

## Gambling With the Lord of Death

Introduction from 'Mind Beyond Death' released by Snow Lion Publications.

This book is the retelling of a story first heard centuries ago by a small group of students of the great Indian master Padmasambhava. This extraordinary master, whose life was filled with many adventures and accomplishments, achieved the greatest accomplishment of all—the realization of the stainless and indestructible nature of his own mind that instantly dispels all illusions, even the fearful illusion of death. It is said that Padmasambhava departed this world in a mass of rainbow light, leaving behind many precious instructions and descriptions of his journey of transformation for students of the future. Though nothing in this story has changed, whoever hears it and takes it to heart might be changed by it. Like classic stories of all times, it takes you on a journey; only in this case you are the main character and the outcome is in your hands.

The story we are looking at here, then, is our own. It is the story of our bodies and minds, our birth and death, and the undeniable truths about our existence as human beings. While we know the facts of life and the inevitability of death, it is a reality we rarely face. When we do, our impulse is to turn away. Though we do not wish to confront death or the fear it inspires, running away from this inconvenient truth will not help us. Reality will catch up to us in the end. If we have ignored death all our lives, then it will come as a big surprise. There will be no time on death's bed to learn how to handle the situation, no time to develop the wisdom and compassion that could guide us skillfully through death's terrain. We will have to confront whatever we encounter there as best we can—and that is a genuine gamble.

Why would we take such a risk? We have a choice: to prepare ourselves to face the most uncomfortable moment of our lives, or to meet that moment unprepared. If we choose to look into the face of death directly, then we can be certain of transforming that meeting into a profound experience that will bring untold benefit to our spiritual journey.

If we chose denial, then, when we meet the Lord of Death, we will be like an innocent youth walking into a late-night gambling den with a pocket full of cash. What are the odds that we will be richer and happier in the morning?

Whether or not we are prepared, we will all meet the Lord of Death. Who is this great Lord and what is his power over us? This legendary figure that inspires so much fear is merely the personification of impermanence and cause and effect, or karma. In Buddhist literature, this "Lord" is invincible. No one can beat him at his game—except a

true holder of wisdom. It is wisdom that slays the slayer, that cleans the table and walks away with the prize.

From ancient times to the present, many cultures have developed a literature—both oral and written—rich in the lore of death and dying. Many of these world wisdom traditions have addressed the question of how the experience of “dying” can be made a meaningful and powerful point at which to connect with one’s own deeper or higher nature. In recent years, “death and dying” has become a hot topic, and “death” itself has become a buzzword. But while some people seem to want to talk about it, no one really wants to face death, or to be in an environment where death is actually happening. Woody Allen once said, “I’m not afraid to die; I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” This is a reflection of the minds of many people in our twenty-first century world. In reality, we try to avoid death altogether. We are afraid to hear about it or look at it, let alone experience it, because we have created a negative and fearful cultural image of death. We believe that death is the end of all that we are, the loss of everything we hold most dear. Yet our fear prevents us from knowing our own story, which is ultimately a tale of renewal and liberation.

According to Buddhist teachings, the reality is that death and birth take place continually. This understanding is also found in Christian teachings, where St. Paul said, “I die every day.” The point is to learn that dying is part of the process of living; it takes place in every moment—not just at the end of life. How do we learn to recognize this sense of moment-to-moment death in our lives?

To go beyond our abstract notions about death, we have to look deeply into our own minds and hearts. This journey requires that we contemplate what death means to us individually—not from the medical or technical points of view—such as the cessation of respiration or the beating of the heart, and not from the perspective of our religious or cultural traditions. Instead, we need to ask ourselves, “What does death mean to me, personally, from my own experience of life? What is my most basic, visceral feeling about what death is?” This is an important question, because how we define death largely determines how we will experience our own. It also becomes our guide for how to die well.

According to the spiritual insight of Buddhism, in order to die well, one must live well. Dying well can only be accomplished when we know how to live well. Could it be that because we don’t know how to live fully, or live well, we are afraid to die? In order to transform our fear of death and overcome it, we must come into contact with death instead of denying it. We must connect with death through genuine reflection. We must contemplate its image with a calm and clear mind, not just with the image of death that our thoughts have created on the basis of superstition and rumor. We must actually see and feel that state nakedly. The way to meet death fully is to die every day, to every moment, to everything; to our thoughts, to our agony, to our emotions, to our loving relationships—even to our joy. We cannot meet death if we don’t die every day!

