

# WE SHOULD NOT BE AFRAID OF DEATH

BY LAMA YESHE

**I've been asked to speak** on the Tibetan Buddhist view of death and rebirth, but before I get into that, I'd like to say a little about life. From the Buddhist point of view, life is the combination of body and mind. However, even though body and mind are related to and depend upon each other, they have quite different characteristics.

With respect to the body, we recognize two types: gross and subtle. Similarly, mind can also be divided into gross and subtle. When it comes to the continuity of life after death, it is not the gross body and mind that continue but the subtle.

Now, every human being, each of us, has within us a pure level of consciousness. At the same time, we have a mind that is contaminated by various negative thoughts. Therefore, we all have access to our pure, clean clear state of mind, but along with that we also have to deal with its negative aspects.

Of course, sometimes our egotistic, intellectual negative thoughts are too strong, too overwhelming, and at such times it seems impossible to be happy and clean clear. When that happens, we need to recognize that what we are seeing is not our basic human nature but a sort of artificial, polluted version of ourselves. We have to know that the fundamental human nature is pure, not totally negative, and that those seemingly uncontrollable, confused thoughts are just like dark clouds in a clear blue sky.

Not only that. We also have to understand that such thoughts are impermanent. They come; they go. Merely recognizing the impermanence of our negative thoughts allows us to destroy them as soon as they arise. In other words, the Buddhist point of view is that human problems such as anxiety and other emotional disturbances are temporary. We can overcome them. We ourselves have the power to change them rather than having to rely on Buddha or God. We have the power to change and overcome miserable conditions because we ourselves made them.

And that's why the main emphasis of Buddhist education is on the mind. The main focus of Western education seems to be on

the body, and we forget about the mind ... unfortunately! The nuclear essence of human life is not the body; it's the mind. It's the quality of mind, not body, that determines whether our life is happy or unhappy. Still, genetically it seems that the Swedish body is pretty healthy, but for me, the Swedish mind is still a question. I'm only a tourist, so I can't tell yet!

As you know, Buddhism always talks about karma. Karma is your attitude, your quality of mind, and it's this that mainly determines your quality of life, whether it's happy or miserable. Karma is the key. This applies whether you believe in religion or not. If your attitude is positive, your life will be happy. If your attitude is negative, you'll be unhappy. It has nothing to do with belief. If you have a yo-yo attitude, your life will be up and down no matter what you believe.

Nowadays many people think, "I don't experience good or bad because I don't believe anything." That's a wrong attitude. Whether or not they believe they have a body and a mind is irrelevant – their body and mind are always there. Perhaps somebody thinks he doesn't exist, but that doesn't matter; he exists and experiences suffering like everybody else. Similarly, some people think that nothing will happen after they die, but when they become a monkey or a tiger in their next life, then what? Saying that you don't believe anything doesn't mean that you're intelligent.

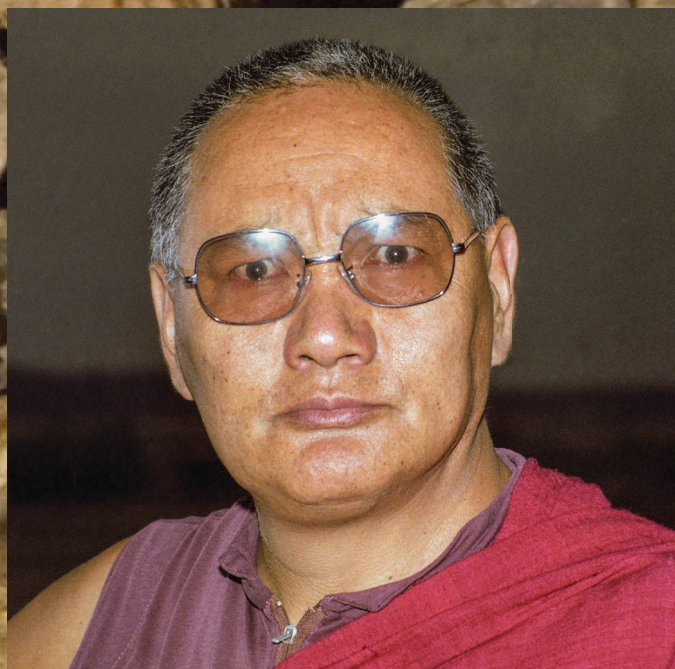
Well, be all that as it may, what Buddhism offers society is the knowledge that human beings can liberate themselves from problems and miserable situations by simply changing their mind. Anybody can do this. But although humans have developed intellectually and learned much about gaining pleasure and

