

ILLUSION OF LIFE AND DEATH



KYABJE DZOGCHEN PEMA KALSANG RINPOCHE

TRANSLATED BY CHRISTIAN A STEWART

Illusion is our life, our death. We are stuck in a dream world, but this is not a sweet dream. There is hope, but we must change.
We must help ourselves, and help each other.

'Illusion of Life and Death' presents us with the complete path to enlightenment. It is a personal testament to the value and effectiveness of the Buddhist teachings and an empowering embrace of our own potential. Written to intrigue and inspire beginners, as well as nourish more experienced practitioners, 'Illusion' is essential reading for anyone interested in awakening to a happier, more enlightened world.



Kyabje Dzogchen Pema Kalsang Rinpoche is one of the most eminent Lamas in Tibet and master of the Dzogchen teachings of Great Perfection. In this, his first volume of writings for a non-Tibetan audience, Kyabje Rinpoche shares what he describes as his 'entire teaching' in a style that is as much an oral teaching as a formal written instruction. 'Illusion of Life and Death' makes many profound Dzogchen teachings widely available in English for the first time.

MahaSandhi
Publishing

ISBN 978-0-9568596-0-0



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MAHASANDHI PUBLISHING

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5 Corinthian Court
West Hill Road
Cowes
Isle of Wight
PO31 7SF

www.dzogchen-monastery.org

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Design and typeset by Mahasandhi Publishing
Printed in the U.K.

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

'Illusion of Life and Death' examines the transitory nature of life and the need to make careful preparation for our future. Kyabje Dzogchen Pema Kalsang Rinpoche engages in thought-provoking discussion of the uncertainties faced by everyone, and using insightful observation, encourages us to reflect more deeply on what is truly important in life.

These discussions are followed by more traditional presentations of Buddhist teachings, including detailed instructions for the Dzogchen Preliminary Practices. Here, Kyabje Rinpoche draws from his deep knowledge of the tradition to guide the reader through each step of practice. Throughout the text, Kyabje Rinpoche does not shy away from confronting the reader with challenging questions in order to evoke genuine feelings and understanding of the Dharma.

In later chapters, Kyabje Rinpoche introduces some advanced and secret practices of the main Dzogchen teachings, including subtle body visualisations, rushen or dividing samsara and nirvana, and Jigme Lingpa's no-thought meditations. Many of these have not been previously made available in English.

Throughout the translation process, I have worked closely with Kyabje Rinpoche and his nephew Mura Rinpoche to ensure the meaning of the text is conveyed accurately and in keeping with the true spirit of the original. I have deliberately avoided embellishing the text with any of my own notes or explanations. Specifically, in some of the more advanced chapters, it was Kyabje Rinpoche's wish to avoid the inclusion of any additional material. The reader is therefore expected to use these teachings as part of a wider programme of study, supported by the guidance of a suitably qualified Lama.

May this virtue enlighten all beings!

Christian A Stewart
May, 2011

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A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE AND WORK OF
KYABJE DZOGCHEN PEMA KALSANG RINPOCHE

Having received an intense and enlightening education with some of the most eminent masters of the 20th century, Kyabje Pema Kalsang Rinpoche became twelfth Throne Holder of Dzogchen Monastery. Throughout the bleak period of the 1960s and '70s, he managed to maintain and practise Dharma in secret. As soon as circumstances permitted, Kyabje Rinpoche spared no effort in undertaking to completely rebuild not only Dzogchen Monastery, but also Shira Sing Buddhist University; and more recently Kyabje Rinpoche established Dzogchen Pema Tung Great Perfection Retreat Centre. His untiring efforts have resulted in a great revival of the Dzogchen tradition and Dzogchen Monastery is once again an unrivalled example of both scholarly excellence and meditative realisation.

Kyabje Pema Kalsang Rinpoche was born on 6th June 1943 in Dzachuka, Eastern Tibet, the homeland of many exceptional masters, including the great Bodhisattva Patrul Rinpoche and the incomparable scholar Mipham Rinpoche. Kyabje Rinpoche's mother was the sister of accomplished master Dzogchen Adro Socho, and she bore many signs of a dakini, including a naturally occurring AH syllable on her tongue. It is said that when Rinpoche was born the surrounding area was filled with blossoming flowers which had never been seen before, tents of rainbows appeared and water miraculously turned into milk. Rinpoche's maternal uncle, the fourth Mura Rinpoche Pema Norbu, named the child Pema Kalsang.

When Pema Kalsang reached the age of five, Dzogchen Kontul Rinpoche, who had been very close to the second Pema Banza, travelled to Dzachuka and arrived at the family camp. As soon as the young Pema Kalsang saw the Rinpoche, he went to sit on his lap very joyfully, as if he was a good friend. He also recognised the knife strapped to Kontul Rinpoche's belt, saying, "That's mine!" The knife had belonged to the second Pema Banza. The names of Rinpoche's parents, his place of birth and other details were found to correspond with the prophecies of Jamyang Khyentse Choki Lodro, the sixth Dzogchen Rinpoche and other genuine masters, and Pema Kalsang was identified as the third incarnation of the Great Khenpo Pema Banza.

In that region the first Dzogchen Pema Banza, also known as Padma Vajra or Pema Dorje, was considered the most learned master of his time. He presided as head Khenpo in Shira Sing Buddhist University for many years, and in the latter part of his life lived and taught in Dzogchen Pema Tung. He was amazingly realised and in particular, in visions of the wisdom body of All-knowing Jigme Lingpa, attained indications of realising the ultimate lineage, thereby receiving transmission of luminous secret Heart Essence. Khenchen Pema Banza had many eminent students including Mipham Rinpoche, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, the fourth Shechen Gyaltsab, Do Khyentse, the third Dodrupchen, Adzom Drukpa, the fifth Shechen Rabjam and the treasure revealer Lerab Lingpa. The second Pema Banza Daychog Dorje (born 1898) was also a very learned Khenpo. At the age of thirty-eight he took over as tenth Throne Holder of Dzogchen Monastery for over seven years following the fifth Dzogchen Rinpoche's passing.

