

# **The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying Study Guide**

**The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying by Sogyal  
Rinpoche**

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# Plot Summary

This novel is based on the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, and focuses on the process of living and dying. Using ancient Tibetan Buddhist practices, stories, legends and teachings, author Sogyal Rinpoche introduces new Buddhist followers to the primary themes in Buddhism. First, Sogyal explains the impermanent of existence, and the link between life and death. Using practices such as meditation, he then explains to readers how to find the nature of the mind, and how to reflect on emotional components and change old behaviors. Building on these concepts, Sogyal then explains the link between karma, evolution of the mind, and the rebirth process. Using this knowledge, he then explains the bardos of life, spirituality, and the innermost essence of human kind.

Continuing this lesson, Sogyal focuses in the next section of the process of dying, and the bardos associated with death. He stresses how the living can assist the dying through compassion and various Buddhist traditions, and on how the dying can help themselves. Through processes such as meditation, phowa, and mantras, Sogyal explains how one can prepare for death.

In the third section of the book, Sogyal focuses on the actual death process, and on rebirth. This section relies on spiritual concepts to explain how one dies, the process of dissolution, the bardo of dying and becoming, and how to help others after death. His explanations include a complete systematic dying guide to alleviate any unknowns in this process. Finally, Sogyal discusses the near death experience, and its relation to the bardos, and the Buddhist teachings. In his final section, Sogyal discusses the concept of a universal process of life and death, and his desire to promote enlightenment and assistance for the dying.



# "Foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama"

## "Foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama" Summary

*The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* is a thought-provoking and educational walkthrough of Tibetan Buddhist views of death, dying, rebirth, and life. As author, Sogyal Rinpoche builds his lessons on all aspects of life and death in the Buddhist faith, his teachings, stories and reassurances lead readers through the various stages of life to the process of dying, through death, and into rebirth or enlightenment. Along this path, Sogyal gives numerous techniques and practices to assist in gaining enlightenment in any one of the six bardos, or stages, of this process. Through his teachings, personal accounts, and included stories of others, Sogyal Rinpoche presents a complete account of life, death, and rebirth from a Buddhist perspective.

The Dalai Lama is discussing the alternate views of life and death. According to His Holiness, one can choose to ignore death or to confront death, thereby minimizing the consequences. As a Buddhist, the Dalai Lama sees death as a natural, acceptable process, but points out one cannot expect to obtain a peaceful death if one's life is filled with violence and anger. Since the process of death, according to Buddhism, is important, the Dalai Lama points out the need for a karmic state of mind at the point of death, as well as the need to assist others in their process of dying. He closes his introduction by praising author Sogyal Rinpoche as a master of Tibetan tradition and student of Western education and by hoping Sogyal can offer a practical reference guide for understanding death and dying.

## "Foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama" Analysis

In this short introduction, the Dalai Lama introduces the basic plot of the novel, that of a discussion of the Tibetan beliefs on death and dying. Further, His Holiness introduces the themes of karma, meditation, and a meeting point between Tibetan tradition and modern Western science, all of which are discussed in detail throughout the novel. Finally, the Dalai Lama introduces the author, Sogyal Rinpoche, with high praise and respect, adding a sense of authenticity to the author's words throughout the novel.



# "Preface"

## "Preface" Summary

Sogyal Rinpoche begins by discussing his childhood. Born in Tibet, and only six months old when he entered the monastery, Sogyal was the student of Master Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö. His name, Rinpoche explains, stems from the Buddhist tradition of finding reincarnations of deceased masters. Sogyal, Master Khyentse believed, was the reincarnation of Master Tertön Sogyal. Sogyal Rinpoche dedicates the book to his master, who he believes was a kind, wise, holy man, and the embodiment of Tibetan Buddhism. He explains Master Khyentse treated him as a son, and Sogyal often found refuge with his Master. Others, however, feared Master Khyentse's power, recognizing him as the reincarnation of a Master responsible for the renaissance of spirituality in Tibet. Many called him 'Rinpoche,' the title for a Master meaning 'precious one.' Sogyal closes by hoping he can impart the knowledge he has learned to readers of the book.

## "Preface" Analysis

In his preface, Sogyal introduces his Master, Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö, and impresses a clear sense of respect, awe, and near unconditional love for the man. This clear emotional connection between himself and his master is apparent throughout the novel, and lends authenticity and emotion to the themes presented. Further, Sogyal mentions his early childhood, foreshadowing stories of that childhood throughout the novel. Finally, his introduction of such themes as reincarnation, meditation, and the teachings of the Tibetan Buddhists foreshadow these themes later in the novel.



# Chapter 1 "In the Mirror of Death"

## Chapter 1 "In the Mirror of Death" Summary

Sogyal is discussing his first experiences with death and dying. At age seven, Sogyal is traveling with his fellow monks through the eastern highlands of Tibet to central Tibet. Samten, an attendant of Master Khyentse, is a kind monk whose love for both Tibet and the Buddhist faith is clear. Samten, a good-natured man, often allows Sogyal to borrow costumes used by Khyentse in his practices and rituals, and is genuinely kind with Sogyal. On the journey, however, Samten falls ill, and the departure of the monks is delayed. Sogyal recalls the smell of death surrounding Samten, but notes the occasion was not one of fear or morbidity, but of learning. As Samten lay ill, breathing laboriously and clearly decaying, Sogyal finds himself saddened and lonely, but realizes Samten is at peace with his coming death, thanks to his teachings, his faith, and the presence of Master Khyentse.

When the time comes, Khyentse leads Samten through each stage of death, and Sogyal notices Khyentse's nearly diabolical attitudes, as he appears carefree yet practical and sober yet lighthearted simultaneously. When Samten passes, Sogyal finds himself aware for the first time of the vast tradition he is a part of, and the purposes of spiritual practices as precursors for the acceptance of death.

Sogyal and his Masters continue their journey, following Samten's death, for three months through Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, and then to the sacred sights of south and central Tibet. Sogyal still recalls these moments as ones of beauty and peace. However, when the party reaches the sacred lake of Yamdrok Tso, it becomes clear that Lama Tseten, a member of the group, is also dying. Refusing to go to the nearby monastery so as not to be a burden, Tseten is instead cared for by tutor Kandro Tsering Chodren, the wife of Khyentse. Sogyal sees Tseten as a grandfather figure, and is thus by his side at the moment of death. Kandro attempts to leave to find Khyentse, but Tseten stops her, as he does not wish to be a bother. Sogyal watches Tseten pass away, but is astonished when Khyentse arrives, chuckling, and telling Tseten to come back so he can be guided. Tseten returns to life, and is guided through death by Khyentse.

Sogyal realizes Tseten's death has taught him that many individuals disguise their remarkable qualities through life. When Sogyal compares the death of Tseten to that of Samten, he realizes the difference is between the death of a realized practitioner, and the death of a good monk who has practiced throughout life. Sogyal also realizes, for the first time, the reality of death, and learns to accept it as a process of life. Sogyal mentions he would face death throughout his life, in terms of the death of Tibet at the hands of the Chinese, the death of exile, the death of possessions, and most profoundly, the death of Master Jamyang Khyentse.

Sogyal notes the vast difference between death in the West and in Tibet. He recognizes the Western traditions to deny death and to be frightened of the process, or to think of



death in carelessness. He views these traditions as leaders to a spiritual wasteland, where only life has meaning. Sogyal realizes these traditions also affect the entire world, in that long-term vision is reduced. He blames this shortsightedness for the terrible state of the world, and for the treatment of the elderly and sick in the West. While he notes the seemingly changing attitudes appearing with such services as Hospice and Medicare, Sogyal still believes many do not see the real meaning of death and dying.

Sogyal suggests that the teachings of the Buddhist faith, which stress the importance of using one's life to prepare for death, can assist individuals in their cycle of life and death. As a result, Sogyal states, he has combined the ancient teachings of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* with teachings of life to form the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. He notes each step in life and death is a 'bardo,' or a juncture that leads to liberation, enlightenment, and peace. These moments, filled with potential, show that each decision in life has a far ranging effect.

Sogyal divides the life process into four realities, those of life, dying and death, after death, and rebirth. According to Sogyal, these are then linked to the four bardos, those of the natural bardo of life, the painful bardo of death, the luminous bardo of dharmata, and the karmic bardo of becoming. Sogyal explains the structure of the book follows these bardos, and explains each in detail. He stresses the importance of the mind in evolution, rebirth, and karma, as well as enlightenment. Sogyal also mentions his desire that the novel be used as a reference for the path of life and death, to avoid the endless cycle Buddhist's call 'samsara.'

## Chapter 1 "In the Mirror of Death" Analysis

In this chapter, Sogyal introduces readers to a number of themes, characters, and concepts used throughout the novel. The primary theme, that of death, is explained from a personal standpoint as Sogyal explains his first two encounters with death, as he watch Samten and Tseten pass away. Their journeys, different from one another in many ways, teach Sogyal the basic tenants of the Buddhist traditions and practices regarding death. Sogyal's descriptions of his master's actions, the actions of the dying, and even the environments in which these individuals died show clearly the peace and harmony Buddhist's find in the cycle of death.

The moment of Tseten's resurrection by Khyentse further shows the power of Buddhist religious faith and practice. Additionally, because the experiences are presented in a personal fashion, the lessons become honest and authentic in their genuine presentation of crucial spiritual beliefs. The characters, those of Samten and Tseten, are described in detail prior to their death. This allows one to fully envision the love and respect given to these individuals by Sogyal, adding to the sense of true understanding.

The clear disapproval for Western traditions surrounding death and age by Sogyal serve to show his profound faith in his own tradition, and to lend support for his belief that Western individuals desperately need the lessons within this book. His comments of





today's state of the world, including violence, anger, selfishness, greed, and a lack of respect, further clarify Sogyal's drive to spread the knowledge he has gained from his Master Khyentse, and the other Lamas and Masters throughout his life to the Western world in a chronological, clear, educational way. In his explanation of the book's purpose and layout, Sogyal presents the concept of bardos, a primary theme throughout the novel. His explanations of the bardos are clear, as is his foreshadowing of the information presented within the book. This allows one to prepare for each step along Sogyal's journey of life, death, and rebirth.



# Chapter 2 "Impermanence"

## Chapter 2 "Impermanence" Summary

Sogyal begins by explaining the two certainties of death. First, one will die. Next, one is unable to determine when he or she will die. Sogyal points out that fear of death stems from the unknown, from a passion for life, and primarily from a lack of knowledge of one's self. Sogyal notes the human dependence on material possessions and other individuals at the expense of learning one's own identity, and believes this to mean humans often believe death leaves one without any friends, familiarity, or dependence, and with only a surface state of consciousness. This state of mind, he points out, is unreliable, and thus a gamble at the point of death.

Sogyal continues this discussion by repeating a story of a meditation master, Dudjom Rinpoche. As Dudjom and his wife were driving through France, his wife praises the beauty of the local cemeteries. Dudjom replies to his wife that the civilized country also builds beautiful houses for the living corpses. Sogyal points out Dudjom's meaning that if life is built on the present, rather than a pursuit of an afterlife, individuals are simply living corpses, living in monotony and triviality. He further points out that in the pursuit of material things, one often ends up a slave to those possessions, and has no time to ponder the afterlife. With such a fear of death, Sogyal believes, one should at least explore the possibility of an afterlife, and practice methods to achieve a positive life after death.

Sogyal stresses the concept of 'I?,' the body, or 'something you leave behind.' The word, Sogyal notes, is meant to explain the concept that individuals are merely travelers on the earth, and should thus not be concerned with external circumstances. He also expresses a near fascination at the selling of 'samsara' in that nearly all modern societal values stem from all things leading away from the truth and towards an endless cycle of anxiety and depression. Knowing this, Sogyal believes, individuals should stop focusing on the future, but should instead focus on the only certainty in life, that of death. He stresses that individuals never know if tomorrow will come, so should not plan for tomorrow, but instead focus on today, and on preparation for the afterlife.

Sogyal continues by expressing the need to take life, and death, seriously. By this, he notes, he does not mean one should meditate endlessly on death. Instead, one should not get too caught up in the nine-to-five existence. He stresses a need for balance and simplicity. Sogyal terms this concept as 'discipline' in Buddhism, and 'tsul trim' in Tibetan, where 'tsul' means appropriate and 'trim' means rule or way. Thus, he explains, discipline is to do what is appropriate. In finding this balance of simplicity, he notes, one can find peace of mind, and the time to pursue spirituality and knowledge. Sogyal describes the experiences of those having near-death experiences, and exclaims on their life review, or the true examination of their existences.



In those examinations, individuals often find their lives have been meaningless, and many begin to seek inner peace and truth. Sogyal stresses that nothing is permanent, and nothing has lasting character, even though humankind pretends things constantly stay the same. Mentally, he notes, change often signifies pain and suffering, but in truth, he continues, impermanence is difficult, yet friendly and less unnerving than imagined. Impermanence is, in fact, the only lasting possession of humankind. Change, he notes, is constant, in that all things are perpetually changing, including our own cells, the leaves, the earth, the sun, and even our expressions. The only constant, Sogyal notes, is the present, and one should thus spend life treating all beings with compassion, since everything is constantly dying, and in dedication of the pursuit of enlightenment.

## Chapter 2 "Impermanence" Analysis

This chapter focuses on one primary theme, that of the impermanent of existence. Throughout the chapter, Sogyal uses personal stories, verses, quotes, and Buddhist sayings to show that the past, present, and future of life are constantly changing, and that these changes are neither frightening nor bad. In reality, Sogyal stresses the need to accept these changes, and focus not on one's body, work, possessions, or future, but instead on the achievement of enlightenment, since death is the only certainty in one's existence. His stress on the avoidance of futuristic thinking is a primary component of later lessons in the novel, foreshadowing these lessons.

The addition of personal stories, such as the lesson of Dudjom and the living corpse, gives a real example to learn from, adding in the understanding of these important concepts. Additionally, his inclusion of Buddhist traditional stories, such as *The Father of 'As Famous as the Moon'* furthers the understanding of Sogyal's point about the impermanent of existence. While Sogyal's words are poignant, his discussion of the modern samsara is particularly meaningful, in that his passion for teaching the corruption of modern society simply amplifies his already clear disdain for modern triviality and the intense pull of samsara.



# Chapter 3 "Reflection and Change"

## Chapter 3 "Reflection and Change" Summary

Sogyal begins by recanting a story of his youth. Krisha Gotami was a young woman whose child had passed away. When she asked Buddha for assistance in bringing the child to life, he sent her to town in order to obtain a mustard seed from a home where death had not taken a life. Optimistic, the woman traveled to town, only to find no home had escaped at least one death. Returning to Buddha, Krisha Gotami realized her selfishness in believing only she had suffered, and sought Buddha's teachings. Sogyal uses this story to illustrate the concept that near-death or life altering events can change individuals' viewpoints permanently.

Sogyal recants three personal stories of near-death experiences that clearly display changes in motivations, emotions, purposes, goals, and personalities due to facing death. One woman, Freda Naylor, discusses her renewal and reassessment following a bout of cancer. Sogyal believes this reassessment cannot only bring a change of mindset, but also actual healing. He recalls the story of a young woman dying from cancer who visited Dudjom Rinpoche in New York in 1976. The young woman asked for Dudjom's assistance, and Dudjom taught her to accept death, relaxing her. He then taught the woman a healing practice. To the woman's surprise, the cancer faded, and she lived. Sogyal explains that when one accepts death and transforms their attitudes toward life and death, they are able to heal themselves, despite what doctors may say of their chances of living. Buddhist's see series illness as a warning only, not as an end to life. This warning, when heeded, can lead one to a greater level of awareness.

Sogyal notes that to truly change one's life, one must look inside and discover the patterns of behaviors that lead to one's failures. In reflecting inward, one is able to gain wisdom, and can begin to alter their paths to exclude these negative patterns of behaviors and thoughts. Sogyal advises reflection on death in the same manner, in that only a true evaluation of death can lead to a transformation of the mind, in which one can see death as a positive experience. This transformation of the mind, known as 'renunciation' or 'nge ung' in Tibetan, means to emerge from contemplation with a feeling of disgust at habitual patterns, but ready to let those patterns go to free one's mind. Life, according to Sogyal, is a cycle of birth and death, and a permanent state of change. He advises, then, to deal with those changes in life prior to death, in order to prepare for the process of dying. If one becomes closed to change, he continues, one will be unable to accept impermanence, and thus, unable to accept death. He points out that to let go does not mean to give up, but simply to think differently of a situation. When one accepts impermanence, according to Sogyal, one can let go of attachment, and rise in renunciation.

