dying from a severe concussion. We never had a chance to say goodbye, or tell her how much we loved her.

These experiences are sobering. And if you haven't been with someone who is dying, we can assure you that living through these moments is more intense and prolonged than you could ever imagine. This is reality.

We are very fortunate that with the expansion of hospice care, our loved ones can die with love and compassion. We can learn so much from the hospice care angels who care for our loved ones at the end of life.

Is it possible that death can be a celebratory and empowering event? Is it possible to enjoy our lives and, as a result, be better prepared for death as it approaches? *What if death can truly become part of the cycle of life?*

The Tibetan Book of the Dead for Beginners shares ancient wisdom on death from the perspective of Tibetan Buddhism, made accessible for readers today—whether Buddhist or not. By learning to acknowledge the reality of death, we can live more fully, die with more peace, and support our loved ones in doing the same. In this book, we hope to share this promise with you.

A Tibetan Buddhist View of Death

Buddhism is well equipped to prepare us for death. Buddhists know that how we live is how we will die. In Tibetan Buddhism, the prospect of death is acknowledged in daily practices, prayers, and teachings that motivate us to live an ethical and happy life. And living with joy and kindness allows us to approach death with confidence and ease.

Buddhists aspire for death to be a smooth, natural, and peaceful process, as we transition into our next post-life experience. To achieve this takes practice while we are alive—practice in the form of meditation, contemplation, and skillful action under the guidance of a qualified Buddhist Master.

If you study death, it can be a transforming, liberating event. If you don't, it can be very difficult emotionally.

The Dalai Lama's Thoughts on Death

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama frequently addresses death in his teaching. He writes:

As a Buddhist, I view death as a normal process, a reality that I accept will occur as long as I remain in this earthly existence. Knowing that I cannot escape it, I see no point in worrying about it. I tend to think of death as being like changing your clothes when they are old and worn out, rather than as some final end. Yet death is unpredictable: We do not know when or how it will take place. So it is only sensible to take certain precautions before it actually happens.

The Dalai Lama prepares himself for the time of death, and as a result does not worry about it. We concur wholeheartedly with his view that we can prepare for it, and in that preparation, we can learn to accept it as well. And in this book, we will show you how we can work with our state of mind now, how to live a meaningful life, and, at the time of death, how to bring about a happy rebirth.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead

Among the numerous Buddhist texts that address the end of life, one of the most widely read, taught, and discussed is *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Scholars believe it was composed in the eighth century by the great Buddhist Master Padmasambhava and then discovered in central Tibet in the fourteenth century.

The text describes practices that prepare the Buddhist practitioner for the experience that awaits us from the time we start to die until we are reborn. As we become more accomplished in this preparation, our level of confidence while alive and as we prepare for death increases. Through these practices, we also experience a sense of calm, compassion, and wisdom.

When we are able to include the practices described by this great master in our daily lives, the prospect of death can be viewed as an empowering opportunity.

Lama Lhanang has taught the practices in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to countless people around the world, and he has witnessed the powerful impact of these teachings in their lives—and in the lives of their loved ones. The full text of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is widely available, but to a reader who isn't an advanced Buddhist practitioner the book can feel esoteric and inaccessible. This book draws on the concepts shared in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to make the teachings available to anyone who is curious about them, to anyone courageous enough to live life fully and prepare for its end.

Appendix A shares a brief summary of the kinds of practices found in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, but you won't find its full original text in this book. Instead, you will find teachings drawn

from its heart, tested across generations and continents, and offered with the intention to ease suffering and bring more joy and peace.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead provides us with a description of all the phases that human beings experience in the birth-life-death-afterlife cycle. It introduces the concept of Buddha nature—the basic and fundamental nature of all sentient beings. And finally, the great Master Padmasambhava introduces many visualizations, prayers, and practices that advanced practitioners can use to guide a dying person through the process of death and the afterlife to ensure their consciousness has an auspicious rebirth, or goes to the Pure Land.

We offer this beginner's book on Buddhist practices and teachings on life and death, based on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, so that anyone who is interested can achieve calmness and confidence as death approaches them or a loved one.

And, as importantly, anyone can utilize these teachings to be happier while they are alive. This book is written to guide us to live our lives joyfully. The natural result will then be for us to die peacefully.

