



# Death and Rebirth as a Natural Pulsation of Existence,

A Unity in Duality approach.

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An interview with Tarab Tulku

**Q:** What is death?

**Tarab Tulku Rinpoche:** In our common view we see birth as some kind of beginning and death as the end, like some kind of cessation or disappearing, as if it was a straight line with a definite beginning and ending.

The Buddhist view however is circular. Birth is a new beginning, then we have being or existence, followed by death, which leads again to new creation, a new birth. So there is a connection between the end of something and a new arising, there is no break in between.

Any kind of phenomenon, all dual existence, is transitory, which implies that it is subject to change, to continuous change. But the change is never in a straight line, it is always attaining a circular movement.

We can look at the example of matter and energy: At the very beginning of evolution matter is born out of pure energy, and at a certain time it dissolves again into its pure energy origin. In that way all phenomena goes round and round. On the human level when being born we are manifesting our body and mind, which is together with and never separate from our basic energy of both. When we are dying the body in connection with the mind changes to a very subtle bodymind energy, into the final stage of dying, and from there starts a new process of creation: first we manifest a

bardo-body, which is not solid but is an energy-body, from there we eventually manifest a more rough body, that of a new incarnation. In this way Buddhism looks at birth and death always as a circle with no interruption, no ‘disappearing’. The circular movement of existence is more like an on-going transformation or pulsation from energy to matter and from matter to energy at different levels of subtlety.

**Q:** Is fear of death universal? Why? Why do we have difficulties to accept death?

**TTR:** Normally every human being is afraid of death. We have a very strong drive of wanting to have a form-nature, a body. This is connected with our particular way of existing, which we share with animals and plants. But on top of that human beings, unlike animals or plants, are conscious of having to die.

Darkness is like an empty nothingness where the forms disappear. That is why many people are also afraid of the dark. We get afraid because we identify with the form-level of existence. So from this very strong connection to the form-level of existence comes our fear of dying: When we die we know for sure that we have to leave our body, as it stops functioning. When we are in the death process the normal conceptual mind as well as the sense abilities dissolve one after the other and we lose the connection with the physical body, and if we still at this stage of dying identify with the physical body we will therefore naturally encounter



fear of disappearing. But as soon as reconnecting with the energy below, the fear disappears.

**Q:** In which way is the approach of death different in Asian and in Western countries?

**TTR:** I just mentioned that human beings in general are afraid to die because of their strong connection or identification with the form-level. But if on top of that you don't accept the idea of reincarnation, then your fear becomes even stronger, because you expect to completely disappear. On the other hand, in the Asian cultures, where the idea of reincarnation is strongly rooted in people, people have a strong self-feeling like a string of continuation, that is not easy to disturb. Also in Asia there is a strong belief in a karmic system, in the influence from one life to the next.

Based on that belief people get engaged in different techniques and meditations to prepare themselves for their next life. If people know there is a way to prepare for and influence their next incarnation, it naturally reduces the fear of death and dying.

**Q:** How do we prepare ourselves? Is there a special attitude of mind or other techniques?

**TTR:** From the point of view of Buddhism, the base is to really accept the idea of reincarnation, so you know you won't just disappear. Buddhism gives a lot of advice on how to live to assure a good incarnation in the next life, and also in Buddhism you will find a lot of meditation methods in order to change and transform ourselves and their bad imprints (to transform our vulnerable self-identities - to say the same thing in a Unity in Duality way), so that they do not disturb or create bad circumstances for our next life.

Concerning a special attitude of mind, this depends on the beliefs of the person, it is always helpful to have trust in and feel supported by the object of one's faith. If we talk about a religious Buddhist person, then complete trust in the three jewels, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha or in a particular Tantric Deity will help tremendously, and will give support to that person during the actual death process.

Similarly, if a person is of another religious belief this trust and support from a 'superior being' or 'energy'

gives the effect that the person automatically will follow the natural process of dying, of returning into the energy base with less or no fear.

If you are a more advanced Tantric practitioner, you would, in connection with the process of dying, apply Tantric practices, as the death process would be seen as a great opportunity to attain a deep meditation state. By the power of your own will you would therefore try to master the different stages of the death process to consciously enter the final stage of the death process, the 'clear light'. Knowing your own abilities in that respect you gain confidence and the fear is greatly reduced or overcome.