From the Buddhist perspective, death does not just mean coming to an end. It also means coming to a beginning. Death is a process of change. Ending itself is neither positive nor negative; it is just reality. Death was part of the deal when we accepted the idea of birth. Our entrance into this world came with a contract to leave it. So, whether you sigh with relief at the end of a torturous moment, or desperately wish some Hollywood movie-like instant could last forever, every moment comes to an end. Every story has an end, regardless of whether that end is happy or sad. Nevertheless, when a moment or a lifetime ends, we cannot argue with it. There is no room for negotiation. Recognizing this reality is the way we come into contact with death in everyday life.

Ultimately, what we call "life" is just an illusion of continuity—a succession of moments, a stream of thoughts, emotions and memories, which we feel is our possession. And therefore we, too, spring into existence, as the possessors of that continuity. However, upon examination, we discover that that continuity is dreamlike, illusory. It is not a continuous or substantial reality. It consists of single moments, which arise, dissolve and arise again, like waves on an ocean. Therefore, this "I" arises and dissolves in each moment as well. It does not continue from one moment to the next. The "I" of one moment dissolves, and is gone. The "I" of the next moment arises afresh. These two "I"s cannot be said to be the same or different, yet they are identified by conceptual mind as a single, continuous self: "Yes, this is me . . . ."

Within this flux, we can clearly see the process of death; the dissolving of fleeting thoughts, the fading of vibrant emotions, the quick alternation of our perceptions—a sound, a touch is there and then gone. But at the very instant we experience the end of a moment, we experience the process of birth; a new world is born as fresh thoughts and colorful emotions arise in response to shifting perceptions. Therefore, the end of a moment is also a renewal, as it is only through death that a new thing can come into being.

Dreading death, we do not see the obvious; that which has the power to renew itself is eternal, while that which is truly continuous has no creative power. Without the play of birth and death, the world would be stagnant, like a scene in an art house movie shot with a still camera. The world that is caught in its lens is held fixed and motionless. Nothing changes for a long, long time. Without the continual play of death and rebirth, our lives would be just as fixed and senseless—only the consequences would be torturous. Nothing would change at all. In contrast, how wonderful and refreshing it is to have these momentary changes, to be blessed by impermanence!

If we were continuous, impervious to change and death, then seeking something beyond or outside ourselves would be fruitless. Whatever we might call it—the real, the creative, the divine mystery, the sacred world or the grace of god—we could never find it. We would find only further projections of our own mind. It is only by dying every day that we can be truly in contact with life. If we think we can find a meaningful connection between life and death—while still clinging to our belief in the continuity of our own existence—then we are living in a fictional world of our own creation.

When this illusion of continuity comes to an end, however briefly, we have an opportunity to glimpse the deeper reality that underlies it. This is the true and abiding nature of the mind, which is inseparable from the mind and realization of Padmasambhava. It is the primordial awareness, the luminous wisdom, from which all phenomena spontaneously arise. This wisdom is unknowable in the ordinary sense because it is beyond concept. Therefore it is also beyond time. It is called "birthless and deathless." If we can connect with that experience, past and future are transcended, and we naturally wake up to a vast and brilliant world.

When we truly know that with every ending, there is also renewal, we begin to relax. Our minds become open to the process of change. We feel we can actually touch reality and are no longer afraid of death. We can learn to live well and fully now, with the understanding that death is not something apart from life. From the Buddhist point of view, we have a choice; to direct our story of living and dying now, or to wait, closing our eyes to the message of impermanence, until death itself opens them. Since we value happy endings, why choose to gamble with the Lord of Death?

Ancient Buddhist wisdom has much to offer to our modern world community on the topic of "death and dying," and in this book I will explore how we can understand and apply these timeless teachings in our every day lives. It is my hope that this book will bring clarity and insight to these issues from the spiritual perspective of the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition. May the profound wisdom and genuine compassion embodied in these teachings swiftly dispel all illusions of beings and relieve their greatest fears. May the true nature of mind, the buddha within, guide us all on the path of living and dying well.

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