

REINCARNATION

(Extracted from [Transform Your Life](#) by [Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso](#).)

Many people believe that when the body disintegrates at death, the continuum of the mind ceases and the mind becomes non-existent, like a candle flame going out when all the wax has burned.

There are even some people who contemplate committing suicide in the hope that if they die their problems and sufferings will come to an end. These ideas, however, are completely wrong.

As already explained, our body and mind are separate entities, and so even though the body disintegrates at death, the continuum of the mind remains unbroken. Instead of ceasing, the mind simply leaves the present body and goes to the next life.

For ordinary beings, therefore, rather than releasing us from suffering, death only brings new sufferings. Not understanding this, many people destroy their precious human life by committing suicide.

We can gain an understanding of past and future lives by examining the process of sleeping, dreaming, and waking, because this closely resembles the process of death, intermediate state, and rebirth.

When we fall asleep, our gross inner winds gather and dissolve inwards, and our mind becomes progressively more and more subtle until it transforms into the very subtle mind of the clear light of sleep. While the clear light of sleep is manifest, we experience deep sleep, and to others we resemble a dead person. When it ends, our mind becomes gradually more and more gross and we pass through the various levels of the dream state. Finally, our normal powers of memory and mental control are restored and we wake up. When this happens, our dream world disappears and we perceive the world of the waking state.

A very similar process occurs when we die. As we die, our inner winds dissolve inwards and our mind becomes progressively more and more subtle until the very subtle mind of the clear light of death becomes manifest. The experience of the clear light of death is very similar to the experience of deep sleep.

After the clear light of death has ceased, we experience the stages of the intermediate state, or 'bardo' in Tibetan, which is a dream-like state that occurs between death and rebirth. After a few days or weeks, the intermediate state ends and we take rebirth. Just as when we wake from sleep, the dream world disappears and we perceive the world of the waking state, so, when we take rebirth, the appearances of the intermediate state cease and we perceive the world of our next life.

The only significant difference between the process of sleeping, dreaming, and waking and the process of death, intermediate state, and rebirth is that after the clear light of sleep has ceased, the relationship between our mind and our present body remains intact, whereas after the clear light of death this relationship is broken.

By contemplating this, we can gain conviction in the existence of past and future lives.

Is Reincarnation Possible?

One way to gain an understanding of past and future lives is to examine the process of sleeping, dreaming, and waking, because this closely resembles the process of death, intermediate state, and rebirth. When we fall asleep, our gross inner winds gather and dissolve inwards, and our mind becomes progressively more and more subtle until it transforms into the very subtle mind of the clear light of sleep. While the clear light of sleep is manifest, we experience deep sleep, and to others we resemble a dead person. When the clear light of sleep ends, our mind becomes gradually more and more gross and we pass through the various levels of the dream state. Finally, our normal powers of memory and mental control are restored and we wake up. When this happens, our dream world disappears and we perceive the world of the waking state.

What happens when we die?

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Proof of Reincarnation

By observing present mental tendencies and predispositions we can infer their causes in previous lives.

Although we are all human beings, we have a huge variety of mental imprints and tendencies. 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.

How can we explain these differences?

A mental tendency is a habit of mind, and habits are created by repeated actions over a long period of time. The fact that children are born with varying mental tendencies indicates that at some time prior to their birth – that is, in a previous life – they performed different actions, creating different mental habits. One child is naturally positive because in a previous life he or she repeatedly performed positive actions of body, speech, and mind, and thus created strong positive pathways in his mind; and the other child is naturally negative because through his repeated negative actions in a previous life he created negative pathways in his mind.

What Are The Effects Of Our Previous Actions?

Adults too clearly have varying mental tendencies. Some people for no apparent reason hate religion as if it were poison, whereas others are naturally attracted to spiritual teachings. What causes these different ways of thinking? The simplest explanation is that the person who instinctively dislikes religion in this life disliked religion in previous lives, whereas the person who naturally likes religion has the virtuous imprints of valuing religion in a previous life.

Since we cannot see the past directly, to understand it we need to infer past actions and events from present effects.

Some people are able to learn a particular foreign language very easily, even though they are no more intelligent than someone else who has far greater difficulty in learning that language. The reason for this may well be that the first person used to speak that language in a previous life.

Amongst those who enter the spiritual path, some gain spiritual realizations very easily, whereas others, no less sincere or skillful, need to apply great effort for many years before their mind changes and they develop realizations. This clearly indicates that spiritual realizations are the fruit not only of our effort in this life, but also of the effort we made and tendencies we created in previous lives.

Since we cannot see the past directly, to understand it we need to infer past actions and events from present effects. Geologists infer past geographical events from the present structure of land, and archaeologists build up a picture of previous cultures through making inferences from their remains. In a similar way, by observing present mental tendencies and predispositions we can infer their causes in previous lives.

What is the Mind?

The mind is a formless continuum that functions to perceive and understand objects.

