



The big picture past and future lives;

THE CONTINUATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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Past and Future lives - the Continuation of Consciousness

The concept of the continuation of consciousness and thus of past and future lives is an essential part of Buddhist philosophy. Without a comprehension or, at least, a belief in this concept many Buddhist ideas do not really make sense. However, it is important to understand that such a belief is not unfounded but based on sound reasoning.

Consciousness, mind, and awareness are equivalent. Consciousness is a non-physical entity and therefore different from the brain. It is indestructible, at all times present and has neither a beginning nor an end. It is a subjective experiencer that always has content; that always has an object, for it always experiences something. The different types of consciousness experience being awake, being asleep, dreaming and even dying; they see, hear, smell, taste and experience tangible objects. Consciousness includes the rational, intellectual aspects on one side and the emotional, intuitive aspects on the other; it both thinks and feels. Even though consciousness is different from the brain, there is no contradiction to scientific findings of the importance and the influence of the brain on the mind. From a Buddhist perspective the coarser types of consciousness and the brain -- though different entities -- have a close relationship in that they can alter and influence each other. Therefore, stimulating or altering parts of the brain has an effect on the mind and transforming the mind changes the chemical reactions and the neurons of the brain.

Furthermore, some of the basic presuppositions behind all Buddhist practices have to do with the *continuation* of consciousness. According to Buddhist logic, past and future lives exist because of the constant stream of awareness. The continuation of life therefore pertains to the continuum of consciousness. Consciousness does not arise from just physical conditions; its substantial and main cause is a similar preceding consciousness. Without a prior moment of consciousness there is no way for consciousness to arise. This is similar to physical phenomena. Without a prior moment of a physical phenomenon another physical phenomenon cannot come into existence.

Therefore, the mind, or consciousness, has existed beginninglessly and this mental stream continues endlessly into the future. While it is true that mind is temporarily connected to a particular body, it is basically different from the body.

The tantric systems of Buddhism explain that the essence of life is a very subtle consciousness in combination with a very subtle form of physical energy or energy wind. These two are inseparable and always exist together. In fact, the very subtle energy wind is described as the mount of the very subtle consciousness, just as a horse is the mount of a rider. This will be explained below.

A particular life comes into existence from both physical causes and the subtle mental continuum. The different physical features of a particular life are due to karma, temporary conditions, the environment, and other physical factors in combination with the mind.

Karma, for instance, determines which realm one is reborn into, who one's parents are, and what genes one receives from one's parents.

The physical material cause for a birth comes from the parents. However, the mind does not arise as a result of the union of the father's sperm and mother's ovum; it is a continuation from a prior mind. If we track back from one moment of mind to the previous moment of mind, we see that the mind of a baby as it emerges from his mother's womb must have had a moment of existence before that. Then we look at consciousness in the mother's womb. The first moment of consciousness in the womb also had to come from a prior consciousness, -- a moment of the consciousness in the intermediate state (Tibetan: *bardo* --which will be explained below).

The first moment of the consciousness of the intermediate state was preceded by the last moment of consciousness just before death, of the previous life.

The *last* moment of the consciousness of the intermediate state results in a moment of consciousness that combines with the father's sperm and the mother's ovum -- the start of the next life.

If the consciousnesses of the parents were the substantial causes of the child's consciousness, i.e. if the child's mind were to exist as the combination of the minds of the parents, then the child's mind should be identical to his parent's mind. For instance, musically talented parents would necessarily have a musically talented child. Whatever natural intelligence, talent etc. the parents have, their child should too. Moreover, three children from the same parents should have the same mental abilities. Yet, we see all the time that this is not the case.

If merely physical conditions caused consciousness -- simply the combination of the sperm and ovum without some unique special non-physical cause -- then a child's mind should be more similar to that of his parents. Also identical twins should be the same regarding their natural talents, preferences, intelligence, and so forth. Yet, there are numerous identical twins who, even though they were raised in the same environment, have a very different character, likes, dislikes, and so forth.

As human beings we have a huge variety of different tendencies and inclinations. Some people have very positive tendencies, whereas other people are naturally inclined to non-virtue. Some of these differences can be accounted for by differences in upbringing and other experiences in this life, but by no means can all be explained in this way. Two children with the same parents can have totally different mental tendencies, which they can display at a very early age. One child, for example, may have a cruel and angry disposition and take delight in torturing animals and bullying other children, whereas the other child has a good heart and a gentle nature. This can be the case even if the children have been brought up in a very similar way, and even, sometimes, apply in the case of identical twins, who have exactly the same genetic make-up.

Of course some aspects of the mind are more closely related to the physical organs than others. It is definitely true that external physical factors have an effect on the mind, but the essence of the mind is completely different from physical matter.

The physical organs play an important role, particularly in sense perception, but they are not the primary causes of consciousness. The primary cause of mind is the preceding moment of mind, just as a seed is the primary cause for a sprout.

Reflecting on the reasoning that establishes the existence of the continuum of consciousness and of the existence of past and future life we are able to generate a strong belief in these concepts. Such belief in turn, motivates us to act in accordance with the law of karma, and to engage in listening, contemplating and meditating on the Dharma. Through training our mind in meditation, we eventually develop a

profound level of concentration, which enables us to verify the truth of rebirth through our own experience.

Furthermore, with regard to the concept of past and future lives, reflection on *past* lives is considered essential, for instance when contemplating the fact that all sentient beings have at one point in time been our mothers and have shown us great kindness. Such contemplation enables practitioners to eventually generate compassion and love for all sentient beings.

However, contemplation of *future* lives is regarded to be even more essential for one's spiritual progress. The reason being, it is unlikely that we will attain liberation and Buddhahood in the immediate future, and so in order not to go astray, but rather to move closer to liberation and Buddhahood, it is crucial to develop the state of mind that strives diligently to attain fortunate future lives, which enable us to continue our Dharma practice.

In order for such state of mind to develop it is essential to become mindful of our own death.

Thus before presenting the process of death, the intermediate state, and rebirth, next follows an explanation of how to develop an awareness of death.

Death

According to Lama Tsongkhapa's ***Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*** (Tib.: ***Lam Rim Chenmo***) contemplation of the following outlines enables us to cultivate an awareness of death:

1. The faults of not cultivating mindfulness of death
2. The benefits of such cultivation
3. The kind of mindfulness of death we should develop
4. How to cultivate mindfulness of death

THE FAULTS OF NOT CULTIVATING MINDFULNESS OF DEATH

Most of us push the inevitability of death from our mind. Everything we do in life - all of our plans, relationships, and endeavors - is based on the assumption that we will survive a long, long time. However, particularly

from a spiritual point of view it is extremely disadvantageous not to reflect upon one's own death.

According to Buddhism most of our actions are governed by misperceptions. One of those misperceptions is the awareness that perceives that which is impermanent to be permanent. Impermanence can be categorized into two: *subtle impermanence* and *coarse impermanence*. Subtle impermanence refers to the momentary change all conditioned phenomena undergo; it refers to their constant state of flux that is not immediately apparent to our senses. Coarse impermanence, on the other hand, is based on subtle impermanence and refers to the coarse changes in life that are directly obvious to us. Therefore, death is an example of coarse impermanence, for we can directly perceive it with our sense consciousnesses. Nonetheless, there is an innate notion that we will always be here and so we live our lives accordingly. This is detrimental to our Dharma practice, for all our efforts go toward attaining the goals we set for this life only. We are thus mainly concerned with achieving short-term happiness and evading short-term suffering. Many of our actions involve negative actions, which help us to feed into our attachment for gain, pleasure, praise, and fame. Even if we have faith and interest in the Buddha Dharma, there is the danger of procrastinating spiritual practice and of instead continuing to spend our life engaging in meaningless activities. And if we do engage in listening, contemplating, and meditating on the Dharma we do it for the sake of this life so that whatever virtue we create will be of meager strength.

However, it is important to understand that this does not mean that there is anything wrong with living a happy, healthy, and decent life. The point of meditating on death is rather to deter us from becoming absorbed in working *only* for this life.

