

The Tibetan Book of the Dead

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The Tibetan Book of the Dead is actually a manual for the living. It details the journey each soul must make after death as reported back by meditators who used their lives to journey on other planes and bring back information about how reality is constructed. What can we expect after death? The Tibetan Book of the Dead is a guide for the soul, but also is related to every day life. Once you realize that life and death are not separate, then death becomes just a continuation of the journey. Here I have tried my best to summarize the great Tibetan classic.

Key words: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *Bardo Thodral*,
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The *Bardo Thodral*, commonly known as “The Tibetan Book of the Dead” or “Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States,” is a text of spiritual magnitude. According to tradition, it was conceived in the 8th century by the Tibetan hero, Padmasambhava. The *Bardo Thodral* was hidden until the 14th century when it was found by Monk Karma Lingpa, the great “treasure discoverer.” It was originally published in English in the 1927 by

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Evans-Wentz in an incomplete form. These days it is widely known, and often wildly misunderstood.

To grasp the significance of this sacred Tibetan text, one must alter their perspective. In modern Western thought, rationalism is the ruler. In most current paradigms, one has to see something to believe it, be able to pin it to cardboard, or keep it in a test tube. Granted, the West is not without its own achievements; people have traveled to the moon, created advanced modern medicine, and induced the industrial revolution.

However, Asia has been not dormant as Western technology flourished; many discoveries made in the East have been metaphysical. While the West revered great scientists and their achievements, the most celebrated discoverers of Tibet, India, and China were *psychonauts*. These people explored unseen energetic landscapes through the mastery of meditation and yoga. Yogis and yoginis delved into the mind and drew maps of other dimensions, which led to the creation of acupuncture charts, chakra diagrams, and such, like the first explorers made maps of the continents. Buddhist teachings became a bedrock of this internal exploration because of the strong emphasis on meditation practice. In Tibet, which is relatively isolated from the rest of the world, Buddhism developed as in no other place on earth.

The *Bardo Thodral* represents one of the peak achievements in *psychonautics*, akin to the first telescopes that revealed the universe. It describes the journey after death that everyone must invariably make. Not just a description of the other world like Dante's *Inferno*, it is also a guidebook, which everyone should take with them to the next world. The breadth of knowledge brought back by meditation practitioners and by Tibetan 'delogs,' people who die and then return to this world to share their experiences, is detailed and profound.

It can be used as a study guide for anyone living, can be read to a dying person, or can be recited to a recently deceased person to help them navigate through the next life. Ultimately, its purpose is to help people recognize their true nature in the afterlife. If that is not possible, the secondary goal is to guide them back to a favorable human birth. The basic

teachings within the text are also recommended for practice in daily living.

Although the *Bardo Thodral* has a rather foreboding reputation, it carries a positive message. Death or change is not to be feared, but to be handled calmly and gracefully. Life does not end after the physical body departs. Dying is just a door to new and interesting experiences, which we are able to prepare for in this lifetime. “Do not be afraid of death” is the message; it is just a transformation to another existence, like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly.

I. Historical Background

Before the Maoist regime’s invasion, Tibet was one of the most isolated, peaceful, and religious countries on earth. A large percentage of the population was engaged in monasticism, and the ubiquity of Buddhism was to the extent that there was no word for “Buddhism” in the Tibetan language. There was an abundance of huge monasteries, thousands of monks, and widespread practice of mantra and prostrations, where Buddhist practices unique to Tibet were developed.

When the *Bardo Thodral* was first written down in Tibet by Padmasambhava, the highland country was not a religious haven. Tibetan people used to be warlike, comparable to the fierce Mongolian nomads who conquered half of the world. At one point, Tibet’s empire even took over parts of China. The Himalayan plateau was divided into many different warring factions, until Padmasambhava, who was adept at memorizing esoteric Buddhist texts, came from India and unified the people under Buddhism.

While Tibetans revered Padmasambhava as a kind of deity, he was also a historical figure and a great religious teacher. According to Tibetan tradition, he brought Tantric Buddhism from India to Tibet and also tamed the warlike gods and spirits of the mountains with the teachings of Dharma. He wrote down a number of texts and then hid them for discovery in future centuries. These are known as “terma” or treasure in Tibet. The *Bardo*

Thodral is one of these hidden treasures, which was discovered by the great practitioner Karma Lingpa six-hundred years later.