Sogyal continues his discussion of letting go to note that only in letting go can one find freedom. Any difficulty in life, he states, can only lead to strength. He tells the story of Gesar, a great warrior king of Tibet. Gesar's uncle consistently attempted to kill him as a



child, but each near-death only served to strengthen Gesar. Gesar rose to power primarily due to these attempts on his life. According to Tibet myth, Gesar became a spiritual master as well, showing signs of courage, intelligence, gentleness, and fearlessness. These attributes were possible only because of his difficulties in life.

If one continues to look at impermanence, he continues, one can see that all things are interrelated. If things are not permanent, then things are empty, or lacking in a stable existence. Sogyal uses the example of a wave to show his point. A wave alone is simply the behavior of the water, and thus, not permanent. However, when viewed in totality, as a behavior of the water, the wave becomes the water, the wind, the soil, and many other interrelated pieces of a larger whole. When one can view ones self as a large part of this interrelatedness, one can feel compassion for all other beings. This compassion, when contemplated, can lead one to see that in impermanence lies something behind the changing world. This knowledge leads one to see that it is the dependence on a permanent existence that limits the mind. Once one can let go of this concept, one finds his or herself opening to the idea that there is something within all living beings that nothing can destroy. This concept, according to Sogyal, is known as the unending nature of the mind.

## Chapter 3 "Reflection and Change" Analysis

In this chapter, Sogyal introduces the themes of reflection and change as tools for enlightenment. Sogyal's use of personal stories, such as the passages regarding personal healing, and his use of Tibetan myth, such as the stories of Krishna and Gesar, show clearly that the circumstances of life often seen as negative or painful can lead to a profound alteration of consciousness. Sogyal's point is that these experiences allow one to grow and change, and thus, reflect on life in a new way. This reflection then leads to an opening of the mind, in which compassion and the interrelatedness of life can be seen, which in turn can lead one to accept the idea of an unending, unlimited portion of all living creatures. According to Sogyal, this is the unending nature of mind. His use of this phrase foreshadows further lessons on this topic.

Sogyal uses the building block method in this chapter to clarify many points presented. Since readers have learned the basic premise of impermanence in the previous chapter, Sogyal builds on this knowledge to further expand the concept, and introduce new ideas, such as the compassion, interrelatedness, and inner mind found within the contemplation of impermanence. In using this method in combination with personal stories and Tibetan myth, Sogyal provides readers with a variety of learning tools aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the vast power within reflection and change.



# Chapter 4: "The Nature of the Mind"

## Chapter 4: "The Nature of the Mind" Summary

Sogyal begins the chapter with a story of a frog in a deep well. When a frog from the ocean comes to visit, the frog in the well is unable to visualize anything larger than his own well. Venturing out to the ocean, the frog from the well is so overwhelmed, that his head explodes. Sogyal continues by recounting two memories. In the first, his Master, Khyentse, suddenly hugs him and kisses him on the cheek, which is never done. At that moment, Sogyal's mind falls away with the warmth and power of emotion. In the second memory, Sogyal and Khyentse are meditating as Khyentse recites the invocation of masters of the lineage. Suddenly, Khyentse leans forward and asks Sogyal "what is mind." Sogyal finds himself without words or thought, and suddenly realizes there is no mind. In that moment, Sogyal says, he found the present moment, naked and simple.

In order for one to experience the nature of the mind, Sogyal notes three 'authenticities' that must be present. One is the blessing of an authentic master, the second is the devotion of a student, and the third is the authentic lineage of the introduction to the mind. In this practice, the master empowers the student with his wisdom, and introduces the student to the Buddha, or the presence of enlightenment within him or herself. When this occurs, there is a clear recognition that the mind of master and student are the same, and can never be separated. Sogyal recalls a similar moment in the presence of Dudjom, when he realized the material phenomenon of life began to fall away, and his excitement, Sogyal began to find bliss. Dudjom, however, realized bliss could be as trapping as suffering, and pulled Sogyal back to stability and grounding.

Sogyal continues to note that in the Buddhist faith, life and death are in the mind only. According to him, there are two aspects of the mind, those of the ordinary mind and the nature of the mind. The ordinary mind, or 'sem' in Tibetan, is the dualistic, thinking mind that relates and functions only to external references. It plots, desires, manipulates, angers, and indulges, and is vulnerable to habitual tendencies and conditioning. On the other hand, the nature of mind, or the inner essence, is untouched by external forces, including death. It is hidden within the ordinary mind, and is only glimpsed on occasion. On those occasions, light, understanding, meaning, and freedom become apparent. This root of understanding, called 'Rigpa' in Tibetan, is a primordial, pure awareness that is intelligent, conscious, radiant, and awake. Sogyal notes all religious icons are the embodiment of 'Rigpa,' including Buddha, God, Vishnu, Brahman, and all other 'gods.' In reality, all individuals are capable of knowing the nature of mind. Sogyal relates this knowing of mind to the realization there is an endless sky beneath the clouds.

According to the Buddhist faith, there are four barriers to knowing the nature of mind. First, the nature of mind is too close to recognize. Secondly, the nature of mind is too profound to realize. Third, the nature of mind is too easy to believe. Finally, it is too wonderful for our ordinary minds to comprehend. Sogyal believes we glimpse the nature of mind, but have no context to understand the meaning behind it. In order to shift



perception, one must look inside the mind. Sogyal notes the difficulty in this, since such a shift requires courage and determination. However, if one can let go of the fear of knowing the mind and ones self, one can find enlightenment.

Sogyal closes the chapter with a discussion of the promise of enlightenment. He stresses that, while modern society stresses the ordinary mind, the nature of mind does exist, and can be found. This promise, according to Sogyal, is not one of magic or mysticism. In reality, it's common sense. When one become enlightened, one does not become a Buddha, but instead ceases to be deluded. Sogyal tells a story of a man who does not understand the nature of mind. His Master, exasperated, tells him to walk up the mountain with a large sack of barley, and not stop. The student, anxious to please, does so. At the top of the mountain, exhausted, the man lies down and finds his resistance removed. Suddenly, he is aware of the nature of mind. Returning to his Master, the student expresses his excitement, to which the Master simply asks if he had an interesting climb up the mountain. Sogyal notes that all individuals are capable of this enlightenment, if only they allow their resistance to fail.

## Chapter 4: "The Nature of the Mind" Analysis

This chapter introduces the themes of enlightenment and the nature of mind. Again, Sogyal uses traditional stories and personal accounts to demonstrate his fundamental point, that enlightenment is not only possible, but occurs on a steady basis. Moments of epiphany are frequent in life, and each produces wisdom. Sogyal's message is that when one lets go of the modern world, stops fearing the unknown, and allows ones self to open to change, one can find the nature of mind, and thus enlightenment. His definition of the duality of the mind is vital to understanding enlightenment, in that one must let go of the ordinary desires and angers of the current world in order to find the nature of mind.

In addition, Sogyal's point of religion as a symbol for the nature of mind and enlightenment is poignant. To him, the Gods are clearly simply reflections of humankind's own ability to find enlightenment, and those beings are clearly created by human kind to embody the concept of the nature of mind. This point, while possibly is conflict with many religious views, is one that shows Sogyal's clear determination that enlightenment is the only path one should pursue. His stress on the pressure of the modern world, and the letting go of material phenomenon, symbolizes his belief that enlightenment requires a more simplistic, holistic mindset. Finally, his focus on the promise of enlightenment foreshadows the lesson on how to achieve enlightenment later in the book.



# Chapter 5 "Bringing the Mind Home"

## Chapter 5 "Bringing the Mind Home" Summary

Sogyal begins this chapter with the story of Buddha's enlightenment. In the story, Buddha sits near a tree and after a long period of meditation, becomes enlightened. At that point, the entire world is in true perfection. What Buddha realizes, according to Sogyal, is that humankind repeats the cycle of samsara because of its ignorance of the true nature of the mind. In order to realize this true nature, one must meditate and 'bring the mind home.'

Sogyal believes that in order to train the mind to meditate properly, one must first understand how the mind functions normally. Then, once one realizes the mind normally operates in illusion, confusion, addiction, and slavery, one can meditate with discipline, patience, and the proper training in order to master the nature of the mind. Since the ordinary mind is often fragmented and separated, meditation can be thought of as bringing the mind home to singularity and completeness.

To meditate in a way that brings enlightenment, Buddhists believe in three primary things. The first is *good in the beginning*, or the awareness that one has the Buddhist nature, and that to realize this nature is to be free of ignorance and suffering. This motivation of meditation is needed to channel the meditation towards enlightenment. The second is *good in the middle*, which refers to the state of mind during meditation that is non-grasping and free of conceptual references. The third aspect is *good in the end*, or the process of closing one's meditation through the dedication of merit. Merit refers to the positive power that radiates from meditation. This merit is verbally dedicated at the close of a meditative session to all beings, to seal the meditation and ensure none of the power obtained can seep away. The presence of these three aspects of meditation, according to Sogyal, means the difference between peaceful meditation, and meditation geared toward enlightenment.

Sogyal continues to note that meditation first requires mindfulness, or the focusing of the scattered mind, which accomplishes three things. First, mindfulness brings together the fragments of the self, so one can begin to know oneself. Secondly, mindfulness defuses negativity and aggression, which leads to well being. Finally, mindfulness reveals the essential 'good heart' within an individual, since it removes the unkindness and negative powers within. This, in turn, makes the inner-self useful to others, and brings out a deeper kindness and goodness.

In order to meditate effectively, Sogyal stresses three crucial points. The first, to bring the mind home, means to bring the mind into a deeper sense, and to turn inward, resting in the nature of the mind. The second, release, means to release the mind from attachment. The final point, relaxation, means to relax the mind of tension, thereby allowing the state of Rigpa. In practicing these points during meditation, Sogyal believes one can let go of all inner struggle, and find a peaceful mind, which in turn, can lead to



the discovery of the nature of the mind. He stresses that if one is able to relax the mind without a particular meditation method, one should do so since to force strict adherence to method is contrary to the meditative process. However, Sogyal continues, if one is unable to relax the mind without method, the use of a skillful method is acceptable. By skillful, Sogyal refers to a method that brings together the nature of mind, the knowledge of one's own shifting moods, and personal insights. Sogyal mentions that one should remember the method is simply a method, not the meditation. Using a method simply allows one to practice meditation.

Sogyal also stresses the importance of posturing in meditation, in that one's posture is linked directly to the attitude of the mind. He recommends a posture used in the ancient teachings of Dzogchen. This posture involves a straightened back, while allowing the lower back to curve naturally and the head to balance comfortably on the neck. One is to sit cross-legged, representing the unity of life and death, good and bad, skill and wisdom, male and female, samsara and nirvana, and humor and non-duality. The eyes should remain open, focusing on a point on the ground in front of the body. As meditation begins, one's gaze should expand. The mouth should remain open, and one should breathe normally through it, preventing 'karmic winds,' or distracting thoughts, from entering. This complete posture, called the 'mind in comfort and ease' posture, Sogyal notes, imitates that of a Buddha.

Sogyal next presents three methods of meditation. The first, watching the breath, involves a mild focus on one's breathing. In particular, the method urges one to let go and release on each outbreath, and resting prior to each intake of breath. Breathing should become 25 percent of the meditative focus, while 75 percent of the focus remains relaxed. This method allows one to become the breath, which can dissolve separation and duality. The second method, using an object, involves the use of a nearby object to help focus the mind and inspire the spirit. Sogyal suggests using an image of the father of Buddhism, Padmasambhava. The third method, reciting a mantra, involves the use of sound to unite the mind. Since each syllable of a mantra is filled with power, spiritual truth, and the blessing of the Buddha, a mantra can help change the state of the mind. Sogyal recommends the mantra, 'Om ah hung benza guru pema siddhi hung', the mantra of Padmasambhava, and all other Buddhist masters. Sogyal mentions using this mantra himself during a workshop with wonderful results.

Once in meditation, Sogyal instructs to leave the mind as it is, allowing the clarity of the nature of mind to shine in a natural state. No attempt should be made to control the mind or even to reflect. Instead, one should simply allow the mind to be at peace, balanced between alertness and relaxation. As one finds meditation, their thoughts and emotions will flow like waves on an ocean, and one should not follow those thoughts or invite them, but simply allow them to flow. A state of bliss may ensue, showing ignorance has temporarily disappeared. Negative experiences may also ensue, which one should turn into a catalyst for realization. When one has found a productive meditation method, one can dissolve the use of the method, and simply allow meditation to continue uninhibited. Sogyal recommends taking frequent breaks during meditation, in order to avoid dwelling on the process. While in a breaking period, one should not lose mindfulness, but instead simply sit and relax.



Sogyal closes the chapter by noting that meditation is useless without integration to every day life. One should allow the peace and harmony of meditation to spill into non-meditative life, and thereby maintain a high level of mindful awareness and a realization of samsara. The calm and centered state of mind found in meditation should be present in all other aspects of life. Sogyal tells a story of a disciple who asks his master how to incorporate meditation with life. The master replies to him he should eat and sleep. When the disciple replies that everyone eats and sleeps, the master notes that not everyone eats when they eat, or sleeps when they sleep. Sogyal explains that this symbolizes the concept that one should be present in all actions. In making meditation a joyful experience and one of inspiration, individuals can become masters of their own happiness and joy, and thereby always live in the presence of their true self.

## Chapter 5 "Bringing the Mind Home" Analysis

This chapter focuses exclusively on the process of meditation, and on the tools and concepts one can use to heighten the meditative experience. Unlike in other chapters, Sogyal uses more instructional language and less personal stories to provide a vast amount of information on meditation in a small span of pages. The story of Buddha in the beginning of the chapter foreshadows the instructions to come on 'bringing the mind home,' and shows the reason for this goal. Concepts such as mindfulness and the good heart are introduced, and many techniques for meditation are explained in vast detail. Sogyal's description of the three meditative things necessary to provide enlightenment help focus on the motivations, mindset, and merits of meditation. Further, the three crucial points of meditation, those of meditation, release, and relaxation, help to explain the surface purposes of the meditative process, which is vital to understanding the process on a deeper level. Additionally, Sogyal's thorough description of the meditation posture explains the posture clearly enough for one to replicate the exact posture recommended, furthering the meditative process.

Sogyal's explanation of the three meditation methods, those of breathing, objects, and mantras, are also clear and informational. With each, Sogyal explains in detail why the method works, the focus of the method, and the result of each process. Further, Sogyal's detailed description of the experiences possible in beginning meditative states assists in understanding exactly what is expected of each, and how to achieve the highest possible level of meditation, which is vital to understanding the changes occurring within each individual as he or she begins to meditate.

Finally, Sogyal's closing remarks pertaining to the integration of meditation into real life is poignant, in that it clearly shows the entire purpose of the meditative process. Without integration, meditation is useless. Sogyal clearly shows that the peace and harmony found in meditation can lead to a more peaceful and harmonious existence, and thereby can lead to a better quality of life, and eventual enlightenment.



## Chapter 6: "Evolution, Karma, and Rebirth"

### Chapter 6: "Evolution, Karma, and Rebirth" Summary

Sogyal begins the chapter by discussing the night of the Buddha's enlightenment, and points out the first stage of the enlightenment was the realization of past lives, or reincarnation. Sogyal notes that reincarnation has been a part of most major religions, including Christianity and Middle Eastern religion, and that a 1992 Gallup study showed one in four Americans believe in reincarnation. He admits that many question reincarnation since there are no memories of previous lives, but debates this issue by pointing out that lack of recollection or experience does not mean something does not exist. Sogyal offers proof for reincarnation by telling the story of Arthur Flowerdew from Norfolk England. Arthur repeatedly saw images in his mind of a city surrounded by a desert, a strange rock, a temple, and an odd structure within the city.

