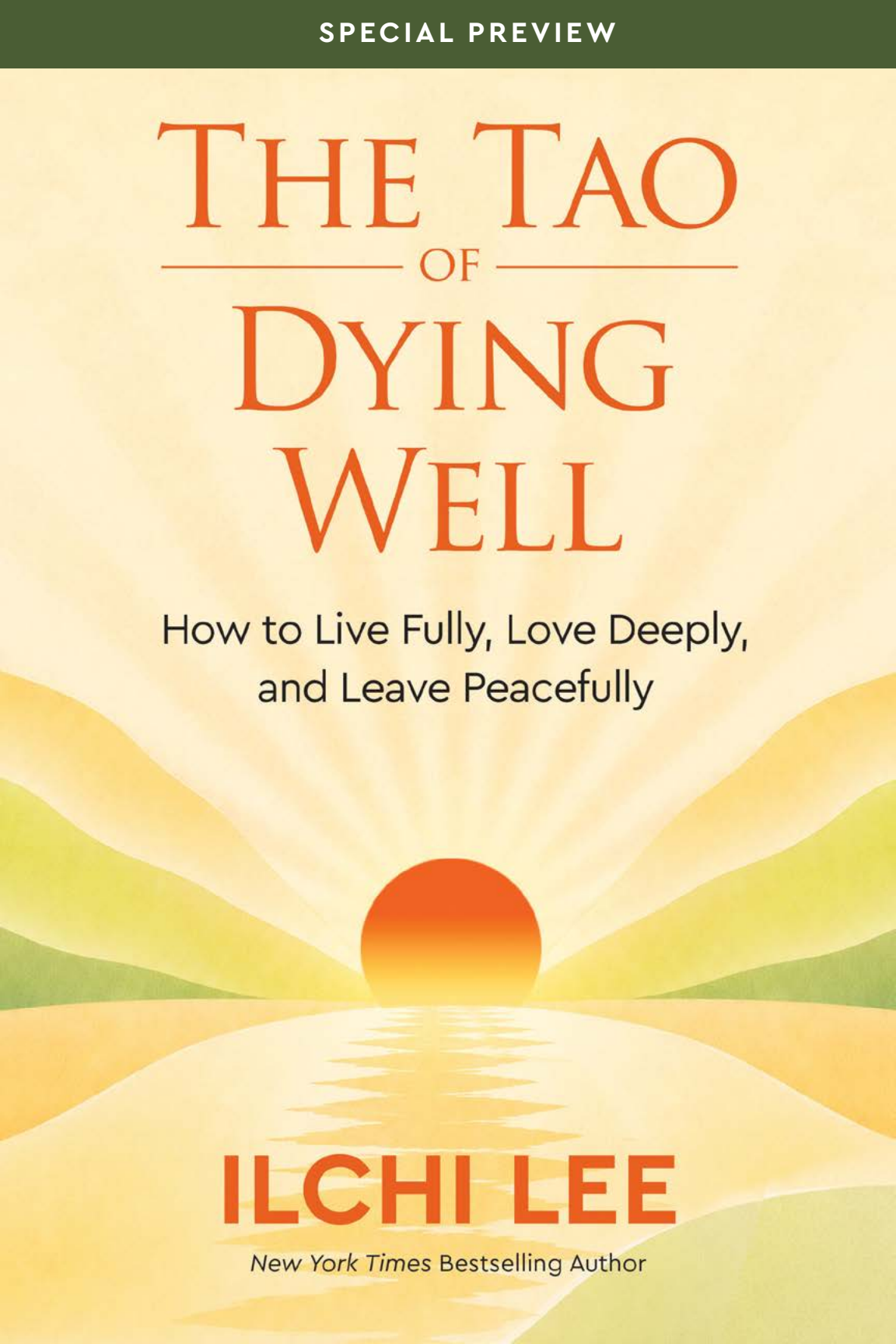
SPECIAL PREVIEW

The Tao of Dying Well

How to Live Fully, Love Deeply, and Leave Peacefully



ILCHI LEE

New York Times Bestselling Author

ABOUT THIS PREVIEW

This special preview features selected passages from
The Tao of Dying Well by Ilchi Lee.
Some sections have been omitted for length.

May these pages invite you to reflect on what it means to
live fully, love deeply, and bring life to completion
in your own way.

Copyright © 2026 by Ilchi Lee. All rights reserved.
Published by Best Life Media.
This preview may be shared in its complete, unaltered form.

The Tao of Dying Well

How to Live Fully, Love Deeply, and Leave Peacefully

ILCHI LEE

BEST LIFE MEDIA

There is a flow that has never once been broken
since the beginning of this world.

