

# LUMINOUS EMPTINESS



UNDERSTANDING THE  
*Tibetan Book of the Dead*



FRANCESCA FREMANTLE

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“A deeply heartfelt guide to spiritual fulfillment through Buddhism, *Luminous Emptiness* provides interested seekers with a journey through the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and Fremantle is an expert guide.”

—Los Angeles Times

“A scholar in Sanskrit and Tibetan, Fremantle is more than qualified to write this guide; she collaborated with renowned meditation master and scholar Chögyam Trungpa on a well-received translation of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* in 1975. Nothing less than a careful explanation of the world and the ideas that surround that text, this new work is an excellent and plainly written manual to the complex mythologies, symbols, philosophies, and doctrines of Tibetan Buddhism. The West could hardly ask for a better primer. Highly recommended.”

—Library Journal

“In *Luminous Emptiness*, Francesca Fremantle provides a commentary on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* that integrates its teachings with both the central topics of the Buddhist canon and with the ongoing experiences of our lives. Her illuminating exposition of the inner meanings and relevance of the text’s tantric symbolism reflects many years of study, contemplation and practice. *Luminous Emptiness* is valuable in making the root text more meaningful and suggestive. It succeeds in enlivening our appreciation of the immense possibilities which we are offered now, moment to moment.”

—Shambhala Sun

“This is the most lucid and comprehensive exposition of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* to appear in English. It illuminates the esoteric path and reveals the way to heal life’s miseries—the projection of our minds.”

—Tulku Thondup, author of the *Healing Power of Mind* and *Boundless Healing*

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a best-seller for three decades, is one of the most widely read texts of Tibetan Buddhism. Over the years, it has been studied and cherished by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. *Luminous Emptiness* is a detailed guide to this classic work, elucidating its mysterious concepts, terms, and imagery. Fremantle relates the symbolic world of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* to the experiences of everyday life, presenting the text not as a scripture for the dying, but as a guide for the living.

According to the Buddhist view, nothing is permanent or fixed. The entire world of our experience is constantly appearing and disappearing at every moment. Using vivid and dramatic imagery, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* presents the notion that most of us are living in a dream that will continue from lifetime to lifetime until we truly awaken by becoming enlightened. Her Fremantle, who worked closely with Chögyam Trungpa on the 1975 translation of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Shambhala), brings the expertise of a lifetime of study to rendering this intriguing classic more accessible and meaningful to the living.

*Luminous Emptiness* features in-depth explanations of:

- The Tibetan Buddhist notions of death and rebirth
- ~~The meaning of the five energies and the five elements in Tibetan Buddhism~~
- The mental and physical experience of dying, according to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition

FRANCESCA FREMANTLE received her doctorate from the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University. She is a scholar and translator of Sanskrit and Tibetan works and was a student of Chögyam Trungpa for many years.

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Tibetan Book of the Dead

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*This book is dedicated  
to the memory of  
the Vidyadhara, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche,  
incomparable messenger of dharma  
and to  
Rigzin Shikpo (Michael Hookham)  
who continues his tradition*

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## Preface

*Understanding little of my guru's teaching,  
Even that little not put into practice,  
How can I write as though it has entered my heart,  
Like a dewdrop dreaming it can hold the sun?  
Please grant your blessing so that beings such as I  
May drink the nectar of the Ocean of Dharma.*

THE TRUE FOUNT OF INSPIRATION behind the writing of this book is Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. It was he who introduced me to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and established my lifelong connection with him by asking me to translate it with him. It is he who is the source of whatever understanding I may have of it. To my deep regret, I was unable to fulfill his expectations and intentions for me while he was alive. This book is my offering to him. With it, I hope to share some of the riches I received from him and carry out at least a small part of his wishes.

Trungpa Rinpoche was probably born in 1940 and was recognized at an early age as a reincarnation in the lineage of the Trungpa Tulkus. He was the eleventh in a line of highly realized teachers, an abbot of the Surmang group of monasteries in eastern Tibet. *Tulku* means “emanation body,” which we usually call an incarnation; *Trungpa* is the name of his lineage, meaning literally “one who is the presence”; *Chögyam* is an abbreviation of one of the many names he received during his training, meaning “Ocean of Dharma”; and *Rinpoche* is a title meaning “precious jewel,” generally used for all respected teachers.

Following the invasion of Tibet by China, he escaped to India in 1959 and came to England in 1962. While living in Oxford, he began teaching a few students, and then moved to Scotland where he founded Samye Ling, the first Tibetan Buddhist center in the United Kingdom. In 1970, he was invited to North America, where his teaching attracted a tremendous response. The United States and Canada remained the bases of his teaching activities until his death in 1987.

The Trungpa lineage belongs to the Kagyü school of Tibetan Buddhism, but many of Rinpoche's teachers were from the Nyingma school. In his own life and teaching, he combined the characteristic qualities of both traditions. However, for practical purposes, there are significant differences between the methods of the two schools. With his first students in England, he taught primarily from the Nyingma perspective, but after his move to America, he emphasized the Kagyü style of practice. In later years, he developed his own unique presentation, known as the Shambhala teachings, whose basic principles he discovered as “mind treasures” (*gongter*). The Shambhala teachings are drawn from ancient Tibetan and other Asian wisdom traditions, as well as Buddhism; they bring the sacred vision of the tantras into everyday life without the need for any religious affiliation or the use of specific Buddhist terminology. Thus, three great rivers of his inspiration and blessings have flowed out to the world from the Ocean of Dharma.

