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Illness and Fear of Death: I Prefer to Go to Hell *Meditation: Now I'll Tell You a Secret Thing*

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illness and mortality are two of the great verities and sources of suffering in our lives.

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I have often thought about the strength that the Archbishop gained from facing illness and death so early in life. Illness is one of the most common sources of suffering and adversity that people face, and yet even here, as with my father, people can find meaning and common motivation for people to reevaluate and transform their lives. It's almost a cliché that people with serious or life-threatening illnesses start to savor each moment and to be more fully alive. [...] distinction between healing and curing: Curing involves the resolution of the illness but was not always possible. Healing... was coming to wholeness and could not happen whether or not the illness was curable.

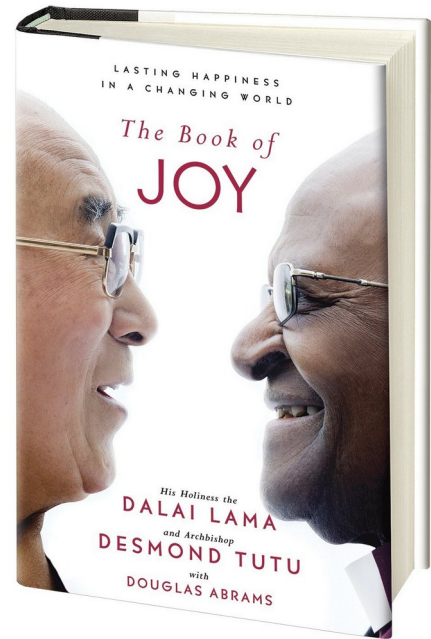
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Perhaps death and the fear of death is truly the greatest challenge to joy. Well, when we are dead, it does not really matter, but it is the fear of its approaching, of the suffering that often precedes it, and ultimately the fear of the oblivion and the loss of our personhood that frightens us. Many psychologists say that the fear of death lies behind all other fears, and many historians of religion argue that religion arose to try to solve the mystery of death. Modern life keeps that fear at bay, as we don't interact with the very old of the very sick, and illness, frailty, and death get tucked away behind institutional walls from our everyday lives.

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I take seriously the contemplation of the Buddha's first teaching, about the inevitability of suffering and transient nature of our existence. Also the Buddha's last teaching at the time of his death ends with the truth of impermanence, reminding us how it is the nature of all things that come into existence to have an end. The Buddha said nothing lasts.

Everything is in a constant state of change – nothing remains static, and nothing remains permanent. In fact, as the Buddha reminds us, the very causes that have given rise to something...have created the mechanism...for that things' eventual end.



Then I ask why impermanence happens. The answer is because of interdependence – nothing exists independently.

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I think maximum lifespan is about a hundred years. Compared to human history, a hundred years is quite short. So if we utilize that short period to create more problems on this planet, our life would be meaningless. If we could live for a million years, *then* maybe it would be worthwhile to create some problems. But our life is short. Now you see, we are guests here on this planet, visitors who have come for a short time, so we need to use our days wisely, to make our world a little better for everyone.

teaching by an ancient Tibetan master: The true measure of spiritual development is how one confronts one's own mortality. The best way is when one is able to approach death with joy; next best way is without fear; third best way is at least not to have regrets.

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If there's nothing you can do to overcome the situation, then there is no need for fear or sadness or anger. [...] even if something were to happen to me, it would still be okay.

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fear is a part of human nature; it's a natural response that arises in the face of danger. But with courage, when in fact real dangers come, you can be more fearless, more realistic. On the other hand, if you let your imagination run wild, then you exacerbate the situation further and then bring more fear.

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I had decided to see the pat down, not unlike those we are often subjected to at airports, as a brief massage rather than as an intrusion of my personal space or as an accusation of my potential danger. I was already learning how much one's perspective shaped one's reality.

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"According to Buddhist Vajrayana psychology, there are different levels of consciousness," the Dalai Lama said, referring to the esoteric Buddhist tradition, which aims to help the practitioner discover ultimate truth. "There's a dissolution that occurs as the grosser levels of our bodily and mental states come to an end, and when more and more subtle levels become manifest. Then at the innermost or most subtle level, this state of clear light arises at the moment of dying. Not death. Dying. Physical feeling completely ceases. Breathing ceases. Heart ceases, it's no longer beating. Brain also ceases its functioning. Still subtle, very subtle levels of consciousness remain, getting ready for another destination of life."

The consciousness at the moment of death that the Dalai Lama was describing is free of duality and content and abides in the form of pure luminosity. [...]

"So, in Buddhist thought... we speak of death, intermediate-state, and rebirth..."

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Daniel Siegel had explained to me that the neural integration created by this crucial area of the brain links many disparate areas and is the locus of everything from emotional regulation to morality. Meditation, he and other scientists have proposed, helps with these processes. He explained that the integrative fibers of the discerning middle prefrontal cortex seem to reach out and soothe the more reactive emotional structures of the brain. We inherited the reactivity of this part of our brain, and particularly the sensitive amygdala, from our skittish fight-or-flight ancestors. Yet so much of the inner journey means freeing ourselves from this evolutionary response so that we do not flip our lid or lose our higher reasoning when facing stressful situations.

The real secret of freedom may simply be extending this brief space between stimulus and response. Meditation seems to elongate this pause and help expand our ability to choose our response.

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I have heard it said that prayer is when we speak to God, and meditation is when God answers.

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[it was the Archbishop's turn to share his spiritual practice] As the Archbishop and Mpho got the bread and wine ready, the Dalai Lama said, "A Buddhist monk does not take wine or any alcohol – in principle, that is. But today, with you, I will take a little."

Sometimes it takes a major disaster for followers of all different faiths to come together and see that we are the same, human brothers and sisters. I consider what we are doing today to be part of the same kind of pilgrimage.

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Many Christian denominations forbid those who are not Christians, or even other Christians who are not of their specific denomination... from sharing in the Eucharist. In other words,, like so many religious traditions it defines who is part of the group and who is not. This is one of the greatest challenges that humanity faces: removing the barriers between who we see as "us" and who we see as "other."

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The Archbishop and the Dalai Lama are truly two of the most inclusive religious figures in the world, and throughout the week the theme underlying their teachings was about transcending our narrow definitions and finding love and compassion for all of humanity. The sharing of traditions that we were engaged in that morning was a reminder to put aside our own narrow beliefs of self and other, ours and theirs, Christian and Buddhist, Hindu and Jew, believer and atheist.

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for these two men, holiness and lightheartedness were indivisible.

Questions for reflection:

1. What do you think about facing illness and death, and its implications for a joy-filled life?
2. What do you think about the different levels of consciousness leading, eventually, to luminosity? (What do you think about 'where we go' after death?)
3. When you hear the description of the Eucharist, and how it may be received by someone outside the tradition, what is stirred inside you?

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Pastor Tyler's highlights and notes on the reading
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