Contents

Author's Preface: If Life Is a Blessing, So Is Death

PART 1. SEEING DEATH DIFFERENTLY
Chapter 1. What We Fear Is Not Death
Chapter 2. Death Does Not End Life—It Completes It
Chapter 3. Chunhwa: Reimagining Death

PART 2. LIVING FULLY TO THE VERY END
Chapter 4. Keep Your Body Moving Until the End
Chapter 5. Release What Is Blocked and Let It Flow
Chapter 6. Return to Your True Self and Embrace the World

PART 3. COMPLETING LIFE IN YOUR OWN WAY
Chapter 7. Why It Matters to Design Your Own Ending
Chapter 8. Lightening the Final Chapter Through Letting Go
Chapter 9. The Author of Life Can Choose How to Meet Death
Chapter 10. Create Your Own Life Completion Ceremony
Chapter 11. Preparing When Death Draws Near
Chapter 12. The Body Departs, but Spirit and Values Remain
Chapter 13. What Our Way of Leaving Leaves Behind
Chapter 14. What Technology Changes—and What It Cannot

Epilogue: I Am a Deliverer of Happiness
A Companion's Guide: How to Be Present for the Final Moments of a Loved One

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

IF LIFE IS A BLESSING, SO IS DEATH

My mother passed away at 82, my father at 95. Both were my teachers, showing me two different faces of death. As she approached her 80s, my mother suffered a fall that left her bedridden for the rest of her years. She had always been spirited and strong-willed, more diligent than anyone I knew. Watching her endure days when she had to rely on others even for the most basic things was not easy.

My mother never seemed able to make peace with the final years of her life. When she passed away, I felt a sense of relief. She was finally released from the long ordeal of her later years and could rest at last.

My father's ending was different. His body grew weaker with age, but he lived without serious illness and passed peacefully in a way that surprised everyone around him. I spent the two weeks before his passing by his side, watching as his life gradually drew to a close. He had long been ready. He said he had lived without regret, that he was content, and then he simply let go.

In the years that followed, several others who had walked a long road with me also passed away. Their endings were different, but the lesson they left behind was the same. Life always comes to an end, and meeting that end unprepared can leave us shaken. A good death does not happen by chance; it requires preparation. And in the end, that preparation comes down to one question: How have I lived? A good death grows from a life well lived. And a good life cannot be completed while turning away from death.

We Either Fear Death or Look Away from It

Our society today is remarkably awkward when it comes to talking about death. "You've got plenty of time." "Don't talk like that." With a single phrase, the conversation ends.

Meanwhile, some people draw their final breaths connected to machines, while others leave without having the chance to say goodbye to the people they love. We push death out of sight as though that might make it disappear.

But the death we push away often arrives in ways we are unprepared for. As a result, we hand over the most important closing chapter of our lives to circumstance and to others, rather than choosing it ourselves.

People look at the evening sky and call a sunset beautiful. They feel the breath of the seasons in leaves drifting on the wind. In things that are passing, they find depth and meaning. Yet when it comes to human death, we seem unable to see it in the same way. Birth is celebrated by the whole world, but death

is met only with sorrow and grief. We cherish the moment of blooming, while the process of growing old and fading away is avoided or pushed aside.

If there is a time for blooming, there must also be a time for fading away. If there is a beginning, there must also be an ending for a story to be complete. A society that turns away from aging and dying has not yet fully matured; it misses something essential about life. If life is a blessing, then death, too, must belong within that blessing.

Death Is Not the End of Life; It Is Its Completion

At the root of our tendency to push death away lies the belief that death is an ending. If death is an end, then everything must be accumulated before it arrives: more, higher, faster.

But life requires time for letting go as much as it requires time for gathering. Knowing what to hold on to and what to release, and bringing your life together with your own hands, is also part of living. To understand death is to accept this whole flow.

The Korean tradition of *Sundo*, an ancient practice of mind-body cultivation, understands *Chunhwa* as part of this flow. It sees death not as a single event but as a transformation within the great cycle of life. The life we have lived is not severed at the end; it continues within a larger life.

For this reason, Chunhwa does not refer only to the state of our final moment. It is the completion of the whole story, shaped by every hour of how we have lived.

Chunhwa is not reserved for extraordinary people. It is a possibility woven into every human life. Just as death comes to everyone, so does the opportunity to bring one's life to completion. It begins with the lifelong work of knowing oneself, living honestly, and remaining true to oneself until the very end.