Pema Banza is in turn considered to be the emanation of Zurchen Choying Rangdrol (1604-1669), who was the Tantra master, root guru and Dzogchen master to none other than the Great Fifth Dalai Lama. He is a very important and precious figure in Tibetan Buddhism, numbering many eminent masters of the seventeenth century among his students. The Great Fifth Dalai Lama wrote a biography of Zurchen Choying Rangdrol which shows the profound devotion he had for his master:

“By the power of these virtuous actions,
Until I have directly realised the expressivity of rigpa,
Samantabhadra,
In all lives, may you, my guardian and spiritual mentor,
Hold me inseparably in your care.”

At the age of seven, Kyabje Rinpoche went to Jangma monastery to study reading, writing and arithmetic with Dzogchen Khenpo Chogyur. He was an amazingly bright child and mastered his subjects quickly without any effort. Then, at the age of ten, together with Mura Tulku Pema Norbu, his parents, and a group of more than twenty others, Rinpoche was ceremonially brought to Dzogchen Monastery. Several thousand Lamas, monks and lay people rode out for three days to Dzachuka to welcome him. There were twenty or thirty incarnate Lamas in Dzogchen Monastery at the time, but none of them received such a huge welcoming party as this.

While he was growing up, Kyabje Rinpoche lived and studied with his root guru Khenpo Gonre and the sixth Dzogchen Rinpoche for many

years in the Lama Palace of Dzogchen Monastery. During this time he received what must have been the most profound and complete spiritual education possible, with highly realised masters as his teachers and companions. From Khenpo Gonre, Kyabje Rinpoche received many profound teachings including those of Longchenpa, Jigme Lingpa and Patrul Rinpoche, together with Khenpo Gonre's own writings.

In addition, Dzogchen Rinpoche gave Kyabje Rinpoche many key empowerments. Together they travelled to the monastery of Dzongsar Khyentse Jamyang Choki Lodru a total of three times, for two or three months at a time, to receive empowerments of the old and new traditions, Sutras, Tantras and treasure texts. In all, there were very few teachings, empowerments and transmissions which Kyabje Rinpoche did not receive during the course of his education.

At the age of thirteen, Kyabje Rinpoche took the vows of a novice monk from Khenpo Gonre and later received the vows of a fully ordained monk from the master Khenpo Wangde Rinpoche; he was given the ordination name Tupten Longdok Tenbe Gyaltzen. In 1955, Kyabje Rinpoche, together with Khenpo Gonre and the sixth Dzogchen Rinpoche, travelled to Central Tibet and Tsang on extensive pilgrimage and met many great Lamas including His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Following their return, from the age of fourteen to sixteen, Kyabje Rinpoche lived in the Long Life Retreat Centre above the Dzogchen valley with great Khenpo Pema Tsewang, who taught him personally. This was to be the last opportunity Kyabje Rinpoche had to study with his masters.

In the autumn of 1958, when Kyabje Rinpoche was seventeen, Dzogchen Rinpoche took him to Gyalgi Drakkar, the retreat centre of Great Khenpo Tupten Nyendrak. With tears in his eyes, Dzogchen Rinpoche requested the Khenpo to give Kyabje Rinpoche seventeen long life empowerments corresponding in number to the years of his age. Dzogchen Rinpoche said to the Khenpo, "Very soon the Buddhist tradition will face great obstacles and destruction. At that time don't worry about me, focus your attention on this young one"; and he pointed to Kyabje Rinpoche. It was only a few days later the political situation deteriorated into violence.

During the winter of the following year, Kyabje Rinpoche, Dzogchen Rinpoche and Khenpo Gonre were imprisoned in Dege for political re-education. At one stage Dzogchen Rinpoche and Khenpo were forced to return to Dzogchen to undergo sessions of criticism and confession. When they were leaving, Dzogchen Rinpoche implored Sonam Gyaltzen, the supervisor of his residence who was with them, to look after Pema

Kalsang Rinpoche especially well. Dzogchen Rinpoche promised Pema Kalsang, “We’ll meet again in the not too distant future.” At that time, Sonam Gyaltzen thought Dzogchen Rinpoche was instructing him to look after the young Rinpoche for a few days while he was away; only later did he realise what he had been told was prophetic. This was the last time they saw either Dzogchen Rinpoche or Khenpo Gonre. Kyabje Rinpoche himself recalls a brief exchange which happened several years earlier:

“One day, as we were sitting together, Dzogchen Rinpoche turned and said to me quite emphatically, ‘I have no heir but you. Do you understand?’ I didn’t know it at the time, but later I realised what Rinpoche said to me that day was prophetic.”

The next twenty years brought terrible suffering, even before the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution began. Dzogchen Monastery and Shira Sing Buddhist University were completely razed to the ground and Kyabje Rinpoche was forced to live in Dzogchen village.

From the start of 1959 to the end of 1980, under extreme duress and with no personal freedom, Kyabje Rinpoche was allotted the heaviest manual labour, forced into all kinds of physical exertions including moving earth and stones, making roads, and building houses for the Chinese. Not only was this work extremely exhausting physically, but the persecution resulting from the socio-political struggle was mentally even more debilitating. During the worst years, not only was he forced to do heavy labour during the day, but the evenings were filled with the mental torment of political education sessions. Every so often, Kyabje Rinpoche was arrested and threatened with imprisonment, or even death, if he did not conform, and this would last for several months at a time. He was often singled out as an object of intimidation, repression and struggle. During the years of the Cultural Revolution, Kyabje Rinpoche was accused of various anti-revolutionary crimes, and forced to live in conditions worse than anyone else. It was only many years later that he was given the less demanding work of tailoring.

In the words of Kyabje Rinpoche himself:

“More devastating than all of this was the complete waste of the crucial time when my youthful mental faculties were developing at their clearest. My progress in studying general areas of knowledge and science, and in particular the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, came to an abrupt end under the Chinese regime. The little

knowledge I have of Dharma does not extend beyond that which I had when I was sixteen years old. If I had completed my education, I believe I would certainly be able to write a few dozen Dharma-related books and leave a positive legacy which would benefit many future generations. However, the lives of my parents and family were taken when I was young, and my holy tutors, spiritual companions and master Khenpos were separated from me by force, leaving me alive but orphaned from their wisdom and love.”