I first met Trungpa Rinpoche in the spring of 1969. At the time, I was engaged in research for my

doctoral thesis on the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Feeling discouraged by difficulties with the text, I hoped that he might be able to help. I had begun studying Sanskrit in the early 1960s because of my love of Indian civilization and philosophy, and soon came across works on tantra in the university library. I felt an immediate attraction to it as a spiritual path that relied on direct experience rather than belief and that gave genuine respect and equality to women. It revealed a transforming vision of a sacred world not to be looked for elsewhere but to be discovered here and now, embracing the whole of life. As I had been brought up with the poetry of William Blake, tantra seemed to embody the philosophy of my favorite work of his, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, especially its closing words: "For everything that lives is Holy."

As part of my undergraduate studies, I was fortunate enough to spend six months at the Government Sanskrit College in Calcutta. While in India, I met several remarkable Hindu teachers, but none with whom I felt a very strong personal connection. On gaining my degree, I planned to return to India to pursue my interest in Hindu tantra, but by auspicious coincidence, as Trungpa Rinpoche would have said, Professor David Snellgrove persuaded me that the Buddhist *Guhyasamaja Tantra* would be a suitable subject for my dissertation. This led to my learning Tibetan in addition to Sanskrit and becoming immersed in the classical world of vajrayana. However, I did not realize that there was no access to vajrayana as an authentic living tradition outside Tibet, where it was rapidly being destroyed. It was not until about halfway through my research that I learned of the existence of a genuine master living in my own country and decided to visit him.

My first glimpse of Trungpa Rinpoche was at early morning meditation at Samye Ling. The sun had not yet risen, and in the darkness, the room was lit only by candles on the shrine, above which hung a glowing gold and red thangka of Amitabha. As he walked into the room and prostrated three times in front of the shrine, his movements were filled with a grace, dignity, and awareness that were overwhelmingly impressive. He radiated a sense of profound stillness and presence that I had never seen in anyone else. During my visit, not only did he give me the help and inspiration to continue with my research, but somehow, without actually saying very much, he transmitted an insight into the real spiritual meaning of tantra.

About a year later, he moved to America, and in the following year I went there to join him. In 1971, he gave three seminars on subjects relating to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. One of them formed the basis for his commentary to our translation and the other two were later published in his book *Transcending Madness* (Shambhala, 1992). During these intensive periods, his teaching produced extraordinary effects on the participants. As he explained the inner meaning of the bardic and the six realms of existence, many of us experienced a rollercoaster ride through those various states of mind, as well as the flashes of openness that accompany their extremes of tension. The vivid emotions of the six realms, the enlightened qualities of the five buddha families, even the process of dissolution that leads to death and the experience of emptiness and luminosity became for that short time much more than beautiful and profound metaphors. It was both terrifying and wonderful—a glimpse into a totally new way of looking at life.

For the seminar most directly based on the text of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Trungpa Rinpoche used a Tibetan blockprint while the audience tried to follow him in the only available English version translated by Kazi Dawa-Samdup and edited by W. Y. Evans-Wentz. Although he had great respect and appreciation for their pioneering work in publishing this and other very important texts, he was less happy with the actual translation. That is why he suggested that we should produce a new version together, which was first published by Shambhala Publications in 1975.

When work on the translation was finished, I came back to England to live in London, fully intending to return frequently to the United States. But at that time I was not committed enough to be able to follow a single path, and too many other interests absorbed my attention; in particular, a deep

karmic link with Bengal and Hindu tantra needed to be resolved. However, the connection with Rinpoche was never broken, so eventually, after a long, roundabout journey, I came back to the practice of vajrayana, thanks to the influence and example of my dharma brother, Rigdzin Shikpo.

As Michael Hookham, Rigdzin Shikpo was one of Trungpa Rinpoche's earliest Western students. He had already been practicing various types of Buddhist meditation for ten years when they met in 1965, so he was exceptionally well prepared. Rinpoche gave him the teachings and transmission of the Nyingma lineage and later authorized him to establish the Longchen Foundation, which at present is based in Oxford and North Wales. In 1993, Michael completed a three-year retreat under the direction of Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche and was given the name Rigdzin Shikpo, by which he is now known.

With a deep knowledge of Buddhism, he has an extraordinary gift for expressing it in vivid and poetic ways and for creating links with many aspects of Western culture. Above all, he has an attitude of complete devotion, so that his mind has become one with the mind of the guru. Listening to him talk about dharma, I often feel as though Trungpa Rinpoche is speaking through his voice. Without him, I would never have gained the experience or the confidence to write about these profound teachings. With regard to this book, he has answered my innumerable questions with endless patience and interest. I am particularly grateful to him for his help in understanding the practices and terminology of dzogchen, and especially for sharing the insights of his yogic experience.

The idea of writing such a book has been growing slowly for a long time. Ever since the publication of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the same questions have been put to me again and again. The questions mainly concern the meaning of the visions of the deities that arise after death and the reasons for such an elaborate system of symbolism. There are also many questions about reincarnation and the significance of the six realms of existence in which one may be reborn. My original idea was to produce a fairly short work centering on the iconography and symbolism of the deities, but it soon became apparent that, in order to do this properly, they would need to be related to the basic concepts of Buddhism.

