

ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE INTERVIEW

with
Tulku Thondup

Interview with Tulku Thondup by Linda Sparrowe, editor in chief of Alternative Medicine magazine. A portion of this interview appeared in the May 2006 issue of Alternative Medicine magazine. For more information on the magazine, visit <http://www.alternativemedicine.com>.

1. Tibetan Buddhism often focuses on death and dying. That is a difficult concept for Westerners, I think, who have a fear of death and a preoccupation about it at the same time. Why does Buddhism focus so much on death?

TT: The goal of Buddhism is to improve life. But for Buddhists, life isn't just this one life that we now see. "Life" includes our future lives too, for Buddhism believes in reincarnation, and we see life from that broad perspective. So for us, death is a part of life. It is the unavoidable transition that joins this life to the next.

When I lived in my monastery in Eastern Tibet, we used to contemplate our mortality and the changeable nature of the world every morning. The purpose was to keep us on track and anchored in reality. There's nothing like the unavoidability of death to focus the mind on what is truly important in life – spiritual values.

We have all asked ourselves: "What should I do with my life?" The fact that we ask this shows that we have some notion that our time here is short and that we should use it wisely.

When we understand our mortality and the speed with which life is passing -- not just intellectually, but from the heart, -- we will innately know what to do with our time here. We will automatically want to deepen our spiritual qualities, for everything else is left behind at death.

Death makes us realize how precious every moment is. We start to critically examine everything we do in this light: "Will this activity further my spiritual evolution and the evolution of all beings, or not?" If it does, we will spend more time on it. If it doesn't, we will waste less of our precious time on it, and perhaps even eliminate it altogether.

Consider our situation from the perspective of death. Rich or poor, famous or unknown, this body is just a guesthouse. It is our mind, consciousness, or soul that will continue on, carrying with it nothing but its habitual patterns and spiritual imprints of all the good and bad that we did in life. Buddhism teaches that our mind will migrate and take rebirth in a new body. As anyone with children knows, they're don't come into this world as a fresh slate. Each of us has a long history going far back in time.

Where we will reborn next and whether we will be happy or not, all depends on the state of our mind now, the mental habits we cultivate, and what we do in this life.

Buddhism explains that everything we think, feel, and do generates a corresponding positive or negative imprint in our subconscious mind. Selfless, peaceful, and joyful thoughts leave imprints that will give rise to the most wondrous forms, sounds, and feelings in our future lives. Negative thoughts will give rise to frightful sights, sounds, and experiences.

At this moment, we can't see the imprints we have etched in our mind. But we will see them when we leave our body at death, for then we will be nothing but mind. The superficial layers of our mind will peel away, exposing the inner layers. Whatever mental habits we sowed there will manifest and unfold as our new reality. We will be reborn in a place that corresponds to our predominant mental habits.

If we cultivate a peaceful and joyful mindset now, we will be reborn in a world of peace and joy after death. We might come back as a wonderful person. Or we might go to a heavenly paradise of light and love, which Buddhists call "pure lands." If we go to these paradises we will become enlightened in that very lifetime. Enlightened ones know every being's needs and can help each of them, if he or she is open.

If, on the other hand, we are filled with, say, jealousy, we will be reborn in a world that reflects that mindset: a competitive world where beings always try to sabotage each other.

The beauty of life is that, like a rewritable CD, we can erase and create whatever imprints we wish in our mind. By cultivating qualities like compassion and peace we can wipe our negative imprints and replace them with positive ones. So we control our future. Every moment is a fresh chance to imprint something new.

So, yes, death is a difficult topic. But thinking about it is so worthwhile. Understanding death will transform how we live. We will instinctively know what's important and what's not, and stop wasting time. We will want to cultivate qualities that will make us blossom spiritually and radiate peace and joy for all – and not just in this life, but also in the infinite future.

2. Doesn't focusing on death in your meditation make it more difficult to be in the present, to be really living? Doesn't it take me away from my day-to-day activities? Wouldn't such a focus add more stress to our lives?

TT: You might think that meditating on death and rebirth would be stressful. However, stress – the bad kind anyway – usually occurs when we feel scared and helpless.