During this time, Kyabje Pema Kalsang Rinpoche prayed day and night for the revival of the precious Buddhist teachings. He risked his life to store secretly even the smallest piece of scripture or representation of the Buddha which came into his possession. He did not waste any time resting from the exhausting daily labour, but tirelessly practised the approach and accomplishment of the yidam, and the practices of generation, perfection and Great Perfection. In this way he embraced the bad conditions into the path of Dharma, and facilitated enhancement of realisation. In Rinpoche’s own words:

“Despite all the physical and mental hardship and suffering that I endured, I also realised many beneficial aspects of these experiences, true teachers which cannot be found in the words of books. These included true renunciation of samsara, realisation of the impermanence and unreliability of worldly pursuits, the way to find inner happiness from undefiled samadhi, and non-separation from the Lama which resides in the centre of the heart.”

During the years 1978 and 1979, limited freedom to travel was allowed, and Kyabje Rinpoche took the opportunity to travel to almost all the important holy sites of the Central and Tsang regions of Tibet. He did this mostly on foot and managed to recover many extremely important texts and statues which had escaped destruction. These he saved, and often carrying them on his back, brought them to Dzogchen. In this way he managed to preserve many sacred items which otherwise would have been lost or sold.

Returning to Dzogchen, Kyabje Rinpoche cleverly saw an opportunity to reinstate one of Dzogchen Monastery’s important traditions. At that time, although religious practices were still strictly outlawed, the Chinese authorities had deemed the Legend of King Gesar of Ling to be suitable reading material. Kyabje Rinpoche managed to persuade the Chinese into allowing performances of the King Gesar Lama dance. The tradition of dancing the Legend of Gesar originated with the fifth Dzogchen

Rinpoche, who saw the dance in sacred visions. To reinstate this tradition, Kyabje Rinpoche personally crafted the masks which were traditionally used by Lama dancers in Dzogchen Monastery, and also managed to gather together basic materials for costumes.

Following this, Kyabje Rinpoche gathered resources to build a small mani wheel house. This was barely permissible at the time, but he managed to complete its construction and it still stands today, at the upper side of the monastery. At the time only a few collapsed earth walls remained of what used to be the glorious monastery of Dzogchen. Kyabje Rinpoche was finally able to move back into the monastery where he lived in a tent. Small pujas and spiritual services began to be held in makeshift buildings, and monks were permitted to wear robes once again.

In 1981, with the support of a good connection among the officials in charge of the region, Kyabje Rinpoche proposed to build a storehouse for the Gesar dance masks he had made. This was a tactical move to begin reconstruction of the ground floor of the Dzogchen Lama Palace. He based the design on the original building and began construction on the original site, managing to finish it the same year. This was the crucial first step in the revival of Dzogchen Monastery.

In the same year, Kyabje Pema Kalsang Rinpoche, together with Zankar Rinpoche, managed to get permission to establish the first Tibetan Language College of Sichuan Province on the site of Shira Sing Buddhist University. Kyabje Rinpoche made great efforts, and travelled great distances to invite senior non-sectarian masters, chief holders of the Dzogchen teaching lineage, to give instruction on Tibetan language and other core subjects. Because Dzogchen is historically such an important seat, these eminent Lamas and Khenpos were willing to act as school teachers in the new Tibetan Language School.

At first the school was merely a few tents pitched on the site of the original university. Only later was it possible for basic classrooms and accommodation to be built. The school served as a lone outpost of learning and culture to educate a generation of Tibetans who otherwise would have had no opportunity of receiving an education or even studying their own language. At that time, becoming a monk or nun was prohibited, so the school also served as a refuge for young men and women, where they were able to dedicate themselves to concentrated study. Later, the Tibetan Language School was moved to Da'u, and finally to Dartsedo, where it continues to provide comprehensive learning

opportunities to young Tibetans; opportunities which are very hard to find elsewhere in the region.

After that, with the slightly improved political climate and the support of one regional official, permission was granted to rebuild the main temple of Dzogchen Monastery. However, at the time money and materials were in scarce supply, so Kyabje Rinpoche expended tremendous effort and went through numerous hardships to gather resources, travelling far and wide to distant communities to garner support. A few other Tulkus also lent their support to the efforts, and as political rule gradually loosened its harsh grip, others joined in the reconstruction efforts, including people from the village.

In 1982, at the age of thirty-nine, Kyabje Rinpoche set out to travel to India, but was tragically involved in a terrible car accident. He was seriously injured and almost died. In Kyabje Rinpoche's own words:

“I managed to survive all the obstacles that threatened my life. I was the only one left of all the Lamas and monks who had lived in the Lama Palace of Dzogchen. That I was able to continue to work for the Dharma at a time of extreme decline was certainly due to the power of Dzogchen Rinpoche's prayers, and the blessings of Khenpo Tupten Nyendrak's seventeen long life empowerments.”

Kyabje Rinpoche was forced to spend a year in hospital where he underwent multiple operations to pin together broken bones, some of which had to be repositioned over and over again. Not disheartened, Kyabje Rinpoche recovered his strength, and relying on two walking sticks, travelled to India and Nepal, working for the teachings and making pilgrimage to all the major holy sites. During this time he once again met with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. From India he visited Europe and the United States, where he gave teachings to many fortunate Westerners.

Having returned to Tibet, Kyabje Rinpoche took responsibility for the completion of the Lama Palace, as well as the reconstruction of the Grand Temple of Dzogchen Monastery. Despite the physical hardships, he once again joined in the manual labour on the construction site. Pooling all his resources, Kyabje Rinpoche built a golden reliquary stupa to enshrine the relics of the sixth Dzogchen Rinpoche, which he had risked his life keeping for twenty-five years. The stupa is now enshrined in the Temple of Great Perfection in Dzogchen Pema Tung Retreat Centre.

From a prophesy of the Great Treasure Revealer Pema Namdrol Lingpa:

“On the supreme fearless lion throne
Of Shira Singha Dharma centre,
Padma’s mind emanation, named Pema,
Will illuminate like the sun
The excellent and enlightened qualities
Of all the conqueror’s teachings,
And the thousand-petal lotuses
Of many young Pemas will bloom.”

This prophesy was fulfilled when reconstruction of the great Buddhist University of Shira Sing began in the fortunate Dragon year of 1988. Kyabje Rinpoche used the small amount of money he received in compensation from his road accident to start the building work. In the past, the university was a highly specialised establishment accommodating only fifty of the most exceptional and promising Tulkus and monks, together with the most eminent Khenpos and Lamas. Kyabje Rinpoche saw the opportunity for expansion, and constructed buildings to accommodate five hundred monks, and a large temple which could hold one thousand. Again, Kyabje Rinpoche worked personally on the construction work to the extent that the soles of his feet split open.

