

SIX

REVVING THE ENGINE TO ENLIGHTENMENT

Empowerment from the Subtle Realms

*Then bless me to embark in the boat to cross the ocean of the Tantras,
Through the kindness of the captain Vajra-master,
Holding vows and pledges, root of all powers,
More dearly than life itself!*

*Bless me to perceive all things as the deity body,
Cleansing the taints of ordinary perception and conception
Through the yoga of the first stage of Unexcelled Yoga Tantra,
Transforming birth, death, and between into the three buddha-bodies!*

*Bless me to realize here in this life
The path of clear light-magic body union,
Coming from you, Savior, when you put your toe
In my eight-petaled, heart center's central channel.*

*If the path is not complete and death arrives,
Bless me to go to a pure buddhaverse*

*By the instruction for implementing the five forces
Of mentor soul ejection, the forceful art of buddhahood!*

In short, life after life forever,

You, Savior, care for me and never part,

Bless me to become your foremost heir,

Upholding all the secrets of body, speech, and mind!

Thou, Savior, when you're a perfect buddha,

May I be foremost in your retinue.

Grant me good luck for easy, natural achievement

Of all my goals, temporary and ultimate!

Thus having prayed, may you, best mentor,

Joyously come to my crown to bless me,

Sit securely, your toenails glistening,

In the corolla of my heart-center lotus!

The pure virtue of performing this practice,

I dedicate to the success of all the deeds and vows

Of all the three times' bliss-lords and their heirs,

And to uphold the word and practice of the holy Dharma.

By the power of that dedication, through all my lives,

May I never lose the four wheels of the supreme vehicle—

May I consummate transcendence, spirit of enlightenment,

Realistic view, and progress on the stages of creation and perfection.

We have completed our retreat on the exoteric path, the three principal themes of the transcendent attitude, the loving spirit of enlightenment, and the wisdom of selflessness. These themes consist, respectively, of four steps, eleven steps, and two insights, each of which can use four keys—though we can always subdivide these processes in more elaborate ways.

When you master these three principal themes, at least to some degree you are prepared to enter upon the esoteric vehicle of the Tantras—spiritual technologies and arts that accelerate enlightenment. However, you also must have the personal authorization, empowerment, and instruction from a qualified mentor and possess the compassion, intelligence, determination, and opportunity for the practices. So, we will enter the jewel tree field together one more time, recapitulate more fully what we have understood, and open the door to take a peek at the possibilities and the magnificence of the Tantric sciences and arts.

Some teachers think that Tantra should remain esoteric, only for the initiated. Even the full-scale practice of the jewel tree of the *Mentor Devotion* normally requires authorization, empowerment, and instruction of a real mentor, since the visualization of the jewel tree itself is drawn from the spiritual technology of the Tantras. Nevertheless, systematic visualization is widely used in most Tibetan systems that propel us along the path to enlightenment. Tantra is the fastest, most powerful technology for accelerating your evolutionary progress toward buddhahood. As long as you have developed the transcendent attitude, have conceived the spirit of enlightenment, and have clearly understood, at least inferentially, the selflessness of subjects and objects, Tantric practice is not excessively dangerous. So let's take a look at it, as revealed by the *Mentor Devotion*.

Turning to the Tibetan wish-granting jewel tree, we'll begin again by opening

our special refuge environment. We let ourselves dissolve, let our whole world picture dissolve. We merge into an experiential taste of selflessness. We arise on the top of the world, at the crystal Lake Manasarovar, sitting on a grassy bluff, with all beings around us looking at us. We behold the jewel tree growing out of the island in the lake before us, filling the sky and the heavens, and glowing and glistening like a giant Christmas tree. We see the wish-fulfilling jewels of all our mentors from all the cultures—Buddha, Zoroaster, Isaiah, Moses, the Goddess, whoever our mentors are. And the whole heavenly host is radiating jewel light rays down to us—diamond, ruby, emerald, topaz, and sapphire. We fill up with light ourselves and radiate the light out around us to all the beings, filling each one with light and energy and hope and pleasure. Their gratitude comes back to us; our gratitude goes back to them and to the refuge tree.

Once you're in this environment of the gem tree, you review the thought steps of the contemplative path to enlightenment: First, you offer the world to the mentors, take refuge, praise and salute the beings, confess and repent of your wrongdoings, rejoice in the virtues of others, request the rain of Dharma to fall from the mentors, and ask them not to go away. You dedicate everything you do to buddhahood, for the sake of all living beings' freedom from suffering.

Now, you are firmly settled in the refuge tree field and are beginning the actual path of development. You recognize the preciousness of human embodiment, endowed with liberty and opportunity; the immediacy of death; the infinite continuity of life, beginningless and endless; the cause and effect of evolutionary actions; and the inevitable suffering found in all egocentric life states, or samsara. These four realizations lead you into the first mind of the transcendent attitude; self-release and self-appreciation; and a new, evolutionary ethic of interrelationships with all beings. You feel a definite release from your habitual preoccupations, a new freedom to look more carefully and meaningfully at your life.

Next, you turn your mind toward the second great theme, the spirit of enlightenment. You survey the condition of all beings, and your relation to them. As you develop equanimity, you recognize that each and every one is your mother. Remembering your mothers' kindness, you wish to repay them

all, so you exchange self and other, trade away self-preoccupation for other-preoccupation. You reflect more deeply on the disadvantages of self-preoccupation and broadly over the advantages of other-preoccupation. You develop universal love, the giving of all your happiness and pleasure to all beings, and you see them as lovely in their happiness. You exercise universal compassion, taking from others all their suffering, bringing it over to yourself to convert it into bliss through understanding. You adopt the messianic resolution that you will be the one to help all of them, and to save them from their suffering. First you free yourself, and then you teach others how to do it themselves. Finally, you conceive the spirit of enlightenment of love and compassion to all beings. You vow to become a buddha for the sake of all living beings, and you move to activate that enlightened mind by taking the vow of the bodhisattva and determining, “Yes, I will become a buddha for the sake of all living beings.” Now you have added the second mind, the spirit of enlightenment, of love and compassion, to the first mind of transcendent renunciation.

