

# Into the Jaws of Yama, Lord of Death



Buddhism, Bioethics, and Death

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

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KARMA LEKSHE TSOMO

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*This book is dedicated to my parents,  
who taught me about life and death.*  
*Martha Jean Haycraft Walters*  
*1918–2001*  
*and*  
*Philip Zenn*  
*1919–2005*

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# Contents



Acknowledgments	ix
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Chapter 2 Understanding Death and Impermanence	15
Chapter 3 Understanding the Nature of Consciousness	31
Chapter 4 Contemplating Self and No-self	43
Chapter 5 Foundations of Buddhist Ethics	63
Chapter 6 Death and Enlightenment in Tibet	79
Chapter 7 The Transition Between Life and Death	99
Chapter 8 The Ethical Urgency of Death	125
Chapter 9 Extending Life and Hastening Death	163
Chapter 10 Buddhism and Genetic Engineering	195
Chapter 11 Bioethics in a Rapidly Changing World	209
Notes	231
Bibliography	245
Index	255



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# Chapter 1



## Introduction

As a small child, I was fascinated with the question of what happens after death. An aura of mystery, fear, and avoidance seemed to accompany the topic of death. Although I asked one authority after another, the answers did not strike me as satisfactory. The rewards of heaven and the threat of hell did not seem convincing explanations of what happens to human beings after the breath stops and the eyes close. I continued to search, ultimately looking further afield to find an answer to this puzzle. My search led me to many countries in Asia and eventually to the Tibetan refugee settlement of Dharamsala in northern India.

After my third serious bout of hepatitis during my studies in Dharamsala, I naïvely asked a Tibetan doctor, “Am I going to die?” Dr. Yeshi Dhonden, the private physician to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, immediately replied, “Of course, you’re going to die! We’re all going to die!” Clearly, his personal perspective on life and death was intimately in tune with the descriptions of death and dying I had been studying in Tibetan Buddhist texts.

Some years later, as I lay for three months in hospitals in Delhi and Tijuana recovering from a poisonous viper bite, the prospect of death loomed very near. The medical staff in Delhi did not expect me to survive and for several weeks after receiving the poisonous bite, I dwelled in a liminal realm between consciousness and unconsciousness that bore little resemblance to ordinary waking reality. Every day death was imminent, particularly in view of the medical care available. After one particular surgery, the staff saw me turn blue and I awakened in what appeared to be another realm of existence. As I was wheeled out of the operating theater, through a blue haze, three

unknown Indian blood donors standing at the foot of the bed appeared to be angels. The experience of living on the edge of death for so long rekindled the questions about death that had fascinated me as a child.

In 1995, the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa School of Hawaiian, Asian, and Pacific Studies (SHAPS) sponsored a six-week project on Living and Dying in Buddhist Cultures, both as a summer session course and as a community outreach effort. The six-week program focused on attitudes toward death and dying in a variety of different cultures: Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Tibetan, and Vietnamese. In the process of directing this project, I became fascinated by the multiplicity of approaches to dying. As I edited the proceedings for a handbook of Buddhist approaches to dying and a series of video programs, many questions arose that challenged traditional Eurocentric notions of death and the afterlife. Gradually I began to realize that gaining a cross-cultural understanding of attitudes toward death and dying has real practical value. It is valuable not only for health care professionals, who deal with questions of life and death on a daily basis, but also for educators, social workers, caregivers, and the general public. Especially in view of new medical technologies, and in today's increasingly multicultural society, it is essential to develop an understanding of different cultural attitudes toward death.

In the course of preparing this manuscript, both of my parents passed away. Suddenly and in a very personal way, I was confronted with the very questions I had been researching academically. Quickly it became obvious that losing a close loved one is an entirely different experience than developing a theoretical analysis about the topic of death. Not only is it a more immediate and emotional experience, but many more factors affect coping, understanding, and decision making than meet the scholarly eye. From these experiences, I learned more than any book could teach me about the questions that need to be asked and the resources available to help make wise and compassionate decisions about end-of-life care.

### Toward New Understandings of Death

Death is perhaps the most urgent topic of all philosophical speculation, yet it is a topic we tend to avoid since it threatens our very existence and challenges our assumptions about an eternal, solid self. Sophisticated modern societies have become especially adept at denying death and hiding it behind a facade of youth, vitality, and beauty. At one point, it seemed that death had replaced sex as a social taboo.