When the building was complete, he invited many of the surviving senior and most learned masters from all schools of Tibetan Buddhism to revive the teaching lineages, and so Shira Sing Buddhist University attracted students from all traditions. This was a very fragile time for the Dharma in Tibet, but Kyabje Rinpoche managed to bring up a new generation of monks, Tulkus and Khenpos in the true Dharma, educating them to the highest possible standard. Kyabje Rinpoche spent the next ten years living in Shira Sing focusing on educating the younger generation, so there would be qualified teachers to spread the Dharma in the future. The basis of the Buddha’s teaching, the ordination tradition, including the lineage of vows, was also revived from the foundations upwards by Kyabje Rinpoche.

In 1998, Kyabje Rinpoche began the construction of the Dzogchen Pema Tung Great Perfection Retreat Centre in the secluded grassy meadow of Pema Tung, the site of his previous incarnation Pema Banza’s retreat centre. In 2003, the stunning Temple of Great Perfection was completed, and it became time for Kyabje Rinpoche to accept the throne of teaching. Despite his education coming to an abrupt end when he was only sixteen, everyone was amazed at the lucid and realised teachings he began to

impart on the most profound and subtle topics of the Great Perfection. Now, every summer, large numbers of Tulkus, Khenpos, monks and nuns come from all over Tibet to attend his profound teachings.

According to a prophesy by Apung Terton:

“In tattered times, around Rudam snow-mountain,
A crystal boulder will unfurl in the Lotus Ground.”

Kyabje Rinpoche considers the reference to the crystal in this prophesy not to refer to shining boulders of temples or buildings, but to the crystal used to indicate rigpa awareness in the Great Perfection tradition. This prophesy, therefore, accurately foretells a revelation of the Dzogchen teachings in Dzogchen Pema Tung or Lotus Ground, after a serious decline.

Kyabje Rinpoche is the main holder of one of the closest and most pure Dzogchen Longchen Nyingthig lineages in the world. Only five lineage holders connect All-knowing Jigme Lingpa with Kyabje Rinpoche, all of whom were truly eminent masters. The heart son of Jigme Lingpa was Jigme Gyalwe Nyugu, root guru of Patrul Rinpoche, who bestowed the Longchen Nyingthig lineage to the fourth Dzogchen Rinpoche Migyur Namkhar Dorje. He then passed it to Khenpo Orgyen Tenzin Norbu, who was the uncle and guru of the incomparable master Khenpo Zhenga, Shenpen Choki Nunwa. He, in turn, was root guru to great Khenpo Yonten Gonpo, who was the root master of Kyabje Rinpoche. This is the close lineage which brings tremendous realisation and blessings to all the teachings, empowerments and transmissions Kyabje Rinpoche imparts.

Kyabje Rinpoche has been invited to the great monastic seats of Dorje Drak, Mindroling, Palri, Jigme Lingpa's seat at Tsering Jong, Samye and Drigang, as well as over fifty of Dzogchen's branch monasteries to give teachings and empowerments. He has sent financial support, as well as Tulkus and Khenpos, to these and many other monasteries and universities all around Tibet. Kyabje Rinpoche was the first master to give the vows of ordination in Samye Monastery after the Chinese take-over, in the same temple where the first seven Tibetans became monks. He has also established extensive community aid programmes through his charitable organisation, the Kalsang Foundation. He has recognised over fifty Tulkus of the younger generation and is the root guru to tens of thousands of Tibetans, Chinese and Western students.

More recently, in Dzogchen Pema Tung, Kyabje Rinpoche has begun to give regular teachings to the lay community on the Preliminaries and Pure Realm practices. Traditionally, the lay community would support the monastery's activities and receive occasional empowerments and blessings, but this is the first time in Dzogchen that Dharma teachings have been given to the wider community. To enable the community to receive these teachings, as well as to accommodate large gatherings of monks and nuns, the temple in Pema Tung was extended in 2009. The result has been tremendously positive, with many lay people becoming active in studying and practising the Dharma for the first time.

Despite being very active in teaching, writing and travelling to many centres of Dharma, Kyabje Rinpoche spends most of his time in retreat, rising early every day to engage in full practice sessions of prostration, sadhana practise and meditation. Despite all the tremendous hardships and challenges he has faced throughout his life, Kyabje Rinpoche has always remained happy and content, with a vast and spacious outlook. He embodies activities of Buddha body, speech and mind. With his body he has rebuilt Dzogchen Monastery from the foundations up. With his speech he teaches the enlightened view of the Great Perfection, and with his mind he never ceases in his efforts to benefit all sentient beings.

Undoubtedly, Dzogchen Monastery, now full of life and Dharma, is almost entirely the result of the intense and prolonged effort of one single master, Kyabje Rinpoche. Without his efforts, Dzogchen would probably still be empty and lifeless. He is the vital force and embodiment of Dzogchen the monastery, Dzogchen the teaching and Dzogchen the realisation.

In Rinpoche's own words:

“From 1980 to the present day, I have been busy with many activities of Dharma, reviving the continuum of previous teachings and practice, and further developing them. For the sake of one Dharma journey, I was involved in a car crash which resulted in the physical problems I continue to suffer from. However, with the joy and happiness that comes from reviving the life of the precious Dharma teachings and practice with my own warm blood, I make prayers of aspiration that all my journeys and activities may benefit the mind. For as long as I live, by uniting and training with the Dharma, I pray this may never cease.”

ILLUSION OF LIFE AND DEATH

KYABJE DZOGCHEN PEMA KALSANG RINPOCHE

ONE

THE FIRST YESTERDAY AND THE LAST TOMORROW

To begin, I would like to consider where all of us living on this spherical planet came from, how we exist, and ultimately what we will become. But firstly, in order to do this, we must address the question of the nature of time. The moment in which we began to think about this topic has now passed, along with a few more moments of our lives, so let us take a look backwards and ask: Where have these moments disappeared to?