A good death is not necessarily a death without regrets. It is a death in which we can accept our lives as our own and bring them to completion. Chunhwa is that kind of death, and it is also the way of living that makes such a death possible.

About This Book

This book is about death, but it is not simply a guide to dying. It is a book about how we see death. The moment that perspective shifts, the choices we make begin to shift as well, and the weight of each day begins to feel different.

From my early 30s until now, I have continued writing books that ask a single question: How shall I live? As I approached 70, I wrote *I've Decided to Live 120 Years*. Now I want to turn to death. If we follow the question of how to live all the way to its end, we eventually find ourselves standing before death. No mirror reflects life more clearly.

This book explores three questions:

Why do we fear death, and what does it mean to see death as the completion of life?

How can we care for our later years on the levels of body, energy, and consciousness?

How can we prepare for an ending that is truly our own—from reconciling our relationships to making decisions about life-sustaining treatment and shaping the way we say farewell?

When we enter school, we know that one day we will graduate. True graduation is more than departure; it includes reflection and a summing up of all that has been learned.

Our lives are no different. To leave without such a process is like walking out of the schoolyard without receiving a diploma. No matter how many years we have lived, a life without completion remains unfinished.

For the questions this book asks, no one is too early and no one is too late. Such an ending does not arrive fully formed on some future day. It is shaped by the days we live now. To prepare for death is, in the end, to live more deeply today. I hope this book can be a small beginning on that path.

In Hawaii, Ilchi Lee

CHAPTER 1

WHAT WE FEAR IS NOT DEATH

The summer I was 14, I witnessed death up close for the first time. I had gone swimming with a friend at a reservoir near our village. We were splashing happily in the water when he suddenly began to flail, then slipped beneath the surface as though all his strength had left him.

Almost without thinking, I dove in and pulled him out. I hoisted his limp body onto my back and ran toward the village like a madman. But by the time I laid him down in the yard of his house, he had already stopped breathing. The strength drained from my body, and I collapsed to the ground. Later, I lay alone behind our house on a pile of bean husks, shivering.

The shock of that day left me in bed for nearly a month. Afterward, an overwhelming fear of death took hold of me. The thought that one day I, my parents, and everything in this world would disappear never left my mind.

I would grab my friends and ask, "What's the point of living?" I would blurt out things like, "We're all just living to die in the end," discouraging friends who were diligently studying. If

everything was going to end in death anyway, I could not understand why anyone bothered to study or strive for success.

At night, I would look up at the sky and protest, "If you brought me into this world without my permission, shouldn't you at least tell me why I have to live?" My chest felt as though it might burst with resentment that had nowhere to go and questions that had no answer.

Why should I live when death waits at the end?

For what purpose?

Looking back, the first thing that taught me about life was death. The question that loss placed before me followed me stubbornly for many years.

What Is Inside the Fear of Death

I have spent a long time looking into the fear of death. In doing so, I came to see something unexpected. If we look closely at that fear, we may find surprisingly little death in it. What we find instead are many other things.

At its deepest level is the fear of our own disappearance. The *I* that now sees, hears, thinks, and feels. The possibility that one day this *I* will be completely gone. That consciousness itself may vanish, and our senses be cut off forever. We understand intellectually that everyone dies, yet it is almost impossible to imagine our own nonexistence. At the most primal level, this is what we fear.

Nearly as deep is the awareness that we will one day be separated forever from the people we love. We will no longer

hear their voices, hold their hands, or return to the ordinary moments we shared together. Because so much of life's meaning comes through relationships, the loss of those connections can feel as though the world itself is disappearing.

Then there is the unease of not knowing. We live with some image of tomorrow, of plans for a few months from now, of where life might lead in the years ahead. Death lies outside all of that. We do not know when it will come, how it will come, or what follows afterward. Just as a dark room can make us uneasy because we cannot see what lies within, we instinctively recoil from what we cannot understand.

For some people, the process of dying is more frightening than death itself. There is the fear of severe pain. The fear of losing the ability to care for one's own body. The fear of becoming a burden to loved ones for years. The fear of illnesses such as dementia, in which we gradually lose ourselves while still alive. Because these are realities many people have witnessed firsthand, they often feel more immediate and more concrete than death itself.

Beneath all of this lies unfinished longing. The fear that we may leave before holding our first grandchild. That we may die before our parents. That the things we postponed throughout our lives, saving them for later, may remain forever undone. There is pain in knowing that so much remains unfinished, and that we may have to leave before it is complete.

If we follow these fears back to their source, we find that what troubles us is not death itself. What we truly fear is the possibility that everything we have loved, built, and valued could disappear in an instant.

