

PART 2

UNDERSTANDING LIVING AND DYING

Introduction to Part 2

Living and dying are not opposites, death is a part of life. Its opposite is birth, not life. We are on a trajectory to death as soon as we are born. In the same way civilisations continually rise and fall. Planets emerge and disappear. The universe, itself, is subject to time. The mystery is not death but life itself, how we come to be here in the first place.

When Montaigne wrote, following the classics, that “to philosophise is to learn how to die”, he implied that we shouldn’t be afraid of dying. It is part of the natural order of things, essential to learning the art of how to live. Death may be a trauma for the dying and the bereaved, but we shouldn’t be shocked. Death is ever only a breath away. Nothing is forever. Transience is our fundamental nature.

But the transience death awareness teaches can be transforming. It reveals what is changeless in us, just as our mortality contains the seed of our immortality. The Tibetan *Book of the Dead* is actually a book of life. Knowing how to die is the supreme consciousness. It connects us with everything in life.

In chapter 5 - “The Perplexity of Sigmund Freud” - I discuss Freud’s confusion arising from his acceptance of the belief in the fundamental split between the organic and the inorganic - the animate and the inanimate - which governs scientific thinking in the modern West. Freud was never able to answer, or even contemplate, the question of how life emerged from matter in the first place or mind from life. His theory of the personal unconscious may have taught us a lot about ourselves but it could not address the ultimate questions.

It is a duality our philosophical traditions are also caught in. Heidegger, partly through his connection with Japanese thought, had some insight into the importance of death consciousness and the non-duality of Being. Chapter 6, “Being’s Poem”, a title taken from one of Heidegger’s verses, is a meditation, begun by Nietzsche, on how Western philosophy, taking a cue from Asian thought, begins to look at our experience of death itself.

Chapter 7 - "Learning Dying" - is a consideration of the subject of death consciousness in Western literature and how it began to change at the end of the last century. As Montaigne suggested, "To practise death is to practise freedom". We are more open today to thinking about death with less of the apprehension and terrors of the past. Perhaps this has helped us begin to understand and benefit from a text such as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, translated and published in English for the first time as early as 1927.

In fact the title, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, taking its cue from the very popular *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, is not a translation of its Tibetan title, *Bardo Thoedal*, which suggests more the idea of the liberation to be achieved through thinking about death. It was Chogyam Trungpa, who, with Francesca Fremantle, re-translated a part of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in 1973 and suggested it could be equally thought of as "a book of life". In chapter 8 - "Death as Transformation" - I give an account of it in this light.