

**The Way of Leaving the Body in Death and Taking Rebirth – Part 1 of 2**  
(lightly edited transcript)  
*by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle, 28 Dec 92*

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Tonight, we're going to cover the points about the way of leaving the body in death, and taking rebirth. We will talk about this whole process of dying, going through the intermediate stage, and then connecting to the next life.

## **a. The Way Death Occurs**

### **Reasons death occurs**

Basically from a Buddhist perspective, death occurs for one of three reasons:

1. We have exhausted the karmic potential to live in this life, or
2. We don't have enough merit to gain the conditions to keep living, or
3. A negative karma ripens to interfere with it.

#### **1. We have exhausted the karmic potential to live in this life**

When we're born, there's a certain karmic potential from previous lives that we have to be in this body, in this realm, for a certain amount of time, according to our karma. If we don't have a certain amount of good karma, we won't have the potential to live a long life. That's why you see some people die in the womb. Or we might have a lot of karma to be born as a human being, then on the basic level, there's the karma to live a long life. Some people die simply because they've lived out that karma - the karma has run out. It's like there's no wax left, the candle flame goes out.

#### **2. We don't have enough merit to gain the conditions to keep living**

Another thing is that to live, we need all the proper conditions to stay alive. We need food. We need medicine. We need a good environment. If we don't have enough merit to have these conditions, then we die. We might have the basic karmic condition to live until, let's say, 80 years old, but if we don't have enough merit to get food, then you see what's happening in Somalia. Or you don't have the merit to get the medicine and things of that sort.

#### **3. Negative karma ripens to interfere with it**

Let's say you might have the karma to have a long life. You might have all the right cooperative conditions and the merit that supports them, but you get into a car accident. Or you get cancer. Or something like that. This is called an untimely death. In other words, there is negative karma ripening in the middle that terminates your life.

We can't extend the first condition (the karmic potential to live in this life). It comes with us from previous lives. But the karma to get the supportive conditions can be extended. That's why there's the practice of liberating animals, or making charity to the poor. These kinds of actions allow us to accumulate positive karma, which helps us get the conditions we need to be able to stay alive thus preventing dying from the second reason.

We do purification practice to prevent untimely death from an accident. If we have a negative karma from our previous lives, it can ripen. If we do purification, we can impede it from ripening. Or instead of it ripening and manifesting in us getting into an accident or getting AIDS, it might ripen in a different way and we get the flu, or something like that. That's why when you're doing purification practice and you get sick, it's real good. You should think, "This is all the negative karma that would have ripened in a horrendous rebirth, an untimely death or some kind of incredible suffering. Instead of experiencing those results, I now have a flu, or a boil or something. Negative karma is getting exhausted."

One nun I know was doing a retreat, and she had a huge boil on her cheek – enormous. This was in Nepal. She was walking around in Kopan [monastery] one day and she bumped into Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Rinpoche asked, "How are you?" She said, "Look, Rinpoche." He said, "Oh, that's wonderful! You're doing retreat. You're purifying your negative karma. This is perhaps eons of suffering that is coming up like this." This is why purification practice is needed. It stops premature death.

### **One reason for dying young**

The Tibetans also believe that a person may have the karma to live a long life, but sometimes, a negative karma ripens in the middle of it and they die young. The person still has a bit of good karma left to be born as a human being, and they might take rebirth. But they may end up like the babies that get aborted, or the children who died while still infants. There wasn't the karma to live a long time as a human. There was just a little bit of good karma left over from the previous life that hadn't ripened.

### **The karma which ripens first at the time of death**

#### **1. Strong positive or negative karma**

When we die, karma starts ripening that will influence the future rebirth we take. The karma ripens while we still have some recognition and the ability to think and generate positive or negative thoughts on our own. The ripening of karma makes us feel attracted towards another rebirth in a particular realm. The karma that ripens first is either a strong positive one or a strong negative one.

Remember when we studied karma, we went over the six conditions that make a particular karma strong – the nature of the action, the strength of the motivation, who you did the action in terms of, whether you purified it or not and so on.

If an action is very strong, it is very likely to ripen at the time of death. People may lead a basically good life, but perhaps at one time in their life, they completely blew it and killed somebody, or they did an incredibly virtuous action, then this kind of karma would be the most likely one to ripen first at the time of death.

