

You Mean I'm Going to Die Too?

Facing aging and death
with an open and fearless mind

Introduction by Judy Lief

I grew up in a small farming community. Each year animals I had seen grazing in their pastures were slaughtered and sent off to the meat packers. One of my neighbors kept a tin cup hanging in his barn that he used to drink blood from the first animal killed each year. My friends in 4-H raised young lambs and calves by hand. They spent hours grooming and pampering them to prepare them to compete at the county fair. But after their animals were judged, they too were sent to the slaughterhouse. My friends shed many tears but slowly learned to accept the farming cycle of first nurturing and caring for animals, and in the end, slaughtering them for food. Over time, my friends and I became more hardened to the reality of death, at least in regard to farm animals.

My father was a hunter. Each year he brought back pheasants he had shot, and it was my job to de-feather and clean them. I loved the beautiful tail feathers and saved them to make headdresses. Scooping out the inner organs, it was clear that each bird had been a real living being, not just a piece of meat in the grocery. So I grew up familiar with the reality of death.

At the same time, I was shielded from the fact of human death. When somebody died it was all hush-hush, kept from the children, talked about in whispers. If I did ask questions, I was told that when people died they went to heaven. That sounded pretty good to me. So when my aunt died, I was surprised to see my mother and other adults crying and acting so deeply sad. At that moment I realized: They don't really believe that story! It is all lies! That experience led me to wonder what people actually do know about life and death. And I wondered, what about me? What will happen to me?

As I grew up, I realized that although death is something we will all experience, nobody really wants to talk about it.

It's as though talking about death can only result in some kind of morbid obsession or that it is just too depressing. However, it was hard for me to pretend to ignore something so powerful and universal. So when I encountered Buddhism, it was a relief to see that here the issue of impermanence is a central concern. Not only that, but exploring our relationship to impermanence is said to lead not to being depressed or morbid, but to liberation from fear and ignorance.

Over the years, I have wrestled with this topic myself and learned from the wisdom of others, especially those facing death and those who work with the dying on a regular basis. I have been exposed to countless theories of dying and the afterlife. But I keep coming back to a point of unknowing, and I try to stay there. And strangely, I have found that to be the best place to connect with others and to be of help. It is a place of openness and tenderness, immediate, and with no agenda whatsoever. From a variety of perspectives, the teachers in this panel express that point of view and give us advice for how to cultivate it in the face of aging, sickness, and dying—both our own and that of others.

The denial of impermanence, aging, and death is a big problem. It leads to a fundamental tightness of spirit and a fearful, reactive approach to life. The more we are willing to face that which we usually avoid, and even fear, the more we begin to relax at a fundamental level with ourselves. It is futile to fight with reality. It just doesn't feel right. What a relief it is to stay with our experience fully, even when it is painful, and in turn be more fully present for others.

JUDY LIEF is the author of *Making Friends with Death: A Buddhist Guide to Encountering Mortality*. For more than three decades she has led classes and workshops presenting a contemplative approach to facing death and helping the dying. She was a close student of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and is a senior teacher, or *acharya*, in the Shambhala Buddhist tradition.



metamorphic(s)XV, 2008
by Bodil Frendberg

BUDDHADHARMA: The Buddha spoke of the suffering of birth, sickness, old age, and death. Some people like to translate old age as “aging,” the process that occurs no matter what chronological age you are. Why do we have such difficulty understanding that we’re aging all the time? Is it possible to embrace this notion without becoming debilitated or depressed?

AJAHN AMARO: In the West, there’s a fixation on being young, attractive, mobile, and fully functional forever. The people on the billboards are always twenty-three and cheerful. There is the

When I'm holding the hand of someone very old or of a dying patient, I notice that their skin is almost transparent, and it's as if their being becomes that way as well. There isn't much obscuring who they actually are. —Frank Ostaseski

feeling that we should be chirpy and healthy and full of vigor and good-looking our whole life. It's seen as an affront that we start getting wrinkles or that we can't move so much. In Asia, as in some other parts of the world, there's much more of a sense of continuity. Aging is not a state of diminution or unattractiveness; rather, one actually becomes more valuable, respected, and appreciated with age.

PONLOP RINPOCHE: In general, we lack an understanding of impermanent nature. Culture and religion can reinforce that. In many religions, we seek eternal existence. We try to rely on ginseng to do the trick, but that doesn't work, so we keep looking for methods to enable us to go against the law of nature, which is impermanence.

