

Suffering



Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.

—Modern Buddhist wisdom

Orthodox Christians believe that suffering has meaning, especially the suffering of Jesus. For them, suffering is part of life. It cannot be avoided, and we shouldn't try to avoid it. Instead, we should learn to endure suffering. Suffering teaches us. Suffering tests us. Suffering makes us stronger.

This response to the reality of suffering is well illustrated in the story of Job, in the Biblical book of *Job*. Job, we are told, was a good and decent man. He was moral and upright in every way. He also had great faith in God.

Job was also blessed with all the good things life has to offer: health, family, and wealth. People in Job's circle considered the presence of all these good things to be evidence that if we are just moral and upstanding, and if we have faith in God, God will reward us materially.

But one day, Job's fortunes began to turn. His flocks were slain. His children were killed. And then Job got very sick. He developed sores from head to toe, and was in such misery that he came to curse the day he was born. When Job's friends saw what had happened to him, they said, in effect, "You must have sinned greatly for such calamities to have come upon you." But Job professed his innocence, knowing that he had not sinned.

In misery or not, Job's wife got tired of his whining, and said to him, "Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God, and die." But Job rejected his wife's advice. He maintained his faith in God in spite of all his suffering.

Now the reader knows from the very beginning of this story that everything that befell Job was God's test. Satan (who was not yet a fallen angel) went to God and said, "Sure, Job loves you because he has all the good things of life. But would he remain faithful if you took them all away?" God pondered this awhile, and finally gave Satan permission to put Job to the test.

Even though Job suffered greatly, by the end of the story he has passed every test, so God restored him to health. The moral of the story being that if one's faith in God is true, it does not falter even in the worst of times.

So Judeo-Christianity views suffering as a test of faith and character. The Buddha, however, viewed suffering in an entirely different way. He wasn't interested in the question of whether or not suffering has meaning. He was more interested in finding the cause of suffering, and a means of ending it.

The Buddha noted that suffering always arises due to the indulgence of some form of desire. If our house burns down, we are miserable because we desire a house that hasn't burned down. When we get sick, we suffer because we crave health.

For most of us, most of the time, it's hard to remember that pleasure and pain always go hand in hand. We forget that we cannot have one without the other. So we seek to maximize pleasure and do our best to avoid pain. But the great masters knew that life doesn't work that way. Everything in our universe comes to us in pairs of opposites, and the opposites are always changing from one to the other. Pain replaces pleasure, pleasure replaces pain, over and over again, endlessly. Nothing in the material universe ever remains the same for long. But when we finally understand this truth at the most profound level, we have a chance to change the rules of the game.

Buddha taught that there is a way out of suffering, and that way is to eliminate desire. If we can retrain the mind so that it no longer craves, so that it no longer prefers one thing over another—so that good and bad, pleasure and pain, hot and cold, love and hate are all the same to us, then suffering ceases of its own accord.

If you understood the nature of suffering, you would not have to suffer. You must first understand what causes suffering, and then you will have the ability to transcend it.

The Hymn of Jesus from The Acts of John

Blessed are those who are persecuted;
they will find rest in the Light.

The [Greek] Gospel of Thomas; parallels: Matthew, Luke

Jesus speaking to his brother, James, after his crucifixion: "I am not the body that surrounds me; therefore I did not suffer. At no time did I feel pain. No one harmed me at all. It was necessary that my body be destroyed."

The [First] Apocalypse of James

When you experience things like heat and cold, pleasure and pain, you only feel them because your senses are in contact with them. These things come and go. These things have the nature of impermanence, so watch them come and go with patience and an even mind.

The Bhagavad Gita

A person who remains steady and unattached when pleasure and pain comes and goes will achieve the highest goal.

The Bhagavad Gita

When, through diligent practice, yoga reaches its highest goal, and the Self is seen as God, the yogi is no longer affected by pleasure and pain—for his senses are no longer in contact with them.

The Bhagavad Gita

To transcend suffering, one must practice with sincerity. Only with practice will one be able to ascend to the top of the mountain—which is wisdom.

The Dhammapada

Suffering proceeds from change and decay, and is accompanied by pain and suffering. These things are not part of essential mind.