The self we fear losing. Relationships cut short. An unknown future beyond our understanding. A body that can no longer sustain us. Dreams and responsibilities left unfinished. Within each of these fears is a record of what we love and hold dear.

This is why reflecting on death is, paradoxically, a way of reflecting on life. To fear death is evidence of how deeply we cherish this life and how much we still hope to experience within it. Seen in this light, fear is not merely something to overcome. It is also an invitation to live more deeply, more consciously, and more completely.

• • •

Death Is Not Only Unavoidable; It Is Necessary

What would happen if human beings never died?

At first, the idea may seem appealing. Time would be limitless. There would be no need to hurry. Nothing would have to be done today. Tomorrow would always remain, as would a hundred years from now, or even a thousand. But in endless time, today would lose its significance. No choice would feel urgent. No encounter would feel precious.

Death gives shape to time. A day is a day because the sun rises and sets. A river is a river because it flows between its banks. Life is no different. Because our time is limited, we must choose what to pursue and what to let go of. We take responsibility for those choices because, in the end, they cannot be postponed forever. Death is not only an unavoidable fate. It is one of the conditions that allows life to become meaningful.

• • •

We treasure our time with the people we love because we know it will not last forever. As long as we assume our parents will always be there, an ordinary dinner together feels like just another day. But the moment we realize that one day we will no longer sit across from them at the table, the same meal takes on a new significance. Tenderness arises. So does gratitude.

Psychologists have long studied what they call mortality awareness—the ways in which becoming conscious of our own death influences our values and behavior. Again and again, studies suggest that people who seriously reflect on death begin to reassess what truly matters. They invest more deeply in important relationships. They begin projects they have long postponed. They become more intentional about how they spend their time.

Bringing death to mind does not lead naturally to the thought, "Life ends anyway, so why bother?" More often, it leads to a different question: "Because my time is limited, what do I most want to do with it?"

Yet this shift does not happen automatically. When we contemplate death from a place of inner stability, it can become a mirror that helps us see life more clearly. But when death arrives suddenly in the midst of a crisis, it can deepen fear instead. Only when we can sit calmly with the reality of death does it begin to teach us something.

CHAPTER 2

DEATH DOES NOT END LIFE— IT COMPLETES IT

The questions about life that began with the death of my friend stayed with me long into adulthood. I found a respectable job, married, and became the father of two sons. Yet I was not happy. Sometimes, on my way home from work, I would look up at the evening sky and feel a deep sadness rise from somewhere I could not name. Outwardly, I had become a responsible adult. Inwardly, I still did not know who I was or what I was living for.

I wanted answers. I read every book on philosophy and spirituality I could get my hands on. Whenever I heard of a wise teacher, I sought them out, even if it meant neglecting my work. Yet none of those answers reached me where I needed them most.

The summer I turned 30, I went alone into Mount Moak. I did not know how long I would stay. I had only one determination: I would not leave that mountain until I found an answer to why I should live.

After nearly 20 days of fasting and meditation with almost no sleep, an excruciating headache struck. My head felt as though

it might split apart. I found myself thinking, "Let it break if it must. I just want this pain to end." Then, in an instant, a question flashed through me like lightning.

Who is feeling this pain right now?

The body was in pain. But the one aware of the pain was not the body. At that moment, it felt as though something burst open inside my head. A peace unlike anything I had ever known flooded in. The boundary between myself and the world dissolved. It felt as though I had become one with everything around me. The anguish that had lived inside me since I was 14 vanished in a single moment.

• • •

A Life of Success and a Life of Completion

How, then, should we live this one and only life?

For a long time, we have answered that question in the language of success: more, higher, faster. A good school, a respected career, a larger house, greater recognition. Success has its place. It helps us develop our abilities, establish ourselves in the world, and build the foundations of our lives.

But at some point, the language of success is no longer enough. There are times when, even after achieving most of what we wanted, something still feels empty. In others' eyes, our lives may look successful, and yet we find ourselves unsure of where we are going. And when death comes into view, the language of success has surprisingly little to say.

One story is often mentioned when people speak about death and regret. Bronnie Ware, an Australian palliative care

nurse, drew on her years of caring for people at the end of life to write *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*. The regret she heard most often was this: "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me."

Other regrets followed: spending too much time working and too little time with loved ones, not expressing honest feelings, neglecting meaningful friendships, and not allowing themselves to be happier. Almost no one regretted not earning more money or not reaching a higher position.

These regrets share something in common. They do not arise from comparison with others. They arise from the distance between the life people truly wanted to live and the life they actually lived.

