

KHENPO'S
TALKS

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

**THE
MYSTERY
OF
PAST
LIVES**



**KHENPO
SODARGYE**

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The Mystery of Past Lives

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Khenpo Sodargye

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University of Toronto

THE MYSTERY OF PAST LIVES

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Host

What a joy to see such a vibrant and attentive audience gathered for this remarkable speaker and topic. It is my great honor and privilege to introduce Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche, one of the most influential and respected Tibetan Buddhist scholars in China today. This occasion is especially significant as it marks his very first visit to Toronto.

Last week, I had the incredible opportunity to attend Khenpo's lecture at York University, titled "Meditation—Finding Comfort and Ease in the Nature of Mind." That experience was profoundly transformative—unexpected, insightful, and deeply inspiring. In a world often filled with confusion, artifice, and superficiality, it was refreshing to encounter authenticity without pretense. Despite the language barrier, his message resonated powerfully, revealing a teacher who fully embodies the dharma with practicality. His teachings are grounded in evidence, infused with wisdom, and delivered with a delightful sense of humor.

Tonight's presentation, "The Mystery of Past Lives," addresses a topic of profound relevance to our lives. Whether or not you

believe in reincarnation or a future life, the concept of rebirth unfolds in every moment of our current existence. Each moment invites us to reflect on our minds, to consider what we have done in the past, and to recognize what we are shaping for our future—drawing from past influences while planting seeds for what lies ahead. I greatly look forward to hearing Khenpo’s reflection on this subject, especially given his unique ability to seamlessly weave together scientific inquiry with spiritual insight, as I witnessed last week at York. We are indeed fortunate to be able to share in this rare and enriching opportunity. Thank you all for your full attention.

KHENPO SODARGYE RINPOCHE

(Khenpo Sodargye delivered the following paragraph in Tibetan to the Tibetan attendees.)

At first, I had intended to speak with you in Tibetan. However, using Chinese is more convenient, as it is much easier to find a Chinese-English translator than a Tibetan-English translator. And since the Tibetans present here also understand English, I will continue in Chinese with an English translation.

This is my first visit to Toronto. A few days ago, I spoke about meditation at York University. Yesterday, I had the opportunity to discuss Buddhist cosmological theories with faculty and students from the University of Toronto's Department for the Study of Religion. It was heartening to see that so many educators and students here are deeply concerned about the state of the world, the nature of the human mind, and the value of life. Tonight, we will explore together the mystery of past lives.

CONTEMPLATING LIFE AND DEATH

As our host just mentioned, reincarnation is not an abstract concept, but a reality woven into the fabric of every moment of our daily lives. Yet, in contemporary society, many people show little curiosity about this subject. This lack of interest largely stems from two key factors. First, mainstream culture in both Eastern and Western societies prioritizes external pursuits—such as wealth and material success—over inward exploration of the mind and spiritual world. Educational systems, research, and cultural norms often reinforce this outward focus, sidelining the deeper inner inquiry of our lives.

Second, the rapid growth of urban populations and the information overload in the digital age have made our minds increasingly restless and distracted. Since my birth in 1962, the global population has surged from about 3.1 billion to over 7.7 billion today,¹ accompanied by an explosive spread of information worldwide. We are now inundated with an unprecedented amount of data every day. While this connectivity offers benefits, it also contributes to collective mental agitation and fragmentation, significantly reducing our inclination to explore questions about life's deeper realities, such as "Where did I come from?" or "What awaits me after death?"

A scientist once remarked that the mysteries of birth and death remain largely uncharted, a statement that prompts reflection. Are past and future lives so incomprehensible that they lie beyond our grasp? I believe they are not. Through persistent and dedicated inquiry, anyone can discover clear answers to questions concerning life and death. We know the physical body forms in the womb and disintegrates after death, but what of consciousness? Have we truly pondered the nature of consciousness and what conclusions we can draw?

A Nobel laureate once said in a lecture, "If there is an afterlife, I hope..." words that stirred an ineffable emotion in me. His vision of an afterlife, tethered to the uncertainty of "if," left a lingering sense of limitation. Growing up in a religious household, I had always believed in the continuity of past and future lives. However, during my academic years, exposure to atheism and materialism sowed seeds of doubt: "Do past and future lives exist? Or is death simply an absolute end, like a lamp going out?" This uncertainty left me in a fog of ambiguity about life beyond death.

