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# Death, Identity, and Enlightenment in Tibetan Culture

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Questions regarding death and the ephemeral nature of life and individual identity have been preeminent in Buddhism for centuries. As Buddhism spread to new geographical regions, it accommodated itself to the local cultural and philosophical climate, often blending elements of belief about death and dying. When Buddhism entered Tibet in the seventh century, it was understood against a background of indigenous Bön beliefs and cultural practices. In this cultural and philosophical environment, Tibetan scholars and practitioners evolved unique interpretations and practices related to death, the evolution of consciousness, and enlightenment.

I examine Buddhist attitudes toward death, rebirth, and the intermediate state between death and rebirth as understood within Tibetan culture. I first describe the cultural milieu within which Buddhist ideas were adopted and recast. Then I explore the centrality of death in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and the practices that arose to utilize the experience of dying and the intermediate state between death and rebirth (*bardo*)<sup>1</sup> as opportunities for psychological transformation.

*I am not, I will not be.  
I have not, I will not have.  
That frightens all the childish  
And extinguishes fear in the wise.*

—Nāgārjuna (in Hopkins, 1998a, p. 97)

AS A SMALL child I was fascinated with the question of what happens after death. An aura of mystery, fear, and avoidance seemed to accompany the topic of death. Although I asked one authority after another, the answers did not strike me as satisfactory. The reward of heaven or the threat of hell did not seem satisfactory to explain what happens to human beings after the breath stops and the eyes close. I continued to search and looked further afield to find an explanation to this puzzle. My search led me to many countries in Asia and eventually to the Tibetan refugee settlement of Dharamsala in northern India.

After my third serious bout of hepatitis during my studies in Dharamsala, I naively asked a Tibetan doctor, “Am I going to die?” Dr. Yeshi

Donden, the private physician to H.H. the Dalai Lama, immediately replied, “Of course, you’re going to die! We’re all going to die!” Clearly, his personal perspective on life and death was intimately in tune with the descriptions of death and dying I had been studying in Tibetan Buddhist texts.

Some years later, as I lay for three months in hospitals in Delhi and then Tijuana recovering from a poisonous viper bite, the prospect of death loomed very near. Every day death was imminent, particularly in view of the medical care available. The medical staff in Delhi did not expect me to survive and for several weeks after receiving the poisonous bite, I dwelled in a liminal realm between consciousness and unconsciousness that bore little relationship to ordinary waking reality. After one particular surgery, the staff saw me turn blue and I awakened in what appeared to be another realm of existence. The experience of living on the edge of death for so long rekindled the questions about death that had fascinated me as a child.



## The Tibetan Pre-Buddhist Worldview

ALTHOUGH THE Tibetan plateau is situated directly north of India and Nepal, the enormity of the Himalayan mountain range made Tibet practically inaccessible to Indian Buddhist culture until the seventh century C. E. Several miraculous portents had drawn certain Tibetans' attention to Buddhism as early as the first century C. E., but it was not until the reign of Songtsen Gampo (618-650)—through marriage alliances with princesses from Nepal and China—that sacred images and monasteries began to proliferate in Tibet. King Songtsen Gampo sent the scholar Tönmi Sambhota to India to devise a script for the Tibetan language in order to facilitate the translation of Sanskrit Buddhist texts. Subsequent kings continued to send Tibet's brightest young scholars to India to study, to invite teachers, and to acquire Buddhist texts and commentaries. Thus began a centuries-long process of translating the Buddhist canon into Tibetan.

The Buddhism that prevailed in India during the period when the tradition was transmitted to Tibet (between the eighth and tenth centuries) included two major discernible streams: the analytical systems of philosophical tenets that flourished in the great monastic universities, and the esoteric Tantric meditation systems that were practiced in great secrecy in mountain caves and other solitary spots. Under royal patronage, the Tibetans exerted enormous energy to import Buddhist texts and teachings of various traditions and lineages, and they spent the next thousand years analyzing and practicing them.

### Bön Thought and Ritual

THE RELIGIOUS traditions of pre-Buddhist Tibet are collectively known today as Bön. These indigenous traditions have absorbed so many Buddhist ideas and practices over the course of time that they have in many respects become nearly indistinguishable from Buddhism. These confluences, combined with the lack of early historical documentation, make it extremely difficult to get an accurate idea of Bön civilization as it existed prior to the advent of Buddhism. We do know that pre-Buddhist shamanistic traditions were deeply concerned with the spirits of the dead. Skilled ritual specialists carried out elaborate

funerary rites and were believed capable of discerning traces of the dead in substances, after a person's consciousness had departed. Bön priests formulated 360 ways of dying, 4 ways of preparing graves, and 81 ways of taming evil spirits (Bansal, 1994, pp. 41-43). Offerings to the dead, the sacrifice of particular animals, and other rituals were performed to ensure a blissful afterlife for the souls of the dead. It was also believed that souls could be exorcized by funerary specialists to benefit the dead. These early beliefs and practices reveal an interest in the liminal aspects of death and could explain the Tibetan Buddhist emphasis on death and dying in subsequent centuries. Even today, Bön practitioners in some Tibetan cultural areas continue to perform these funeral rites (Bansal, 1994, p. 183).

Sky burial, a Tibetan practice still in evidence in Tibet today, most likely springs from the Bön tradition. Disposing of the dead in this manner surely reflects the environment: The earth was too hard to dig graves, and fuel for cremation was scarce and costly. Cremation was only an option for wealthy or illustrious people such as renowned lamas. In sky burial, on a particular day that is determined by divination, the corpse of the deceased is chopped into pieces and fed to the birds. This practice, which may appear disrespectful of the dead, is performed as a final act of generosity. Rituals carried out to determine the karmic destiny of a dead person or to exorcize troublesome spirits apparently trace their roots to Bön and similar shamanic practices, and are performed even today.