In recent years, however, the nuclear and biological dangers that threaten life and the advances in medical technology that prolong life have made a reexamination of death imperative. Death will inevitably come to all living beings, and therefore holds great significance for the living. Death is a paradox, because it is both a personal concern and a social concern. It is especially painful because when a loved one dies, the personal realm and the external social spheres collide, such that our innermost feelings frequently become the object of public scrutiny. Death is a further paradox because it is at once universal and culture-specific. It is for this reason that cross-cultural perspectives on death hold the potential to enrich our common human understanding.

But what is death, and what is it that dies? From a Buddhist perspective, personal identity is constructed in dependence on various physical and psychological components and death is the dissolution of those components. If death were merely the disintegration of the physical body, human beings should feel no greater sadness at a person's death than they feel at the loss of any other material item. The fact that the death of a human being or an animal can cause a far greater sense of loss than the loss of a material thing raises important questions about the psychological components of personal identity and what becomes of them at the time of death.

Questions about death and personal identity have been integral to Buddhist thought for over twenty-five hundred years. The way in which these questions have been addressed by scholars and practitioners in Buddhist cultures suggests new directions for inquiry that may be especially useful in a consideration of ethical dilemmas. Many of the bioethical questions raised by new medical technologies remain unresolved, and religion is often seen as interfering with law and medicine. A consideration of these unresolved controversies requires open-minded inquiry, from every possible vantage point. An examination of Buddhist ideas on these topics is not only a convenient focus for understanding various Buddhist philosophical perspectives and cultures, but it may also open new lines of inquiry in Western thought.

Recent public debates on abortion, for example, have raised questions about the sanctity of human life, the status of a fetus as a full conscious being, the ethics of surrogacy, and a woman's rights over her own body. Debates on euthanasia, assisted suicide, and organ transplantation similarly raise questions about moral agency, quality of life, the ethics of extending life, and the rights of human beings to terminate their own lives. Because death is such a central focus of Buddhist philosophy, it has stimulated centuries of inquiry and analysis that may be useful in the current debates. Buddhist

approaches to these questions, based as they are on a specific set of assumptions about death, personhood, and moral agency, introduce new ways of thinking about these highly controversial issues. Utilizing the framework of Buddhist philosophy may contribute insights that will spark new directions and ways of thinking about a continually expanding range of bioethical issues.

### The Face of Death

When one enters a Buddhist retreat center in Thailand, it is not uncommon to be greeted by a full human skeleton suspended from the top of its frame, a grim reminder of the inevitable outcome of life. Similarly, when one enters a Tibetan retreat center or monastery, one is likely to be met by a painting of the wheel of becoming. The wheel is divided in concentric circles: the outer circle depicts the twelve links of dependent arising, beginning with ignorance, that explain how sentient beings become entangled in the dismal cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*). The middle circle depicts the six realms of rebirth into which sentient beings may be born after death. The central circle depicts a rooster, snake, and pig, representing the three mental defilements of greed, hatred, and ignorance that keep beings spinning from one rebirth to the next. Above the wheel Yama, the Lord of Death, drools in anticipation of his victims. The wheel of becoming as a whole represents *saṃsāra*, the vicious cycle of existence in which ordinary beings are trapped.

The skeletons and images of dying found in Buddhist monasteries remind us that death is inevitable for all living beings. Among the more than six billion people currently inhabiting the Earth, all face the same inescapable end. Regardless of race, class, or gender, death is the most fundamental human experience. One of the most basic, defining aspects of a culture is the way it responds to death. What fresh perspectives do the Buddhist philosophical traditions bring to a discussion of our common human destiny?

Most Buddhist adherents view death as a wake-up call, a reminder of impermanence and the preciousness of human life. Despite the infinite expanse of time and notions of personal continuity assumed by early Indian religious and philosophical traditions, the duration of a specific lifetime is brief and uncertain. From the moment of birth, our lives flow inescapably toward death. For Buddhists, this inevitability inveighs against frivolity and mediocrity, and prompts the thoughtful to weigh their priorities against some higher standard of value.