The last disadvantage of not contemplating death is that we will be less likely to pass away peacefully, for we have not made the necessary preparations. Instead we may be filled with fear, regret, anger, attachment, and so forth, thereby activating a karmic seed that may lead us to a less fortunate rebirth.

THE BENEFITS OF CULTIVATING MINDFULNESS OF DEATH

Once we recognize the certainty of death and that death may come at any time, we will know that there is no time to delay. The only sensible thing to do is to begin preparing for death right now. When this thought spontaneously arises, whatever we do - working, studying, listening, or meditating - will be directed toward the benefit of future lives. Every moment will be imbued with that beneficial motivation. And with that attitude we will also be prepared to meet death.

We will be less attached to family, friends, wealth, and so forth, because we become aware that they cannot really benefit us when we are dying. Instead they may serve as an obstacle to our ability to let go.

Furthermore, we come to see all mundane goals as hollow and meaningless, and thereby our strong ambition to obtain all of our usual objects of attachment is transformed into the intent to use our life to seek the highest spiritual goals.

Also, we will gradually understand that others are in the same situation. Moved from our heart, we do not want the highest happiness merely for ourselves, but also strive to lead others onto the path, and eventually to full enlightenment.

THE KIND OF MINDFULNESS OF DEATH WE SHOULD DEVELOP

Most of us are afraid of dying, of separating from our body, our loved ones, possessions, and so forth. However, fear and worry about death does not prevent death from coming, for once we take birth in cyclic existence we certainly have to die.

Instead we should feel concerned about where we will be reborn after death. Each second takes us closer to the end of this life. It is as if we are about to be exiled from our own country and have no idea where we will go. The future is completely uncertain and might hold great misery for us. Thus, it makes sense to be concerned and worried about future lives so that we will create the causes for higher rebirths and avoid the causes of lower rebirth.

With this initial concern and worry we will gradually be able to engage in beneficial actions and stop harmful actions, imbuing ourselves with a type of self-confidence which enables us to experience a peaceful and happy death.

HOW TO CULTIVATE MINDFULNESS OF DEATH

This outline provides us with the reasons and insights that can make our meditation stronger and more effective. It is categorized into three primary outlines which each comprise three reasons, totaling nine reasons in all. The three primary outlines are:

1. Death is certain
2. The time of death is uncertain
3. At the time of death nothing helps except spiritual practice

Death is certain

There are three reasons why death is certain:

- 1) Death is certainly coming and nothing can prevent it
- 2) Our lifetime cannot be extended and constantly diminishes
- 3) While we are alive there is little time for spiritual practice

Death is certainly coming and nothing can prevent it

Once we take birth in cyclic existence, we have to die. There are no means by which we can prevent death; there is no force in the world that can turn it away. Powerful politicians, heads of state, famous actors, farmers, office clerks, and beggars are all equal in that one day they will die.

Our lifetime cannot be extended and constantly diminishes

The length of our life depends on the karma we previously accumulated, and it is impossible to extend our lifespan. Thus, from the moment we enter our mother's womb we move towards our own death. Every second represents a shortening of our time in this life. Every minute, every hour, every day the rest of our life is getting shorter and shorter. Our life is leaking away moment by moment and the remainder of our life just keeps getting shorter. Hence death is not - as we mistakenly feel- something far away. We will face it very soon.

Trying to forget death will bring disaster because when we are about to die it is too late to act. Even if we want to prepare for our future life there is not much we can do, for we are likely to be paralyzed by fear and misery.

While we are alive there is little time for spiritual practice

If we have accumulated the karma to live a long life and have a lifespan of possibly eighty, ninety years, it may seem that we have a lot of time to engage in Dharma practice. But this is deceptive. Even if we live to be one hundred years old, most of our life passes away senselessly. The time we have left can be divided into day and night. Most of the night will be spent sleeping, so we will not be practicing the Dharma then. During the daytime all kinds of distracting activities will take up our time: eating, working, walking around, chatting, and playing as we try to avoid problems, make money, meet with friends, and so forth. All of these activities are only for the enjoyment of our present life, so our days will pass meaninglessly.

Of course, as long as we are alive we require certain necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter. They are fundamental to making life possible, and there is nothing wrong with satisfying these needs as long as we recognize that these objects bring only temporary benefit. Yet we should not seek them for mere sensual enjoyment but use them to protect this precious body so we can continue to develop our mind and seek a higher goal.

The time of death is uncertain

Even though we are certain to die, we cannot be certain as to when death will come. Everyone present in this course will die between today and one hundred years from now. But we do not know when. Death can come any moment.

Therefore, we should constantly be mindful of the reality of death; use various reasons to strengthen the idea and to counteract the usual tendency to feel that we are immortal. It is illogical to think that we will not die today. We simply do not know which will come first, tomorrow or death.

There are three logical reasons supporting the understanding that the time of death is uncertain:

- 1) The lifespan in this world is uncertain
- 2) The causes of death are many and causes of life are few
- 3) The time of death is uncertain because the body is very fragile

The lifespan in this world is uncertain

Whether one is a human being, an animal, a celestial being, etc. the lifespan in this world is uncertain.

Even though we may have accumulated the karma to live a long life there is no guarantee that we live until the karma is exhausted.

In general, there are two types of karma:

1. projecting karma
2. completing karma

Projecting karma is responsible for the kind of rebirth we take and also determines the lifespan of that rebirth. Completing karma, on the other hand, determines what happens in our life, whether we are rich or poor, what kind of family we are born in, and so forth. (A more detailed explanation of the two types of karma will be given below.)

Hence even though the length of our life is basically dependent on our projecting karma, we may die before that lifespan is exhausted due to the ripening of a completing karma. This means that we cannot be sure that we will live to a particular age. Whether we are old, young, or middle-aged, there is no certain time of death. Therefore, we cannot be sure that we will not be dead by tonight.

The causes of death are many and causes of life are few

The conditions necessary to continue living are far fewer and much weaker than the many internal and external causes for the destruction of life. There are both animate and inanimate sources of harm that can end our lives. Living beings, such as other humans, can cause us injury. There may be people who know us and want to harm us. Some people we do not know might harm us because of who we are, what country we belong to, and so forth. Sometimes even people who are trying to help us can do things that become the cause of our death. For instance, we may have a bad reaction to a medical treatment or surgery. Also among the animate sources of harm are all sorts of dangerous non-humans - we can even die from a mosquito bite, a bee sting, or a tiny virus.

Many of the inanimate objects and substances we rely on to keep us alive can become the cause of our death. We can die from the food we eat and the beverages we drink. The house in which we seek shelter could collapse or burn down. We could have a car accident and be killed. Hence we are surrounded by numerous causes and conditions that could end our life while ordinarily there is nothing that could extend the

lifespan determined by the projecting karma that propelled us into our present life. Our life is like a delicate bubble dancing on the water. It may appear stable but the slightest thing can burst it.

The time of death is uncertain because the body is very fragile

The human body is extremely fragile and delicate. It is very easy to destroy. Something as insignificant as being pricked by a little thorn can be enough to cause our death. From one moment to the next we may fall ill and die.

And even the earth, the sun, mountains and oceans, which seem very stable and permanent, are disintegrating moment by moment. They will not always be there but one day will go out of existence.

At the time of death nothing helps except spiritual practice

Having understood that death is certain and that we could die any time, we need to become aware that at the time of death, all the wonderful things of this life - our family, friends, wealth, and reputation - will be of no use. They cannot prevent us from dying, and we have to leave them behind.

Let us look in more detail at each of these things that cannot help:

1. Friends will not help
2. Resources will not help
3. Our body will not help

Friends will not help

When the time of our death has come our relatives and friends may circle around us, but the experience of dying is felt by us alone. None of them can share it with us. None of them can accompany us, and just as we were born alone we will die alone.