Aging can be appreciated. As you age, your ego-centered and unreasonable impulses start to mellow; you can become tamer, calmer, and more compromising. Relationships age in the same way. In the beginning, you start out fighting for your own agenda, and at some point you mellow into a more cooperative approach. But culture and religion can sometimes work against the appreciation of the natural aging process.

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: Even criminals mellow with age. They burn out and just can't keep up a life of crime.

FRANK OSTASESKI: Getting old isn't easy, and neither is sickness or death. One of the inevitable experiences of getting old is loss, which leads to grieving. In fact, all growth brings grieving, and we have an aversion to grieving. Of course, there are gains, as several people have said, but for most of us our self-image is tied to the physical. When it starts to change, we fight against it, and some of us in spiritual communities try to use spiritual concepts as a bypass that actually avoids facing the loss. Instead, we could just feel the loss.

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: Many of us have had a to-do list for a long time, things to get to later. But at some point we realize we're not going to get to those things later. We have to jettison some of those projects, and they can be hard to let go of. One woman I visited recently who was just days away from dying of liver cancer told me, "I always intended to practice later, and now there is no later."

BUDDHADHARMA: Are there any instructions for young people to help them begin to appreciate aging as early as possible?

AJAHN AMARO: One of the standard daily recollections in the Theravada tradition is: "I am of the nature to become sick; I am of the nature to die; all that is mine beloved and pleasing will become otherwise, will become separated from me." That may sound like an extremely depressing thing to think of...

Ajahn Amaro is co-abbot of Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery in Redwood Valley, California.



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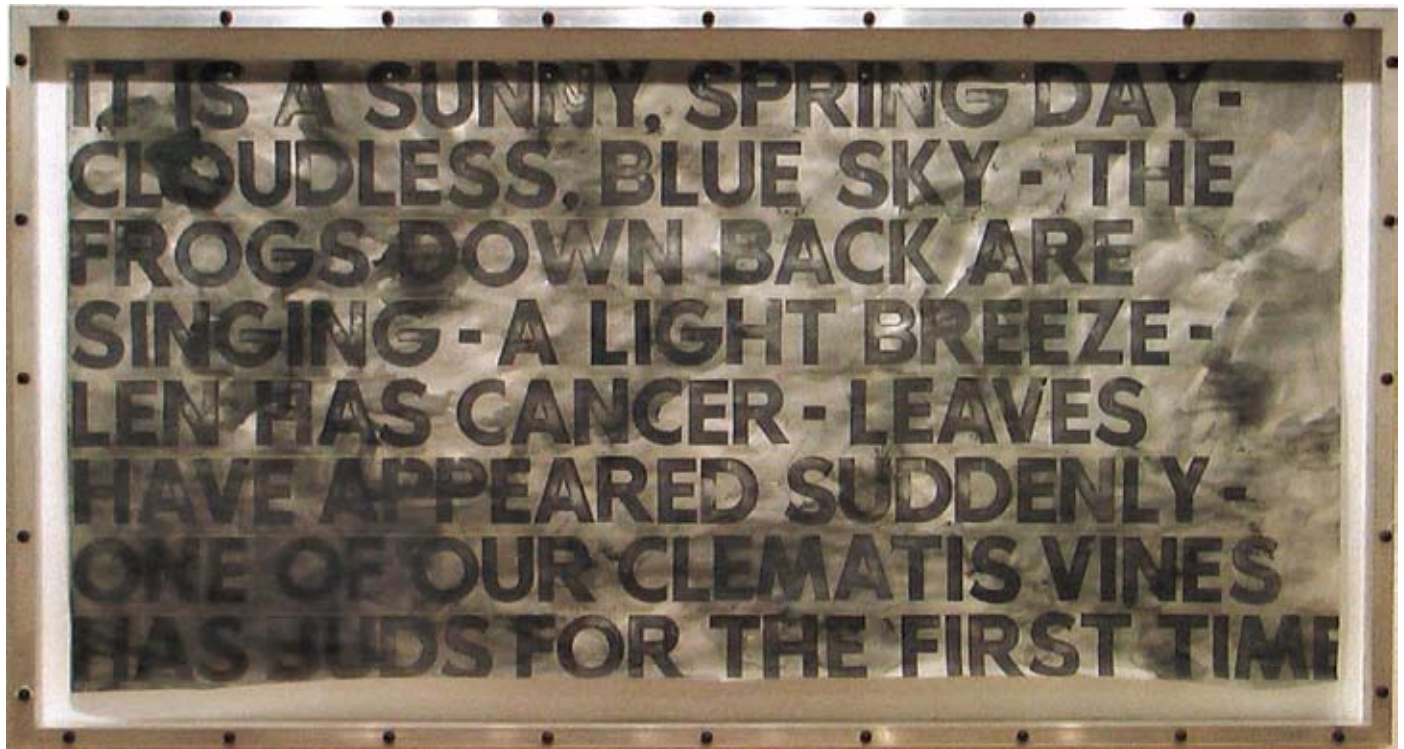
Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche is the founder and spiritual director of Nalandabodhi, a network of meditation centers and study groups, and the author of *Mind Beyond Death*.