The Buddha

When one no longer considers anything in the world his own, when he no longer grieves for what no longer exists, when he is no longer influenced by ideas . . . he reaches a place of peace.

The Purabheda Sutra

I suffer because of my ego and my selfishness. If I became unselfish, how could I suffer?

The Tao Te Ching

That which is essential within a person cannot suffer. That exists forever.

The Tao Te Ching



This is why you get sick and die; you follow those things that mislead you.

The Gospel of Mary [Magdalene]

Do not fear suffering, for you are surrounded by a protective wall of Spirit. The world has existed for a very long time, and it will continue to exist for a very long time. Your sufferings represent no more than an instant in time.

The Apocryphon of James

When you leave behind your suffering and the shame of your flesh and attain enlightenment, then you will become One, and will be One for all eternity.

The Book of Thomas the Contender

Learn from these teachings. Understand knowledge and live life. Then, no one but yourself can cause you to suffer.

The Apocryphon of James

Grief and sorrow result from holding the world dear.

The Doctrine of the Buddha

If you fear suffering, just do no evil deeds, either in secret or for all to see.

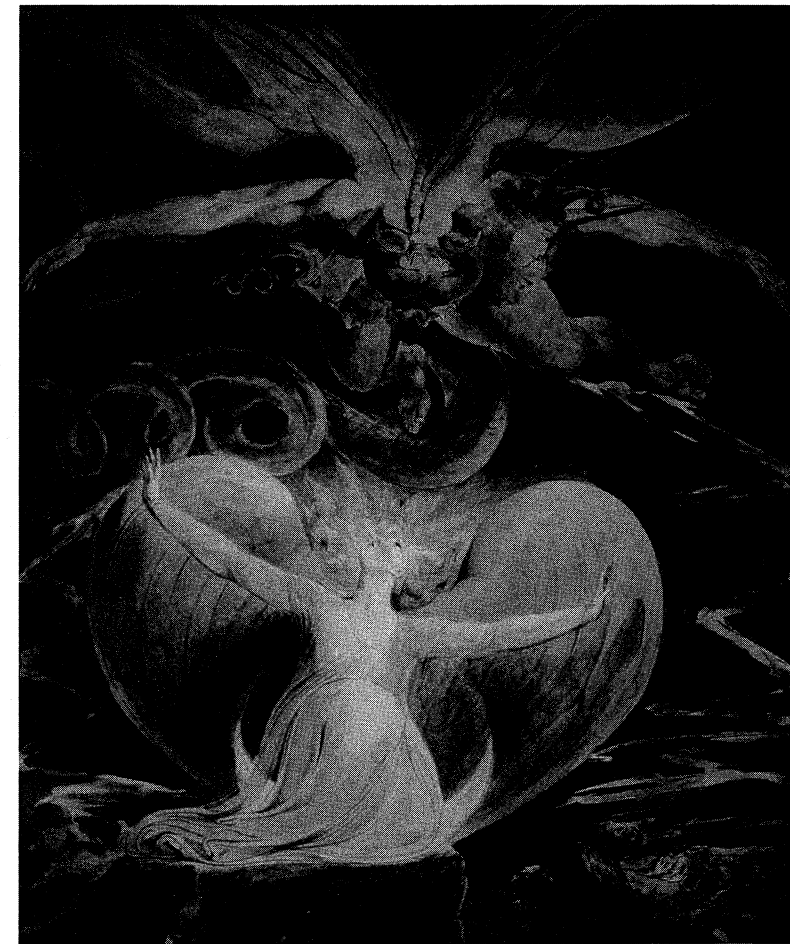
The Dhammapada

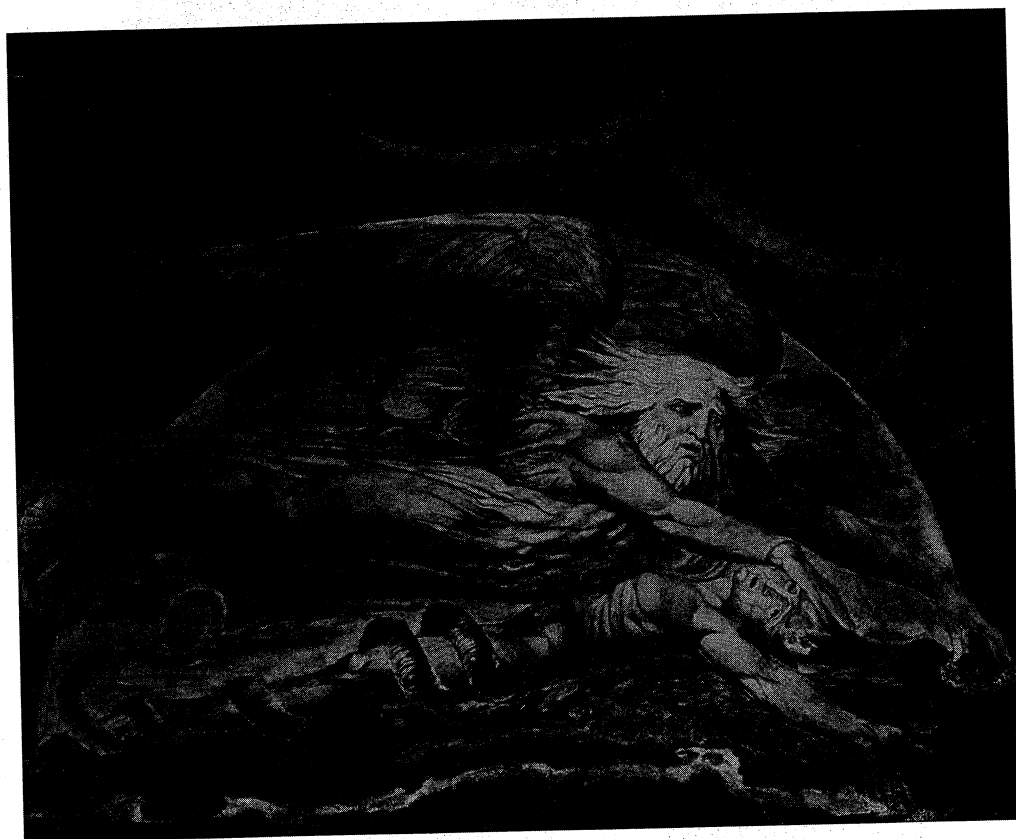
There is a place without substance. It exists beyond the Great Beyond. I call it the end of suffering.

The Buddha

Gain wisdom, conquer lethargy by practice, and then you will transcend suffering.

The Dhammapada





Karma and Reincarnation



*The snowdrop is a snowdrop and not an oak,
and just that kind of snowdrop, because it is
the outcome of the karma of an
endless series of past existences.*

—Rhys-Davids

Karma and reincarnation are topics that cannot be discussed separately since they are inextricably linked. Karma is what *causes* reincarnation, or rebirth. Put an end to karma and you put an end to rebirth.