**Q:** How would you describe the process of dying and taking rebirth / of being reincarnated?

**TTR:** In the death process at first you go through the absorption of the elementary powers: first the earth element of manifestation and structuralization loses its power, then the water element of the cohesive energy (holding together the different components) loses its power, then the fire element of ripening (the energy pushing the entity forward to its peak development) loses its power, followed by the losing of the power of the air element, the power of movement basic to creation. This part of the process of dying may give rise to certain more violent experiences of destruction. At the end of this process the breathing stops and the person is clinically dead. However, according to the Tibetan tradition this point is just a shift to a different type of body-mind existential level, to an energy level, i.e. beyond the matter level of existence. What follows are the different experiences of the space element, our potential nature: the white, the red and the dark experience, a process that naturally leads to the 'clear light'. The 'clear light' is the endpoint in the process of dissolving our form-existence, dual existence, towards the non-dual. Therefore it is also a turning point from where a new cycle of manifestation from subtle energy presence back into a more and more rough levels of being, ending in rebirth at a matter level.

Coming out of the 'clear light' there is the intermediary state between death and rebirth, in Tibetan called "bardo". If one is trained in dealing with one's energy-body (the dream-body is also an energy-body, and has frequently been used for this kind of training) in the



bardo-state one can do different kinds of advanced practices in order to influence the next incarnation in a more positive direction. This practice has to do with the recognition of certain attractions / rejections, which should be avoided and transcended, and it has to do with cultivating deep inner strength and compassion furthering a unity experience in regard to one's object (in this state one has objects as in the dream state) in order to master this state. From this very special and unique establishment of one's Bardo body-mind one can influence the whereabouts and conditions of one's birth.

**Q:** Is death and reincarnation the same for an "ordinary" person as for a person who has undertaken certain meditation practice or for a "Master"?

**TTR:** In the Tantric tradition there exists a "death meditation practice" where one trains to consciously go through the process of the absorption of the elements to the 'clear light' and back again through the process of manifestation to rebirth. The main purpose of this meditation, however, is not to prepare for one's death or rebirth, but mainly to gain the power from our rough outer body-mind level to attain a much more subtle level of existence, but as a side effect also one is prepared for dying and one is trained to master the different processes of manifestation.

Ordinary persons have no control in their process of dying or in the process of manifesting anew, one is just pushed through it by the natural forces of existence. And normally one falls unconscious long before reaching the 'clear light', first waking up in the Bardo state, like when we go to sleep and wake up in the dream state. But if someone is able to have an inner control or power to consciously follow the natural process of dying, he or she has the possibility to absorb with the whole existence into the non-dual nature of the universe, into the border between Samsara and Nirvana.

When actually dying such trained people can absorb into the non-dual meditation state of mind for a considerable time. Some stay absorbed in the 'clear light' state for weeks.

When an ordinary person is dead you can immediately see it, but these very special practitioners who are able to stay in the 'clear light' meditation state, can retain

their physical position (lotus position) as long as they stay in the 'clear light' state, i.e. weeks after their heart stopped beating and they stopped breathing. They radiate a strong energy in this time span, it can be much stronger than when they were alive and well, which is especially noticeable if they have been sick and weakened before their death.

While staying absorbed in the 'clear light' state their body can also become smaller. Someone of my size (175 cm) can actually shrink to 40 or 50 centimetres, and even it has been seen that Masters from this state can dissolve the body completely, leaving behind only the nails and the hair.

These and many other phenomena actually occurred in Tibet at the time of Great Masters death.

For example, my grand uncle, the Regent of Tibet before this Dalai Lama, was burnt after his death, and in one of the bone-plates of the skull they found a bone-formation, which had taken the form of a seed syllable letter, the main letter of a mantra. There was another bone-formation of a seed syllable letter in his knee.

The way we can understand these phenomena is, that through the power attained in the Tantric practice some people really succeed in mastering the process to energy and the unity nature and back into the matter level. Mastering this process enables one to manifest phenomena at one's will.