One day when watching a documentary, Arthur realized the city in his mind was that of the ancient Petra. The BBC flew Arthur to the area, where he led explorers directly to the site of the now-demolished temple, pointed out the strange rock, and even gave archeologists a probable use for the strange device within the ancient city. Arthur claimed never to have seen the city, read about the area, nor seen anything related to the area. Sogyal suggests Arthur's uncanny ability to recall a city he had never seen is due to a past life experience. Sogyal gives another example through Kamalijit Kour, a young Indian girl. Kamalijit was convinced she had lived in another village in a previous life, and had been killed by a bus. When her family took her to the village in her mind, she walked immediately to the home of a young woman killed in a bus accident. Kamalijit could name all relatives of the deceased young woman, asked for items the young woman had owned, and showed many likenesses to the deceased. Sogyal also points out that child prodigies may retain talents of previous lives, thus giving probability to reincarnation.

Sogyal continues his discussion of reincarnation by pointing out that the Buddhist faith believes that reincarnation is related to continuity of the mind. The Dalai Lama explains that the mind is real, as shown by one's ability to think and learn, and is clearly changing continuously, as shown by the mind's alterations based on external stimuli. Further, the mind is clearly linked with physiological states of the body. If one were to trace back this mind, one would find a continuous pattern and origin of the mind, showing proof for successive rebirths. The Buddhists also believe in universal causation, or the idea that all things are subject to change based on causes and conditions, rather than an overall superior being. Thus, everything is self-created. Therefore, the mind must come into being because of previous instants of mind. Substantial causes are those that are produced of something else, and cooperative factors are those that contribute to causation. In the case of mind and body, one cannot cause another, since mind and



matter are dependent on one another, and thus, rebirth is accepted as the basis for a mind and body connection.

Sogyal continues by pointing out that reincarnation, according to the Buddhist faith, is not based on a soul or independent entity being reborn, but rather, a subtle level of consciousness that is carried through to the next life. Sogyal uses examples of the pearls in a necklace, linked together, a fire burning throughout the night that must be rekindled, and milk as examples of the concept. Pearls of a necklace are linked together, and one pearl supports the pearls immediately proceeding, just as the current life supports the prior life. A fire lit in the early night is not the same fire as the flame at the end of night, since kindling has been used, but the light its self has never faltered, showing the concept of continuity and difference. Finally, milk can be found in a variety of forms, all of which are independent of one another, but dependent on the case component. This, according to Sogyal, is rebirth.

The force behind rebirth, according to the Buddhists, is karma, the natural law of cause and effect. Sogyal describes karma as one's actions, and the consequences of those actions. Karma cannot be destroyed or eliminated. As a result, one's life is dependant on this karma, in that the current life is often a result of the karma of one's previous life, and one's future life is determined by one's current actions, or karma. Sogyal notes the importance of an action lies not in the scale of the action, but in the intention behind the action. If an action is aimed at assisting others, one's karma is improved. On the other hand, if an action is aimed at self-gratification, one's karma is harmed. Karma is therefore creative, in that one can change behaviors to improve future lives.

All negative actions can be purified through regret, and any behavior can be changed through overcoming behavioral conditioning. Current conditions in one's life are dependant on one's past karma, and can therefore appreciate a painful existence with the knowledge that through careful, positive actions, future reincarnations will suffer less. Sogyal continues to note that individuals who have near-death experiences are often faced with a review of their actions in life, and often find new behaviors because of their ordeals. He stresses that many feel regret at their past behaviors, and use their experiences to increase their karma, thereby enhancing future reincarnations.

Sogyal closes the chapter by discussing the tulkus, or reincarnations of great masters. When a master dies, a disciple or other master may have a vision of his rebirth. The individual is then sought out, and trained from an early age, to extend their already vast knowledge. According to Sogyal, these reborn individuals often have extraordinary knowledge or wisdom, stemming from their previous lives. Sogyal tells of his Master's youth, in which he rapidly memorized a book others would take months to memorize. This ability is common amongst reborn tulkus. Sogyal stresses the reincarnation of a tulku is both the same person as the previous incarnation, and another person. The blessing and grace of the individual is reincarnated, but the individual himself is another person. The Dalai Lama, for example, is seen as the reincarnation of Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Infinite Compassion. The Dalai Lama has learned traditional teachings and training, but also shows simplicity and practicality. These combined traits form the current Dalai Lama.



## Chapter 6: "Evolution, Karma, and Rebirth" Analysis

This chapter introduces the core concepts of rebirth and karma. Sogyal's use of personal examples is of primary importance in this chapter, as those examples lend authenticity to the concepts of rebirth. His discussion of individuals who exhibit clear memories of experiences not had by them suggests the possibility of reincarnation. Further, his points of the inability to discredit things one has no experience of also lend weight to his argument for reincarnation. The analogies of the fire, pearls, and milk are particularly useful in demonstrating Sogyal's primary point, that there is a level of consciousness that is tied directly to a consciousness of previous lives.

Sogyal's discussion of karma is also of particular interest in this chapter. The concept that there is some form of universal justice in the world, and a force that dictates one's lives that is shapeable by current actions, is a promising thought. His use of examples, such as his discussion of Master Khyentse's wisdom in childhood and of the tulkus, lends insight to these difficult concepts, and allows one to understand the basis of the Buddhist faith with clarity.



# Chapter 7: "Bardos and Other Realities"

## Chapter 7: "Bardos and Other Realities" Summary

Bardo T?drol Chenmo, meaning *The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*. These teachings are based in Dzogchen Tantras, and stem as far back as the Primordial Buddha. The book is a guide to after-death, and for preparing for death. Tibetans believe there are five ways to attain enlightenment without meditation, those of seeing a great master or sacred object, wearing blessed drawings of sacred mantras, tasting sacred nectars, remembering the transference of consciousness, or the phowa, at death, and hearing certain teachings, such as those in the Dzogchen book.

According to Sogyal, existence is separated into Four Bardos, those of the natural bardo of life, the painful bardo of dying, the luminous bardo of dharmata, and the karmic bardo of becoming. The natural bardo spans the period between birth and death, and is the best time to prepare for death. The painful bardo lasts from the beginning of death through the inner respiration, or the beginning of the Ground Luminosity, of the awakening of the nature of the mind. The luminous bardo of dharmata is comprised of the after-death experiences of the nature of the mind, including the sound, color, and lights revealed in this stage. Finally, the karmic bardo of becoming lasts until rebirth, and is known as the intermediate state. Each bardos is associated with a sense of uncertainty, and is filled with opportunity of insight and wisdom. While bardos actually occur throughout life, they are often missed in the daily business of life. The particular bardos listed have particular opportunity for enlightenment, since the body and karma are free momentarily in these stages from the physical form. At the moment of death, the Ground Luminosity or Clear Light, the nature of the mind, manifests, and if one is able to grasp that moment, one can find enlightenment. To do so, however, one must have previously become acquainted with the nature of the mind.

Sogyal points out the bardos are other realities of the mind, and are present in sleep and dream, at least in part. The process of going to sleep is similar to the bardo of dying, dreaming is similar to the bardo of becoming, and the period between falling asleep and dreaming is similar to the bardo of luminosity. Sogyal points out that, if one examines the comparison, one can see how difficult awareness will be during the bardos states, since few can remain aware when asleep. However, one's actions during these stages of sleep may represent how one will react at the comparable bardos.

Practitioners seek to maintain awareness both night and day, and thus, the states of sleep and meditation are often included in the bardos, resulting in series of the Six Bardos. Each bardo has a unique set of instructions and meditation practices, and each state of mind can be realized during life. Sogyal describes a Tibetan Master, Kunu Lama Tenzin Gyaltzen, who became a great Master, moved to Indian, and lived as an ascetic. When the Tibetan monks came into exile, he taught them grammar, Sanskrit, and



Buddhism. The Dalai Lama soon took him in, and yet the master remained genuine and simple. When asked to explain the bardos, even well versed masters were in awe of his explanations because of their vividness and precision. These explanations were possible, because Kunu had experienced the bardos personally. Sogyal notes that all humans are Buddhas, and can discover the knowledge of the bardos within the current life.

## Chapter 7: "Bardos and Other Realities" Analysis

In this chapter, Sogyal explains the states and purpose of the bardos. His opening explanation of the meaning of the word, as well as his clarification of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* help to clarify the base definitions needed to comprehend the rest of the chapter. Further, his explanation of the Four Bardos, the sleep states, and the Six Bardos provide the information needed to explain the process involved in remaining aware during death. This information will be required to understand concepts later in the novel.

Sogyal's story of Kunu Lama Tenzin Gyaltzen is particularly enlightening, in terms of concept comprehension. The life of this master clearly exemplifies the ability to experience the journeys through the bardos during the natural bardo of life. While Sogyal points out these journeys can be partially understood through sleep cycles, Kunu clearly understands the bardos in a much more advanced way. This advanced understanding, as shown through the symbol of Kunu, is the embodiment of enlightenment.



# Chapter 8: "This Life: The Natural Bardo"

## Chapter 8: "This Life: The Natural Bardo" Summary

Sogyal begins this discussion with an explanation of the fundamental state of the mind, or "the ground of the ordinary mind." This state is unenlightened, and neutral, and is the foundation for karma, samsara, and nirvana. This state is the storage facility for all negative emotions in past lives, which grow when accessed in this life. Since these negative emotions often stem from habitual negative tendencies, these negative emotions and actions will continuously resurface throughout this life and lives to come.

Individuals with similar visions of the world are said to share a karmic vision. Yet each individual also has his or her own karma, since each person leads a different life, with different experiences. In addition, Buddhists believe in six realms of existence, those of the gods, demigods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hells, which correspond to six negative emotions, those of pride, jealousy, desire, ignorance, greed, and anger. These six realms exist in reality in the way one unconsciously uses his or her negative emotions. Sogyal uses the example of the god realm to show how this realm is manifested in life. The god realm is based in changeless beauty and sensual ecstasy, where gods lie on beaches, listen to music, are intoxicated by stimulation, high on meditation, and do not ever find the true nature. He compares this realm to that of some areas in California and Australia.

Sogyal stresses that the human realm is more valuable, since humans have awareness and intelligence to become enlightened beings. He describes a story in which an individual from each of the six realms looks at a river. The human sees useful water, the fish a home, the god a blissful nectar, the demigod a weapon, the hungry ghost pus and blood, and hell as molten lava.

Sogyal points out that all karmic visions are illusion, and dependant on relativity. There are three kinds of vision, those of the karmic vision, or that of ordinary beings and impure karmic visions, the vision of experience, which is open to masters and mediators, and pure vision, open only to enlightened individuals. Those with pure vision will see the world as perfect, since they have purified all causes of karmic vision, or all negative emotions. During this life, one is able to become enlightened in the same way.

In order to become enlightened, or to find egolessness, the Buddhists stress three wisdom tools of the mind, those of listening and hearing, contemplation and reflection, and meditation. Ego, in Buddhism, is the absence of true knowledge of one's identity. Known as *dak dzin* in Tibetan, the ego means to grasp to a self, and refers to the tendency to grasp at constructs referring to personal desires. The ego, inherently deceitful, convinces one that the pathway to enlightenment is self-service, rather than positive action. Sogyal states that when one walks the path to spiritual awakening, one





must learn to discard the ego and embrace the spiritual being, and learn to listen only to the wisdom of that being.

Gradually, one will learn to quickly discard negative emotion and embrace joy and bliss, and will learn the ego did not really exist in the first place. By listening to teachings, contemplating their meaning, and meditating on those contemplations, one can find enlightenment. One must cast aside negative doubt, and replace it with noble doubt, which is not a doubt of the teachings, but of ones self. This will inspire one to travel further on the path, and empower one to find the truth of spirituality. By taking the time to examine all doubts and by using the tools of wisdom, one can continue on a path of spirituality, purification, and realization.

## **Chapter 8: "This Life: The Natural Bardo" Analysis**

The discussion of the natural bardos in this chapter provides not only a starting point for the upcoming discussion of enlightenment and the spiritual pathway, but also valuable tools to realization. Also important is the discussion of the six realms, in that Sogyal's use of analogy demonstrates how the living world is relative to the perspective of the individual. This relativity is vital to understanding the individualized pathway to enlightenment. Further, the discussion of the three visions helps lead one into the discussions of the next chapters, and foreshadows lessons on enlightenment. Finally, Sogyal's discussion of egolessness and the three tools of wisdom lead into the discussion of attainment of the spiritual path in the next chapter.

As in previous discussions, Sogyal's building block teaching method is particularly effective in this chapter. While the bardos, karma, and enlightenment have been discussed previously, Sogyal uses this base knowledge to extend the lesson without overburdening the new student. This method is not only useful in relaying the information needed to understand the base concepts, but when combined with personal stories and Buddhist traditional myth, is a powerfully successful teaching method.



# Chapter 9: "The Spiritual Path"

## Chapter 9: "The Spiritual Path" Summary

According to Sogyal, the purpose of life is to achieve enlightenment. The only way to achieve this is to undertake a spiritual journey with a trained master. While Sogyal does accept that the current state of the world, samsara, is extremely deceitful in its illusion of grandeur, he also notes there is hope for enlightenment, that of the masters. He points out that choosing a master can be difficult, but once one is chosen, a disciple should remain with the same master throughout their journey. A master should be kind, compassionate, tireless in their effort to share knowledge, non-abusive, and humble. In addition, the master must provide teachings consistent with those of the Buddha. As one is trying to find their own path, Sogyal stresses, one should examine spiritual books of all traditions, and find the path most in tune with one's own beliefs.

Once a path and a master are found, Sogyal notes the importance of developing the master and disciple relationship. Without this relationship, one will be unable to learn the truth of teachings, and will be unable to participate in the transformation that occurs through devotion. The inner Buddha teacher within individuals is also the inner teacher, who works tirelessly to bring one back to his or her true being. The master, then, is the outer teacher, who is an expression of one's own inner teacher. In addition, the master is the channel and transmitter of the blessings of enlightened beings.

Sogyal also stresses the importance of devotion in the path to realization. He defines devotion not as adoration, responsibility, or whim, but as an unbroken receptivity to the truth, rooted in awe and gratitude as well as in intelligence and lucid thought. The feeling of gratitude experienced when a master opens the heart is the result of repeated experience with the master, and this is devotion, or *mtz g'* in Tibetan. *Mtz g'* translates to 'longing and respect', which stands for the respect one has for the master, and longing for the lessons he or she can teach. One should see the master as a Buddha, in order to receive the full benefit of their teachings, and to transform into living Buddha. The master becomes a mirror for the relationship between the disciple and the world, and can show the place of the disciple in the universe.

To show the power of the master, Sogyal tells of the greatest female master in his day, Khandro Tsering Chtzdrtn, the wife of Master Jamyang Khyentse. Honored by most Tibetans, Khandro is described as humble, beautiful in physical form and in heart, simplistic, modest, lucid, wise, and contemplative. Trained by Khyentse himself, Khandro was beloved by Khyentse, and their relationship was one of profound depth and spirituality. Following his death, Khandro remains in Sikkim, the place of his passing, devoted to him and to constant prayer. Her devotion has allowed her to learn the teachings completely, and to teach others flawlessly. Sogyal believes Khandro would be a perfect Western instructor, in that she 'incarnates with a mysterious completeness the love and healing wisdom of Tara, enlightened compassion in its female form.'



Sogyal discusses the need for disciples to ask for help from enlightened beings in purification and healing of karma, power to understand the meaning of suffering, and for the realization of absolute nature of mind. To request this assistance, Sogyal recommends the use of Guru Yoga, a process that melds together the individual and the guru. Sogyal admits the practice has been the inspiration for his own life, and that his yoga focuses on Padmasanbhava, the individual responsible for spreading Buddhism through Tibet in the eighteenth century, and is the embodiment of all Sogyal's masters.

Guru yoga consists of four phases, those of invocation, merging of the mind and heart through the mantra, the receipt of blessing, and unity of mind in rest in the nature of Rigpa. Invocation involves sitting quietly, invoking the embodiment of the person of one's master or an enlightened being into the space in front of the self. Visualization, Sogyal notes, may help. Relaxing, one will then fill the heart with the presence of that individual, and will call on him or her to help inspire purity of karma. The individual then merges minds with the enlightened being, and rests in their wisdom mind. This merging is done through recitation of a mantra, where one offers their heart and soul in devotion, feeling as the minds merge with one another. This merging results in a state of Rigpa. Once in Rigpa, one should imagine brilliant rays of light streaming toward the self, purifying, healing, blessing and empowering the seeds of enlightenment. The master or enlightened being is then one with the individual, and the two rest in the nature of the mind. Sogyal points out this practice is used in death, discussed later in the novel.