Although death is unavoidable, the conditions of its occurrence often invite moral judgment. Suicides, drug casualties, deaths from self-destructive behavior, and capital punishment, for example, are deemed blameworthy, denounced as “wasted lives” or “just deserts.” Other cases, condemned by circumstances, are labeled “a bad death,” “an unworthy death,” “a tragic death,” or “an untimely death.” Still other deaths may be commended, as in “good,” “honorable,” or “courageous” deaths. Death may be viewed as a moral imperative, such as Arjuna’s mandate to avenge his kinsfolk in the *Bhagavadgītā* or the custom of *sati*, a woman’s immolation on her husband’s funeral pyre. Death may be a social or personal imperative, as when a Japanese executive commits suicide to atone for his own or his company’s negligence; a national imperative, as a patriotic duty in war; or a medical imperative, as in some cases of euthanasia or assisted suicide. Even the most innocuous death may be judged “sad” or “premature.”

Some construe death as the final measure of a person’s life. Whether death is viewed as the completion of a life well-lived, the welcome conclusion of a painful illness, or simply the terminus of one’s present worldly experience, death is undeniably the extinction of one individual’s current possibilities. In many cultural narratives, including the varied Buddhist narratives, the positive and negative deeds of a lifetime are weighed to determine a person’s destiny. This prevalent cultural motif is consistent with the life review often reported after near-death experiences. Death as the measure of one’s life is illustrated literally in the Chinese hell scrolls, where a judge resembling a Confucian bureaucrat calculates the account balance of one’s virtues and vices. Parallel images are drawn in Buddhist literature, where white and black stones symbolizing wholesome and unwholesome deeds are weighed by Māra, the Evil One, “the god of lust, sin, and death.” For Buddhists, death is a moment of reckoning—epitomizing the thoughts and actions of our lifetime and determining our future after death. Death is not just a singular event, but a process of transition, whether to awakening or future rebirth.

### Why Death is Important

Paradoxically, although death is the end of all life’s achievements and pleasures, it also serves as a catalyst for understanding life’s ultimate value. Why does death acquire such importance and how does the finality of death affect the way we live our lives? How can human beings meaningfully prepare for death when they have no firsthand knowledge of it? What about death is culturally specific and what is



universal to all living beings, bridging cultural differences? How do our understandings of death and personal identity inform the ethical choices we make?

Even though death is an uncomfortable topic, it continues to capture the human imagination. Deny or ignore death as we may, it is all around us—in the morning news, in the falling leaves, in the falling of our hair, and in countless other reminders. The recent global AIDS epidemic has forced the complicated, often frightening issues around dying to the foreground of public awareness. Films on death and rebirth appear one after the other, not to mention thousands of films involving murder. What makes death so intriguing?

Death is, beyond dispute, a universal terminus for all living beings, yet paradoxically it is an experience about which the living have no firsthand information. The threat of death looms for the living, but it is not clear why death presents such a threat. When death looms, it has the effect of accentuating our relationships and our understanding of life. Yet when death arrives, everything that has been most dear to us, including our carefully crafted identity with its memories, opinions, and preferences, becomes totally irrelevant.

### Life Beyond Death: A Persistent Claim

The contention that human beings are solely material entities of flesh, bone, liquid, and air has major implications for how we live our lives and how we die. If there is no soul or afterlife, then death is simply the end of a biological and psychological process—the inverse of life and a simple negative. The view that living beings' physical components are recycled may be some consolation, but does not satisfy the human mind's quest for meaning. While it may be true that death is as valuable as life itself, that notion may not give us much solace at the death of a loved one, or in facing our own death.

Death has different implications for a person who believes in the existence of a soul and one who does not, but the differences are not simple. The notion of a soul is generally couched in a religious belief system, often one that entails a supreme being, judgments, concepts of retribution and reward, and entitlements for believers. Despite the inroads of secularism, the belief in an afterlife still has a strong following. According to a 1996 survey by *Newsweek*, 96 percent of American people believe in heaven and 75 percent of them believe that they are going there; only 26 percent believe in hell and only 3 percent of them believe that they are going there. Although most people today seem to be more concerned with this life than the

next, a belief in heaven and hell persists, with heaven definitely the more attractive option.

As is widely recognized, concepts of personal identity and ethics are constructed in early childhood, conditioned by family, education, society, and culture. In a number of human cultures, assumptions about past and future lives are part of this conditioning. Individual propensities, aptitudes, and affinities may be explained as the result of past life experiences. An individual is regarded as a composite of predispositions from past lives and the influences of environment, education, and life circumstances, as well as the individual's responses to these influences. This process of identity formation is exceedingly complex, complicated further by the physiological aspects of human development.