#### **2. The karma that is habitual**

If there's no karma that is particularly strong, then the karma that's repeated or habitual will ripen first. This is karma that might not be strong but which you do everyday. For example, maybe you set up your altar every morning, while you're half asleep. It's not a strong skilful action because the mind is still half-asleep, but you have the intention to make offerings and purify your mind. You do it everyday and it becomes habitual. Or it could be a negative action that we do everyday like for example, taking things from our workplace or lying about this and that. Whatever it is, because we do it again and again and again, it becomes very easy for that action to ripen at death. That's habitual karma.

#### **3. The karma that was created first**

If none of the karma is particularly strong or habitual, then whichever karma was created first, would ripen. It's the one that's been in your mindstream the longest.

## **Why the time of death is a very important time**

The time of death is a very important time because things are all up for grabs. It's very important to be able to concentrate and live well at the time that you're dying (when the karma that influences the next rebirth is ripening). This is why we put so much emphasis on having a good environment around someone who's dying. If they can have a good environment, it becomes that much easier for positive karma to ripen. Whereas if they're in an environment that antagonizes them, upsets them or arouses their attachment, then it becomes very easy for negative karma to ripen. This is why if you're dying or if you're with somebody who's dying, try to make the passing on peaceful and calm.

You walk into some hospital rooms, and you have three people in a room with three TV sets blaring at the same time. People may be dying to "LA Law" or "Rambo." What does that do to your mind when you're dying, to have that kind of energy around you? It excites that kind of energy within yourself. Basically, we die the way we live. When you watch that kind of stuff on TV, what does it do to you inside? You can see. If it does that to you when you're alive, when you have some "control," then at the time when you're dying and really bewildered, what is it going to do to you then?

In South-east Asia, for example, they often like to have the whole family around when somebody is dying. It's considered that you've lived a very good life if all your children and grandchildren, aunts and uncles and the whole group is there around you, crying when you die. That means you've had a very good life, because they love you so much.

From a Buddhist viewpoint, that kind of situation is one that's just going to set off your attachment and make it incredibly difficult to leave. If somebody's dying and their relatives are in there crying and crying, "How am I going to live without you? I love you so much!" Doing these things invokes a person's clinging and attachment, making it very difficult for them to die peacefully. The mind is agitated, making it more likely for negative karma to arise.

Another difficult situation is if the family is fighting over your money and wanting you to sign the will. We may think when somebody's in a coma, they don't hear things. But I've talked to people in coma. They hear things. They get input from the environment. Even if the dying isn't in a coma, if they see people going to a corner and whispering, they will know it's bad news. Their mind gets agitated. They get worried. "What are they planning? What are they saying behind my back that they can't say to my face?" Or relatives come up and say, "Who do you want to leave the family heirlooms to? Don't you want to revise the will and give them all to me?" It's incredible that so many brothers and sisters stop speaking to each other because they start fighting over inheritance.

## **Analogy of the gull**

This kind of thing agitates the dying person's mind. When we're dying, it's really important to let go. I remember Lama Yeshe used this image once. He said when a gull is on a ship in the middle of an ocean, and that bird takes off, it just takes off. It just leaves. It doesn't look back at the ship. It just leaves.

It's a similar thing. When we die, we just leave. That's it. But if you're worried about who's going to take care of your kids; or you're very angry at somebody because you've had a bad relationship with them for years and it didn't clear up; or you have a whole lot of regret for something you did and you weren't able to purify it because you were too proud to acknowledge it; or your beloved is sitting there crying, sobbing and saying, "I'll miss you so much." It's going to make it difficult to take off. It's important to have a quiet environment.

## **Real-life cases**

One of my students in Singapore was dying. He was young and he had cancer. He was an incredible person. Sharing his death was the greatest gift somebody had ever given me. He called his family – his sister and brother-in-law – together one day with me, another friend, and the mortician, and gave instructions on how he wanted it to be. He looked at his sister and said, "I love you, but if you're going to be in the room crying, I don't want you there. If you cry, you go out to the other room." It was incredible. He was so clear. And she respected this. There was one night (which turned out to be a false alarm), we thought he was dying, but the family didn't cry, because they knew he didn't want them to.