Frank Ostaseski was the founding director of San Francisco's Zen Hospice Project, the first Buddhist hospice in America. In 2004 he founded the Metta Institute, which offers education in end-of-life care, emphasizing the spiritual dimensions of dying.



(LEFT-TO-RIGHT): RICHARD YASKI; BRINKMAN PHOTOGRAPHY; RYSZARD FRACKIEWICZ; PATTY WINTER



Nice Day Bad News, 1989
by Greg Curnoe

PONLOP RINPOCHE: It is depressing [laughter].

AJAHN AMARO: ...but for young people particularly, it's helpful to bring that into consciousness, because it helps them to realize that this is the deal, the contract we all sign, the rules of the game. Bringing that into consciousness brings on an "aha" moment. It helps illuminate that presumption that we should not decline or experience grief. When things do depart, rather than experiencing a sense of shock, we can have an attitude of "There it goes. Bye bye."

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: Young people also need to be with old people more. The hospice movement is vitally important. For thousands of years, we saw people die in our own families and villages, and now it's hidden from us. We need to bring it back into plain view and help people see death as a normal part of our lives. When I ask people in my classes if they have seen a dead body, very few people raise their hands.

PONLOP RINPOCHE: In the Tibetan refugee settlement I grew up in, we saw sick and dying people all the time. When someone dies, you usually take the body into the home for three days, so it's very common for children to be in contact with that. It helps them get used to impermanence and to appreciate longevity, rather than fear aging.

FRANK OSTASESKI: One of the improvisational methods we used with students who we were teaching to do hospice work was to

ask them to act old. They all hunched over and mimicked being weak and fragile, except for one Latina who became more powerful and graceful, because she said in her culture that was the image of old age, something fuller. Those of us who are getting older need to speak of the beauty of being older. I just went through a series of heart attacks, and the greatest gift that's come out of that for me is a deeper appreciation of vulnerability, which is usually seen as weakness. But I'm experiencing it as a kind of porousness, of feeling less defended, less armored. If we can impart to younger people the gift of that vulnerability, it may help them to embrace aging.

BUDDHADHARMA: No matter how much we may appreciate the beneficial qualities of aging, old age brings some definite diminished capacity. Is there any practice advice that can help us deal with this difficult time—a time when we may not be able to practice as much or offer much to others, and in fact may need to be completely taken care of by others?

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: In our practice communities, I feel that we need to make adjustments so that people who are older can continue to hear and practice the dharma, so we may have to amplify talks more and provide some less rigorous schedules and ways of sitting—or even of reclining if need be. The loss of your spiritual life can be a great sorrow, and we ought not to hasten that for people.



And when the time comes that we need help, we can accept it. One student asked me, in great anxiety, “How will I practice if I get Alzheimer’s?” I responded, “At that point, you’ll be somebody else’s practice.” We can release our desire to always be in control.

AJAHN AMARO: In the United States, the culture of independence is enormously strong, and interdependence is not yet well understood. Needing to be helped by another intrinsically represents a state of weakness and diminution. Our minds bring that notion into being and sustain it. But if instead we see the illusion of control, if we see that we’re never really in control, then as our faculties diminish, we can appreciate giving others the opportunity to practice generosity.

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: I find people are glad to do that if they’ve quit relying on the mind and practice with the heart instead. When my mother was in a retirement home and then an assisted care facility, I saw a lot of old people. Those who were still relying on the mind, the discursive mind, and dredging up old stories again and again, struggled. But the people who had a warm heart, who could only sit there and couldn’t carry on a conversation, those were the people you wanted to be near,

like a warm fireplace. It’s important to cultivate the heart as we get older, because that’s what will last.