You go then into the third main theme of the path, the wisdom of reality and selflessness. Realizing there is “subjective self” and “objective self,” you implement the four keys on the personal self: First, you recognize the instinctive, solid gut feeling of absolute self-identity and independence; next, you commit to find that self or to give it up if you cannot find it; next, you seek the self in the life systems but affirm that it is not there; finally, you turn to look for the self as something truly separate from, but connected to, the life systems, but you fail to find it there, either.

Each time you fail to find the self, you experience a meditative dissolution: Your subjectivity dissolves along with all objectivities, and you experience a spacelike, balanced state. Each time you emerge from that spacelike state, you seek the self or essence of the spacelike state itself. That state itself then dissolves under analysis, and you discern the inconceivable entirety of the universe on the surface of the space, so to speak, as if in a dream or a reflection in a mirror. You oscillate from spacelike to dreamlike and from dreamlike to spacelike states. As you do so, they become more and more fused together, until they are ultimately experienced as nondual, the nonduality of voidness and relativity. At that time, your wisdom of selflessness manifests simultaneously as unconditional compassion—you feel

one with all beings and so feel their sufferings as your own sufferings and so naturally are moved to end them. You realize the nonduality of your wisdom that is aware of everything's emptiness and your compassion that is committed to everything's relational presence. This nondual insight enables you to effectively help beings terminate their suffering and to begin to live relationally in a harmonious, happy, nonsuffering way.

Now, we come out of the meditation, having run through the contemplative summary of the path. You should now have this under your belt, so that you can play with these themes and reflect on them again and again. Even when you focus on just one particular step of thought, say, the precious human life endowed with liberty and opportunity, it's good to do so within the context of the whole path. Before settling on one step, try running through all the steps briefly, and then come back and really practice your focus on that one theme. All the different principles reinforce each other and lead to a harmonious, unified mental state.

Once you've practiced one principle and move on to the others, however, you mustn't think you know it forever. For example, if you meditate on the cause and effect of karmic evolution, it's not as if you don't have to think about that ever again. In fact, the first time you learn something, your knowledge is not that deep. Usually, you have gained mere intellectual knowledge. It won't necessarily come out in your experience of life and the world right away. Often, we think we understand something, think we've got it all settled, and the next day we're sort of confused, and we go through it again, gaining a much deeper experience of it. Then we really feel, "Now, today, I really understand it." Yet we come back again, and we know it again, and we seem to find an infinite depth of experience and reexperience. Reality is infinite openness, infinite potential, infinite possibility, and, therefore, it's no wonder that you can go on and on, become more and more amazing, more and more miraculous, more and more wondrous, the deeper and deeper you go.

Now that you have the path as a whole, you can even memorize the different points and count through them regularly. Doing this is very helpful. The Asian traditions in general use memorization, which is why they like to

number things—the four noble truths, the three principal themes, the four steps of this, the eleven steps of that, and so forth. This is not because they are all would-be accountants, but because structuring things makes them more useful in meditation. To really understand something, whatever it is, any subject, you have to meditate, to engrain that understanding more deeply in your mind. Memorization is very useful, because it focuses your mind without distraction. If you just read something and feel you understand it as you read it but leave it in the book, then when you do meditate, your mind will wander here and there, and you won't really be able to go more deeply. But if you memorize the main points of what you've learned, when you meditate you will have a clear framework for your thought, a set of points to serve as parameters for your critical inner gaze, and you can drill more deeply at each of the main points and deepen your understanding.

To drill deeply, you can't just accept a surface realization. You have to develop a more critical penetration. You can do this by questioning, by debating, by arguing and discussing. You don't passively accept any one idea but see where you stand in relation to it. You work the ideas, argue with someone else about them, see where your own thinking and perceptions are ill founded or well founded. Even if they are well founded, you may not really know how to explain that well foundedness. And you want truth. You don't simply want to adopt an idea for your life and enlightenment without making sure it is bedrock solid. You deepen your reasoning, you deepen your insight, and as you do so you also deepen your inner meditation. You drill to deeper levels of understanding.

Even at over sixty years of age, I'm still kind of suspicious of what I think I understand, because I have had so many experiences of having thought I understood something really sharply, even having a eureka-type insight, only to have a further insight a couple of years later that turned my previous understanding upside down. Sometimes I have even been embarrassed about the way I previously understood something! And yet, every new understanding has a quality of, "Wow! Eureka! Now I've got it!" Later that dissolves, and I go more deeply still, and I am embarrassed that I had thought the other thing. Again and again, it goes like that.

So, you shouldn't be defensive and think you have one thing you know

for certain, and hold on to that because you think it will never change. It will change, the deeper you live your knowledge. And the deeper you live and examine your knowledge, the more wonderful it is. We have the assurance of the enlightened beings that reality is goodness, that reality is freedom from suffering, that reality is bliss. So we should never fear to open ourselves to reality, to cast aside our preconceptions and biases, and to open more and more to whatever turns out to be real. You can have faith in enlightenment, faith in evolutionary potential, faith in infinity, faith in your infinite self.

ACCELERATING YOUR BUDDHAHOOD

Now, think back to your conception of the spirit of enlightenment, your determination and vow to achieve perfect buddhahood. Even though at that point you established the bodhisattva mind and the soul of enlightenment, you're not yet at the full awareness of enlightenment. You have planted and sprouted the seed, however, the determination for enlightenment that changes all of our subsequent evolutionary experience.