One of the unique aspects of Trungpa Rinpoche's communicative skill was his ability to make connections across the whole range of teachings, which are traditionally kept in separate compartments. He not only linked the various components together, but also explained how each of them relates to everyday life in a very practical way. With this as my basic inspiration and guideline, I have tried to incorporate all the most relevant aspects of the teaching into the first part of *Luminous Emptiness* in a manner that will illuminate the text.

Coming to the text itself, I have retranslated all the excerpts that appear in the second part of the book. The revision is mostly a question of style, which has become rather more free and less literal, although I also discovered some mistakes that I have taken the opportunity to rectify. As the quotations included here are quite extensive, it is not really necessary to refer to a complete translation of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, but if readers wish to do so, it should not be difficult to follow the explanations with any of the current translations.

Trungpa Rinpoche was unusual among Tibetan lamas in speaking excellent English, and he greatly enjoyed the challenges of translation. He was very open to suggestions, but he also had firm views on certain issues. For example, he wanted to avoid any hint of theism or theosophy, and he was determined not to use words that suggested the sense of guilt and blame prevalent in much of conventional religion, whose effects he saw in his students. In fact, he originated many terms that were later adopted by other Buddhist teachers and have become part of dharma language, especially in America. However, those were very early days in the transmission of vajrayana to the West, and with hindsight I feel that not all of our decisions in the 1975 translation have stood the test of time. Especially in the area of dzogchen texts, there have been some excellent translations during the

intervening years, through which several of its key terms have become widely accepted in English. Although in a certain sense all of Trungpa Rinpoche's teaching was imbued with the flavor of dzogchen, he did not go into many of its technical details at that time, and I did not possess enough knowledge to ask him the necessary questions while we were working together.

In common with many scholarly Tibetans, Trungpa Rinpoche had great respect for the Sanskrit language, and he often used Sanskrit as well as Tibetan words in his teaching when he could not find a suitable English equivalent. He always preferred to use the Sanskrit names of deities. In Tibet, the names of the more important and well-known deities—the five male and five female buddhas for example—are generally translated into Tibetan, although in some texts they are simply transliterated into Tibetan script. In this text, we find a combination of both methods, but I have kept to Trungpa Rinpoche's practice of rendering them in Sanskrit and giving English translations. A very few are referred to mainly by English names when the meaning is particularly relevant and the Sanskrit is particularly unwieldy.

Rinpoche was always concerned with how best to express the true spirit of Buddhism, and his interest extended into every area of its presentation. For instance, he had strong opinions about what he saw as the overuse of initial capital letters, which he related to an underlying theistic attitude. He felt that it produces a false impression by making too much of concepts that should be presented as simple, accessible, and unpretentious. He wanted to put across the idea that enlightenment is no big deal—it is our natural state. Readers who are not accustomed to his style may be surprised to find words such as *dharma* or *bodhisattva* not capitalized. Even *buddha* is lowercase, except with reference to a specific buddha, like Buddha Shakyamuni. (Neither the Sanskrit nor Tibetan script possess capital letters, so it is often difficult to tell whether a word is a proper name, a title, or an epithet.) Words such as *Nyingma*, *Zen*, and so on are names of distinct schools or traditions, so they are treated as true proper nouns. But the three yanas, tantra, mahamudra, and dzogchen are stages on the path or styles of practice, so they are not capitalized. In this I have followed Trungpa Rinpoche's guideline with a few exceptions. I have decided to use capitals for the names of the five families of buddha (Buddha, Vajra, Ratna, Padma, and Karma), treating them just as if they were family names in English so as to avoid confusion with the alternative meanings of buddha, vajra, and karma. I am very much indebted to Larry Mermelstein, of the Nalanda Translation Committee, for clarifying these issues drawing on his long experience of working with Trungpa Rinpoche in this field.

Apart from proper names, I have tried to reduce the use of Sanskrit and Tibetan in this book to a minimum. However, there are some examples of rather specialized terms that I felt I should keep, and I have explained the reasons where such terms first occur. There are also a few words that I do not translate, but where an examination of the original Sanskrit, and sometimes the Tibetan as well, helps to illuminate their meaning. I have perhaps indulged my fascination with words and their meanings a little too much in these passages, but I hope that some readers may find these digressions interesting; those who do not may skip them without much loss.

As this is not an academic work, I decided rather regretfully not to use the accepted transliteration system with diacritics, of Sanskrit words. This system is obviously preferable for those who already know Sanskrit and provides the only reliable guidance to correct pronunciation; but it can be a real barrier for those who do not understand it and requires quite an effort to do so. There is a different problem with Tibetan, because the correct transliteration generally creates even greater difficulties in pronunciation. Where Tibetan words occur in this book, I give approximate phonetic versions, with the full spelling in brackets or in the endnotes. As an aid to the pronunciation of Sanskrit words, it helps to imagine that one is speaking Italian rather than English, especially with regard to the vowels. Another point to note is that, in both Sanskrit and Tibetan, *th* is never pronounced as in "other," but as in "hothouse." Similarly, *ph* is not equivalent to *f*, but is an aspirated *p*, as in "uphold."

Perhaps I should explain a little about my own approach to translation. Since my introduction of Buddhism came about through Indian studies, I am always very much aware that Buddhism grew out of Indian thought and culture, and that its expression is very closely linked to the Sanskrit language. I feel it is absolutely essential to keep returning to the Sanskrit roots of Buddhist terminology. Some of the work that has been done purely from Tibetan sources, apparently without any reference to Sanskrit, seems to me to depart occasionally from the original meaning.