What we call 'time' is a vast ever-flowing river, a great demon that consumes everything. If I were to trace back this morning to yesterday, yesterday to the day before, and so on, I would eventually reach the day I first appeared in this world. The day before that I was not yet born, but there were certainly many other people who were. If we go back further along this stream of endless yesterdays, we will eventually come to the point when the first living creatures appeared. Before these single-celled creatures came into existence there was only physical matter. Physical matter, despite lacking consciousness, undergoes formation and disintegration in the same way as the living creatures of the world come into existence and die. If we trace even further back in time to before the earth existed, we are able to infer that there were other planets in existence at that time, but who can say how many of these planets there were? The most advanced telescope cannot see even a fraction of the universe, so currently it is impossible to determine exactly how the stars and galaxies came to be formed.

The enlightened Buddha taught that the cycles of the universe are endless and have no beginning. It is also taught in the Buddhist scriptures that in one single atom an unimaginable number of universes exist. These profound concepts are important to consider, no matter how limited our world view may be.

Again, if we trace time forwards from tomorrow, we inevitably find another tomorrow. Even if tomorrow is my time to die, it is most probable that there will be other humans still alive who will experience even more tomorrows. Through such a process of analysis we may reach

the conclusion which the Buddha asserted, that the cyclic existence of samsara is endless.

Where did we come from? We all came from our parents. Where did they come from? They came from their parents. If we trace backwards in time in this way we will come to the moment when a creature produced the very first offspring. Where did this creature come from? It could have evolved from a similar species, it might have come from a different planet, or perhaps it came into existence miraculously. These are the only possible options.

If we suggest the creature came from another planet, we assume there are living creatures on other planets in the universe. We cannot see these planets and we do not know how many there may be. It may be stretching our imagination, but we cannot be certain that alien worlds and extraterrestrial creatures do not exist. Even if we trace time back in this way to an ancestor from another planet, we are still unable to determine the beginning of time.

If humans and other types of creature are the result of evolution, or even came into being through miraculous birth, all of them depend on the basis and interaction of the four main elements: earth, water, fire and wind. However, a living creature does not come to life from a mere arrangement of these elements. Regardless of the type of living creature or the place where they come into existence, each one is, to a greater or lesser degree, conscious. The continuum of consciousness is determined by propensities and their results, and this is known as karma.

Two thousand five hundred years ago the Buddha taught that multitudinous kinds of universes come into existence through the action of interdependent connection and karma. These two concepts, together with the unimaginable true nature of phenomena, which is beyond the normal comprehension of ordinary beings, must become the main focus of our attention if we are to understand the nature of our existence in this world.

There is a point, known in the scriptures of the Dzogchen Great Perfection as the 'ground where samsara and nirvana divide'. It marks the very moment when, through the creative power of interconnectedness, the four elements and karmic winds unite together, and a consciousness becomes associated with a physical body possessing the five sense faculties. It is through examining this crucial event that I believe the

investigations of materialists, religious believers and impartial scientific researchers will find common ground.

There are three periods in the time cycle of a universe: formation, abiding and destruction. This cycle of change is the essential nature of every material object. In the Buddhist scriptures the period of time when a universe is formed is called the 'aeon of formation'. The time it abides is the 'aeon of remaining', and finally, when the universe disintegrates, it is known as the 'aeon of destruction'. This is one way in which we can understand the changes of our world system.

Alternatively, by examining ancient rocks and fossils, we can learn about the gradual formation of our universe over hundreds of thousands of years, and how it changes. However, ultimately it is certain that this world system will reach a point of disintegration. At that time it is not certain if other world systems will also disintegrate. This planet that we live on will be destroyed eventually, but other planets may not.

According to Buddhist understanding, consciousness exists separately from the four elements, and is able to change its physical basis. Should our planet be destroyed, we can infer that consciousness would be able to transfer to another planet or world system. For this and other reasons, researchers should at least develop clear understanding of what consciousness is in essence, from where it arises, and finally how it can change.

According to the Buddhist scriptures, there are six or eight different modes of consciousness, but none of these is understood to transcend the illusions which appear to the mind as reality. This means that in everyday life, the natural clear awareness of the mind is shaken up by karmic winds, which cause all kinds of discursive thoughts and feelings to arise. If we are continuously driven by these karmic winds, we experience unstable feelings of pleasure and suffering throughout rebirth after rebirth.

However, if we engage in particular practices and conditions are favourable, our experiences can change. The senses of the mind can become separated from the disturbing winds. This will cut their continuum and the mind will come to rest in its natural state. In Buddhism this is understood to be the special state called 'attainment of liberation' or 'enlightenment'. It is also known as 'separating from' or

‘passing beyond suffering’, Nirvana in Sanskrit. This is nothing more or less than entering a state of permanent and fully satisfying happiness.

If this is so, the question arises: when did consciousness first appear? Other than the aspect of consciousness which has been confused from time without beginning by the power of ignorance, there are no newly appearing consciousnesses. If new consciousnesses were to appear, we could discover the beginning of cyclic existence. This is not to be found, so in the same way, a beginning of consciousness is undiscoverable.

‘Time’ is the name given to the division between past and future. No one is able to say, “This is the start of time.” For this reason, the esoteric Dzogchen Great Perfection scriptures epitomise the conclusion of all Buddhist analytical traditions: the true state is understood to be timeless, beyond the three times, and known as the ‘fourth time of equality’.

Due to our ignorance, or the external influence of unknowing, we take on all kinds of physical forms continuously, and experience bouts of happiness and suffering. In this present life we have taken birth in this world to parents with whom we have karmic connections. If we continue to create more karmic propensities, we will have no choice but to follow their resulting influences, just as a dream unfolds uncontrollably while we sleep.

Billions of people who currently live in this world are ceaselessly busy every day and unable to relax at night. They keep themselves occupied with countless tasks right up until the moment they die. We have never met and we will never meet anyone who has managed to accomplish all the tasks they think they must complete in their lifetime. We are all born in different places, our fates are different, the level of comfort and status we enjoy varies, but we all spend our entire lives chasing after happiness and comfort. Ultimately we all end up the same. We have to leave everything behind and depart empty-handed. Both the vulnerable and exhausted beggar wandering around the outskirts of a town and the silken-robed king living in a wonderful palace full of jewels are equally powerless in front of the Lord of Death.