AJAHN AMARO: Father Bede Griffiths, a very lovely Christian monk who lived at Shantivanam Ashram in India for many years, gave a talk in Berkeley when he was in his eighties, and one of the people who attended asked him what it was like being so old and venerable and what his experience of the aging process was. He replied, “Oh dear boy, it’s wonderful. I was so erudite and had so many things to say and so many papers and books to write, and now I can’t remember a thing. As long as I can remember where I left my sandals, I’m fine.” He had developed the heart so much that he wasn’t in a state of distress over the fact that he couldn’t remember his quotations from the Upanishads, the Christian theologians, or the Bible. It’s just as important to encourage that attitudinal shift as it is to provide hearing aids and wheelchair access.

PONLOP RINPOCHE: It’s interesting to see how our labeling mind works. When does old age begin? Retirement age? When we first get really sick? When we lose our childhood friend? From the day we’re born, we’re aging and getting old. There’s no benchmark we can precisely define.

(Facing page) *Xu Bing blow*, 2004
Artist, Xu Bing. Photography by Jeff Morgan

Xu Bing, a Chinese-born artist based in New York, created artwork with the dust he collected in New York following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

We need to have a sense of humor and not take our labels so seriously. It's also important to loosen the strong sense of needing to be independent that Ajahn Amaro was talking about. Everything is interdependent. Even buying something at the grocery store with our own money is not an independent act. It's connected to so many other people and factors, so many causes and conditions that come together to make it possible. Once we have that understanding and appreciation of interdependence, it won't be difficult to accept help from other people when we need it.

FRANK OSTASESKI: When I had my heart attack, Lama Tharchin Rinpoche, a beautiful Dzogchen master, called me. He also had trouble with his heart, so I asked him how to deal with all the drama and the confusion, the precariousness and the beauty that seems to accompany this experience. He said, "Well, I thought, it's good to have a heart, and if you have a heart, you should expect that it should have problems." It's true, all hearts, all bodies, all beings have problems, and we just have to accept that it's part of the deal. I wouldn't trade my heart or any of its suffering. Part of its beauty is its fragility.

BUDDHADHARMA: That speaks to an actual change in what we perceive as beautiful.

FRANK OSTASESKI: Yes. When I'm holding the hand of someone very old or of a dying patient, I notice that their skin is almost transparent, and it's as if their being becomes that way as well. It's as if the wind could blow right through them, and there isn't much that's obscuring who they actually are. In the aging process, we can't sustain the energy that's required to maintain our self-image. It can't be propped up anymore. So aging, sickness, and even death are conducive to our opening. It's vital that we reflect on this and reflect that back to the person who's aging, not in some imposing way, but simply by appreciating it.

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: Cherry blossoms in Japan are appreciated for their transient quality. The poignancy of the briefness of their bloom and their falling is what is beautiful. The very fading of the beauty we want to hold on to is the beauty.

FRANK OSTASESKI: The decay actually makes the beauty more apparent.

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: Yes, exactly.

BUDDHADHARMA: At some point, aging and old age give way to dying, whether sudden or prolonged. What's important to

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—Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche

emphasize in the dying process, whether it is our own or that of someone close to us?

PONLOP RINPOCHE: A friend of mine, a student, came to me a few years ago and told me she was dying of cancer. I couldn't help but burst out laughing. "What are you talking about," I said. "We're all dying." Whether you're enlightened or confused, rich or poor, you will die. That's the number one thing we need to completely accept. Secondly, we need to see how we cling to this life, and how we can let go of that clinging.

At the time of death, it's important to have a peaceful environment and calm and gentle mind, however you can do that—through Buddhist teachings, Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. No matter what your religious belief, it's important to have a calm mind. Yes, there are many teachings and practices we could do, but the heart of the matter is keeping the mind clear and peaceful through whatever practices we do. In Vajrayana Buddhism, we talk mostly about resting in the nature of mind. It's said that your last thought is the most important, because that is what will join your mindstream from this life to the next.

FRANK OSTASESKI: In the chaos of illness, one calm person in the room can make all the difference.

PONLOP RINPOCHE: Absolutely.

FRANK OSTASESKI: When we help a sick person, moving them from the bed to the commode, for example, we lend them our body, the strength of our arms and legs. But we can also lend them the concentration and stability of our minds, and the confidence and fearlessness of our hearts. We can open and expand our hearts, which can inspire the other person to open theirs in a similar way. We become a refuge, a presence that restores trust in the patient's capacity to heal, to come to wholeness.