Karma, literally, means “works” or “actions.” Since most of our actions in life have either positive or negative effects on ourselves and others, we can speak of accruing both “good” and “bad” karma during each lifetime. In theory, if our good karma outweighs our bad karma, our next birth will find us in circumstances that are more conducive to spiritual growth. If the opposite is the case . . . well, we don’t even want to think about that.

Karma, we are told, is never neutral. If one becomes enlightened in any given lifetime that person may continue to act, but it is said that no karma of any kind is accrued. Enlightenment frees us from the wages of karma at the same time that it frees us from “samsara”—the ever-turning wheel of birth, death, and rebirth.

So who’s keeping score? Dualistic religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam believe the scorekeeper is a supernatural Being who keeps a journal of debits and

credits for each person. Eastern philosophies, by contrast, believe that we ourselves are the scorekeepers. But even if there is no supernatural being to pass judgment on us, it doesn't mean we get a pass. The law of karma suggests that we alone are responsible for all of the things that happen to us in this life and the next. Our specific karma is predicated upon everything that we have ever thought, said, or done in this life and all those that came before.

Traditional Christians might be surprised to learn that Hindus and Buddhists believe in "heaven" and "hell." But for Hinduism and Buddhism, such positive and negative realms have no location in time and space and are the product of our own karma. Like all phenomena, heaven and hell are devoid of ultimate reality. Like the life we are experiencing right now, they are projections of our own dualistic and deluded minds.