After my ordination, I turned to Buddhism for answers, immersing myself in numerous Indian and Tibetan Buddhist texts on reincarnation. I also consulted a wide range of Eastern and

Western sources, both ancient and modern, carefully comparing their perspectives. Alongside this study, I engaged in rigorous debates with wise monastics in our academy—whether amid winter’s snow or summer’s rain. Debate, a distinctive and cherished tradition in Tibetan Buddhism, sharpens the mind by requiring participants to thoughtfully challenge opposing views and skillfully defend one’s own; its invigorating intensity inspires deep insight. Through dedicated research and debate, my doubts dissolved, and my faith in the reality of past and future lives grew firm.

Since then, I have translated Tibetan Buddhist texts on this subject and shared my insights with diverse audiences in various settings. When I discuss past and future lives—particularly the afterlife—many people instinctively associate the topic with death, often treating it as a taboo and hesitating to discuss further. They may believe that a peaceful death represents a positive conclusion and that exploring such matters offers little practical benefit. This tendency to avoid the subject may come from a place of vulnerability and a gentle reluctance to confront such a profound reality.

Despite the advancements of modern science and medicine, which have extended our lifespans, every individual will eventually face the end of this life. If death were the absolute cessation of everything, there would be little need for concern. But if consciousness continues into future lives, then contemplating and preparing for those lives becomes crucial. Wholesome deeds can lead to positive consequences in this life and beyond. Even if we entertain the unlikely hypothesis that afterlives do not exist, living by moral principles causes no harm and can only bring benefits, such as happiness and well-being.



THE JOURNEY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

In the following discussion, I will briefly examine the continuity of consciousness across past, present, and future lives from a Buddhist perspective, while occasionally drawing parallels to related ideas in science. As a Buddhist practitioner, I believe the pursuit of truth transcends religion, ethnicity, or nationality, uniting us in this shared exploration.

1 Exploring the Origin of Consciousness: Insights into Past Lives

What is the origin of past lives? While some may view this inquiry as an insurmountable challenge, it is not beyond our reach. We all acknowledge the existence of the mind, and with wisdom and logical analysis, it is not that difficult to examine the origin of consciousness. When a person is born, does the very first moment of their consciousness arise without a cause? This idea is irrational and contradicts our everyday experience, as it would imply that minds could appear randomly at any time or place; such a notion defies logic and reality.

Having rejected the idea of a mind arising without a cause, we then consider whether the cause of consciousness is permanent or impermanent. If it were permanent—whether envisioned

as a creator, an almighty God, or the great Shiva—it could not logically produce effects in accordance with the law of causation. By definition, anything that brings about change or generates something new cannot itself remain unchanging or permanent. Reflect on our daily experience: Are the causes of any phenomenon permanent? If a cause is truly permanent, how could it give rise to change or results? If a permanent cause produces an effect, does it remain identical before and after? If so, the very concept of causation becomes meaningless; if not, the cause must undergo change, thereby forfeiting its permanence. This line of reasoning compels us to conclude that a permanent entity cannot give rise to any phenomenon.

Therefore, the cause must be impermanent. Such impermanent causes could produce consciousness of all living beings either simultaneously or sequentially. The first possibility contradicts direct perception, as beings are born at different times rather than all at once. Thus, sequential creation must be the case. The next question is whether this creation process is intentional or unconscious. If it were intentional, it would suggest a deliberative creator deciding, “I shall create this virtuous individual and that wicked one...,” a notion unsupported by most religious and philosophical traditions. On the other hand, the idea of an unconscious creation process also lacks supporting evidence.

My intention is not to criticize any faith, but to urge a deeper engagement: let us apply rigorous logical analysis and thorough examination, guided by our wisdom. This approach is crucial. When a theory cannot be substantiated by logical reasoning, we should turn to exceptionally sound and reliable scriptural teachings. If a viewpoint lacks support from both logic and scripture, it deserves further scrutiny, regardless of the religion from which it stems.

At this stage, some might argue, “Consciousness originates in the brain, or from the father’s sperm and the mother’s ovum.” This view, common in contemporary atheistic thought, suggests that consciousness emerges from the evolution of our genetic material. However, it faces logical hurdles. The mind or consciousness is self-aware; its main cause or perpetuating cause must share this nature. Thus, consciousness must arise from the preceding moment of consciousness, not from an inanimate matter like the body. The physical body acts only as a cooperating condition, like sunlight and water supporting a sprout that grows from a seed. The seed is the main cause; the sunlight and water are the cooperating conditions.

One might also question, “If past and future lives are real, why do so few believe in them?” Remember the saying, “Truth always

rests with the minority.” This pattern has repeated throughout history. For example, heliocentrism was dismissed for centuries in favor of geocentric models, and scientists who supported the heliocentric view were persecuted for their beliefs.