If death is simply a physiological event and there is nothing beyond death, then death wipes clean the slate of human virtues and transgressions. But there are moral and logical problems integral to this view. First, if death obliterates the traces of our actions, what is the motivating force for ethical living? If actions have no effects beyond this life, what prevents humanity from deteriorating into chaos and evil? Second, even if it is impossible to substantiate rebirth, is it possible to disprove it? The fact that human beings do not remember past lives is not sufficient evidence to prove that they do not exist. Remembrances of past lives have been documented, and if past lives exist, it is possible that future lives exist as well. In many cultures the possibility of rebirth seems at least as likely as the spontaneous occurrence of sentient life without cause. In Buddhist cultures, it is believed that rebirth can be verified through direct perception by skilled yogis, as a by-product of intensive meditation practice, and that this knowledge is therefore theoretically accessible. In the absence of conclusive proof to the contrary, even many ordinary people accept the possibility that their actions may produce results beyond this life, just as actions within an individual lifetime have consequences.

### Death and Rebirth Across Cultures

Although the idea of other lives may be discounted or viewed as simply an expedient to allay fears of death, it is a common aspect of many world cultures, both Asian and Western. In *Meno*, Plato speaks of an immortal soul that gains knowledge and experience through an endless round of deaths and rebirths: "Thus the soul, since it is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen all things both here and in the other world, has learned everything that is."<sup>1</sup> This perspective coincides with that of Empedocles, who recalls: "For already

have I once been a boy and a girl, a fish and a bird and a dumb sea fish.”<sup>2</sup> In the *Republic*, drawing on the after-death experience of a Pamphylian named Er, Plato speaks of a literal judgment of souls similar to that portrayed in Chinese hell scrolls. He speaks of heavenly rewards for good deeds and dreadful punishments for bad deeds, including a tenfold escalation of retribution analogous to the exponential increase in karmic consequences described in Buddhist texts.

Buddhist ruminations on death have further counterparts in Greek philosophy. Socrates, for example, characterized philosophy as “practicing dying.” This mirrors the standard Buddhist practice of rehearsing one’s own dying. This practice may be viewed as dying to the world prematurely, dissociating from the body to evade death’s sting, or artificially depriving oneself of life’s full enjoyment. But, for Buddhists, life’s pleasures are ephemeral and largely deceptive; this short lifetime will be over all too soon, and attachment to the pleasures of the world only makes dying that much more difficult. Through rehearsing the experience of dying, a practitioner is more likely to live with heightened awareness and appreciation, referred to in Zen as “living having let go of life.” An awareness of the imminence of death imbues life with greater intensity and meaning.

A notion of personal identity that extends beyond death was also common among the ancient Greeks. The Orphics believed in the transmigration of souls; they had specific instructions designed to guide them through the perils of the next world and to “escape from the wheel of birth.” Pythagoras believed that the body entombs the soul and that things are born again and again in a cyclical pattern. Possibly influenced by Indian thought, he believed that the soul is capable of transformation and release from the wheel of repeated rebirth.

### Constructions of Personal Identity: What Dies?

Buddhist texts and teachers frequently state that living beings hold nothing so dear as their own lives. Understanding the nature of the self has been a central topic of Buddhist inquiry from the start because the self is the locus of a person’s experience. All experiences, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, are experienced by oneself. And, according to the Buddhists, whether one experiences happiness or misery is a result of one’s own actions and perceptions. But, for Buddhists, the self is merely a label given to a set of components. The belief in an independently existent self is a mistaken perception with serious consequences, for all afflictions are rooted in a fundamental misconception about the nature of the self. Grasping at the mistaken

perceptions of oneself and other phenomena leads to constant frustrations, anxieties, and unhappiness. Understanding the illusory nature of the self allows one to experience things “as they are,” without interference from conceptual constructs.

In the Buddhist view, grasping at a mistaken view of the self and the world is the source of profound disillusionment. All afflictions arise from identifying with a false sense of self, whereas great contentment arises from seeing the true nature of things. If one believes that the self exists solidly and independently, as it appears, then the dissolution of the self at death is a disaster. But if the self is understood to be illusory from the beginning, the dissolution of the self at death is simply another opportunity for awakening. The conventional self is simply a convenient designation for the everyday collection of transitory aggregates: body, feelings, recognitions, karmic formations, and consciousness. Ultimately, the self as a permanent entity is an illusion and all attempts to elevate the self merely compound the illusion. The stronger one grasps at the illusory self, the more one suffers when the illusion shatters.