In our hospitals and care facilities, we're so ready to problem-solve and fix things that we often encourage the person who's sick or dying to see themselves as broken. When we attend to dying people, we need to help reflect their intrinsic wholeness. Through grace and love, we can help them with the obstacles in front of them. We can be a portal through which they travel to what they feel most disconnected from. Above all, we can love them when they cannot remember to love themselves.

AJAHN AMARO: Ram Das tells a story about being with his stepmother as she was dying. He's a world expert on death and dying and the role of meditation. He was giving her guided meditation and talking about following her breath and visualizing the light and how the light would well up in her and that she should go toward the light, and so on. He'd been doing this for about forty-five minutes when he paused for a breath, and his stepmother turned her head gently toward him and said, "Ram Das, be quiet." [Laughter]

What really seems to help, more than doing the helping thing, is to just be a simple, pure, caring presence and let go of all the stuff we think we should be doing.

BUDDHADHARMA: Sometimes people, including Buddhists, can be quite doctrinal about how to approach another's dying process.

FRANK OSTASESKI: It's a kind of fundamentalism. I ran the first Buddhist hospice in America, so believe me, I saw Buddhists many times trying to impose their idea on a poor dying person. We had the president of the California Atheists Association come to die with us at Zen Hospice. I was happy that he came to us because he felt it was a place where someone wasn't going to impose some dogmatic notion on him. I'd ask him, "What do you think is going to happen after you die?" And he'd say, "Nothing." I queried him further about whether he thought there would be anything that would carry on, and he said, "My molecules will just mix with all the other molecules in the universe." I said, "Oh, you mean, that kind of nothing." [Laughter]

Everybody who is dying has a story about how one dies, and that story shapes the way they die. It helps to discover more about the story someone is holding and to work with it, rather than to try to change it or impose some other story.

PONLOP RINPOCHE: Exactly.

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: Some of the stories of the death process can cause problems. In doing a class we call "Preparing for Your Own Death," for example, we've had people come in and say something like, "I want to read the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* to my mother, so she will have a good transition into the bardo, but she's a Christian and that would really

upset her. So I'm afraid she's going to have a poor destination."

In response, I read a very beautiful story from the Pali Canon, from the *Samyutta Nikaya*. It's called the *Mahanama Sutta*. A Sakyan who's been practicing for a while suddenly becomes afraid that if he is killed by a stray elephant or horse or chariot, he may end up in a bad destination. The Buddha tells him that his death will not in fact be a bad one, because his mind has been fortified over the years by practice, faith, generosity, wisdom, and so on. He says, "Just as oil rises to the top of a pot submerged in water, your virtue, your goodness, your faith, or generosity will rise to the top, and that is what will carry you to your next destination." I find that sutra reassuring for people, because we're so afraid we're doing the wrong thing.

It's also helpful to remember that whatever your idea is of a good death, there's no guarantee you're going to have that. Yes, preparing is good. If you prepare for a natural childbirth, chances are better that you'll have a natural childbirth, but there is no guarantee. It's the same with death. If you prepare in a sane way and do practices around it, chances are higher that you will have a death that is more serene and involves less anguish for people around you. But we must never forget that the next moment is unknown. If we practice stepping into the unknown, moment by moment, hour by hour, year by year, millions of times, then death is just the next step into the unknown. It loses its terror.

We must also learn not to run away from the inevitable pain, but rather to move into pain. We need to take apart the sensations of pain and discover that pain is not a solid object. The confidence we get from knowing the impermanence of pain, from seeing how interesting it can be, replaces anxiety, which makes for a much better time when you're sick or dying.

PONLOP RINPOCHE: The greatest fear about dying is the unknown. It helps to see that this unknown territory is something we should be interested in exploring, like pioneers exploring a new territory. We need to explore this new, unknown territory of mind. When we open to that, we lessen the fear and preconceptions we have about unknown territory.

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: Absolutely. If we can replace anxiety with curiosity, we've done a lot to help ourselves, and others, with the dying process.

BUDDHADHARMA: The Vajrayana tradition in particular has emphasized the actual process of what occurs after death, which has not been dealt with quite so explicitly in the other traditions. Are those Vajrayana teachings predominantly

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about techniques for dealing with the afterlife, or are they about the fact that we are going through birth and death constantly all the time?

PONLOP RINPOCHE: The bardo teachings are about both of those. These teachings, however, are frequently misunderstood. People take the descriptions of this deity and that deity appearing very literally, but these are all symbolic teachings that come out of a particular framework of symbols. In each manifestation, the deity described is connected with an expression of the enlightened nature of mind, which has many qualities, such as transcendence, compassion, wisdom, and love.