Also, think about the tenth step toward enlightenment, the step of messianic resolution, "I must do it all for everyone, I can't wait." We vow to proceed as bodhisattvas, but we don't have to be high holy people or reincarnate lamas to be bodhisattvas. Sure, an advanced, even angelic bodhisattva such as Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of perfect compassion, or Tara, the female bodhisattva who symbolizes the dynamic redemptive activity of all buddhas, is like a celestial archangel. But even we can be bodhisattvas just with our deep vow and deep determination to become buddhas for the sake of all beings, to focus all our life experience on that.

The bodhisattva is ready to be patient and enduring; ready to practice generosity for three incalculable aeons of lifetimes; ready to practice justice and sensitive, ethical interaction with others for three incalculable aeons of lifetimes; ready to practice tolerance and bear with the injuries of others, sacrifice the self, and leave the victory to others for three incalculable aeons. The bodhisattva is ready to do all of that from her or his own perspective; the bodhisattva is in no rush. For once we have tasted a single drop of the bliss of bringing others into that freedom, with the spirit of enlightenment of love and compassion, once we have loosened the grip of the solid, separated, alienated

self that is the core of self-centeredness, then we are already happy in a certain way. The bodhisattva is always joyful, even when suffering. Bodhisattvas are always happy and cheerful under pressure, because they have felt the essence of reality as freedom, even though they haven't fully experienced it. So bodhisattvas can pretty much undergo whatever comes their way.

However, bodhisattvas will never be patient or tolerant about the suffering of other beings. They basically can't stand to wait around the three incalculable aeons of lifetimes that it takes to create a buddhaland, to create a world for all beings that is a buddhaverse, in which everything is openly the mirror wisdom. They're unwilling to wait these three incalculable aeons because of the plight of other beings, of their mothers. How can we stand by when our mothers roast in hell, fight and kill each other unnecessarily and endlessly?

To help the bodhisattvas, the buddhas teach Tantras, which are almost miraculous methodologies. *Tantra* means "continuity." Even enlightenment has infinite continuity, which we studied and accepted during our first steps on the path. Tantra is the definitive system that arises when you finally abandon the notion of a separated state as your inner nature and final destiny. You've set aside all those misinterpreted visions of liberation as being an ultimate separated place, and a state apart that you can enter—some sort of great formless quiet. In Indian culture about a thousand years after Buddha's time, people had become committed to seeing their interwovenness and interrelativity. It had become more normal, and more common-sensical, to see continuity. At that time, the Tantras that buddhas had always taught in secret became more explicated, and they emerged among the educated public as a separate discipline, as scriptural and commentarial texts, although they had always been there in secret.

One of my great teachers, the late Tara Tulku, once said something that surpassed any wisdom I have read in any book, although it was in total harmony with all teaching. In response to the question "What is Tantra?" he said, "Once critical wisdom demolishes the world built on the foundation of ignorance, the world of the samsaric life cycle, the world of self-other conflict, then you are free to build a new world on the foundation of wisdom.

Tantra is the art of building such a world of wisdom.”

A wisdom world is a mandala, a perfected environment that provides all beings with the optimal opportunity to evolve toward enlightenment. It is a world in which every lotus teaches selflessness. Every passing dragonfly—when its wings buzz, the teaching of universal compassion can be heard. The gurgling water says, “Impermanence, suffering, selflessness, freedom.” Everything in the whole world itself is a teaching of liberation and freedom and enlightenment to beings. And that world is built of wisdom by enlightened beings, and the technology of building such a world is called Tantra.

Some people talk of enlightenment as if it were the end of life rather than the aim of every life. They say, “No more rebirth for me, this is my last life.” Sometimes Buddha encourages them. But they mean that this is their last egocentrically imprisoned life, their last self-preoccupied life, last life of suffering, of self struggling with the overwhelming other. To them, life is so unbearable, they’re actually looking to escape. But if you told them, “Well, sorry, even Buddha is going to have boundless, endless lives, infinite emanations benefiting all others and interwoven with all other beings,” this type of person looking for escape would be just terrified and might figure, “Why become a buddha, since I’d be having the same horrible time I’m having now?” So Buddha lets them say “No more rebirth” rather than impose on such timid people the magnificent vision of infinite continuity and infinite life, wherein Tantra serves as the supreme art of building wisdom worlds.

Therefore, to protect such timid people from the unnecessary fear of being overwhelmed with too much life, Buddha decreed that for at least eleven centuries Tantra should be kept a secret, and even after that time it should be treated reverently as esoteric. It was not hidden because Buddha was some sort of elitist and didn’t want to share this teaching with people. Tantra is esoteric because if people were not prepared, if the society was not prepared, people would become confused, and they would do the wrong thing, even as they tried to base their actions on the teaching of the right thing.

Say you have a bicycle, and you also want to glide off a cliff. If you use the bike, you’ll crash and die. It’s not the right equipment for gliding. This is

not a mystery. You also need the right equipment to build the world of wisdom and fly into it. The right equipment includes the mind of transcendent renunciation, first of all. To develop that mind, you recognize the infinite continuity of life, appreciate your own human sense of that life, and envision the possibility of freedom. Then you understand that there is no escape, that you are infinitely involved. That's the first wing. Then you recognize that the only thing to do is also the most essential thing to do—you conceive the messianic spirit of enlightenment. Infinite compassion is another wing, the second prerequisite for Tantra.

