



How Does the Perspective of Tibetan Buddhist Monks on Impermanence Shape a Positive Attitude Towards Death

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Abstract: Introduction: Perspectives towards death have been largely negative across cultures, where fear, anxiety and avoidance have been prevalent practices in the face of death. Yet certain religions provide frameworks that signify the need to foster acceptance of mortality. Based on Tibetan Buddhism, the concept of impermanence (*anicca*) primarily occupies a central role in understanding the nature of existence and death. The present study is an exploration of how contemplation and practice of impermanence influence the development of a positive attitude toward death among Tibetan Buddhist monastics. **Method:** A qualitative research design was employed using purposive sampling. Nine Tibetan Buddhist monks holding the Geshe degree, equivalent to a doctorate in Buddhist philosophy, participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. **Result:** Four overarching themes emerged from the findings: Acceptance of Death, Purposeful Living Through Impermanence, Spiritual Readiness for Death, and Emotional Resilience Through Impermanence. Findings suggest that the participants learned to perceive death as a natural and inevitable aspect of existence. With that understanding, regular reflection on the nature of impermanence was reported to eliminate fear and adopt acceptance of mortality. **Conclusion:** It could be concluded that impermanence serves both as a spiritual principle and a psychological tool in assisting the participants to cope better with loss, reduce attachment, and develop emotional resilience. The study contributes to death studies by highlighting the potential value of contemplative practices centred on impermanence in promoting psychological well-being.

Keywords: *Impermanence, death acceptance, Tibetan Buddhism, death anxiety, emotional resilience, karma, rebirth*

1. Introduction

Buddhism flourished in the fifth century B.C in the world, and predominantly during the first millennium, it spread in the regions of the South Asian subcontinent (Doney, 2020). This religion eventually reached central Tibet in the 4th century CE. It later seeped deeply into the sentiments of the nation's people, leading to a significant interweaving of the faith with their everyday lives (Apple, 2014).

Tibetan Buddhism, unlike other philosophies, Walshe believes, actively and enthusiastically engages in the discussion, dissemination, and delivery of mortality-based understanding to its disciples, ultimately grounding the core of its doctrine in the acceptance of impermanence (Walshe, 2005). Supporting this perspective, a recent finding conducted upon ayahuasca and non-psychedelic users revealed that impermanence acceptance as the mediator in lower death anxiety levels and avoidance (David et al., 2025). This conceptual framework of impermanence serves as a pivotal avenue towards self-actualization and acceptance of the constant changes occurring around us. It posits the reality of mortality as an inevitable phenomenon and that an individual is obliged to depart from the life lived irrespective of caste, creed or religion. In the contemporary world, the acceptance of impermanence can significantly contribute to leading people to not just live their lives with utmost potential, but rather to foster a positive attitude towards death (Walshe, 2005). Because perspectives on death are most importantly shaped by cultural factors, along with social and familial views.

However, another factor that literature posits assists the Buddhists in reducing their fear of dying might be because they believe in rebirth (Werner, n.d.). An innovative therapeutic intervention, such as the employment of virtual reality in perceiving virtual bodies, and thus taking ownership as a reality, found this approach to reduce thanatophobia with strengthened belief in the afterlife (Blomstrom et al., 2022; Barberia et al., 2018). According to Werner, they do not believe that death is the ‘annihilation’ of existence, due to which those with religious commitment think beyond the nothingness resulting from the disintegration of the biological components, but towards a possibility of another life as a continuum of the present life.

Therefore, aligning with the philosophy of palliative care, Tibetan Buddhism focuses and prioritizes tending to the people at their deathbed with positivity, as it is a crucial component of a natural process, as well as for a better rebirth (Chan et al., 2011). As Smith-Stoner, in 2005 stated regarding the significance of a nursing practice in cultivating a

religious support system during the critical period, the tasks of dying were categorized in terms of Buddhist hospice: transforming suffering and preparing spiritually for death.