Modern people are becoming expert in engineering and science, and we witness daily advances in technological development. The force of competition ensures this will continue with even more impressive developments in the future. However, with the rapid proliferation of external material objects, disturbances to our internal state of mind also increase. Positive tendencies are not encouraged, and the result is

imbalance. One person's pursuit of pleasure harms others. This kind of selfish motivation results in misery, both for us and others, and these ripples extend out into the wider world, influencing matters beyond our comprehension.

Analysing the limits of yesterday and tomorrow, we see that time does not stay still for one moment but passes away continuously. An entire aeon and a single moment are identical when they are over. We consider living for a hundred years to be a long life, but in another world system it may pass with just a click of the fingers. Our lives consist of sleeping, waking, eating and sleeping again. We may occupy ourselves with trivialities, like children at play; but after what seems like no time at all it is as if a switch is suddenly turned off. Between one beat and the next our heart stops and we are powerless to get up from what has become our deathbed.

Like last night's dream, the time of childhood and youth flashes by without us even noticing, in the same way as the sun passes over the western mountains. When we suddenly come up against the great door of death, we see that all the things we rushed around busily achieving are useless. It confirms that everything we do in life is like the dance of a madman. Therefore I consider it very important for us to examine our current situation carefully.

At present there are billions of people living on this planet. The previous generations also contained similar numbers of people. The total number of people who have set foot on this earth is beyond calculation. Like us they all ran around, frantically trying to achieve things in their lives. Ultimately they did not achieve anything permanent and at last even their names have vanished from memory. This is both comical and depressing. Among these trillions of people there were certainly many intelligent and far-sighted people, but none of them found a way to live forever. Only a few of them were truly unafraid of death, having realised and investigated the happiness and suffering that follows it. What is the reason so few people investigate and realise the nature of life and death?

It is a terrible shame that throughout all ages various false religions and cults have exploited countless people for political and financial gain. Through instilling ignorant philosophies, blind faith and fear, these false religions have ruined the lives and minds of many generations of people. However, to consider the importance of the future, in terms of rebirth for example, as some religious cults do, is much better than never addressing

such concepts at all. In this way, a mistaken path can promote the urge to find an authentic one, and through gaining experience of opposing points of view, this situation has helped create a legacy of experience for future generations. If people of the past and present were as concerned with questions of death and what lies beyond as they are with concerns of this life, this would certainly result in benefitting everyone.

Some exceptional masters, by spending their entire lives in meditation on profound truths, have actually transmuted their physical bodies into light. However, it is my guess that if they had concentrated their attention and effort on the mundane pursuits of one lifetime, they would probably have achieved even greater scientific advances than the most pioneering modern scientist. But these Buddhist masters, using the opportunity given by what they considered to be the borrowed body of one lifetime, contemplated deeply and with great insight on how their suffering and the suffering of others could be overcome, once and for all. Understanding the implications of future rebirths, these masters sought a method to enable them to abandon the afflictions that are the cause of, and main factors involved in, all our problems. They sought the answer to the crucial question: how to put an end to suffering forever. These masters established a new path for achieving this goal which is a million times more useful for everyone than, for example, establishing a human colony on Mars.

To illustrate the importance of a far-sighted attitude with regards to our current situation, let us look at the Legend of the Supreme Steed:

Long ago, before his enlightenment, Buddha Sakyamuni was born as the son of a sea merchant. He was named Singala and was very handsome and strong. As a boy he was extremely intelligent and he studied all areas of learning and became very wise. When he grew up, after pleading with his father, he finally obtained permission to equip a ship and together with five hundred men, set sail to find wish-fulfilling jewels.

To navigate the great ocean they knew they would have to face grave danger and risk their lives many times, but they were determined. Singala thought, "If we don't encounter any obstacles, we'll be able to cross the great ocean and find what we desire, but if the boat sinks we'll be eaten by sea monsters. If we're driven off course by unfavourable winds we won't be able to return home and we'll all lose our lives." Singala captained the ship, with a crew of five hundred other merchants.

Having set sail, a powerful easterly wind drove the ship off course towards the shores of the southern Copper Island where, unknown to the sailors, lived flesh-eating demonesses. On the island were two fortunetelling banners; one indicated fortunate events, the other predicted disasters. As the merchant ship smashed against the island's rocky coast, the banner indicating fortunate events shook. This alerted the attention of the demonesses who knew immediately that a ship had been wrecked.

The demonesses transformed themselves into beautiful women, dressed up in fine clothes, adorned themselves with gorgeous jewellery, and ran down to the seashore. When they saw the merchants swimming towards the island, the demonesses called out to them. "Handsome men, come here!" they cried. "We have the best food and clothes, delightful accommodation and villas, pleasure grounds, forests, parks and bathing pools. We have wish-fulfilling jewels, gems, pearls, right-spiralling conch shells, and many more riches. Take these for yourselves, we have no men folk here, become our husbands and look after us." All this was promised to the merchants on one condition; they were forbidden to venture down the path which led to the south of the island.

The men, seduced by the demonesses, fell in love with them and fathered many children. A long time passed. The merchant leader Singala began to think over what had happened and wondered why the women were so protective about the southern path. He decided he must discover the secret. One night he gently left his wife sleeping in bed, strapped a sharp sword under his arm and set out to the south.

After walking for some time, he began to hear the cries of many men echoing out of the darkness. Listening carefully, he heard the lament: "We're forever separated from our families, our children, and loving friends... We'll never return to the wonderful human world in this lifetime..." Terrified by what he heard, Singala stopped in his tracks. At last, overcoming his fear, he made for the direction where the cries were coming from and swiftly reached a huge iron city surrounded by a high wall. Thinking there must be a few windows in the wall, he searched the perimeter but could not even find a hole big enough for a rat to enter. However, close to the northern edge was a very tall tree. Singala climbed the tree and was able to look down into the city.

Inside he saw a group of wretched men cowering in houses made of metal. Calling out to them, Singala asked, "How did you end up in here? Why are you weeping?" The men replied, "We were merchants from the human world. We were sailing across this ocean when sea monsters

destroyed our ship. By clinging to spars and broken wood we survived and swam to this Copper Island. But when we arrived we were deceived by a group of demonesses. They transformed themselves into beautiful women and seduced us into becoming their lovers and fathering their children. Not long after this, more traders were shipwrecked and arrived on the island. When the demonesses discovered that new merchants had arrived, they revealed their true terrifying forms to us. They devoured most of us immediately, down to the last hair and nail. They even licked up the drops of blood which had fallen on the ground. The few of us they didn't eat were thrown into this metal fortress to be eaten later."

