**PSYCHO-SCIENTIFIC FRONTIERS**

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An interview with Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche. The interview was conducted by Dorothea Mihm on behalf of the journal „Die ANDERE REALITÄT“, a scientific journal for parapsychology, 1th of August 2002.



Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche

**The process of sleep**

**and the process of death**

**are related.**

**Preface**

Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche is a master of the Dzogchen traditions of Tibet. Rinpoche was born in India after his parents had fled from Tibet before the Chinese invasion. He was recognised as one of the reincarnations of the famous master Khung Tul Rinpoche, who was not only a great meditator, but also a well-known pundit and productive author.

From age 13, Lama Tenzin Dzogchen practised in close contact with his two most important teachers, namely *Lopon Sangye Tenzin Rinpoche* and *Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche*. He also received tuition from other important Bon or Bön (considered the native pre-Buddhist religious tradition of Tibet) and Buddhistic masters whilst studying with them.

He is one of two Bonpo masters that live in the West and that are qualified to impart these doctrines. He also holds the title of a Geshe, the highest academic grade within the spiritual traditions of Tibet.

Rinpoche lives in Charlottesville, Virginia these days where he founded the *Ligmincha Institute* for the preservation of the religions and cultures of Tibet. (<https://www.ligmincha.org/>)

Bad Salzuflen, August 2002

The interview with Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche was conducted by Dorothea Mihm (D. M.)

D. M. : Rinpoche, what is the *Dzogchen view* about dying and death?

Rinpoche : (laughs) The ultimate perspective of Dzogchen is: *These is no death*. From a relative point of view, we human beings have a body wherein our spirit resides and there is a separation between spirit and body and we call it death. The whole process of dying, death and the question of how one supports this process, particularly *after* death, is very important within Tibetan traditions. A lot of people live their whole spiritual life not specifically for this life, but for the spiritual life that follows *after their demise*.

 The process of dying and death, the dissolution and transformation of elements follows the sequence of earth, water, fire, air and space. It is a case of learning to maintain one’s consciousness during the dissolution process from the coarse to the ethereal.

D. M. : Can you explain the various, so-called *Bardos*?

Rinpoche : One usually talks about four Bardos: The *life Bardo*, the *near-death Bardo*, the *Bardo of the clear light* and the *Bardo of existence*. Bardo means intermediate state. All conditions we find ourself in, from waking life to death, are intermediate states.

1. The *Bardo of life* lasts from birth to terminal illness.
2. The timespan from the start of the terminal illness to the moment of dying is the *near-death Bardo*.
3. The *Bardo of clear light* follows death. It is initially an empty state from whence visions arise after a while.
4. When one begins to have visions, one find identities in regards to these visions. These identities in turn prepare a new birth, a new life. This is called the intermediate state of existence and it is the *fourth Bardo*.

D. M. : Is this state also called the Bardo of rebirth?

Rinpoche : Yes, it is the same.

D. M. : In contrast to the people in the East, 99% of the people in the West direct their focus towards the Bardo of Life. Would you like to make a comment about this?

Rinpoche : To begin with, there is a strong relationship to rebirth, to the next life in the East. This is why the people there have the feeling that they have a good chance to live a really long life (laughs). Maybe it’s a case where the people in the West think: “Let us live this life, because it is the only one,” They therefore direct their focus on this life only.

 I think that the belief in reincarnation or the doctrine of karma hardly plays a role in the Christianity dominated West. The result is that the people there concentrate on material things and on this life. And a lot of people are indeed very successful in the material world: They manage to fly to the Moon etc. These are powerful means to control the physical world or possibly the whole universe with. But once death arrives, they *lose their powers*. And this is not the end of it: They sometimes *suffer quite severely*.

 I know a few people from the world of commerce that control all sorts of things and that imagine that they can control everything, even death. But they eventually comprehend: When death arrives, there is nothing they can do. I do believe that it is very difficult for these people to accept the fact that this is *not* under their control. People that believe in one religion or another and perform some spiritual practices do have the opportunity to also trust in a non-physical world beyond the material world.

D. M. : Rinpoche, you said that one can *prepare* oneself for death. Can you explain to us, who know very little about Tibetan doctrines, a little about *how* one prepares oneself?

Rinpoche : I think that it is important to begin with *to comprehend* transience. One must know how to *accept* transition and how to *adapt* to changes. I do not necessarily mean external situations, but rather one’s own life: Illness, ageing. You can be a professional runner, but you find out one day that you can’t even walk anymore. One should be in a position to be able to reflect on all of these realities of life, before they actually eventuate. People in the East prepared themselves by beginning relatively early to engage in the basic practices and by contemplating and meditating about transience and changes.

 A *deep trust in oneself* is important then, independent of what one has or what one can do. It is simply about the deep trust in who you are. This is very powerful the moment you die. One can observe it in the eyes of the dying and on their mental state, when they completely trust themselves. They are not particularly strongly dependent on whom or what they lose, they are *not dependent* on their body. They can no longer raise their hands, but one can see the smile on their face. This shows a lot of trust. And one learns this a long time before one’s death through preparations.

 I believe that there is *no genuine* acceptance of death within people’s psyche. On the contrary, there is a lot of resistance there and this makes it *very difficult* when death arrives.

D. M. : How easy or how difficult is it to enter a state of enlightenment in the *Bardo of Dharmata*?

Rinpoche : Oh, this is very difficult (laughing). It is a good test. How simple or how difficult is it to enter a state of recognition when one sleeps and when the dreams arrive? This gives us a point of reference. It is important to not look for major things. It is a case of *simply accepting one’s death*, this is already very good. One can utilise every moment to reflect. We sit here at this point in time, drink a glass of wine, talk and we might die tomorrow. We have great plans, but nobody waits for when the time comes.

