

How My Karma at Death Will Propel Me Into a New Life

Venerable Thubten Dondrub, former Resident Teacher at Hayagriva Buddhist Centre, recently explained how it is that when your death comes and you have virtuous thoughts at that moment, you will be reborn into a happy life; but if at the time of death you have a non-virtuous mind, you will be reborn into a place of great suffering.

Geshe Lhundub Sopa, in his book *Steps on the Path to Enlightenment*, also goes into the role of karma at the time of death in some detail.

When we commit actions of body, speech or mind with a clear and strong intention, strong karmic imprints, good and bad, are planted on our mind. These are called 'throwing karma' because if one of them ripens at the point of death they have enough power to throw or propel us into the next life.

That is why it is so important to guide the mind to the side of virtue as one approaches death. For example, as long as the dying person can still hear, his spiritual teacher or a close friend, or a relative, can gently recite the practices or mantras or sayings that the person is familiar with.

This is one way we, as trained volunteers, can help when *The Pure Land* is up and running. How amazing and wonderful it would be if our guidance enabled the dying person to have a more peaceful death and a happier rebirth!

Geshe Sopa says: 'The mental karma, or thoughts, of the dying person as he or she approaches death, act as an essential condition, along with craving and grasping, that nurtures and activates the main throwing karma, the main projecting karmic seed.

Generally, whatever type of action - virtuous or non-virtuous - you were accustomed to performing during your lifetime will be the most powerful type of seed in your continuum; it is this that will naturally come to mind at the time of death. Gradually other thoughts become weaker and weaker till they are forgotten. At that point the mind is completely absorbed in those most powerful, habitual actions, and, with those actions propelling the mind, you take rebirth.

Of course at the time of death, the person does not have much control over his or her own mind, even at the gross level. Sensory awareness has disappeared and even conscious thinking has faded away, so the mind is essentially passive.

Under those circumstances, the experience stored in the mind as karmic propensities becomes the dominant force determining what will come into the mind. If you were accustomed to doing non-virtuous actions during your life - for example if you were a slaughterer of animals or a fisherman - thoughts of killing will naturally push to the surface when your mind is in this passive state. If your life was spent practising powerful virtues, those are the thoughts that will come to the mind most vividly.

According to which type of karmic seeds ripen first at the time of death, the heaviest, or nearest or most habitual action will naturally come to mind during the death process. If you have cultivated a strong Dharma practice, you can direct your mind to virtuous objects your time to die approaches by intensifying your practice and eliminating all other concerns from your thoughts.

It is also possible for someone else - someone who is sitting with you as you die - to influence the direction your mind will take. This kind of assistance, which leads the dying person's mind toward faith and other virtuous qualities, can be tremendously beneficial and can make a great difference in determining the next life.

For example, when a man who has engaged in a Dharma practice in his lifetime is dying, his friends and relatives may know what his daily practice consisted of. Then, as long as the dying one can still hear, someone can sit beside his bed and remind him of those practices, perhaps reading the prayers or mantras that he recited every day.

The person providing this assistance may be a spiritual teacher, a relative or a close friend. This person can gently guide the dying person's mind back to the virtuous practices he cultivated when he was alive and healthy. This also keeps the mind focussed on virtuous thoughts and pulls it away from wandering to unwholesome objects. This type of outside help leading the mind in a positive direction can be quite helpful.

On the other side, it is important to avoid disturbing the peaceful mind of the dying person. Sometimes people gather near the deathbed and indulge in all sorts of distracting conversation, with a lot of crying, or arguing, or expressions of fear. When the dying person hears this disturbing chatter, negative thoughts and emotions of anger, fear, or attachment can be churned up. That kind of distracting talk can cause real damage to a person who is about to die.

Extracts selected by Len Warren from *Steps on the Path to Enlightenment A Commentary on Tsongkhapa's Lamrim Chenmo*, by Geshe Lhundub Sopa, with David Patt, Volume 2, Wisdom Publications, 2005, page 306
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