Professor Robert Thurman speculates on why someone would hide a religious text for centuries. If it were really so beneficial, why would someone deprive generations of people from it? The reason, says Thurman, is because Tibet was not ready to confront death. In a war-like country, death is not allowed to be acknowledged, because then people stop fighting, producing, and driving the country economically. The sacred text was received at the right time for the Tibetans, when people were ready to contemplate and “live in the clear light of death” as Thurman says (2005). As the Dalai Lama says on death, “it is not morbid to contemplate it, but rather liberating from fear, and even beneficial for the health of the living” (Thurman 1994).

II. Tantric Buddhism

Tantra is called the left-handed path. Unlike most religious traditions which stress piety in order to keep negative emotions under control, Tantra suggests that one use the negative and passionate emotions as fuel to propel oneself to evolve quickly along the spiritual path. It is said that the left-handed path can be dangerous if someone approaches it without proper understanding, which is why it is necessary to have a guiding teacher. By welcoming the scariest feelings and emotions, one can actually harness their immense power as fuel for spiritual growth.

Buddhist teachings often utilize the metaphor of a peacock, a bird able to ingest poison. Instead of killing the bird, the poison serves to make its plumage even more brilliant. This means that no emotion, experience, or sensation is good or bad. “A good situation is actually a bad situation,” quoted Zen teacher Hyon Gak Sunim (Quote from Seung Sahn). This means that even a situation that seems terrible can be used positively when seen from another angle—every phenomenon is actually pure awareness.

In Zen Buddhism, bright color themes are used to excite the emotions, unlike in Zen Buddhism, which is starker by contrast. In Zen Buddhism, one tries to calm the passionate emotions like water on a still lake, where Tantra is more comparable to surfing on the waves of mind. In Tantra, instead of asking oneself a question, devotion to the teacher or compassionate deities is the most important method. Zen has less to say on Death—“When you die, just die!” said Korean Zen master Seung Sahn Sunim when asked about death and dying (Ok Kwan 2007). Both Buddhist approaches are equally valid; the left and right hand are two sides of the same coin, and contain the same essence (Hyon Gak 2006-2007). Both are designed to discover the true nature of mind.

The use of peaceful and frightening images describe the human psyche in Tantra. Those deities are actually aspects of our own consciousness and shouldn't be feared or idealized, but recognized as the true nature of our own minds. Even the frightening deities with skull necklaces and many heads are compassionately trying to wake us up; they have something to teach. Another sacred image in Tantric Buddhism is two humans or deities in sexual embrace. This might be confusing to a Judeo-Christian mind, but this image is meant to represent the essence of the universe, male and feminine energies coming together to create life. This image is actually one of the most sacred images in Tibetan Buddhism.

Buddhist philosophy does not acknowledge the existence of a 'soul' in the Judeo-Christian sense of the word. This is because consciousness has no essential nature separate from the rest of the universe. It is more like a continuous stream. Buddhist scholar Alan Watts describes the “soul” as a rope made of many different materials. At the top it is silk, in the middle nylon, and then cotton below that (Watts 2005). There is a knot in the rope that slides down through the various materials. Is it still the same knot or a different knot? The world Tantra actually means “thread” in Tibetan, which suggests a continuous awareness.

III. The Journey through the Bardos

Bardo means “between state,” and there are many bardos in this lifetime. For example, the state between sleeping and waking is a bardo in which we are neither asleep nor awake. Between this life and the next is the afterlife bardo. What follows is a description of how one can cope with this between state in order to relieve suffering, attain spiritual realization, and achieve a favorable rebirth. It is advice both for the departing person and those around him or her to facilitate a positive experience.

The *Bardo Thodral* describes the dying process; first the body breaks down into its constituent elements—earth to water, water to fire, fire to wind, and wind into consciousness (Dorje 2005: 229). During this time, a dying person is instructed to imagine whatever compassionate deity they believe in about one foot above the head, whether it be Buddha, Allah, Jesus, or otherwise. Imagining the essence of compassion and goodness floating above the head is the goal. Devotion to any specific deity is not prescribed (Dzogchen Ponlop 2007: 153).

