

DEATH, REBIRTH, AND MEDITATION

SOME TYPE OF REINCARNATION DOCTRINE is found in virtually every mystical religious tradition the world over. Even Christianity accepted it until around the fourth century CE, when, for largely political reasons, it was made anathema. Many Christian mystics today, however, accept the idea. As the Christian theologian John Hick pointed out in his important work *Death and Eternal Life*, the consensus of the world's religions, including Christianity, is that some sort of reincarnation occurs.

Of course, the fact that many people *believe* something does not make it true. And it is very difficult to support the idea of reincarnation by appealing to "evidence" in the form of alleged past-life memories, because in most cases these can be shown to be only a revival of subconscious memory trace from *this* life.

Yet this problem is not as serious as it might at first appear, because the doctrine of reincarnation, as used by the great mystical traditions, is a very specific notion: It does *not* mean that the *mind* travels through successive lives and therefore that under special conditions—for example, hypnosis—the mind can recall all of its past lives. On the contrary, it is the *soul*, not the mind, that transmigrates. Hence, the fact that reincarnation cannot be proven by appeal to memories of past lives is exactly what we should expect: Specific memories, ideas, knowledge, and

so on, belong to the mind and do not generally transmigrate. All of that is usually left behind, with the body, at death. (Perhaps a few specific memories can sneak through every now and then, as the cases recorded by Professor Ian Stevenson and others suggest, but these would be the exception rather than the rule.) What transmigrates is the soul, and the soul is not a set of memories or ideas or beliefs.

Rather, according to most branches of the perennial philosophy, the soul has two basic defining characteristics: First, it is the repository of one's "virtue" (or lack thereof)—that is, of one's karma, both good and bad; second, it is one's "strength" of awareness, or one's capacity to "witness" the phenomenal world without attachment or aversion. This second capacity is also known as "wisdom." The accumulation of these two—virtue and wisdom—constitutes the soul, which is the only thing that transmigrates. So, when people claim to be "remembering" a past life—where they lived, what they did for a living, and so on—they are probably not, according to any major religion or branch of the perennial philosophy, remembering any actual past lives. Only Buddhas (or tulkus), it is said, can usually remember past lives—the major exception to the rule. Even the Dalai Lama has said he cannot remember his past lives, which should perhaps serve as a reminder to those who think they can.

REINCARNATION AS A SPIRITUAL HYPOTHESIS

But if ostensible past-life memories are not good evidence for reincarnation, what other type of evidence could there be to support the doctrine? Here we should remember that the perennial philosophy in general allows three major and different types of knowledge and its verification: sensory or empirical knowledge; mental or logical knowledge; and spiritual or contemplative knowledge. Reincarnation is not primarily a sensory or a mental hypothesis; it cannot easily be explained or verified using sensory data or logical deduction. It is a spiritual hypothesis, which is to be tested with the eye of contemplation, not with the eye of flesh or the eye of mind. So, although we will find little ordinary evidence to convince us about reincarnation, once we take up contemplation and become fairly proficient at it, we will start to notice certain obvious facts—for example, that the witnessing position, the soul position, begins to partake of eternity, of infinity.

There is a timeless nature about the soul that becomes perfectly obvious and unmistakable: one actually begins to "taste" the immortality of the soul, to intuit that the soul is to some extent above time, above history, above life and death. In this way one becomes gradually convinced that the soul does not die with the body or the mind, that the soul has existed before and will exist again. But this usually has nothing to do with specific memories of past lives. Rather, it is a recollection of that aspect of the soul that touches spirit and is therefore radically and perfectly timeless. In fact, from this angle it becomes obvious that, as the great Vedantic seer Shankara put it, "The one and only transmigrant is the Lord," or absolute Spirit itself. It is ultimately Buddha-mind itself, the One and Only, that is appearing as all these forms, manifesting itself as all these appearances, transmigrating as all these souls. In the deeper stages of contemplation, this realization of eternity, of spirit as undying and indestructible, becomes quite palpable.