Regarding feeling scared, we tend to fear what we don't know, just as children are afraid of the dark. But Buddhism gives us all the information we need about death. Enlightened Buddhist masters going back to the Buddha have described death and after-death in detail. Even today, clairvoyant Tibetan adepts – including my own teacher -- can remember their past lives and see where others take rebirth.

Tibet also has an amazing tradition of people who undergo prolonged near-death experiences (they're called *delog*, returners from death). They travel extensively through the next world until they revive, days later, to share vivid

accounts of what they saw and learned. My book, *Peaceful Death, Joyful Rebirth*, describes 11 such stories. Simply having all this information demystifies death and helps reduce our fears.

As for feeling helplessness, Buddhism's core message is that we can handle death and our journey beyond. There's no reason to feel helpless. No matter how negative our life may be now, Buddhism shows us how we can dispel the nightmare of our confusion and usher in the dawn of peace and joy when we die.

Also, if we believe in life after death, preparing for our next incarnation is the ultimate insurance policy. It lets us rest easier and enjoy life more. It's like students before exams. They can't feel confident unless they studied. Or it's like stocking up before a storm. If the refrigerator is full, we can relax despite the storm. So preparing for rebirth should make us feel more confident and hopeful.

Now, if thinking about death just makes us worry without doing anything constructive to improve our lives, then that's not helpful and we should think less about it, and try to improve our life.

Meditations on death and rebirth do not remove us from living fully in the present. What is most important to living fully is not to be aware of every detail in our surroundings. Rather, it is to be aware of the peaceful, joyful, devotional, compassionate qualities in our own mind and heart.

That's what most death and rebirth meditations try to do: transform awareness from the inside. In many meditations, we imagine that we are in a celestial paradise of light and love. We generate feelings of peace, devotion, joy, love, purity, and respect, and contemplate in them. The purpose is to transform our mind's way of perceiving so that we see everything with peace, devotion, joy, love, purity, and respect.

When that happens, we begin to really live life fully, bringing these amazing mental qualities to everything we do, for the mind is the source of everything. As our mind becomes more peaceful and joyful, whatever we say or do becomes the expression of that peace and joy. We become a source of peace and joy for others. And after we die, these inner qualities will manifest for us as a world of peace, joy, and love, and we will be reborn in such a world.

As we develop these inner mental qualities, we experience everything -- from washing the dishes to taking a walk -- as much more beautiful, vibrant, and open. Why? Because when we transform our mind, we transform our perception of the world -- and that is what fills life with meaning, richness, and wonderment.

Right now, we don't control how we think and feel much. We mostly just react to external events and our surroundings. If someone slights us, for instance, we immediately feel hurt. If we live in an ugly house, we're resentful. However, by making our mind more peaceful and joyful, we eventually bring the celestial world of happiness and peace into our own heart and mind. Then, even if we live in the same house, we will be happy there.

Also, preparing for our next incarnation requires that we be always watchful of what we're thinking and feeling. We need to be able to catch our negative thoughts and feelings and stop them, and then consciously replace them with

positive thoughts and feelings. That's how to wipe out old mental habits and etch new imprints in our mind. So it takes a lot of being present in the moment to train for death and rebirth properly.

3. Do you offer meditations on death and dying to those who are not initiated into the Buddhist tradition?

TT: Actually, most Buddhist meditations on death and dying are for everyone. They are intended to help us peel off the outer layers of our mind and bring us closer to the amazing wisdom, peace, and joy that we possess in the core of our own minds.

My book, *Peaceful Death, Joyful Rebirth*, focuses on some of the most accessible, yet also most powerful, death meditations in Tibetan Buddhism: those on the Buddha of Infinite Light (Amitabha) and his pure land, or paradise. The only condition is that we be open to them.

Here is the meditation in brief.

First, we visualize the Buddha of Infinite Light and his pure land (or paradise), vast as the universe, in the sky before us. It is a beautiful world, made of colorful rainbow-like wisdom light filled with infinite enlightened beings of light. They have omniscient wisdom, unconditioned love as a mother to her only child, and the power to fulfill all our wishes, if we are open for that. In truth, they are not someone else, but the reflection of the enlightened qualities of our own mind.

