



**Ask the Lama**  
**Lama Surya Das**

## Awakening to the Present

### Q. What is the Buddhist perspective on an afterlife?

**A:** Different schools and traditions offer slightly different answers. For example, some Buddhists say that the Buddha himself did not say much about the afterlife, or even about rebirth for that matter, but concentrated on teaching how this life can be lived in virtue and wisdom. A Zen teacher once told me, "The afterlife is just a dream. Be here now." When I said I had heard and read much about it from Tibetan and other sources, he laughed out loud and said, "That is all just a Himalayan nightmare!"

Nonetheless, the Tibetan teachings on dreams, conscious dying, the afterlife or *bardo* (intermediate stage), and rebirth, are very well developed and subtle. They aim to help us awaken from illusion and realize our true nature. These teachings are found in the renowned "Tibetan Book of the Dead," an ancient scripture of the Nyingmapa tradition, recently outlined and commented upon by Sogyal Rinpoche in his best-selling "Tibetan Book of Living and Dying," which I highly recommend.

The concept of an "afterlife" is not generally found in Buddhism. Lamas say that birth is not our beginning nor is death our end, that the bardo is a transitional space between death and rebirth.

The afterlife more properly applies to Christian theology and its notion of a heaven and hell--which people reach after death, depending upon how they live in this world. I used to think that my Jewish ancestors believed in heaven, but when I asked an Orthodox rabbi from Jerusalem who teaches Kabbalah about this, he responded that rather than a permanent heaven or hell, the Kabbalah views all creation as being in constant transition and process until such time when all re-unites in primordial oneness with God.

Buddhists are similarly process-oriented, recognizing the nature of all conditioned phenomena as impermanent, ever-changing, and interconnected. Therefore, Buddhists do not believe in any eternal state such as heaven or hell. The bardo between one life and another, between one day and the next (through the bardo of sleep and dreaming), or between daily reality and spiritual reality through the bardo of meditation are viewed as equally real and unreal. Each stage is simply part of our spiritual journey and can be utilized--either intelligently or unskillfully--as grist for the mill of awakening and enlightenment.

Thus, Buddhism stresses the importance of mindful, ethical, and compassionate living in the Holy Now, each and every moment. Living in this manner helps us awaken from the dream-like nature of everyday existence, come into lucidity while dreaming at night, and awaken through conscious dying and even after death. If in our lives we become awakened, liberated, and free then there is no afterlife to be concerned about.