### Persons as Moral Agents

Constructions of personal identity are integral to personal and social ethics, especially in matters of bioethics. Patterns of ethical decision making reflect differences in family structures and these patterns change as family structures change. For example, individuals who are raised to be independent decision makers may view end-of-life decisions as matters of personal choice, whereas individuals raised in close-knit families may approach these matters cooperatively, as decisions affecting the whole family. New technologies are dramatically affecting opinions on life and death issues such as surrogate parenting, organ transplantation, physician-assisted suicide, and genetic engineering. The public uproar and legal wrangling over terminating artificial life support, as in the case of Terri Schiavo, reveal that advances in medical technologies have outstripped society’s ability to neatly determine what is moral and what is not. The debate exposes deep fissures in the process of moral judgment that are both emotionally and politically charged.

Ethical decision making is influenced not only by cultural attitudes, but also by taboos and proscriptive regulations created and enforced through individual and group approval and censure. In their pivotal study on the interrelationship between cultural constructions of self and emotions, Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama demonstrated that actions, moral judgments, and decisions are made by a

culturally constructed self in relation to culturally and socially defined values.<sup>3</sup> Understanding how culture affects individuals as moral agents helps us understand the values that influence human beings' bioethical decision making.

The aim here is to analyze the concepts of death and personal identity as they are understood in Buddhist metaphysics and to investigate what becomes of personal identity at the time of death. In the Buddhist view, there is no fixed concept of self; instead, there is a sequence of impermanent, dependently arising moments of consciousness. If the self is contingent and has no ontological status, however, this raises questions about how to develop a viable theory of moral agency and moral efficacy. If individuals have no true, independent existence, the Buddhists are pressed to explain how human beings generate delusions, create actions, experience joys and afflictions, and sow the seeds for future rebirths. These questions are not only problematic for Buddhists; the link between the individual and moral agency is an age-old conundrum.

Until recently, discussions about biomedical ethics have been based on theories of self and moral agency that have developed within a Western context. The primary goal of this book is to expand the conversation by exploring the issues of death, identity, and bioethics within a Buddhist framework, focusing especially on Tibet. Because all Buddhist traditions trace their roots to India, an exploration of Indian Buddhist views on death and personhood serves as a foundation for tracing further Buddhist philosophical developments. The earliest strata of Indian Buddhist texts describe the self as a label used to denote the conventionally existent person, based on five categories of momentary aggregates. The contingent, momentary nature of the self raises questions about moral agency, karma, and the continuity of consciousness after death. An exploration of these basic questions is crucial for understanding attitudes toward death in Buddhist cultures and for discussing such issues as suicide, abortion, and euthanasia. After discussing the philosophical foundations of Buddhist ethics in India, I focus on how these ideas were interpreted in Tibet and other Buddhist cultures. An understanding of the questions about death that have been the focus of so much philosophical inquiry among diverse Buddhist traditions over many generations will provide points of departure for discussing death in a multicultural context. These topics of inquiry will also provide a foundation for cross-cultural discussions about ethical values, dying with dignity, and end-of-life care.

The ephemeral nature of life, the inevitability of death, and the shifting nature of individual identity have all been acknowledged in

Buddhist cultures for centuries. For a very long time Buddhists and non-Buddhists in India debated the nature of the self, the workings of karma, and the continuity of consciousness. If self and consciousness are no more than contingent, momentary realities, then how are the impressions of positive and negative actions transmitted from one lifetime to the next? If there is no ultimately existing person, then who experiences the results of action? A satisfactory explanation for the paradoxical relationship between the doctrines of karma and selflessness is critical for establishing Buddhist ethics as a convincing framework for discussing present-day biomedical realities.

### Tracing the Sources of Buddhist Ideas

The close encounters with dying that opened this chapter evoke a host of questions about the universal experience of death. The theories of consciousness, death, and rebirth that are discussed in early Indian Buddhist texts serve as a foundation not only for understanding subsequent Buddhist philosophical developments in Tibet and other Buddhist cultures, but also for understanding our own attitudes toward death and the possibility of an afterlife. The discussion of Buddhist views of death and how they were interpreted over time requires a grounding in Indian Buddhist viewpoints on the topic and a comparative analysis of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, the two major streams of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought. These philosophical systems provide a framework for understanding death through Buddhist eyes.

