

## Care of the mind

# Buddhist theory of life, death and rebirth

### Life

Most simply put, a human life depends on the combination of a body and a mind. While the body comes from the physical elements of our parents, from a Buddhist perspective, mind is a continuum which exists before and after the present life. A point to a time when mind begins or ends cannot be found.

Mind is awareness and clarity. It is formless, without shape or colour. Mind does not come from the physical body. It has its own cause which is of the same formless nature. From the Buddhist perspective, the cause of each moment of mind is the immediately preceding moment of mind. Each moment of mind gives rise to the next moment. Thus, mind is continuous and in a process of constant change.

When the mind comes together with the fertilized egg at the moment of conception, life begins. And when the mind separates from the body at the time of death the current life ends and a future life begins.

For Buddhists, the continuity of mind and future lives is why living well is important. In the present life we have opportunities to develop qualities like loving kindness, compassion, respect and forgiveness. These qualities bring us happiness in this life, peace at the time death and they continue to be part of who we are in future lives.

### Death

There are different views of what happens at the time of death. Some people believe that death is a permanent end and nothing continues after death. Others believe their spirit or soul continues on after death.

The Buddhist belief is that the mind separates from the body at the time of death and continues on to take rebirth in a new form. For Buddhists, death is a transition from one life to the next. The state of mind at the moment of death is important as it influences the quality of the next rebirth.

Cause of death may be natural or premature. Death may come naturally. This is when the strength of the life force we were born with has been used up. In this case, there is probably nothing that can be done to extend life. On the other hand, death may occur because our life force is prematurely interrupted. There are many things that can cause premature death, including untreatable illness, harm from the elements, harm from other beings and

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physical injury. We may or may not be able to prevent an untimely death.

### Dying

Buddhism offers a detailed explanation of what happens during the dying process. The following quote from His Holiness the Dalai Lama gives a brief overview of this process.

*When we are awake our mind has a certain level of awareness. The continuity of that awake mind becomes more subtle as we go to sleep and more subtle again when we dream. From there it becomes even more subtle when we are in a deep sleep. Our mind then becomes gradually less subtle and goes in reverse order from deep sleep to the dream state to being awake. [Similarly] during the dying process the mental continuum goes through different levels of dissolution as it passes from the present life to the next.*

*...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.*

According to Buddhism final, death occurs when the very subtle level of mind or consciousness completely leaves the body. This does not coincide with the general signs of physical death from a medical perspective, which occurs once breathing and heartbeat are no longer detectable. For Buddhists, the main sign of final death is when warmth is no longer detectable at the 'heart centre' in the centre of the chest.

It is common for the final moment of death to take place a day or two after the physical death. Those who have complete control over their mind can even remain in meditation for a period of weeks before they choose to finally leave their old body.

### Intermediate State

When the very subtle level of mind finally leaves the body the type of rebirth that will be taken has already been determined. However the causes and conditions required for that rebirth may not be immediately available and the mind will remain in the intermediate state until rebirth can be taken.

The Tibetan Buddhist tradition is to support a person for 49 days after death whilst they are in the intermediate state seeking their next rebirth. During this time the prayers of those who have had a close connection can help the person find a positive rebirth.

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### Rebirth

It is possible to reach high spiritual attainment during the life time, during the dying process, or in the intermediate state whereby the person has complete control over their future rebirth. However, if the mind is still obscured by layers of ignorance and disturbing emotions rebirth will occur without choice.

Uncontrolled rebirth happens because of having a strong sense of “I” and desire to continue existing at the end of life. This causes grasping at a new life which is shaped by the karmic imprints carried in the mind from previous actions.

Uncontrolled rebirth is determined by the karmic imprints that are the most intense, or the most familiar due to habit or the imprints that arise immediately preceding the moment of physical death.

Uncontrolled rebirth may be in one of six realms of desire. These are divided into three lower realms (hell, preta, animal) and three upper realms (human, asura, sura). Rebirth in the lower realms is caused by negative actions, whereas rebirth in upper realms is caused by positive actions. None of these six realms are permanent and on leaving one life, rebirth is taken in another.

Of the six realms a human rebirth is considered the most favourable as there is the potential for greater spiritual development. The awareness of one’s own suffering and that of others motivates compassion and the desire for liberation from uncontrolled rebirth in the six realms and achievement of the ultimate state of enlightenment. A human rebirth is caused by ethical behaviour, generosity and sincere prayer such as the aspiration to benefit others.

### Pure land rebirth

Rebirth can be in a pure land of peace and joy, free from suffering. This is achieved by a strong faith in a Buddha or other Divine Being and trust in their unconditional love and compassion for every living being.

### Compassionate Life, Death and Rebirth

Each of us has the potential as human beings to be in control of our death and rebirth if we train and prepare during our lifetime for this pivotal transition. However, for many of us we will have limited control of our mind at death. In this case, the best thing we can do is to die with compassion for all living beings, wishing everyone to be free of suffering not just ourselves. Strong compassion then provides the positive momentum that takes us into our next life where we can continue our spiritual growth.

Karuna also has experienced people you can talk with on:  
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