

The Way of Leaving the Body in Death and Taking Rebirth – Part 2 of 2
(lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 20 Jan 93

[Contents \(click on heading to view text\)](#)

- c. The Way Connection is Made to the Next Life
 - A Confusing Time
 - Attachment Keeps Samsara Going
 - Choosing Our Rebirths?
 - Death and Rebirth
 - Excellent Time for Practice

c. The Way Connection is Made to the Next Life

You remain in the bardo for a maximum of seven weeks. Each week you might go through a mini-death. For example, Terry dies on Monday before noon. Every Sunday, for seven weeks, we should do special prayers like the Chenrezig practice, or make offerings, or do some other virtuous activity, and dedicate the positive potential generated to him. If he hasn't taken his next rebirth, this is a crucial time because he will leave that bardo body and take another, and at that point the karma can be changed. When we do prayers and virtuous activities and dedicate the positive potential generated to him, it creates a very good energy field so that his own good karma can ripen.

At the end of the seven weeks, we usually do one big activity because they say that by that time, the person would have to take rebirth.

In general, if somebody has a lot of negative karma which is ripening for their next rebirth, the bardo is very short. If someone is to be reborn as a formless realm god – the very high level gods who have attained an incredible state of concentration and mental absorption – they don't have to go through the bardo, because they don't take another grosser body in their next life.

A Confusing Time

The bardo is generally a rather confusing time. Bardo beings have a subtler body and only have to think of some place and automatically they go there. There are a few exceptions though. A bardo being cannot go into a holy statue or stupa. They also cannot go into a womb if the circumstances haven't come together for them to be reborn as a human. Other than these exceptions, they can go any place that they think about.

Bardo beings usually take a body similar to that of a young child in their next life. For example, if somebody is going to be born as a human, the bardo body will look like a child of six to eight years old in the next life. Even if bardo beings have the karma to be reborn deaf or blind, in the bardo state, they will still have all the senses intact. The karma to be deaf or blind only ripens when they are reborn and take a grosser body.

The bardo is quite a confusing time. The mind is under the influence of ignorance, anger and attachment. It is very difficult to control the mind. You don't know where you are and what's going on around you. Different texts describe it differently: some texts mention that when a person dies and is in the bardo state, they don't identify with their past body; they only identify with their bardo body. Other texts say that when a person dies and is in the bardo state, they initially do not realize that they are dead and still identify with the last body. They try talking to their relatives, but their relatives don't respond, so they get very confused, angry and upset. Later at a certain point, they realize that they're dead.

There are certain Tibetan rituals where you invoke the consciousness of the person in the bardo and give them a lot of instructions on how to transfer their mind to a pure land or to take a precious human life. Some lamas do these kinds of practices once the person is in the bardo.

Attachment Keeps Samsara Going

If somebody has the karma to be reborn as a human being, and they have the karma to be reborn the child of specific parents, then when those parents are making love – this is very interesting because it seems Freudian – if they have the karma to be reborn as a woman, they're going to be attracted to the male and go there as if it were some place beautiful. If they have the karma to be reborn as a male, then they're attracted to the mother and go there. And when they get there, thinking it's all great and wonderful, they feel disillusioned. Here they leave the bardo body and take rebirth inside the sperm and egg.

[In response to audience:] Well, it is the same thing you do when you fall in love with some guy. [laughter] When you are attached to pizza, it's something beautiful to you, so you run for it.

They often say that although ignorance is the root of samsara, it is attachment that keeps samsara continuing. When we're dying, it's our attachment, our craving for this body and our grasping for a next body that makes the karma ripen. When we're in the bardo, it's the attachment to a place that looks beautiful that draws us to the next rebirth. Even when you're going to be reborn in the hells, right before you're reborn into one, you will be attracted to it. You're dying, it is freezing cold, and you crave for warmth – that sets the impetus for karma to be reborn in the hot hellish realms to ripen. Similarly, if you crave for something cold when you die because it is very hot, then that kind of craving sets the stage for that karma to ripen.

Also, once you're in the bardo, the mind is attracted by a certain rebirth, so the bardo being runs towards that place to take rebirth. They say, for example, that if somebody was a butcher in a previous life, then in their bardo, they might see sheep and they might run towards the sheep thinking, "Oh, this is great! I'm going to go kill them," and then they take rebirth as a sheep. This is how attachment (craving, yearning, wanting, clinging) keeps this whole cycle of confusion going on and on.

[Audience: Inaudible]

I wouldn't call it a choice. Ordinary people like us are just propelled to our next rebirth. Just look at how we live now. We actually have a lot of choice, but in another way we don't have much choice, because we're just propelled by our likes and dislikes, our attachment and aversion. I think especially in the bardo, the mind runs for what looks nice and runs away from what doesn't.