## Chapter 9: "The Spiritual Path" Analysis

This chapter introduces two major themes of the book, those of the master and the technique of Guru Yoga. The master is discussed thoroughly, allowing one to clearly understand the relationship necessary to achieve enlightenment and the merging of minds required for a successful realization of the nature of mind. Sogyal's discussion of choosing a master, and a Buddhist faith, is particularly interesting, in that his acceptance of the search for one's path shows clearly his dedication to the principles of Buddhism. In addition, his discussion of his own master's wife shows not only the power of devotion clearly, but also shows Sogyal's high respect for both his deceased master, and Khandro herself. His description is filled with a clear sense of awe and wonder, as well as an almost tangible level of pure love.

Sogyal's complete discussion of Guru Yoga gives a comprehensive walkthrough of the process, allowing one to replicate each step in confidence in the quest for the wisdom of Rigpa. The method is simple and can be practiced by nearly anyone, furthering the already accessible nature of Buddhism. While the process seems difficult to master, Sogyal assures it is completely possible with repetition. The idea of merging minds and wisdom with an enlightened being provides hope for Rigpa for all individuals.



# Chapter 10: "The Innermost Essence"

## Chapter 10: "The Innermost Essence" Summary

Sogyal stresses the practice of Dzogchen throughout this chapter. He begins by discussing the origins of the practice, and notes Dzogchen is the most ancient form of wisdom within Buddhism, as well as the source of the bardo teachings. Traced back to Samantabhadra, the Primordial Buddha, Dzogchen has been responsible for the enlightenment of hundreds of thousands of individuals over time. Described as the primordial state of total awakening, Dzogchen is the heart essence of all Buddhas, and is the already self-perfected state of the primordial nature. Sogyal notes that all Buddhist teachings are in terms of ground, path, and fruition. In Dzogchen, the ground is the fundamental state of absolute nature. Sogyal notes two paths, those of the enlightened, and the confused unenlightened. The path of the Dzogchen is to uncover the intrinsic nature through teachings and practice. The fruition of the Dzogchen is to realize original nature and to obtain complete liberation, thereby becoming a Buddha.

Sogyal notes the complexity of the Dzogchen, but simply describes the path in terms of the View, Meditation, and Action. The View is used to see the absolute state, the stabilization of that state is the Meditation, and the integration of that state with reality is the Action. Sogyal begins by discussing the View in detail. He describes the concept as the ability to see things as they truly are, and as knowing the true nature of mind is the true nature of everything. It is, simply, the realization that the mind is the absolute truth. All range of possible appearances, whether of samsara or nirvana, are limitless within the nature of the mind.

This View is introduced to the student by the master in Dzogchen by a blessing that transmits the direct experience of realization. The student must have achieved karmic purification and an openness of the mind in order for this transmission to be successful. To achieve this, the student must first meditate effectively, in order to enter a natural state. Secondly, purification and the strengthening of positive karma must be achieved through merit and wisdom accumulation. This practice can include Ngdzendo, or purification practices, and involve contemplation of the uniqueness of human life, the impermanence of death, the infallibility of the cause and effect of actions, and the cycle that is samsara. These realizations lead to a desire to take refuge in Buddha, thereby enhancing one's own inner Buddha, the birth of compassion, the removal of obstructions through visualization and mantra, and merit and wisdom accumulation through universal generosity. Finally, one should investigate the nature of the mind to exhaust the hunger for thought, and achieve a personal understanding of emptiness.

Meditation in Dzogchen is the process of resting in the View in an effort to strengthen and stabilize Rigpa. Four points characterize true Dzogchen meditation. First, Rigpa is the point between the end of one thought and the beginning of another. Second, the self-radiance of Rigpa is the arrival of a new thought. Third, if the new thought is not recognized as such, it becomes an ordinary thought. Fourth, if you are able to recognize



the new thought and leave it alone without following, then that thought will dissolve back into Rigpa. The point, then, is to achieve a continuous flow of Rigpa. Sogyal continues to explain the process. In Dzogchen, the fundamental nature of all things is the Ground Luminosity. When one achieves the key to the nature of the mind, one received the Path Luminosity. When this key is used to open the innate nature of reality, it is called the Meeting of the Ground and Path Luminosities. When a thought arises, the Rigpa recognizes the thought, and the two luminosities merge and liberate the thought. This process is vital, since this is the same process used in death.

Action in Dzogchen refers to the flow of Rigpa permeating the everyday life and actions of the meditating individual. By remaining in a permanent state of Rigpa, one is able to see thoughts and emotions as futile and pointless, and in this, one is liberated within the expanse of Rigpa. There is danger in this, since if one is mistaken about his or her ability to liberate thoughts, one is in reality only accumulating vast amounts of negative karma by self-serving actions. Dzogchen relies on two fundamental processes, those of Trekchitz and Tzgal. Trekchitz refers to cutting through delusion with Rigpa, allowing the primordial purity of the nature of the mind to come through. Tzgal refers to the learned ability to work with the Clear Light to reveal all aspects of enlightenment within a single lifetime. The practice is rare, and is generally done in retreat, under a highly qualified master of Dzogchen. Sogyal stresses the need for a master during Dzogchen, since the process can be a dangerous method in terms of karmic affects.

Once an advanced master of Dzogchen reaches the highest state of enlightenment in life, they are able to end life in an extraordinary way. When these individuals die, their body is reabsorbed into the light essence, and their material body dissolves into light and disappears. This is known as the rainbow body. When a master dies, he or she asks to be left for eight days. On the return of others, they find the body no longer in existence, other than the hair, nails, and impurities of the body. Sogyal offers a story of personal experience to show the reality of the rainbow body. In 1952, Stznam Mangyal, brother of Lama Tseten, began to go into the mountains and sit quietly, writing songs and chants. He soon after fell ill, and masters and doctors were called. Stznam stated all things were illusion, and asked to be left after death for one week. The family wrapped the body, and as grieving individuals came to pay their respects, they noticed the wrapped body getting smaller, and noticed rainbow colored lights surrounding the house. When the body was retrieved for the funeral eight days later, the undertakers found only hair and nails. Jamyang Khyentse verified this was a case of the rainbow body.

## **Chapter 10: "The Innermost Essence" Analysis**

This chapter provides the basis for numerous lessons later in the novel, and foreshadows much deeper understanding of the principles involved. First, Sogyal's explanation of the history and terminology used in the Dzogchen method is vital, in that these base, simplistic explanations serve as the fundamental base knowledge for comprehending the rest of the process. Further, his discussion of the View not only prepares one for the remainder of the chapter, but the View, Meditation, and Action



analysis provided by Sogyal provides the needed information used in later chapters when discussing death states. The brief introduction of Trekchitz and Tzgal, more advanced Dzogchen methods, allow for a complex understanding of the Dzogchen method otherwise unattainable, as well as provide needed background information for later chapters. Finally, Sogyal's inclusion of the rainbow body is not only interesting, keeping readers entertained, but is also very useful in showing the immense power of the Dzogchen master. Additionally, by using his own personal experience, Sogyal adds an element of truth and reliability to a concept Westerners may otherwise disbelieve.



# Chapter 11: "Heart Advice on Helping the Dying"

## Chapter 11: "Heart Advice on Helping the Dying" Summary

Sogyal begins by stressing the need to establish heartfelt communications with loved ones or friends or acquaintances who are dying. He points out that these individuals often feel alone, insecure, and confused, and need to relax before true communication can begin. Once trust is established, the relaxed atmosphere can allow the dying individual to breach topics he or she would otherwise not be comfortable discussing. As this occurs, one should not attempt to interrupt the dying individual, but should instead simply listen in sensitivity, warmth, and loving compassion. Sogyal states humor, when appropriate, can also help to lighten the atmosphere. In addition, he notes that dying individuals may misdirect their negative emotions, and one should not take this misdirection personally. Finally, he notes one should not try to convert the dying, nor feel badly if one's efforts seem futile, since one cannot know the true effects of one's actions.

Sogyal continues by stating the dying need to feel as much unconditional love as possible. However, he also admits that in some cases, such as abusive relationships and negative friendships, this is difficult, since there are negative feelings in association with the dying individual. Sogyal suggests trying to see the dying as similar to ones self, or placing ones self directly into the shoes of the dying individual. In these ways, one can overcome negative feelings through the opening of the heart and mind to the experience of the other individual.

One must remember that the dying are going through denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance of death, and are challenged by their own samsara. By trying to comprehend them, one can lift spirits and show care. One should not try to be wise or prolific, but should instead simply try to express honest love and concern. Sogyal states the importance of remembering that all people are inherently good, and have the true Buddha somewhere within. This, he notes, means they have the full capability of enlightenment, and thus deserve respect and care. Sogyal also stresses the need to tell the dying of their condition, in order for them to prepare for death. First, Sogyal believes the dying already know of their condition, but wait for others to confirm. Additionally, he notes the need for individuals to have the opportunities to come to terms with their lives, and find their own strengths and meaning.

In order to assist the dying, Sogyal continues, one must first face the fear of death within themselves. In caring for the dying, one must contemplate and reflect on one's own death, and in doing so, can come to a resolution and understanding of the primary focus of life. In doing so, one can experience the same fears as the dying, such as fear of pain, the unknown, loss, separation, and indignity, and can find sensitivity to the dying



in a whole new way. Sogyal also notes there is no need to die in pain, with the advancements of modern medicine. Although the Buddhist faith stresses the need to die in lucid thought, Sogyal points out there are a variety of medications that remove pain without consequences to consciousness.

To assist the dying in finishing their business on Earth, Sogyal suggests a variation of the Buddhist technique of equalizing and exchanging the self with others, and of the Gestalt technique. The process begins by visualizing the person with whom one has unfinished business. Next, one imagines the individual to be open to dialog, forgiveness, and honest communication. The individual then visualizes a conversation with the person in which the issues are discussed, and writes down the ensuing imaginary dialog. When finished, one is to express love and appreciation, and imagine the other individual walking away following forgiveness. The dialog can be practiced with a friend to find an even cleaner reconciliation. One may find, after this exercise, the courage to seek out the individual and complete the reconciliation in reality.

One must also learn to let go of the dying individual. Sogyal notes that many individuals remain living long after they should from fear of disappointing loved ones. In order to ensure this does not occur, one must give oral permission to the dying to leave the world, and reassure them their families will be okay. With children, Sogyal notes there must be honesty in the explanation of death, but also humor and lightness. He closes the chapter by stressing the need for a peaceful death, which includes the removal of any medical equipment, and a stopping of any tests and injections. While Sogyal recommends death in the home, he realizes this is not always possible. In these cases, he recommends movement to a private hospital room, the creation of a shrine, and the presence of a master. After death, Sogyal recommends a period to allow the body to rest, preferably as long as possible.

## **Chapter 11: "Heart Advice on Helping the Dying"**

### **Analysis**

Sogyal's discussion of assisting the dying is a heartfelt, honest, and pure discussion filled with tools to assist both those giving comfort and those who are dying. His stress on open communication and sincere care and concern for others foreshadows the next chapter, that of compassion. In addition, as in previous chapters, Sogyal uses personal experiences to enhance the learning experience by allowing readers to see his tools and methods in real life situations. The stories of Emily and the Murphy couple, as well as Sogyal's own vast experiences with the dying introduce a sense of realism and sincerity in his teachings. In addition, these stories provide an emotional component to the lesson that would otherwise be lacking. His discussion of facing one's own fear of death is particularly poignant, in that the tools he provides can greatly assist one in facing death. Finally, his very heartfelt and passionate plea to doctors in the final section of the chapter reveal Sogyal as a compassionate Buddha master, filled with care and concern for the dying, and for the peace of their death.





# Chapter 12: "Compassion: The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel"

## Chapter 12: "Compassion: The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel" Summary

Sogyal begins the discussion by defining compassion. He mentions compassion is not a sense of sympathy, or a warming of the heart, but is a sustained and practical determination to alleviate suffering. The compassion of the Buddhist teachings is one of logic, in that the compassion taught makes the practice urgent and far reaching, as well as stable and grounded. This level of compassion is the primary power of karma, and can combat the selfish nature found in samsara. By taking on the suffering of others, one can increase wisdom and the source of enlightenment. Compassion protects from self-interest, and is the source for all healing. Sogyal notes three benefits for the dying person stemming from one's compassion. First, the opening of the heart allows for unconditional love. Secondly, the inspiring atmosphere of compassion can lead the dying to a spiritual path. Finally, in showing compassion, one can actually lead the dying individual to feel compassion, which can, in turn, physically heal them.

Sogyal presents several tools to increase compassion in cases where enough love cannot be found within ones self to fully feel for the dying individual. Sogyal strongly recommends the practice of Tonglen, or the giving and receiving of suffering. Tonglen can lead to an opening of the heart, a revelation of one's true nature, and destruction of the self-cherishing of the ego. Sogyal presents several techniques to evoke compassion within ones self in preparation to practice Tonglen. First, if one finds he or she does not have enough love to show compassion, one should visualize a person who has shown them love, and allow that love to permeate his or her being. This love, then, will naturally flow outward toward that person. Next, one should allow their heart to open, in order to extend this love to all beings. In doing so, the spring of love can be opened and one can find compassion.

Another way to increase compassion is to imagine the other person as ones self. Third, one can put ones self in the place of the dying person to feel compassion for their situation. Fourth, one can imagine ones dearest friend in place of the dying individual, as an instrument of compassion arousal. This not only benefits the dying and the self, but also the individual being visualized, in that the karmic benefits of the use of their likeness will flow to their being. Finally, one should allow compassion during every day life to fill his or her heart, rather than pushing the feeling aside. If one sees a woman struggling with groceries, or a dying animal, one should allow those feelings to invade the heart, and should meditate on it, develop it, and deepen it.

Finally, one should direct this compassion through pray to the Buddhas to allow the feelings to benefit all other beings, and should dedicate all positive actions and spiritual practice to the enlightenment of others. To do so, one must obtain enlightenment



personally, and this drive to assist others can assist one in finding his or her own enlightenment. This wish, called Bodhicitta in Sanskrit, is the wish of the enlightened mind to awaken the seed of the Buddhist nature.

Once these practicing steps have been completed, one can begin to practice Tonglen. To begin, one should evoke and rest in the nature of the mind. When one is calmed, one should analyze his or her mood. If the mood is uneasy, one should breathe in and mentally absorb unwholesomeness, and breathe out while mentally exhaling calmness, clarity and joy, thus purifying his or her atmosphere. Another practice is to divide the self into two aspects. The first is one of love and compassion, while the other is the harmed, abused self. Breathing in, one should imagine the first aspect opening the heart and absorbing the second aspect, as the second aspect melts in compassion. On exhale, one should imagine the first aspect sending love, warmth, and joy to the second aspect.

A third practice involves one imagining a situation in which he or she acted wrongly. Breathing in, one can accept responsibility for the actions, and ask for forgiveness. Breathing out, one should send out forgiveness, healing and understanding. A final practice involves thinking of one who is suffering. Breathing in, one imagines taking in the person's pain and suffering, while breathing out, one sends warmth, compassion, and love. This compassionate exhale is then widened to include all creatures, including all enemies.

Once practiced, an individual can practice Tonglen in true life. In reality Tonglen, one takes in various mental and physical sufferings of individuals through compassion, and gives out love, joy, and happiness. Using one of the practice methods given, one should first find all compassion within the natural mind, and then allow the Bodhicitta to flow freely from the self to another person. Sogyal points out these practices work well when dealing with the dying, since they give strength and confidence, and widen the circle of compassion within the self. In this exchange of the self for the benefit of others, one can practice the holy secret of Tonglen masters.

## **Chapter 12: "Compassion: The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel" Analysis**

This chapter focuses primarily on the theme of compassion and the practice of the Tonglen. As foreshadowed in previous chapters, the base knowledge of compassion, assistance for the dying, karma, and other areas is vital to understanding the Tonglen practice. Sogyal uses this base knowledge to expand the information, providing a thorough method for the preparation, practice, and method of Tonglen. This method is simple and can be done by anyone, including non-spiritual beings, which allows a wider circle of practitioners. Further, Sogyal's use of personal stories and traditional myths throughout the chapter enhance the information presented by providing real examples of the Tonglen method in life. This adds a sense of honesty and possibility to the chapter that would otherwise be difficult to obtain. Even further, Sogyal's words on the widening of compassion and his discourse on the opportunities in life to give compassion show again his place as a compassionate master of the Buddhist faith.