2 Life Beyond Death: The Enduring Consciousness

The teachings of Padmasambhava, the founding master of Tibetan Buddhism, emphasize the continuity of consciousness beyond death. For instance, when Princess Pema Sal², the young daughter of King Trisong Detsen, passed away, the King was overcome with grief. Padmasambhava taught him that each person must face death, yet death is not the end. While the body dissolves, consciousness endures without end. By realizing the true nature of human life and attaining enlightenment—the ultimate meaning of precious life—one transcends the six realms of samsara. These teachings deserve our careful contemplation. Sometimes, a single lecture or a remark from a wise master can inspire and guide us through both our present and future lives.

With respect to the continuity of consciousness across past, present, and future lives, the Indian Buddhist master Dharmakirti’s treatises provide extensive and compelling arguments. While I will not delve into his detailed analysis here, it is worth

noting that some scientists have also explored the persistence of consciousness beyond physical boundaries. For example, John Eccles, the 1963 Nobel laureate in Physiology or Medicine, devoted much of his career to studying neurophysiology and later explored questions of consciousness. He authored numerous works, including *The Self and Its Brain* (co-authored with Karl Popper) and *Facing Reality*, which I recommend reading. In these books, he posited that a non-material “consciousness of self” interacts with the brain much like a user operates a computer. He explicitly suggested that consciousness might survive the body’s dissolution.

The possibility of consciousness continuing beyond death is also suggested by American biologist Robert Lanza. While his numerous awards are noteworthy, my primary interest lies in his theory of Biocentrism, detailed in his book *Biocentrism*³. In it, Lanza presents seven principles that explain how consciousness shapes everything in the material world, suggesting it may persist beyond physical death. A passage of the book writes: “In the end, even Einstein admitted, ‘Now Besso’ (one of his oldest friends) ‘has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing. People like us. . . know that the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.’”⁴ Such perspectives imply that

life transcends space and time, pointing to a more profound reality.

In fact, the existence of future lives can bring comfort amid widespread fear of mortality. A significant number of people believe that death marks the absolute end, which often fuels anxiety and a frantic pursuit of wealth. A substantial portion of Chinese society prioritizes saving money, only to regret it when their funds are left unused at the end of life. In addition, family members may later find their bank accounts inaccessible after the passing. In essence, ample evidence from spiritual traditions and science supports the continuity of consciousness and the existence of past and future lives, even if few can recall their previous reincarnations.

3 Why Do We Forget Our Past Lives?

Some might question: “If past lives are real, why can’t I remember them?” The inability to recall does not negate their existence; there are explanations for this apparent memory gap. Consider, for instance, dark matter and dark energy—though invisible to the naked eye, their existence is widely accepted by science. Similarly, the hidden treasures buried beneath the homes of some fortunate individuals may or may not be discovered by them. In the same way, the true nature of our minds and latent

potentials—whether in music, art, or sciences—may remain unrecognized, yet still exist within us. By these analogies, the lack of recollection does not negate the truth of past and future lives. Thus, dismissing their reality based solely on absent memories warrants a second look.

Buddhist sutras provide further insight into this phenomenon. When consciousness enters the womb, memories of previous lives are often obscured by the veil of gestation, much like how a basement can block the transmission of signals. Nevertheless, cases of past-life recall do occur. Among a few people who experience past-life recall, children are especially likely to report vivid memories of previous lives. Such accounts have been recorded across eras and cultures, among people of various religious and non-religious backgrounds. I have personally met individuals with clear recollections of their past lives. Anyone who seeks to reject the existence of past lives is unlikely to prevail, given the substantial and well-documented body of evidence available for their existence.



THE ETERNAL QUEST: EXPLORING CONSCIOUSNESS AND REINCARNATION

I suggest delving into pertinent Buddhist texts, which provide in-depth insights into past lives, and their continuity into future ones across countless lifetimes, as well as offer practical guidance for the present life, including methods of training the mind. More importantly, these teachings describe the journey of consciousness after death: free from the body, it may take rebirth in any of the six realms—such as human, animal, celestial, or hell realms—based on accumulated karma.

Beyond Buddhism, certain religions acknowledge the existence of heaven and hell. When I ask adherents from these traditions details about heaven and hell, such as whether one can dwell in heaven or hell eternally, a common response is that such matters are beyond human comprehension. While this view holds merit, I find Buddhism's articulation particularly clear: celestial beings may fall to lower realms after exhausting their good karma, and those in hell can escape suffering and ascend to higher realms, either as humans or celestial beings, upon exhausting their negative karma. In light of various views among religions, I propose that frequent interreligious dialogue—where different traditions share insights and complement one another—would

greatly enrich our understanding of life and the nature of consciousness.