Yet, according to the perennial teachings, it is not *merely* the Absolute that transmigrates. If the soul awakens, or dissolves in spirit, then it no longer transmigrates; it is "liberated," or it realizes that, as spirit, it is reincarnated everywhere, as all things. But, if the soul does not awaken to spirit, if it is not enlightened, then it is reincarnated, taking with it the accumulation of its virtue and wisdom, rather than specific recollections of its mind. And this chain of rebirths continues until these two accumulations—virtue and wisdom—finally reach a critical point, whereupon the soul becomes enlightened, or dissolved and released in spirit, thus bringing individual transmigration to an end.

Even Buddhism, which denies the absolute existence of the soul, acknowledges that the soul has a relative, or conventional, existence, and that this relatively or conventionally existing soul does transmigrate. When the Absolute, or shunyata, is directly experienced, the relative transmigration—and the separate soul—comes to an end. One might think, however, that a Buddhist would object to our use of the word *soul* in this context, since this term generally has the connotation of something that is indestructible or everlasting—a connotation that seems to be incompatible with the Buddhist idea that the soul has only a relative and temporary existence. A closer look at the teachings of the perennial philosophy, however, will resolve this apparent contradiction.

According to the perennial tradition, the soul is indeed indestructible, but when it fully discovers spirit, its own sense of separateness is dissolved or transcended. The soul still remains as the individuality, or expression of the particular person, but its being or center shifts to spirit,

thus dissolving its illusion of separateness. And this doctrine accords almost exactly with the highest teachings of Buddhism—the anuttara-tantra yoga, or “highest Tantra teaching”—according to which there exists at the very center of the heart chakra, in each and every individual, what is technically called “the indestructible drop” (or luminosity). As the Vajrayana teaches, it is this indestructible drop that transmigrates. Further, it *is* indestructible; even Buddhas are said to possess it. The indestructible drop is said to be the seat of the very subtle “wind” (*rLung*) that supports the “very subtle [or causal] mind,” the mind of enlightenment, or one’s spiritual essence. Hence, Buddhism agrees with the perennial philosophy: The indestructible drop is the soul, the continuum, as I have defined it.

STAGES OF THE DYING PROCESS: DISSOLUTION OF THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING

The various branches of the perennial philosophy agree, in a general way, about the stages of the dying process and the experiences that accompany these stages: Death is a process in which the Great Chain of Being “dissolves,” for the individual, “from the bottom up,” so to speak. That is, upon death, the body dissolves into mind, then mind dissolves into soul, then soul dissolves into spirit, with each of these dissolutions marked by a specific set of events. For example, body dissolving into mind is the actual process of physical death. Mind dissolving into soul is experienced as a review and “judgment” of one’s life. Soul dissolving into spirit is a radical release and transcendence. Then the process “reverses,” so to speak, and based upon one’s accumulated karmic tendencies, one generates a soul out of spirit, then a mind out of soul, then a body out of mind—whereupon one forgets all the previous steps and finds oneself reborn in a physical body. According to the Tibetans, the whole process takes about forty-nine days.

The Tibetan tradition contains the richest, most detailed phenomenological description of the stages of the dissolution of the Great Chain during the dying process. According to the Tibetans, the *subjective experiences* that accompany each of what are said to be eight stages of the dissolution are known technically as: “mirage,” “smokelike,” “fireflies,” “butter lamp,” “white appearance,” “red increase,” “black near-attain-

ment,” and “clear light.” In order to understand these terms, we need a somewhat more precise and detailed version of the Great Chain. So, instead of our simplified version of body, mind, soul, and spirit, we will use a slightly expanded version: matter, sensation, perception, intention, cognition, psychic, subtle, causal (or formless unmanifest), and spirit (or ultimate).