# Chapter 13 "Spiritual Help for the Dying"

## Chapter 13 "Spiritual Help for the Dying" Summary

Sogyal begins this chapter by noting the right for individuals to die with spiritual assistance. He stresses that while one cannot guide another into a spiritual path, one can help him or her find spirituality and help him or her to find healing and awareness within the self. Since all beings have the true potential to be a Buddha, all are lovable and forgivable. One should practice assisting the dying prior to the experience in order to inspire the self beforehand. Only then, can one open his or her heart and find compassion and inspiration. This not only helps the dying, but also the self, in that one's faith can be deepened through practice and invocation.

Sogyal singles out two areas of assistance one can provide to the dying, those of the giving of hope, and the finding of forgiveness. By stressing the achievements of the dying individual, pointing out his or her virtues, encouraging the individual to rest in the nature of the mind, and inspiring the dying, one can give him or her a sense of hope and happiness. To assist in the finding of forgiveness, one can encourage the dying to make amends with estranged individuals, through personal contact, message, or letter. In this way, the dying can feel as though he or she has attempted to make amends, and can clear his or her heart. Sogyal stresses that if a relationship seems beyond repair, a letter or message may be more appropriate, since a refusal of forgiveness can be more destroying than the lack of attempts at forgiveness. In addition, one can assist the dying in finding or practicing a spiritual practice by locating resources and solutions to physical limitations to those practices. Since spiritual process is most important at the point of death, any assistance at this time is vital to the transformation of the dying individual.

Sogyal recommends the practice of Phowa, or the transference of consciousness, in caring for the dying most emphatically. This practice is done by friends, families or masters, and allows one to die serenely. There are many methods of practicing phowa, and Sogyal discusses three of these. Practice one involves first bringing the mind home through meditation. Next, in the sky in front of the self, one invokes the embodiment of truth in a form of radiant light. Then, one focuses the mind, heart and soul on this presence, and prays for purification of karma, forgiveness, a peaceful death, and a death that is a benefit to all beings. One then imagines the light penetrating the self to heal and cleanse negative karma. Now purified, one imagines the body dissolving into light, soaring to the sky, and merging with the light of the invoked. One remains in this state as long as possible.

In practice two, one's consciousness is imagined as a sphere of light flashing out from the heart and merging into the light of the invoked. In practice three, the mind is merged with the wisdom mind of the invoked. One should practice their chosen version of phowa, so he or she can perform the ritual without requiring additional assistance, in case death is sudden. If using the practice for another individual who is dying, the steps are the same, except the invoked image is imagined above the head of the dying, and



the light imagined flows to the dying, rather than the self. This form of phowa can be used at any time to cleanse and heal, as well as to assist the dying.

Sogyal also stresses the need to dedicate one's pain and suffering to the benefit of others in pain and suffering. In death, or the process of dying, there is often much pain and suffering. By dedicating this suffering, or by teaching a dying loved one to dedicate their suffering, one can transform the pain and anguish into strength, compassion, and a sense of purpose, which can help alleviate one's own pain. This process is generally done through the practice of Tonglen, explained in Chapter Twelve.

## **Chapter 13 "Spiritual Help for the Dying" Analysis**

This chapter is dedicated to assisting the dying in their spiritual enlightenment prior to the death process. Sogyal's focus on healing, forgiveness, spirituality, and strength is vital, in that these qualities are often the very qualities causing disruption in dying individuals. If one can assist a dying individual in dissolving these disruptions, one can essentially assist the person in dying well. This power, when examined and explained by Sogyal, is simple and can be practiced by anyone of any religion. The phowa, for example, is a powerful practice that can greatly help the dying, but requires little knowledge of any traditional belief systems. The discussion of phowa foreshadows Sogyal's expansion of the topic in later chapters, but also serves as the base knowledge for the aspects needed to cleanse and heal a dying loved one. Sogyal presents these instructions with a clear focus on compassion, showing again the power of this emotion when dealing with and assisting the dying. As in other chapters, Sogyal's use of personal examples of the teachings in life show the true power and lasting influence of the Buddhist faith.



# Chapter 14: "The Practices for Dying"

## Chapter 14: "The Practices for Dying" Summary

Sogyal begins by noting that at the moment of death, there are two primary aspects, those of the actions done in life, and the state of mind at the moment of death. He reminds that all tendencies are stored in the ordinary mind, and are ready to be activated in an instant. By dying in a positive frame of mind, one can improve the next life even in the face of negative karma. If upset and distressed at death, the next life may be damaged, even if karma is positive. To die ideally, one must first let go of any attachments, including personal possessions, friends, and loved ones. By dictating prior to death what loved ones are to do with possessions, one can avoid worrying about such issues in the bardo of becoming.

To ensure a peaceful passing, grieving loved ones should not be allowed at the dying person's bedside, since such grief may cause disturbance to the dying. While having friends and relatives near during death can improve the atmosphere of death, these individuals should remain as calming, positive, and as non-attached as possible. When one passes, one should enter into clear, undistracted awareness. For one who has learned the nature of mind, one can simply rest in Rigpa during the death process. If one does not know this nature, one can remember the essence of their master, and recall their teachings.

At the moment of death, the master should reintroduce the truth of the teachings and guide one through death after the final outer breathing has ceased and before the inner respiration has stopped. If the master is present, he or she will make declarations to the enlightened beings, and then lead the dying through dissolution. Next, he or she will create a strong impression in the mind of the dying, to remind one to practice phowa, and will remind one of the bardos. The master will also remind the dying that whatever images they see, they should recognize them as projections of the mind. Finally, the master prays for rebirth, and directs his or her blessing to the dying.

When dying, three practices are essential. First, one should rest in the nature of the mind. Secondly, one should practice the phowa, or transference of consciousness. Finally, one should rely on prayer and devotion of enlightened beings. For already enlightened beings, this is not necessary, since the transference of mind is designed to transfer one to the enlightened realm. Instead, these individuals need only to rest in Rigpa, and assume a position of the 'sleeping lion', and focus on merging their Rigpa with the primordial state of truth.

For unenlightened individuals, the nature of the mind is stabilized through a visualization of consciousness as the letter 'A', which is ejected from the central channel of the body into the Buddha realm. This practice is known as phowa. Most commonly used is the phowa of three recognitions, those of the recognition of the central channel, of the consciousness as the traveler, and of the environment of the Buddha realm as the



destination. The central channel is the area of the body through which the consciousness travels, and is the deciding factor of where the consciousness will be reborn, of which there are nine possibilities. If achieved through the crown of the head, rebirth is achieved in the pure land, where enlightenment can proceed. This process can only be done by a master, or with the instruction of a master.

Sogyal stresses that the phowa explained previously can be done anytime, while the dying phowa can only be done at the moment of death. Signs of a successful phowa include a loss of hair on the deceased, fainting of others in the room, and bone shrapnel propelling from the body at the place of the exit of the consciousness. He also stresses again the need for a positive atmosphere, and suggests using the Guru Yoga technique explained previously. Additionally, love, compassion, strength, and encouragement are needed in the final stages of death.

Once deceased, the consciousness travels without the body through the bardos, provided one could recognize the body as a mere illusion, and detach from it. In doing so, one can ensure no trauma will result from the loss of the body, and that one can experience the true freedom of death. The gap between the loss of body and future karma experiences is filled with potential, according to Sogyal. In this brief moment, provided one is resting in the nature of the mind, one can purify all karma in this bardo of dying, and can instantly achieve liberation and enlightenment.

## Chapter 14: "The Practices for Dying" Analysis

This chapter focuses on the processes of death, and the practices used by the dying and those around the dying to achieve the best possible rebirth. Sogyal's opening statements regarding a positive mind, positive environment, and letting go are simply explained, and show clearly the need for purity at the time of death. Sogyal also clearly explains the role of the master in death, and the expected ritual surrounding the dying. This alone can alleviate anxiety of death, in that his explanation removes the unknown from the death process.

Of particular interest in this chapter is the process of the dying phowa. Sogyal's stress on the need for qualified masters shows the power of this process, and the dangers surrounding inappropriate timing of the phowa. While the concept is a bit difficult to grasp, Sogyal uses the base knowledge of phowa presented earlier, along with the knowledge of bardo and karma to clearly explain the phowa from beginning to finish. His inclusion of signs of a successful phowa also adds a way to 'prove' a successful phowa, and add a sense of authenticity to the practice.

Finally, Sogyal's closing statements regarding the need for a realization of illusion of body at death further clarify the base knowledge of the body as a simple housing for the nature of mind. This knowledge shows the need to recognize the body as such, and provides hope for enlightenment and liberation even at the moment of death. For individuals just beginning to practice Buddhism, this knowledge can provide a hope for liberation even in lack of a lifetime of practice and knowledge.



# Chapter 15: "The Process of Dying"

## Chapter 15: "The Process of Dying" Summary

Sogyal begins by separating two types of death, those of the exhaustion of the natural lifespan, and premature death. Due to karma, the lifespan is limited, and difficult to extend. However, Sogyal notes, through yoga, one can extend this limit slightly. In the case of premature death, a lifetime of good karma or forewarning can avert death.

Sogyal explains the bardo of dying as the point between the contraction of an illness or condition that results in death and the ceasing of the inner respiration. It is called painful since the bardo can be one of suffering if one is not prepared. Sogyal stresses the need to know the process of dying to avoid this suffering. He explains the process as consisting of two stages, those of the outer dissolution, where the senses and elements dissolve, and inner dissolution, where thought and emotion cease. Sogyal notes the human existence is made of the elements of water, fire, air, and space, through which the body is maintained. Ancient Tibetan medical texts explain the consciousness is born of the mind, which is born of the body. The flesh, bones, and senses of smell are formed of earth elements. The blood, body fluids, and sense of taste are formed of water elements. The regulation of body temperature, pigmentation, and sense of sight are formed of fire elements. Breathing and the sense of touch are formed by air elements. The organs and sense of hearing are formed of space elements.

On the other hand, Tantric Buddhism explains the body as a dynamic network of subtle channels, called nadi, prana, and bindu in Sanskrit, or tsa, lung, and tikli in Tibetan. This is similar to the notion of ch'i energy in Chinese. The central channel of the body runs parallel to the spine, the right and left channels are on either side of the spine, and these channels combine together to form a series of knots, and energy centers, or channel wheels. These channels conduct the inner air, or winds, each of which represents one of the five elements. The essences are also contained within these channels. As one meditates, one can force the winds to enter the central channel and can thus increase the nature of the mind. According to Sogyal, this is what occurs during death.

In addition to the body, humans also have the five skandhas that make up the mental and physical existence. These skandhas are form, feeling, perception, intellect, and consciousness. Sogyal explains that these skandhas, as well as the body, dissolve at death. He also recommends using the sleeping lion position when dying, which consists of lying on one's right side, with the left hand resting on the left thigh, the right hand placed under the chin, closing the right nostril. This position allows the karmic wind of delusion to be blocked.

In terms of outer dissolution, one may notice the cessation of the senses. Since these senses are related to the elements, Sogyal explains how each element is dissolved. When the earth element dissolves, strength is lost, heaviness and discomfort begin, the



complexion fades, teeth stains appear, the cheeks sink, and the mind becomes drowsy. As the water element fades, one loses control of bodily fluids, tongue movement fails, eyes, mouth, and throat become dry, thirst sets in, trembling begins, body sensations become random, and the mind becomes irritable and nervous. As the fire element fades, the mouth and throat dry completely, the body cools, digestion stops, confusion begins, memory fails, and sight and sound fail. As the air elements fade, breathing is difficult, immobilization occurs, and the mind becomes unaware. Blood gathers in the heart, or the channel of life, and breathing ceases. This is the point of death, but inner respiration continues for twenty minutes.

In terms of inner dissolution, there are four levels of consciousness. First, in the Appearance level, the white essence given to one by his or her father travels through the central channel toward the heart. Inner awareness becomes clear, all anger thought states cease, and the outer body becomes pale. In the Increase level, the mother's essence is drawn through the central channel, all desire thought states cease, and the outer body becomes red. When the two essences meet in the heart, consciousness is enclosed between them, and ignorance and delusion cease. This is the level of Full Attainment. Finally, in the Ground Luminosity level, one becomes slightly conscious, and attains enlightenment. Since, in death, the three poisons of samsara, those of anger, desire, and ignorance, fall, one can rest in the gap and become enlightened.

## Chapter 15: "The Process of Dying" Analysis

Sogyal's explanations of the death process in this chapter help to solidify one's concept of death and enlightenment. While the information is mystical in nature, and somewhat difficult for novices to understand, Sogyal's explanation is detailed enough to provide at least a base concept of the body and mind. His combination of Tibetan medical texts and Tantric Buddhism form a working theory of the dissolution of mind and body is at least comprehensive, if not completely comprehensible. Sogyal's description of the outer and inner dissolution is equally thorough, and he ties these concepts in with the discussion of the origins of mind and body cohesively to form an entire working process of death. Sogyal's emphasis on knowing this process through meditation and understanding why a gap exists between outer and inner respiration is vital to understanding the achievement of enlightenment during this phase. This knowledge, combined with the knowledge from previous chapters, foreshadows Sogyal's upcoming discussion of death and rebirth.





# Chapter 16: "The Ground"

## Chapter 16: "The Ground" Summary

In this chapter, Sogyal discusses the Ground Luminosity. He begins by noting that in death, one cannot escape what or who he or she truly is. Once inner and outer dissolution have occurred, there is nothing left to obscure true nature, and one is left with the primordial ground of absolute nature. This is called the Ground Luminosity of the Clear Light. This is the greatest moment for liberation, but one must recognize the opportunity. Many cannot, and thus resort to old habits and conditioning, which lead to negative emotion and grasping, preventing enlightenment. In order to recognize the moment, one must stabilize the nature of the mind throughout life, and rest in the nature of the mind through meditation. In doing so, one is able to allow habits and conditioning to die in every day life, and thus prepare for the Ground Luminosity.

In higher meditations, the union of two luminosities is practiced, which is the best preparation for death. In this merging, the mother luminosity, or the fundamental, inherent nature of everything, merges with the child luminosity, or the nature of the mind so one can recognize the nature of the mind and enter realization. Once this occurs, one can recognize the nature of the mind again, with practice. The Ground Luminosity of death lasts as long as a practitioner can rest in the nature of the mind, but for most, lasts only an instant. Thus, it is customary in Tibet not to move a body for at least three days, to give the deceased maximum time to rest in the nature of the mind.

Sogyal describes the death of his master, Jamyang Khyentse Chtzkyi Lordrtz in 1959. China had invaded Tibet, and the monasteries had fallen. As a result, Jamyang and Sogyal traveled to Sikkim, and became ill as all of Tibet fell to the Chinese. His body was customarily left for three days upon his death, but by the third day, word had come that thousands of monks were in exile, and coming to mourn the fallen master. In the end, the body was kept for six months, with no signs of decay. His body was cremated. Sogyal notes the power seen in his master's death, and the clear guidance he now gives Sogyal, even in death.

## Chapter 16: "The Ground" Analysis

Sogyal's discussion of the Ground Luminosity in the chapter foreshadows his discussion in the next chapter of the bardo of dharmata, and later of the bardo of becoming. His clear stress on practicing for death through meditation and resting in the nature of the mind is shown to be a powerful message by his recount of his master's death. This personal, amazing, and heartfelt story shows clearly the power of the nature of the mind, and of finding liberation in the Ground Luminosity, as well as shows Sogyal's deep love, admiration, and faith in his master.



# Chapter 17: "Intrinsic Radiance"

## Chapter 17: "Intrinsic Radiance" Summary

Sogyal begins by noting that when one fails to recognize the Ground Luminosity, one enters the bardo of dharmata. This bardo has four phases, each of which presents another opportunity for liberation. The first phase is the Landscape of Light, where one takes on a body of pure light. One is aware of sound, light, and color, and of a clear and radiant landscape of Rigpa. If one fails to recognize this moment of liberation, the second phase, that of the Union of Deities, begins. This phase consists of the rays of light changing to balls of light of various sizes, known as tikli. The hundred deities of the Tibetan Book of the Dead exist within these balls of light, and as one's own light shines on them, their light dissolves, resulting in a merging of hearts and minds. If one again fails to recognize the moment, another single light springs from one's heart, and from it appears various aspects of wisdom. This phase, known as the wisdom phase, includes vast carpets of light symbolizing the capacity for enlightenment. If one fails again to see the opportunity, the final phase of spontaneous presence begins. This phase involves the appearance of the hundred deities, and the six realms of samsaric experience. If one fails again to find enlightenment, the vision disappears, and one is lured back into one of the six realms. Sogyal explains that it is the use of the Toga and Tantra practices that can lead to enlightenment in this bardo, but that few are able to recognize the opportunity here.