In summary, consciousness has endured from beginningless time to the present moment, and will continue to cycle through samsara until liberation is attained. As educators and students, it is essential that we apply our wisdom to unravel the mysteries of consciousness. Even Buddhists are called to engage in ongoing inquiry into the truth of past and future lives. Although Buddhist teachings offer extensive information on this subject, a superficial acquaintance is insufficient for developing a clear understanding and unwavering conviction.

When asked whether past and future lives exist, some Buddhists may simply answer “yes,” yet struggle to provide reasons when pressed further, having never deeply contemplated or logically examined the issue. They might focus earnestly on chanting a buddha’s name but neglect the cultivation of clear understanding and conviction in Buddhist teachings—an approach that is not advisable.

BEYOND BOUNDARIES: EMBRACING A UNIVERSAL VISION OF LIFE

The truth about life before and after death should not be limited to sectarian beliefs, but rather be embraced as a universal understanding that is accessible and beneficial to all. Unfortunately, numerous people today remain unaware of this reality. Such understanding does not require religious dogma; anyone can discover it through personal exploration and even try to refute such a theory with solid evidence. Buddhism, with its open and inclusive nature, welcomes critical inquiry and debate.

Currently, the urgent priority is not to dwell on religious or sectarian biases but to recognize that a foundational truth about life has always existed—yet it eludes many, resulting in a significant loss for humanity. Clinging to unfounded beliefs is irrational, but ignoring reality is an even greater misfortune. I encourage everyone to cultivate a clear and discerning mind, using extraordinary wisdom to investigate the truth—you will be amazed by what you can find.

Developing a correct outlook on life is essential. All beings share a fundamental aspiration: to be free from suffering and to attain lasting happiness. How can we achieve this universal goal?

Buddhism teaches that this aspiration is fulfilled by cultivating a fundamental human value: wholesome actions lead to happiness, while unwholesome actions result in suffering. When we develop a correct perspective on life and embrace the core human principle, not only do our individual lives improve, but our families thrive, and the world becomes more harmonious and beautiful.

(Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche gave the following closing remark in Tibetan.)

Finally, I wish everyone here—especially the Tibetan guests—success in your spiritual practice and may auspiciousness and good fortune accompany you all.



QUESTION AND ANSWER

QUESTION 1 A psychotherapy book suggests that some individuals' fear of water may originate from past-life memories, such as drowning in a previous life. How do you assess the validity of this view?

KHENPO SODARGYE The causes of inner afflictions, such as fear, are complex and multifaceted, including, for example, imprints from past lives or various conditions in our current life. Case studies have shown that some fears are tied to previous-life experiences. For instance, a teacher I know in Toronto shared a verified account of his student who, before the age of three, vividly recalled a past life as a Tanzanian man whose hand was severed in a World War II bombing. Specific details, such as the bombing incident and his younger brother's identity in that life, were confirmed accurate.

QUESTION 2 Can an individual deliberately choose the realm into which they will be reborn, such as a pure land or a hell realm?

KHENPO SODARGYE While the wishes of ordinary beings do carry some influence, rebirth is the natural result of the alignment of causes and conditions. Those with accumulated virtuous karma will ascend to higher realms, such as the celestial realm, or even attain liberation through rebirth in pure lands, often without deliberate intention. Conversely, individuals with accumulated negative karma will find themselves driven by karmic forces to lower realms like hell, despite their resistance.

During my recent lecture in New Zealand, “When God Meets the Buddha,” I mentioned scholars who propose that the Buddhist pure lands and Christian heaven might be comparable realms. Whether this is indeed the case invites thoughtful reflection. What remains clear across both traditions is the universal truth that virtuous actions lead to positive outcomes, including genuine happiness.

QUESTION 3 In hypnotherapy sessions, some patients describe experiences from different eras and locations. Can these be authentically identified as memories from past lives?

KHENPO SODARGYE It is wise to approach this phenomenon with a nuanced view. Hypnotherapy recollections typically fall into two categories. In the first, the recalled experiences

are indeed from a past life, as the mind—through triggers like deep serenity or contemplation—can access deeper layers of consciousness where past-life memories surface. Such an approach is similar to a method adopted in Buddhist meditation. In the second category, the recollections stem not from past lives but from other sources.