The first stage of the dying process occurs when the aggregate of form, or matter—the lowest level of the great chain—dissolves. There are said to be five *external* signs of this: the body loses its physical power; one’s vision becomes unclear and blurred; the body becomes heavy and feels like it is “sinking”; life goes out of the eyes; and the body’s complexion loses its luster. The *internal* sign, which occurs spontaneously with these outer signs, is a “miragelike appearance,” a type of shimmering, watery image, such as appears in a desert on a hot day. This is said to occur because, technically, the “wind” (*rLung*) of the “earth” element has dissolved in the “central channel” and the “water” element thus predominates—hence, the watery or miragelike appearance.

Next, the second aggregate, that of sensation, dissolves. Again there are five external signs: One ceases to have bodily sensations, pleasant or unpleasant; mental sensations cease; bodily fluids dry up (the tongue becomes very dry, for example); one no longer perceives external sounds; and inner sounds (buzzing in the ears, for example) also cease. The internal sign associated with this second dissolution is a “smokelike appearance,” which is like a fog. Technically, this is said to occur because the “water” element, which caused the miragelike appearance, is dissolving into the “fire” element—hence the smoky appearance.

The third stage is the dissolution of the third level or aggregate, that of perception or discernment. The five external signs: One can no longer recognize or discern objects; one can no longer recognize friends or family; the warmth of the body is lost (the body becomes cold); one’s inhalation becomes very weak and shallow; and one can no longer detect smells. The internal sign spontaneously accompanying this stage is called “fireflies,” which is described as an appearance like a bunch of fireflies or cinder sparks from a fire. Technically, this is said to occur because the “fire” element has dissolved and the “wind” element now predominates.

The fourth stage is the dissolution of the fourth level or aggregate, that of intention (or “intentional formations”). The five external signs of this dissolution: One can no longer move (because there are no impulses); one can no longer recollect actions or their purposes; all breath-

ing stops; the tongue becomes thick and blue and one can no longer speak clearly; and one can no longer experience tastes. The internal sign of this is a “butter-lamp appearance,” described as looking like a steady, clear, bright light. (At this point we can start to see similarities with the near-death experience, which I will discuss further below).

To understand the fifth and subsequent stages of the dissolution process, it is necessary to know a little Tantric physiology. According to Vajrayana, all mental states—gross, subtle, and very subtle (or causal)—are supported by corresponding “winds,” or energies, or life forces, (*prana* in Sanskrit, *rLung* in Tibetan). When these winds dissolve, their corresponding minds also dissolve. Stage five is the dissolution of the fifth level or aggregate, that of cognition, or gross consciousness itself. As the Vajrayana teachings make clear, however, there are many levels of consciousness. These levels are divided into what are called the gross mind, the subtle mind, and the very subtle mind, each of which dissolves in order, producing specific signs and experiences. So, stage five is the dissolution of the gross mind, along with the “wind” that supports it. There is then no gross conceptualization, no ordinary mind, left.

During this fifth stage, after the last of the gross mind dies away and the first of the subtle mind emerges, one experiences a state called “white appearance.” This is said to be a very bright, very clear white light, like a clear autumn night brilliantly lit by a shimmering full moon. To understand the cause of this white appearance, however, we have to introduce the Tibetan notion of *thig-le*, which means, roughly, “drops” or “essence.” According to Vajrayana, there are four drops, or essences, that are particularly important. One, the white drop, is said to be located at the crown of the head; one receives it from one’s father, and it is said to represent (or to actually be) *bodhichitta*, or enlightenment-mind. The second, the red drop, one receives from one’s mother; it is located at the naval center. (The white drop is also said to be connected with semen, the red drop with [menstrual] blood, but the point is that men and women have both, equally.) The third, which is called “the drop that is indestructible for this life,” is located at the very center of the heart chakra. This drop is, so to speak, the essence of this particular lifetime of the individual; it is one’s “continuum,” which stores all the impressions and understandings of this particular life. And *inside* this “drop that is indestructible for life” is the fourth drop, “the drop that is eternally indestructible or forever indestructible.” This is the indestructible drop that remains forever—that is, it is indestructible through this life, indestructible through death and the dying process, indestructible

through the bardo, or intermediate state between death and rebirth, and through rebirth itself. This drop even remains through enlightenment and is, in fact, the very subtle wind that serves as the “mount,” or basis, of enlightenment being. As mentioned before, even Buddhas are said to possess this eternally indestructible drop.

