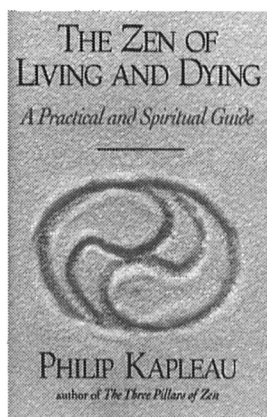


BOOK REVIEW

~~~~~ Tony Somlai, Original Root Zen Center

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**The Zen of Living and Dying:  
A Practical and Spiritual Guide**

by Philip Kapleau

Shambhala Publications,  
Boston, 1998

Writing about the human struggle with life and death could be a considerable epic or a brief composition. In the extended narrative form the saga would be filled with heroic deeds of grand efforts to deal with the irreversible fate we all face. As a short story the theme would focus on individual scenarios that appear less grand and yet more intimate with the reality of transformation and change. Philip Kapleau in his major work *The Zen of Living and Dying* has masterfully married two difficult techniques to share a narrative that describes the depth of human issues regarding death.

I am writing this review in Geneva, Switzerland while attending the International AIDS Conference. Today, the announcement was made that thirty million human beings are infected with the AIDS virus and that twenty million, most of them living in developing countries, will die shortly without any medical care. What can we do? As I read Kapleau's book there were many times I would stare off into space, digesting another insightful passage. This book is a "thick" work that at times is very scholarly and on other occasions very intimate. Take your time when reading *The Zen of Living and Dying*; it is a wonderful resource deserving of your full attention.

The four sections of this work (Death, Dying, Karma, and Rebirth) are packed with information, insight, resources, and suggestion on how to deal with a great human fear. However, don't stop there. The appendices are a "how to" for constructing living wills, using hospice care, following a checklist upon someone's death, consoling the bereaved, and how to use meditation during the dying time. There is an extensive glossary and bibliography that points to other important works.

The purpose of Kapleau's book is quite simple, "To help the reader learn to live fully with life at every moment and die serenely with death." This uncomplicated purpose is fraught with the traps of existential psychologizing regarding the meaning of life and death. Kapleau is able to avoid this problem by "pointing" to the constantly changing landscape in front of us rather than "explaining" the clinical and biological terms of death. Kapleau is not afraid of dying. He points to others who also are not afraid, and asks us to investigate the journey. His invitation is clear, "Death, then, does not extinguish the flame of life; it merely changes its form and direction. Put another way, death is not a period but a comma in the story of life, as the writer Vern McLellan noted."

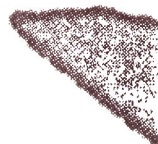
Western culture seems particularly perplexed and confused by our ideas of what we call "death." Perhaps this is why we are so interested in the subject. Ultimately, this is the silent scream behind most mental health issues in the West. Kapleau views it as a deep human need to find the answers to the perennial questions of "Where did I come from when I was born and where will I go when I die? What meaning has my life, my death?" He believes that there is no greater goal than to "be free from the dualistic restrictions of life and death." He uses Dogo's response to a student's question regarding death, "I won't say alive and I won't say dead," as a means of teaching that what is called life and death are mutually dependent, "you can't desire one without inviting the other." In this way, birth and death are temporary points between what precedes and what follows. As Kapleau says, "at every second there is life, and at every second, death." He then asks, "Which condition is life, which death?"

While these teachings on life and death may be perplexing for human beings, the critical point is that intellectual understanding explains only part of the truth. Kapleau places greater importance on the teaching that “what is beyond understanding—unrecognizable—is the whole truth.” This issue needs no solution or explanation, only to be transcended and lived fully. The question then is how to do this? Kapleau points to attaining our true self through a spiritual practice. “The reading of certain books can provide a compass and a map, but there is no substitute for personal experience. The good book, to paraphrase Emerson, is the one that gets you onto the meditation mat (or chair).” Much like “The Human Route,” Kapleau has us coming empty handed and leaving empty handed, “clinging to nothing—just fading away like clouds in the sky.”

A word of caution regarding Kapleau’s advice on suffering intense pain, keeping a clear mind, and making every effort to avoid “heavy” sedatives. Kapleau is not a physician, nor am I. However, I have seen intense physical pain from the outside. There is a “Calvinistic” anti-drug belief system in America that borders on hysteria. I believe, that when

possible, the issue of pain management should be based on providing comfort and relief. Those of us who are not suffering the pain do not intimately “know” the experience. It is quite easy for me to say how others should handle their pain, until I have a toothache. At that point my “opinions” and “ideas” take a very radical shift! There are times when the body needs to rest, where the mind needs to relax, from the struggle with pain. When my mother was dying from the final stages of breast cancer she needed significant relief from the pain and I chanted Kwan Seum Bosal. Who was keeping clear mind then?

As stated at the beginning of the review, there are numerous moments where *The Zen of Living and Dying* will force a reflective digestion of what we believe to be the truth. Philip Kapleau is a master in teaching each of us to live fully. As I sit here at the International AIDS Conference it is clear that all beings, living with or without AIDS, are faced with the issues of life and death. Philip Kapleau provides a guide that points to the transitions before all of us. If your direction is clear, this book will help you and all beings deal with their feelings, condition, and situation—alive or dead.



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