According to the book ‘The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying’, it aggravates the idea that death should be carried out peacefully, where accompanying the death with a negative state of mind should be avoided. Such beliefs shape how general religious faith can sometimes diminish fear of death due to its doctrine of the afterlife.

According to Buddhism, by realizing the truth of impermanence, the essential objective is to evoke and indulge in the practice of contentment over greed as the key to internal peace and tranquility. Similarly, it is revealed that understanding the nature of impermanence and the law of dependent origination, karma, cause and effect, significantly helps in overcoming death anxiety, according to the findings of a case study (Kei Cheng, 2016).

According to the Tibetan Buddhist death model: the “biopsychosociospiritual” model (Namdul, 2021), the spiritual state of reflecting upon impermanence and emptiness facilitates in adopting a different perspective about death. Contributing a freshly optimistic outlook towards the nature of life and death in an accepting approach based on the Buddhist philosophy acts as a ‘psychological adaptation tool’ that could equip the population with an insight to spend the better days constructively by marking the death as a red deadline rather than compromising on one’s potentials, passions, productivity and peace by fretting over the ultimate end (Namdul, 2021). Buddhists were usually revealed to be reflecting on impermanence, which makes them psychologically prepared to accept misfortunes in their life but findings regarding the direct correlation between the positive impact of impermanence on impending death were limited. Though one study had recounted how one can approach death with calmness and dignity if reflected upon impermanence (Keown, 2005).

There lies an extensive gap in the current literature, particularly the effects on the death mechanism through the light of impermanence. It is thus coming to be a novel area of research interest. Furthermore, research conducted on the selected population with practice in meditation upon impermanence was extremely deficient, which the current research will strive to fulfil. Since the Tibetan Buddhist monks were exclusively taught and trained in the Buddhist Philosophy, examining the implications and the efficiency of reflecting upon impermanence by the practitioners upon the death awareness and perspective would be reliably profound and academically serve as a different contribution to the field of death

studies.

2. Method

2.1 Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to understand how the perspective of impermanence embedded in Buddhist philosophy helps in shaping a positive attitude towards death among Tibetan Buddhist monastics who practice meditation on impermanence

2.2 Research Question

How does the contemplation and practice of impermanence influence the development of a positive attitude toward death among Tibetan Buddhist practitioners?

2.3 Research Design

The current study followed a qualitative research design. This design was appropriate to allow in depth understanding of the participant's lived experiences as the research aims to explore personal experiences, meanings, reflections, and interpretations related to impermanence and death.

2.4 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed in this study. Participants were selected intentionally based on their knowledge, experience, and engagement with the practice of impermanence meditation within Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

2.5 Participants

All the participants have completed formal monastic education and achieved the Geshe degree, equivalent to a doctorate in Buddhist Philosophy. The interviews had been conducted with male participants. The mean age of the participants was 56.67, and the range extends from 47 to 70. Their extensive philosophical training and meditative experience made them suitable participants for exploring the research topic.

2.6 Inclusion Criteria

- Tibetan Buddhist monastics with Geshe-level monastic education
- Individuals actively practising meditation on impermanence

2.7 Data Collection Technique

Data was collected through semi-structured, in-person interviews, which enabled flexible expression of experiences and exploring themes beyond the rigid structure of a questionnaire across interviews.

2.8 Procedure

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study. The informed consent was

obtained thereafter, and interviews were conducted in person at a mutually convenient and comfortable location, where each interview took from 20 to 40 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed and translated from Tibetan to English for data analysis.

2.9 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. Recurring themes, patterns, and meanings related to impermanence and attitudes toward death were identified and interpreted.

2.10 Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the research before participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the paper by removing identifying information. Participation was entirely voluntary, with the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

Table 1. *Demographic details of the participants*

S.no	Age	
1.	56	Geshe
2.	47	Geshe
3.	58	Geshe
4.	62	Geshe
5.	53	Geshe
6.	49	Geshe
7.	70	Geshe
8.	59	Geshe
9.	56	Geshe

3. Results and Discussion

Four overarching themes were identified: Acceptance of Death, Purposeful Living Through Impermanence, Spiritual Readiness for Death, and Emotional Resilience Through Impermanence.