It is our wish that this book will provide access to these precious teachings and practices to people of all religions. After all, in the events of life and death, we are all the same.

As the Dalai Lama says, “When I see people with smiles, I feel these are all my brothers, sisters; seven billion human beings, actually, our brothers and sisters.”

We hope this book is of great benefit to you and your loved ones.



Chapter I

Karma—How We Live Is How We Die

“If a person speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows, like a shadow that never leaves.”

—BUDDHA, FROM THE DHAMMAPADA

You don't need to be a Buddhist to believe in karma, also known as the Law of Cause and Effect.

How we speak or act at this moment determines our experience in the next moment. How we live today impacts how we live tomorrow, the next day, the next week, month, year—and, when you believe in rebirth, in our future lives.

If we love unconditionally, love will come to us. When the flower grows, the bees and butterflies all come and enjoy it. When we open our heart, everyone wants to be near. When we close our heart, no one wants to be around us.

Karma does not lie, and we can't run away from it. If you really want to know your karma, look at yourself in the mirror. How we are now results from what we have done in our life until now. Our

karma in the future is determined by what we are thinking, doing, and saying now.

How Karma Works

Many books and teachings are devoted to explaining the complex nature of karma. And understanding karma is invaluable in seeing the relationship between the present moment and the end of life.

Our actions result in consequences. And when we speak of *action* we refer to physical action, speech, or thought.

The consequences that we will experience come in the form of creating a habit of our actions. In the future, we will find ourselves in the same kinds of environments where the actions initially occurred. And finally, we will become the recipient of those actions, as well.

Habitual consequences relate to our mindset and actions. Environmental consequences relate to our surroundings. And personal consequences relate to our circumstances.

Here are a few examples:

If we are generous with someone, then three consequences may follow:

1. We will be generous again in the future (habitual consequence).
2. We will find ourselves in an environment where people are generous (environmental consequence).
3. We will be the recipient of someone else's generosity in the future (personal consequence).

If right now our colleague or loved one speaks to us in a way that triggers our anger, then these three consequences may follow:

1. We will be angry in a similar situation in the future (habitual consequence).
2. We will find ourselves in an environment where those around us are angry (environmental consequence).
3. We will find ourselves in a situation where others are angry with us (personal consequence).

Every thought, speech, or action that we take as a reaction to what happens to us or around us creates karma, a consequence.

Our intention precedes or triggers our thoughts, speech, or actions. Intention is the basis of karma. Good intention yields good karma, and vice versa.

As we change our inner world—through thought, speech, and action—the external world around us reflects those changes.

When We Experience Karma

When does one experience the results of one's actions? When does karma come to fruition?

We experience the “fruits” of our actions anytime from the very next moment to years or lifetimes later.

Let's use the analogy of planting a vegetable seed in a field. When does it ripen? And how good will it taste?

Well, that depends on many variables. Here are just a few—sun, earth, fertilizer, water, how much sun, how much water, when it was planted, if it was a big seed, if it was a small seed, how many seeds, what the ground was like, the season when it was planted.

These are but a few of the variables that determine the result of the seed being planted.

Karma *seeds* that are in your mind, likewise, sometimes ripen immediately and sometimes in the future. The future for most Buddhists includes this lifetime, as well as future lifetimes.

How We Work with Karma

From a Tibetan Buddhist perspective, we have the ability to purify our negative karma. In other words, we can work to mitigate the negative consequences of past negative actions. Purification practices are an important focus of chanting and prayers in Tibetan schools of Buddhism. They include meditation, an admission or confession of the actions that created the negative karma, remorse, and intention not to commit the actions that caused the negative karma again in the future. Although we can read about these practices or watch videos about them, Tibetan Buddhist purification practices are best learned directly from a qualified teacher.

Even if we haven't learned these traditional practices, we can dilute our negative karma—just by engaging in more positive actions, and fewer actions that create negative karma.

As mentioned earlier, what we experience now in life is a result of all of our actions until this moment. And likewise, how we deal with circumstances around us now determines our future. So, in a sense, from this moment on, we all create our own karma!

With that in mind, many of us use karma to attribute blame to ourselves or others. This can be counterproductive, and in many cases not true. The best example of this is blaming individuals or groups of people today for what they may