**LAMA YESHE IN STOCKHOLM,  
SWEDEN, SEPTEMBER 1983.**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE  
LAMA YESHE WISDOM ARCHIVE.



*From a talk on death and  
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Stockholm, Sweden in 1983.*





happiness, from the moment we're born, consciously or unconsciously, we're constantly seeking and grasping for more and more. That's how we're contaminated – we're unable to abide in a natural state of mind.

As you also know, Buddhism stresses the importance of meditation, which is a method for bringing the mind into a natural, clean, calm, peaceful state. Every human being has the ability to accomplish this. Anybody can do it. It's a natural thing.

For example, when you go to sleep at night, all the intellectual garbage that has occupied your mind during the day, all your anxiety and confused thoughts, slowly, slowly dissipate and you gradually approach a natural state of mind. In fact, every night you're asleep you touch that natural, clean clear state, but because you're unconscious, you don't notice it. We're not dead when we're asleep. We're still alive, still breathing, still absorbing oxygen, but it's very light, very slow, very gentle. So, without our noticing, our mind reaches a clean clear point. When we're asleep, we don't have any emotional grasping for chocolate. Our sense-grasping mind completely slows down. It's like we're meditating!

If we find ourselves in a confused, mentally exhausted state, sometimes it's good just to go to sleep because when we awaken, our mind will, to some extent, have become clean clear. It's natural; it's human nature. That's why Western doctors sedate agitated people. It slows their nervous system down.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF DEATH

First, we should not be afraid of death because from the moment we were born we've been destined to die. There's no way out. Sometimes people get angry when they're asked how old they are: "That's none of your business!" But even though getting old is natural, it often makes Western people upset.

Dying, too, is natural and, as we know, it can be a gradual experience. It can also be a blissful experience, although most people regard it as something fearsome. That's a wrong attitude. Our body is composed of the four elements of earth, water, fire and air, and in the course of a natural death, these four elements gradually disintegrate. We also have five *skandhas*, or aggregates – form, feeling, discrimination, compositional factors and consciousness. At the time of death, these too sequentially deteriorate, or lose power.<sup>1</sup>

What first happens when we die is that the form skandha, the essence of our body, begins to disintegrate and we feel as if we are being buried under a great pile of dirt. The concomitant dissolution of our earth element causes us great confusion, as do the forthcoming dissolutions of the other skandhas and elements.

Therefore, it is very important to educate people and ourselves as to what happens during the death process so that we know what's coming and can understand that it's just a mental projection. In that way, we can die without fear and confusion. In this first cycle our eye sense also dissolves and our eyesight becomes unclear. The internal sign is a mirage-like vision.

Next, the skandha of feeling disintegrates and we lose all sense of pain and pleasure. We also lose our hearing. Our body becomes just like a dead banana! Along with this our water element dissolves. The internal sign is an appearance of smoke.

Third, our fire element and skandha of discrimination disintegrate and we can no longer remember the names of our mother, father, husband, wife, children or other family and friends. We also lose our sense of smell. Our inhalation becomes weak and our exhalation lengthy. The internal sign is that of sparks of fire. These internal signs are not observed by our eye sense consciousness but are mental projections, manifestations of our more subtle consciousness and akin to dreaming.

So you can see, during the death process, as in life actually, nobody is creating problems for you other than yourself. All your anxiety, emotional hatred, desire and so forth come from within yourself. At this time, however, your delusions naturally slow down and gradually disappear.