The *Visuddhimagga*, written by Buddhaghosa in Pāli in the fifth century CE on the basis of Sinhalese commentaries, is important because it has become the standard interpretation of Buddhist doctrine in the Theravāda tradition on the issues of self, rebirth, and personal continuity. Vasubandhu's commentary on the *Abhidharmakośa* is equally significant because it presents a Mahāyāna viewpoint from a subsequent time period and because it specifically addresses the theories of *karma*, rebirth, and the intermediate state. Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttikakārikā* provides a lucid analysis of the notion of self. The *Lamrim* texts, *Bardo Tödrol*, and other Tibetan texts are valuable resources for an understanding of Tibetan Buddhist views, especially on the nature of consciousness and the transference of consciousness at the time of death.

Buddhist understandings of death, personal identity, and rebirth all trace back to India, but they did not develop in a vacuum. As Buddhism spread to new lands and peoples, these understandings were informed by indigenous attitudes that predate the introduction

of Buddhism. The process of diffusion and the subsequent intermingling of ideas and practices accounts for the different voices and the rich panoply of beliefs and customs related to death that we find in various Buddhist cultures. To understand the Buddhist attitudes and practices that differ from culture to culture, I examine the Indian Buddhist philosophical foundations of belief and praxis, and how they developed over time. To begin, I focus on several fundamental topics: the nature of death, the nature of consciousness, the apparent contradiction between the concepts of no-self (*anātman*) and rebirth, and the nature of personhood in the intermediate state (*antarābhāva*, Tibetan: *bardo*). Specific examples illustrate how these concepts were interpreted differently in Buddhist cultures. For example, when Buddhism entered Tibet in the seventh century, it was understood against a background of indigenous Bön beliefs and ritual practices. In this cultural environment, Tibetan scholars and practitioners developed unique practices related to death, using the experience of dying and the intermediate state between death and rebirth (*bardo*) as an opportunity for psychological transformation. In similar ways, Buddhist ideas were adopted and recast in other cultural milieu.

These topics lead naturally to a discussion of the ethical implications of the *anātman* theory for end-of-life decision making. To begin, I consider traditional formulations of Buddhist ethics and how these theories are related to questions about death and rebirth. Although Buddhist texts provide clear guidelines on some basic moral questions, such as abortion and suicide, they do not provide ready answers for the ethical complexities of the twenty-first century. The complicated issues raised by new medical technologies require a thorough understanding of Buddhist ethics and philosophy as a basis for thinking about the ethical implications of a whole new range of complex issues, such as organ transplantation, stem cell research, and cloning. To discuss these issues intelligently requires a familiarity with a whole new vocabulary, for example, the distinctions between suicide, assisted suicide, and euthanasia, and between the qualifiers voluntary and involuntary, active and passive. Further, it requires a recognition that specific philosophical and cultural premises underlie much of the dialogue on these issues to date. Expanding the conversation requires recognizing that these assumptions may or may not apply in other cultural contexts. It is therefore a timely opportunity to reexamine these assumptions. Buddhist attitudes about death and personal identity provide a different theoretical framework and new perspectives on end-of-life issues that can enrich contemporary discussions of bioethical issues.

The questions that Buddhism asks about life and death are questions that concern all thoughtful human beings. The accumulated wisdom of the Buddhist traditions shed light on what human beings can learn from these universal experiences. Whereas some aspects of Buddhist belief and practice attract attention because they appear unusual or exotic, other aspects attract attention because they deal with ordinary human emotions and experiences. Buddhists are being called upon to reflect on ancient Buddhist texts and traditions and how they are relevant to the challenges of society, technology, and politics today. Traditional Buddhist ethical ideals have stood the test of time in Asian societies, but now they are being tested in light of new realities unimaginable in the Buddha's day. If the Buddhist teachings have lasting value, then they must be applicable to the critical needs of the contemporary world. The rich variety of Buddhist philosophies and practices demonstrates the adaptability that has served the tradition well over many centuries, while at the same time maintaining the compassionate, nonviolent, tolerant core values that have made the tradition a source of hope and meaning for millions of people for ages. The willingness to engage with vastly different ideas and ways of living is a major asset in a world beset by violence, exploitation, and misunderstandings. The Buddha's agenda of creating human happiness seems more relevant than ever.

