Lesson: Comparative Religion Investigation:
What Happens When We Die?

OVERVIEW
In this lesson, students will research and discuss what Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism teach in terms of what happens when people die. Students will also watch two video clips that show a Buddhist man named Yeshi as he first resists and later accepts the idea that he is the reincarnation of a famous spiritual master. These clips provide interesting insights into Tibetan Buddhism and challenge students to consider how beliefs about death influence the way they live their lives. This lesson will also provide an opportunity for students to think critically about the differences and similarities between religions and belief systems.

The video clips in this lesson are from the film My Reincarnation, a documentary that covers 20 years in the life of Buddhist master Chögyal Namkhai Norbu and his son, Yeshi. Please note that the film uses English subtitles extensively. For more information on Buddhism, plus general guidelines for teaching about religion in the classroom, please see the Related Resources sections of this lesson.

POV documentaries can be recorded off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from their initial broadcast. In addition, POV offers a lending library of DVDs and VHS tapes that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our Community Network.

OBJECTIVES
By the end of this lesson, students will:
- Explain their beliefs about what happens when people die.
- Identify how these beliefs influence the way they live their lives.
- Summarize and compare what Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism teach about what happens after death.

GRADE LEVELS
9-12

SUBJECT AREAS
Geography, Religion, International Studies, Social Studies, World History, Current Events

MATERIALS
- Internet access and equipment to show the class online video and conduct research
- Handout: Summary of Beliefs: What Happens When We Die? (PDF file)
- Teacher's Guide for the Summary of Beliefs Handout (PDF file)
ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED
One 50-minute class period

FILM CLIPS
Clip 1: “My Son Is the Reincarnation of My Uncle” (length 4:40)
This clip begins at 18:05 with a shot of the Dalai Lama kneeling on the ground. It ends at 22:45 with the statement “…we should see how he manifests.”

Clip 2: “Yeshi Visits Tibet” (length 5:00)
This clip begins at 1:09:58 with a car driving under a bridge. It ends at 1:14:58 with the statement “…he will do the same for you now.”

ACTIVITY
1. Instruct students to write for a few minutes in response to the question “What do you believe happens to people when they die?”

2. Invite a few volunteers to summarize what they wrote and briefly explain how their beliefs about this topic have developed. Do beliefs about what happens when people die influence how students live their lives? Why or why not?

3. Tell the class that they are going to investigate what the five major world religions teach about what happens when people die. Give each student a copy of the handout and explain that they are going to examine Buddhism first.

4. Using the Teacher’s Guide for the handout as a reference, help the class fill in the row for Buddhism in the chart. Point out that that while there are some diverse teachings within Buddhism about what happens after death, many Buddhists believe that the human soul never dies. Instead, they believe it is reborn or “reincarnated” in a new form.

5. Show the class two excerpts from the film My Reincarnation to illustrate how the concept of reincarnation affected the life of Yeshi, the son of Tibetan Buddhist master Chögyal Namkhai Norbu. Set up the video clips by explaining that after the Chinese took over Tibet in 1959, Namkhai Norbu established a center of worship in Italy. Yeshi was recognized as the reincarnation of Namkhai Norbu’s uncle Khyentse, a prominent Buddhist teacher who died after the Chinese invaded Tibet. As a young man in Clip 1, Yeshi questions the evidence that his father and others rely on to conclude that he is the reincarnation of Khyentse. The Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, is also shown visiting followers in Italy. In Clip 2, Yeshi accepts that he is the reincarnation of Khyentse and visits people in Tibet who have been waiting for their reincarnated teacher to return. (Note: In the clips, the title “Rinpoche” is used several times. It means, “precious one” and is given to Tibetan Buddhist masters as a sign of respect.) Play the two video clips for the class.

6. After watching the clips, discuss how Yeshi’s shifting ideas about reincarnation played into his life. What role does reincarnation have in the formation of his identity and in his relationships with his family and members of his father’s community? What is it about Yeshi’s faith that you think keeps him from being afraid of death?
7. Have students work in pairs to research the information needed to complete the rest of their handouts. Students should use a variety of primary and secondary sources (books, library databases, Internet, textbooks and so on) in their investigations. As religious beliefs can vary widely, please explain to students that their research may turn up conflicting information. Students should reference multiple sources to inform their investigations. Helpful starting points for research include:

**BBC: Religions**
http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/
This BBC reference resource explains the beliefs of a number of key world religions.

**Georgetown University: Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs**
http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/traditions
This site provides an overview of beliefs and practices of the world’s major religions.

8. Conclude the activity by discussing the similarities and differences among the different religions/belief systems. How might the beliefs of each group affect how members live their lives?

**EXTENSIONS**

1. Explore the online video and educational resources for these related PBS films:


3. Preserve the heritage of your community. In *My Reincarnation*, Namkhai Norbu, who had to flee Tibet when China took over, says, “I am Tibetan and my culture is important to me. And I must save my culture, and Dzogchen teaching. So I have such a responsibility.” Closer to home, students can also work to preserve the customs,
traditions, experiences and beliefs of older community members with animated documentaries. Coordinate a class field trip to a local convalescent home to record interviews with residents, perhaps based on a single theme drawn from the curriculum, such as the civil rights movement, voting or the changing role of women. Then have students create animation or illustrations to accompany the audio from the interviews. Students can view examples of interviews animated by StoryCorps (http://storycorps.org/). Some good examples are September 11 Stories (http://www.pbs.org/pov/storycorps911/) and Miss Devine (http://www.pbs.org/pov/missdevine/). Students can also watch interviews with the animators (http://www.pbs.org/pov/missdevine/rauchbrothers_videos.php) of these StoryCorps shorts to learn more about process and style.

RESOURCES

The Buddha
http://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/
This site provides a complete online documentary about the Buddha’s life, a timeline, a map showing where key events occurred, details on the Buddha’s teachings, a glossary, examples of Buddhist art, a teacher’s guide on mindfulness and more.

Dzogchen
http://myreincarnationfilm.com/resources/what-is-dzogchen/
My Reincarnation features Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, a master of the Dzogchen Buddhist tradition. This set of teachings focuses on realizing the true nature of all beings.

POV Background Information: Introduction to Buddhism
POV provides information on the basic beliefs of Buddhism, its history and its main schools of teaching.

Teaching Tolerance: Religious Diversity
http://www.tolerance.org/supplement/religious-diversity
Four guidelines are provided for teaching about religious diversity in a simple and respectful manner.

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

RH.9-10.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
RH.9-10.9 Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

W.9-10, 11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization and analysis of content.

W.11-12.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection and research.

Content Knowledge: (http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Behavioral Studies, Standard 1: Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity, and behavior.

Geography, Standard 9: Understands the nature, distribution, and migration of human populations on Earth’s surface.

Geography, Standard 10: Understands the nature and complexity of Earth’s cultural mosaics.

Language Arts, Standard 7: Uses skills and strategies to read a variety of informational texts.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

World History, Standard 44: Understands the search for community, stability and peace in an interdependent world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in secondary education and media development. Previously, she served as PBS Interactive’s director of education, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource website (now PBS Teachers) and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and Northern Virginia.