 I think that it isn’t just about the question of dying, it is also about living. A lot of people naturally find it difficult to die, but they *also* find it *difficult* to live.

 People that have an illness that results in their demise are often surprised because they live *differently*, they live in the moment. The live *in the moment* and they do not know whether they will still be alive tomorrow. I have felt this with a few. Such an interview might not be boring or exhaustive for them, but rather a wonderful experience, *the* *joy of being alive*. There is this urgency present. I witnessed a woman who studied Chinese acupuncture giving a talk to terminally ill people. I found this very interesting. She virtually talked about her ego: The kind of research she did, the kind of therapy she thought possible etc. But who amongst the ill was interested in this? What happens *now*? People who look for help live in the future. But it is all about the presence and *not* about tomorrow to them. When one suffers from a terminal illness, it is all about the *here and now*. This is what the afflicted learn, namely *the preciousness of the moment*. They gain a certain understanding for this.

D. M. : Rinpoche, what is the relationship between dreams and death? You wrote a book about this: “Übung der Nacht” (Diederrichs?).

Rinpoche : The process of sleeping and the process of dying are seen as closely related to one another. The similarity consists in the manner one loses contact to one’s exterior world and whether one perceives the *inner processes* or not. How does one find oneself in the inner world - when one loses everything in the exterior world? It is not just about the conceptual relationship of the ego with the exterior world, but rather more about the direct perceptions of the senses. What happens when one loses them? When one stops seeing forms, when one stops smelling, when one no longer hears sounds one either likes or dislikes? When one loses contact with these external things one, in a way, loses oneself. In our day to day life, the *external* world is *constantly* defining who we are. When practicing people *lose* their connection to their external world, they have the opportunity to find their *inner* world. But those that have *no experience* in regards to their inner world, *only* know about who they are from their relationship to externalities.

D. M. : We in the West have a great fear of dying and death. To what degree is this connected to the fear of living?

Rinpoche : I think that it is *exactly the same*. The fear of death is basically the fear of losing oneself. How do we usually define ourselves? Everything that I am is what I have *done* in my life and what I *possess.* Who I am is found *in externalities* and *not* in knowledge or in the perception of the *inner* self. I therefore lose everything and this is naturally scary. But if one is in possession of experiences or the trust in one’s inner self that are not dependent on externalities, death is less scary. Philosophically expressed:

* *When one has a stronger connection to the basics, one is less scared. When one has a stronger connection to clarity, one is on the other side of hope. When one finds oneself on the other side of fear and hope, one no longer has a reason to fear death.*

D. M. : How can we, the living, support the dying? This question not only deals with the time to their last breath, but also with what we can do after their external breathing has come to a stop?

Rinpoche : I think that the best kind of support lies therein, that we know the individual about to die very well and this includes the circumstances. Does this person have a *spiritual* background? Does it have *trust in itself*? Does is have the ability to act in regards to the things that are required? When people die, it means for us that we *shouldn’t* try to save them, but to help them *so they can die well*. One should not forget this. To simply be there for them is enough.

 It is sometimes better to not talk too much and it is sometimes better to talk. This always depends on the person who is dying. I know of situations where the dying person *is at peace with itself*, but the person that wants to be there for it is *nervous*. This person is then *not* a help, but a *hindrance*. It is important to perceive what the dying person requires at a given moment. If one is too clinging as an attendant, the dying find it *particularly difficult* to leave.

 Once a person has died, it is important according to Tibetan tradition, that one should not behave as if that person has left us and no longer exists. One should rather see this person as someone who is *in a state of transition*. The soul adopts a different form. Just like with any transition - this person requires support. Food and the like is traditionally burned as offerings. When one eats, one should try to maintain a connection and one should give support for at least the first 49 days.

 The children in the West are often not too closely attached to their parents. When the parents die, the children want *to inherit the parents money*, but they are not interested in seeing or in helping their parents. I sometimes think that it would do well for the children to not only think of themselves, but to use the inherited money for charitable purposes for instance, for things that the parents cared about, thereby *also helping their own soul* and their spirit.

D. M. : You are going to teach about Phowa during this year’s retreat. What exactly is this Phowa practice?

Rinpoche : The Phowa practice goes back to some very ancient doctrines. It is first of all used *the moment death* occurs and this in order to raise one’s own consciousness to the purer dimensions of enlightened beings. It is about understanding the major energy channels within the body, about recognising the *power of Prana* or the element of wind and about how to utilise them in order to raise the consciousness within the central channel thereby freeing it so that the consciousness can exist the body at the moment of death. This praxis is however *not* restricted to the moment of death, one can also utilise it now, whilst one is still physically alive, when one works with it to open the channels, particularly the central channel.

D. M. : Can Non-Buddhists also work with this praxis?

Rinpoche ; Non-Buddhists can work with the Phowa practice, but in order to really learn Phowa, one has to take refuge, because one can otherwise not correctly practise it. If these people are really interested in this praxis, they might consider becoming Buddhists.

D. M. : Are you presently working on a new book?

Rinpoche : Yes, it deals with the healing practice of the five element and it will hopefully be published in English early next years and probably towards the end of next year in German. It is dealing with understanding the five elements within the Tantra and this in regards to the human body and its energies: How does one balance and fortify it? How does one apply these qualities to achieve enlightenment? And last but not least, it deal with understanding the five elements in regards to our consciousness: In what form of light and space do these elements exist within us? How can one utilise and apply them?

D. M. : Thank you for this interview.

Note: Those that would like more information about the lectures and seminars given by Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche should ring the following telephone number in Germany: 069/4423568 or write to the E-mail address: mihm@praxis-adarsha.de