[Audience: Inaudible]

The bardo being can see many, many things, but it will only run to take rebirth in the one it's attracted to. Even if we're to be born into a really awful rebirth, at that moment when we're running towards it, it looks great. To put it into psychological terms, this is like somebody who constantly gets into dysfunctional relationships. When you get into it, it looks great. You make the same mistakes again and again. Similarly for the bardo being. It looks great, you run for it, and then you jump into this gross body that gets born, gets old, gets sick and dies. You're stuck with this body which does this whole suffering trip on you, but at the moment when you were in the bardo running for it, it looked like Disneyland, even if it were a rebirth as a hungry ghost or some other rebirth of great suffering. This points out how clinging attachment just pushes us along.

Choosing Our Rebirths?

These days, many people have the idea that we choose our rebirths to learn lessons. It is as if you're sitting on a cloud contemplating, "Which mummy and daddy do I want? What lesson do I want to learn?" That's really glamorous, but that doesn't correspond to the teachings. And if you look at our mind, it doesn't really correspond to what we are now either. Do we pick situations because we want to learn in them? Do we learn from most of the situations we experienced? [laughter] How much do we really choose the things that are offered, and how much are we propelled by the force of our repetitive habits?

[Audience:] Could you talk a little bit more about the mini-deaths?

It's like if you have a karma ripening, let's say, to be reborn as a human being, then your bardo body will be similar to a human body. (But bardo bodies are subtle, they aren't gross like our body now.) I'm not sure exactly what it is, if it's karmic energy or what energy, but somehow that doesn't go beyond seven days. If you haven't been able to be reborn into a gross body within these seven days, then at the end of

the seven days, you dissolve back into the clear light. When you come out of the clear light, you take another bardo body.

[In response to audience:] I think that's the way things are. I don't think anybody designed this system specially. [laughter]

Death and Rebirth

The following description might help you to understand how this works. When a person dies, their gross consciousnesses dissolve into a subtle consciousness which then dissolves into an extremely subtle consciousness, which is the clear light. This extremely subtle consciousness has a very subtle energy with it. When this union of very subtle energy and very subtle consciousness leaves the body of the deceased, the extremely subtle consciousness becomes the perpetuating or substantial cause that transforms into the consciousness in the bardo, except it's slightly grosser than it is in the clear light stage. The extremely subtle wind or energy that accompanies the extremely subtle consciousness becomes the substantial or perpetuating cause that generates the body of the intermediate stage, except it's also grosser.

And then let's say the person is going to be reborn as a human being. The bardo body and mind are subtle, but they're not extremely subtle. They again, first dissolve into the subtlest mind and the subtlest wind or energy, and this subtlest mind and energy then joins with the sperm and egg. Once they join with the sperm and egg, they start becoming grosser and you get subtle minds and then you get gross minds.

You can see a little bit how rebirth works. It's not a soul, a self or any permanent essential thing that's *us* that goes from one life to the next. The subtle mind is changing every moment in the bardo. The subtle energy is also changing every moment. They continue from one moment to the next. You get a feeling of how we go from one life to the next, and yet there's no solid personality that does that.

[Audience:] Is there reproduction in the hell realm?

Rebirth in the hell realms happens spontaneously, so you don't need a mother and father. That's why you don't need to wait so long in the intermediate stage, because you don't need to wait for them to make love. If you have the karma to be born there, you just manifest that body [fingers snapping] right there.

[Audience:] What about rebirth as an animal?

I think it's a similar thing. The bardo being sees a father and mother dog or cat and it happens the way I described before. This is why I think we have to be so careful, because you hear people say, "Oh, wouldn't it be nice to be a cat and sleep all day." You've to be real careful what you think, because in one way you do get what you want. And if you have this wish of being a cat, if that comes on strong at the time when you're dying, then that thought propels you in the bardo to seek a cat body.

[In response to audience:] Yes, it's like making an aspiration. This is why at the beginning of every meditation or teaching session, we say that we aspire to become Buddhas for the benefit of others. We are planting an aspiration. The stronger you make it, the more it comes automatically in your mind. If somebody is wishing all the time to be an animal because they think it's so great – you don't have to pay taxes [laughter] – the imprint becomes very strong and that draws the mind towards that rebirth. When we take rebirth as something, it's not necessarily due to just one karma. It can be multiple karmas ripening, or even if it's just one karma ripening, there're all sorts of cooperative conditions. There can be the scene around you, your own thought and mood, etc. that help that karma ripen, drawing you towards a certain body.