## Chapter 17: "Intrinsic Radiance" Analysis

This chapter focuses solely on the bardo of dharmata, which is rarely discussed in Tibetan Buddhism simply because those who can achieve enlightenment here are few. The four phases of this bardo offer four distinct chances of enlightenment, but are confusing, since the ordinary mind, that of the negative emotions of samsara, are constantly present. Since one has already failed to reach enlightenment due to samsara in the prior experience, the dawning of the Ground Luminosity, it is difficult to overcome that samsara presence in the bardo of dharmata. Sogyal's stress in this chapter that anyone from any religious tradition will see the deities in whichever form is customary shows again the unique acceptance of all religious faiths in the Buddhist tradition.



# Chapter 18: "The Bardo of Becoming"

## Chapter 18: "The Bardo of Becoming" Summary

Sogyal notes that if one fails to reach enlightenment during the bardo of dharmata, one falls into unconsciousness, and enters the bardo of becoming. With failure to recognize the Ground Luminosity and bardo of dharmata, habitual tendencies reawaken. In this bardo, the mind is no longer limited by the physical body, and thus, can be reborn into different realms. One's karma determines the direction of the mind, in that the winds of karma reappear, as do the thought states of ignorance, desire, and anger. One then forms a mental body, similar to the body one had in life, which possess all senses, is light, lucid, mobile, seven times more aware than in life, and able to read the minds of the living. Any physical or mental deficit in life is no longer present. One still feels hunger, but can only eat the offerings of others dedicated specifically to the deceased.

During the first few weeks of the bardo, one is convinced he or she is still alive, and one returns home only to find loved ones unable to see, hear, or touch him or her. One watches as belongings are sold, funeral arrangements are made, and loved ones grieve. The past life is reviewed in detail, and every seven days, one must relive the experience of death. As the winds of elements return, one hears loud sounds, feels avalanches, fires, and storms in a terrifying darkness. The abysses of ignorance, desire, and anger open before the individual, and one is assaulted by downpour, hailstorms of pus and blood, haunted cries, and flesh eating demons. The landscape is molded by karma, in that if one is genuinely good, their bardo experience will be pleasant, but if one is hurtful, the experience will be negative. This bardo lasts an average of forty-nine days, with a minimum of one week in most cases.

However, for those who have lived beneficial lives, and those who have lived extremely negative and harmful lives, rebirth is nearly immediate. Some accounts describe a period of judgment, where a guardian angel and black devil battle a case for salvation, and the Lord of Death passes judgment. Other individuals believe the judgment occurs within one's own mind. In both cases, the motivation behind past actions remains the deciding factor. In this bardo, the power of thought is the key issue, because habits and tendencies grow and dominate. While this can be detrimental, it also opens opportunity for enlightenment. While the Buddha realms do not appear spontaneously, they can be called forth with the mind, and one can be transported, and proceed to enlightenment. However, most find it impossible to focus the mind in this bardo, and thus, are reborn.

As the time for rebirth nears, one longs for a material body, and because of karma, will feel drawn to a particular realm. There are signs as to which realm one is being drawn. If one is to be reborn as a god, the vision will be of a heavenly palace, if as a demigod, the vision will be of weapons of fire, if as an animal, it is of a cave, if a hungry ghost, it will be of a hollow tree, and if in hell, it will be of a black pit. Arriving at the destination of rebirth, one will witness his or her future parents making love, and will be reborn. To close the entrance to rebirth, one should avoid emotions such as jealousy, desire, and



anger, and in doing so, rest the mind in empty nature, thus closing the door to rebirth. If one is unable to do this, one can also avoid rebirth by seeing potential parents as the Buddha. If one cannot do these, one can choose a better rebirth by entering the human realm, and will, in doing so, complete the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

## **Chapter 18: "The Bardo of Becoming" Analysis**

In this chapter, Sogyal describes the bardo of becoming in a straight forward and easy to understand manner. Building again on concepts introduced in previous chapters, such as karma, enlightenment, and the Ground Luminosity, Sogyal's method of instruction is effective. The concepts introduced include the theme of rebirth, which is central to the concept of Buddhism, in that rebirth is the beginning of the new cycle of life. Sogyal's discussion of the dangers of realm signals, and of how to alter the rebirth realm are informative, and provide a base understanding to both the realms themselves, and of how to avoid each unwanted realm. In addition, his reassurances of the possibility of enlightenment help to alleviate some of the concerns surrounding this bardo. Further, his points about judgment appeal to both Christians and Buddhists, making the text accessible for a variety of readers. His use of personal stories again helps to form a solid, realistic foundation to his teachings.



# Chapter 19: "Helping After Death"

## Chapter 19: "Helping After Death" Summary

Sogyal states one can help the deceased after death, particularly during the time of the bardo of becoming. During the first twenty-one days of the bardo, the deceased remains linked to this life, and are thus more accessible to help. However, Sogyal stresses it is never too late to help the dead. To assist, Sogyal recommends practicing the phowa prior to the removal of the body, or every seventh day during the forty-nine day bardo. Another way to help is to direct positive thoughts towards the deceased. Sogyal stresses a particular need to help those who died in suffering, since they will relive this suffering every seventh day. One can imagine light rays emitting from the Buddha toward the deceased, freeing them from pain and suffering. Offering charity in their name, donating their belongings, and sponsoring retreats can also help improve the karma of the deceased, even after death. Additionally, since the deceased become able to read minds, one must not dwell in suffering, anger, or greed, since doing so may cause more suffering and negative thoughts in the dead.

Sogyal then discusses the numerous Tibetan practices for the dead. First, Sogyal recommends reading the Tibetan Book of the Dead repeatedly to the dying individual. Since the deceased still has a clear presence in the real world during the bardo of becoming, he or she can benefit from the practices within the book. Secondly, Sogyal recommends the practice of Ne Dren and Chang Chok, the ritual for guiding the dead and the ritual purification. These should be done immediately following death, or within forty-nine days. If the deceased is not present, the consciousness is summoned through an effigy. The consciousness is called from the bardo, the karma is cleansed, and the deceased is introduced to the nature of the mind.

A third practice is the purification of the six realms. This process involves a visualization and meditation that purifies the six negative emotions. This is particularly effective with the deceased, since the practice breaks the roots of samsara. The fourth practice is that of the hundred peaceful and wrathful deities. In this practice, the practitioner visualizes him or herself as each of the hundred deities, where the peaceful deities center in the heart, and the wrathful deities center in the brain. The deities then send out cleansing rays of light to purify karma as the practitioner says a mantra designed either to purify and heal or to close the gates of the realms of samsara.

Another practice is cremation, or the burning of the corpse. The dead body is seen as the negative karma of the individual, and as the corpse burns, the hundred deities are seen as consuming this negative karma. Finally, Sogyal mentions the weekly practices, which are rituals by monks, family members, and Lamas performed every seventh day following death.

In addition to helping the dead, Sogyal mentions several ways to assist the bereaved. These include encouragement to act on behalf of the deceased loved one, writing



letters of condolence to friends and family that inspire, spending time with the bereaved, and listening to the memories of the bereaved. When one is anguished and depressed, Sogyal also recommends the heart practice. In this, one invokes an enlightened being, calls out to the being for assistance, and imagines the enlightened being responding with love, compassion, wisdom and power, transforming suffering into bliss. As one does this, Sogyal suggests imagining the sending of this bliss to a loved one who has passed away, thus feeling empowered to assist him or her. Finally, Sogyal notes that while grief is necessary, one must also accept and end the grief process through meditation and resting in the nature of the mind. As one grieves, one should examine his or her own life and learn from the mistakes of others.

## **Chapter 19: "Helping After Death" Analysis**

In this chapter, Sogyal explains how to assist the dead and the loved ones of deceased individuals, completing the cycle of healing. Building again on the ideas of enlightenment, the bardo of becoming, and karma, Sogyal's numerous suggestions are designed to assist the deceased in finding enlightenment or rebirth, and to assist the bereaved in overcoming their grief. His suggestions are all simple to do, and do not require a practiced Lama or monk, but instead can be done by family or friends. These methods, then, will assist not only the dead, but can also allow the loved one to feel as though his or her actions are assisting the deceased. This can help heal their grief. Sogyal stresses that one must learn from death, and more forward in life, gaining knowledge from those whom have perished.



## Chapter 20: "The Near-Death Experience: A Staircase to Heaven?"

### Chapter 20: "The Near-Death Experience: A Staircase to Heaven?" Summary

Sogyal begins this chapter by quoting several individuals regarding the experience of near death, and by stressing that modern science allows many to die, and be revived. Sogyal continues by describing a core experience, or common thread among near death experiences. Those who have experienced death report an altered state of feeling that includes peace, and a lack of pain, a buzzing or rushing sound accompanied by an out of body experience where the body is viewed from the outside, and an awareness of a dark alternate reality. Additionally, many report a bright, blinding light, filled with love, occasionally accompanied by a judgment of life. While some report visions of beauty and heavenly music, others report visions of hellish realms. Further, some report meeting deceased relatives, who explain they must return to the body. These experiences tend to alter the lives and attitudes of those who experience them.

Sogyal points out that the experience of a dark alternate reality coincides with the final dissolution in the bardo of dying, or the experience of full attainment. The bright light, he reasons, is symbolic of the Ground Luminosity. The out of body experience symbolizes the first twenty-one days of the bardo of becoming, as does the often-described experience of viewing grieving relatives. The bright light, mobility, and clairvoyance described by near-death experts symbolize the mental body in the bardo of becoming. The meeting of deceased family members coincides with Tibetan teachings of the mental body, and the views of heaven and hell coincide with the different realms seen in the bardo of becoming.

Sogyal then describes the *de lok*, or those in Tibet who experience near death. These individuals visit hell realms, witness the judgment of the dead, and are often accompanied by a deity who protects them and explains what is occurring. After a week, these individuals are sent back to the living to encourage others to find spirituality and enlightenment.

Sogyal notes that while near death experiences are similar to the bardos, there are some disparities. Further, he suggests, one should not view near death as inspiring messages that one must simply die to experience bliss. He notes the complexity of the true bardos, and theorizes the near death experiences are simply one small part of the death process. He notes that several renowned scientists and medical practitioners have supported the idea of near death experiences as symbols of the bardos of death, but also notes others who have dismissed them as mere chemical reactions in the brain. Sogyal firmly believes that the technology of today and the spiritual world can coexist, and can be used to help others.



## Chapter 20: "The Near-Death Experience: A Staircase to Heaven?" Analysis

In this chapter, Sogyal compares the near death experience to the bardos of death and dying, and the results are somewhat striking. His analysis includes several personal accounts of near death experiences that show clearly a resemblance to the bardos previously described by Sogyal. The knowledge throughout the book is pivotal in this chapter, as one can see the clear resemblances between these two states of being. Further, since many who experience near death appear to see Christian spiritual symbols, Sogyal combines the spirituality of the West with the bardos of Buddhism effectively, suggesting a link between all spiritual experiences. This allows even those who are strong Christians to access the text, and learn from the information provided.

While many have not witnessed the de lok, for example, one can still relate to his or her experiences through Biblical counts of similar experiences. Further, these personal statements serve to add a layer of sincerity, depth, and honesty to the discussion that would otherwise be difficult to obtain. His inclusion of renowned scientists and medical practitioners' statements serves a similar purpose, in that one can see the complexity of the issue, even if he or she is not convinced of the reality. Finally, Sogyal's stress on the point that technology must coexist with spirituality is a valid point, in that the whole of the book rests on the merging of the mind, body, and spirit.





# Chapter 21 "The Universal Process"

## Chapter 21 "The Universal Process" Summary

Sogyal begins by discussing the Chinese invasion of Tibet, and the loss of over one million citizens, vast forests, wildlife, and over six thousand monasteries. He stresses the atrocities done against the spiritual masters, monks, and nuns of the region. In particular, he tells the story of a monk who sings as he is led by the Chinese to his death. Surprising the Chinese captors, the man purposefully passes away prior to reaching the place of his execution. Sogyal notes his view that the enlightened of Tibet have the ability to see the boundary between life and death as imaginary, and can see reality instead as an unbroken wholeness of movement, and the bardos as not only the processes of death, but also of life. He states the bardos show the manifestation of mind from the nature of mind through light and power and into a mental form. This threefold pattern is not only applied to death, but also to the three levels of being, known as kaya. The first, Dharmakaya, is the absolute nature, the second, Sambhogakaya, is the radiance of energy, and the third, Nirmanakaya, is the crystallization into form.

Sogyal proceeds to explain how these three processes are found in life as well as death. When one falls asleep, the senses dissolve and the nature of the mind unfolds. Once asleep, there is a dimension of consciousness, much like the bardo of dharmata. In dreams, one is aware and conscious as one wanders through the dream state in belief it is reality, much like the bardo of becoming. The rise of thought and emotion is similar, as well. One begins in a state of Rigpa without thought or emotion. As energy grows, the fuel for raw emotion is developed. Finally, this energy takes on a form, that of thought or emotion. Sogyal uses joy as an example of this process. Prior to the experience of joy, one has a glimpse of the nature of the mind in a brief gap. However, if one misses this opportunity, one fuels the emotion, which turns to joy. In this way, the bardos explain not only the process of death, but also that of life. Sogyal notes the similarity between the three processes and those of other spiritual traditions, such as the Trinity, and the Hindu's threefold vision of God. He also stresses the role of the three kayas and bardos in human creativity, and mentions the capacity of art to enlighten.

Sogyal also notes the parallels between Buddhism and modern physics. In particular, he stresses the theory of David Bohm that consists of an approach to reality based on the bardos teachings. According to Bohm, the order in the universe has three aspects, those of the three dimensional world, unfolding from a universal unbroken field of the background to our experience. The relationship between the two is a continuous cycle of unfolding and refolding, organized by a subtle and infinite dimension. This concept, according to Sogyal, closely resembles that of the three kayas and the process of the bardos. Both spring from the idea of wholeness and unity, and the need to transform ones self.



## Chapter 21 "The Universal Process" Analysis

Sogyal's discussion of the horrific invasion of Tibet by the Chinese is one of honest anguish, anger, and resentment, clearly reflecting the emotions of Sogyal and others at the time of the Chinese occupation. His story of the old monk is a remarkable display of the power of the nature of the mind, and lends credit not just to the concepts of the novel, but also to the struggle of the Tibetan monks.

In addition, Sogyal's discussion of the three bardos in relation to kayas, the sleep cycle, the cycle of emotion, and other religious faiths lends credit to the concept that all of life is a cycle, and that the Rigpa can be applied to everyday life, if one masters the art of mediation. This discussion brings together the themes within the book, in that Sogyal's explanation revolves around the cycle of life, death, and reality, in addition to the karmic forces, the bardos, samsara, and Rigpa. Together, these concepts combine to form the life, death, rebirth, and enlightenment of all individuals. His inclusion of the physics concept of David Bohm furthers the idea that all things in life are cyclical, continuous, and aim to achieve a sense of unity, transformation, and wholeness. These concepts symbolize the nature of the Buddhist faith.



## Chapter 22: "Servants of Peace"

### Chapter 22: "Servants of Peace" Summary

In this chapter, Sogyal discusses his hopes for the novel, and the inspirations for his writings. He begins by noting his wish that no humans fear death or life, and his wish that all humans could die in peace. He dreams of the book changing the world to allow for a spiritual transformation, and believes that to do this, the lessons of death must be taught from kindergarten through the elderly. Sogyal also stresses the importance of hospice, and urges governments to encourage such programs.