Why have compassion, if other beings are just illusions? You have to maintain a view of the unity of life and to have compassion for others, or you would not have cared to evolve a body. A buddhahood, a body, is only for the purpose of reaching out to others, to hold them, to caress them, to communicate with them. That's the only purpose of a body when you are enlightened. Only love and compassion would make you willing to undergo the heroic efforts of rebuilding a whole universe. If you didn't have the messianic resolution of the bodhisattva, why would you want to rebuild the universe? You wouldn't even think it were possible to rebuild the universe.

The final essential prerequisite of Tantra is some degree of wisdom. You do not necessarily have to be at the brink of buddhahood, but you need enough wisdom to be secure in the emptiness and relativity of the self. You have to have unseated and dethroned your gut feeling of solid self, which is our only enemy in the world, and to understand that no absolute thing can ever be experienced by any relative thing. You allow that any sense of person you have is relative, made up of experiences, and infinitely transformable and malleable. Therefore, you are open to change and won't get stuck rigidly in any particular sense of self. The motivation is the spirit of enlightenment; the knowledge of infinite continuity provides the horizon of possibility; and the drive for freedom is the engine. And wisdom safeguards the openness for self-transformation. So, the path that we have taught following the *Mentor Devotion* also comprises the pillars, the tripod, on which the palace of Tantra is built.

The need for Tantra arises from the messianic impatience of the bodhisattva

—“I want to become a perfect buddha sooner, even in this life, if possible, in the between-state after death, or at least in a couple of lives. I want to become a buddha because I can’t leave my mothers in this predicament longer than that.” Buddhahood is not just a change of your mind, leaving your body as it was. Thus, the bodhisattva usually has to develop transcendent generosity, justice, patience, creativity, concentration, and wisdom in many, many lives, in body after body. In one life, perhaps, the bodhisattva may perform transcendent giving and give her life for another. Such bodhisattvas live lightly within their bodies, realizing that the body is something that is easy come, easy go. They are transcendentally detached. They feel it is just bliss to make a gift of their life, because of the pleasure the one who receives the gift gets.

Without the methodology of Tantra, the bodhisattva has to be born again, grow up, study, make sure he gets to be human, then learn again until, maybe, finally, he accomplishes another great deed of love and compassion. You make one evolutionary leap per lifetime, and it takes millions and billions of lives to evolve into this extraordinary magical being that is a buddha. With the power of Tantra, however, this evolutionary process accelerates. Tantra can speed up the evolutionary process.

The doorway into Tantra itself is the guru, the mentor, the person already adept at the method. The mentor creates a mandala, a sacred place, a magical circle, a divine palace and environment that is totally secure and ultimately beautiful. He or she then introduces the practitioner, reveals the potential of enlightenment, and anoints her or him with the empowerment to practice. Then the practice can begin within a transformed space. This is why the *Mentor Devotion*, as well as most Tibetan versions of the path of enlightenment, introduce the practitioner to the secure and sacred space of the jewel tree. And the practitioner develops the relationship with the mentor and the sense of presence and empowerment within such a space *ahead of time*, while still practicing the foundational practices, developing the foundational insights into life, without going through formalities of formal consecration.*

How does the Tantric vehicle provide its acceleration of positive evolutionary development? Say you have a dream at night in which you do a heroic act—you give your life for the sake of your beloved or your

community. In that dream, this supreme sacrifice is difficult for you to perform, because you feel greatly attached to yourself—and yet you do succeed and give yourself away. But then you wake up and realize that actually you didn't die or lose your recognizable self, but you went through the whole spiritual achievement of giving yourself in the virtual reality of the dream, without having to go through the clumsy, heavy process of dying and being reborn. Tantra opens the doorway to such a virtual reality. It helps you open your imagination, your nervous system, your neural net, to the possibility of being a much vaster type of sensibility and being. It teaches you how to dream lucidly, how to use the virtual, subtle body in a dream, and how to cultivate more merit, develop more experience, and develop deeper knowledge in a dream. And that is also why you have to have understood some degree of emptiness to do that. You couldn't do it if you didn't understand the insubstantiality and malleability of the seemingly solid self. You have to have come to the understanding that you are actually imagining yourself in the embodiment you now have, so therefore you can reimagine yourself in another, completely different world. You won't have the creative power of visualization or imagination if you have not dissolved your imagination's habitual perceptual patterns, which are stuck on you by your inheritance and acculturation and which constitute your normal sense of self.

TANTRIC PRACTICES

Tantra is the great treasure of Tibet, but it is not ultimately different from the rest of the Buddhadharma path. There are four main kinds of Tantra. In the Buddhist tradition, there are the outer ritual Tantras, the inner ritual Tantras, the Yoga Tantras, and what are called "Unexcelled Yoga Tantras." The Tantric mandalas, taught most elaborately in the Unexcelled Yoga Tantras, are sacred spaces in which you train and develop your deepest sensibilities. They can have the form of magnificent palaces, beautiful magical environments, and alternative universes. In the Unexcelled Yoga Tantras, you begin to train in two stages, the first of which is called the "creation stage." You train as an architect of worlds of enlightenment, as an engineer of the embodiments of enlightenment. You experiment with different virtual embodiments for yourself. A man may visualize himself as woman; a woman may visualize herself as a man; either sex may visualize himself or herself as male and female, two beings in union. You may visualize yourself as an

entire community of seven hundred beings, or as each one of the different beings.

There are many degrees of complexity and sophistication in Tantra, but basically, the practices all aim to expand your mind and imagination. I think it's the most amazing, most subtle, spiritual psychoneurology that the world has ever seen. But I believe that most mystical systems—including Hindu Tantra, Taoist Tantra, Kabbalah, Sufi Tantra, Christian mysticism (like the many mansions of Saint Teresa of Ávila and the union with the Christ that she experienced, or the visions of Hildegard of Bingen)—are all in the same ballpark.

