

~ *What Happens When You Die?* ~

Mingyur Rinpoche

So what happens when we die? Normally this topic comes up in my culture. My culture is of course infused with a lot of Buddhist ideas and experience, so we have elaborate, intensive teachings on the view and perspective, and also how to use the fear of death and dying as help for better living.

When I was young, in my hometown, I tried to make a sand castle. It broke, and my grandmother said, “This is impermanent. Everything is changing. One day you will die, too.” She said, “Do not fixate on it. Do not care too much. Let go.” But of course, letting go is not giving up.

Normally, all the fear in our life is somehow related to death and dying. At an unconscious level, we do not want to die. At the same time, what we do is purposely try to ignore death and dying. So when this dilemma arises — you do not want to die, but you do not want to face it, you do not want to learn it, you try to suppress it — you try to pretend that death does not really exist. This will, at a subtle level, create a kind of fundamental fear.

In our tradition, we face it and learn it. Actually, death and dying really help us to learn to live better.

We call this the *bardo*. *Bardo* means “intermediate state.” Death is actually what we call a “transition.”

We have six bardos or transition moments. And there are practices for death and dying. Three are related with living, and three are related with dying, the moment of death and dying. In total, we have six practices.

The first important one, for the living, is what we call the “bardo of living.” The bardo of living is to really learn and grow from the ups and downs of life. Because our life always goes up and down, right? Maybe one day you are happy and then not happy, your relationship works well, and then in the end the relationship becomes terrible. Or you

find a good job and at the beginning are very happy, you get a promotion, and then sometime later your boss is not happy and you get fired. Or you are very happy with your family, or you lose somebody, your loved one.

Life always goes up and down. This is the impermanent nature of life. This up and down is very good for learning, growing, and transformation. Why? Because we all have a cocoon. We all live in a bubble that we create by ourselves. Normally it is very difficult to go out of that bubble.

But then when we experience a transition moment — the down moment, or the peak of an up moment — there is what we call “plasticity.” There is a crack, a gap in that bubble. If you use that moment, really be with that moment, learn from that moment, accept it but transform it for the next chapter, then we can go out of our own cocoon, out of our own prison. We can really learn and grow and transform.

I think many of us do that naturally. Maybe when you look back at your life, that toxic relationship that ended, you might think, “When they left me that actually was one of the best things that happened in my life.” Or, “That lost job. It turned out it really helped me to find a new job, or learn something new, or something new happened.” Normally that happens.

But the key point in the bardo teachings is that we need to have the willingness to learn, the willingness to transform. And letting go means to accept it, but not give up. To transform and learn. We learn from ups; we learn from downs. That is the bardo of living.

Second, we have the bardo of meditation. The second bardo means an in-between moment or intermediate state. Normally what happens is our mind always jumps between past and future. We lose the present moment. Sometimes we worry about the past, what happened, thinking, “I did something wrong.” There is guilt, shame, and blame toward yourself or others. Or we worry about the future: “What should I do? Tomorrow there is a deadline. I need to reply to all these emails. I have these projects.” And then you cannot sleep. Even in the nighttime, you are living for tomorrow. It is time traveling. We lose the present.

When we lose the present moment, it is not good for the future. The bardo of meditation means being with the present moment, being with the present experience. Maybe you can begin with breathing. Just be with your breathing. When you try to be with the breath in the present moment, you might experience thought and emotion. Let them come, let them go. Do not try to stop them, but do not totally lose yourself in the past and future. Just be with the breathing.

Then feel your body. Relax the muscles. Just feel the body now, whatever you are experiencing — the temperature, warm or cold. You might feel relaxed, you might feel tight, and especially you might feel gravity and heaviness. Just feel it and be with that. This is the bardo: being with the present moment, in between past and future. That is the bardo of meditation.

Third is sleeping and dreaming. This really prepares you for how you are going to face what we call the “big day” — the big adventure day — meaning the moment of real death that one day you will face in the future. The process of sleeping and the process of dying are very similar.

When you really are going to die, what happens? The dissolution experience. What we call the four-element dissolution. This is very similar to when you go to sleep. It is very short when we go to sleep, but the process is the same.