So, what we have seen so far is the dissolution of all the gross winds and the gross minds associated with them. The first subtle mind has thus emerged—that of “white appearance”—and it is “riding” a correspondingly subtle wind, or subtle energy. Now, the actual cause of this mind of white appearance is said to be the descent of the white drop, or bodhi-chitta, from the crown to the heart chakra. Usually, it is said, the white drop is held at the crown chakra by constricting knots and winds of ignorance and gross-level clinging and grasping. But at this stage of the dying process, the gross mind has dissolved, so the knots around the crown chakra naturally loosen, and the white drop descends to the indestructible drop at the heart chakra. When it reaches it, the mind of white appearance spontaneously arises.

Incidentally, if these Tibetan explanations of the phenomena in question sound a bit far-fetched, we should remember that there is a tremendous amount of contemplative evidence supporting the existence of the various experiences said to occur during the dying process. The *experiences* themselves are real and seem largely incontrovertible, but there is plenty of room to argue with the traditional Tibetan account of what actually causes them. (I’ll return to this point shortly.) Here I am merely describing the straight Tibetan version as a point of departure.

Nevertheless, we should also keep in mind that, unlike our own Western culture, traditional cultures like the Tibetan live with death constantly; people die in their homes, surrounded by family and friends. The actual stages of the dying process have thus been observed thousands, even millions of times. And when we add the further fact that the Tibetans possess a rather sophisticated understanding of the spiritual dimension and its development, the result is an incredibly rich store of knowledge and wisdom about the actual dying process *and* how it relates to the spiritual dimension, to spiritual development, to karma and rebirth, and so on. Clearly, it would be foolish for an investigator to toss out the massive data that this tradition has accumulated.

But, to continue with the stages of the dying process. At stage six, the subtle mind and its wind dissolve, and an even subtler mind, called “red increase,” emerges. Red increase is also an experience of brilliant light; but in this case, it is an experience like a clear autumn day pervaded by

bright sunlight. Technically, this is said to occur because the gross life-supporting winds have dissolved, and thus all the knots and constrictions around the navel, which were holding the red bodhichitta, or red drop at the navel, are released or unloosened, and the red drop rises up to the indestructible drop at the heart. When it reaches it, the mind of red increase spontaneously arises.

Stage seven is said to be the dissolution of the subtle mind of red increase and the emergence of an even subtler mind and wind, called "the mind of black near-attainment." In this state, all consciousness ceases, all manifestation dissolves. Further, there is a cessation of all of the specific consciousnesses and energies that were developed in this life. The experience is said to be one of a completely black night, with no stars, no light. It is called "near-attainment" because it is "nearing" the final attainment, so to speak; it is nearing the clear light void. This level, in other words, can be thought of as the highest of the subtle or the lowest of the causal, or as the unmanifest dimension of spirit itself. Technically, this "blackness" is said to occur because the white drop from above and the red drop from below now surround the indestructible drop, thus cutting off all awareness.

In the next and final stage, however—in stage eight—the white drop continues downward and the red drop continues upward, thus freeing or opening the indestructible drop. Then, it is said, a period of extraordinary clarity and brilliant awareness results, which is experienced like an extremely clear, bright, and radiant sky, free from any type of blemish, any clouds, any obstructions. This is the clear light.

Now, the mind of clear light is said to be not a subtle mind, but a very subtle mind, and it mounts a correspondingly very subtle wind or energy. This very subtle or "causal" mind and energy are, in fact, the mind and energy of the eternally indestructible drop. This is the causal body, or the ultimate spiritual mind and energy, the Dharmakaya. At this point, the eternally indestructible drop sheds the lifetime indestructible drop, all consciousness ceases, and the soul, the eternally indestructible drop, commences the bardo experience, or the intermediate states that will eventually lead to rebirth. The white drop continues downward and appears as a drop of semen on the sexual organ, and the red drop continues upward and appears as a drop of blood at the nostrils. Death, finally, has occurred, and the body can be disposed of. To do so before this has occurred makes one karmically guilty of murder, because the body is still alive.