The purpose of the visualization is so the consciousness will leave from the top of the head, to project one’s awareness into the heavenly realms. A person present at that time can also put their fingers on the pressure points at the base of the skull to direct one’s consciousness out through top of the head. “The Tibetan Book of the Dead” instructs one to remain calm and positive as the moment of transcendence approaches. Even just creating the intention to remain calm will help greatly. Also, it is suggested to recite mantras such as “Om Mani Padme Hung.” To keep a loving mind in every moment is important, especially before dying, as the state at the time of death will set the trajectory into the Bardos.

Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche is a modern day master of Buddhist Tantra. In his book, “Mind Beyond Death,” he gives advice to the loved ones of the dying person. He says that one of the best things to do is to read the “Tibetan Book of the Dead” to the dying person, and recite it again after consciousness has left the body. This way they can be guided through the

Bardo states. He also notes, immediately after death, people should not cry or be depressed, as this can disturb the spirit of the departed. They should treat the possessions of the person respectfully, as not to cause any upset. Rather than crying and being depressed, we should maintain an atmosphere of support and loving kindness (Dzogchen Ponlop 2007: 125).

The *Bardo Thodral* tells us that immediately after death we experience “the luminosity” or, “inner radiance of the first intermediate state” (Dorje 2005). The luminosity described appears right after the consciousness leaves the body, and lasts, according to Thurman, about as long as it takes to eat a meal (Thurman 2005). The naked luminosity is perhaps the “white light at the end of the tunnel,” which so many people describe in near-death experiences. It could be called God, pure consciousness, or awareness. In Tibet, it is called “the nature of mind,” among many other descriptors. What the *Bardo Thodral* points out is this clear luminosity is one and the same as our true nature. The luminous consciousness is our true essence. If one can recognize that, one can attain state of “rainbow body” and move beyond samsara, or suffering, completely. The Tibetans see death as a great opportunity for this reason. It is easier to attain enlightenment in this state than in the afterlife (Thurman 1994: 121).

After this state, if one does not recognize the pure luminosity, one moves into the “between stages,” or bardos. After the luminosity stage, the consciousness of the being is able to perceive and move in the world without their body, like a ghost. At this point, the soul may see those people who are close to him or her in mourning. This may cause suffering for the being because they want their loved ones to know that they are not dead, but still alive. However, at this point, the soul should completely let go of attachment to the past life, the people and the places in it, in order to embark fully on a new journey (McLean 1999).

The *Bardo Thodral* reads,

O, Child of Buddha Nature, that which is called death has now arrived. Therefore you should adopt an altruistic motivation and concentrate your thinking as follows: ‘I have arrived at the time of

death, so now, relying on the process of death, I will single-mindedly cultivate an altruistic motivation. I will meditate on generation of loving kindness and compassion and altruistic intention to attain enlightenment. For the benefit of all sentient beings, who are all limitless as space, I must attain perfect buddhahood' (Dorje 2005: 230).

As the consciousness being releases attachments to this life, at this stage of the afterlife, one becomes extremely powerful. Consciousness can go anywhere in heaven or earth just by thinking about it. Because one has such power in this state, one should remember to keep an altruistic mind, because it is possible to accomplish feats that may have been impossible during life (McLean 1999). The after-death process is said to take 49 earth days to complete, depending on the individual's karma, though the way the soul experiences the passage of time is relative. The exception to the 49 days is if someone manages to attain enlightenment immediately after death. Then, they will be instantly reborn in the pure lands or another birth of their choosing.

In the Bardo, both peaceful and wrathful apparitions begin to emerge. Because there are so many deities in Tibetan tradition, the descriptions of who you may meet in the afterlife are quite colorful. For example, the *Bardo Thodral* reads,

The transcendent lord Ratnasambhava will dawn before you, his body yellow in color, holding in his right hand a jewel, seated on a horse throne and embraced by his supreme consort Mamaki. ... [a light] will emanate from the heart of Ratnasambhava and his consort will shine piercingly before you at the level of your heart with such brilliance that your eyes cannot bear it. ... at that time, abandon your fear of the yellow light and recognize it as pristine awareness. Relax and abide directly within it, in a state of non-activity. Again and again, have confidence in it! Be drawn to it with loving devotion (Dorje 2005: 240).