Sogyal also discusses the death of his master, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche during 1991. He notes his deep respect, love, and admiration for the master, and his belief that the master's strengths and power live on in his disciples. He notes the death of this master, and the other masters of fallen Tibet, should not be in vain. The teachings of these individuals should be preserved. Sogyal dedicates the book to those who perished in terror in Tibet and other countries in recent decades. If one learns to use the power of wisdom and compassion, he notes, one can transform oneself as well as the rest of the world. Sogyal finishes the chapter by admiring the bodhisattva, or those who chose rebirth after enlightenment to assist others in their spirituality. He hopes the book can serve to assist those bodhisattvas in their goals, and hopes it can serve all beings living, dying, or deceased to find peace, wisdom, happiness, and liberation.

### Chapter 22: "Servants of Peace" Analysis

In this final chapter, Sogyal dedicates the novel to numerous important figures in his life, showing a personal and sentimental touch. The hopes of Sogyal are clearly intended to enlighten the masses, and assist all creatures in attaining a peaceful death. These goals are core to the Buddhist faith, and to the themes presented throughout the novel. His discussion of the death of his master is further proof that the love, honor, and dignity felt for Buddhist masters is a symbol for their power, and for the nature of the mind. Sogyal makes a clear statement in the chapter that he sincerely hopes all can find liberation, enlightenment, and happiness.



# **Appendix 1: "My Teachers" and Appendix 2: "Questions about Death"**

## **Appendix 1: "My Teachers" and Appendix 2: "Questions about Death" Summary**

In Appendix One, Sogyal displays images of his instructors, along with short biographies of each master. Included are Jamyang Khyentse Chtzkyi Lordrtz, Dudjom Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and Khandro Tsering Chtzdrtn.

In Appendix Two, Sogyal answers several questions often posed to him from students. First, Sogyal states that life support system use should be examined on a case-by-case basis in terms of whether such methods should be employed to prolong life. If the dying individual has a chance to have positive thoughts, life should be preserved. If the individual is without hope, however, support should be removed. Sogyal recommends creating a Living Will or appointing a Durable Power of Attorney to ensure one's rights and wishes are followed at the time of death. Sogyal also stresses that passive euthanasia, or the withholding of food for those with no hope of recovering, is acceptable. If one is beyond medical assistance and chooses to die, those wishes should be fulfilled. On the other hand, if one is healthy but unhappy, a suicide is a source of extremely high negative karma.

He also notes that children who die early are reborn into the human realm, organ donation is a course of high positive karma, cryonics are useless, since the consciousness cannot reenter the deceased body, and the only care one can give a senile family member is quiet practice for them, and mantras.

## **Appendix 1: "My Teachers" and Appendix 2: "Questions about Death" Analysis**

The first appendix is a simple listing, with photographic images, of the influences on the life and teachings of Sogyal. The second appendix is a useful tool in answering difficult questions about death and dying using the Buddhist perspective. The insight in Sogyal's answers shows a clear desire to assist others in making difficult decisions regarding life support, suicide, euthanasia, organ donation, and senility.



## **Appendix 3: "Two Stories" and Appendix 4: "Two Mantras"**

### **Appendix 3: "Two Stories" and Appendix 4: "Two Mantras" Summary**

In 'Two Stories,' Sogyal tells of two Buddhist students who pass away using the Buddhist teachings. In the first story, that of cancer stricken Dorothy, Sogyal stresses the woman's energy radiation and careful planning for death. When she entered the hospital, she took few possessions, created a shrine in the hospital room, practiced every day, regardless of her failing health, and relied on her Master. When death approached, she requested a removal of all pain medication, curled into the sleeping lion position, and passed away gazing at the sky. In the second story, that of AIDS stricken Rick, Sogyal tells of Rick's adherence to the teachings. Rick takes responsibility for his illness, applies his meditation practice to life, uses mantras and meditation daily, and rests in the nature of the mind. As he says goodbye to family and friends, he reminds them to find their own enlightenment, and to find love and compassion.

In 'Two Mantras,' Sogyal explains the meanings behind OM AH HUM VAIRA GURU PADMA SIDDHI HUM, the Vajra Guru Mantra, and OM MANI PADME HUM, the mantra of the Buddha of compassion. OM AH HUM represents the transformation of the body, speech, and mind of all Buddhas. VAIRA GURU PADMA signifies the essence of the View, the Meditation, and the Action. SIDDHI HUM means real accomplishment, or realization. Thus, when combined, the mantra means to invoke the Vajra guru, and ask for blessing and supreme wisdom. The mantra of compassion, OM MANI PADME HUM, invokes the compassion and blessing of all the Buddhas. The six-syllable mantra purifies the six poisonous negative emotions, which in turn purifies the karma.

### **Appendix 3: "Two Stories" and Appendix 4: "Two Mantras" Analysis**

Appendix Three is a touching memorial to two individuals who used the Buddhist teachings during the process of death. Dorothy, a cancer patient, clearly focuses her last moments on her practice of meditation and resting in the nature of the mind, and dies in a peaceful enlightened manner as a result. Rick, an AIDS patient, also clearly uses the Buddhist teachings of meditation and karmic winds to purify karma and prepare for death. Both stories symbolize the whole of the Buddhist faith, and the power of the cycle of death in this tradition. In addition, the personal nature of the stories lends a sense of truth to the practices taught throughout the novel, in that these individuals clearly benefit from the teachings.

Appendix Four is an informative section on the meanings behind two of the more popular mantras in Tibet. Sogyal describes each in detail, and gives definitions for the complete phrases. This allows one to understand the powers being invoked through the mantra, and informs one as to which mantra is appropriate for specific moments.



# Characters

## Sogyal Rinpoche

The author of the book, Sogyal was born in Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion. Sogyal was only six months old when he entered the monastery, and was taught by Jamyang Khyentse Chtzkyi Lordtz in the province of Kham. Sogyal is a master himself of Tibetan Buddhism, and has written the novel in an effort to inspire others to find enlightenment, and to assist the dying and deceased. Sogyal firmly believes in the bardos of dying as mirrors to life, and believes all individuals have the right and the power to live and die with wisdom and enlightenment. He stresses throughout the novel the benefits of meditation, karmic acts, love, compassion and a strong desire to assist others in the process of death. His lessons are taught in a cohesive, systematic method that allows all to both understand and benefit from his lessons.

## Jamyang Khyentse Chtzkyi Lordtz

Master Khyentse is Sogyal's master in the Buddhist faith. Described as a tall Tibetan man with short, silver hair, humorous eyes, and a deep, rich voice, Master Khyentse clearly had a profound impact on the life of Sogyal. Teaching him from near-birth, and treating him as his own child, Khyentse teaches Sogyal the fundamentals of the Tibetan faith of Buddhism, as well as the fundamental lessons of life. From his stories of early discipline to his travels with Khyentse, Sogyal makes it clear his respect, love, and admiration for his master is of the highest caliber. Further, the wisdom and knowledge of Master Khyentse is bestowed on many of the Tibetan faith, as shown through his lessons to large groups throughout the novel on death, dying, and the art of life. Without Khyentse, Sogyal admits he would not be the proficient Buddhist and educator he is today. Khyentse's gentle love for Tibet, his profound faith in the Buddhist tradition, and his vast and endless knowledge of spiritual realization are the foundations of Sogyal's knowledge, and thus, of the lessons contained within the novel.

## Samten

As a personal attendant to Khyentse, Samten is a role model to Sogyal, and a dear friend. Samten is described as being a bright, chubby individual with a constant smile and good-natured temper who is always willing to assist Sogyal in his replications of Khyentse's teachings. When Samten falls ill on the group's journey to central Tibet, Sogyal learns of death as a spiritual journey. Although a long and painful death, Samten greets it with peace and joy, guided by Khyentse through the process. This death, occurring when Sogyal was only seven, shows the beginning of Sogyal's learning process of life and death.



## Lama Tseten

Lama Tseten is a grandfather figure to Sogyal, and a practiced monk. Described as 'immensely human,' Tseten was over sixty, tall, with grey hair and a profound gentleness. Although firm in punishment, Tseten clearly adores Sogyal. When Tseten falls ill along the journey to central Tibet, he chooses not to burden anyone, and instead quietly dies in his tent. Sogyal, however, witnesses Khyentse's revival of Tseten, and his assistance is Tseten's passing. Through this, Sogyal learns the power of spirituality and the clear presence of faith in death.

## Dudjom Rinpoche

Befriending Sogyal following the death of Khyentse, Dudjom is known as one of the most powerful meditation masters and mystics of recent years. Sogyal tells many stories of Dudjom, including a story of Dudjom and his wife driving through France, noting the beautiful cemeteries. When Dudjom's wife states how beautiful the cemeteries are, Dudjom notes the wonderful houses of 'the living corpses' as well. Sogyal's story reflects the belief that that life is futile and hollow if one lives only in the present, aiming for permanence. Instead of pursuing triviality, Sogyal states, Dudjom's statement teaches that beautiful houses are not enough, but that one should instead pursue an end to 'samsara,' or the endless cycle of life and rebirth. Dudjom's words, teachings, and lessons such as this are told throughout the novel, clearly showing Sogyal's high level of respect, honor, and love for his beloved teacher.

## Guatama Siddhartha (Buddha)

Buddha, in many forms, is a primary and fundamental character throughout the entire book. In Chapter Five, Sogyal describes the enlightenment of the known Buddha, that of the Indian Prince Guatama Siddhartha. According to legend, Buddha searches for truth throughout many lifetimes, and sits under a tree in Northern India nearly 2,500 years ago. He vows not to rise until he has found the truth, and when morning broke, the Buddha achieves enlightenment. The Earth shakes and everything is at peace. Buddha realizes the ignorance of true nature is the root of samsara, and decides to teach humankind how to escape the cycle of samsara. Since that time, millions have followed the Buddha's lessons for enlightenment.

## Kamalijit Kour

Used in Chapter Six as proof of rebirth, Kamalijit was a young Indian girl. Kamalijit was convinced she had lived in another village in a previous life, and had been killed by a bus. When her family took her to the village in her mind, she walked immediately to the home of a young woman killed in a bus accident. Kamalijit could name all relatives of the deceased young woman, asked for items the young woman had owned, and showed many likenesses to the deceased.





## Arthur Flowerdew

Arthur Flowerdew was a man from Norfolk, England. Arthur repeatedly saw images in his mind of a city surrounded by a desert, a strange rock, a temple, and an odd structure within the city. One day when watching a documentary, Arthur realized the city in his mind was that of the ancient Petra. The BBC flew Arthur to the area, where he led explorers directly to the site of the now-demolished temple, pointed out the strange rock, and even gave archeologists a probable use for the strange device within the ancient city. Arthur claimed never to have seen the city, read about the area, nor seen anything related to the area. Sogyal suggests Arthur's uncanny ability to recall a city he had never seen is due to a past life experience.

## Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama is the reincarnation of Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Infinite Compassion. The Dalai Lama has learned traditional teachings and training, but also shows simplicity and practicality. He has interest in contemporary physics, neurobiology, psychology, and politics, but is also one of the most renowned masters of the Buddhist tradition. He has worked tirelessly for nonviolence, universal responsibility, the environment, and peace. His efforts to lead the Tibetan people to independence following the Chinese invasion won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

## Khandro Tsering Chtzdrtn

To show the power of the master, Sogyal tells of the greatest female master in his day, Khandro Tsering Chtzdrtn, the wife of Master Jamyang Khyentse. Honored by most Tibetans, Khandro is described as humble, beautiful in physical form and in heart, simplistic, modest, lucid, wise, and contemplative. Trained by Khyentse himself, Khandro was beloved by Khyentse, and their relationship was one of profound depth and spirituality. Following his death, Khandro remains in Sikkim, the place of his passing, devoted to him and to constant prayer. Her devotion has allowed her to learn the teachings completely, and to teach others flawlessly. Sogyal believes Khandro would be a perfect Western instructor, in that she 'incarnates with a mysterious completeness the love and healing wisdom of Tara, enlightened compassion in its female form.'



# Objects/Places

## Bardos

Bardos are the constantly changing realities of one's existence. Defined originally as the state between death and rebirth, Sogyal redefines the word to include all junctures in life where one can become enlightened, liberated, or introduced to potential. Sogyal continues to explain the four primary bardos as those of the natural bardo of life, the painful bardo of death, the luminous bardo of dharmata, and the karmic bardo of becoming.

## Samsara

Samsara is endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth seen by the Buddhist tradition as an uncontrolled cycle of suffering. Sogyal believes an end to samsara should be the pursuit of all individuals, rather than the material possessions of the modern world.

## Lu

The body, or translated from Tibetan language as 'something you leave behind.' Sogyal believes all individuals should be less concerned with this external baggage, and more concerned with the internal karma and wisdom of the mind, in order to find an end to samsara.

## Ng? Jung

The Tibetan word for 'renunciation,' this phrase refers to the idea of actual emergence. According to Sogyal, when one contemplates death in full, one becomes disgusted at the pattern of behaviors exhibited that are harmful or negative. Simultaneously, one is able to forge new pathways in order to find a higher plane of life, thus resulting in a deeper understanding of impermanence, compassion, and the interrelatedness of the universe.

## Lhodrak Kharchu

Lhodrak Kharchu is a province of Tibet and the location of the cave of the great saint and father of Tibetan Buddhism, Padmasambhava. This cave is one of the locations in which Sogyal received an opening of the mind at the hands of Master Khyentse. After a traditional invocation of a lineage of masters, Khyentse suddenly asks Sogyal "What is mind?" Sogyal finds himself without words or thoughts, and glimpses the nature of mind, or enlightenment.



## Sem

The Tibetan word for the ordinary mind, the sem is the dualistic, thinking mind that relates and functions only to external references. It plots, desires, manipulates, angers, and indulges, and is vulnerable to habitual tendencies and conditioning. The ordinary mind is the covering for the nature of mind, found only through enlightenment.

## Rigpa

The Tibetan word for the root of understanding, Rigpa is the primordial, pure awareness that stems from enlightenment. It is the intelligent, conscious, radiant and awake portion of the mind that lies within the ordinary mind, hidden until the nature of mind is known.

## Mind in Comfort and Ease Posture

A meditative posture used in the ancient teachings of Dzogchen, this posture involves a straightened back, while allowing the lower back to curve naturally and the head to balance comfortably on the neck. One is to sit cross-legged, representing the unity of life and death, good and bad, skill and wisdom, male and female, samsara and nirvana, and humor and non-duality. The eyes should remain open, focusing on a point on the ground in front of the body. As meditation begins, one's gaze should expand. The mouth should remain open, and one should breathe normally through it, preventing 'karmic winds,' or distracting thoughts, from entering.

## Reincarnation

Reincarnation is the process of rebirth that is central to the Buddhist faith. According to Buddhist tradition, a subtle level of consciousness is carried through to the next life, as well as the blessing and grace of an individual. These components become a part of the individual in the next life. Karma, the natural law of cause and effect, is responsible for the conditions of the past, current, and future lives.

## Karma

Karma, the natural law of cause and effect, is the driving force behind reincarnation. According to Buddhism, one's actions in the current life dictate how one will live in the next life. Thus, if one's conditions are of poverty and suffering, one can know their previous lives were filled with selfish actions. One can then alter their perceptions and behaviors to focus on actions that help others, thereby improving their conditions for future reincarnations.



## Dak Dzin

Known as dak dzin in Tibetan, the ego means to grasp to a self, and refers to the tendency to grasp at constructs referring to personal desires. The ego, inherently deceitful, convinces one that the pathway to enlightenment is self-service, rather than positive action. Sogyal states that when one walks the path to spiritual awakening, one must learn to discard the ego and embrace the spiritual being, and learn to listen only to the wisdom of that being.

## Guru yoga

Guru yoga consists of four phases, those of invocation, merging of the mind and heart through the mantra, the receipt of blessing, and unity of mind in rest in the nature of Rigpa. Invocation involves sitting quietly, invoking the embodiment of the person of one's master or an enlightened being into the space in front of the self. Visualization, Sogyal notes, may help. Relaxing, one will then fill the heart with the presence of that individual, and will call on him or her to help inspire purity of karma. The individual then merges minds with the enlightened being, and rests in their wisdom mind. This merging is done through recitation of a mantra, where one offers their heart and soul in devotion, feeling as the minds merge with one another. This merging results in a state of Rigpa.