STAGES OF THE REBIRTH PROCESS

What we have seen so far is the progressive dissolution of the Great Chain, in an individual's case, starting at the bottom and working up. Matter, or form, dissolved into body (or into sensation, then perception, then impulse), and body dissolved into mind, into the gross mind. The gross mind then dissolved into the subtle mind, or soul realms, and the soul then reverted to causal or spiritual essence. Now, at this point, the process will be reversed, depending on the karma of the soul—on the accumulation of virtue and wisdom that the soul takes with it. Thus, the bardo experience is divided into three basic realms, or stages, and these stages are simply the realms of spirit, then mind, then body and matter. The soul, according to its virtue and wisdom, will either recognize, and thus remain in, the higher dimensions, or it will not recognize them—indeed, will actually flee from them—and thus will end up running “down” the Great Chain of Being until it is forced to adopt a gross physical body and hence be reborn.

At the point of actual or final death—which is what we have been calling the eighth stage of the overall dying process—the soul, or the eternally indestructible drop, enters what is called the chikhai bardo, which is nothing other than spirit itself, the Dharmakaya. As the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* states, “At this moment, the first glimpsing of the Bardo of the Clear Light of Reality, which is the infallible Mind of the Dharmakaya, is experienced by all sentient beings.”

This is the point where meditation and spiritual work become so important. Most people, according to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, cannot recognize this state for what it is. In Christian terms, they do not know God and thus they do not know when God stares them in the face. In fact, they are at this point one with God, entirely and totally in a supreme identity with Godhead. But unless they recognize this identity, unless they have been contemplatively trained to recognize that state of divine Oneness, they will actually flee from it, driven by their lower desires and karmic propensities. As W. Y. Evans-Wentz, the first translator of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, put it: “Owing to unfamiliarity with such a state, which is an ecstatic state of non-ego, of [causal] consciousness, the average human being lacks the power to function in it; karmic propensities becloud the consciousness-principle with thoughts of personality, of individualized being, of dualism, and losing equilibrium, the consciousness-principle falls away from the Clear Light.”

So the soul contracts away from Godhead, from Dharmakaya, away

from the causal. Indeed, it is said that the soul actually seeks to escape from the realization of divine Emptiness and “blacks out,” so to speak, until it awakens in the next lower realm, which is called the chonyid bardo, the subtle dimension, the Sambhogakaya, the archetypal dimension. This experience is marked by all sorts of psychic and subtle visions, visions of gods and goddesses, dakas and dakinis, all accompanied by dazzling and almost painfully brilliant lights and illuminations and colors. But again, most people are not used to this state and have no idea about transcendental light and divine illumination, so they actually flee these phenomena and are attracted by the lesser or impure lights that also appear.

Thus, the soul again contracts inwardly, tries to get away from these divine visions, blacks out again, and wakes up in what is called the sidpa bardo, the gross-reflecting realm. Here the soul eventually has a vision of its future parents making love, and—in good old-fashioned Freudian style—if it is going to be a boy it feels desire for the mother and hatred for the father, and if it is going to be a girl it feels hatred for the mother and attraction to the father. (So far as I can tell, this is the first detailed explanation of the Oedipal/Electra complex—about a thousand years ahead of Freud, as Jung himself pointed out.)

At this stage, it is said, the soul—because of its jealousy and envy—“steps in” in its imagination to separate the father and mother, to come between them; but the result is simply that it really does come between them—that is, it ends up being reborn to them. It now has desire, aversion, attachment, hatred, and a gross body: In other words, it is a human being. It is at the lowest stage of the Great Chain, and its own growth and development will be a climb back up the stages that it has just denied and fled from; its evolution is, so to speak, a reversal of the “fall.” How far it gets back up the Great Chain of Being will determine how it handles the dying process and the bardo states when it is again time to shed its physical body.