Also, even if every human being of this world were our friend, not one of them could prevent our death. No matter how rich and powerful our family may be there is nothing they can do to extend our life. And if we have strong attachment to them, instead of bringing us help and comfort, they may make us feel more miserable since we experience the pain of separating from them.

Resources will not help

We may have spent our entire life making all kinds of sacrifices and fighting to accumulate money. But no matter how much wealth we possess, at the time of death we cannot carry a single Shekel with us.

When their lives come to an end, there is no difference between a billionaire and a beggar in that neither can take anything with him.

Our body will not help

At the time of death we also have to leave behind the body we had for our whole life. We worried about it, nourished it, exercised it, and gave it healthy food. We dressed it well, beautified it, and tried to make it strong. But despite all that effort it will be of no use at the end, for we have to leave it behind and take on a new body.

Thus, the conclusion we should reach by meditating on these outlines is that at the time of death nothing except the Dharma will be of benefit.

According to Buddhism, whatever we have right now is the product of previous karma: our food, clothes, body, friends, relatives, and experiences are the results of our previous beneficial volitional actions of body, speech, and mind. We were born as a relatively healthy human in comfortable and enjoyable circumstances, so clearly we accumulated a lot of positive karma in our previous lives. At the time of death all these things must be left behind. The one thing that we take to the next life is our mental consciousness which holds the karmic seeds that were left there as a result of our past actions. These seeds determine what will happen to us in the next life. If we have created a lot of positive karma, another good life- perhaps even a much better life- will follow. If, on the other hand, we have not engaged in any beneficial actions and instead committed many harmful ones, we are bound to experience great misery in the future.

Therefore, our future lies in our own hands.

Meditating on death results in a strong feeling that: "Today I may really die". This brings a powerful sense of urgency to our practice every day. Since we will sincerely feel that it is imperative to make preparations for our future lives we will want to live a virtuous life, free from harm to others, and in that way accomplish many goals for our future lives.

Next follows an explanation of the process of death:

THE PROCESS OF DEATH

In order to comprehend the death process it is important to gain an understanding of the Buddhist presentation of the physical constituents of human beings of this world. This presentation is found in the Buddhist scriptures on Highest Yoga Tantra.

Human bodies (of this world) are comprised of six constituents.

The six constituents

The six constituents are:

- 1) Earth
- 2) Water
- 3) Fire
- 4) Wind
- 5) Channels
- 6) Drops

Earth

The earth constituent refers to the hard constituents of the body, such as bone, skin, nails, and hair.

Water

The water constituent is comprised of the fluids in the body, such as urine, bile, and blood.

Fire

The fire constituent is the warmth that maintains the body.

Wind

That of wind refers to currents of energy winds that perform physical functions such as swallowing and serve as the 'mounts' of consciousness. Regarding the energy winds, according to the Tantric scriptures all awarenesses are mounted on energy winds, which in turn flow through the energy channels in our body.

Channels

The channels are the veins, arteries, ducts, nerve pathways, energy channels, and so forth.

Regarding the energy channels, as humans our bodies have about 72,000 different energy channels that, similar to our blood vessels, are spread throughout our entire body. Moreover, there are three main channels, the right, left, and central channel. The central channel begins at the point between the eye brows and ascends in an arch towards the top of the head. From there it descends in a straight line down to the end of the spine and then under the trunk of the body to the opening or tip of the sexual organ. Immediately to either side of the central channel are the right and left channels. At various places the right and left channels wrap around the central channel, forming knots that constrict the flow of the energy winds. This means that during ordinary existence the energy winds do not move upward or downward inside the central channel (except at death).

There are explained to be seven places of constriction or knots which are called *chakras* (channel-wheels). They are located at the forehead, the crown of the head, the throat, the heart (or rather at the center of the chest), the navel, at the base of the spine, and the opening or tip of the sexual organ.

Drops

The drops are essential fluids that course through the energy channels and that are described to be of two types: white and red drops.

The eight constituents possess different coarseness and subtlety which is illustrated by the presentation of the three levels of consciousness and the three levels of the physical body.

The three levels of consciousness

The three levels of consciousness are:

- 1) Coarse consciousness
- 2) Subtle consciousness
- 3) Very subtle consciousness

The five sense consciousnesses are the coarsest consciousnesses. They are always present while we are awake, and directly perceive the five

sense objects, such as shapes, colors, sounds, and so forth. Also, they dissolve and thus cannot arise when we are *not* awake or conscious, i.e. for instance, when we are sleeping, when we faint, and so forth. Our coarse consciousnesses rely heavily on our physical body, particularly on the sense powers and the brain. Any alteration or even damage to the sense powers or the brain (e.g. when suffering from a stroke or brain injuries) has an inevitable effect on the coarse mind.

Subtle consciousnesses refer to the *mental* consciousnesses that are present while we are awake and the *mental* consciousnesses that become active while we are asleep, when we faint, during the initial stages of death, and for advanced practitioners on the completion stage of Highest Yoga Tantra. The mental consciousnesses that arise when we are awake are coarser than those that arise when we are asleep, etc., but nonetheless they are subtler than the sense consciousnesses. Furthermore, the mental consciousnesses that arise when we are awake depend more on the brain than those that arise when we are asleep, etc.

The third category of the very subtle consciousness refers to the *clear light mind*. This is the awareness which in the case of ordinary living beings becomes active only at the time of death and which can exist without depending on the physical body. Advanced practitioners on the completion stage of Highest Yoga Tantra can manifest the subtle clear mind also through meditation.

The three levels of the physical body

The three levels of the physical body are:

- 1) The coarse body
- 2) The subtle body
- 3) The very subtle body

The coarse body refers to the ordinary physical body that we can perceive with our sense consciousnesses and that is a composite of the four constituents (earth, water, fire, and wind). The subtle body is comprised of the energy channels, energy winds, and drops. The very subtle body is the very subtle energy wind that serves as the mount of the clear light mind.

While a human being is alive the very subtle clear light mind and its very subtle energy wind abide in a closed case the size of a large mustard seed or small pea that is located at the heart chakra. That closed case has a white top and red bottom. The white top constitutes a white drop, and the red bottom a red drop. Therefore, the clear light mind and its energy wind are basically enclosed in a case that is comprised of a white and red drop. This white and red case is called the 'indestructible drop', since it lasts until death.

The white drop of the indestructible drop comes from the sperm of the father and the red drop from the blood (of the ovum) of the mother. After conception, i.e. after the sperm and the ovum have joined, the indestructible drop forms in the fertilized ovum in the womb of the mother (with the top coming from the sperm and the bottom from the blood of the ovum). It now acts as a suitable base into which the very subtle clear light mind and the very subtle energy wind of a future human being can enter. Once such a clear light mind and its energy wind have entered the indestructible drop the body of the human being starts to develop. Eventually from the white drop of the indestructible drop one part moves up into the chakra at the crown of the head and remains there. It directly and indirectly increases the white drops in other parts of the body. Likewise, from the red drop of the indestructible drop, one part moves down into the chakra at the navel and abides there. It directly and indirectly increases the red drops in other parts of the body.

Returning to the process of death, death occurs in eight stages that involve the dissolution of twenty-five factors. Dissolution here refers to former factors dissolving into latter factors. This means that the former factors which act as the basis of consciousness are withdrawn (hence weaken), and the capacity of the latter ones to act as such a basis become more manifest. Yet it does not mean that the former factors *become* the latter ones.

The explanation on the eight stages of dissolution is preceded by a presentation of the twenty-five factors.

The twenty-five factors

The twenty-five factors all exist in the physical body of a human being (of this world). They are:

1. The five aggregates
2. The four constituents
3. The six sense powers
4. The five objects
5. The five basic wisdoms

The five aggregates

Every human being is comprised of five aggregates. The five aggregates are:

1. *Form*: the physical body of sentient beings. It includes bones, blood, flesh and so forth.
2. *Feeling*: a mental factor which experiences pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feelings.
3. *Discrimination*: a mental factor whose main function is to discriminate and comprehend an object without mistaking it with others.
4. *Compositional factors*: this aggregate includes all other mental factors such as attention, intention, anger, compassion etc. Furthermore, seeds and imprints of awarenesses are compositional factors.
5. *Consciousness* (main minds): this aggregate includes the five sense consciousnesses and the mental consciousness which are not mental factors but main minds. Main minds' principal function is to perceive their objects.