At least we should be happy to learn that "punishment," the feedback loop of karma and self-judgment, is never eternal. If we reap the negative effects of our actions here, and hereafter, these conditions last only as long as we choose them to. We can begin to alter our karma the moment we decide to leave the world behind and give our full attention and effort to the process of ending our suffering and achieving enlightenment.

Unlike their orthodox brethren, many Gnostic Christian movements believed in karma and reincarnation, although there are not a great number of references in the recovered texts. Contrary to the opinion of some, there are no references to reincarnation in the canonical Gospels of the *New Testament*. Certainly the historical Jesus understood the law of karma (we reap what we sow), but we have no idea what he believed about the afterlife. Many *New Testament* scholars believe that all of Jesus' references to judgment, the coming apocalypse, heaven, and so on, in the canonical Gospels, were not his words, but those of the Christian evangelists who wrote those Gospels.

No doubt there are at least some modern Christians who believe in reincarnation, but don't dare talk about it in church. Certainly this was the case with the early Church. The most famous orthodox Christian who believed in karma and reincarnation was the brilliant third-century apologist and theologian, Origen. There is no record that Origen bore the wrath of his brother clerics during his own time, but the Church excommunicated and anathematized him three centuries later just to set the record straight.

Origen cannot have been the only orthodox Christian who believed in the twin doctrines of karma and reincarnation, since these beliefs were specifically repudiated by the Church—not during the third century when Origen lived, but several centuries later. In 553 C.E. the Second Council of Constantinople decreed: "Whosoever shall support the mythical doctrine of the preexistence of the soul and the consequent wonderful opinion of its return, let him be anathema."

While the decree could be considered retroactive, and while it anathematized Origen officially, this could not have been its main purpose. For an anathema against reincarnation to be issued formally suggests that the belief was widespread among Christians even as late as the sixth century.

Reincarnation has always been a difficult doctrine to grasp because there are so many different interpretations about just how it works. The Buddhist understanding of "rebirth," for instance, differs from the Hindu belief in reincarnation—at least philosophically. To confuse matters even more, every philosophical system within each of these religions explains the doctrine in a slightly different way—all of which can be confusing to the Westerner who didn't grow up in any of these traditions.

Certainly the Tibetan Buddhists have concentrated on this subject far beyond the scope of other sects or religions. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a guide and road map of what happens between death and rebirth. It is also a good place to begin for those who wish to know more about this subject.

Be merciful that you may obtain mercy.
 Forgive, so that you may be forgiven.
 As you judge, so you will be judged. As
 you serve, so will service be done to
 you. And whatever you measure out,
 that is what will be returned to you.

The Gospel According to Matthew; parallel: Luke

Agree with your adversary quickly
 while you are on the way with him,
 lest he deliver you to the judge, and
 the judge deliver you to his officer, and
 you are cast into prison. I tell you, you
 will not be released from that prison
 until you have paid the last farthing.

The Gospel According to Matthew; parallel: Luke

The soul of someone evil will be punished
 according to its transgressions. The virgin
 of light will blind that soul and hand it over
 to one of her judges to have it cast into a
 body which is appropriate for its crimes.

The Pistis Sophia

Everyone creates their own fate.
 Even life in the womb is affected by
 the karma from a previous life.

The Garuda Purana

Those who remain ignorant of Me, from
 one lifetime to the next, are born into
 wombs of those who are also ignorant.
 Trapped in delusion, they fall ever
 lower into the realms of existence.

The Bhagavad Gita

Into the wombs of cruel beings I cast
 malevolent and heartless persons
 who do evil—the most degraded of
 all those who exist in these worlds.

The Bhagavad Gita

From a sound, an echo returns. A body
 creates a shadow. So, too, will misery
 come to him who does evil works.