INTERPRETATION OF THE SUBJECTIVE DEATH AND REBIRTH EXPERIENCES

The contemplative evidence strongly suggests that the data, the phenomenological *experiences* that accompany the dying process—for example, the “white appearance,” the “red increase,” the “black near-

attainment”—exist and are very real. Further evidence of their reality is found in the fact that they seem to have actual ontological referents in the higher dimensions of the Great Chain of Being. The three experiences just mentioned, for instance, refer respectively to what I have called the psychic, the subtle, and the causal levels of consciousness. In my opinion, then, the levels are real, and thus the experiences of those levels are themselves real. But this does not mean that individuals' experiences of these levels cannot be quite different.

For example, a Buddhist would probably experience the “white appearance” as a type of emptiness or shunyata experience, whereas a Christian mystic might see it in the form of a saintly presence, possibly Christ himself, or a great being of light. But this is as it should be. For, until the “lifetime indestructible drop”—the accumulated impressions and beliefs gathered throughout this lifetime—actually dissolves (at what we have called stage seven), it will color and mold all of one's experiences. A Buddhist will therefore tend to have a Buddhist experience, a Christian will have a Christian experience, a Hindu will have a Hindu experience, and an atheist will probably be extremely confused. All this is what we should expect. It is only at stage eight, at the clear light void, or pure Godhead, that one's personal interpretations and subtle beliefs are shed and a direct realization of pure reality itself, as clear light, is given. Hence, the Tibetan explanation of the data is not the only account possible. It is, however, one among several very important reflections or perspectives on the process of dying, death, and rebirth, rooted in a profound grasp of the Great Chain of Being, both going “up” (meditation and death) and going “down” (bardo and rebirth).

NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE AND THE STAGES OF THE DYING PROCESS

The most common phenomenon in Western reports of the near-death experience (NDE) is the experience of passing through a tunnel and then seeing a brilliant light, or meeting a great being of light—a being that has incredible wisdom and intelligence and bliss. The particular individual's religious belief does not matter here; atheists have this experience as often as true believers. This fact, in itself, tends to corroborate the idea that, in the dying process, one does contact some of the subtler dimensions of existence.

From the standpoint of the Tibetan model we have been discussing, the “light” reported in NDEs, depending on its intensity or its clarity, could be the level of the butter lamp, the white appearance, or the red increase. The point is that, at this point in the death process, the gross mind and body, or the gross winds and energies, have dissolved, and thus the subtler dimensions of mind and energy begin to emerge, which are characterized by brilliant illumination and mental clarity and wisdom. So it is not surprising that people universally, regardless of belief, report the experience of light at this point. Many people who report NDEs believe that the light they have seen is absolute spirit. If the Tibetan model is accurate, however, then what people see during the NDE is not exactly the highest level. Beyond white appearance or red increase is black near-attainment, then clear light, then the bardo states.

The experience of the subtle-level light is very pleasant—in fact, amazingly blissful. And the next level, the very subtle or causal, is even more so. Indeed, people who have had NDEs report that they have never experienced anything as peaceful, as profound, as blissful. But we need to keep in mind that all of the experiences up to this point are molded by the “lifetime indestructible drop”; hence, as we have already noted, Christians might see Christ, Buddhists see Buddha, and so on. All this makes sense, because the experiences of these realms are conditioned by one’s present life experiences. But then, at stage eight, the “lifetime indestructible drop” is shed, along with all the personal memories and impressions and specifics of this particular life, and the “eternally indestructible drop” moves out of the body and into the bardo state. And thereupon commences the bardo ordeal—a real nightmare unless one is very familiar with these states through meditation.

The dying experience and the NDE are actually a lot of fun, in a sense: It is universally reported that, after one gets over the terror of dying, the process is blissful, peaceful, extraordinary. But when the “ascent” is completed, the “descent,” or bardo, begins—and there’s the rub. Because at that point, all of one’s karmic propensities, all of one’s attachments, desires, and fears, actually appear right before one’s eyes, so to speak, just as in a dream, because the bardo is a purely mental or subtle dimension, like a dream, where everything one thinks immediately appears as a reality.