Then, filling the whole universe with the celebratory sound of prayer, we chant *Om A(Ah)-mi-ta-bha hri (Oh Buddha of Infinite Light, please heed me!)*, again and again. We visualize and feel that the wisdom, compassion, and power of the Buddha and all the enlightened ones flood into our body and mind in the form of streams of blessing lights - the purest qualities of the elements of earth, water, fire and air -- with blissful-heat. All our physical impurities are cleansed and we are transformed into a pure body of light. Our mind is transformed into a mind with wisdom, compassion, and power. We feel and enjoy the experience over and over. We then share the blessing lights with all beings and the universe, especially the dying and dead. Finally, we contemplate in the resulting feeling, relaxing in it without thinking.

If your faith permits it, you could incorporate this meditation into your own tradition. Pray to the divinity or higher power of your faith, receive their blessings, and contemplate in the feeling that results -- be it peace, joy, compassion, or whatever other positive feeling you may have.

4. What can such a meditation teach us about who we are and how we are connected to one another, to those who came before us and those who have yet to come?

TT: Buddhism teaches that we were all each other's parents or children in at least one of our infinite lives. Anyone could be our son or daughter in the future. We are invisibly linked in many ways.

Death meditations are much more powerful when we appreciate our interconnectedness and generate love and the wish to help all beings. This caring

attitude opens our mind. And it is the truth. According to Buddhism, we all share the same foundation: we're all basically good and enlightened. It's our rigid mentalities and negative emotional habits that trick us, like nightmares, into thinking that we are separate from each other.

Meditations like the one on pure land help break the walls that separate us by purifying negative emotions like hatred, greed, and jealousy and awakening universal qualities like joy, peace, respect, devotion, openness, compassion, and wisdom. We deepen the feeling of interconnectedness by imagining that we are praying with countless other beings and by sharing blessing lights with all at the end of the meditation.

Also, the reason we train to go to the pure land in the first place is to serve others. Pure land beings have clairvoyance to see what others need and power to help them – far more power than we have here. Once such beings attain enlightenment, they become omniscient and can manifest what every being needs, if he or she is open.

5. For those who are not Buddhists, can they enhance their own lives and their own spiritual tradition by incorporating some of these practices?

TT: The meditations in my book can be incorporated into any spiritual tradition that permits. You can substitute the Buddha of Infinite Light and his pure land for whatever higher being and heavenly world that you believe in. Enlightened beings and heavenly worlds transcend all boundaries of culture, language, and tradition.

All beings are enlightened in their true nature. Every one of us can unlock our true nature that is preserved in the depth of our mind. The meditations I give are essentially designed to help us uncover our enlightened nature, and refine and perfect it so that it may shine forth to serve all beings with the same love we would have towards our only child or our own parents. They apply to any tradition.

6. What are a few practices we can do to prepare ourselves for the death of those we love as well as our own death?

TT: The death of someone we love is always difficult because we think it is the end of our physical connection with them in this life. But death is not the end; there will be life after death.

Still, to reduce the shock of death, we should get used to the idea that he or she will die. Death is part of life. We are always losing things as we get older. Understanding this will make it less shocking when it happens.

If we could feel confident that our loved one will have a better future after death, that will bring joy and mitigate the pain of separation. So we should always look out for our loved one's spiritual wellbeing. Since the mind is the main source of what happens after death, we should encourage whatever makes the person's mind more peaceful, joyful, and kind, as that will result in a happier rebirth for them. Even if the person is still negative, feeling that we did our best for their future happiness, that we made even a small difference, will be very healing to us psychologically and spiritually.

We should remember that we are not helpless in the face of our loved one's death. The closer a person is to us, the more our prayers can make a difference for them. The reason is that the closer people are, the more channels link them together. So people dear to us will be more receptive to us spiritually. Knowing this will help us channel grief in constructive ways and help us and them.

Lastly, we can pray that we, our loved ones, and all beings take rebirth in a pure land, a paradise, when we die. The message of Buddhism is that we determine where we go after death. The thought patterns we generate now will guide our journey then. So if we prepare to go to a pure land, it is entirely possible to reunite and become enlightened together there. We can do the pure land meditation I described earlier.

Also, whenever we do anything positive, -- meditation, charity, whatever, -- we can dedicate the good karma we created to all beings for their rebirth in a pure land. Dedicating like this augments the positive force of our efforts to be reborn there manifold.