In the fourth cycle our air element deteriorates and our breathing stops altogether. At this point all our ego problems naturally disappear. This is not as a result of practice; it's just natural. It is here that meditators take the opportunity of meditating on the fundamental nature of universal reality. By contemplating on it more and more they can begin to gain direct experiences of it.

I want to make one thing very clear here because Western preconceptions are very strong regarding this – from the Buddhist point of view, even though external breathing seems to have stopped and it would appear to be the moment of clinical death, a subtle breath remains inside. The person is not yet completely dead. This explanation conflicts with baby Western science. Western science is very young and its opinion on this is very dangerous because, at this stage of the death process, the person is still alive and can survive for a long time in the subtle body with subtle breathing, which is not observable from the outside.

As you know, India is a very hot place and refrigerators for corpses are few and far between. So they tend to burn bodies within hours of what they consider to be death. I heard that once someone was being burned and when his body was half burned he sat up and cried, "Please don't burn me, I'm not dead!" This is

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed description of the stages of death see Lati Rinbochay and Jeffrey Hopkins, *Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth*, Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1985. Also His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Mind of Clear Light: Advice on Living Well and Dying Consciously*, New York: Atria Books, 2003.

human experience. I'm not talking religion here. Don't think that this is some Buddhist projection. Ordinary people saw this.

Similarly, I heard of a case in France where a non-religious man was declared dead by doctors but awoke after a couple of hours. He wrote a quite well known book describing his experience of being dead for two hours. Again, this is human experience, not something influenced by Buddhist or religious philosophy.

## OUR NATURAL STATE

The essence of our nervous system is the 72,000 psychic channels we have running through our body. There is a large central channel, slightly smaller right and left psychic channels running alongside it, and then the others branch and sub-branch off those. At certain points along the central channel are energy centers, or *chakras*, which, during life, are normally closed. At the time of death they open and our mental energy enters and flows through our central channel. This is what allows experienced meditators to meditate on emptiness at this stage of the process.

Because our energy normally flows in the wrong direction, we experience wrong pressures in our life. Correct meditation – focused concentration – can reverse this and help our energy flow

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in the right direction. But at the time of death we don't have to make this kind of effort. Our energy naturally flows in the right direction. From the time we were born up to the time we die we've been accumulating wrong conceptions and superstitions, all the time thinking good and bad, all these dualistic concepts, so by the end of our life we're like full garbage bags stuffed with rubbish. During the death process all this completely disappears and we experience some kind of universal reality, infinite space, the true nature of ourselves and all other existent things.

To *be* in our natural state is to touch reality. Therefore, it's important for all of us to recognize that we have access to our natural state instead of constantly pushing ourselves into an artificial one. We have to analyze what's best. Is it valuing an artificial life full of emotion and intellectualization or abiding in our natural state?

Most of the time we think, “I have to use my intellect; I feel I should be clever.” Being clever is easy - cut your throat and die. It's better not to be that kind of clever; it's better to be ignorant. At least you won't commit suicide.

## COMPLETING THE DEATH PROCESS

Anyway, to get back to the death process, after our breathing stops we experience three visions. The first of these is the white vision. This has nothing to do with our physical eye sense, which is already a dead banana. It's an inner, mental experience. Because all our crowded, intellectual, ego-grasping superstitions have stopped, we suddenly reach a point of infinite space, or sky. The impression in our mind is of a calm, clear blue sky, a clear mental experience of completely infinite blue space that appears to our subtle consciousness as a white light vision.

From that experience our mind again moves to infinite blue sky in which there now appears a red light vibration. Then that suddenly stops and everything goes black. Finally, this black vision slowly clears and we again experience infinite universal space and a fourth vision, that of clean clear light. In this there are no concepts, no value judgments, no classifications and no division of anything into good and bad.

Some meditators can remain in the clear light meditation for many days. Even if you are not a meditator, you stay there a little while. Even if you don't believe you're in a clean clear state, you stay in the clear light state of consciousness anyway. Sometimes we refer to it as the dharmakaya experience. Actually there's a bit of a debate about this. Some meditators say that everybody experiences universal reality. Others say that it's not exactly that but similar.





