

THE TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD

DEATH AND INTERMEDIATE STATES

Bardo Thodol, *'The Tibetan Book of the Dead,'* is a guide for the dead and dying. The first part, called Chikhai Bardo, describes the moment of death. The second part, Chonyid Bardo, deals with the states which supervene immediately after death. The third part, Sidpa Bardo, concerns the onset of the birth instinct and of prenatal events.

When the expiration hath ceased, the vital-force will have sunk into the nerve-centre of Wisdom ¹ and the Knower ² will be experiencing the Clear Light of the natural condition ³. Then the vital force, being thrown backwards and flying downwards through the right and left nerves ⁴ the Intermediate State (Bardo) momentarily dawns.

The above [directions] should be applied before [the vital force hath] rushed into the left nerve [after first having traversed the navel nerve-centre].

The time [ordinarily necessary for this motion of the vital-force] is as long as the inspiration is still present, or about the time required for eating a meal.

Then the manner of application [of the instructions] is:

When the breathing is about to cease, it is best if the Transference hath been applied efficiently; if [the application] hath been ineffident, then [address the deceased] thus:

O nobly-born [so and so by name], the time hath now come for thee to seek the Path [in reality]. Thy breathing is about to cease. Thy guru hath set thee face to face before with the Clear Light; and now thou art about to experience in its Reality in the Bardo state, wherein all things are like the void and cloudless sky, and the naked, spotless intellect is like unto a transparent vacuum without circumference or centre. At this moment, know thou thyself-, and abide in that state. I, too, at this time, am setting thee face to face.

Having read this, repeat it many times in the ear of the person dying, even before the expiration hath ceased, so as to impress it on the mind [of the dying one].

If the expiration is about to cease, turn the dying one over on the right side, which posture is called the 'Lying Posture of a Lion.' The throbbing of the arteries [on the right and left side of the throat] is to be pressed.

If the person dying be disposed to sleep, or if the sleeping state advances, that should be arrested, and the arteries pressed gently but firmly. Thereby the vital-force will not be able to return from the median-nerve and will be sure to pass out through the Brahmanic aperture.⁵ Now the real setting-face-to-face is to be applied.

At this moment, the first glimpsing of the Bardo of the Clear Light of Reality, which is the Infallible Mind of the Dharma-Kaya, is experienced by all sentient beings.

After the expiration hath completely ceased, press the nerves of sleep firmly; and, a lama, or a person higher or more learned than thyself, impress in these words, thus:

Reverend Sir, now that thou art experiencing the Fundamental Clear Light, try to abide in that state which now thou art experiencing.

And also in the case of any other person the reader shall set him face-to-face thus:

O nobly-born [so-and-so], listen. Now thou art experiencing the Radiance of the Clear Light of Pure Reality. Recognize it. O nobly-born, thy present intellect, in real nature void, not formed into anything as regards characteristics or colour, naturally void, is the very Reality, the All-Good.

Thine own intellect, which is now voidness, yet not to be regarded as of the voidness of nothingness, but as being the intellect itself, unobstructed, shining, thrilling, and blissful, is the very consciousness, the All-good Buddha.

Thine own consciousness, not formed into anything, in reality void, and the intellect, shining and blissful,-these two,-are inseparable. The union of them is the Dharma-Kaya state of Perfect Enlightenment.⁶

Thine own consciousness, shining, void, and inseparable from the Great Body of Radiance, hath no birth, nor death, and is the Immutable Light-Buddha Amitabha.

Knowing this is sufficient. Recognizing the voidness of thine own intellect to be Buddhahood, and looking upon it as being thine own consciousness, is to keep thyself in the [state of the] divine mind of the Buddha.

Repeat this distinctly and dearly three or [even] seven times. That will recall to the mind [of the dying one] the former [i.e. when living] setting-face-to-face by the guru. Secondly, it will cause the naked consciousness to be recognized as the Clear Light; and, thirdly, recognizing one's own self [thus], one becometh permanently united with the Dharma-Kaya and liberation will be certain.

[if when dying, one is familiar with this state, the wheel of rebirth is stopped and liberation is instantaneously achieved. But such spiritual efficiency is so very rare that the normal mental condition of the dying person is unequal to the supreme feat of holding on to the state in which the Clear Light shines. There follows a progressive descent into lower and lower states of the Bardo existence, and finally rebirth. immediately after the first state of Chikhai Bardo comes the second stage, when the consciousness-principle leaves the body and says to itself. 'Am I dead, or am I not dead?' without being able to determine.]

But even though the Primary Clear Light be not recognized, the Clear Light of the second Bardo being recognized, Liberation will be attained. If not liberated even by that, then that called the third Bardo or the Chonyid Bardo dawneth.

In this third stage of the Bardo, the karmic illusions come to shine. It is very important that this Great setting-face-to-face of the Chonyid Bardo be read: it hath much power and can do much good.

About this time [the deceased] can see that the share of food is being set aside, that the body is being stripped of its garments, that the place of the sleeping-rug is being swept; ⁷ can hear all the weeping and wailing of his friends and relatives, and, although he can see them and can hear them calling upon him, they cannot hear him calling upon them, so he goeth away displeased.