It's important to have a smooth passage, without a lot of disturbances. This is what makes it very hard to die in hospitals. Doctors and nurses are always coming by and monitoring this and poking you for that. If

you know that somebody is not going to live more than a few hours longer, it's better to just take all the tubes out, stop all the monitors, stop the resuscitation, and allow them to go naturally without so much invasive stuff, which can be damaging. Somebody's trying to concentrate and be aware, but they're getting poked and jabbed.

That's why they say if you know somebody is dying, try and help them clear up their worldly things. I think in most cases, it's good that somebody knows that they're dying, so that they can take care of their worldly things. This way when they die, they don't have to worry about it.

There was this other person I knew in Singapore. He was also young – twenty-four or twenty-five – and had a brain tumor. He'd had surgery on it and then it recurred. His family did not want to tell him that he was dying, so he had some kind of fantasy that he would be going on a vacation to Malaysia soon.

I went over to his family's house, because I'd been with them during the whole process. We were close. I said, "Look, we've got to tell him he's dying." But his mother and father couldn't handle it, and they said, "Oh, but the doctor said we shouldn't tell him." And so I couldn't tell him.

Right before he died – just a couple of weeks before he died – he was really out of it. By then, it was too late for him to clear things up. His mother said to me, "You were right. We should have told him."

### **Clearing up unfinished business**

It nearly broke my heart, this whole thing. It's important for someone who's dying to clear up their things and not have to worry about their kids, their money, etc. If they have disturbed relationships with people, they should contact them and meet up to try and clear things up.

Actually, the best thing to do is to clear up our mucky relationships as they're happening. I think it's real good that every night when we go to bed and every morning when we wake up, to say, "If I were to die right now, is everything clear in my mind? How did I relate to other people? Did I let the people I care for know I care for them?"

Often we're too proud to tell the people we care for, that we love them. Perhaps we're too proud to help them, or we're too resentful, and then after they die, we're stuck telling it to Steven Levine instead. I went and I heard how many people said, "Oh, they died, and I've never told them ..." How many people are like that, uncomfortable about telling how much they care for someone. Or people we've hurt whom we're too proud to apologize to.

I think it's good if we can go home and think, "If I were going to die now, what unfinished business do I have, either with people or with things? What do I need to clear up? What do I need to say to different people? I think it's important to set about doing that as much as we can, so that when death comes – because we don't know when it's going to come – we know we've done the best we can.

It doesn't mean that we can heal every difficult relationship. Some people may not want our apologies – they'll throw it right back in our face. But the important thing is that from our side, we try and do what we could to make a relationship good, or to at least take the bad feelings out of it. Even if the other person is not in the state to respond, if we die, at least we know we've done what we can.

That's why they say in the teachings to wake up every morning and say, "Well, this might be the last day that I'm alive." We should try and keep things clear in that way. Of course, relationships can get difficult. But it's important to try to be lucid and then as much as we can, when we've made mistakes, acknowledge them. It's especially important to tell the people we care about, that we do care.

### **Helping the dying**

**[Audience:] Despite our good intentions, I think we might end up pushing our own agenda to the dying person. How do we avoid doing that?**

That's very true. Sometimes we can, with all of our good intentions, go into a bedside situation with our agenda for what this dying person has got to do. Instead of tuning into them, we go in and say things like, "OK, do you have your will signed? Have you apologized to your mother? What do your kids think?" We go in with our agenda, pushing and pushing.

We're trying to help clarify things, but if that person has a terminal illness, it's better to help him or her clarify these earlier in the course of the illness. It wouldn't be appropriate right before they die. When they are dying, just help them to be in the present moment and generate positive thoughts. If it's somebody who's a practitioner, remind them of their spiritual teacher. Remind them of the Buddha. Lead them in taking refuge. If they do a practice of a specific deity, like Chenrezig, Manjushri or Tara, remind them of that. Say the mantra. Tell them to pray for a good rebirth. Speak to them about bodhicitta. Speak to them about emptiness and things being just karmic appearances.

So if somebody's a Buddhist, go in there, but be sensitive to the situation - don't give them a whole talk. Just give them what they need at that moment so that they can have a positive attitude when they die.