Another very strange phenomenon is the so-called Rinzel<sup>1</sup>. They are small round, shiny pearl-like phenomena, usually whitish, but they can also have different colours. They can also emanate from the body of a great Tantric practitioner when he / she is burnt after death. They have also to do with a person's meditative power, i.e. an effect of the ability to go through the death process consciously, mastering this process. The Tibetan name for this ability is in translation 'to have gained power over the five elements', or 'to master the elements'.

**Q:** What is the influence of karma for the process of dying and reincarnation?

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<sup>1</sup> Tib. Ring-bsril, (phon. ringsil)



**TTR:** “Karma” actually means action, action, which give imprints and will give a result in the future. That action can be universal or personal. On a universal level there are natural laws, implying that a certain cause will give a certain result. That is a universal law. On a personal or human level the most influential karmic actions are the mental actions. From the mental actions come the verbal and/or physical actions. In terms of the mental actions we can have peaceful mental actions, that will produce a peaceful result, and we can have more violent mental actions that will produce a violent result. The consequence of that for the death process is, that if, while dying you have a mentally peaceful nature, your energy is more peaceful and the whole process will take you in a more peaceful direction.

**Q:** What is happening in a situation of a violent death? What is happening in a situation of keeping a person who is in deep coma artificially alive?

**TTR:** It is not so much the outer situation that is the main determining factor, but the question whether something disturbs the person mentally. A peaceful mind will always give the best result. But of course the outer circumstances can influence the mind. In the Tibetan tradition it is said that when a person is dying, one should make the environment as peaceful as possible, and one should make sure that no one provokes any kind of emotional state in the dying person. The same applies to the process of falling asleep, if the mind is negative before going to sleep, it will influence the sleeping state in the same way, just like a peaceful mind will influence the mind in a positive sense.

In accordance with the Tibetan tradition there are many different correlations between going to sleep and dying. In accordance with the dream-yoga, when working with the process of going to sleep we prepare for the death process, and when working with our dreams we are preparing for the Bardo state.

Deep coma is some kind of unconscious state. In general the mind and the body have an interconnection during the whole process of the element absorption, all the way until the ‘clear light’ state, i.e. even after what in the West would be considered physical death. As already mentioned, there is a shift to a different type of body-mind level from the moment when the breathing

stops (i.e. after the air element loose power) to the arising of the different space element experiences. If you keep someone, who is unconscious, artificially alive in a respirator, you more or less keep him/her suspended in between the absorption of the air element and the space element experiences, you don’t let the energy go on.

If someone is in a deep coma, there is really nothing you can do for that person, unless you are somehow able to connect through your subtle mind-energy, to make some sort of positive energy support to the dying person.

*Tarab Rinpoche continues without questions*

How the death process will be depends to a great extent on our self-references, on the feeling and identity of ourselves. The more stable and genuine the self-identities and self-references are, the less fear we have. If you believe in reincarnation, then you believe that there is some kind of ‘self’ both before and after your body is born. In that way the view of ‘self’ is not limited to the conceptual idea of oneself, it is not narrow, and it is then more likely that you can follow the natural process of transforming your self-identity, your self-reference, in the process of dying without fear. On the other hand, if you don’t have any idea of yourself continuing after death, your feeling of your ‘self’ becomes easily fixed and limited to your surface idea and feeling of yourself. And as you have to leave this surface feeling and idea of yourself behind when you die, fear naturally arises. You are afraid of disappearing, because you are completely identified with that which will disappear in the process of dying. I sometimes give the example of a tree, when you are just identified with being a leaf on that tree and that leaf falls down, you have a problem. But if you somehow could see that on a deeper level you are also the whole branch, and on an even deeper level you are the stem of that tree and its root, then the continually changing nature of the leaves falling of and new leaves appearing doesn’t affect you so much, because you are identified with a much deeper level of beingness.

So in the view of U.D., if you deeply understand the interdependent nature, the cause and effect nature and the transitory nature, you have another view of yourself, your self-identification is a different one, and your fear of being destroyed decreases.



