

The Dalai Lama on Death and Dying

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At a three-day teaching in California in 2004, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was asked a question about death and how to prepare for it. This is his response:

When we speak of death as a phenomenon from the Buddhist point of view, it is understood to be the moment when all the gross levels of mind, the various levels of consciousness, have eventually dissolved into the clear light nature of mind, which is the most subtle level of consciousness.

However, something similar to this process occurs even in our day-to-day life while we are alive. For example, when we experience sleep, before we reach the dreaming state, there is a deep-sleep state, which is devoid of dreaming. That deep-sleep state is quite similar in its experience to the actual experience of death; at that point the level of consciousness is comparatively much more subtle and deeper. As the level of consciousness assumes greater grossness or coarseness, one moves from the deep-sleep state into the dreaming state, which is a coarser level of consciousness. When one wakes up, that's an even coarser level of consciousness.

Similarly, death is when all the consciousness levels have dissolved into this subtle-most level of consciousness. This will be followed, in most cases, by an interval period during which the consciousness arises from this extremely subtle state into a comparatively grosser level of existence, which is described in the Buddhist texts as *bardo*, or intermediate state. (There are some types of rebirth where there will be no interval period of bardo). From the bardo state, when one takes the full embodiment of a rebirth, then the level of consciousness has assumed an even greater coarseness.

So in a sense, we can see that our existence is characterised by this continuing cycle of the consciousness moving through an extremely subtle level to a comparatively less subtle level to a gross level, and then dipping down through a reversal process of subtlety and so on. When we go to sleep, we have this deep sleep, and then it rises from there into the dream state, and from there to the waking state, and then back to the sleep state, dream state, and so on.

Even in our day-to-day life our consciousness goes through these transitions of different levels of subtlety. Death marks a big point when consciousness has finally dissolved into the most subtle level of its existence. When the new rebirth occurs, then it again reverses the whole cycle.

In our ordinary sense, when we think of death, we think of this almost as a kind of absolute separation of our body and consciousness. We also tend to get the impression that death marks the end of everything, the end of the continuum of the individual, and if there is a rebirth, then it's a new chapter; but in a strict sense, death is really an interval that marks a new beginning. From that point of view, we can understand the statements in the texts where it is said that what is called death is nothing but a state of consciousness.

This perspective is of course grounded in the Vajrayana understanding of death. These perspectives are found in Nargajuna's explanation of the Guhyasamaja Tantra. The more explicit explanation of these ideas is found in Aryadeva's Lamp on the Compendium of Deeds, where he explains in greater detail where a correlation is drawn between the three buddhakayas: dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya, and the three basic states of our experience, which are sleeping, dreaming and waking states.

Generally speaking, when we define death, we have to understand it in terms of the separation of the link between the present body and the consciousness.

So from the point of view of someone who accepts the concept of the theory of rebirth, then death is like changing to a new body. From the point of view of someone who does not accept rebirth, then death marks the real end of all the work!

This reminds me of a joke: A monk and his pupil were living together in the monastery, and the teacher kept saying to the pupil, "One day we are going to go on a picnic," but there were so many chores to do that they never seemed to finish. The student kept asking the teacher, "When are we going to go on the picnic?" The teacher said, "Wait, when we finish all our work." Days went by, and months went by, and no picnic. One day a corpse was being carried away, with people walking in a group. The teacher looked out the window and asked what was happening. The student looked out, and seeing it was a funeral procession he told his teacher, "That guy has finished his work!"

So given that death is really a separation of our present body and consciousness, whatever experiences that we have as an individual human being will come to an end at that point. Because of this, for most of us when we think of death, it instils in us some kind of apprehension or even fear.

Preparing for Death

How do we as individuals prepare for death? One can think of three different levels: At one level we can prepare for death so that we don't experience a sense of fear. A second level of preparation, which is a bit more profound, is actually to think about our future life, so that following death one can enjoy favourable circumstances in one's rebirth. Finally, there can be a highly advanced preparation for death, in which one prepares oneself through a spiritual practice in such a way that one can transform the clear light moment of death into an aspect of the spiritual path.

On the first level, it is important to cultivate constantly the recognition that death is part of life, part of existence. Once one is able to cultivate that kind of familiarity with the idea, then when death actually happens, there will be less a sense of shock, less a sense of fear.

Furthermore, while one is alive, if one has made every effort to live one's life as meaningfully and purposefully as possible, then at the point of death at least there will be no regret, no remorse.

On the second level of preparation, as you approach the point of death, it is very important to recall many of the virtuous activities that you engaged in and to dedicate them toward the attainment of a favourable rebirth, so that in your future life you will also have the opportunity and the possibility to continue with spiritual practice. This dedication of one's own merits is important. One should also apply practices to transform the consciousness at the point of death into a virtuous state, a positive state.

Although the exact point of death – the subtle consciousness at the moment of death – is said to be neutral, in the process of dying the grosser levels of consciousness are still present, so one should find a way of transforming these states toward a more positive and virtuous state.

On the third level, which is the most advanced level of preparation, it becomes crucial to develop a deeper understanding of the actual phenomenon of the dissolution of elements that occurs at the time of death. In the Vajrayana texts, eight stages of dissolution are described: These are the dissolution of the four elements and the fifth element, space, which is further divided into four stages. Of course, the most important factor is meditation on emptiness, which must be grounded in the underlying motive of bodhicitta, which is the altruistic awakening mind.

Advanced practitioners have remained in the clear light of death for prolonged periods of time, up to several weeks. It seems that even some ordinary people (probably as the result of some karmic forces) may be able to remain in that state for three days and so on. This pertains to an expression you find in the Vajrayana literature, where it is described as the mixing of the mother and son clear lights.

(Later a geshe asked a question in Tibetan. There was a citation from one text where a statement is made that at the point of death for the practitioner it is important to recall the memory of one's spiritual teacher or lama.)

Since we are talking about the preparation of death from the perspective of general practitioners, not so much for a highest yoga tantra practitioner, probably recalling the lama may not be that relevant. But, of course, if an individual is a practitioner of the highest yoga tantra class, and in highest yoga tantra one's devotion to, or reverence for, the lama or spiritual mentor is emphasised as an important foundation for practice, then, of course, that would have an important bearing on the practice of the individual at the point of death.