WORKSHEET 2

DEATH AND REBIRTH FROM A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

From the Buddhist point of view, every period of time is a transition, whether birth, life, death or dying. Every human being has a body, which is composed of conditions and therefore must also die; the mind, which perceives everything, experiences everything and has all qualities inherent in it, is like space and is indestructible by its very nature, beyond time and unlimited. As long as the mind is connected to the body, one lives. If the mind separates completely from the body, one is dead. It connects after about seven weeks with a new developing body at conception. Understanding this fundamentally, that the mind cannot die, one loses the fear of death.

Buddha explained in the teachings on cause and effect that all living beings have corresponding experiences in the cycle of rebirths because of their thoughts, words and deeds, but they can also change them by setting corresponding new causes.
The consciousness - in Buddhism generally called 'mind' - connects from life to life with a new body, depending on the impressions gathered in the previous lives. If one understands the meaning of cause and effect, one will consciously act sensibly and avoid negative impressions as much as possible. Burdensome impressions that one has not cleared up, and things that one always wanted to do and did not do, make the dying process more difficult. Thus, an essential part of Buddha's teaching is to use life meaningfully, as one is constantly planting the seeds for the future, including future lives.

The Buddha gave precise descriptions of the dying process:
When a person is dying, certain processes take place that can be observed, the inner processes are only experienced by the dying person himself. One increasingly loses control over the solid elements in the body, over the body fluids, over the warmth and breathing. At the same time, the senses become weaker and the mind more confused and one often encounters one's fears, in general it can be said that one dies as one has lived. If clinical death is established in medicine - the end of life - this does not mean death in Buddhist terms. It takes about another half hour for all the inner energies to dissolve into each other.
During this half hour after clinical death, it is advisable to leave the body of the dying person alone



The Buddha of Limitless Light (sanskr.: Amithaba, tib.: Öpame)

so that these final energy processes can proceed undisturbed. At this time, the relatives are of great help through calm compassion, conscious presence and trust.

In the so-called Bardo teachings there are detailed descriptions of which processes take place in the mind after death. Different phases throw the untrained mind uncontrollably back and forth for 49 days.
According to Buddhist terminology, there are six realms of consciousness in which one can be reborn. The six realms of existence are called samsara (sanskr.: "coming and going", tib: khorwa: "the wheel"). They are not created by anything external or by a higher power, but are the result of past attitudes, actions, and the resulting experience. The spectrum includes all mental states: from extremely sorrowful to very joyful.
When one is reborn as a human being, the consciousness is drawn to the future parents. It connects with the seed and egg of the parents and a new life is formed. A new body is formed. Here the effects on the causes set earlier are shown:

The tendencies in the mind give a corresponding environment and culture, a body - strong and healthy or susceptible and weak - and the same mental and emotional attitudes.

Some people - especially in early childhood - can remember past lives. Special abilities of so-called "prodigies" suggest that they have already invested their special talents in previous lives.

There are meditation masters who are consciously reborn because of their Bodhisattva attitude, such as the Karmapas, Shamarpas or Dalai Lamas. They are enlightened and free from the cycle of rebirths, but they come back in a human body out of compassion for the benefit of living beings.

In some Buddhist schools, there are meditations aimed at bringing the consciousness to a suffering-free state after death, to a so-called "Pure Land", in Tibetan "Dewachen", which means "Land of Supreme Joy".

EXERCISES

Discuss in your group and mark corresponding passages in the text.

1. How is the "space nature of the mind" described?
2. What is the relationship between mind and body from a Buddhist perspective?
3. Why are beings in the cycle of rebirth?
4. Explain why it is important to become aware of one's habits of thought and action and to change them if necessary.