7. Many people face the painful task of helping a parent or someone they love when they are sick or at the end of their life. Does Buddhism have any tools for us to become more present to those who are dying? Are there rituals or meditations we can do if we haven't been initiated into the secrets of Tibetan Buddhism?

TT: Caring for a sick or dying parent or loved one is an amazing spiritual practice.

It isn't always easy, of course. In those moments we should remind ourselves what a privilege it is to help another; what an opportunity it is to grow in patience, compassion, strength, and love – extraordinary mental qualities that will become a great source of good karmas for ourselves and others. So if we feel resistance, we should try to break through it and feel thankful for the privilege of helping the person during this hard time. The words "thank you" are magical in how they open our mind and heart. If we approach the situation this way, every moment will be a blessing.

It is very important to prepare yourself spiritually and meditatively, as the person nears the end of life. If your mind is peaceful, joyful, and energized with blessings, your presence and whatever you say will help. If you are sad, nervous, and shaky, your help will be less effective. So meditate and pray yourself. Try not to lose your own spiritual ground. Instead extend your experience to the person. Consider the mental, habitual and cultural background of the person and think about what help would best suit them.

If it is proper, hold the dying person's hand. Look at them with kindness and confidence. Give whatever advice is proper. Meditate and think that the blessing lights and energies that you are experiencing are being transferred to them. Think that all their fear, worry, and sadness are totally dispelled in the form of darkness from their body and mind.

Don't talk to the dying person about too many things, even if they are profound, for as people prepare to leave, their minds become less sharp. Say less, but make it meaningful. Just say something like, "Remember that the Buddha of

Infinite Light [or whatever higher being the person believes in] is with you" or " *Om A(ah)-mi-ta-bha hri.*" Say this over and over. This is simple and easy to comprehend. Repeating it with a gentle, strong voice makes it sink into the person's mind and could remain with them through their journey.

How we speak to the dying person is as important as what we say. Everything should be from the heart. Everything should be said calmly, truthfully, with confidence. Do nothing that would hurt or upset the person. Say nothing that might create anger, confusion, or attachment.

Keep reminding the person to pray to whatever higher power they trust in. If you know whom they pray to, you can invoke them, too. If the person has no tradition, but is open to prayer, you might ask if they would like to repeat a prayer like, "God, please be with me all the time." If the person is Buddhist, remind them to pray to whatever Buddha they prayed to. You can use the meditation on the Buddha of Infinite Light and his pure land described earlier.

8. Are there simple meditation practices we can do once someone has died to help him or her and help ourselves in the grieving process?

TT: People who have just died may stay around familiar places and people for a few days before continuing on. They have semi-clairvoyance to read others' minds. So it would be a great help if survivors refrained from thinking or saying anything impolite about the deceased and postponed all thoughts of inheritance for some days.

In my book, *Peaceful Death, Joyful Rebirth*, I describe the prolonged near-death experiences of 11 gifted Tibetans that offer an amazing insight into what it is like on the other side. One woman said that after she died, she stayed in her house for some time. Her grieving children's tears felt like hail pelting her. Their cries sounded like thunderclaps. But when friends came to pray for her, she felt immense joy and peace. When one man visualized himself as the Buddha of Infinite Light, she saw him as a translucent Buddha and experienced ineffable joy and security. Such experiences are common, which is why Buddhists urge survivors to pray or at least generate peaceful, celebratory feelings after someone dies.

When a person passes away, they are just mind. Whatever they think instantly appears, their karma permitting. If the deceased could remember higher beings, those beings would instantly appear, conjuring up all associated feelings of devotion, love, peace, and joy. This experience would help them greatly in their journey.

That is why we could also remind our dying loved one: "You might see and hear scary or beautiful images and sounds. If you do, remember that they are not real. They are just the projections of your mind, like dreams. Don't get scared. Don't get attached. Just keep remembering the presence of the Blessed One (whomever the person believes in). Keep praying to the Blessed One. Bathe in their blessings. That will protect you. That will lead you to a wonderful place."

For a simple meditation, think and feel that the room and house where the body is resting is filled with peace and calm. Rest in that feeling as long as you can. When your mind is peaceful, visualize and think that the deceased person is bathing in that peace, over and over. Then think and feel that the room fills with light, light of joy, and that the deceased is bathing in that light of joy. Stay in that feeling as

long as you can. This meditation will help anchor the deceased's floating mind, calm their fear, and fill them with light and joy.