The objective of this analysis is not only an understanding of Buddhist attitudes toward death. Because death is a universal experience, an exploration of Buddhist approaches to death, personhood, and bioethics will also hopefully contribute to contemporary dialogue on these issues and take the conversation in new directions. Recent advances in biomedical technology have stimulated a surge of interest in death and bioethical issues such as abortion, cloning, euthanasia, organ transplantation, assisted suicide, and stem cell research. As the human life span lengthens and the time between the onset of old age and the final moment of death increases, these issues take on renewed urgency. Ethicists, health care providers, and ordinary individuals have begun to refine their questions, expand their awareness, and consider alternative ways of looking at a vast new array of issues.

A consideration of Buddhist theories unmasks certain assumptions inherent in the usual ways these issues and questions are framed in Western cultures. In the following chapters, I explore how a Buddhist analysis of these questions may open up lines of philosophical inquiry that will have practical relevance for social workers, hospice workers, health care professionals, and caregivers in today's increasingly multicultural communities. The questions raised and the diverse



Buddhist perspectives presented bring new voices to the conversations that are shaping legislation and public policy on what are likely to be some of the most controversial issues of the twenty-first century.

## Chapter 2



# Understanding Death and Impermanence

One day in June 1963, Thich Quang Duc, a highly respected Vietnamese Buddhist monk, sat outside the Cambodian Embassy on a noisy thoroughfare in Saigon to protest the oppression of Buddhists by the United States-backed regime of the Catholic dictator Ngo Dinh Diem. Dressed in traditional orange Buddhist robes and surrounded by a chanting circle of devoted supporters, the monk quietly doused himself with petrol and, seated in the lotus position, was soon engulfed in flames. This powerful image of a Buddhist monk's self-immolation is deeply ingrained in the historical consciousness of American social activists, the Vietnamese people, and ordinary television viewers around the world. His action, often cited as a turning point in toppling Diem's corrupt and autocratic regime, eventually led to the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam and an end to a vicious, protracted war. Along with a half-dozen other "human torches," he is revered as a selfless *bodhisattva* by Vietnamese Buddhists.<sup>1</sup> His heart, seared by the blaze but still intact, is enshrined on the altar of Xa Loi Pagoda in Saigon.

One dawn on Chakpori Hill, just outside of Lhasa, the capital city of Tibet, a silent procession moves slowly to the top of a craggy barren mount. As the procession nears the "cemetery" atop the mound, members of a special class of morticians known as *rogyapa* (*ro rgya pa*, corpse cutters) clear a spot to place the body of an old man who passed away three days before. The body, wrapped in plain white cloth, has been carried on a stretcher accompanied by close friends, monks, and family members. At the head of the procession is a *thangka*

(*thang ga*, religious scroll painting) depicting the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara fixed to a makeshift post. The *bodhisattva*, on behalf of the deceased, has been honored with a *khata* (*kha btags*), a traditional white scarf symbolizing purity and auspiciousness. Amidst the monks' prayers for a favorable rebirth, the body has been washed in fragrant herbs, then placed in the center of a prepared space and the cloth removed. After some time, the *rogyapas* begin their appointed task of chopping up the limbs of the body, pounding them, and mixing them with roasted barley flour to feed to the vultures that hover nearby. This kind of "sky burial" is the most common mode of disposing of the dead in Tibet, since the frozen ground and the lack of trees make both burial and cremation impractical. The time for disposing of the body is chosen through divination, conducted either by a *lama* (lit., teacher, a religious specialist), or an astrologer who determines when the consciousness has left the body. The rite serves as a stark reminder of the impermanence and interconnectedness of all life and is regarded as a final act of generosity by close relatives on behalf of the deceased.<sup>2</sup>

These two images of death and the associations they evoke reveal several paradoxes between doctrine and social practice in Buddhist cultures. All Buddhist traditions ultimately trace their roots to India and the teachings of Buddha Śākyamuni. Over hundreds of years, the fundamental teaching of the Buddha evolved into a rich variety of Buddhist traditions, each with its unique interpretations and practices. A variety of attitudes toward the body and consciousness, life and death, this world and the next, reflect not only the independent developments of the Buddha's teachings, but also the influences of indigenous thought and practice. Buddhist ideas about the nature of consciousness, the process of conscious dying, rebirth within different realms of existence, and liberation from cyclic existence were adapted in the process of interaction with local beliefs, rituals, and customs. The resulting eclectic blends of belief and practice are apparent in disparate Buddhist cultures today, especially in relation to death and dying. The variety of beliefs and practices associated with death in Buddhist cultures, especially in Tibet, provide new ways of looking at the universal experience of dying.