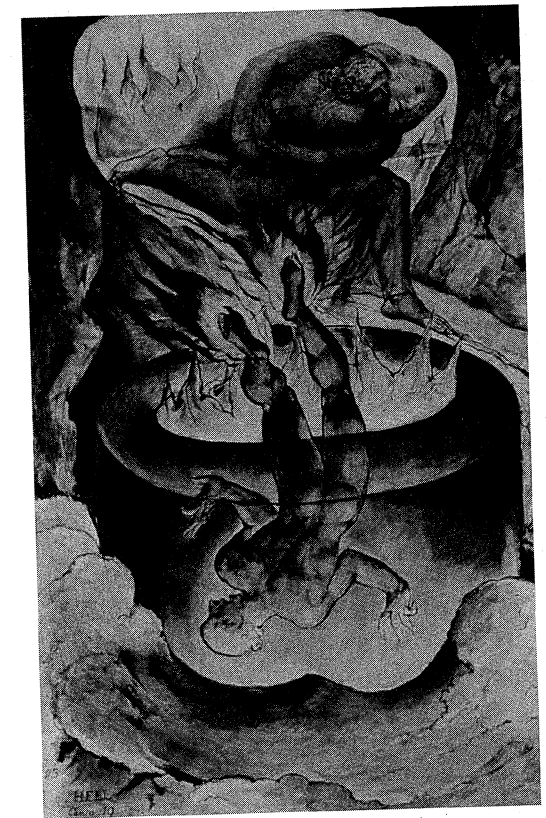
Three Sermons

If an evil person criticizes someone
 who is virtuous, it is like spitting at the
 sky. The spit doesn't dirty the sky, but
 returns to pollute the person who spits.

Three Sermons

Adversity and suffering is the end of
 all those who do evil in this life.

The Lotus of the True Law



The sheep need not fear wolves after this lifetime, nor anyone who can kill the body in this lifetime. They should fear, instead, those who have the power to kill both body and soul, and cast both into the flames of hell.

The Gospel of the Egyptians; parallels: Matthew, Luke

Seek now the meaning of all things so that your suffering may end. Do not wait, believing that you will find knowledge after you have taken on a new body.

The Pistis Sophia

Fate causes the old soul to forget all the many regions it has traveled over time, and all the punishments it has endured along the way. This forgetfulness becomes the body that surrounds the soul. It pretends to be the soul, but it is a false spirit.

The Pistis Sophia

Judge not, that you may not be judged. For with whatever judgment you pronounce, you will be so judged.

The Gospel According to Matthew; parallel: Luke

There are two eternal paths in this universe. One is of light, the other of darkness. The first leads to freedom from the wheel of birth, death, and rebirth; the other leads back to this world once more.

The Bhagavad Gita

If one does not find God in this lifetime, he is doomed to rebirth.

The Katha Upanishad

Many are the births you and I have passed through. I know them all, but you have forgotten.

The Bhagavad Gita

One's actions in life determine who that person is, and what befalls him. Those who do evil, become evil. Those who do good, become good. What we do in life determines our fate in this life and the next.

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

Those who seek happiness in this lifetime by robbing others of their happiness will find nothing but misery after they die.

The Buddha

Do no evil, for suffering comes to those who cause suffering. But suffering cannot assail those who do good. Become a fortress, both on the outside and within yourself, so that nothing can overcome you. Life is short; there is not a moment to lose.

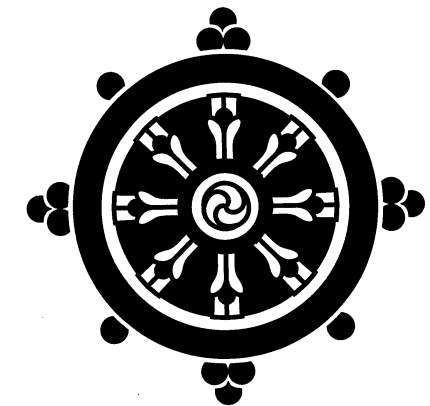
The Dhammapada

Pleasures in life are like a flowing river. You float away on them and are carried from lifetime to lifetime. They pursue you like a hunter pursues his prey. The cycle of birth, death, and rebirth goes on and on. It is a long journey for those who do not know the dharma.

The Dhammapada

Harm returns to the person who does harm. It is like throwing dust into the wind.