Table 2: Findings from the thematic analysis

Major Themes	Subthemes
Acceptance of Death	Death as Reality
	Reflection Reduces Fear
Purposeful Living Through Impermanence	Valuing Time
	Compassionate Living
Spiritual Readiness for Death	Hope Through Karma and Rebirth
	Preparing for Death Through Dharma
Emotional Resilience Through Impermanence	Coping with Loss
	Letting Go of Attachment

Acceptance of Death

Death as Reality

One of the significant themes that arose from the interviews is the acceptance of death as something unavoidable and as a natural process of impermanence. Participants would never see death as something sad and unfortunate, but rather they always saw it as something integral to life itself. Realizing that death could affect everybody, as all people are subject to being born and then aging until their deaths, the monks were able to develop an attitude of acceptance. Death is not an ending but rather a universal law that affects everybody.

"Death is something which everybody has to go through... one day I also will die."
(Participant 1)

"Everyone is impermanent... We will all die. No one is exempt from death. Thinking about this is very helpful." (Participant 6)

"Because our body and life are impermanent, we do not know when they may come to an end." (Participant 7)

Across participants, recognizing death as a universal reality appeared to reduce denial and foster a calm acceptance of mortality. Rather than avoiding thoughts about death, participants considered accepting its certainty as the first step toward developing a positive attitude.

Reflection Reduces Fear

One of the findings is that the process of contemplating the reality of impermanence eventually turned the participants' attitude towards death into something different. Instead of creating more fear, it enabled them to get psychologically ready to face death. They reported

that through contemplation, they were taught to cherish the preciousness of life and make meaningful decisions.

"Once you understand the concept of impermanence, it will make you more accepting of your own death." (Participant 3)

"If you have a strong belief in the afterlife and the teachings of the Buddha, you can meditate on death with less fear. In fact, you can even die happily, knowing that you have done good deeds." (Participant 6)

"When I first think about death, a certain feeling of uneasiness naturally arises.

However, when I study and reflect on impermanence, I gradually come to see its profound importance." (Participant 7)

Notably, Participant 6 also indicated that too much contemplation without a proper understanding may make one emotionally stressed since contemplation on impermanence must be done within the context of good knowledge of Dharma. It means that although contemplation helps reduce fear, the success of this practice is determined by one's spiritual knowledge.

In general, the participants saw that considering impermanence was a process which slowly replaced fear with acceptance. With repeated reflections on the transience of life, they acquired psychological preparedness for death and perceived mortality as a positive transformation and not an unpleasant event.

Purposeful Living Through Impermanence

Valuing Time

Reflection on impermanence always led participants to appreciate and value life and time differently. The realization that one can die at any moment motivated them not to delay anything and devote themselves to doing something valuable like following the path of Dharma, which made them grow spiritually and mentally. Instead of leading to despair, thinking about death became a strong incentive to live a fulfilling life right now.

"The person will somehow know that the time is limited... within that time period I will do something more productive and worthwhile." (Participant 1)

"Every day you are going one step towards death, so it is better to do something fruitful for yourself and for others." (Participant 3)

"Starting with impermanence, I was able to progress to renunciation... What I have achieved is all due to the knowledge of impermanence." (Participant 6)

"Realising impermanence made me appreciate the value of time and inspired me to stop postponing important things." (Participant 7)

Impermanence for many participants thus was seen more as an impetus for living rather than a signifier of their mortality. Their impending death and its unknown arrival time motivated them to live meaningfully by continuously learning, practicing spiritually, and improving themselves.

Compassionate Living

Other significant findings included that subjects believed consciousness of impermanence automatically generated feelings of compassion, morality, and altruism. The monks did not simply prepare themselves to die; instead, their aim was to practice compassion, accumulate merit, and do good deeds in the service of other sentient beings.