Thus, one does not hear about this “downside” to the death process from the NDE people. They are just tasting the early stages of the overall process. Nevertheless, their testimony is powerful evidence that this process does in fact occur. It all fits with a fairly remarkable precision.

Moreover, it is not possible to explain away their testimony by claiming that all of them have studied Tibetan Buddhism; in fact, most of them have not even heard of it. But they have essentially similar experiences as the Tibetans because these experiences reflect the universal and cross-cultural reality of the Great Chain of Being.

MEDITATION AS REHEARSAL FOR DEATH

Where does meditation fit into all of this? Every form of meditation is basically a way to transcend the ego, or die to the ego. In that sense, meditation mimics death—that is, death of the ego. If one progresses fairly well in *any* meditation system, one eventually comes to a point of having so exhaustively “witnessed” the mind and body that one actually rises above, or transcends, the mind and body, thus “dying” to them, to the ego, and awakening as subtle soul or even spirit. And this is actually experienced as a death. In Zen it is called the Great Death. It can be a fairly easy experience, a relatively peaceful transcendence of subject-object dualism, or—because it is a real death of sorts—it can also be terrifying. But subtly or dramatically, quickly or slowly, the sense of being a separate self dies, or is dissolved, and one finds a prior and higher identity in and as universal spirit.

But meditation can also be a rehearsal of actual bodily death. Some meditation systems, particularly the Sikh (the Radhasoami saints) and the Tantric (Hindu and Buddhist), contain very precise meditations that mimic or induce the various stages of the dying process very closely—including stopping the breath, the body becoming cold, the heart slowing and sometimes stopping, and so forth. Actual physical death is then not much of a surprise, and one can then much more easily use the intermediate states of consciousness that appear after death—the *bardo*s—to gain enlightened understanding. The point of such meditations is to be able to recognize spirit, so that when the body, mind, and soul dissolve during the actual dying process, one will recognize spirit, or Dharmakaya, and abide as that, rather than flee from it and end up back in *samsara* again, back in the illusion of a separate soul, mind, and body; or to be able, if one does choose to reenter a body, to do so deliberately—that is, as a bodhisattva.

These death-mimicking meditations are not actually life threatening; the body is not really dying, or going through the concrete death stages themselves. Rather, it is like holding one’s breath to see what it is like:

One does not stop breathing forever. But some of the states that can be induced by these meditations are powerful imitations of the real thing. One's heartbeat, for example, can actually stop for an extended period, as can the breath. This, for example, is how it is possible to tell that the "winds" have entered and are remaining in the central channel. One is "imitating" death, but doing so by actually—if temporarily—dissolving the same winds that are dissolved in death. Thus it is a very concrete and very real imitation.

How exactly do the various winds or energies described in Tantra relate to meditation? The central idea of all Tantra, whether Hindu, Buddhist, Gnostic, or Sikh, is that every mental state, or every state of consciousness—in other words, every level in the Great Chain of Being—also has a specific supporting energy, *prana*, or wind. (We have already examined the Tibetan version of this doctrine.) Thus, if one dissolves that particular wind, one will dissolve the mind that is supported by it. Hence, if one can gain control over these winds or energies, one can transcend the minds that "ride" them. This is the general notion of pranayama, "breath" or "wind" control. But also, since mind rides wind, wherever one puts the mind, its winds tend to gather. So, for example, if a meditator concentrates very intensely on the crown chakra, then wind, or energy, will tend to gather there and then dissolve there.

This means that mind, at whatever level, has a measure of control over the winds associated with it. Hence, by mental training and concentration, one can learn to gather winds or life energies at particular places, then dissolve them there. And that dissolution is said to be the same type of process that occurs at death. So one is actually experiencing, in a very concrete way, what happens when all the various winds dissolve at death—beginning with the gross winds, then continuing as the subtle winds dissolve, leaving the very subtle or causal wind and the mind of clear light that rides it. By inducing these experiences of the dying process by one's own free will, then, when actual death comes, one knows exactly what the dissolution of the winds is going to produce.