The four constituents

The four constituents (as explained in the section on the eight constituents) are:

1. Earth
2. Water
3. Fire
4. Wind

The six sense powers

The first five of the six sense powers are: (1) the eye sense power, (2) the ear sense power, (3) the nose sense power, (4) the tongue sense power, and (5) the body sense power. Those five are described as subtle inner physical form, in dependence on which the sense consciousnesses are able to apprehend their objects. In the case of an eye consciousness perceiving a car, for instance, a subtle inner physical form associated mainly with the eye organ, called the 'eye sense power' is responsible for the eye consciousness' ability to perceive the car. Hence if a person's physical eye organ, the optical nerve, or the part of the brain that facilitates visual perception (e.g. the visual cortex) are not functioning properly his eye consciousness cannot manifest.

Similarly, an ear consciousness depends on the ear sense power, the nose consciousness on the nose sense power, and so forth.

The sixth sense power refers to mental consciousness itself.

The five objects

The five objects are the five objects of the five sense consciousnesses that exist in the human body:

1. Visual forms - i.e. shapes and colors
2. Sounds
3. Smells
4. Tastes
5. Tangible objects

The five basic wisdoms

The five basic wisdoms are:

1. *Basic mirror-like wisdom*: it is an ordinary consciousness to which many objects appear simultaneously and clearly, just as reflections appear in a mirror.
2. *Basic wisdom of equality*: it is an ordinary consciousness that is mindful of pleasure, pain, and neutral feelings as of being feelings. It is also described as a consciousness that is mindful of many synonyms as having one meaning.
3. *Basic wisdom of analysis*: it is an ordinary consciousness that is mindful of the individual names, purposes, etc. of people that are emotionally close to oneself.

4. *Basic wisdom of achieving activities*: it is an ordinary consciousness that is mindful of external worldly activities, purposes, and so forth.
5. *Basic wisdom realizing the nature of phenomena*: it is an ordinary consciousness that is the seed to becoming a wisdom truth body (i.e. the mental consciousness) of a Buddha.

The eight dissolutions

For ordinary Buddhist practitioners, becoming familiar with the process of the various dissolutions, together with their external and internal signs, can be extremely beneficial. It may reduce confusion and fear that will likely arise during the different stages of the death process, and thereby may be highly beneficial for the attainment of a high rebirth.

The reason for such confusion and fear is that at death, the energy winds which serve as the mounts of the different types of consciousness dissolve into the energy winds in the right and left channels. These in turn dissolve into the very subtle energy wind in the indestructible drop in the central channel, whereupon the constrictions or knots are loosened. They are loosened in the sense that the outer channels become deflated, thereby loosening the central channel and allowing movement of the energy wind inside it. This induces the arising of subtle minds, which ordinary beings may fear since they feel they are being annihilated.

For advanced tantric practitioners, becoming familiar with the eight dissolutions is essential because they practice to transform the clear light mind into the Dharmakaya (Truth Body) of a Buddha by engaging in the meditations of the generation and completion stages of Highest Yoga Tantra.

Regarding the dissolutions themselves, twenty-two of the twenty-five factors dissolve over the first four stages (with five during the first dissolution, five during the second, five during the third, and seven during the fourth dissolution). The remainder - the aggregate of consciousness, the mental sense power, and the basic wisdom realizing the nature of phenomena - dissolve over the last four stages.

The first dissolution

The five factors of the first dissolution dissolve simultaneously. The dissolution of each factor is associated with an individual external factor, while the dissolution of *all* five factors is associated with one internal sign.

The five factors and their external signs are:

- (1) *The aggregate of form*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the form aggregate, one's limbs become smaller than before, and one's body becomes weak and powerless.
- (2) *The basic mirror-like wisdom*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the basic mirror-like wisdom, one's sight becomes unclear and dark.
- (3) *The earth constituent in one's continuum*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the earth constituent in one's continuum, the body becomes very thin, the limbs loose, and one has the sense that the body is sinking under the earth.
- (4) *The eye sense power*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the eye sense power, one cannot open or close the eyes.
- (5) *The visible forms in one's continuum*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the visible forms in one's continuum, the luster of one's body diminishes and one's strength is consumed.

The internal sign of the dissolution of these five is the arising of a bluish appearance called 'like a mirage'. It is like an appearance of water when the light of the sun strikes a desert in the summer.

The second dissolution

The five factors of the second dissolution dissolve simultaneously. The dissolution of each factor is associated with an individual external factor, while the dissolution of *all* five factors is associated with one internal sign.

The five factors and their external signs are:

- (1) *The aggregate of feeling*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the aggregate of feeling, the body consciousness can no longer experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings which accompany the sense consciousnesses.
- (2) *The basic wisdom of equality*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the basic wisdom of equality, one is no longer

mindful of the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings of the mental consciousness.

- (3) *The water constituent in one's continuum*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the water constituent in one's continuum, one's saliva, sweat, urine, blood, and regenerative fluid dry greatly. Therefore, the mouth, nose, tongue, and throat become dry.
- (4) *The ear sense power*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the ear sense power, one can no longer hear external and internal sounds.
- (5) *The sounds in one's continuum*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the sounds in one's continuum, the "ur" sound inside the ears no longer arises.

The internal sign of the dissolution of these five is the dawning of an appearance called 'like smoke', which is like blue puffs of smoke. It is similar to smoke billowing from a chimney in the midst of a mass of smoke.

The third dissolution

The five factors of the third dissolution dissolve simultaneously. The dissolution of each factor is associated with an individual external factor, while the dissolution of *all* five factors is associated with one internal sign.

The five factors and their external signs are:

- (1) *The aggregate of discrimination*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the aggregate of discrimination, one is no longer mindful of the affairs of close person's such as one's parents.
- (2) *The basic wisdom of analysis*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the basic wisdom of analysis, one can no longer remember the names of even one's parents.
- (3) *The fire constituent in one's continuum*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the fire constituent in one's continuum, the warmth of the body diminishes, whereupon the capacity to digest food and drink is lost.
- (4) *The nose sense power*: as an external sign of the dissolution of the nose sense power, the inhalation of wind (air) through the nose is weak whereas the exhalation is strong and lengthy, and the breaths are as if piled one on top of the other.

- (5) *The smells in one's continuum*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the smells in one's continuum, one cannot smell any fragrant or non-fragrant odors.

The internal sign of the dissolution of these five is the arising of an appearance called 'like fireflies'. It is like burning red sparks on the soot on the bottom of a pan used for parching grain.

The fourth dissolution

The seven factors of the fourth dissolution dissolve simultaneously. The dissolution of each factor is associated with an individual external factor, while the dissolution of *all* seven factors is associated with one internal sign.

The seven factors and their external signs are:

- (1) *The aggregate of the compositional factor*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the aggregate of the compositional factor, one cannot perform physical actions such as moving about.
- (2) *The basic wisdom of achieving activities*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the basic wisdom of achieving activities, one is no longer mindful of external worldly activities, purposes, and so forth.
- (3) *The wind constituent*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the wind constituent, the different energy winds in the body move from their own abodes of the body to the heart, and the breath ceases to move in and out.
- (4) *The tongue sense power*: as the external sign of the dissolution of the tongue sense power, the tongue becomes thick and short, and its roots turn blue.
- (5) *The tastes in one's continuum*: as an external sign of the dissolution of the tastes in one's continuum, one can no longer experience the six tastes (sweet, sour, bitter, astringent, pungent, and salty).