## Dzogchen

Dzogchen is the most ancient form of wisdom within Buddhism, as well as the source of the bardo teachings. Traced back to Samantabhadra, the Primordial Buddha, Dzogchen has been responsible for the enlightenment of hundreds of thousands of individuals over time. Described as the primordial state of total awakening, Dzogchen is the heart essence of all Buddhas, and is the already self-perfected state of the primordial nature. In Dzogchen, the ground is the fundamental state of absolute nature. Sogyal notes two paths, those of the enlightened, and the confused unenlightened. The path of the Dzogchen is to uncover the intrinsic nature through teachings and practice. The fruition of the Dzogchen is to realize original nature and to obtain complete liberation, thereby becoming a Buddha.

## Phowa

Phowa is the transference of consciousness. This practice is done by friends, families, or masters, and allows one to die serenely. Practice one involves first bringing the mind home through meditation. Next, in the sky in front of the self, one invokes the embodiment of truth in a form of radiant light. Then, one focuses the mind, heart, and soul on this presence, and prays for purification of karma, forgiveness, a peaceful death, and a death that is a benefit to all beings. One then imagines the light penetrating the self to heal and cleanse negative karma. Now purified, one imagines the body dissolving into light, soaring to the sky, and merging with the light of the invoked.



One remains in this state as long as possible. In practice two, one's consciousness is imagined as a sphere of light flashing out from the heart and merging into the light of the invoked. In practice three, the mind is merged with the wisdom mind of the invoked.

## **Ne Dren and Chang Chok**

Ne Dren and Chang Chok are the rituals for guiding the dead and the ritual purification. These should be done immediately following death, or within forty-nine days. If the deceased is not present, the consciousness is summoned through an effigy. The consciousness is called from the bardo, the karma is cleansed, and the deceased is introduced to the nature of the mind.

## **De lok**

The de lok are those in Tibet who experience near death. These individuals visit hell realms, witness the judgment of the dead, and are often accompanied by a deity who protects them and explains what is occurring. After a week, these individuals are sent back to the living to encourage others to find spirituality and enlightenment.



# Themes

## Reincarnation

The Buddhist faith believes that reincarnation is related to continuity of the mind. The Dalai Lama explains that the mind is real, as shown by one's ability to think and learn, and is clearly changing continuously, as shown by the mind's alterations based on external stimuli. Further, the mind is clearly linked with physiological states of the body. If one were to trace back this mind, one would find a continuous pattern and origin of the mind, showing proof for successive rebirths. The Buddhists also believe in universal causation, or the idea that all things are subject to change based on causes and conditions, rather than an overall superior being. Thus, everything is self-created. Therefore, the mind must come into being because of previous instants of mind. Substantial causes are those that are produced of something else, and cooperative factors are those that contribute to causation. In the case of mind and body, one cannot cause another, since mind and matter are dependent on one another, and thus, rebirth is accepted as the basis for a mind and body connection.

Sogyal continues by pointing out that reincarnation, according to the Buddhist faith, is not based on a soul or independent entity being reborn, but rather, a subtle level of consciousness that is carried through to the next life. Sogyal uses examples of the pearls in a necklace, linked together, a fire burning throughout the night that must be rekindled, and milk as examples of the concept. Pearls of a necklace are linked together, and one pearl supports the pearls immediately proceeding, just as the current life supports the prior life. A fire lit in the early night is not the same fire as the flame at the end of night, since kindling has been used, but the light its self has never faltered, showing the concept of continuity and difference. Finally, milk can be found in a variety of forms, all of which are independent of one another, but dependent on the case component. This, according to Sogyal, is rebirth.

## Enlightenment

The theme of enlightenment, a vital concept in Tibetan Buddhism, is a major focus of the novel. Throughout the book, author Sogyal instructs readers on the various ways one can find the nature of the mind, and thus, enlightenment. In order for one to experience the nature of the mind, Sogyal notes three 'authenticities' that must be present. One is the blessing of an authentic master, the second is the devotion of a student, and the third is the authentic lineage of the introduction to the mind. In this practice, the master empowers the student with his wisdom, and introduces the student to the Buddha, or the presence of enlightenment within him or herself. The ordinary mind, or 'sem' in Tibetan, is the dualistic, thinking mind that relates and functions only to external references. It plots, desires, manipulates, angers, and indulges, and is vulnerable to habitual tendencies and conditioning.



On the other hand, the nature of mind, or the inner essence, is untouched by external forces, including death. It is hidden within the ordinary mind, and is only glimpsed on occasion. On those occasions, light, understanding, meaning, and freedom become apparent. This root of understanding, called 'Rigpa' in Tibetan is a primordial, pure awareness that is intelligent, conscious, radiant, and awake, known as enlightenment. In reality, all individuals are capable of knowing the nature of mind. Sogyal relates this knowing of mind to the realization there is an endless sky beneath the clouds.

## Karma

The force behind rebirth, according to the Buddhists, is karma, the natural law of cause and effect. Sogyal describes karma as one's actions, and the consequences of those actions. Karma cannot be destroyed or eliminated. As a result, one's life is dependant on this karma, in that the current life is often a result of the karma of one's previous life, and one's future life is determined by one's current actions, or karma. The importance of an action lies not in the scale of the action, but in the intention behind the action. If an action is aimed at assisting others, one's karma is improved. On the other hand, if an action is aimed at self-gratification, one's karma is harmed. Karma is therefore creative, in that one can change behaviors to improve future lives. All negative actions can be purified through regret, and any behavior can be changed through overcoming behavioral conditioning. Current conditions in one's life are dependant on one's past karma, and can therefore appreciate a painful existence with the knowledge that through careful, positive actions, future reincarnations will suffer less.

## Compassion

Compassion is a primary tool of the Buddhist faith, and is thus a major theme throughout the novel. Sogyal stresses that compassion is a sense of sympathy or caring for the person suffering, warmth of heart toward the person before you, a sharp clarity of recognition of their needs and pain, and a sustained and practical determination to do whatever is possible and necessary to help alleviate their suffering. When one can view ones self as a large part of the interrelatedness of the universe, one can feel compassion for all other beings. This compassion, when contemplated, can lead one to see that in impermanence lies something behind the changing world. This knowledge leads one to see that it is the dependence on a permanent existence that limits the mind, and once one can let go of this concept, one finds his or herself opening to the idea that there is something within all living beings that nothing can destroy. This concept, according to Sogyal, is known as the unending nature of the mind. Throughout the novel, several practices, such as the Tonglen, are explained which can increase one's compassion. This compassion is used to assist the living, the deceased, the dying, and one's own personal life.



# Style

## Point of View

As a reference book, the novel is written in a first person perspective, with several references to third person narratives. Sogyal Rinpoche, the author, is a well-spoken, reliable, and insightful Tibetan Buddhist master, and thus, has the ability to effectively explain concepts and themes inherent to the novel's lectures. This first-person viewpoint is necessary for the success of the novel, in that the teachings presented are those of Tibetan Buddhism, of which Sogyal is fluent. Further, since the concepts presented are vast in content and difficult to comprehend, a single, first person viewpoint is necessary to remain consistent throughout the novel. Further, Sogyal's own personal experiences with Buddhism are presented with clarity and are convincing, because they are presented through the first person viewpoint. His addition of third person accounts of Buddhist tradition, legend, and teachings, however, adds a necessary level of real life examples to his teachings, and adds variety to the text that would otherwise be lacking.

## Setting

The novel, as a reference piece, does not have a consistent setting, other than several references to Sogyal's homeland of Tibet. This Tibetan backdrop to the novel adds a sense of authenticity and mysticism to the teachings, in that several accounts of displays of power in Buddhism stem from the mountains of Tibet. The setting is historically significant, in that the ancient texts of Buddhism and many practices discussed by Sogyal stem from Tibet, and is therefore appropriate to the novel. In addition, the setting also provides an interesting focus of Buddhist tradition. For example, stories of the amazing deaths of Tibetan monks, the atrocities committed at the hands of the Chinese during occupation, and the tragic fall of Tibet, all serve to enhance the text of the novel and to provide a real life example of the theories of Buddhism.

Within the stories and examples presented by Sogyal, other areas of the world are also mentioned briefly. These include India, the West, China, Israel, and Russia. While brief and often unneeded for the plotline, the descriptions of these areas and the stories presented from these other countries provides not only variety, but also a sense that Buddhism is extensive in its reach across the globe.

## Language and Meaning

The novel uses primarily the English language, but also references several Sanskrit, and Tibetan phrases and concepts. While not particularly difficult to read, the concepts can be extensively complex, and difficult to grasp for beginning readers. The language is engaging and enjoyable, however, and follows a structure of the building block lesson plan. In this way, Sogyal builds the knowledge of the reader from chapter to chapter,





and uses the knowledge previously gained to introduce new and more complex information. The extensive use of Tibetan phrasing adds authenticity and realism to the text, but can be difficult to retain for later lessons. Nevertheless, the reading experience is not painstaking, and the text is accessible to most.

The novel is based in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, and does assume at least a working knowledge of Buddhist principles. Without at least some familiarity with Buddhism, readers may find the lessons and concepts presented confusing and difficult to comprehend fully. While the text explains most references, these explanations are often brief and limited in content. Readers with a no familiarity with spirituality or Buddhism may find the use of a Buddhist primer helpful in understanding deeper and more complex areas of the text.

## Structure

The 439-page novel is divided into a preface and foreword, twenty-two named chapters of uneven length, four appendices, notes, bibliography, acknowledgements, and an index. In general, each chapter contains a specific set of lessons surrounding one primary theme, and the chapters are arranged in a simple and sequential method that allows the reader to build on knowledge learned previously in the book. Major concept changes and shifts in lessons are always accented by a chapter break. The structure of the novel allows it to be easily interpreted and appreciated.

The novel's background content, that of the life of Sogyal and the trials of Tibetan monks during the Chinese occupation, spans the time between Sogyal's birth in Tibet in the 1940's and the current year. However, since the primary focus of the novel is Tibetan Buddhism, the information presented spans across thousands of years, and in some cases, concerns the very beginnings of the universe. This structure allows Sogyal to focus on the lessons of Tibetan Buddhism, and use real life examples of these lessons.

## Quotes

"Without our familiar props, we are faced with just ourselves, a person we do not know, an unnerving stranger with whom we have been living all the time but we never really wanted to meet. Isn't that why we have tried to fill every moment of time with noise and activity, however boring or trivial, to ensure that we are never left in silence with this stranger on our own?" (Sogyal Rinpoche, Chapter One, page 16.)

"This modern samsara feeds off an anxiety and depression that it fosters and trains us all in, and carefully nurtures with a consumer machine that needs to keep us greedy to keep going. Samsara is highly organized, versatile, and sophisticated. It assaults us from every angle with its propaganda, and creates an almost impregnable environment of addiction around us. The more we try to escape, the more we seem to fall into the traps it is so ingenious at setting for us. As the eighteenth century Tibetan master, Jikm? Lingpa said "Mesmerized by the sheer variety of perceptions, beings wander endlessly astray in samsara's vicious cycle." Obsessed, then, with false hopes, dreams, and ambitions, which promise happiness but lead only to misery, we are like people crawling through an endless desert, dying of thirst. And all that this samsara holds out to us to drink is a cup of salt water, designed to make us even thirstier." (Sogyal, Chapter Two, page 21.)

"So often we want happiness, but the very way that we pursue it is so clumsy and unskillful that it brings only more sorrow. Usually we assume we must grasp in order to have that something that will ensure our happiness. We ask ourselves: How can we possibly enjoy anything if we cannot own it? How often attachment is mistaken for love! Even when the relationship is a good one, love is spoiled by attachment, with its insecurities, possessiveness, and pride; and then when love is gone, all you are left to show for it are the (souvenirs) of love, the scars of attachment." (Sogyal, Chapter Three, page 35.)

"So we make our lives so hectic that we eliminate the slightest risk of looking into ourselves. Even the idea of meditation can scare people. When they hear the words "egoless" or "emptiness," they think experiencing those states will be like being thrown out the door of a spaceship to float forever in a dark, chilling void. Nothing could be further from the truth. But in a world dedicated to distraction, silence and stillness terrify us; we protect ourselves from them with noise and frantic busyness. Looking into the nature of our mind is the last thing we would dare to do. Sometimes I think we don't want to ask any real questions about who we are, of fear of discovering there is some other reality than this one. What would this discovery make of how we have lived? How would our friends and colleagues react to what we now know? What would we do with this new knowledge? With knowledge comes responsibility. Sometimes even when the cell door is flung open, the prisoner chooses not to escape." (Sogyal, Chapter Four, page 52.)

"In simple terms, what does karma mean? It means that whatever we do, with our body, speech, or mind, will have a corresponding result. Each action, even the smallest, is



pregnant with its consequences. It is said by the masters that even a little poison can cause death, and even a tiny seed can become a huge tree. And as Buddha said "Do not overlook negative actions merely because they are small; however small a spark may be, it can burn down a haystack as big as a mountain." (Sogyal, page 92, Chapter Six.)

To follow the path of wisdom has never been more urgent or more difficult. Our society is dedicated almost entirely to the celebration of ego, with all its sad fantasies about success and power, and it celebrates those very forces of greed and ignorance that are destroying the planet. It has never been more difficult to hear the unflattering voice of the truth, and never more difficult, once having heard it, to follow it: because there is nothing in the world around us that supports our choice, and the entire society in which we live seems to negate every idea of sacredness or eternal meaning." (Sogyal, Chapter Nine, page 128.)

"I have often seen also that people who are very sick long to be touched, long to be treated as living people and not diseases. A great deal of consolation can be given to the very ill simply by touching their hands, looking into their eyes, gently massaging them or holding them in your arms, or breathing in the same rhythm gently with them. The body has its own language of love; use it fearlessly, and you will find you bring to the dying comfort and consolation." (Sogyal, Chapter Eleven, page 176.)

"As Cicely Saunders, the great pioneer of the hospice movement in Britain, writes: "I once asked a man who knew he was dying what he needed above all in those who were caring for him. He said, "For someone to look as if they are trying to understand me." Indeed, it is impossible to understand fully another person, but I never forgot that he did not ask for success, but only that someone should care enough to try." (Dame Cicely Saunders, Chapter Eleven, page 176.)

"So everything that I have been saying up until now about caring for the dying could perhaps be summed up in two words: love and compassion. What is compassion? It is not simple a sense of sympathy or caring for the person suffering, not simply a warmth of heart toward the person before you, or a sharp clarity of recognition of their needs and pain, it is also a sustained and practical determination to do whatever is possible and necessary to help alleviate their suffering." (Sogyal, Chapter Twelve, page 187.)

v w k l F ? ? K L ??&?"It happens often too that someone is left after the death of a loved one feeling intense guilt, obsessively reviewing mistakes in the past relationship, or torturing themselves about what they might have done to prevent the death. Help them to talk about their feelings of guilt, however irrational and crazy they may seem. Slowly these feelings will diminish, and they will come to forgive themselves and go on with their lives." (Sogyal, Chapter Nineteen, page 313.)

"When he died it was as if the sun had gone out of the sky, leaving the world dark, and a whole glorious age of Tibetan spirituality had come to its close. Whatever the future



holds for us, I am certain none of us will ever see anyone like him again. Just to have seen him once, even for a moment, I believe, is to have had sown in you a seed of liberation that nothing will ever destroy, and which will one day flower completely." (Sogyal, Chapter Twenty-Two, page 358.)



## Topics for Discussion

This novel stresses the importance of allowing the dying to pass away with dignity. Using examples from the text, explain how this is accomplished.

Throughout the novel, Sogyal uses reference to ancient Tibetan books of Buddhism. Do you feel these references are helpful in understanding the concepts Sogyal is attempting to explain? Why, or why not?

Compare the bardos of dying to traditional Christian accounts of the death process. How are they similar? What are the primary differences?

Sogyal stresses importance on near death experiences as proof that the bardos exist. Using information from Chapter Twenty, explain how Sogyal concludes this. Do you feel he is justified in his conclusions? What other explanations could be used for the near death experience phenomena?

Using information from the text, define karma and explain its role in the rebirth process. Be sure to use your own examples in your explanations.

The book's focus is on the process of death and dying, and the six bardos. Discuss each bardo in detail, explaining the processes that occur in each bardo, and the primary goal of each.

Sogyal mentions in his conclusion that one of the goals for writing this book was to help others learn how to care for the dying. After reading this book, do you feel your attitudes toward death, or those who are dying, have changed? Explain your answer.