Translation of Buddhist texts into English presents entirely different problems than those faced by the early translators of Sanskrit into Tibetan. This is because our language has been formed by so many diverse influences. As a result, it contains a huge number of synonyms and many alternative ways of saying the same thing. With so much variety, our individual choice of words and expressions is extremely subjective. All translation is interpretation, and there is no perfect translation, least of all in this field. I sincerely hope there will never be a standardized code of translation for Buddhist literature. Any such attempt would have a deadening influence. Even though such a great variety of different versions may seem confusing to students of Buddhism, it can also be regarded as an opportunity. By comparing translations, those who do not know any Sanskrit or Tibetan may be able to look at these elusive concepts from different points of view and gain greater insight into them.

Westerners are at a disadvantage in that our whole background of philosophical and religious thought is very different from that of Buddhism. This means that certain English terms, which might at first appear suitable, are too heavily loaded with inappropriate implications. All the same, it is perhaps surprising that some translators are not content with the incredible richness of the language of Shakespeare and feel the need to invent even more new words or to hunt out obscure ones. In keeping with the Buddha's own attitude toward teaching, the great majority of dharma texts, whether in Sanskrit or Tibetan, use ordinary, everyday language. In the context of dharma, this simple language is used to express the most profound ideas and experiences, yet the Buddha and his successors did not choose to use complex or obscure words to express themselves, and I believe we should try to follow their example. An exception to this would be in the study of philosophy and logic, where technical terminology is entirely appropriate. However, this affects only a very small area; it does not apply in most cases, and especially not to tantric literature.

In any language, we can understand these ordinary words in a special way according to the context. If further explanation is required, it can be given in commentaries or notes, but I believe that it should not intrude into the translation itself. Some teachers say that because the experiential meaning of certain words such as *emptiness* or *compassion* changes at different stages of the path, especially in dzogchen, they should be translated differently. To me, the important thing is that those words were not changed. The great masters of long ago had plenty of choice, but they chose to retain the same terms. Part of their effectiveness is that they can be understood on many levels. It is for the reader to imbue them with meaning according to the context and in light of his or her own experience.

Above all, translation is an art. As translators, we must remember that the same words that give us so much trouble in trying to pin down their meaning are not just technical terms but are used in poetry, spontaneous songs, and liturgies whose purpose is to inspire and arouse the imagination. Sadly, it is sometimes impossible to find a solution that is both accurate and aesthetic, but we should try, as far as possible, to retain the spirit of the original. Beside the depth and beauty of texts such as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, I am only too aware that my own work is clumsy and confused, and I apologize for its defects. Nevertheless, I feel that I have been blessed with tremendous good fortune in being able to produce this book. It has given me great joy in the writing; may it bring joy and benefit to all who read it.

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# Acknowledgments

First and foremost, my profound thanks to the late Chögyam Trungpa and to Rigdzin Shikpo, to both of whom this book is dedicated; the parts they both played in its origination and its eventual completion are explained in the preface.

There are many other accomplished lamas, as well as teachers from other traditions, from whom I have received much help and kindness; in particular, I had the great privilege of meeting and receiving teaching from several of the exceptional Tibetan lamas of the older generation who are no longer with us in the same bodily form. To all of them, I am extremely grateful. I remember with deep gratitude the late Sochi Sen, my guide in the Shakta tradition, whose life exemplified the genuine spirit of tantra beyond sectarian differences. Thanks also to the many scholars and translators whose writings have been a source of both information and inspiration.

I would like to express my gratitude to my friends who read early drafts of the manuscript and made many valuable suggestions, especially Caroline Cupitt, David Hutchens, Barbara Wanklyn, and Kathleen Taylor; also to Larry Mermelstein, who greatly improved it in the final stages with his expert advice.

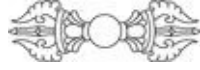
Thanks also to Gonkar Gyatso for his beautiful paintings, combining the ancient and the contemporary in timeless imagery.

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*Part One*

**FOUNDATIONS**





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# Homage

*I bow down at the feet of my gurus:  
May the power of their presence  
Inspire and dwell within these words  
So that their vision is fulfilled.*

*May the peaceful and wrathful devatas  
Shine within our heart and mind  
So that we may clearly know them  
As our own awakened nature.*

*May the dakinis who dance  
In the boundless sky of wisdom  
Reveal the secret treasure  
Of dharma profound and vast.*

*May the powerful dharmapalas  
Protect the truth of the teachings,  
Grind to dust all misconceptions,  
And guide us always on the path.*

# A Book of the Living

THE BOOK THAT WE KNOW in the West as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a most extraordinary and wonderful text. It was one of the first examples both of vajrayana literature and of Tibetan literature to be translated into a European language, and is probably still the best known among Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. Although the choice may have been accidental, it is well deserving of its fame as representative of Tibetan Buddhism. It bridges a wide range of interests, for on the one hand it is a very specialized teaching connected with advanced meditation practices, but on the other hand it is an expression of a universal truth, appealing to many people beyond the sphere of Buddhism. The purpose of *Luminous Emptiness* is to serve as a guide to understanding this classic text by interpreting in detail the concepts on which it is based, the terms it uses, and the imagery it contains. This book is addressed to everyone who feels attracted to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, whether they are Buddhist or not. I hope that non-Buddhists will not find it too full of technicalities, and especially that it will be helpful in illuminating the complex symbolism of vajrayana both to them and to Buddhists of other traditions who are unfamiliar with it.