- (6) *The body sense power*: as an external sign of the dissolution of the body sense power, one can no longer experience any smoothness or roughness.
- (7) *The tangible objects in one's body*: the external sign of the dissolution of the tangible objects in one's body is the same as the

external sign of the dissolution of the body sense power (i.e. one can no longer experience any smoothness or roughness).

The internal sign of the dissolution of these seven is the arising of an appearance called 'like a burning butter-lamp'. It is like the sputtering point of a butter-lamp's flame when it is about to go out.

The fifth dissolution

After the twenty-two factors have dissolved, the last three factors (the aggregate of consciousness, the mental sense power, and the basic wisdom realizing the nature of all phenomena) gradually dissolve during the last five stages. The last four stages are associated with five types of awareness.

The five are:

- 1) Coarse conceptual consciousness (i.e. the 'eighty indicative conceptual consciousnesses' - for a list of these eighty see Lati Rinpoche's ***Death, Intermediate State, and Rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism***)
- 2) The mind of white appearance
- 3) The mind of red increase
- 4) The mind of black near-attainment
- 5) The clear light mind

During the last four stages of dissolution, the first four of the five awarenesses gradually dissolve into their latter awarenesses, i.e. coarse conceptual consciousnesses dissolve into the mind of white appearance, the mind of white appearance dissolves into the mind of red increase, and so forth. The result of these dissolutions is the arising of the fifth awareness, the clear light mind (during the eighth stage of dissolution). Hence, during the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth dissolutions consciousness dissolves, in the sense that coarser types of consciousness cease and subtler ones become manifest. In other words, when the coarser former mind dissolves in the subtler latter mind, the

capacity of the former ceases and the latter becomes more manifest, until the subtlest mind, the clear light mind arises. But please note that this does not mean that the coarser former mind *becomes* the subtler latter mind.

Regarding the fifth dissolution, during this stage coarse conceptuality ceases -- dissolving, so to speak, into the mind of white appearance. This means that the eighty types of coarse conceptual consciousness as well as the energy winds that serve as their mount dissolve into the mind of white appearance. To this subtler consciousness only a vacuity filled by white light appears. This appearance is likened to an Indian night sky pervaded by moonlight in the autumn when the sky is free from dust after the Indian summer monsoon. The cause for this appearance is that the energy winds in the right and left channel, which abide above the heart, enter the central channel at the top of the head. Through the force of this, the knot of the channel at the crown of the head is loosened, and the white drop that abides there and is obtained from the sperm of the father (as explained above), comes downward through the central channel. When it arrives on top of the knot of the heart chakra, the white appearance arises. Thus, this is not a case of an appearance of white light coming from the outside.

The appearance of white light is called 'white appearance' because it is an appearance of white light. It is also called 'the empty' because of being devoid of the eighty conceptual consciousnesses as well as of the energy winds that serve as their mount.

The sixth dissolution

After that, the mind of white appearance, together with the energy wind that serves as its mount, dissolves into a mind of red increase. To the mind of red increase red or orange light - empty and vacuous but much clearer than before - appears like an Indian autumn sky, free of defilement and pervaded by sunlight. The cause for this appearance is that the energy winds in the right and left channels, which abide below the heart, enter into the central channel at the base of the spine. Through the force of this, the knot of the 'chakra in the jewel' (i.e. the chakra at the sexual organ) and the knot of the chakra at the navel gradually loosen. Thereby, the red drop that is obtained from the mother moves upward through the central channel. When it arrives below the knot of the heart chakra, the red or orange appearance arises.

The appearance of red or orange light is called 'red increase' because of being very vivid like sunlight. It is also called 'the very empty' because of being devoid of the mind of white appearance as well as of the energy wind that serves as its mount.

The seventh dissolution

After the sixth dissolution, the mind of red increase, together with the energy wind that serves as its mount, dissolves into the mind of black near-attainment. During the first part of the seventh dissolution a vacuous, thick blackness, like an Indian autumn sky free of defilement and pervaded by the thick darkness of the beginning of night, appears to the mind of black near-attainment.

The appearance of thick blackness is called 'black near-attainment' because of its appearance of blackness and of being close to the appearance of clear light, and it is called 'the greatly empty' because of being devoid of the mind of red increase as well as of the energy wind that serves as its mount.

The cause for this appearance is that the upper and lower energy winds (which have previously entered the central channel) gather at the heart through the force of which the constriction or knot of the right and left channels at the heart chakra is loosened. Thereupon, the white drop that is above the knot of the heart chakra descends, and the red drop that is below the knot of the heart chakra ascends. Both drops then enter respectively the white and red drops that form the indestructible drop in the center of the heart chakra. Due to their meeting, the black appearance of near-attainment arises. Therefore, the first part of the mind of black near-attainment is accompanied by a sense of an object. But during the latter part, one is not mindful of any object, as if swooning unconsciously confounded in darkness.

The eighth dissolution

When the mind of black near-attainment, together with the energy wind that serves as its mount, dissolves into the clear light mind, the clear light mind arises and the latter part of the mind of near-attainment that is without mindfulness is cleared away. At that time, to the clear light mind a clear vacuity, which is like the natural color of a dawn sky in autumn, free of the three causes of pollution -- moonlight, sunlight, and

darkness -- appears. The cause of that appearance is that the white and red drops (that have previously *entered* the white and red drops that form the indestructible drop in the center of the heart chakra) now *dissolve* respectively into those white and red drops. Also, all the energy

winds inside the central channel dissolve into the very subtle energy wind inside the indestructible drop. Through this, the very subtle energy wind and mind are activated, whereby such an appearance of clear light dawns.

The appearance is called 'the clear light of death' and 'the all-empty' because of being devoid of the eighty conceptions, and of the minds of white appearance, red increase, and black near-attainment as well as of the energy winds that serve as their mounts.

Please note that the four appearances (white appearance, red increase, etc.), called the 'four empties' (empty, very empty, greatly empty, and all-empty) dawn for all dying sentient beings. Yet here 'empty' does not refer to 'empty of inherent existence', for ordinary sentient beings do not have the appearance of emptiness, leave alone realize it when they are dying. In fact, to all their awarenesses, including to their clear light mind, *inherent existence* appears.

Only very advanced practitioners of Highest Yoga Tantra are able to activate the clear light mind -- even while they are alive --to directly realize emptiness with it.

Also, even though the mind of white appearance, the mind of red increase, and the mind of black near-attainment are not discursive and more subtle than the eighty conceptions, they are nonetheless conceptual. The mind of clear light, on the other hand, is a non-conceptual awareness. For an ordinary person it is *an awareness to which an object appears but is not ascertained*.

Furthermore, the arising of the clear light mind marks the moment of death.

Since the outer breath (which is detectable moving through the nose) ceased during the fourth dissolution, from the tantric perspective the point of actual death is not tied to inhalation and exhalation but to the arising of the clear light mind.

Most ordinary humans remain in the clear light for three days, whereupon the signs of the white and red constituents occur. A little phlegm and blood emerge from the nose and/or the sexual organ - these

being the unrefined portion of the drops that have dissolved at the heart. Only at that point is it safe to remove the body for cremation or burial since prior to that time, the consciousness is still in the body and any violent handling of it can only disturb the end processes of death.

However, in cases where the physical constituents have been severely consumed by disease, the signs of the white and red constituents do not occur. Also, such a person might not remain in the clear light for even a day.

Advanced tantric practitioners can remain in the clear light mind for a greater or lesser number of extra days.

In general, the stages of the eight dissolutions arise gradually over some time when a person passes away slowly due to, for instance old age or prolonged illness, whereas they arise very rapidly one after the other when someone dies suddenly, for instance in a car accident.

Having presented the stages of the process of death it is important to understand that at the latest during the death process of this life the causes for being reborn in cyclic existence in the next life are activated. This requires an explanation of how karma that propels us to our future life starts to ripen at the latest while we are dying.

In general, there are two types of karma:

1. Projecting karma
2. Completing karma

Projecting karma

Projecting karma is responsible for the kind of rebirth we take. It projects us in our future life by serving as the main cause that determines birth as a human being, an animal, a celestial being etc. But it also determines birth into the intermediate state which precedes birth into either the desire realm or the form realm. (Please note that birth into the formless realm is not preceded by an intermediate state -- this will be explained below).