The Dhammapada



Death and Immortality



*For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and
to melt into the sun? And what is it to cease breathing,
but to free the breath from its restless tides,
that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?*

—Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

Of all animal species on Earth, only *Homo sapiens* know they will die. Knowing this, all human beings have to face the fear of dying. It seems almost unimaginable that “I” will cease to exist. It seems ludicrous that our *experience* of reality will end in utter annihilation. Certainly total extinction has to be the most frightening thing we can imagine.

The ancients sought a remedy for the fear of dying, and developed religions to deal with the fear. Most of the ancient religions suggested that we don’t really die, but live on in one form or another after our physical body goes back to the earth from which it came. Even though they wished to give their followers hope, how did these first religionists *know* what happened after death? Did they commit suicide so they could come back to life and explain what death was like? Or did they simply tell people to believe and have faith that their doctrines about death and the afterlife were accurate?

The problem is that everyone talks about death (if they dare mention it at all) from *this* side of the grave. Do any of us speak from experience? One of my favorite stories illustrating this question is about a Zen monk who asked his Zen master, “Roshi, is there

life after death?” The Roshi answered, “I don’t know.” The monk was incredulous at this answer, and blurted out, “But Roshi, you’re a Zen master.” To which the Roshi replied, “Well yes, but I’m not a *dead* Zen master.”

Tibetan Buddhists, on the other hand, claim to know a great deal about death and the process of dying—even the process of rebirth. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is purported to be a primer and navigational chart relating to what happens to us after death. It discusses what takes place as the body is dying, and the “bardo” planes of existence that we go through after we are dead. Tibetan Lamas even claim to remember their past incarnations—which can be confusing to the non-Buddhist because Buddhists do



not believe in a human soul. If there is no soul, what is it, then, that leaves the body at death? What is it that experiences the "lokas," or other worlds (or planes of existence) including heavenly and hellish realms, not to mention demons and deities? More puzzling still, what is it that is reborn? If "I" no longer exist, who or what takes on a new body? What has existed through countless incarnations? What can break the bonds of samsara and attain Nirvana?

Christians believe each one of us has a soul, but the belief that the soul flies off to heaven or hell immediately after death is actually a Christian heresy. The "true" Church doctrine holds that our souls do not separate from our bodies, but both body and soul remain together in the ground until the day of judgment—at which time all good Christians will rise from their graves in reconstituted bodies (with souls intact) and ascend into heaven, where they will live in God's presence for all eternity. But woe to all those dead who died without having confessed Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior; these unfortunate pagans will also rise from their graves, but only to be sent directly to hell where they will be tortured for all eternity.

Another group of people with strong convictions about the afterlife are those who draw conclusions from the "near death" experiences of others. People such as Dr. Raymond Moody have documented many cases of people who claim to have experienced after-death states where they find themselves floating above their bodies while doctors are trying to revive them. More than a few of these people tell of being drawn toward a brilliant light at the end of a long dark tunnel where they may meet long dead relatives, or even find themselves in the presence of a divine being such as Jesus or the Buddha.

Modern science, on the other hand, denies that near-death experiences have anything to do with life after death. They point out that people who had these experiences did not, in fact, die, and almost dying is not the same thing as being dead. Explaining the near-death experience, researchers argue that the brain secretes certain chemicals as the body is shutting down, and these chemicals cause the dying person to have pleasant hallucinations. But when these hallucinations dim, researchers tell us, all brain activity ceases, and consciousness comes to an end.

Those scientists who do work on the human brain go further yet in telling us that none of their electronic instruments have ever measured any form of energy leaving the body at the time of death. As far as they are concerned, science has proven once and for all that there is no such thing as a human soul. In this, they agree with the Buddha: "When the body and mind dissolve, they do not exist anywhere, any more than musical notes lay heaped up anywhere."

Yet while Buddhists deny the existence of the human soul, they believe that there is some form of consciousness that experiences phenomena after death. And they also believe in "rebirth." But what is reborn? The Buddhist answer is that there are "samskaras," or collections of karmic tendencies and patterns that are attached to "us" during this lifetime. This core, or "mind-stream," because it still craves material existence, perceives phenomena after death in the same way it perceived phenomena while in a physical body. But because of the craving for material existence, these "mind-streams" are eventually drawn back into the material realm.