[Audience: Inaudible]

When we do prayers and virtuous activities, the deceased do not experience this karma. We ourselves experience the karma we create by doing the prayers and activities. But it creates a good energy field around (the consciousness of the deceased), so that their (the deceased) own good karma can ripen. When we do prayers and virtuous things, the bardo being knows that these things are going on, they feel

delighted and it helps their minds turn towards the Dharma which then helps their own good karma to ripen.

Excellent Time for Practice

One important thing to mention is that the time of death is an excellent time to practice. Death is a very powerful transition moment with lots of karma ripening. If your mind is in a good state when you die, you can direct it towards a good rebirth so that in your next life, you have the opportunity to continue to practice. For example, if a person's main practice is thought training, then when they're dying, they're going to give away all their possessions, practice the taking and giving meditation, meditate on emptiness and make prayers to never be separated from the Mahayana teachings and teachers as well as to have conducive conditions for practice. This helps the good karma ripen allowing them to have a good rebirth. They can then continue to practice in the next rebirth.

If somebody is practicing Vajrayana, then this is a really incredible time. In the highest class of tantra, there is a meditation practice you do everyday that is analogous to death, bardo and rebirth. In the meditation, you imagine going through all the different dissolution stages of death, going into the clear light, meditating on the clear light, and then re-emerging as a Buddha instead of as an ordinary being. At the time of dying, you will be able to practice it there and then. If somebody is well-trained, they can have incredible results and achieve very profound realizations at that time. This is because during the death process, you're going into that extremely subtle mind which is very good for meditating on emptiness. Somebody who's very well-trained in emptiness and the recognition of all the stages that precede going into the clear light will be able to do this meditation at the time of dying and instead of taking a rebirth, they emerge as a Buddha, with a Buddha's body.

This is why our teachers give us commitments when they give us initiations. This is the value of taking commitments. By doing the practice everyday, when it comes time to die, we'll be able to practice it there and then.

For deep practitioners, when they die, they're so excited because... [laughter] I saw one monk in Dharamsala die. Physically, he was hemorrhaging inside and this unbelievable stuff was coming out of him, but he was definitely meditating. Two people were taking care of him and they put him in the same posture as that of the Buddha when the Buddha passed away. I'm sure he was doing his regular meditation practice at that time, and some of his other friends were also doing the same practice as what he was doing.

[Audience:] This tantric meditation on the stages of death seems to be something very high practitioners do. Why don't we learn it earlier since it is so crucial in helping us get a good rebirth?

Because the mind has to be prepared for it. To get the teaching on doing this meditation, it requires an empowerment into the highest class of tantra, which means taking bodhisattva vows and tantric vows. Very often, the teacher, like I said, gives you a daily commitment to do the practice to make sure you do it. But our mind is such that when we hear a lama coming to town, the first thing we ask is, "Is there a commitment? What is the commitment?" We don't want to take the commitment, because then we feel burdened by having to do the practice everyday. Or we take bodhisattva vows or tantric vows and afterwards we go, "What did I do? I don't want all these vows. This is a super-burden!"

You see, when we are only concerned with our life now, we don't want to do all these practices. This is why it's so important to remember death, because when you remember death, then you'll come up with a question like what you have just asked, which is "I want to learn how to do this, because I know I'm going to die." And when you really have that wish and you want to learn how to do it, the commitments and the vows aren't a burden anymore. It's something you really want to do. You see the benefit.

But in the meantime, before we could take the empowerment to do those practices, what we can do is to train very well in 'the five forces at the time of death'. This is taught under the thought training teachings. Here, you train your mind well in relative bodhicitta – the altruistic intention to become a Buddha for the benefit of others, and the absolute or ultimate bodhicitta – the wisdom realizing emptiness. These we can do now, since we've had teachings on them.

[Audience:] We see that tantric practice is an advanced practice, yet it seems that it is easily available to the general public. Why is this?

This is one question that I have too. I talked with the attendant of one of my teachers, and he thought that for people who are going to engage in Dharma practice on a long term basis, the teacher won't give them tantric initiation too soon. Since this person is going to practice long-term, the teacher will lead them gradually, allowing them to progress in this lifetime.

But in the West (and I think also in the East), to people who aren't going to practice in a committed way, the teacher often gives tantric initiations with the idea that then at least the person has some contact with the tantra. A seed has been planted in their mind. Even if they don't keep their vows, at least there's some connection with it so that they can meet the tantra again in future lives. Hopefully, at that time they'll be better prepared and can actually practice it. This is probably why they give the initiations openly and publicly. It hasn't always been this way in the past. I personally have some reservations about this way.

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>