In the process of creation-stage practice, you visualize exquisite virtual realities, in which you rehearse the experience of death. In fact, you learn to see death not as a fearsome thing, not as an annihilation, but as a gateway into ever greater transformation, as a gateway into new birth, the space wherein you can find freedom to shape yourself in such a way that you can interact with any being, to mirror to that being its own potential, its own future development. You learn the exact process of unentwinement of soul and body. You see how the subtle mind, the spiritual gene, is embedded deeply in the central cells, the heart cells of the body. You see how the spiritual gene was originally embedded there at the time of conception, and how at normal death the cells unravel, and the physical connection unravels, and then the soul gene flies free from the body without actually dying. This is the training ground of becoming a buddha, so that you know exactly how to teach another being.

After the creation stage, you enter into what is called the “perfection stage.” By realizing deeply the meaning of emptiness, you realize that the shapes of life, the forms of life in which we live are basically created by mutual imagination, not only some sort of god's imagination, but by our mutual imaginations. We imagine ourselves and each other. These intersections of the imaginations of sentient beings are the shape of reality. You discover this insight through knowledge of emptiness, voidness; once everything is void, nothing does not exist. But things exist as they are being shaped by mind. The intersecting, subjective minds of many beings shape the world through language, through the word. You can't reshape the world alone

by force, because other beings also have to understand. But you can lead them to the teaching, you can reason through it for them, you can exemplify it for them, you can illustrate it for them. But you can't understand it for them—they have to do that for themselves.

In the ancient Tantric arts and sciences for building the world of beauty and evolutionary fulfillment for all beings, you use all the energies of life. You transform anything that may have seemed negative—even negative passions, even fierce, frightful things—into various wisdoms of selfless, loving, compassionate benefit. Even the way in which we have been meditating on the wish-granting gem tree path is a kind of Tantra. After canceling the context of the ordinary, dark, confused world with our ordinary limitations, when we bring up our vision of the wish-granting jewel tree, with all our mentors and all the great mentor beings of all traditions, cultures, and civilizations throughout history, that is Tantra. That is creating a mandala within which we are capable of new understanding, a sacred space that helps us meditate and transform ourselves. In our habitual world, we're always incapable and imperfect, and so we never can get past our normal awareness. The mandala, an exalting environment, is immensely empowering, and the mental practice of being there actually is Tantra. It is not esoteric. You don't need to have made a vow. You just use those imaginative arts, surround yourself with them and are empowered by them to create positive change for yourself and for other beings.

NAVIGATING DEATH CONSCIOUSLY

The Tibetan Book of the Dead was developed as a set of instructions for everyone to use at the moment of death. We hope that, by being aware of the immediacy of death, we will not be shocked by it, and we actually will be prepared way ahead of time. So death will not be such a big deal for us, it will be just a transition, a doorway, like leaving a cocoon and moving into a butterfly state. It is an opportunity, something joyful, a release—but it's not a release into some fantasized nothingness, or some fantasized passive place where we're just going to be sitting in some heaven. It's a release into a new embodiment in which we can develop even more.

In fact, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in Tibetan Buddhism is called *The*

Book of Natural Liberation Through Learning in the Between State, or *bardo-toeudroeu*. That is to say, you will become naturally liberated when you learn about this nature of your own reality, when you learn about it in your subtle body-mind complex that you inhabit during the between-state, in the after-death experience, the bardo.

When I first translated *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, spent time with it, and steeped myself in it, I had many incredible revelations. I like to say that the main thing I learned from it is the opposite of its Western title, *The Book of the Dead*, because I learned that there are no dead. No one is dead. That was a big thing for me. Many cultures believe that people continue after they die in various ways, and many human beings are afraid of the dead and of ghosts. But the great message of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is that there are no dead people. Nobody has time to be dead. Death is just a doorway into further existence.

Now it can be frightening, of course, to go through a doorway. If you hurtle through with no control, and you don't know what's on the other side of the door, that can be very frightening. I think that's really what people are afraid of—letting go of the known and falling into an unknown that would be unpleasant, without having any control. Death is a doorway, a line with no width. When you walk through a doorway, when are you in the doorway? A doorway, the exact boundary between one room and another, has no width. A threshold, however, has a width. You can stand on a wooden threshold that's six inches wide. But when are you actually in the doorway? When your toes just touch that threshold? When you're in the middle of the threshold? Where is the line that is the actual doorway that divides one room from another? It's arbitrary. In a way, the doorway doesn't exist, it has no width. Just so, death is a line with no width between one life and the next one. It's when mind detaches from embodiment in this body and moves into a dream body, called the "between-state body," a virtual-reality body made of subtle energy and shaped according to how the mind is used to feeling itself embodied.

A minute after I die, my out-of-body may have approximately the shape of my former body, because that's how my mind is used to being embodied, with eyes and ears and limbs. In dreams, you seem to see, you seem to hear, occasionally you touch something, so you seem to have a body, limbs, eyes,

and ears. But your mind in the dream is in a virtual-reality zone, not in the body, operating it mechanically, creating a virtual body like the body to which it's accustomed. Death is nothing but that line. So, therefore, nobody stays dead; there are no dead people.

My mother, my father, my grandfather, my friend who died—they're not sitting around being dead, they immediately went into new experiences. They immediately became embodied in new ways. Some may have remained in a between-state, which can happen if they were strongly attached to the previous life, although the sages say that everyone goes through little deaths and rebirths even in that state. They periodically dissolve and arise again in a new between-state embodiment, a virtual-reality embodiment, as if they were having a series of dreams without ever awakening. And they can have a ghostlike way of being connected with their previous material reality. It can happen. That is actually how a ghost is defined in the Buddhist tradition. Even then they are not dead but living in a ghostly existence. They're staying close to their previous form, but they're not dead.