The first question we must ask is whether it should really be called the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* at all. Probably most people who have read it, in any of its translations, are aware that this is not the original title, but a name given to it by W. Y. Evans-Wentz, the compiler and editor of its first translation into English.<sup>1</sup> This was chosen because of the text's apparent similarity in subject matter to the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, which was very popular at the time. That title was also invented and had proved to be extremely effective from the point of view of publicity. It is human nature to feel a fascination with death and an intense curiosity about what will happen afterward, so a name like this is excellent for catching readers' attention. It is quite likely that if Evans-Wentz had introduced it to the Western world as the *Great Liberation through Hearing during the Intermediate State*, it would not have attracted so much interest. Trungpa Rinpoche did not particularly like the new title, but we continued to use it for our translation because it is so well known.

Calling it the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is not entirely inappropriate; after all, the text is undeniably addressed to those who are close to death or who have just died, and it is read aloud to guide them. In another sense, we who think of ourselves as the living could really be called the dead. We are the unawakened, living our lives in a dream—a dream that will continue after death, then through life after life, until we truly awaken.

In this book, however, I shall refer to it by its short Tibetan title: *Liberation through Hearing*. This is because I also make use of some of the other texts associated with it, so it seems more consistent and appropriate to give it its real name alongside them. Also, my intention is not to treat it as a book of the dead in the usual sense of the word. Except incidentally, its application to the care of the dying and preparations for death, or its use in rituals for the dead, will not be discussed at any length. Instead, it will be presented as a book of the living: a book *for* the living, about this life. The ideas, the

visions, the insights it contains can have no genuine, effective significance for us if we approach them only as descriptions of what happens after death, and if we do not understand that they apply to us here and now in our everyday lives.

Trungpa Rinpoche, at the very beginning of his commentary to our translation, remarks that it could just as well be called the *Tibetan Book of Birth*.<sup>3</sup> He explains that it is a misunderstanding to treat it as part of the lore of death and compare it to the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* or to the death traditions of any other culture. “The book is not based on death as such, but on a completely different concept of death.” Its whole point is “the fundamental principle of birth and death recurring constantly in this life.” Wherever there is birth, there is death, and wherever there is death, there is birth. The book describes not only the process of dissolution, but also the process of coming into being, and these two processes are continually at work in every moment of life. According to the Buddhist view, nothing is permanent, fixed, or solid. The sense of self in each one of us, the “I,” is being born and dying every moment. The whole of existence, the entire world of our experience, is appearing and disappearing every moment.

Whatever happens to us after death is simply a continuation of what is happening to us now in this life, even though it manifests in unfamiliar ways: as the text says, “samsara is reversed, and everything appears as lights and images.” We are not catapulted into a completely different world, we just perceive the same world in a different way. Everything the text describes can be understood symbolically in terms of this life. Learning to perceive the world in this way is part of the transformational process of vajrayana Buddhism, and a practitioner who continues far enough along the path will be able to experience it all directly through meditation. But it is only in this life that we have the opportunity to prepare ourselves. After death, without the grounding influence of the physical body, events will overtake us with such speed and intensity that there will be no chance to stop and meditate. To be of use, meditation must become part of our innermost nature. That is why this is a book of the living as well as a book of the dead.

To treat it as a book of the living is not to deny that it is also literally about death nor to suggest that it cannot help the dead and dying. This interpretation does not in any way lessen the importance of contemplating the certainty of death or diminish its tremendous significance. Meditation on death, on the ephemeral nature of life, and on the inevitable consequences of our actions remains fundamental throughout the whole of the Buddhist path. There is no intention here to explain away rebirth in the six realms of samsara as an allegory or to reduce the visions of the deities, who are the living presence in the awakened state, to psychological archetypes. On the contrary, being able to see them all in terms of this life gives them an immediate relevance and rescues them from the danger of becoming mere fantasy. Reading *Liberation through Hearing* with this attitude can provide tremendous motivation and inspiration for practice.

In it, the events that take place during the period between death and rebirth are described in a way that is, by any standards, extraordinary—extraordinary to many Asian Buddhists as well as to people who are neither Buddhist nor from an Asian culture. Buddhism is said to be a nontheistic religion, yet here we find visions of buddhas known as the peaceful and wrathful deities. These deities are awe-inspiring and frightening, even in their peaceful forms, and overwhelmingly terrifying in their wrathful manifestations. They may be multicolored, many-headed, many-armed, part animal or part bird, or they may appear as avenging demons who pursue the dead through surreal landscapes amid a bizarre cacophony of sounds. Then there are the six realms of existence into which the dead persons may be reborn, perhaps as an animal or even as an otherworldly being such as a ghost or a god or goddess.

Sometimes people ask, “Do Buddhists really believe all this?” The immediate answer must be that only a small minority accepts the whole of this particular account, but that many more probably

accept the principle behind it, if not all the details. The outline of the teachings concerning death—the dissolution of the elements of the body followed by rebirth in accordance with one's previous actions—is accepted by all schools of Buddhism. But the existence of a period of transition between death and rebirth is not held by all, and there are different ideas about its nature. *Liberation through Hearing* presents us with very elaborate descriptions of all these processes, which are not found in such complete form in any other tradition.