It is a formless continuum that functions to perceive and understand objects. Some people think that the mind is the brain or some other part or function of the body, but this is incorrect. The brain is a physical object that can be seen with the eyes and that can be photographed or operated on in surgery. The mind, on the other hand, is not a physical object. It cannot be seen

with the eyes, nor can it be photographed or repaired by surgery. The brain therefore is not the mind but simply part of the body.

Because the mind is formless, or non-physical, by nature, it is not obstructed by physical objects. Thus, it is impossible for our body to go to the moon without travelling in a spaceship, but our mind can reach the moon in an instant just by thinking about it. Knowing and perceiving objects is the uncommon function of the mind. Although we say, “I know such and such”, in reality it is our mind that knows. We know things only by using our mind.

Our Body and Mind Are Different Entities

There is nothing within the body that can be identified as being our mind because our body and mind are different entities. For example, sometimes when our body is relaxed and immobile, our mind can be very busy, darting from one object to another. This indicates that our body and mind are not the same entity.

The Levels Of Mind

It is the very subtle mind that will eventually transform into the omniscient mind of a Buddha.

There are **three levels of mind: gross, subtle, and very subtle**. Gross minds include sense awarenesses such as eye awareness and ear awareness, and all strong delusions such as anger, jealousy, attachment, and strong self-grasping ignorance. These gross minds are related to gross inner winds and are relatively easy to recognize. When we fall asleep or die, our gross minds dissolve inwards and our subtle minds become manifest. Subtle minds are related to subtle inner winds and are more difficult to recognize than gross minds. During deep sleep, and at the end of the death process, the inner winds dissolve into the center of the heart channel wheel inside the central channel, and then the very subtle mind, the mind of clear light, becomes manifest. The very subtle mind is related to the very subtle inner wind and is extremely difficult to recognize. The continuum of the very subtle mind has no beginning and no end. It is this mind that goes from one life to the next, and, if it is completely purified by training in meditation, it is this mind that will eventually transform into the omniscient mind of a Buddha.

Relationship between the body & mind

Like a bird leaving one nest and flying to another, at death the mind leaves this body and seeks another body.

The relationship between mind and body is explained in great detail in Buddha’s Tantric teachings. It is a relationship between two distinct entities, which for the duration of a life have become associated with each other but which can also exist separately. Buddha compared the mind to a bird and the body to a nest. Like a bird leaving one nest and flying to another, at death the mind leaves this body and seeks another body. Alternatively, mind and body are like a driver and a car, which affect each other but are obviously not the same entity.

Inner Energy Winds

The way in which mind and body are related is explained in terms of inner energy winds. As mentioned before, every mind is said to be ‘mounted’ on an energy wind that gives the mind the power to move towards its object. The winds flow through a network of subtle energy channels in the body, which can be clearly experienced by meditators. These winds serve as an intermediary between formless mind and the gross physical body. Detailed explanations of the inner winds and how they help connect mind and body can be found in the books [Clear Light of Bliss](#) and [Tantric Grounds and Paths](#).

Consciousness

The mind is an ever-changing stream of consciousness, one moment of awareness giving rise to the next moment.

Where does mind come from? The mind is an ever-changing stream of consciousness, one moment of awareness giving rise to the next moment. If we ask where one moment of mind comes from, the only answer we can give is the previous moment of mind. Suppose we are thinking of India. Where does this thought come from? It did not arise from nowhere, nor did it arise from our body or the outside world. It arose from a previous moment of mind, and if we try we can probably follow the train of thought back a long way. Even when thoughts seem to pop up out of the blue, in reality they arise out of a deeper and subtler level of consciousness.

What Are The Causes Of Mind?

Every thing is produced from two types of causes: a main, or substantial, cause and various contributory conditions. For example, a clay pot is produced from its substantial cause – the clay it is made of – and a number of contributory conditions, such as the potter, his wheel, and the kiln, which serve to mold the clay into the particular form of the pot. The substantial cause transforms into the effect, whereas the contributory conditions enable this transformation to occur. The substantial cause of a thing must be something of similar type or substance. Thus, the substantial cause of a clay pot must be clay and the substantial cause of a gold coin must be gold. Similarly, the main cause of barley is a barley seed and not a wheat seed, and the main cause of a human body is the sperm and egg of human parents and not the sperm and egg of two dogs.

Since mind is by nature formless and able to cognize objects, its main cause must also be formless and able to cognize objects. Physical phenomena like the brain possess form and lack the power to cognize objects, so they cannot be the main cause of mind. Our nervous system and the chemicals that make up our brain and body may be able to shape what kind of thoughts and feelings develop, but there is nothing within the brain or the body that can transform into mind. The only thing that can transform into one moment of mind is a previous moment of mind. If this is the case, then where does the first moment of mind of this life come from? The only possible answer is from a previous moment of mind.

This is the most important reason establishing the existence of reincarnation. When we understand through our own experience that mind is by nature non-material, this reason will be very powerful for us. A non-material phenomenon with the power to cognize objects cannot arise

from insentient matter, nor can it arise from no cause; the only thing it can arise from is another non-material phenomenon with the power to cognize objects – i.e. a previous moment of mind.