

Tastes from
*Luminous Emptiness – Understanding the Tibetan Book
of the Dead*

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Based on the teachings of Chögyan Trungpa Rinpoche

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As long as we perceive the elements only in their material forms, they remain within the realm of samsara or worldly existence. In this sense, they are like a prison or a tomb. They appear and disappear, they change and decay, and eventually everything composed of them – our bodies and our world – will die. But the jailer of the prison is our own mind, unable to see beyond their surface appearances and understand them as they really are.

The five elements arise from awakened mind, therefore they themselves are aspects of that awareness: they are buddhas. This is their secret essence. This essence is empty, and yet it is also luminous; it shines forth with the pure qualities of the five elements. In *Liberation through Hearing*, the pure essence of the elements simply appears as light of the five colors. The essence of earth is a yellow light, the essence of water a white light, the essence of fire a red light, the essence of air a green light, and essence of space a blue light. Essence is invisible, therefore these colors do not appear externally; if they did so, they would have entered the realm of the material elements. They are visionary colors, perfectly pure, clear, and luminous, like a rainbow seen within the heart.

Emptiness is the realization that nothing has a permanent, substantial, independent existence of its own. Since this is so, since nothing is fixed and static, there is infinite potentiality and dynamic transformation. It is this alone that makes it possible for the ever-changing display of life in all its multiplicity to arise. Therefore emptiness is regarded as the creative feminine principle. The five great elements, arising from emptiness, are the mothers who give birth to all phenomena. When they are perceived in this way they are known as the five female buddhas. In the tantras, they are called devis, dakinis, mothers, or queens, and I generally refer to them as devis in this book.

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Vajrayana [*a high form of Tibetan Buddhism*] goes even further along the open way. No experience is rejected; everything is integrated into practice. Vajrayana is a path of spiritual alchemy, a path of transmutation. What is transmuted or transformed is our own experience: our perception of our own body and mind is transformed into divinity, the ordinary world is transformed into a sacred world, and the energy of negative emotions and destructive passions is transmuted into wisdom and enlightened action. A verse from the *Hevajra Tantra* expresses this principle very clearly:

*Those things by which the world is bound,
By those very things may its bondage be released,
But the world is deluded and knows not this truth,
And without this truth will not attain perfection.*