### The Four Sights

When Siddhārtha Gautama first left his father's palace, he witnessed four sights that turned him to the spiritual quest: a sick person, an old person, a dead person, and a renunciant. Because his father, King

Śuddhodana, had conscientiously shielded him from unpleasant experiences, these four sights alerted the young prince to the realities of life and set him on the path to awakening. After his enlightenment, the Buddha taught his followers to reflect on these same realities in order to gain a better understanding about the human condition and the precariousness of life. According to the Buddha, reflection on death and impermanence is the key means to awakening from the slumber of ignorance, gaining insight into “things as they are,” and achieving liberation from the wheel of birth and death.

The centrality of death and impermanence in Buddhist thought is evident in the texts of all Buddhist traditions. Sentient beings are portrayed as trapped in the cycle of birth and death like animals tangled in a net. Suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anitya*), and no-self (*anātman*) are the three “marks” of cyclic existence. The term *dukkha* includes mental and physical sufferings, all dissatisfactions, and the all-encompassing unsatisfactory quality that characterizes the cycle of rebirth. As the Buddha described it:

This, O Bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of Suffering:  
Birth is suffering; decay is suffering;  
illness is suffering; death is suffering.<sup>3</sup>

Impermanence refers not only to death at the end of a lifetime, but also to the momentary process of production and disintegration that characterizes conditioned things. All that arises will inevitably perish, even the most minute particles that are the basis for presuming the existence of persons. Comprised of constantly shifting physical and mental elements, living beings are said to be dying from the moment they are born.

The inevitability of death is often illustrated by the story of Kisagotamī. A cousin of the Buddha, Kisagotamī went mad from the shock of losing her only child. Totally deranged, she carried the dead child’s body from house to house in hopes of bringing him back to life. Eventually someone directed her to the Buddha and Kisagotamī pleaded with him to restore her child’s life. The Buddha agreed to do it, on the one condition that she bring him a mustard seed from a house where no one had ever died. As she went from house to house, she soon realized that no one was untouched by death, and thus recovered her sanity. She later became an ordained nun and applied herself intensively to meditation practice. Eventually she achieved the state of an *arhat* and celebrated her attainment of *nirvāṇa*, “the undying,” with this verse:

I have practiced the Great Eightfold Way straight  
to the undying.  
I have come to the great peace.  
I have looked into the mirror of the Dharma.<sup>4</sup>

The reflections on death, impermanence, and suffering that were so pivotal in the awakening of the Buddha and Kisagotamī are central to the Buddhist worldview and to the Buddhist cultural legacy that has been transmitted to lands far and wide. In each country, the Buddhist reflections on death assume unique cultural expressions.

### The Question of Rebirth

The Buddhists inherited or appropriated the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth from earlier Indian thought. Buddha Śākyamuni affirmed these doctrines, but reinterpreted them, replacing the belief in a soul with teachings on impermanence, suffering, and soulessness. The perennial question that arises is: If consciousness is insubstantial and impermanent, and there is no underlying soul or self, by what mechanism do the impressions of virtuous and non-virtuous actions in one lifetime bear fruit in another? In the early Buddhist texts, the continuity of consciousness is likened to a flame that lights a candle, though nothing is transmitted from one to the other. No two moments of an individual's stream of consciousness are the same, yet actions give rise to consequences. This analogy is used to explain questions about the relationship between actions and their effects, and about the relationship between one lifetime and the next. From a Buddhist viewpoint, even without an underlying soul or self, an individual's actions in one lifetime may have consequences in another. Although the stream of consciousness in one life is neither the same nor different than the stream that continues into the next, the imprints or potencies of actions imbue successive moments of consciousness with specific psychological tendencies. Just as personal identity continues from day to day in one lifetime, even though no two moments are the same, Buddhists assume that a very subtle stream of causally connected moments of consciousness continues in future lifetimes.

Buddhists do not spend much time analyzing the claims and assumptions about rebirth that prevailed when the Buddha taught. At the time when Buddhism arose in India, the idea of life as a phase in a continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) was already so prevalent that little effort was spent formulating a convincing case for rebirth. Further, Indian notions of infinite, cyclical time and infinite