If it's somebody who's not a Buddhist, speak the language of whatever religion or faith they believe in. You can talk about compassion in many different languages. It doesn't have to be Buddhist. You can tell them to think of Jesus, Moses or Mohammad. As long as it's something that can relax their mind, that will give them some spaciousness and compassion in their mind.

To help somebody who is dying, we have to be really comfortable with death. We have to be comfortable with pain and watching people wither away into skeletons. If we're trying to help them through our own fear and horror, it doesn't work because they can sense it. You have to be comfortable, watching people pee in their pants. You have to be at ease with all of that.

It's very important, in our mind and in the mind of the dying person, to just let go. The more we cling on to this life, the more difficult it is to leave. That's why, when we were doing the death meditation a few months ago, we talked about our body, possessions, friends and relatives – how none of them are of ultimate help at the time we die. Now, if you die and you take refuge in your body, you're terrified of losing your body. Or you're terrified of being separated from the people you love, "Who am I going to be if I'm not this person's wife or husband or mother or father? Who am I going to be? Who am I going to be if I don't have this body? Who am I going to be if I'm not President of this or owner of that?" Fear can come up, and that just makes death all the more difficult. It's important while we're alive, to let go of the attachment to these things as much as possible. If we're clinging and attached at the time of death, it will be miserable.

#### Karmic visions

People with really bad or good karma can have visions at the time of their death. They say that butchers, because they killed a lot of animals, can have visions of being stampeded by cattle, or something like that when they're dying.

You see, when there's this really strong kind of karma, it causes what we call 'karmic visions.' Different hallucinatory things can happen to somebody who is dying. It's their internal experience; sometimes they'll speak about them, sometimes they can't.

Similarly, people with a lot of good karma can have good karmic visions. They tell the story of this one practitioner of thought training. He always did the taking and giving practice, where you take on the suffering of others and give them your happiness. When he was dying and his disciples were around, he said, "I'm praying to be reborn in the lower realms so that I can go and help those sentient beings. I really want to be born in the hells to help them. But I'm having visions that indicate I'm going to be reborn in the pure land. Please, pray that I can go to the hells and help the sentient beings."

[In response to audience:] A bodhisattva can take deliberate rebirth in the hell realms. But you see, when you have that kind of compassion, what was happening to him as he was dying was the karmic vision of a pure realm.

#### *Dealing with negative karmic visions*

[In response to audience:] Let's say a butcher is having a negative karmic vision. If you're that person, try and recognize that this is just an appearance in the mind. How many times when we're dreaming, do we recognize we're dreaming? "Oh, this is just an appearance in my mind. It isn't a real monster. It's not a real wonderful place. This is just a dream." Even when we're awake, when we get angry at somebody because we're seeing that person as evil, how many times are we able, at that moment, to say, "Oh, this is a karmic appearance. This is just an appearance to my mind." We need to develop the ability to relax when we have different appearances to the mind and not jump on the bandwagon.

## Identifying the point of death

In the teachings, there's a whole detailed process relating to what we call the 'death absorptions' and the different kinds of outer signs and inner signs that happen when one is dying. The different steps in the death process are very clearly laid out in the teachings. People first lose the ability to see and the body feels heavy. Then the ability to hear is lost, and all the moisture in the body dries up. The ability to smell is then lost, and the heat goes away from the body. Then the ability to taste things and touch things is lost, and the breath stops. But from the Buddhist viewpoint, the breath stopping is not the final moment of death.

There was this time when I was with his Holiness in India at a conference. The scientists were trying to say what is death, but they didn't really know what death is. They talked about the death of the brain, the lungs and the heart, because the breath has stopped. But these three things don't happen at the same time. They talk about the death of an organ, but they don't know when the death of a person is. Actually, they don't know what the person is.

From the Buddhist viewpoint, we have different levels of consciousness. First our very gross levels of consciousness absorb. They gradually cease to function as our body weakens. The power of the elements is also weakening and dissolving. As all these are happening, we're able to access a subtler and subtler state of mind. Therefore, even after the breath has stopped, you can have an extremely subtle state of mind still existing in the body, so the person technically isn't dead yet. The breath has stopped. The brain has stopped. The heart has stopped. But the person still has a subtle consciousness at this point.