To answer the question in a more satisfactory manner, we must look at the nature of belief in Buddhism and at the place of *Liberation through Hearing* in its history. The Buddha did not teach dogma; he offered a path based on understanding and personal experience rather than a creed. His own spiritual search was one of constant questioning and experimentation. The enlightenment he attained—the highest awakened state, cannot be expressed in ordinary human language. At first, he was extremely reluctant even to talk about it. Even after he was persuaded to teach, he never asked anyone to believe in what he said, but only to try it out for themselves. Words can only point to the truth; genuine knowledge must be experienced directly.

From the absolute point of view, to speak about truth is inevitably to lie, yet it is the very nature of truth to communicate itself. Once it is put into words, or even into images and symbols, it becomes subject to the limitations and distortions of human thought and language. The Buddha was very much aware of the limitations of human expression, and he knew that his teaching would be misunderstood. Frequently, he would remain silent when he was questioned about such things as the existence of the self or what happens to an enlightened person after death. At other times, he would allow the questioner to keep on suggesting alternatives, and to each one he would say no, it's not like that. Often his silence was an invitation to the questioner to look deeper into the preconceptions implicit in the question, which was based on false assumptions. Only a very few were able to understand his silence itself as an answer and to go away satisfied.

The Buddha certainly possessed that supreme gift of the greatest teachers to convey truth simply by his presence and to lift his disciples' minds into an intuitive state of awareness where doubts and questions become irrelevant. The warmth and radiance of his personality, which is clear from all the stories about his life, must have demonstrated better than any words his totally positive approach to the meaning of life and death. Unfortunately, his silence has left itself open to interpretation in rather negative ways, while his positive statements seem to have been ignored or glossed over, and Buddhism has sometimes falsely been presented as world-rejecting, agnostic, and even nihilistic. In contrast to this misleading impression of the original teaching, later forms of Buddhism may appear to go to the opposite extreme and are not accepted as genuine by followers of some Buddhist traditions.

Above all, Buddhism is a religion of practical methods for spiritual realization. Because of this, it contains many different views and formulations in response to people's needs and a huge variety of techniques to suit their inclinations and capabilities. Some of these may appear contradictory, yet they do not teach different truths; they present different points of view from which to approach the same truth. To distinguish the main movements, Buddhism is often described as consisting of the three *yanas*: *hinayana*, *mahayana*, and *vajrayana*. *Yana* is generally translated as "vehicle," but can also mean the path or the journey itself. The use of these three labels has become a rather sensitive issue, but they are very widely found, especially in the context of Tibetan Buddhism, so it is worthwhile to look into them a little.

In the most obvious sense, they correspond to phases in the historical development of Buddhism, represented by their characteristic scriptures. *Hinayana*, "the lesser way," is a retrospective label referring to the first period and is based on the actual words of the Buddha as reported by his disciples. The Buddha himself never attempted to codify his teachings into any kind of system. He taught in his local dialect rather than in Sanskrit, the language of orthodox religion. His disciples traveled far and

wide, so that many different collections of his discourses, instructions, and rules for monastic life were handed down from memory in the various languages of India and the surrounding region. According to tradition, eighteen separate monastic orders grew up during the centuries following the Buddha's death. Most of them died out or amalgamated, but four remained as distinct schools, which flourished alongside the later developments in the great monastic universities of India. Among these the sarvastivada provided the monastic rule and basic philosophical analysis that were transmitted to Tibet. The descendent of only one of the four schools, the Theravada, still exists today as a fully independent tradition, thanks to its survival in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. Its collection of teachings was preserved in Pali, a dialect of western India, and provides the most complete record we have of early Buddhism.

By about the first century B.C., a new movement was developing, which began to produce its own distinctive scriptures, the sutras. Traditionally, they are believed to have been taught by the Buddha during his life, but since people were not yet ready to hear them, they were entrusted to the serpents, deities and other semidivine beings until the time was ripe. The followers of this movement referred to it as mahayana, "the great way." In contrast, they called the earlier tradition hinayana, which, it must be admitted, had the meaning of inferior. This discrimination rested mainly on their differing attitudes toward liberation. On the one hand, certain hinayana orders seem to have concentrated on the negative concept of nirvana as extinction, with the belief that it can only be attained by oneself and for oneself. On the other hand, the mahayana was based on a sense of the interrelationship of all existence and the aspiration to lead every single living being to enlightenment, seen as a very positive state. Many different traditions with widely divergent views and practices, from the devotion of the Pure Land school to the distinctive meditation of Zen, emerged from the spread of the mahayana throughout Asia.

The third phase is vajrayana, "the indestructible way." Its scriptures are the tantras, revealed by the Buddha not as a human being, but in his transcendent aspect. The dating of this movement is still very speculative. There appears to be no recorded evidence of Buddhist tantras in the monasteries until the second half of the seventh century A.D., but they may well have been practiced secretly in isolated places long before that time. Vajrayana is not considered separate from mahayana, but a special section within it. The *Guhyasamaja Tantra*, for instance, says that those who practice it will "succeed in this best of ways, the highest mahayana, this way of the buddhas, the great ocean of mahayana." Vajrayana spread to the Far East in an incomplete form, and it was only Tibet that received and has preserved the complete heritage of Indian Buddhism, including all the levels of tantra.