While we are alive (in this and previous lives) we have and are constantly accumulating different types of projecting karma (as well as completing karma) which leave karmic residues on our mental consciousness. These karmic residues are called 'karmic seeds', for similar to flower seeds that hold the potential to ripen into flowers, karmic seeds hold the potential to ripen into the results of previously accumulated karmic actions. One (or sometimes more) of those projecting karmic seeds ripens, at the latest, towards the end of this life,

and propels us in another birth in cyclic existence. This process is extensively explained during the presentation of the twelve links.

There are only two types of projecting karma: (1) virtuous and (2) non-virtuous.

Virtuous projecting karma causes rebirth in one of the higher realms (human, semi-celestial, or celestial realm) whereas *non-virtuous* projecting karma causes rebirth in one of the lower realms (hell, preta, or animal realm).

Furthermore, in some cases a single projecting karma propels one only into one rebirth. In other cases, a single powerful projecting karma can propel one into a succession of numerous rebirths. Similarly, a collection of smaller karmas can lead to one rebirth.

The latter is possible when one performs several similar actions repeatedly, with each action being unable to act as projecting karma but with the culmination of those actions propelling one into a single rebirth in any of the realms of cyclic existence.

Projecting karma also determines the length of our life. Dependent on the karma it may be responsible for a lifespan of eighty, fifty, or merely ten years. Also, once the lifespan which that karma projected is exhausted, there is nothing we can do to extend it.

Completing karma

While projecting karma determines birth in one of the six realms, completing karma determines the quality of that life, i.e. whether one's life is pleasant or unpleasant, beautiful or ugly, rich or poor, who one's parents are, what country one is born in, and so forth. It is basically responsible for the numerous different pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences one has.

The analogy of the two types of karma is that of creating a painting. Drawing the outlines of the painting is analogous to projecting karma, and filling in the details of color and highlight is analogous to completing karma.

However, *virtuous* completing karma does not necessarily ripen in one of the higher rebirths and *non-virtuous* completing karma does not necessarily ripen in one of the lower realms.

Also, it is important to understand that each and every experience we have is the result of a particular completing karma. Therefore, from the point of view of just this lifetime, there are *countless* different types of

completing karma that ripen throughout our life and thereby determine the different situations we undergo and experiences we have. Yet there is only one or -- at the most -- a few projecting karmas, that determine in which of the six realms of existence we were born into in this lifetime. And that projecting karma did not start to ripen in this life but, at the latest, during the end of our last life.

As mentioned above, the process of the ripening of a projecting karma is usually explained in the context of explaining the twelve links of dependent arising. However, here a presentation of only nine of the twelve links is necessary to illustrate that process. Those nine are: the first link of ignorance, the second link of compositional action, the third link of consciousness, the sixth link of contact, the seventh link of feeling, the eighth link of attachment, the ninth link of grasping, the tenth link of existence, and the eleventh link of birth:

The first link of ignorance

The first of the twelve links is the link of ignorance. Ignorance refers to the root affliction which misperceives reality on its deepest level, for it perceives phenomena to exist inherently and from their own side. That ignorance then induces other misperceptions such as the ignorance that perceives a self-sufficient, substantially existent self, the ignorance that perceives that which is impermanent to be permanent, and so forth. It also induces afflictions such as anger, attachment, jealousy, arrogance etc.

Motivated by these different types of afflictions, i.e. by ignorance, anger, and so on, we engage in various volitional actions (karmas) of body, speech, and mind. These actions are either projecting or completing karmas.

The second link of compositional actions

The second link of compositional karma refers only to *projecting* karma, for it refers to the volitional actions that are responsible for rebirth in cyclic existence. As explained above, projecting karma is either virtuous or non-virtuous, and thus either determines birth in the higher or the lower realms. Also, a projecting karma is necessarily one of the three, a volitional action of the body, the speech, or the mind. In general, after a volitional action of the body or the speech, that is the result of ignorance, is completed it leaves behind a karmic seed, a subtle form,

which is stored with the mental consciousness (or since it is a subtle form it is probably stored with the energy wind that serves as the mount of the mental consciousness). With regard to volitional *mental* actions, after an action of the mind is completed it leaves a karmic seed, which is a karmic imprint on the mental consciousness.

In the case of *projecting* karma, these karmic seeds have the potential to give birth in either the higher or lower realms. Unless a virtuous projecting karmic seed is destroyed by anger, or a non-virtuous projecting karmic seed is purified by means of the four powers or by an action motivated by, for instance love and compassion, the seeds of these actions remain with the mental consciousness until their ripening. A projecting karmic seed, which propels a sentient being to be reborn in one of the six realms in the *next* life, starts to ripen at the latest toward the end of that being's *present* life, but it does not ripen in the life *previous* to that present life.

Furthermore, there is no certainty as to *which* life a projecting karmic seed that was created in this life starts to ripen in. It may start to ripen in *this* life, in the *next*, or in *any* future life.

The third link of consciousness

This link refers to the mental consciousness which stores the karmic seeds of the projecting karma of body, speech, and mind. Since there is no time in which a mental consciousness in the continuum of a person is not present, the seeds cannot disappear. While the person is awake they are stored on the coarser mental consciousness, and while he is asleep, fainting, etc. they are stored on whichever subtler mental consciousness arises and is active.

The ripening of a projecting karmic seed is best explained by way of an example. The example here is of an ordinary human being, who in his previous life was a celestial being of the desire realm. As a celestial being he created (besides other projecting karmas) a non-virtuous projecting mental karma that holds the potential to project rebirth as an animal. The moment that non-virtuous projecting action was completed, it left a karmic imprint on his mental consciousness. However, towards the end of the life of that celestial being another previously created projecting karmic seed that holds the potential to propel rebirth as a human being ripened, whereupon the celestial being first became an intermediate state being, and thereafter took birth as a human. This means that at that time his very subtle energy wind and very subtle

clear light mind, together with all his karmic seeds (including the non-virtuous projecting karmic imprint that holds the potential to propel rebirth as an animal), left the body of the celestial being, established the body of an intermediate being, and thereafter entered the body, i.e. the fertilized ovum of a human.

Now, eighty years later, the human being lies on his deathbed, proceeding through the stages of death. At this time the non-virtuous projecting karmic imprint that holds the potential to propel rebirth as an animal (and that was created when the previous continuum of the dying human was a celestial being) starts to ripen. As a result of such ripening his very subtle energy wind and very subtle clear light mind, after they have left his human body, establish the body of an intermediate state being, and thereafter enter the body (i.e. the fertilized ovum) of an animal.

Having, in dependence on the above explanation, gained a rough understanding of how a karmic seed is left on the mental consciousness (i.e. the third link) until it ripens into its result as, for example, an animal, the question that arises is: How did the projecting karmic imprint ripen?

This is answered when explaining the following six links: the links of contact, feeling, attachment, grasping, existence, and birth.

The sixth link of contact

In general, contact refers to a mental factor that distinguishes its object as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral upon the coming together of, for instance an object, a sense power, and a sense consciousness.

However, in the context of explaining the ripening of a projecting karmic seed on the basis of the example of the above mentioned dying human being, contact refers to a mental factor that distinguishes the stages of death the dying person goes through as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Furthermore, as an ordinary human (and thus due to his ignorance that grasps at an inherently existent self) he definitely experiences at some point -- while his physical constituents and coarser consciousnesses are dissolving -- the fear of annihilation. Therefore, his mental factor of contact is bound to identify these dissolutions as unpleasant. Also, contact induces the next link of feeling.

The seventh link of feeling

This link generally refers to the mental factor of feeling which experiences a pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling upon the object having been distinguished as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral by contact.