Standing close to death, people often discover that what they most wanted to hold on to was not success, but something else. I call that completion. Completion is not the accumulation of achievements. It is knowing who you are and living from that truth. Not becoming the person others expect you to be, but becoming fully yourself. In the end, what comes to completion is not achievement. It is our own being.

Success and completion move along different paths.

Success moves outward. There is always another standard to reach, another comparison to make, another person who seems to be ahead. Because of this, success has no natural endpoint. One goal is achieved, and another immediately appears. It becomes difficult ever to say, "This is enough."

Completion moves inward. Did you live according to what truly mattered to you? Were you faithful to your own life? Did you fully inhabit the life that was given to you?

No one else can answer these questions for you. They are questions each person must face alone. And the answers, in the end, can only be found within your own heart.

CHAPTER 4

KEEP YOUR BODY MOVING UNTIL THE END

For a long time, I have spoken of a life that is longer and healthier. In that sense, I have been an advocate of longevity. But the long life I speak of has one clear condition. Living longer, by itself, is not enough. The final years should not be spent merely delaying death. They must be years in which we remain truly alive until the very end.

There is a difference between a long lifespan and a long life. A long lifespan is measured by years. A long life is measured by how fully those years are lived.

Seen from this perspective, what matters in the final years is not age itself but the quality of your life. The final years do not refer to a particular age. They are the season of life when you realize your body will never quite return to what it once was, and when you find yourself asking more often, with growing sincerity, "What will I leave behind?"

Although people are living longer than ever, the years spent in good health are often fewer than we imagine. For many, it is

in their late 70s or 80s that the realization begins to settle in: the body no longer responds as it once did.

If you are reading this, the chances are that you are still in fairly good health. You get through your days without serious illness, and death is something that crosses your mind only now and then, not something pressing at the door.

This chapter, and the two that follow it, are written above all for you. Not because the end is near, but because it is not. What your final years become will depend less on what you do after you have grown frail than on the habits you build while you are still well. The best time to begin is not after the body, heart, or mind has already begun to decline, but now, while they still respond to your care.

Around us, we can see two very different faces of old age. One is prolonged suffering. Lifespan has been extended, but the ability to direct your own life has already slipped away. Even going to the bathroom requires waiting for someone's help, and the rhythm of the day is set not by your own will but by the schedule of caregiving. The heart is beating, but much of the life that person hoped to live has long since faded. Lifespan has lengthened, but life has shrunk.

The other is a life lived fully until the end. A life in which, almost until the very end, you continue to move on your own, meet people, and carry out the roles you have chosen. It is a life in which, upon waking in the morning, what comes to mind is not "How will I endure today?" but "Who can I see today? What can I try?"

Even when the body is no longer what it was, you continue moving toward what matters to you and continue to play at least one meaningful role of your own choosing. Conversations with loved ones are still there, and the sense that today still holds

something new remains. A state in which the gap between how long you live and how fully you are alive stays narrow until the end. That is the long life I am speaking of.

Which of these two paths you move toward is not decided by chance. The life of your 70s arises from the choices of your 60s, and the life of your 80s is shaped by the habits of your 70s. What forms the backbone of those habits is physical power, heart power, and brain power—three capacities through which we cultivate body, energy, and consciousness. When these three powers are developed together, the period of prolonged suffering grows shorter, and the time in which you can remain fully yourself grows longer.

In the Korean Sundo tradition, this cultivation takes three forms: stilling the senses, regulating the breath, and guarding one's essence from external distractions. In daily life, these practices can be understood as listening to the body, steadying the breath, and returning again and again to the present moment.

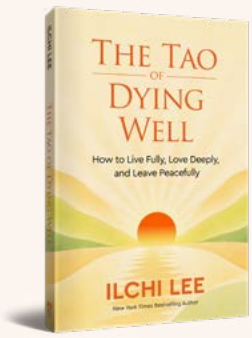
In everyday life, these practices are expressed through three essential capacities: physical power, heart power, and brain power. Through them, we cultivate body, energy, and consciousness, especially in the later years.

How do we care for the body? How do we keep the heart clear and the energy flowing? How do we deepen conscious awareness? In this chapter and the two that follow, we will explore each of these paths in turn.

None of this is merely about staying healthy longer. Caring for your body, heart, and consciousness now is how you preserve the freedom to remain yourself until the very end. That is where a good death quietly begins.

If you knew your time was not unlimited,
what would matter most?
Are you living it now?

LIVE FULLY.
LOVE DEEPLY.
LEAVE PEACEFULLY.



PRE-ORDER ON AMAZON

Coming October 20, 2026