Singala asked the prisoners if there was any way to escape. They replied, "We have no way out. However we try, the metal walls double or treble in size so we can't escape. But there is a way out for you. Gods once passed over in the sky and called out to us, "Hey, childish traders from the human world! On the fifteenth day of this month at full moon, follow the northern path. There the king of horses known as Powerful Cloud lives on wild Salu rice. He is free of illness, and has great strength. When he extends his head and asks three times in a human voice, 'Who wants to travel safely and easily to the world across the ocean?' approach him and say, 'We want to travel across the ocean, take us safely to the human world.' Then he will carry you across the ocean."

Hearing this, Singala memorised the exact instructions of the gods and returned to his house, slipping into bed without waking the sleeping demon-woman. The next day he got up early and secretly assembled the other merchants in a secluded park. He told them exactly what he had seen and heard the previous night. Everyone agreed to go to the north on the fifteenth day, and Singala forbade the traders to speak of the plan or bring their children or wives.

On the full moon night the merchants followed the path to the north, found the king of horses and begged him to take them back to the human world. The king of horses spoke to them, saying, "Do not be even the slightest bit attached to your women, your children, or your houses or riches, and do not look back. If you are attached you will fall from my back like a ripe fruit from a tree and the demonesses will eat you alive. Those without attachment, simply hold onto my mane and you will escape easily." Saying this, the great horse stooped down and allowed them to mount.

Some of the merchants clambered onto his back, some onto his hind quarters, and they all held onto his mane. Using all his strength, the king

of horses named Powerful Cloud soared up into the sky. Below on the island, the banner which predicted disaster suddenly shook violently and the demonesses immediately knew that the merchants were escaping. They quickly transformed their faces to seem beautiful, adorned themselves with the finest jewellery and, carrying their children, called out with heart-wrenching cries, "Handsome men! Have you no consciences? Stay as our lovers and protectors, this is your home, these are your children, and we are your wives!" Some of the merchants felt attachment towards their partners, children and possessions and so slipped from the mighty horse's back. As they fell to the ground and ran to their wives, the demonesses revealed their true repulsive form and devoured them completely, even licking the last drops of blood from the ground. Singala and the remaining merchants felt no attachment and returned safely back to the human world.

Like the merchants in the legend, if we are attached to our identity and our possessions we will never be free from cyclic existence. If we do not experience attachment we will become liberated forever. So we need to think like this: We are merely a wandering consciousness from some unknown place. This consciousness has conjoined with the sperm and ovum of our parents to produce a solid body of flesh and bone, but it is through this that we experience all the suffering of this life, without the slightest true happiness.

Everything desirable in cyclic existence is certainly deceptive, no different from the island of demonesses in the legend. At the end of life there is not one living creature that does not have to go screaming into the mouth of the demoness of impermanence. If just one person could manage to refrain from seizing onto essence-less deceptive phenomena and find a method to escape permanently from this place of suffering, cyclic existence, he or she would become a leader of many people, like the merchant chief Singala. Everyone would consider them wise, intelligent and more exalted than others.

We consider the length of our human lives to be very long. The time we spend running around attending to mundane concerns can be divided into past, present and future. However, we are unable to separate the present moment from the past and future. Because of this, the past and future cannot be determined either. Therefore everything that depends on the continuity of time, which does not exist inherently, is either

grossly impermanent, obviously changing continuously, or subtly impermanent, but still changing moment by moment.

If this is the case, then, whether we consider the past or the future, even the nature of great mountains and the earth itself is changeable and unstable. Obviously our small and feeble human body is even more unstable. Made of fragile flesh, blood and bone it can be destroyed by just small changes in heat and cold. Compare photos of yourself when you were a child to those taken when you were grown up, or in middle age, and now perhaps, when you are old and decrepit. Looking back at past events that happened yesterday or the day before it is hard to believe the months and years are now gone forever.

The changing appearance of our face and body can be compared to a soap opera on television. It is almost as if the suffering of human life experienced by one person from childhood to old age is condensed into a single episode, just an hour or a half hour long. But this is our own real TV show, a living tragedy of human life. The way to end the script of this brief programme depends on you, the writer and director, and it is connected with the future path you take in life.

The path in front of us has many turns. From the crossroads of uncertain paths, which direction we choose should depend on our new eyes of wisdom, otherwise we will be confused by lack of awareness. If we do not even have a plan for tomorrow, we will be left to be jostled along by others. If we let this happen and the unseeing group we follow jumps into a great ocean, will we also follow then? Think about this.

We pass through the appearances of childhood, youth, adulthood and old age which are accompanied by the sufferings of birth, ageing, sickness and death. Eventually we will come to the end of our human life. However, we presently have enjoyments and happiness and we assume that we will live a long time, so we strive to increase our wealth and possessions, cope with adverse circumstances, and look after our loved ones. Jobs that need our attention keep on appearing, one after another, like the ripples of a stream. If these tasks do not cease appearing then we will never reach an eventual or definite goal. Therefore, if we do not have a guarantee that we are going to live forever, the way we live our lives is no different from that of the most ignorant animal. Having been rounded up for slaughter, a yak still munches grass unaware of the fact that its life is about to end.

In the time since the formation of the earth many billions of years ago, there has not lived one single being that has not died. In one hundred years time everyone on this earth will almost certainly be dead. If we had clairvoyance or foreknowledge of the exact day, month, year and cause of our death, we would have no appetite for food today. However, we are like stupid yaks in many ways. We know that one day we will die, but we do not know when or how, so we laze around carefree, cheating ourselves, as if we could sit around like this forever. Is this not incredibly dangerous?

Now, I am going to push the nib of my pen to record the memory of events in my own life:

Into the arms of my parents were born five treasured spirits, like five feathers blown together by the winds of karma. These were my elder and younger brother and sisters. During the period when we were together, our family situation was wealthy and harmonious. We lived in nomadic pastures like gardens, where wild deer, donkeys and other forest animals wandered peacefully. We ate fresh and nutritious food, wore clothes of soft white lamb fleeces, and spent our time playing and enjoying life. When I think about it now, this life was as wonderful as that of the gods. But this vision of a happy and pleasurable human life disappeared like mountaintop mist, a summer rainbow, or the dream of last night; just another example of impermanence.