If you've been really very, very bad, if you have a very negative, fearful, paranoid, hostile mind, you may go into an all-consuming negative state of experience. If you have a very good, open, generous, loving, luminous mind, you will very soon go into an experience that is positive, that seems to you much more delightful than whatever you were having on Earth. Everything is luminous and nice, and you don't feel any regret about having been on the middle-level, rather grimy planet Earth, although it is beautiful. It is said that Earth is kept in this noncelestial way on purpose by enlightened beings and deities, in order to give us more opportunity to practice compassion.

HOW WE REALLY DIE

The Tibetan Book of the Dead grew out of the learning of the great Indian and Tibetan adepts of the Tantra. They carefully, empirically, and experimentally studied the process of dying and being reborn, of being in the dream state and being awake, and of the most subtle transitions between these phases of consciousness and phases of embodiment. They developed the ability to maintain awareness through those transitions, and from those experiences they developed instructions and guides. For example, when you die, they say,

at first you experience a kind of melting feeling. All the hardness in your system gets lost, and you melt in a heap, or in a puddle, internally. You experience a kind of hallucinatory mirage because the hard edges of your vision, the distinct edges of the things you are used to seeing, begin to melt. They become swirling, fluid patterns. You lose your ability to see, and you lose your connection to form.

In the next level, you have a kind of internal vision of smoke (but not with your eyes). You're in a realm in which you feel as if you were in smoke; instead of feeling liquid and melted, you feel hot and agitated, except that you've already lost the feeling of your limbs and all your senses. Your hearing is going, and you sense roaring sounds, like the crackling of flames, or the rushing of floods within you, but you don't hear an external sound. If people speak, you don't hear what they say.

Next, the inner zone of experience becomes like a field of shooting sparks or a cloud of fireflies, flickering and humming, or like raindrops gently falling on a smooth pond surface, creating interference patterns of ripples. It's a sparkier vision than the others.

Then you get the feeling of a single candle flame, absolutely unflickering, a whitish, yellowish light with a little tinge of blue perhaps, like the flame of a candle that's standing perfectly still. It is perhaps at the moment before guttering out, this moment of total stillness, this pure, internal candle flame. You don't see it with your eyes, because they are not functioning at all. No motor energy is functioning at all by this time. Your body has all gone to sleep, as when you sit uncomfortably and a leg or foot falls asleep. Here, the body as a whole has tingled, has gone past tingling, and has become completely numb. You have no sensation of being in it.

Then you go into a stage known as "luminance." You completely disconnect from coarse energy but have a very subtle, virtual energy, what they call "wind," or "subtle wind," like neural energy. And you go into an inner state that feels like a vast space filled with moonlight, luminance, peaceful, cool space.

From there, you go into a state called "radiance," which is like a vast sky full of sunlight. There is no sun or moon, no separate objects. Instead, your

whole space is pure sunlight, bright and intense, hot, energetic, a reddish orange. You go from that stage into a deeper stage called “imminence,” or “dark light,” in which everything is pitch-black, so black it’s like a shining black. When you first are aware of going into it, it’s like becoming nothing or going into nothing, and the untrained person will become totally unconscious in this state. The untrained person doesn’t feel like a person in those states. His or her own sense of subjectivity is pretty muted in the previous two states, the vast, moonlike state and then the vast sun-like state. In the dark light state, you just lose consciousness. But a yogin can retain a very subtle awareness, indivisible from unawareness at this point, and she or he won’t completely lose consciousness.

The last state is known as the “state of transparency,” popularly known in America as the “clear light,” which is okay if one understands *clear* as “transparent.” Unfortunately, I think many people think *clear* means “vivid” or “bright,” and they think of it as a white light. This isn’t white but more like gray, between light and dark, like glass, a transparency. It has no brightness, it has no darkness. It’s a light that has no shadow. It’s a light that doesn’t fall on an object; it’s within the object as much as not in the object. It’s true transparency. That state of transparency is said to be the subtlest state of any mind, of any awareness. It is true freedom, the deepest state of the buddha-mind, transiting through it is actually what death is, and it is where enlightenment conjoins all beings. It’s transparent but doesn’t obstruct any of the other states, so it isn’t separate from anything. Yet it is very creative, healing, and powerful. It is infinite, and yet you experience it yourself.

When the ordinary person dies, because his or her mind is so used to being in the traction of the sense organs, it immediately tries to create another form and a feeling of being a self isolated from other subjects and objects. So he or she just shoots past these vast stages of moonlight, sunlight, dark light, and clear light, and then the person is back struggling for a form. So, the untrained person, the undisciplined, the unaware person, forgets, or doesn’t even notice those states.

But those are the best states with which to work. Those are the states that the Tantric yogin in the mandala, in the subtle yogas of the Tantra, has learned to navigate and remain conscious in, and then to build up consciously

a form out of those states, and consciously arise in that form, coming back up through those eight signs of light. The yogins move from transparency to dark light, from dark light to sunlight, sunlight to moonlight, moonlight to candle flame, candle flame to fireflies or sparks, fireflies or sparks to smoke, smoke to mirage, and mirage to solid perception of forms.

Now in a dreamlike, between-state body, the yogin can do that, and the yogin can do that consciously. When nonyogins die, as *The Book of the Dead* tells us, we go back and forth through various kinds of vicissitudes over forty-nine days. Yet we want to—and can—guide our subtle body-minds into a positive rebirth. We want to do this, unless we are at the very highest Tantric stage, at which we are using the subtle embodiments in the between-state to attain buddhahood, or unless we're at an advanced enough stage where we can perceive the buddhas who appear during that subtle time and would be willing to install us in their mandalas in their different buddhahands.