Compassionate living was an integral part of dying well.

Participant 5 added that knowing about death leads people to do good things and refrain from doing bad deeds so that they could pass away without feeling guilty.

"If, at the time of death, one has developed strong bodhicitta through practice, then there is virtually no need to fear death... cultivating loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta is the best practice." (Participant 6)

"Impermanence acts as a force that pushes and encourages one toward practice." (Participant 7)

Compassion, in all the interviews conducted, was expressed to involve focusing on life rather than being afraid of dying, as it is about the well-being of other people. It was found that when people practiced ethics, were compassionate, and performed good deeds, then they were able to die more peacefully.

Spiritual Readiness for Death

Hope Through Karma and Rebirth

It emerged from the interviews that death was viewed not as the end of life but rather as a transformation, which depended on karma and spirituality. The concept of rebirth was importantly, people were worried not about death but more about their lives and whether they had done enough to be worthy of being reborn.

Participant 2 also stated that the quality of rebirth after one's life depends on what one does in their present life, and thus dying should be seen as another step towards fulfilling one's spiritual endeavors.

Also, Participant 5 shared that by practicing good deeds and heeding the teachings of Buddha, one will have no regrets at the time of their death.

"If you have done a lot of good deeds, you might not be very scared when you die... if you are a pure spiritual practitioner, you die happily and joyfully." (Participant 6)

He further described three different attitudes towards death: "The ordinary person dies with no regret but is still scared. The mediocre person dies without fear. The excellent person dies happily and joyfully." (Participant 6)

"Death and impermanence serve as a driving force that moves us onto the path of Dharma practice." (Participant 7)

The results indicate that the fear of death is overcome through faith in karma, rebirth, and further spiritual development. The participants felt that by living their lives in accordance with Buddha's principles, they could face death with hope and not anxiety.

Preparing for Death Through Dharma

Moreover, there were also some Buddhist practices mentioned by participants that helped develop a peaceful attitude toward dying. This included contemplating impermanence, meditation, the development of bodhicitta, reliance on the Three Jewels, and practices like phowa. Instead of trying to evade death, these practices helped people prepare their minds for the moment of death.

"The best meditation at the time of death is the cultivation of bodhicitta... If one has cultivated bodhicitta and compassion, then there is virtually no need to fear death." (Participant 6)

He further explained that genuine refuge in the Three Jewels provides lasting security: "The only true refuge is the Three Jewels... They never deceive us." (Participant 6)

"Phowa is not primarily a method for avoiding death. Rather, it is a practice for guiding consciousness skillfully at the time of death and helping secure a favourable transition after death." (Participant 7)

"Whenever one begins any spiritual practice... one should first remember death.

Reflection on death acts as a powerful motivation." (Participant 7)

In general, participants understood spirituality as an effective way to help turn death from a frightening experience into something positive. By constantly meditating on impermanence and compassion and trusting Buddhist principles, people were able to find peace in their approach to death.

Emotional Resilience Through Impermanence

Coping with Loss

The participants felt that impermanence was an essential psychological resource which helped them deal with the loss of loved ones, teachers, and other monks. Instead of eradicating their sorrow, acceptance of the inevitability of death helped them accept the loss as an inevitable part of life, enabling them to overcome their grief faster. The participants felt that the level of emotional pain reduced due to the certainty of death.

Participant 3 further clarified that by accepting the idea of impermanence, he could cope with the deaths of others more emotionally, as losing someone is inevitable in everybody's life.