One of my teachers, a Dzogchen master, told me that it's not true that all sentient beings experience these deities. That is not the fundamental meaning of these teachings. The bardo teachings are about relating with the nature of mind. If it so happens that you are a practitioner who is very familiar with deity meditation, these images may pop up as a symbolic reminder for you to connect with what we call purity, the pure nature of mind.

In deity meditation, the most important thing is to connect the symbolism with the pure nature of the world. We call this practice "remembering the purity." It is a practice of recalling the pure nature of the aspects of mind that are represented by the deities.

The bardo teachings are indeed about death and dying. According to Vajrayana, at the moment of death and after death, we have tremendous opportunity to experience the enlightened nature of mind. This nature can be experienced in many different forms and in the form of different types of light, as has been described by people who have had near-death experiences. What is described in the *Bardo Thotrol*, often translated as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, is a symbolic representation of this process. I've tried to clarify that in my book *Mind beyond Death*.

BUDDHADHARMA: So death is not sectarian, so to speak.

PONLOP RINPOCHE: Exactly [laughter].



BUDDHADHARMA: Could others speak to the teachings in their traditions concerning what happens after death?

AJAHN AMARO: In the standard Theravada texts, it's less spelled out than it is in the Tibetan texts, but there is the recognition that the faculties fade out one by one at the moment of death, with hearing being the final one to go. A friend of ours is dying in the hospital near here, and even though he's not been responsive, throughout the day people have been chanting and reading aloud the cards he's received. We're doing that based on the understanding that the hearing faculty can still be operating even if vision is gone and the conceptual thought faculty is compromised. And because there is still hearing, someone can not only take in words of the teachings but also connect with others gathered around.

PONLOP RINPOCHE: In the Vajrayana, many people sing *dobas*, spontaneous songs of realization, and as we sing, which is a practice, we receive many instructions on the nature of mind. Some years ago, a friend of mine in England had a friend who was dying from Alzheimer's. At that point she didn't remember anything or recognize anyone, so the only thing they could do together was sing songs from her childhood that they both knew. She remembered the words perfectly. It occurred to me then that singing yogic songs of realization about the nature of mind, and practicing and resting in the nature of mind through singing, can be really beneficial and helpful even when you have Alzheimer's.

AJAHN AMARO: Another principle we recognize is that what the mind fixates on at the end has a strong effect on what the future destination might be, but it's not wholly incumbent on that. There's an interesting teaching called "reappearance through aspiration," which partly echoes Chozen's recommendation to listen to the advice of the Buddha from the *Mahanama Sutta*, where he says that just as oil floats upward in water, so too will your goodness rise to the surface.

I often give that kind of teaching to people as an encouragement. In his teaching on "reappearance through aspiration," the Buddha says if you really want to gravitate to another particular realm, you can do that through the power of your mind. But this kind of activity is for the virtuous, not the unvirtuous. You have to have done your homework and not have too many outstanding debts, as it were.

PONLOP RINPOCHE: That's very true.

AJAHN AMARO: For those who have developed virtue and are intent on gravitating to a particular realm—back to the human realm or to a different realm of being—the Buddha gives teachings of how to focus the mind on that particular realm and to bring that to mind at the very end of life.

Generally speaking, you guide someone according to their capacity and background. If someone is a Christian or if they've been a Buddhist but don't really have much of a meditation practice, you wouldn't speak to them about refined details of meditation or expect them to focus the mind in a

very specific way. Rather, you would try to find a way to communicate and manifest a loving presence. If someone understands meditation practice or particular dharma teachings, you would bring those out because being reminded of those will help to catalyze their own insight. Practices and teaching can help someone use the potency of the moment to break through obstructions and habits of self-identification.

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: Your discussion of reappearance through aspiration gets us to a very interesting Mahayana question. If you did have the bodhisattva aspiration, bodhichitta, would you aspire to reappear in the human realm rather than step off the wheel of samsara completely? That's not a Theravadan question, though, is it, because in the Theravadan understanding, isn't the Buddha prior to his enlightenment the only bodhisattva?

AJAHN AMARO: It depends on which Theravadin you talk to.

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: I see. Well, I'm talking to you right now. [Laughter]

AJAHN AMARO: Within the Theravada world, to a certain degree, there is a tradition of people taking bodhisattva vows. It's not very prominent, but it's certainly there and it's been in the mix over the centuries.

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: Would there be an active aspiration, then, to reappear in the human realm?