That is the historical meaning of the three yantras, which cannot be totally disregarded, but which can be quite misleading. It is especially misleading if we try to label existing Buddhist schools, such as Zen, Theravada, or Tibetan Buddhism itself, as belonging to one or another yana on the basis of their historical origins. Contemporary Theravada practitioners understandably object to their path being considered inferior. Besides, hinayana contains all the fundamental teachings, and it is not possible that mahayana Buddhists intended to disparage the actual words of the Buddha! They were reacting only to what they perceived as a narrow-minded interpretation of his teachings on the part of certain groups at that time. If we look at those teachings as they are recorded in the Pali scriptures, we can find many passages to support the evolution leading to mahayana and vajrayana. In addition, the changes occurred very gradually and generally incorporated, rather than displaced, whatever existed already. In fact, all three yantras flourished together in India right up until the final destruction of the monasteries by Islamic invaders in the thirteenth century, as a result of which Buddhism was no longer able to survive in the land of its origin.

But there is another way of looking at the three yantras. The Buddhism of Tibet, although it is often referred to simply as tantric Buddhism, actually contains all three yantras. Trungpa Rinpoche and others

teachers in his tradition treat them as stages in spiritual progress: different psychological attitudes on the path, all equally valuable and necessary.

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The journey begins with hinayana, which is not regarded as inferior, but as the preparation for the foundation of the other yanas. Trungpa Rinpoche called it the narrow way. He described it as the path where we begin to make friends with ourselves and learn not to be a nuisance to ourselves and others. Here the emphasis is on working toward our own awakening, rather than that of all living beings. It is based on an attitude of honesty and humility. We realize that we need help and feel that we must do something about our own problems before we can even think about helping others. It is a path of simplicity and renunciation. At this stage, the attractions and temptations of worldly life are regarded as obstacles to be avoided, and there are many rules of conduct to help guide our behavior. As the basis of the entire path, it is never abandoned, but built upon like the foundation of a house. The meditation practices of this stage are those of tranquillity (Sanskrit *shamatha*), which is the practice of mindfulness to tame and calm the mind, and insight (Sanskrit *vipashyana*) into the nature of existence, which leads to the discovery of selflessness.

Practicing correctly with the simplicity of hinayana quite naturally results in a transformation of our relationship with the world. The narrow path leads into the open way, mahayana. The mahayana vision of the universe is a boundless web of interconnections embracing the whole of time and space. With this wider vision we realize that we are each part of the whole and that individual enlightenment attained in isolation is incomplete. With the feeling of space and relaxation that comes with selflessness, we begin to see that others are more important than ourselves. Compassion becomes the motivating force of practice. Training on this path is directed toward developing the six perfections, the transcendent virtues of generosity, morality, patience, energy, meditation, and wisdom.

Mahayana focuses not so much on the historical Shakyamuni Buddha, as on the principle of buddhahood manifesting in countless divine forms. The perfection of the spiritual realm is expressed in terms of all that is best in this world, and so the language of mahayana is filled with images of royal splendor, riches, sensual pleasures, and the beauty of nature. It emphasizes the ideal of the *bodhisattva*, an awakened person who chooses not to dwell in the peace of nirvana but to act for the benefit of all beings. At this stage, practitioners take the bodhisattva vow, a commitment to serve all beings and not to rest until every single one has awakened. We begin to realize that buddha-nature already exists within us, so it becomes possible to let go of spiritual ambition and the idea of attainment. Sensual pleasures are no longer regarded as hindrances in themselves; they can be purified and enjoyed by offering them to others. The path becomes a celebration, a great feast of joy to which we invite all living beings as our guests.

Vajrayana goes even further along the open way. No experience is rejected; everything is integrated into practice. Vajrayana is a path of spiritual alchemy, a path of transmutation. What is transmuted or transformed is our own experience: our perception of our own body and mind is transformed into divinity, the ordinary world is transformed into a sacred world, and the energy of negative emotions and destructive passions is transmuted into wisdom and enlightened action. A verse from the *Hevajra Tantra* expresses this principle very clearly:

Those things by which the world is bound,  
By those very things may its bondage be released,  
But the world is deluded and knows not this truth,  
And without this truth will not attain perfection.<sup>5</sup>

The methods of vajrayana are based on identifying oneself and the whole of one's experience with the qualities of enlightenment, which are brought to life in the forms of all the peaceful and wrathful



deities. The awakened state manifests everywhere, in every aspect of existence. This is the key to the language of vajrayana and the symbolism we find in *Liberation through Hearing*. The tantric path itself is divided into four or six stages, depending on which tradition one follows. At the final stage, the innermost essence of vajrayana, the very heart of tantra, lies the recognition that we have never been anything other than awakened. Here there is no longer any need for techniques, for symbolism, for transformation. The practitioner who has accomplished the path lives in a condition of complete simplicity and direct experience of reality.

Although the development of the three yantras seems perfectly natural in retrospect (at least from the point of view of vajrayana), the texts contain stories that show how revolutionary some of these ideas were perceived to be. In the sutras, it is related that many hinayana disciples walked out of the assembly and refused to listen to mahayana teachings; and when vajrayana was expounded in the tantras, even the bodhisattvas fainted in fear and had to be revived by rays of light shining out from the hearts of all the buddhas.