In the context of the example of the dying human being, it refers to his mental factor of feeling that experiences unpleasant feelings as a result of the preceding mental factor of contact that identified the dissolution of the physical constituents and coarser consciousness as unpleasant. The feeling of displeasure then induces the eighth link of attachment and thereafter the ninth link of grasping.

The eighth link of attachment and the ninth link of grasping

These two links, attachment and grasping, are both types of afflictive desire. The difference between them is that attachment is a phase of desire that is weaker in force, whereas grasping is stronger.

In general, there are four different types of afflictive desire: (1) desire for any of the sense objects, (2) desire for the view of the self, (3) desire for harmful systems of ethics and conduct, and (4) desire for any of the remaining types of harmful views. But there are more types of afflictive desire.

In the context of the above example of the dying human being, the type of desire he generates (induced by fear of annihilation as well as the corresponding links of contact and feeling) is attachment to the self.

Then when the projecting karmic imprint that propels rebirth as an animal, and that was stored on the mental consciousness is nourished by the eighth link of attachment and the ninth link of grasping, such that it now has the full capacity to produce the next rebirth, it is called 'existence' -- the tenth link.

The tenth link of existence

As explained above, this link refers to the projecting karmic seed that started to ripen due to the preceding links of attachment and grasping so that it now has the full capacity to produce rebirth as an animal.

An analogy for the tenth link is a barley seed that started to germinate upon nourishment by water and fertilizer. Previous to such germination the barley seed lay dormant without possessing the full capacity to produce a barley sprout. However, in dependence on water and fertilizer it developed that full capacity.

The tenth link of existence, i.e. the karmic imprint that started to ripen in dependence on the links of attachment and grasping, is analogous to the barley seed that started to germinate in dependence on water and fertilizer. The eighth link of attachment and the ninth link of grasping are analogous to the water and fertilizer.

Therefore, sentient beings can only be reborn in cyclic existence when they have attachment and grasping. An Arhat, for instance, who has eliminated all afflictions, can no longer take birth in cyclic existence since, although he still possesses virtuous projecting karmic seeds, he does not have the necessary attachment and grasping to activate those seeds.

The eleventh link of birth

The tenth link of existence then induces the eleventh link of birth, for after the ripening of the karmic imprint it propels the subtle energy wind and the subtle clear light mind (after they have left the human body) to first establish the body of an intermediate being, and thereafter enter the body (i.e. the fertilized ovum) of an animal.

Therefore, the eleventh link of birth does not actually refer to the moment of being born from, for instance, the womb of an animal but to the moment when the subtle clear light mind enters the fertilized ovum of that animal.

Having gained an understanding of the process of the ripening of a projecting karma the next question that arises is: What determines which kind of projecting karmic seeds ripens, resulting either in rebirth in the lower or the higher realms?

This is answered to some degree when discussing the importance of dying with a virtuous state of mind. Even though it is not possible for ordinary sentient beings to determine what are the exact causes and conditions that activate a particular projecting karmic seed, it is highly likely that a virtuous projecting karmic seed is activated when generating a virtuous state of mind during the different dissolutions, while there is great danger that a non-virtuous projecting karmic seed is activated when generating a non-virtuous state of mind during those dissolutions.

In general, sentient beings die within a virtuous, non-virtuous or neutral mind. In the first case, the dying person might take to mind a virtuous

object such as the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) or his own lama -- thereby generating a mind of faith. Or he might cultivate immeasurable equanimity, free from impartiality toward any sentient being or meditate on emptiness or cultivate compassion. This can be done either through one's own remembering to do so or through other's urging. If such states of mind are cultivated at the time of death, one dies within a virtuous mind, through which, as mentioned above, one is more likely to activate a positive projecting karmic seed.

Sometimes, however, it happens that others, even though not purposely seeking to arouse anger, annoy the dying person with their nervousness, thereby making him angry. Sometimes, also friends and relatives gather around the bed lamenting in such a manner that they arouse attachment.

Whether it is anger or attachment, if one dies with a negative state of mind to which one is well accustomed, it is very dangerous.

Some die within a neutral state of mind, which is neither virtuous nor non-virtuous. These three states of mind -- virtuous, non-virtuous, and neutral -- can remain until the point when the very subtle clear light mind becomes active.

For ordinary people, the clear light mind of death is neutral. But a qualified practitioner of Highest Yoga Tantra can convert the very subtle mind into a virtuous path consciousness, making death very profound and meaningful.

In any case, the attitude before death is extremely important, for, if even a moderately advanced practitioner is disturbed at that time, afflictions such as attachment and anger may arise.

This completes the presentation of death and of how a projecting karmic seed ripens in order to propel another rebirth in cyclic existence. Next follows a presentation of the subtle clear light mind leaving the indestructible drop of this life, and moving to the next life by first establishing an intermediate state being.

Intermediate State

At the end of howsoever long the clear light mind of death abides without any movement, a slight movement that is a mere quiver occurs within it. This initiates the rising of the mind of clear light. The indestructible drop at the heart opens and the very subtle energy wind and mind leave and pass outside. With this the connection to the body is

severed. Simultaneously, the white drop at the heart descends and emerges from the male or female sexual organ, while the red drop ascends and emerges from the nose.

The very subtle energy wind that serves as the mount of the clear light mind of death acts as the substantial cause of the body of the intermediate state being, for it arises as that body. That energy wind also acts as the cooperative condition of the mind of the intermediate state being.

The very subtle clear mind of death, on the other hand, acts as the substantial cause of the mind of the intermediate state being since it is the earlier mental continuum of that being. At the same time, it also acts as the cooperative condition of the body of that being.

In the case of the above cited example of the human being who takes rebirth as an animal, the intermediate state being (between the human live and the animal live) has a body of energy wind with the shape of the animal of the next life.

As soon as the subtle clear light mind has left the human body, the three minds of white appearance, red increase, and black near-attainment appear in reverse order.

The dawning of the black near-attainment of the reverse process, the stoppage of the clear light mind and the achievement of the intermediate state are simultaneous. Many texts such as Asanga's *Treatises on the Levels* say that the stoppage of the death state and the achievement of the intermediate state are simultaneous, like the movement up and down of the higher and lower ends of a scale.

As explained above, the mind upon achieving the intermediate state is that of black near-attainment of the reverse process. From it the mind of red increase of the reverse process is generated; from this the mind of white appearance, and from the mind of white appearance the eighty indicative conceptual consciousnesses. At these times, the internal signs -- from the black near-attainment to mirage -- occur in series but in reverse order from that of the process of death.

The order now is:

- 1) Clear light
- 2) Black near-attainment
- 3) Red increase
- 4) White appearance
- 5) Burning butter-lamp
- 6) Fireflies

7) Smoke

8) Mirage

The being of the intermediate state rushes about seeking a birthplace and seeking smells for nourishment. Having a very subtle mental body which is achieved from energy wind alone, and having abandoned the coarse body of the constituents with heavy and gross flesh, blood, bones, and so forth, it is called 'basic Sambhogakaya' (Enjoyment Body) since it is the basis of purification to be transformed into a Sambhogakaya. It is also called a 'smell-eater' because it feeds on smells.

Characteristics

An intermediate being has five characteristics:

1. It has all five sense powers
2. Since it has been born spontaneously, all its parts of the body are simultaneously completed.
3. Since it has a subtle body, it cannot be destroyed even by a diamond
4. Except for birthplaces, such as the mother's womb, it is not obstructed even by mountains, fences, and so forth
5. Through the force of karmic powers it can in an instant go wherever it wants and not even a Buddha can stop it.

Length of life

The longest intermediate state is seven days. However, since there are cases of transmigrating to the next birth immediately upon achieving the intermediate state when the causes for rebirth come together, there is no certainty. If within seven days the causes of birth do not come together, at the end of the seventh day a small death occurs, whereupon another intermediate state is achieved. Asanga's *Actuality of the Levels (Bhumivastu)* says that, when in that manner seven weeks have passed, the causes for rebirth definitely come together and rebirth is necessarily taken.