AJAHN AMARO: Yes.

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: Gosh, you're like us.

AJAHN AMARO: We're all one...[Laughter]

BUDDHADHARMA: ...particularly when we're dead.

FRANK OSTASESKI: Most of the people I've worked with have some notion of what is sacred to them, whether they live within a Buddhist context or Christian context or some other religious or nonreligious context. I try to discover what is sacred for them. The sacred is not something separate or different or more than other things. It is rather hidden in things, so dying becomes an opportunity to discover the sacredness that is hidden all around us. It becomes this process of gradually removing obscurations and perceptions that block our capacity to see the truth of what was already there. This process can be facilitated by a good relationship between the person giving care and the dying person.

BUDDHADHARMA: And of course the caregiver is not necessarily a professional. It could be one of us with our parent or spouse, or even child. What is the most important element in that relationship?

FRANK OSTASESKI: Compassion doesn't have an agenda. It doesn't have judgments or shoulds or a concern for what's "right." It expresses gentleness, the kindness that's necessary for our hearts to open, and for the heart of the dying person

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to open. Without that compassion, the heart won't open to its suffering. It just simply won't open to the pain, in the way Chozen was talking about earlier. As a caregiver, my task is to attune myself as closely as possible to exactly where the other person is in this moment and not to try to lead them anywhere, and certainly not try to lead them away from their suffering. We don't really serve a person by taking them away from their suffering. We serve them by helping them come into contact with it.

Dying is a matter of relationship—to oneself, to those we love, to God, spirit, buddhanature, however we frame our image of ultimate kindness. Being a companion to the dying involves being fully with the person as we help them, enabling them to address those different levels of relationship. This process is characterized much more by mystery than mastery. Of course, when we're dying, it's good to have mastery, somebody who knows what they're doing, but that won't be enough. I also want somebody there who can help me explore the territory of meaning, to help me understand what's had value and purpose in my life. But there's a point in the dying process where meaning falls away completely. At that point, I'll want somebody who's comfortable in the territory of mystery, of unanswerable questions, who can be there without feeling the drive to get it all resolved. I want somebody who's comfortable in that not knowing.

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: The experience of meditation—which is that, as you enter it, every moment is completely unknown—hopefully makes us comfortable with not knowing.

BUDDHADHARMA: Training in meditation leads many people to conclude that there's no reason that the process after the death of our body would not bear some strong similarity to the process we're already familiar with, of things arising, taking shape, and ending, and therefore the teaching of rebirth can seem quite natural. On the other hand, many people feel

► *continued page 80*

the teaching of rebirth is not an essential part of the teaching, and is in fact an obstacle. Is the teaching of rebirth essential to Buddhist practice?

PONLOP RINPOCHE: Oh no, not that question! [Laughter]

A lot of people say to me that they can't see past or future lives, so they have no conviction in a system that posits rebirth. But as much as we cannot see a past or future life, neither can we see that there isn't a past and future life. That brings us back to square one. What is most important is to do your best in your present life, and as long as you have lived your life fully and practiced dharma, you can feel comfortable that there will be a good rebirth, if there is rebirth. It's better to prepare as if there is a rebirth, rather than have it come upon you as a surprise. It's like Woody Allen said, "I don't believe in the afterlife, although I am bringing a change of underwear." [Laughter]

The bardo teachings also tell us that having a meaningful and good process of dying depends largely on having a meaningful and good process of living. If we have lived our life fully in a wholesome way with virtuous and compassionate and loving practices, our rebirth will be positive, if there is any.

AJAHN AMARO: There are many people who want to be committed Buddhists but don't like the idea of past and future lives. Many well-known Buddhist teachers have that same kind of reticence about rebirth. There's a teaching in the *Middle Length Discourses, Majjhima Nikaya* 60, the *Apannaka Sutta*. It's called "The Incontrovertible Teaching," and it's almost verbatim the teaching that Rinpoche described.

The Buddha starts off by saying, "If you ask me, I say that there is this life and there are previous lives and future lives. They're the result of good and bad action. However, there might be some other good person who has the view that there are no past lives, no future lives, only this life. If that person leads a virtuous life, they will attract good friends to them, they will sleep easily at night, they will be praised by the wise, live without anxiety, and when they pass away they

will have no regrets. If they are correct and there is no life after this one, they've made a pleasant abiding for themselves here and now. If they are incorrect and there is a life after this one, they've certainly set themselves a good direction and can certainly look forward to reappearing in a pleasant destination."