"When we lose contact with someone or our parents die, we feel very sad. But since everyone is impermanent, what is the point of crying? We will all die. No one is exempt from death." (Participant 6)

Recalling the death of a respected senior monk, he further stated, "When we went to his funeral, I was extremely reminded of impermanence... if I don't accomplish anything in Dharma, I don't know how much longer I can stay." (Participant 6)

"Previously, I would experience a great deal of worry and emotional suffering. But after studying and understanding impermanence... the amount of mental anguish I experience is much less." (Participant 7)

"Understanding impermanence helps both oneself and others face death and loss with greater acceptance and resilience." (Participant 8)

From these findings, one can infer that contemplation of impermanence cannot stop one from grieving, but can help a person to accept their loss, build emotional stability, and be more resilient to it.

Letting Go of Attachment

Another recurring result found is that realization of the concept of impermanence helped in overcoming attachments towards people and material objects. It appears that realization of the transient nature of existence made people realize their attachment towards people and possessions and motivated them to shift focus on spiritual development instead. This led to a calmer and more positive approach towards death.

According to Participant 1, awareness of life's transient nature motivates one to

appreciate significant life moments rather than being excessively attached to material things. Participant 5 shared that embracing impermanence allows one not to be too attached, thus, enabling one to face death with fewer regrets.

"From the worldly perspective... everything is by nature subject to change. If we can see things in this way, our attachment and craving will lessen." (Participant 6)

Likewise, Participant 7 explained that understanding impermanence and the nature of samsara reduces suffering because individuals become less overwhelmed by illness, obstacles, and death.

"There is a noticeable difference between someone who understands impermanence and someone who does not... they understand that such experiences are simply the natural course of existence." (Participant 7)

In general, impermanence was considered by participants not only in terms of its philosophical nature but also as a tool for the cultivation of emotional stability. Being able to accept changes, minimize attachment, and conduct themselves spiritually constantly, the participants reported feeling peaceful about their own death and other aspects of life.

As the results show, Tibetan Buddhist monks consider impermanence to be an essential psychological and spiritual component that promotes a positive view of death. The interdependent processes of acceptance of mortality, the ability to live purposefully, trust in Buddhist principles, and emotional resilience were identified by the participants as those that helped them transform their fear of death into acceptance and inner peace.

3.1 Limitations

1. The study focused exclusively on Tibetan Buddhist monastics with extensive experience in Buddhist philosophy and meditation; therefore, the findings may not reflect the perspectives of lay Buddhists or individuals from other religious and cultural backgrounds.
2. As a qualitative study, the findings provide an in-depth understanding of participants lived experiences but are not intended for broad generalization.
3. The interviews were translated from Tibetan into English, and some cultural and linguistic nuances may not have been fully preserved during translation.

3.2 Implications

1. The study contributes to the field of death studies by demonstrating how the Buddhist understanding of impermanence can foster acceptance of death, emotional resilience, and purposeful living.

2. The findings highlight the potential application of contemplative practices on impermanence in counselling psychology, grief counselling, palliative care, and mindfulness-based interventions to address death anxiety and existential distress.
3. The study enriches cross-cultural psychological literature by providing insights into how spiritual and philosophical beliefs influence attitudes towards death.

3.3 Future scope

1. Future research may include larger and more diverse samples, including lay Buddhists and practitioners from different Buddhist traditions, to broaden the understanding of attitudes towards death.
2. Comparative studies across different religions and cultures may further explore the influence of spiritual beliefs on death acceptance.
3. Quantitative, mixed-method, and longitudinal studies may examine the relationship between contemplation of impermanence, death anxiety, resilience, and psychological well-being using standardised psychological measures.

4. Conclusion

In this study, the influence of impermanence within Tibetan Buddhism on the positive attitude towards death was examined in Tibetan Buddhist monks. The research results show that the concept of impermanence allows practitioners to view death as an inevitable part of life and something they can accept. Contemplations about impermanence motivated people to live purposefully, to develop compassion, decrease attachment, and be emotionally resilient regarding death and loss. Additional notions of Buddhism like karma, rebirth, Dharma practice, and bodhicitta contributed to the confidence in acceptance and peace at the time of death. Consequently, from a psychological point of view, the concept of impermanence may be considered not only spiritually important but also a useful tool for cultivating a healthy approach to mortality.

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