If you are religious, visualize and feel the presence of the Blessed One in which you and the deceased have faith. Pray and ask the Blessed One to envelope the deceased in blessings and feel the peace and light, as above, believing that it came from the Blessed One. This will help the deceased and spontaneously ease your own sadness and pain. Helping the deceased through prayer and meditation brings consolation to your heart.

The following simple suggestions may also help with grief.

In your mind's eye, see your grief as a huge, dark cloud. Feel that the whole sky of your mind is covered with this heavy cloud of sadness. Then see an opening in the clouds. A patch of bright blue sky and sunrays pour through it. The opening gets bigger and brighter. Finally, all the clouds dissolve and fade away without leaving a trace. Believe that your sadness dissolves with the clouds.

All you now see in the sky of your mind is the clear, clean, wide open, bright blue sky and a magnificent shining sun, the sun of joy.

The open sky is the clarity and openness of your mind. The sun is the joy of your mind. Feel the sun's joyous rays shining on your face. Feel the clear, open blue sky in your heart. Let yourself be in communion with the sky and sunlight. Know that only joy and openness are in you.

Whenever we feel sad, we should remember that in its true nature, our mind is totally peaceful, clear, clean, joyous, open, and wise. No matter what happens in our life, this true nature is unstained. Simply remembering that we have these qualities within us will give us strength, confidence, and hope.

If you can't help feeling sad, give yourself permission to feel sad. Tell yourself, "Of course I am sad. It's okay to feel sad – something serious happened."

However, instead of dwelling on the sadness, try to focus on whatever is positive in the situation. Even if the picture looks 99% bleak and just 1% positive, if you focus on the 1%, it will become bigger and stronger and may eventually subsume the 99%.

So explain to yourself: "I am sad because of my love for this person. My tears are the expression of my love. It is wonderful." The moment you see your sadness as a positive, your mind will emerge from the negative clouds of sadness and experience joy.

Try to recall happy memories. Think about the person's good qualities.

Remember that sadness will pass. Nothing is permanent. Everything changes momentarily. Time does heal. Tell yourself, "it will pass." If you do, the burden of the sadness will lessen. But if you tell yourself, "I'll never ever get over this," the sadness will feel heavier.

We always want everything to be smooth sailing in life. That's normal. But difficult times are an amazing source of refining our lives, if we know how to use

them. They help us grow even more than good times do. They make us realistic, resourceful, wise, intelligent, and strong. So when you feel grief, remind yourself that every trial has a treasure buried within it, and that you will see little shoots of green grass beginning to sprout in your life.

9. The Tibetan system of bardos is also a difficult thing for most Westerners to understand. Do we move through them only after death or during the dying process?

TT: The bardo is the transitional passage between death and rebirth. When we die, we lose consciousness. When we regain it, we find ourselves outside of the body and our bardo journey begins. It ends the moment we reincarnate.

Our experience in the bardo is like a dream. It isn't real. But we think it is, just as we believe our dreams are real when we're dreaming.

Our mental habits are all-important in the *bardo*. Without a physical body to anchor us, we have little mental stability. So we fall back on our habitual mental patterns. Our thoughts and feelings unfold as the terrain we experience in the *bardo*. For one person it could be raining weapons; for another, flowers. It all depends on what habits we sowed in our mind.

Jealousy and hatred will assume threatening, scary forms. Joy and peace will manifest as loving, sublime beings who welcome us and lead us to happy rebirths.

Most of the people who had prolonged near-death experiences that I describe in my book met divine helpers after death. They were all devout. One woman encountered a female Buddha blazing in a sphere of light when she died, for instance. This Buddha whisked her off to a pure land. Another woman was met by a radiant male Buddha. Yet another person was overjoyed when he encountered the historical Buddha.

We, too, can have wonderful experiences in the *bardo*, for we control our destiny. Right now, with our mind anchored in this body, we can cultivate positive mental habits through meditation. Doing so will enrich our life now, contribute to a better society, and usher in the dawn of peace and joy for our future.

Death isn't an easy subject. But there are few subjects that are as worth our while to understand.