LAMA YESHE, WITH (FROM LEFT) VEN. GUN JOHANSSON, JEFF NYE AND VEN. KARIN VALHAM, STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN, SEPTEMBER 1983

## THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

When the clear light vision stops, our consciousness finally separates from our body and passes into the intermediate state, the *bardo*. Because the clear light was so bright, when it stops, passage into the bardo is experienced as darkness. Then we're in the bardo for a while and when it's time to go into the next life, we go through the three visions in reverse: the dark vision, the red vision and the white vision. After that, in our next life, all our worldly superstitions and ego problems arise once more.

What is a bardo being? The bardo body is not material like ours. It's a sort of conscious body. It's very light and can pass through mountains and other solid things. Its only enjoyment is smell. It has no desire to eat chocolate. But it is full of confusion and superstition and is constantly seeking to come into the desire realm, grasping to enter a mother's womb.

A bardo being fortunate enough to be reborn human sees its future parents engaged in intercourse and its consciousness enters

the father's central channel, passes down through it and enters the products of conception in the mother's womb. After that its development is exactly the same as contemporary science explains. Therefore, Western parents should not expect their children's minds to be the same as their complicated minds. The new generation also has its own generation gap, its own evolution and its own ignorant understandings. From the Buddhist point of view, every human being is completely different until we reach beyond the dualistic mind. Then everybody's mind is at the same level.

What I've been describing here is the evolution of a natural human death. This is Buddhism's scientific explanation of what happens to the human body and mind at death.

## YOUR FUTURE IS IN YOUR HANDS

Whether you believe in reincarnation or not, you do know that you have a body and a mind. You also know that your mind is the



main problem, not your nose. Since you understand that clean clear, it's good to develop your understanding of the mind. This is very important for your life and for gaining the happiness you seek. And that's what Buddhism talks about: human problems and how to deal with them and the fact that each of us is individually responsible for our own happiness and misery.

The way to liberate yourself from the uncontrolled mind is to put an end to your small, narrow, nonsensical way of thinking and to recognize that you can change it and think something else. It's so natural. You don't have to grasp at belief in God or Buddha; it's just a humanistic thing. Even Western children know this. I once asked a young Italian boy what he did when he had problems. He said, "When I have problems I think about something else." If you ask adults that question, they'll have difficulty answering: "I wouldn't know what to do." I was very happy with the boy's reply. It was such a natural answer. Adults would be like, "Oh, Lama, it's so hard!"

OK, now, I don't like problems myself, so maybe I should talk about good things. The good thing is, if you have a pure attitude, loving kindness for others, you'll have no problems when you die. If you can recognize that any confusion you experience is just some kind of mental projection, you'll have no fear. If you see that it's just a trip and are able to deal with reality, there's no way that your dying experience will be dangerous.

Many people, consciously or unconsciously, are scared of what comes after death. If your mind is clean clear, if you have loving kindness for others and no self-cherishing, concrete concepts, you have nothing to worry about. Your future lives will get better and better.

Of course, if at death your mind becomes a crazy chicken or a crazy pig or a crazy snake, it's possible that you'll be reborn as a chicken, pig or snake. Unfortunately. But that's difficult for the Western mind. If you're born a young boy or girl – intelligent, clean clear – but as you get older you take drugs and get drunk a lot, your mind can become worse than bananas. This is not something made up by Tibetans or Buddhists. It's part of your culture. Don't think, "I'm beautiful. How can I become an ugly pig?" You might have been a beautiful teenager, but in your old age, your good looks get completely destroyed. You can see that. It's the same with the mind. It can degenerate in the same way and then finish up entering such an undesirable body. It's very flexible.

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Lama Yeshe teaches more about the Tibetan Buddhist view on life and death in *Life, Death and After Death*, a free publication from Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive ([lamayeshe.com](http://lamayeshe.com)).



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