He uses an analogy from dice and says, "They have a lucky throw on both counts." He goes on to discuss the opposite effect for an unvirtuous person, who will "have an unlucky throw on both counts." This is the Buddhist version of Pascal's wager.

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: I look at this as a biologist, a scientist. That's what I trained in before I went to medical school. From the point of view of physics, energy is neither created nor destroyed, at least as far as we've been able to tell so far, and that certainly applies to our physical energy. I ask people in our death and dying classes to consider the calcium in their teeth and bones and to project it backward into time. Where did it come from? They can see the milk they drank and the cow that gave the milk, and then they can see the cow eating the grass and that the grass came from other decaying organisms, and on and on. It goes all the way back to very soon after the Big Bang, when calcium, as far as we know, originated. The next question, then, is how many lifetimes has our calcium lived through, how many living organisms has our calcium passed through? It's an infinite number.

Project that calcium forward in time, so after we die and are cremated or put in the earth and decay, what happens to our calcium? It's not destroyed. It goes forward into the air, the soil, the plants, and more living organisms, including lots of people, so the calcium in our body could be calcium from Jesus, from the Buddha. A rational materialist can understand that.

We go on to consider what you could call our psychic energy, the energies that are of the mind ground, however you want to frame them. You could call them personality, psyche, or whatever Buddhist terms you might have for such energy.

But it is energy. You walk into a room and you can tell if somebody's just had a fight there. It's not imaginary energy.

Wouldn't the same principle apply to that energy? Why would psychological energy not also continue along with the carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, and so on? We know, for example, that anger can be passed from generation to generation. We know that if you're angry at the store clerk, that some real energy gets passed around from the store clerk to the people who come afterward. If this energy continues after our death, then what is our job?

Many people today are trying not to pass on pollution to the next generations, on to the seventh generation, as the Native Americans say. What about the pollution from psychic energy? It's clear that our job is to clean up that energy too. Whether we pass it on in a future life as a new, clean so-and-so or pass it on to "someone else," it's our job to pass on the best inheritance of energy, the least-polluted energy we can.

BUDDHADHARMA: So the first law of thermodynamics is a statement of rebirth?

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: It is. Buddhism is mathematics. And when you add to that the collected research on children who can remember past lives, there's some pretty darn good evidence there.

FRANK OSTASESKI: People have been asking me for thirty years, usually on their deathbed, "What's going to happen after I die?" I have lots of ideas, but I have no idea if any of them are true. I'll find out.

BUDDHADHARMA: Or *you* may not find out.

JAN CHOZEN BAYS: If your consciousness continues, you might find out.

FRANK OSTASESKI: There is a quote from a piece on the Internet by a Buddhist practitioner and teacher, Carol Hyman, called "Living and Dying: A Buddhist Perspective." In it, she says, "If we learn to let go into uncertainty, to trust that our basic nature and that of the world are not different, then the fact that things are not solid and fixed becomes, rather than a threat, a liberating opportunity." That really guides me, when I meet this

question. I'm quite willing to rest in the uncertainty, and I trust that resting with not knowing actually is the most helpful element tending toward liberation. So, when I'm with someone at the bedside, I try to rest in the uncertainty to the greatest extent possible and to support their resting in that not knowing as well.

On the other hand, people have very strong faith in things, and whatever it is they have faith in, I tend to support that for them, and just rest in my own uncertainty.

BUDDHADHARMA: Buddhist belief, in fact, is not what will make a big difference, it sounds like, since whether you believe in rebirth or not, the experience will be the same.

AJAHN AMARO: Sometimes that big of a picture, the doctrine of rebirth, can be threatening, particularly if it's coming from an authority figure, the Buddhist teacher. It can be encouraging but it can also be threatening. The more applicable teaching is to focus on the sense that when we meet the unknown from a perspective of self-view, from the ego-centered perspective, what arises is fear. But as others have suggested, when we meet the uncertainty, the unknown, with heart, we experience wonderment. So I try to encourage letting go of those self-centered perspectives and instead coming more from the heart, which makes us open to what will unfold, the mystery of it, rather than feeling we must have a defined image of what's out there to look forward to. All that does is compound self-view.

FRANK OSTASESKI: We have made death so technological, and professionalized care of the dying. We sometimes even do that in our religious contexts with our fixed ideas about the right way to die. People have been dying since forever. It's important to remember, and remind people, that we know how to die. It's in our bones. Somehow, we have just forgotten. 