

the language through debate, I can now read a few words on some pages, and also I can see what it did for my mind. Do you feel that Westerners who want to gain a really deep level of knowledge of Dharma should learn Tibetan?

GD: Yes, to a certain extent I think it is helpful. If one is really interested in knowing the Dharma more deeply for one's own practice as well as for the purpose of teaching others, it's hard to believe that one would not learn Tibetan. If you really want to transmit the tradition, I don't see how you can do this seriously without understanding Tibetan. The tradition is still mostly in Tibetan and taught by Tibetans, so we are not yet at a stage where we can take things fully into English and study them on our own. If you don't study Tibetan and

still have to depend on a translator, that's okay, but you cannot depend on a translator your whole life.

MC: How do you see debate in English, for example?

GD: I don't have much experience of it, so it's hard for me to say, but it is conceivable that people who are being trained for seven years [in the Master's Program] would learn Tibetan and would read texts in Tibetan but would still debate in English. That is perfectly conceivable, because debating in Tibetan would be difficult unless you have Tibetans around. If you are just there for a couple of years, that's fine. But if this is what your whole life is supposed to be about, you have to be able to read the Tibetan texts. You want to be a grown-up at some stage. ●

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ASK A LAMA

with Lama Zopa Rinpoche

REINCARNATION AND KARMA

Q: Do we have to believe in reincarnation to attain enlightenment?

A: Forget about belief; it's impossible to attain enlightenment without realizing the fact of reincarnation, or rebirth.

In the East, in the West, black, white, yellow, in whatever kind of body we find ourselves, most of us were born without choice, without freedom. There's a reason that we have to experience rebirth without choice, a life without freedom. First of all, this lack of control of our rebirth itself is what the Buddha meant by suffering. Similarly, death without control is also suffering. In addition, the suffering of uncontrolled rebirth and death has a cause, and the cause was created before this life began. The result – uncontrolled suffering rebirth and death – and their principal cause can't be born together any more than a mother and her child can be born together.

Q: Is [our rebirth and death] karma?

A: Yes, it's karma, and this principal cause, this karma, was created in the past; not necessarily in the immediately preceding life but possibly over many lifetimes.

Forget about enlightenment; even to attain nirvana, the complete cessation of suffering, you have to understand the nature of suffering and that the mind is beginningless. The entire path to liberation is based on that. If you don't understand that the mind is beginningless, your understanding is limited. But if you do, you'll automatically understand the existence of past and future lives.

Therefore, an understanding of beginningless mind and reincarnation is fundamental to the discovery of the nature of problems and of the greatest importance in preparing your mind for spiritual realizations.

But it's not a question of believing in reincarnation; it's a question of investigating reality to see whether or not reincarnation exists. That's the most important thing: trying to see clearly whether it exists or not.

If past and future lives are actual objects of existence, it's nonsensical for you to try not to believe in them. It's like looking at your car, which is parked right over there, and trying to believe it's not there. All you're doing is making yourself more ignorant. It's like covering your eyes in order not to see something that exists. It



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just limits your own understanding.

Ignorance is the mind that does not perceive objects as they really exist. This is the connotation of the term "ignorance" to Tibetan lamas, the great Indian pandits, and Guru Shakyamuni Buddha himself. And ignorance is the main obstacle to the attainment of enlightenment.

Enlightenment means omniscient mind, the fully knowing mind: a state of mind that fully sees every single thing that exists – all aspects of existence – and completely realizes every past, present, and future thing and event, without missing even an atom. This completely purified state of omniscience is what is meant by enlightenment.

What is the purpose of gaining such a state of mind? It's not for yourself but for you to be able to bring all living beings to the state of everlasting happiness by showing them all the different paths and methods according to what suits their various levels of mind, with complete, unobstructed understanding of all their thoughts and desires.

Anyway, if past and future lives do exist, an understanding of this is of great importance, especially if you want to attain enlightenment. On the other hand, if you think there are no past and future lives, then there's no reason for you to try to attain enlightenment in this lifetime or to seek a new way of life.

If there were no past and future lives, there would be no karma. What is karma? Karma is any action of body, speech, and mind; it's that which creates a relationship between cause and effect, that which brings effect from cause. In other words, it's karma that causes us to circle in cyclic existence.

So if there were a beginning to life, there would also be a beginning to karma, but there's no such initial karma. Why does karma have no beginning? Because the negative karma that forces us to circle endlessly through

death and rebirth has no beginning; such karma is created by ignorance, which itself is beginningless. Since the mind is beginningless, ignorance is also beginningless.

This present rebirth was created by karma. That karma was created by previous lives' ignorance. There's no karma that we experience that was not created by us, that was created by some other, separate being, such as God.

In other words, it's impossible for me to experience any karma that I myself did not create; it's impossible for me to experience the result of a cause that I myself have not created. For example, I can't experience the result of my father's killing yaks; he himself has to experience the suffering result of that karma. Any suffering that he experiences can only be the result of causes that he created. Similarly, any happiness that he experiences can also only be the result of causes created by him.

It's good to think about it like this: If the mind had a beginning, then ignorance and the result it brings, suffering, would also have a beginning. If that were so, then what would be the reason for the existence of ignorance? If this life had a beginning, then karma, ignorance, and suffering would also have a beginning, and there'd be no reason to seek an inner method, to practice meditation, which is different from and transcends worldly activities, ordinary actions. There'd be no reason to pursue higher, pure activities. Why not? Because if ignorance and suffering had a beginning, they would end by themselves.

If life had a beginning, karma would also have a beginning. Then it would be possible to experience the result of karma that you yourself had not created. But nothing can exist without being created; without a creator, how can creation exist? If this initial karma had been created not by oneself but by another, it would be possible, for example, for me to enjoy the pleasure of somebody else's eating a delicious piece of steak; or for somebody else to travel to exotic places and for me to experience the pleasure of that.

However, I am the creator of my present life's karma; I am the creator of this life. In a previous lifetime I created the karma for my present rebirth. Therefore, previous lives exist and, by extension, so do future lives. ●

Lama Zopa Rinpoche gave this reply during the Fifth Kopan Meditation Course, November 1973. Edited from the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive by Nicholas Ribush and abridged for Mandala by Ven. Connie Miller