## After death, leaving the body untouched

That's why from the Buddhist viewpoint, it's best if you can leave the body for three days, because most ordinary beings' consciousness leaves the body within three days. If you can't do it for three days, because the body's in a hospital for example, then at least do it for as long as possible.

When Lama Yeshe passed away in a hospital in Los Angeles, they arranged with the doctors to move his bed into a private room after his breath had stopped. However, the doctors would only let him stay there for eight hours. [Zopa] Rinpoche was there doing pujas, and so were the students. Lama was meditating even though his breath and everything else had stopped. I guess Lama knew he had eight hours because right before the eight hours were up, there were signs that he had left the body. It's good to leave the body untouched for as long as possible, because the subtle consciousness is still in it. If you touch the body you can disturb it and jar it; it can be very intrusive.

Where the body is first touched can influence how the consciousness departs. If you have to touch a body, touch the crown. There're special Tibetan pills made with herbal substances and blessed things that you can grind up and mix with honey or yogurt. You put that on somebody's crown when they're dying and it helps their consciousness to leave through that.

Remember the young man I had just told you about, who called his family around when he was dying? We had planned for him to die at home. But at the very end, he got frightened. I wasn't around and the family took him to the hospital. If I were around, I would have really avoided that. Anyway, we wound up at the hospital. Before he died, he had given all his things away, but right before he died, the last thing he did was to call his sister over and say, "Please make sure that you give all my things away." His last thought was being charitable to others.

It was clear he was dying, because his breath was changing. I always carry one of these pills with me in my bag, so I had one with me. We didn't have any honey. We didn't have any yogurt. My friend had a Snickers bar in her purse, so we ground the pill up, we put it in the Snickers bar and we put it on top of his head.

And then when he died, I stayed around and I did lots of mantras. I kept the doctor away for as long as I possibly could, which wasn't very long. Every time he came back, I'd say, "No. No. Go away." And then finally, I had to give in. You do what's best. But if you can, leave the body without touching it. And if you have to touch, touch the crown and tell the person, "Go to the pure land." Or when they're dying, encourage them to take rebirth in a pure land or in a precious human rebirth.

## [Audience:] How do we know if the consciousness has left the body?

The sign that the consciousness has left the body is you get a white or red substance coming either from the nose or from the genitals. And if the body starts to decay, then at that time, usually the consciousness has left. Not everybody stays up to three days. Some people leave really quickly. Some stay a long time. And great meditators stay even longer and meditate in the clear light for quite a while.

### b. The Way Bardo is Reached After Death

But what usually happens is, as we're dying, the mind starts to crave this life. We start to crave this body, because very often, what happens is there's this fear of disappearing. This fear of "I'm going to disappear. I'm going to cease to exist." There comes a very strong craving for this body, because the body is what gives us an identity. We won't cease to exist if we have a body. We crave this life and the craving increases. When we realize we can't have this body, then the mind grasps for another body. You have the craving for this life and the grasping for the next life which activates the whole karmic process. That makes the karma good and ripe, like a really ripe watermelon. Or the blossom of the flower right before it opens. That propels the karma to ripen.

The mind dissolves and we go from the gross level of mind to the subtle to the extremely subtle mind. When the extremely subtle mind leaves the body, even though it isn't craving or grasping, it's still propelled by the force of energy from the previous life's craving and grasping for another body. When the mind leaves the body, it takes a bardo body and becomes slightly grosser (but it's still a subtle mind, not as gross as our regular mind). Bardo means intermediate stage, the period of time between one gross body and another.

Some people say that when we first go into the bardo, we're still attached to this life and we even resemble this life's body. Other Tibetan Buddhists say, "No. As soon as you go in the bardo, you have your body of your next life." If you have the body of this life, you might not realize you're dead and what's actually happened to you. The bardo being may come around and go back to their house, or go back to where they were. But bardo beings can't communicate with people. They try to, and they get really frustrated, because nobody listens. They have clairvoyance and they can read the people's minds. Sometimes what they see is not so nice and they get really horrified by it. Which is why after somebody dies, it's important to keep a good attitude.