In the fourteenth century, Karma Lingpa, one of the great discoverers of Tibetan spiritual treasures, was led by the angels, the mystic dakinis, to the right place, and he found the book inside a hollow pillar in the Samye monastery, which had been built in Guru Rinpoche's time, six hundred years earlier. Karma Lingpa brought out and published the text, and he wrote commentaries on it. The book has been widely used throughout Tibet from that time. I actually had a fight with the Library of Congress, who insisted that the author of the book is Karma Lingpa, the fourteenth-century discoverer, because they would not credit a tradition in which somebody would have written something and not have published it for six hundred years. Because of all the modern people who are desperately trying to publish something all the time, the library couldn't conceive of such a degree of self-restraint, of such clairvoyance. I told the Library of Congress that putting Karma Lingpa as the author in classifying the earlier translations is disrespectful to the original tradition. If the Tibetans thought Karma Lingpa was the author, they would have said he was the author. They put Padmasambhava as the author and Karma Lingpa as the discoverer, so why don't you get it straight? But they wouldn't change. Nonetheless, I put that down on my publication: Padmasambhava the author, Karma Lingpa the discoverer, and I the translator.

But it surprised me to discover that there are no dead people. I came to understand that Tibetans, the more modern ones particularly, have almost no interest in ancestors. They're not into ancestor worship at all, which is a big thing in China and a big thing in other cultures in Asia, still quite big in India. Nomadic people are not too hot on it, but some, Turkic and Mongolian, still do it. But Tibetans are almost unique in that they don't care for their ancestors much. They care for spiritual ancestors, such as Buddha, Marpa, Milarepa, but they don't care about blood ancestors, because the sense of there being no dead people is embedded in the culture. As told in *The Book of the Dead*, they know that the minute someone dies, he is no longer your uncle, aunt, or grandpa, but he immediately becomes a new being, who goes on into a bunch of new experiences. The people they meet in the street could well be their grandpas and grandmas, so they diffuse out over all beings that sense of relationship, kinship, and familiarity. So if I wanted to be nice to my ancestor, I'd be nice to you, you see. This attitude is a wonderful cultural achievement of the Tibetans, a key to transcending racism.

When Padmasambhava was living in Tibet, the country was run by a militaristic emperor. Although the emperor was intelligent and interested in Buddhism, he was running a military empire with a very authoritarian, hierarchical, sexist social structure. His soldiers were marching out, conquering China, conquering the Silk Route, conquering northern India, Nepal, Kashmir, parts of Bengal. It was a fierce, ferocious, uncivilized country, sort of like America today, highly militarized. In such a militaristic country, people are not supposed to think about death that much. You know, when you think about death, as you noted from meditating on the immediacy of death, death is not depressing. Death is liberating. If you're living each day as if it were your last, you're not going to follow the orders of a boss—you're going to smell the roses. You're going to get into your best meditation. You're going to go on retreats. You're not going to slave at the office, work in the factory, fight in the battle, plow the fields if it's your last day on Earth, even if you're well enough to do so. You're not. So, if you live in the immediacy of death awareness, you're going to be insubordinate, individualistic, seeking some sort of freedom, liberation, bliss, being compassionate. You're not going to be easily coercible by authority.

So, after six hundred years of struggling with their own rigidities,

confusions, racisms, fanaticisms, and violence, Tibet opened up. It became normative for individuals to seek their own highest transcendence, to be universally compassionate, to become profoundly and comprehensively wise. Then it was possible for death to be published, so to speak, for people to become widely aware of death. In the new death and dying communities here in America, people are recently becoming aware of it. No one has addressed the problem that by hiding death in this way our culture coerces us to be more avid consumers, more avid producers, more obedient followers of the party line, of the military line, more avid taxpayers. Our delusion becomes exploitable into those social channels. We think, “I’ll produce, and I’ll get some benefit later. I’ll consume, and I’ll get a benefit later.” We don’t think, “Oh, this is my last day on Earth. Why should I produce, consume, fight for somebody else with some minor purpose? I have my highest evolutionary purpose of traveling now on to the new life in the best possible way.” People pretend Tibet was a feudal theocracy, but the fact that Tibet was one of the most psychically free countries that history has perhaps ever seen, even though they didn’t have the formal documents of democracy, is proven by their feeling that they could afford to let their people live in the full light of death all the time.

THE GREAT MANTRA: BE HERE NOW

In order to live in the light of death, you have to be living with a sense of meaningfulness. You have no life to waste when you live in the light of death. You live intensely, demanding fulfillment, security, compassion from the universe.

In Tibet the national mantra, which I will close by making our mantra, is the mantra of the perfection of each instant. It’s the original expression of “be here now.” It hails and salutes the lord of compassion, the Jesus Christ messiah of the Buddhist popular tradition, Avalokiteshvara—Chenrezig, as the Tibetans call him—the one who looks down from heaven upon human beings with compassion and does not ignore their state of suffering and difficulty. He is represented in many different forms, of course, but in one of the most beautiful he has eleven heads, a thousand arms, and a thousand eyes, with one eye in the palm of each hand. His arms symbolize his power of compassion to reach into every atom, every moment, and every life of every

being, like a great king of Dharma. He is the king of reality, a king of compassion, helping everyone along the way to enlightenment, giving each a thousand helping hands, which are symbolic of an infinite number of helping hands. These helping hands are not just helping you according to what he thinks you need, but they are sensitive to what you really need, because he has infinite powers of sight. The palm of each hand has an eye, the most sensitive area of the body, and therefore, he sees exactly what you need and how you need to be helped. Avalokiteshvara also holds a jewel, which is the symbol of compassion, in his two front hands at his heart.