From the vajrayana viewpoint, they are different aspects of the same, single path. The Buddha did not hold anything back in his teaching, but how those teachings were interpreted and applied by his later followers could vary greatly. It depended not only on their own understanding, but also on the spirit of the times. Changes in social conditions, as well as the intellectual and religious environment, affect people's receptivity to ideas and their ability to put them into practice. India was never isolated; it was open to many streams of influences, especially in the far northwestern regions where vajrayana flourished. This does not mean that anything essentially different from the Buddha's original message was introduced, nor does it imply that his enlightenment was surpassed. The sutras of mahayana and the tantras of vajrayana simply unfold in their own special ways a vision already inherent in the Buddha's own words. They drew out to the fullest extent various aspects of his teaching that had not been emphasized previously because they could not be understood completely in accordance with the prevailing circumstances and conditions.

In the vajrayana tradition, one of the ways of communication is through extremely vivid and dramatic imagery. This approach, like the silence of the Buddha, has dangers, but of a different kind. There is the possibility of becoming fascinated by tantric symbolism and misled by its ambiguous language. This may lead to a belief based on wishful thinking and to a practice without understanding. The human tendency to believe what someone else tells us rather than try to understand through our own experience can easily provoke the opposite reaction, complete rejection: they are two sides of the same coin. We might have a reaction of bewilderment, or even of fear and dislike, which would prevent us from going deeper. This is why it is important to look carefully into the genuine meaning and purpose of these images during life in order to appreciate their potential significance for us after death. My intention in this book is to relate the symbolic world of vajrayana both to nontantric Buddhist teachings and to the experiences of everyday life.

*Liberation through Hearing* belongs to the highest stage of vajrayana, although it also speaks to the whole range of people of different capacities and levels of experience, taking for granted a familiarity with the entire Buddhist path. Inspiring as it is in its own right, its message is likely to be distorted without some understanding of the foundations on which vajrayana is built. It is impossible to understand tantric texts without a knowledge of these foundations and even more impossible to engage in tantric practices in any meaningful way without genuine experience of the basic principles of Buddhism, which are essentially the development of selflessness and compassion. As Trungpa Rinpoche said, "Trying to practise vajrayana without compassion is like swimming in molten lead—it is deadly."<sup>6</sup>

The first part of this book is intended to provide an infrastructure of basic information. It is not a comprehensive account of Buddhism, but only introduces those aspects that are particularly relevant

as a guide for further exploration of *Liberation through Hearing*. On certain points there are doctrinal differences and disagreements, even among the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, but in such cases I have followed Trungpa Rinpoche's teaching to the best of my understanding. The second part of the book will go through the text itself, bringing these principles into relationship with it. Before that, however, let us look at its origin and authorship.



*Liberation through Hearing* came into existence in its present form in the fourteenth century, but its story goes back six hundred years before that. Buddhism had already entered Tibet<sup>2</sup> in various forms from India, central Asia, and China, perhaps sporadically even as early as the third century. It was given royal patronage by the seventh-century king Songtsen Gampo, who sent his most learned ministers to India to learn Sanskrit and to create a script for the Tibetan language. Then in the second half of the eighth century, his descendant, Trisong Detsen, invited several famous teachers from India and firmly established Buddhism by founding Samye, the first monastery in Tibet. This is known as the earlier diffusion of dharma in Tibet.

Among these teachers was Padmakara, better known in the West as Padmasambhava. Both names mean "the Lotus-Born": literally, "he whose origin (*akara*) or birthplace (*sambhava*) is a lotus (*padma*)." In the tradition that he founded, Padmakara is the preferred name, and Trungpa Rinpoche hoped it would become more widely known and adopted, so I have decided to use it in this book (Padmakara should be pronounced with an emphasis on the second syllable, which has a long "a" sound; the others are short.) According to the legend of his miraculous birth, he was discovered as an eight-year-old child, sprung from the heart of a lotus in the center of Lake Dhanakosha in Uddiyana, now identified with the Swat Valley in northern Pakistan. He became renowned for his supernatural powers and was expressly invited to Tibet in order to overcome obstacles to the building of Samye and the spreading of Buddhism. Very little is known about him historically, but his spiritual influence was enormous, and in time he became revered as the most important figure in Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>3</sup> He is also known as Guru Rinpoche, "the Precious Teacher," and is regarded as the second Buddha, inseparable from the historical Buddha Shakyamuni himself, taking human form once more in order to teach the tantras. Through the work of Guru Rinpoche and his colleagues, Tibet received all the streams of Buddhism that existed in India: monastic, lay, philosophical, yogic, and magical.

During the following century, the line of kings descended from Songtsen Gampo died out, and the kingdom descended into political chaos. Buddhism was first suppressed and then neglected by the ruling families who had previously supported it. It survived in the border regions and continued to develop there, but almost a century and a half went by before it returned to the whole country in what has become known as the later diffusion of dharma. Gradually Tibetans, including Marpa, the guru of the great yogin and poet Milarepa, started traveling to India once again to receive teachings and take them back to Tibet. As a result of this revival, several distinct traditions developed, based on the work of certain renowned teachers and the particular practices they taught. Over the next few centuries these "new schools" formed the three main traditions now known as Kagyü, Sakya, and Geluk. In contrast to them, the tradition that had survived from the old days became known as Nyingma, "the Ancient." (The suffix *pa* can be added to the names of the schools to form an adjective and also indicates their followers.)

Padmakara, with his overwhelming presence and spiritual power, is the central figure and inspiration of the Nyingma tradition. He realized that the Tibetans were not yet ready for many of the profound insights of tantra and foresaw that Buddhism would soon endure a period of great upheaval, and so he magically concealed a vast number of teachings for the future. He did this with the



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