Seven days

Some Buddhist masters say the statement that the lifespan of a being of the intermediate state is seven days refers to the days of the individual types of migrators (as which the being is to be reborn), some of which are very long compared to human days. However, this is not correct

because an intermediate state being that is to be reborn as a hell-being or as a celestial being of the form realm would have to dwell in those states for the seven days of those types of beings, resulting in the absurdity that one would have to assert that there are cases of staying in the intermediate state for a great million of years without the causes of rebirth coming together.

Death of an intermediate state being

With respect to the mode of the small death at the end of a week, the energy winds of the intermediate being gather in stages from the top and the bottom into the heart, like breath on a mirror gathering from the limits.

Thus, the four signs (mirage, smoke, fireflies, and burning butter-lamp) and the four empties (the empty, the very empty, the greatly empty, and the all-empty) of an intermediate state being's death dawn quickly, and the clear light of death is actualized. Then the energy wind that serves as the mount of the clear light acts as the substantial cause, and the wind body of an intermediate state being is achieved as before, simultaneous with achieving the mind of black near-attainment of the reverse process.

Seeing the former body

Asanga's *Actuality of the Levels* says that, even when an intermediate being sees its former physical body, due to the force of having severed any relationship with that body, it does not think, 'My body', and does not generate a wish to enter it.

Perception

Vasubhandu's *Treasury of Knowledge (Abhidharmakosha)* explains that intermediate state beings are seen by others of similar type and by those with clairvoyance attained through meditation. It also says that beings of the intermediate state of higher type perceive lower ones.

Appearance

Asanga's *Actuality of the Levels* explains that to an intermediate being that precedes rebirth in the lower realms (animal, preta, and hell), there appears an outstretched black flag, or night pervaded by darkness; whereas, to a being of the higher realms (human and celestial being),

there appears an outstretched white cloth , or night pervaded by moonlight.

Color

The *Sutra of Teaching to Nanda on Entry to the Womb (Ayushmannandagarbhavakrantinirdesha)* explains that the color of the body of an intermediate state being who will take birth in the hell realm looks like a log burned by fire; in the preta realm, like fire; in the animal realm, like smoke; in the human and celestial realm of the desire realm, like gold; and in the form realm, white.

The three realms

There are three realms of existence within cyclic existence:

- (1) Desire realm
- (2) Form realm
- (3) Formless realm

The desire realm has a further six states:

- I. Hell realm
- II. Preta realm
- III. Animal realm
- IV. Human realm
- V. Semi celestial realm
- VI. Celestial realm

The form realm has four states:

- I. First Concentration state
- II. Second Concentration state
- III. Third Concentration state
- IV. Fourth Concentration state

The formless realm also has four states

- I. Limitless Space state
- II. Limitless Consciousness state
- III. Nothingness state
- IV. Peak of Cyclic Existence state

In order to be born in either the desire or form realms, it is necessary to pass through an intermediate state. But there is no intermediate state for rebirth in a formless realm. This is because the four aggregates of the being of the formless realm (feeling, discrimination, compositional factors, and consciousness) are achieved the moment after death. A person who is to be reborn in a formless realm actualizes a formless meditative stabilization from within the clear light of death. There is no dawning of the mind of black near-attainment, etc. upon arising from the clear light of death in the reverse process, because such would be a mind of the intermediate state.

Birth

The *Sutra of Teaching to Nanda on Entry to the Womb* says that, in general, for an intermediate state being to take rebirth in a mother's womb six conditions must come together. Please note that the following explanation is mainly from the point of view of human rebirth.

1. The mother must be free from disease and at a time of non-menstruation
2. The being of the intermediate state must be nearby and wish to enter
3. The male and female must desire each other and have sexual intercourse
4. The mother's womb must be fully functioning
5. Both the blood (in the ovum) of the mother and the semen of the father must be fully functioning.
6. The intermediate state being must have accumulated a completing karma for being born as the child of that male and female, who must also have accumulated a completing karma for becoming its father and mother.

In general, a being of the intermediate state that has these six conditions sees in an illusory manner the father and mother lying together. Due to wanting to have sexual intercourse, if it is to be reborn as a male, it desires the mother and wishes to separate from the father; whereas, if it is to be reborn as a female, it desires the father and wishes to separate from the mother. Then when it begins to embrace the one that it desires, through the force of previously accumulated karma it does not perceive any part of the body except the person's sexual organ, whereby anger is generated. This desire and anger act as the cause of the

intermediate state being's death, and of its very subtle clear light entering the womb of the mother.

Some masters explain that a person accustomed to non-virtuous actions when entering the mother's womb hears clamorous noises and has a sense of entering into a marsh, dark forest or the like; whereas one accustomed to virtuous actions hears peaceful and pleasant sounds and has a sense of going inside a nice house, etc.

The 'Many Levels' chapter of Asanga's *Actuality of the Levels* says that, whereas the father and mother are not actually lying together at that time, after conception the being of the intermediate state mistakenly perceives the semen and blood (of the fertilized ovum) as such.

The intermediate state being then enters the body of the mother, whereupon which the signs from mirage to clear light occur, and the clear light mind, together with its energy wind, makes -- in the centre of the semen and blood of the fertilized ovum of the mother -- the connection to the new life.

The first moment of the mind of black near-attainment of the reverse process marks the moment of birth (the eleventh link), and is the mind of initial connection to the new life.

From that, the second moment of black near-attainment is produced; from that, red increase; from that, white appearance; from white appearance, the eighty indicative conceptual consciousnesses, as well as the energy winds that are their mounts.

From the energy wind that is the mount of the mind of white appearance, an energy wind constituent is generated that has a special capacity for acting as a basis of consciousness. From it, a fire constituent that has a special capacity for acting as a basis of consciousness is generated; from that, a water constituent that has such a capacity; and from that, an earth constituent that has such a capacity.

Thereafter the gross physical body of the new life starts to grow. Hence the subtle and coarse bodies that last until death are achieved from the four constituents.

Birth forms the basis for the Nirmanakaya (Emanation Body) because a highly advanced practitioner practices to transform the ordinary birth of a sentient being into the arising of the Nirmanakaya (Emanation Body) of a Buddha by engaging in the meditations of the generation and completion stages of Highest Yoga Tantra.

The process of death, the intermediate state, and rebirth is similar to falling asleep, dreaming, and waking up. When we fall asleep the four signs (mirage, smoke, fireflies, and burning butter-lamp) as well as the four empties (empty, very empty, greatly empty, and all-empty) of sleep dawn like those at the time of death, but only briefly. The clear light of sleep, which is coarser than that of death, arises, followed by the eight signs of the reverse process. When we rise from the clear light of sleep, we do so in a dream body, and we perform the various activities of the dream state. This is like rising from the clear light of death in a body of the intermediate state. Passing from one dream to another is similar to the small death between two intermediate states. Then, when we begin to awaken from sleep, the wind of the body of dream dissolves from the outside like breath on a mirror and, gathering at the heart, dissolves into the very subtle energy wind that is located inside the central channel at the heart of our body. Hence we experience the eight signs, followed by the eight signs of the reverse process. Thereupon, we awaken from sleep which is similar to taking rebirth.

Other states of increasing subtlety are experienced in fainting, orgasm, and sneezing. But similar to falling asleep the dissolutions do not take place in their complete form.

Please note that, not only do the dissolutions indicate levels of subtlety on which every conscious moment is built but also describe states through which we frequently pass without noticing them. This indicates that ordinary conscious life is concerned with only the coarse states, without taking heed of more subtle states that are the foundation of both consciousness and appearance. It is a case of not being aware of either the origin of consciousness or the basis into which it returns. Ordinary beings are so identified with the coarse states that the transition to the deeper states involves even fear of annihilation.

Therefore, it is imperative to deepen our understanding of the different levels of consciousness, and to learn to control these awarenesses in order to actualize our fullest potential and to transform death, intermediate state, and rebirth into the three kayas of a Buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings.

This completes the presentation of past and future lives - the continuation of consciousness.



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