Our wish-granting gem tree, the refuge tree on which such gems grow, is a special Indian and Tibetan vision. But the actual wish-fulfilling gem is everyone's own heart of compassion and love. Wisdom helps you pry open that clamshell of the solid, self-centered gut feeling "I am the one!"—and then you're happy. Then you can fulfill all your wishes. Then not only do you fulfill the wishes of others, but your own wishes are fulfilled when you fulfill those wishes of others. And that is the real wish-fulfilling gem.

Avalokiteshvara holds the wish-fulfilling gem of universal love and compassion. And in another hand he holds a white lotus, which is the symbol of wisdom—delicate and beautiful, growing in the mud and on the surface of the water, but untainted by mud or water. This lotus of perfection symbolizes knowing the perfect freedom of all reality and beautifully embodies that symbolism in its delicate, opening petals. In a sense the jewel and the lotus are indivisible; the jewel is in the lotus, a symbolic integration of body and soul, wisdom and compassion, life and death.

"The jewel is in the lotus" is the often repeated mantra by Tibetans, who feel they are living in this imminent, wish-granting gem tree refuge field: the whole land of a thousand million snowy peaks, the vast land as large as Western Europe, surrounded by snowy peaks like a snow-peaked lotus. The land resonates with the mantra "The jewel is in the lotus": *Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum*. The Tibetans actually tend to drop the *d*, and they go "*paymey hoong*." "*Om Mani Paymey Hoong, Om Mani Paymey Hoong*." Tibetans recite that when they walk down the road. "*Om*

Mani Paymey Hoong, Om Mani Paymey Hoong, Om Mani Paymey Hoong.” The Sherpa Tibetans recite that when they haul backpacks up Mount Everest for mountain climbers. Tibetans recite that when they drive down the street. They have handheld prayer wheels with *mani* mantras on and within them, which they spin round and round as they repeat the syllables. When they sew, as they put in each stitch, they go “*Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum.*”

And they visualize that a great shining wheel is turning in the core of every atom, or perhaps like a wheel above them in the sky, any way they can do it. Or it could be in the heart. They visualize a beautiful wheel, a kind of carousel wheel, on the surface of which is written, “*Om Mani Padme Hum.*” As the wheel turns, these six syllables enunciate, and light rays flow from the wheel. And the light rays flow out from the wheel and down into the hells. When they go to the cold hells, they become sun and sand and warmth and rain. And when they go to the hot hells, they become rain and ice and coolness. And when they go to the realms of hunger and thirst, they become food and drink and all delicious things to satisfy the thirst and hunger of the *preta* beings there. When these rays go to the animal realm, they become the light of intelligence, and the animals become sensitive to each other, and they begin to talk to each other. And when the rays go to the human realm, they become the light of the Dharma, of the teaching of liberation and love and compassion. And when they go to the titan realm, they become the light of rejoicing and the light of joy, and they teach the titans not to feel jealous of the gods anymore, not to attack the heavens all the time, not to fight and compete with each other all the time, but to feel content and to rejoice in the fortune of others. And when the rays go to the divine realm, they become the light of realistic awareness, of impermanence, and they let the gods see the short-term nature of their existence in the heavens—even a billion years is a moment at the end of it—and they recite “impermanence, impermanence, impermanence” to the gods.

And so, as you say “*Om Mani Padme Hum,*” these light rays stream from the multicolored jeweled letters of “*Om Mani Padme Hum,*” and they fill the whole universe with the compassion of Avalokiteshvara, the compassion of all the buddhas, with everything that every being needs everywhere in the universe. As you’re saying this, your own moment and every cell and atom of

your body are filled with that, and should you die at that moment, you would be simply as one of the light rays within the wheel of “*Om Mani Padme Hum.*” You would be embraced by the gentle, loving, tender hands of Avalokiteshvara, and he would care for you and see to it that you didn’t go to any of those terrible negative places, and see to it that you didn’t go to some terribly overly positive place, where you might indulge yourself and goof off all the time, and see to it that you’re reborn in the human realm and that you come back again into a place where you can learn the path of transcendence and the path of compassion and the path of selfless wisdom, and then enter into the subtle realm of the Tantras and evolve and accelerate your evolution to become a perfect buddha in order to bring all beings into the bliss-void indivisible wish-granting jewel tree refuge.

So, with that in mind, just join that Tibetan prayer: “*Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum.*” And it would not be out of place at the very end, as we say the “*Om Mani Padme Hum,*” to think that this “*Om Mani Padme Hum*” sends out the jewel rays of compassion and intelligence and calmness and contentment and satisfaction to the leaders of communist China, and to all of the soldiers who are sitting on top of the Tibetans in Tibet, and to the poor Chinese who are suffering in labor reform camps, who want democracy in that place, and those who are working in terrible conditions on export platforms at slave wages. Think about “*Om Mani Padme Hum*” and the light of freedom, the brave Chinese people who once fully embraced Avalokiteshvara—Guanyin, they called it, Kannon—with a full vision of that forced love embedded deep in the heart of their culture. But temporarily, as a result of the influence of the industrial compulsion and the productivity compulsion and materialism, they temporarily want to crush every vestige of spirituality, and they’re denying and depriving themselves of it out of fear and pain and paranoia and insensitivity. Therefore, they are harming the poor Tibetans, who could be developing so many institutes of learning and retreat, and they themselves could go back to their own retreat and send out their own rays of blessing to the world, and all the world could visit them and have meditation centers there and climb their mountains and talk to them and enjoy them.

And we should send out “*Om Mani Padme Hum*”s to all beings, so that