On the subject of death, there is one extremely important teaching that seems to be common to all four of the spiritual teachers in this book. Jesus, the Buddha, Krishna, and Lao Tzu make the point over and over again that the *fear* of death is the worst possible state of mind a person can be in at the moment of death. The fear of death, it would seem, affects what we perceive after we die. If we are fearless at the moment of death, we see death for what it is: just another illusion. In this case, we do not "taste" death. But for those with fear, the after-death state can be a nightmare.

Interestingly, this is precisely what those who have had near-death experiences tell us. For them, the fear of death no longer exists. Knowing this, they are able to live life more fully in the here and now.

Certainly the Buddhist and Hindu would agree. If there is no immortality in the usual sense of the term, neither is there "death." If nothing is born, nothing dies. Perhaps it is in this recognition that we come to realize that the fear of death is an inappropriate, and unnecessary, response to the dissolution of the human body.

When what gives life to a person leaves the body, the person is considered dead. But the spirit within the body remains.

Dialogue of the Savior

When the nature of something takes on form, it exists in relationship to all other forms. But when it ceases to exist in this form, it returns to its essential nature.

The Gospel of Mary [Magdalene]

There is no point to running from death. Rather, death is your deliverance. No one who fears death can escape it.

The Apocryphon of James

Of that which is born, death is inevitable. Of that which is dead, birth is inevitable. One should not grieve over what is inevitable.

The Bhagavad Gita

All things in the beginning are un-manifested. In their intermediate state they are manifest. At the end, they are un-manifest once again. Why grieve over the essential nature of things?

The Bhagavad Gita

We have existed in the past, we exist now, and we will exist in the future. The soul that has a body in this world will find another body after death. Those who know this are not deceived by the threat of death.

The Bhagavad Gita

There is nowhere you can hide from death—not in the skies, not in the mountains, not in the depths of the sea.

The Dhammapada

A Zen master was dying, and his disciples were grieving. "Why are you grieving?" the Zen master asked. "Because you will go away from us," the monks responded. To this, the Zen master replied, "But where would I go?"

The Buddha

One who has lived wisely does not fear death.

The Buddha



A body, while living, is soft and flexible. But when it dies it becomes rigid. Those things that are soft, then, belong to the living. Rigidity belongs to what is dead.

The Tao Te Ching

To be united with Tao is to be One. To be One is to live forever. Even though the body dissolves, the person who is One is safe.

The Tao Te Ching

Those who lived long ago did not fear death because they were not attached to life. They were happy when they were born and they did not resist death when it came. Their coming and going was easy.

Chuang Tzu

When one has completed his
designated time here,
his body will die,
but his soul will be alive.
He will transcend this world.

The Gospel of Judas

Judas asked, "Does the human spirit
die?" Jesus answered, "The spirit is
given to people on loan. But for those
who are enlightened, the spirit and the
soul will find their rest [in the All]."

The Gospel of Judas

Jesus said, "I am returning to the place from
which I came. If you wish to follow me, you
may. But you will not enter the Kingdom
until you have perfected yourselves."

The Apocryphon of John

This world is the wheel of God to which all
beings cling. The world is the river of God,
and all of its streams eventually return to
Him. Around and around the individual
self goes, all the while believing itself to
be separate from everything else. Finally
the individual soul realizes its essential
unity with God, and achieves immortality.

The Shvetashvatara Upanishad

Those who are in the body, but have
transcended [one's lower nature] is freed
from birth and death. He is freed from
suffering and achieves immortality.

The Bhagavad Gita

When the Self leaves the body it will
go to whatever the attention is focused
on at the time of death. Therefore,
remember Me at all times. With your mind
absorbed in Me, you will come to Me.

The Bhagavad Gita

Death will claim those who pursue
pleasure. But those who understand
the dharma transcend death.

The Dhammapada

The master found his disciple crying
one day and said, "For whom are you
crying?" If your sorrow is because you
don't know where I am going, then
tears are not necessary. If I didn't know
where I was going, I wouldn't leave
you. In the dharma, there is no coming
and going, no birth and no death.

The Manual of Zen Discipline

You can only go beyond death by
practicing faithfully and with diligence.
Otherwise, you cannot escape death.