My younger brother was a kind-hearted and intelligent young monk with a tanned face and rosy cheeks; everyone liked him. In August of 1959, when he was just thirteen years old, he was forced to flee his home and leave his playground behind. Surrounded by the bodies of the relatives who had brought him up, his father, uncles and aunts, and the gentle horse who was his constant companion, his maroon robes were torn to pieces. Among bombs that struck like lightning, just as a flower is destroyed by hailstones, a hail of bullets that knew no compassion stole his cherished life, and his warm blood fell onto cold ground.

My younger sister was also thirteen when we were separated forever. She had a light complexion with rosy cheeks, and teeth like rows of pearls. Like all girls of the nomadic meadows, she was always kind and happy, dressed in her soft lamb's wool clothes and hat. Sometimes she would go out with a thousand or more of our family's sheep to the high park-like meadows of the mountains. There she would enjoy picking flowers with petals which looked like red silk tassels, and playing with the little lambs. After her elder brother and entire family had gone together down the

path of impermanence, she did not wander very long in the barren plain of suffering. In the darkness of night the howls of a wolf merged with the wailing northerly wind across the wilderness, and a lone girl, radiant in the prime of youth, suddenly fell.

My youngest sister, lovely, and complete with all the beauty of youth, was orphaned at six. After being left without friend or protector she suffered great misery and yearning, with no chance of enjoying any feelings of happiness and pleasure in this world. Not long after, the fragile spirit of this little one also travelled, once again, down a future path.

In summer, young lotus blooms in a flower garden are beautiful in every way and emanate natural fragrance. The smooth surfaces of fresh petals are more beautiful than any painted by an artist's brush. Some are beginning to blossom, some are fully developed, some buds are just forming. All of them have grown from the same root, their gorgeous petals and leaves attractive to everyone. But suddenly black storm clouds cover the sky. Lightning, thunder and hail stones crash down, and the delicate flowers are destroyed to the root.

My tear drops of terrible sadness rain on fierce flames of yearning. Feelings of unbearable pain well up in my heart. Urged by the force of sadness and yearning, I use my tears as ink to draw the following picture:

Alas! Sun above! Can you see
upon the ground your beams embrace
vague reflections of my sisters and brother?
Please send out warm rays of kind light
to care for each of them.

Full white conch moon!
In your orbit have you seen
three wandering, unsupported spirits?
Please illuminate their lonely path
with your brilliant light.

Vast earth! May the fresh blood
of my cherished, precious siblings
dissolve into your soil and revive you.
May the essence of their radiant flesh
merge into your great expanse.

THE FIRST YESTERDAY AND THE LAST TOMORROW

Keep them forever safe
in your loving kindness.

Sometimes I visit their mournful graves,
cold, encircled by wandering spirits.
But the high craggy cliffs,
piercing the thin air
and wrapped in hail and thunder,
are still vengeful.

Alas! Lord of Death!
Will you not grant
three innocent wandering spirits
freedom to go as they please?

Ah! Three Jewels of the sky!
Will you lead my siblings
with pure aspirations
to a pure divine land?

Small white easterly cloud!
Did you welcome my siblings
with a rain of flowers and rainbow light
scattered from within your heart?

Three beautiful spirits, my beloved siblings, listen! We had only a short opportunity to meet in this life but, with indestructible confidence and unyielding armour, may we find a way to protect other timid and frightened children like us. By generating true confidence and strength, may we come to protect all sentient beings, our mothers in countless lives, threatened by the three sufferings of the boundless ocean of samsara. This is my true heart-felt aspiration, may it also be yours!

It might be better if, when we die, there was nothing left to experience any pleasure or suffering; if we were to disappear naturally and completely, like an extinguished butter lamp, or a wolf's paw print in melted snow. However, there is no reliable logical argument or authoritative assurance that this will be the case. So, if we are not careful from this point on, there is a danger that we will make the mistake of incorrectly focussing our energy and effort forever.

Some people do not believe in the relationship of karmic cause and effect. They decide that there will be no future lives. Having come under the influence of ignorance, they think that just because they cannot perceive future lives, therefore they do not exist. This illogical view cannot be defended indefinitely. Some people, so long as they are alive and well, are happy to believe in the non-existence of future lives, but at the time of their death they suddenly become afraid and cry out, "Help me!" Others in their youth are lucky in their endeavours and proudly believe there is no one better than themselves in the whole world. Only when they encounter negative circumstances which force them to lower their heads, do they begin to consider karmic cause and effect. These short-sighted attitudes are foolish.

To wise up to our human predicament we should first gain an understanding of some essential points. For example, we should understand the basis of past and future lives, and karmic cause and effect. We need to understand where we came from, where we are going, and how long we will remain here. Once we have achieved this, and when we have settled our minds by assimilating these ideas, we should live a comfortable, happy life. But we should not sit around blindly accepting whatever happens to us and occupy ourselves with minor distractions. This is dangerous, just like the way a pig lives; a pig bends its head down to the ground searching for food with its tough snout. It never looks up at the sky. A pig sees the sky only once in its lifetime, and that is when the butcher, getting ready to stab a knife into its heart, turns the pig over onto its back. By that time it is too late.

To start with, we have become deluded, and therefore we wander in cyclic existence, the root of which is ignorance. In this life we constantly come under the influence of emotional afflictions and accumulate all kinds of negative karmic propensities. We live our brief lives in a state of tension and anxiety. Finally, we go helplessly down the path of impermanence and death. At this time we experience the undesirable results of the negative karmic propensities which we have accumulated, and once more we must wander endlessly in cyclic existence. This is such a shame! How chilling to the heart!

In fact, right now we have a rare opportunity to discover true happiness. We should not waste the time that we have in this life; we should make our lives meaningful. Having found a way to accomplish the goal of ultimate happiness, we should certainly do so without delay.

THE FIRST YESTERDAY AND THE LAST TOMORROW

In Buddhist understanding, to gain a human body, complete with all the freedoms and advantages, is very rare. While we have this short human life, we should not end up dying empty-handed, having wasted all this freedom and opportunity. We can make our lives meaningful. We should find the unmistakable path which results in happiness and fulfillment, not just for now but also for our entire future. We should engage determinedly in the great practices that result in everlasting happiness and achieve our true potential without delay!