In Singapore, they have this big thing about spirits. There's a lot of confusion between spirits and bardo beings. A spirit is a particular rebirth, but a bardo being, because it's in the middle, doesn't have a rebirth. It's in the middle of things. But everybody is terrified that when their friends and relatives die and are in the bardo state, they're going to come back and hang around and bother them. I find this an incredible thing because when the person's alive, you love them so much, but as soon as they die, you're terrified. It's an interesting thing psychologically, that as soon as they die, you're very afraid of them.

I remember a particular wake where this young woman offered to go out and get dinner for her aunt, whose husband had passed away. As she was going from the front of the house to the back of the house, she tripped over a bucket. When she had bought dinner and came back, her aunt was all excited, "My husband came back! I heard him! He rattled a bucket." And she was saying, "No, auntie. I tripped over it." "No! No! No! He came back! I know he came back!" The fact is, bardo beings may come back and hang around because they don't realize they're dead. That's why, if we do prayers and practices for them and they see that, then that gives them a lot of pleasure. Or if we request other people – different lamas or monks and nuns, or any kind of practitioner – to do practices for them, and then they come and they see that other people are doing practices, then that can make their mind happy. If the dying person sees that the family is getting along harmoniously, this can make their mind happy even though they are in the intermediate state.

### [Audience:] Do bardo beings have afflictions\*?

Oh yes. The bardo beings have incredible afflictions [Note: 'afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes']. As long as the mind is under the influence of attachment, anger and ignorance, it will come under the influence of afflictions\*. It doesn't matter whether it's this life, the next life or the intermediate stage.

In fact in many ways, the bardo being is really tortured. They have clairvoyant powers. They can read different people's minds, and they may not like what they see, so their mind reacts in anger or some kind of afflicted way to what they see in other people's minds. They can have an incredible number of visions and different appearances that can be very frightening, which brings up their anger, their attachment.

It can be an incredibly confusing time for them because they don't know who they are or where they are. All they have to do is think of something and they can be there. They can go through walls. They can go through mountains. They can go under the earth. All they have to do is think of something and whammo, they're there!

They say that bardo beings can go anywhere except into a consecrated object and into their future birth site. Let's say there's some bardo being who has the karma to be your child. Well, they can't enter your womb just because they think of it. They have to wait. When the conditions are ripe, then they can enter the womb. The future birthplace and holy objects are blocked, but anywhere else, they just zap around which can be tremendously confusing to them.

### Dedicating positive potential

They say that the bardo stage, the longest it can last is forty-nine days. I don't know why not another week, but they say usually just seven weeks. And after each week, if the conditions haven't come together for that being to take rebirth, then they go through what's called a mini-death in the bardo, where they lose that particular bardo body and take rebirth in another bardo body. That one lasts another week, and if they haven't found a place to be reborn, that one dies, and they pick another bardo body. That's why when somebody dies, each week, for seven weeks, we do prayers. Often they're done every single day. But if you can't do it every day, then do it every week. On the day when somebody might be changing their bardo body, you can really affect them with your prayers, dedication and everything.

When somebody dies, they are really confused. Their karma to be reborn as a tortoise [for example] ripens, and so they have that kind of bardo body. But if at the end of the week, the whole family and friends do prayers, pujas, make charity and offerings, they create merit. They can then dedicate the positive potential towards the bardo being, and that sets up a good ambience around the bardo being, makes the bardo being's mind happy, so that the bardo being's own good karma can ripen. Then at the time of the mini-death, maybe what will ripen instead will be the karma to be reborn as a human being instead of the karma to be reborn as a tortoise. The tortoise karma goes back into the mindstream and the human being karma becomes a more prominent one at that time. That's the reason these different positive actions are done each week.

### [Audience: Inaudible]

Sometimes we can get very fixated, "I want to die like this." But it may not happen the way we want, because the people around us may freak out and not do what we had wished for. In such a case, like you said, just have compassion. We can't always get what we want, so we need to have some kind of flexibility in it all.

### Use of life-support machines

[In response to audience:] I asked one of my teachers not long ago about hooking up to life-support machines. He felt that if you know that there's no hope, then you don't need to hook somebody up to a machine. You can just let them die naturally. But if they're on the machine, then he thought it was better not to pull the plug.