The Dhammapada

All things come together in Tao.
Life and death are equal.

Chuang Tzu

He who lives in the Tao cannot be
harmd by weapons. If he were attacked
by a buffalo, the horns would find
only emptiness. Were he attacked by
a tiger, there would be nothing for the
claws to sink into. For such a person,
there is no opening for death.

The Tao Te Ching

Those who are not attached to life will not
fear death. They are more fortunate than
those who give life too much meaning.

The Tao Te Ching

Jesus' disciples asked him, "When will we take our rest in the All, and when will the new world arrive?" Jesus answered, "What you seek, you already have within you, but you haven't recognized it."

The Gospel of Thomas

Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.

The Gospel According to Mark;
parallels: *Matthew, Luke, John*

His disciples asked him, "Tell us about our end." Jesus answered, "Why do you want to know about the end, when you have yet to discover the beginning? Anyone who has recognized the beginning already knows the end, and he will never die."

The Gospel of Thomas

Fortunate are those who understand that they existed before they came into being.

The Gospel of Thomas

That which is unreal never exists. That which is real has never ceased to exist. One who knows this has discovered the truth. All things work in this way. The reality that exists within all things is indestructible. No one can destroy the Absolute.

The Bhagavad Gita

Anyone who thinks that the slayer and the slain are not one and the same does not understand.

The Bhagavad Gita

Those who understand that the Self is changeless and indestructible will never die.

The Bhagavad Gita

Those who see the Lord in all things understand that death is not real.

The Bhagavad Gita

The wise person knows about the coming and the going of consciousness. He knows that it comes from nowhere and returns to nowhere. It is devoid of reality.

The Buddha

Death comes when least expected—often when a person's mind is distracted by something else. It is like a flood that comes in the night and carries away all those who are sleeping.

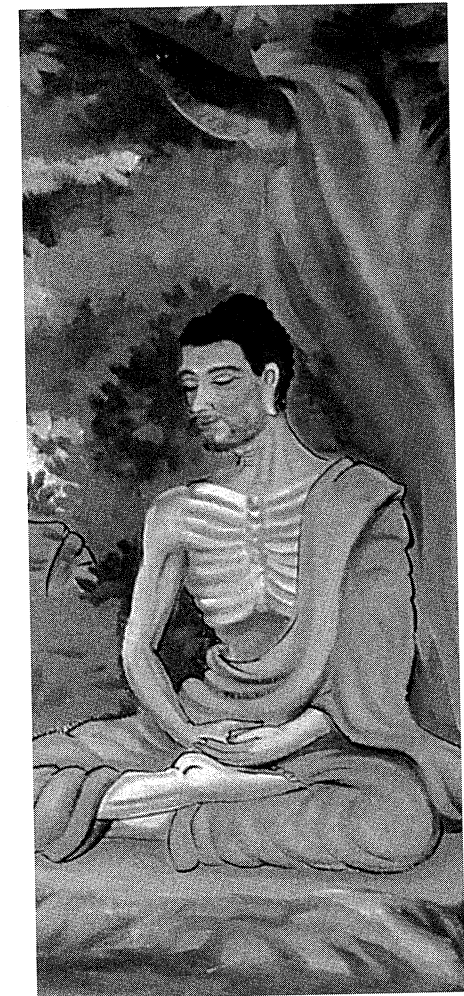
The Dhammapada

One who understands that life in the body is like a mirage is invulnerable to both temptation and death.

The Dhammapada

When the body and mind dissolve they are no longer in existence anywhere. That which comes into existence, comes from nowhere, then passes away again.

The Visuddhimagga Sutra



Anyone who understands the words
in this book will never die.

The Gospel of Thomas

Those who are awakened into the
Kingdom will never leave it.

The Apocryphon of James

Those who have taken refuge in
Me, and who focus on Me at the
time of death, will come to Me.

The Bhagavad Gita

The Self is changeless and un-manifested.
Those who know this need not mourn.

The Bhagavad Gita

When one wakes up from a dream,
he forgets all who he met there.
So it is with death and rebirth.

The Jara Sutra

The way to life is to be awakened. Fools
who sleep are already dead, but the
master who remains awake lives forever.

The Buddha