Maybe I will ask you: how many of you, when you are going to sleep, might feel like you are falling? Or losing some kind of ground? That is what we call the “earth energy,” the earth element dissolution. Then after that we feel like melting. That is the water element dissolution. Then after that we might feel a little shock, like a burning or sparking. Anybody experience that? That is the fire element dissolution. The falling is easy to feel, the melting is less, and the fire also is experienced more. Then after that you feel like you are blown away — the air element dissolution — and then it becomes dark. Normally that is very difficult to experience, very rare. You feel dark and then become unconscious. That is how we sleep. When we die, a similar thing happens.

I experienced that myself. I did a wandering retreat, and at the beginning of my retreat there was not much money — all the money

was gone — and I had to beg for food. I got food poisoning with diarrhea and vomiting. Then after five or six days, with no medicine, I entered the process of dying. And I got this dissolution. A very clear experience.

We have the meditation bardo, right? The bardo of meditation. Now we stay in that present moment, staying with the awareness. Then what happens? Although these energies dissolve . . . The elements and the sensory perceptions also dissolve. For me, I could not see at a certain level, could not hear, and my body became paralyzed. Then I felt I was almost about to become unconscious, and suddenly there was a feeling of opening up.

In that moment, there was no physical sensation, no thought like what we are thinking now — when we think about an apple, there is an image and a word. Those disappeared. It is a kind of nonconceptual state, yet you know what is happening. That vividness, that nonconceptual, wakeful experience, does not have front and back. It is beyond time, beyond concept. And it has a feeling of joyfulness — not physical bliss, but a joyful contentment. That is what we call “mother luminosity.”

Actually, when we go to sleep, everybody experiences that. Maybe I would like to ask you: how many of you, when you are in a boring meeting, or you are in the car but you are not the driver, or you are waiting at the bank, and you doze off, you fall asleep a little, and then wake up. You fall asleep for a few seconds and then awake. When you wake up, your mind feels so fresh, wakeful, nonconceptual, and the tiredness is also gone. You become fresh. Anybody experience that? I hope you do. That is what happened: at the end of the dissolution, we enter a state of nonconceptual awareness — something like a baby mother luminosity. And we will experience that at the moment of actual death very clearly, normally.

But most of the time, we do not recognize that. Then we become unconscious again.

Similarly, when we go to sleep, we experience that present wakeful awareness, but normally we will not recognize it. If we do not have this practice, we become unconscious again. Then what happens? We wake up in the dream. That is what we call “sleeping meditation.” And

we have the lucid dream practice: recognizing your dream as a dream. If you recognize that you are dreaming within the dream, you have freedom.

The moment you die, after death, after you become unconscious, normally you will remain unconscious for at least half a day to three or three and a half days. Then you will wake up.

These are the three bardos related with death and dying. The first — element dissolution and then becoming unconscious — is what we call the “bardo of the moment of dying.” Then you wake up. That is what we call the “bardo of dharmata.” When you wake up, it is just like a dream, because you do not have a physical gross body anymore. You have what we call the “subtle body,” the mental body. You still have a body, but there is a lot of light, and everything becomes like a mirage, and there are a lot of images and sounds. All the senses are totally open.

If you recognize in that moment you are in the bardo of dharmata, especially if you meditate, then you will become enlightened. Within a short period of time, you will become fully enlightened. If not, after a few weeks you become more gross, more heavy, and then the karmic imprint — whatever baggage you created in this life — continues, and you will look for the next life. That is what we call the “bardo of becoming.”

Altogether we have six bardos. Normally we learn through the up and down moments, through gaps, through transitions. Actually, there is no real thing as real death. Death is just a transition. Nobody really dies.

Death is like this: yesterday you were awake, last night you became unconscious for some time, had some dreams, and this morning you are awake. It is like that. The gross body might not be there, but the subtle body continues. In the dream you have a body — a body that is similar to the body in the bardo of dharmata. And that may change in the next life.

In Buddhism, we call this a cycle. When you are born, you have baggage. About twenty years ago, developmental psychology said that when a baby is born, the baby has nothing — like an empty blank

sheet — and has to learn everything after birth. Now psychologists are saying that is impossible. The baby already has a sense of the world. Maybe even the personality is preset. This huge baggage comes together with the baby. That is what we call “imprint.” That imprint in the mind, together with the subtle body, will change.

But if you really recognize the bardo moment in the present moment, if you cut that imprint, then you become enlightened.

Thank you.