But it was interesting. I was reading Sogyal Rinpoche's book where he asked his teachers the same question. His teachers gave a slightly different answer and said if the person wants the plug pulled - not that they're wishing to die, but because they're just not wishing to suffer - then it's not a suicide. He said it could put the healer in a difficult position, but if the healer has the wish to help, then it didn't seem like there would be negative karma created. That was Sogyal Rinpoche's teacher's view.

People have asked His Holiness about this. You have to listen very carefully when His Holiness gives answers. His Holiness usually replies to this one, "If you know somebody can recover, you put them on a life-support machine in the hope that there'll be a recovery. If there's no hope of recovery and it's a lot of expense to the family and it causes great emotional turmoil, then it seems to be a different case." People go away saying, "Oh, His Holiness says we can pull the plug." But His Holiness didn't exactly say that. I've never heard His Holiness say it is okay to do that. I haven't heard him say to keep the person on the machine either. He'd say that it's a different case. Each situation needs to be looked at individually. And so there we are again, on "It depends." It depends on all the different circumstances that are going on in that situation. The wish of the person is also very important. If they wish one thing and you're doing another thing out of your own agenda, it can really disturb their death process.

[In response to audience:] I think that hope exists in all the cultures, but I don't think all cultures have the technology to go to the extreme that we do here [in the U.S.]. In India, I'm sure the family still hopes their loved one will recover, but very often, they can't even get to the hospital. They accept what happens. It's not a question of somebody staying on the machine for seven years. Most people in the world don't have access to that kind of paraphernalia.

#### **[Audience:] How was the bardo experience documented?**

They say that beings with clairvoyance in meditation can look and see the experience of the bardo beings. Or maybe meditators can remember being in the bardo, if they're really powerful meditators.

#### **[Audience:] Will you still remember Dharma teachings after death?**

I think you retain your Dharma teachings in the next rebirth. The imprint is there. That's what may enable you to meet the Dharma when you are young. Things do continue. It may not continue on a conscious level, but you'll see tendencies in children.

I've talked to people who tell me when they were little, they were already interested in Buddhism. They would walk past one of these antique shops and see a Buddha statue, and as a kid, they would just look and be fascinated by it. Or when they were in grammar school, they might study about Asia and start getting very interested in Buddhism. They would start reading about it, even when they were ten or eleven.

This kind of imprint from previous lives creates an interest and feeling of affinity in this lifetime, even though they may not remember anything consciously.

I've talked to many people who have come to Dharma teachings and say, "I feel like I know this already." It's like they knew this already at some level. There's some kind of imprint from previous lives, again not a direct memory. It could be a different situation with beings who have clear minds, like one of Lama Yeshe's gurus. He's in his early twenties now. When I first went to Kopan [monastery], he was a child, eight or nine years old. He'd sleep at night - you know how kids talk in a dream - and he would recite texts, not texts he had memorized this lifetime. Isn't that incredible? When the mind is asleep, because it's at a subtler level, that kind of imprint can manifest.

#### **[Audience:] What about organ donation? Will it affect the bardo process?**

Again, it depends on each person's individual situation. I asked one of my teachers about this and he said, for some people, it might be quite disruptive to be cut up and thrown around for an organ transplant when their body is going through this slow dissolution process. For some people, it could be quite disruptive to the natural process of dying and the karma that's going to ripen. But for other people, their sense of compassion in wanting to give charity with their body would make it so that even if that

happened, they wouldn't care, because they want somebody else to have their organs. They really want to give their bodies. It's an individual thing.

**[Audience:] At the point of dying, does the act of craving this body and grasping for another one create a karmic seed?**

When you have the craving, you're not creating the seed of karma at that time. The craving is making previous karma ripen. When you're dying and you're craving this body and then grasping for another one, that activates some of the karma we've created before.

[In response to audience:] I received a letter from somebody recently and the letter disturbed me. At a certain point I said, "This is just a karmic vision." I don't really know what was going on in the other person's mind. I could try reading it this way or I could also read it another way. I could read it three, four, five or six ways. I don't really know. It's my own karmic vision that is choosing one of the negative ways to interpret it, and then running around in circles about it.

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This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>

\*'Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'.