At that time, sounds, lights, and rays-all three-are experienced. These awe, frighten, and terrify, and cause much fatigue. At this moment, this setting-face-to-face with the Bardo [during the experiencing] of Reality is to be applied. Call the deceased by name, and correctly and distinctly explain to him, as follows:

O nobly-born, listen with full attention, without being distracted: There are six states of Bardo, namely: the natural state of Bardo while in the womb; the Bardo of the dream-state; the Bardo of ecstatic equilibrium, while in deep meditation; the Bardo of the moment of death; the Bardo [during the experiencing] of Reality, the Bardo of the inverse process of samsaric existence. These are the six.

O nobly-born, thou wilt experience three Bardos, the Bardo of the moment of death, the Bardo [during the experiencing] of Reality, and the Bardo while seeking rebirth. Of these three, up to yesterday, thou hadst experienced the Bardo of the moment of death. Although the Clear Light of Reality dawned upon thee, thou wert unable to hold on, and so thou hast to wander here. Now henceforth thou art going to experience the [other] two, the Chonyid Bardo and the Sidpa Bardo.⁸ Thou wilt pay undistracted attention to that with which I am about to set thee face to face, and hold on;

O nobly-born, that which is called death hath now come. Thou art departing from this world, but thou art not the only one; [death] cometh to all. Do not cling, in fondness and weakness, to this life. Even though thou clingest out of weakness, thou hast not the power to remain here. Thou wilt gain nothing more than wandering in this *Samsara*.⁹ Be not attached [to this world]; be not weak. Remember the Precious Trinity.¹⁰

O nobly-born, whatever fear and terror may come to thee in the Chonyid Bardo, forget not these words; and, bearing their meaning at heart, go forwards: in them lieth the vital secret of recognition:

*Alas! when the Uncertain Experiencing of Reality is dawning upon me here,
With every thought of fear or terror or awe for all [apparitional appearances] set aside,
May I recognize whatever [visions] appear, as the reflections of mine own consciousness;
May I know them to be of the nature of apparitions in the Bardo: When at this all-important*

moment [of opportunity] of achieving a great end.

May I not fear the bands of Peaceful and Wrathful [Deities], mine own thought-forms.

Repeat thou these [verses] dearly, and remembering their significance as thou repeatest them, go forwards, [O nobly-born]. Thereby, whatever visions of awe or terror appear, recognition is certain; and forget not this vital secret art lying therein.

O nobly-born, when thy body and mind were separating, thou must have experienced a glimpse Of the Pure Truth, subtle, sparkling, bright dazzling, glorious, and radiantly awesome, in appearance like a mirage moving across a landscape in spring-time in one continuous stream of vibrations. Be not daunted thereby, nor terrified, nor awed. That is the radiance of thine own true nature. Recognize it.

From the midst of that radiance, the natural sound of Reality, reverberating like a thousand thunders simultaneously sounding, will come. That is the natural sound of thine own real self. Be not daunted thereby, nor terrified, nor awed.

The body, which thou hast now is called the thought-body of propensities.¹¹ Since thou hast not a material body of flesh and blood, whatever may come, -sounds, lights, or rays, -are, all three, unable to harm thee: thou art incapable of dying. It is quite sufficient for thee to know that these apparitions are thine own thought-forms. Recognize this to be the Bardo.

O nobly-born, if thou dost not now recognize thine own thoughtforms, whatever of meditation or of devotion thou mayest have performed while in the human world-if thou hast not met with this present teaching-the lights will daunt thee, the sounds will awe thee, and the rays will terrify thee. Shouldst thou not know this an important key to the teachings, -not being able to recognize the sounds, lights, and rays, -thou wilt have to wander in the Samsara.

Notes

1 The 'nerve-centres' are the 'psychic centres' (*cakra*). The 'nerve-centre of wisdom' is located in the heart-centre (*anahata-cakra*).

2 'Knower,' i.e. the mind in its knowing functions.

3 The mind in its natural, or primal, state.

4 That is, the 'psychic nerves,' *pingala-nadi* and *ida-nadi*.

5 *Brahmarandhra*, the fissure on the top of the cranium identified with *sutura frontalis*.

6 From the union of the two states of mind, or consciousness, is born the state of Perfect Enlightenment, Buddhahood. The *Dharma-Kaya* ('Body of Truth') symbolizes the purest and the highest state of being, a state of supramundane consciousness.

7 The references are (1) to the share of food being set aside for the deceased during the funeral rites; (2) to his corpse being prepared for the shroud; (3) to his bed or sleeping-place.

8 The *Chonyid Bardo* is the intermediate state during the experiencing of Reality. The *Sidpa Bardo* represents the state wherein the deceased is seeking rebirth.

9 *Samsara*, the universal becoming.

10 That is, the Buddha, the Dharma (=the Law, the Doctrine), the Samgha (the entire community of monks and hermits).

11 'Thought-body' or 'mind-body' born of the past worldly existence.

W.Y. Evans-Wentz (translator and editor), *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Oxford, 3rd ed.; 1957), pp. 90-2, 95-7, 101-4