This type of practice also gives one the ability to prolong each state, particularly the subtler states, such as those of white appearance, red increase, black near-attainment, and clear light, because one has already more or less mastered them. Then, at the actual final point of death, at what we have been calling the eighth stage—as one enters the *chikhai bardo*, the *Dharmakaya*—one can remain there if one chooses. That clear-light state is very clear and obvious and easy to recognize, because one has seen it many times in meditation and in the mind of one's guru;

hence, one cleaves to that and is thus released from the necessity of rebirth. (One might, however, still choose to be reborn in a physical body in order to help others reach this understanding and freedom—just as in a lucid dream one can consciously control what appears.)

A common technique for gathering and dissolving winds at a particular spot in the body is to concentrate on the “red drop” at the navel center (the source of what is called the tummo fire). One simply concentrates on that object—visualized as a fiery red drop, the size of a small pea—until one can remain concentrated, with unbroken attention, for thirty or forty minutes or so. At that point, the energies of the body will be so concentrated in that area that breathing will subside and become very soft, almost imperceptible. All of the winds or energies of the body are being withdrawn from their ordinary work and concentrated there. Hence, it is very similar to these winds dissolving, or being withdrawn, as occurs in actual death. So if one continues to meditatively concentrate, it is said that one will begin to experience all the signs of the dying process, in order, including the miragelike appearance, the smoke appearance, the fireflies appearance, and the butter-lamp appearance.

At this point, as the winds or energies of the body begin to gather and dissolve at the heart, as in actual death, one will experience the levels of the subtle mind, the mind of white appearance, then red increase, then black near-attainment. Then, through the power of one’s meditation and spiritual blessings, all winds or energies will finally dissolve in the indestructible drop at the heart, and one will experience the clear-light void, the ultimate spiritual dimension and realization. In short, this type of meditation is a perfect mimicking of the dying process. And again, the whole point is that by familiarizing oneself with the clear light, by developing meditative wisdom and virtue, then upon actual death, one can remain as the clear light and thus recognize final liberation.

This type of mediation is obviously a very intense ordeal, almost gymnastic in its demands. Not all meditation is this exacting, nor is this the only contemplative path that can traverse the entire upper reaches of spiritual development. But the importance of the anuttaratantra class of meditation, which I just outlined, is the incredibly rich phenomenological descriptions that it gives of an overall contemplative path that uses *both* the mind’s awareness and the body’s energies to plumb the depths of the human spirit.

Although most meditative paths are not this demanding, most do in fact follow a similar, general, overall course of unfolding (see *Transformations of Consciousness*). There is the initial rising above the gross

ego, experienced as a release from the confines of the separate-self sense and its obsessive sufferings. This initial release—depending on the specifics of the path and the person—might be experienced as a type of cosmic consciousness or nature mysticism, as an initial arousal of kundalini energy beyond the conventional realm, as an awakening of paranormal powers, or as an interior experience of blissful luminosity, to name a common few. If consciousness continues to move through the subtle and into the causal, all of those experiences continue to intensify, to the point that they are all dissolved or reduced to pure formlessness, to the causal unmanifest, to an Emptiness prior to all form, a Silence prior to all sounds, an Abyss prior to all being, a Godhead prior to God. The soul reverts to spirit and is released into formless infinity, timeless eternity, unmanifest absorption, radiant emptiness. Consciousness resides as the unmoved Witness, the formless mirror mind, impartially reflecting all that arises, utterly indifferent to the play of its own patterns, thoroughly quiet in the face of its own sounds, wholly non-attached to the forms of its own becoming. And then, in the final mystery, the Witness dies into everything that is witnessed, Emptiness is realized not other than Form, the mirror mind and its reflections are not two, Consciousness awakens as the entire World. The sound of a waterfall on the distant horizon, the sight of a gentle misty fog, the crack of lightning in a late night storm, somehow say it all. The subject and object, the human and divine, the inner and the outer, by any other names, are simply and only One Taste.