The descriptions of these gods and goddesses span the range from compassionate pure land-beings to terrifying demons. Everything one

encounters is basically a manifestation of one's own mind. Without being caged in the body, the subconscious mind is projected completely, as in a dream. While a person of Tibetan upbringing may very well see the myriad of deities described, the author feels that one shouldn't take these descriptions literally, but realize they are aspects of consciousness that we already know quite intimately. However, these states of mind will be much more vivid in the afterlife state (Dzogchen Ponlop 2007: 124).

It is said that the lord of death will appear and judge the soul for all good and bad deeds, but the *Bardo Thodral* reminds us, do not be afraid. There is nothing that can harm you because you are pure consciousness. On the subject of these appearances, it is said, they "have emerged from your own brain! Do not fear them! Do not be terrified! Do not hate them! Feel delight! Recognize them as an image of your own awareness" (Thurman 1994: 156). Basically, whatever appears after death is no different than your own mind's projections. Be relaxed, do not be afraid, and try to recognize these creations as your own pure nature.

These appearances are all the karma, or mental patterns from the mind stream, from our deep unconscious minds. Unlike Christianity, which suggests that a person will either go to heaven or hell eternally depending on the individual's good and bad deeds, in Buddhism, it is possible that both realms of heaven and hell will appear. These also are only temporary, so one should not get attached to any state, but just let them appear and experience them without loving or hating them. One should keep an altruistic mind, and keep the goal of attaining a precious human rebirth. In death, as in life, one should not give way to fear, hatred, or ignorance.

IV. The Six Realms

After the appearance of the various psychical manifestations run their course, the lights of the six realms appear. Here, the soul can choose the next rebirth. These lights are not as bright as the dazzling appearances

before, but this is just as important as the spirit can choose its next rebirth. According to Buddhism, everyone reincarnates unless they have become completely enlightened during the Bardo stage. Even enlightened masters choose to reincarnate, because they are Bodhisattvas who have vowed to be reborn until every being is saved (McLean 1999).

For each realm, there is a different colored light. The grey smoky light represents the hell realm, where anger is the dominant emotion. The yellow light represents the realm of the hungry ghosts, which is characterized by craving, and the green light is that of the animal realm. The blue light is that of the human realm. The red light is the realm of the assuras, jealous gods who are more powerful than humans; the white light is that of the godly realm, which is said to be heavenly, but is characterized by pride. Although it may seem more desirable to be reborn in the gods' realm, it is said that the human realm is the best one, because here exists a mix of pleasure and suffering to make one's consciousness strive to evolve (Dzogchen Ponlop 2007: 211-217).

V. Attaining a Human Rebirth

In order to attain a human rebirth, one is supposed to go towards the blue light. Another suggestion that could potentially help attain this rebirth is visualizing the guru and consort in union. As the spirit is drawn to a particular rebirth, it should look for a good situation, including loving parents and an environment where there is leisure time to practice meditation or contemplation. One will see a human couple copulating and will be drawn to them at the moment of conception. "They will be drawn to human parents like a magnet" says Ch'an Master Sheng-yen. This couple will become the person's new parents.

While the Tibetan teaching on this subject can seem tremendously esoteric, with its ornate and complex pantheon, it also points to the fact that the mind is the most powerful in deciding one's experience. Thus, a natural

and relaxed stance is important. Also making positive aspirations, feeling compassion or devotion to loving kindness are perhaps more important than any information we can keep with us.

VI. The *Bardo Thodral* and Everyday Life

What relevance has the *Bardo Thodral* beyond just a guide book for the afterlife? While the descriptions of the bardos are lush and detailed, the instructions always point to a few simple ideas, like strength, courage, and devotion to compassion. If we have cultivated a positive, altruistic mind during this lifetime, and have acted kindly towards others, then the afterlife and next rebirth will reflect this. Cultivating the mind means being able to stay calm in a trying situation, to relax, and not give way to fear. To develop loving kindness, or metta, for others is actually the point of meditation practice (Pannayaboga 2007: Personal conversation). When we make friends with our intense emotions instead of running from them, then nothing can harm us (Dzogchen Ponlop 2007: 43).

The *Bardo Thodral* tells us it is possible to recognize that all phenomenon is actually none other than our true nature of mind; benevolent, compassionate, and luminous. All you have to do is just trust your own universal nature, which has been there all along. Every moment of life we have a choice; to remain asleep or to choose consciousness and finally wake up (Wu Bong 2007).

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