QUESTION 4 Given that the past, present, and future are not fixed, can we use visualization and meditation to change our current and future lives, achieve enlightenment, and thereby alter the past?

KHENPO SODARGYE Time can be understood through two key perspectives of ultimate truth and conventional truth. From the standpoint of ultimate truth, upon scrutiny, the future has not yet arisen, the past has already ceased, and the present moment cannot be firmly grasped. In reality, not just time but all phenomena we perceive lack inherent existence when examined at this ultimate level of emptiness—yet they appear and function in our everyday reality. From the perspective of conventional truth, the present feels real; the future warrants planning and anticipation; and the past lingers only as unchangeable memories.

QUESTION 5 Within the vast expanse of the ten directions and across three times—past, present, and future—is the number of sentient beings infinite? Do new conscious entities arise? Where do the beginning and end of a being’s consciousness lie?

KHENPO SODARGYE I will not explain this issue from the tantric perspective, but rather through the lens of the common vehicle. Countless sentient beings are trapped in samsara, each having cycled through the six realms of samsara since beginningless time, with no “new” consciousness arising. Until liberation is attained, they continue to reincarnate within this endless cycle. However, for any being who achieves liberation, their experience of samsara irrevocably ends at that moment. Were you seeking to determine the exact number of sentient beings? Our universe is boundless, and the beings within it are equally immeasurable.

QUESTION 6 On behalf of the Tibetans here, I would like to thank you for your presence. We fully appreciate the language arrangements made today. Could you share what factors or motivations inspired you to embark on the path of Buddhism?

KHENPO SODARGYE Thank you for your kind words and understanding. In our Tibetan homeland, many are born into Buddhist families and raised in a Buddhist environment—and I was no exception. From a young age, I have been immersed in Buddhist life. While my journey has included formal education, diverse experiences, and moments of doubt, my faith has only deepened over time. Through long-term, in-depth study and contemplation, my conviction has become unwavering. I firmly believe that among all forms of knowledge, Buddhist teachings offer the most profound insight into the truth and are worthy of a lifetime of dedicated study and practice.

QUESTION 7 This world is full of extremely tiny life forms such as bacteria, viruses, and various other microorganisms. Do they have minds? Are they sentient beings?

KHENPO SODARGYE Biology classifies plants, bacteria, and many other microorganisms as living entities under a broad ecological definition, but they may not qualify as sentient beings in the narrow sense according to Buddhist teachings. The Buddha explained in relevant sutras that sentient beings consist of the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. Generally, any entity is not regarded as a

sentient being if it lacks any one of the five aggregates, even if it exhibits response, growth, reproduction, and decay. Biology labels certain entities as “life” based on observable traits like reactivity. This difference underscores a fundamental distinction between religious and biological definitions of living beings.

QUESTION 8 One of my significant challenges is a tendency toward irritability, which negatively affects both me and those around me. How can I cultivate better self-regulation and counteract aversion?

KHENPO SODARGYE All human beings are naturally influenced by afflictive emotions—some may be more prone to anger, while others tend toward desire or greed. It is commendable that you recognize your own challenges, as this awareness is the first step toward positive transformation. For Buddhists like you seeking to reduce irritability and cultivate patience, I recommend studying the chapter on patience in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. With over a hundred verses, this chapter has helped many who once struggled with fiery tempers to develop patience, achieve a peaceful mind, and even reach advanced spiritual states. Additionally, physical practices such as prostrations and jogging can help calm and relax the mind, thereby fostering inner peace. Plenty of effective methods are readily

available to you. Remember, the transformation is a gradual process.

NOTES

1. "Population, total," World Bank Group, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.P0P.T0TL?start=1962>
2. Pema Sal, Rigpa Wiki, https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Pema_Sal
3. The full title of this book is *Biocentrism: How Life and Consciousness are the Keys to Understanding the True Nature of the Universe*.
4. Robert Lanza, MD with Bob Berman, *Biocentrism: How Life and Consciousness are the Keys to Understanding the True Nature of the Universe* (Dallas: Benbella Books, Inc., 2010), 106.

Dedication

May the merit resulting from this piece of work contribute
in the greatest possible measure to the long life of all great
masters, to the flourishing of the Buddhadharma,
and to the welfare of all sentient beings.

It is always our wish to present a work of the highest quality to the readers so that anyone who reads this text would find inspiration. So we would very much appreciate your comments, feedback or suggestions for how this text might be improved and made more valuable. You are also greatly welcomed if you want to make a contribution to any of our other projects of translation. Please email us at: *translation@khenposodargye.org*