Buddhism has all kinds of different methods on how we can go in the direction of decreasing fear of life and death, especially useful for people who believe in a next life. A very famous method in the Buddhist tradition is the “powa”<sup>2</sup>, the transference of awareness at the time of death. In the common Powa they say that you transfer your awareness to Dewachen, which is the pure land of Buddha Amithaba. According to the Mahayana Buddhist tradition you can ask the eight Bodhisattvas for help to guide you there, and when you get there, you have all the practices and teachings you could wish for, and you will never return to a lower rebirth. They call this kind of powa for powa magom sangye<sup>3</sup> that means something like “transference by which means one becomes a Buddha – without meditation”.

Being in the bardo, one manifests as a bardo-being. That is we take on a particular energy-body with particular energy-senses, which has quite a different time-space limitation than our physical body. For example, the bardo-beings can go through walls or mountains, as we can when we are using the dream-body. Also the senses are not limited like the physical senses, which imply that the bardo mind becomes much more sensitive, for example, if one does not master the bardo body-mind, it perceives too many strong impressions.

There are many types of bardo and it is said that bardo beings from different Bardo-realms cannot communicate with each other. For example, the bardo beings of the desire realm, like humans or animals, cannot communicate with the bardo beings of the form-god-realm.

However, if Lamas have special meditative powers, they are able to connect with the bardo-beings. There are certain rituals where they can call the bardo-beings and teach them how to practice. In that context the famous Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Bardo Choedrol<sup>4</sup> is read out to the Bardo being.

Usually the bardo lasts for 49 days, but these are not human 49 days, for the bardo being it could be centuries, depending on what kind of bardo it is. There

is also the phenomenon of being lost in the bardo. In that case there are special bardo prayers one can do for such a being.

The main thing, if one wishes to support people during their death process, is to help them to be in a peaceful state of mind, a state that is not afflicted by strong emotions. Even if the dying person is very materialistic and has no idea of a continuation after death, we can support him/her in this way. Also, if we have trained ourselves, we can centre ourselves in the feeling of our heart-chakra area, partly for strengthening ourselves to be able to have an open attitude to the dying person, and partly for supporting the dying person from there, as the energy of the heart-chakra, in accordance with the Tibetan tradition, is similar to that of the final state of death.

If the person has an idea of a continuation, and also has connections with superior energy/being, one can help the person to contact this to ask for support, which will allow one to rest into the natural transformative process of dying.

Now you might ask how do we know all these things?

In terms of reincarnation, if we look at the universe, we can see that all of nature has a fundamental attraction drive for continuation and a rejection drive of that which threatens its survival. The energy basic to reincarnation is such an energy. It is basic to continuation. You can see that this continuation principle is a universal rule of existence.

We can also observe, the sciences have discovered it and the yogis, that no form stays fixed for the duration of a split second, but that a phenomena is based on a continuous change and exchange, appearing and disappearing of its smallest components. In this sense we, in Unity in Duality, speak of the pulsation of energy into matter and from matter to energy without which existence would no longer be.

Finally, concerning the knowledge of the process of dying and of the Bardo there exist spiritual death-practices, which have allowed Yogies and Yoginies to move with their whole being from matter to energy to unity, and back again, which has enabled them to gain the knowledge of these processes.

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<sup>2</sup> Tib. Pho-ba, (phon. powa)

<sup>3</sup> Tib. Pho-ba ma-sgom sang-rgyas

<sup>4</sup> Tib. Bar-do'i-thos-grol



My own experience of being a reincarnation Lama is as follows:

As a reincarnation Lama you do have some feeling of the past – for some it is just feelings, but others really remember concrete things of the past. But there is a special aspect to be considered here: as a reincarnated Lama you are brought up having people around you constantly talking about your past incarnation, so whether from the beginning you had a feeling of it or not, you could really get into the feeling of this former incarnation as being part of yourself. But all in all it is as if, as reincarnation Lama you have access to more realities, or we could maybe say access to a wider field of realities.

In accordance with my family, before the age of one I was showing special interest in rituals, monks, nuns and religious ceremonies. To make me at ease in the evenings my parents had to carry me a little towards Lhasa, the holy town, and the direction both of Drepung University Monastery and my Monastery. Also I was saying mantras, which my mother tried to hide, as she was afraid somebody would get the idea that I was a reincarnated Lama, which would mean she would lose me. But as the apple tree in the garden was blossoming at my birth at the end of December, and as the water changed to a white milky colour, it did not seem too difficult for the monks from my monastery to be guided to my family house.

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