Shamanic practices never died out in Tibetan societies and many complex indigenous rituals for death and other aspects of life persisted long after Buddhism was introduced. Samuel (1993, pp. 446-447) suggests that prior to Buddhism funerary rituals were focused on protecting the surviving community from the spirits of the dead, whereas after Buddhism was introduced emphasis shifted to the welfare of the dead person in the afterlife. Even though Buddhism is famous for rejecting the notion of an enduring soul, Samten Karmay argues that "Buddhism was never able to suppress the concept of soul in Tibet" (in Lopez, 1997, p. 37). The *la (bla)*, translated as spirit, life-force, or life-essence, is not the same as the self, but nonetheless is highly individuated. In Tibet, a person is believed to have an individual *la* that



can wander away and be lost, and thus cause psychological disorientation or psychosis. But there are specific rituals that can be performed to lure the *la* back into the body.

*La* is a concept not only associated with human beings, such as in a personal soul or life force, but also with animals, natural elements, and places. At the time of birth, the *la* appears in conjunction with five other deities, representing life, female, male, enemy, and locality. Just as Hawaiians plant a breadfruit tree at the birth of a child, in some regions Tibetans plant a tree, usually a juniper, which they call a “*la* tree” (*la shing*) (Samuel, 1993, p. 187). The *la* is related to fortune in this life rather than to liberation, and does not seem to be related to rebirth (Samuel, 1993, p. 187).<sup>2</sup> Samuel (1993) says that, “The *la* can leave the body, weakening one’s life and exposing one to harm. It can also be affected by damaging or destroying its external resting-place” (p. 187). The *la* must be protected from harmful influences and “returned” through rituals if stolen. The fact that rituals such as these continue up to the present day in Tibetan societies is evidence that a covert theory of soul (*la*) has endured since pre-Buddhist times and continues to coexist with the Buddhist concept of selflessness.

With regard to death, there is considerable common ground between Bön and Tibetan Buddhism. Both draw analogies between death and sleep, death and dreaming, and exhort practitioners to maintain total awareness as the internal and external signs of death are encountered. Both Bön and Tibetan Buddhism speak of: (a) *phowa* (*pho ba*) practice (transference of consciousness); (b) visions in the *bardo* (intermediate state); (c) prayers for the dead for forty-nine days; and (d) liberation in the *bardo*. But there are also some conceptual differences between Bön and Tibetan Buddhism. For example, Bön speaks of the Six Clear Knowledges of: (a) death; (b) cause and effect; (c) complete knowledge; (d) clear light of the *bardo*; (e) nature of the mind; and (f) *trikāya* (similar to the Buddhist *trikāya*, “three bodies of the Buddha”); and the Six Recollections on: (a) past lives; (b) stages of the *bardo*; (c) consciousness as without support; (d) the master’s instructions; (e) visions as mental projections; and (f) the pure essence of mind that opens onto one’s *yidam* (“meditational deity”) (Wangyal, 1993, p. 187). Instead of four or

six *bardos* as in Tibetan Buddhism, Bön speaks of three, each of which corresponds to a different level of practitioner: superior, average, and inferior. The superior practitioner is one who dies with total awareness of the absolute view, liberating the mind into the essential nature of reality like “a snowflake dissolving in the ocean” (Wangyal, 1993, p. 187). Despite these differences, there are obvious confluences between Bön and Tibetan Buddhism.

## The Ephemeral Nature of Life

### The Tibetan Mode of Dying

NEWCOMERS ARE often struck by the centrality of death in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Images of Yama, the Lord of Death, greet visitors at the door of most Tibetan temples. Beginning meditators are taught to meditate on the impermanence of life and to reflect that from the moment of birth, death stalks “like a murderer with poised sword” (Wangyal, 1993, p. 187). To visualize one’s own rotting corpse and the dissolution of body and mind at the time of death engenders insight into the impermanence of life. This insight then acts as an antidote to laziness and attachment. Through the practice of *chö* (*chod*), accompanied by the rhythm of drums and lyrical chanting, one perfects the virtue of generosity by donating one’s own severed limbs and internal organs to hungry ghosts and spirits. One learns to direct the 84,000 winds of the body into the central psychic channel, through the crown of the head, and toward a rebirth in a Pure Land. Another method of teaching impermanence is the ritual of creating a three-dimensional sand *maṇḍala* symbolizing the “pure land” of the enlightened being which all sentient beings are capable of becoming. After being carefully constructed, the *maṇḍala* is destroyed and thrown into moving water to symbolize the ephemeral quality of all life. Ritual instruments used in the *cham* (monastic “dance”) and other Tantric rituals symbolize cutting through the attachment to self. In various ways, each of these practices offers methods to demolish misconceptions about the self. Symbolically, ego identification is transcended on three levels: (a) the outer, symbolizing external form; (b) the inner, symbolizing the emotions; and (c) the secret, symbolizing the subtle mind and body.

A huge corpus of literature generally referred to under the rubric of *Lamrim (The Graduated Path to Enlightenment)* arose in Tibet to facilitate study and meditation on key Buddhist concepts; meditation on death and dying is a principal topic. The texts provide instructions for actual meditation practice, including contemplation on the inevitability of death and the stages of the dying process. In the texts are many slogans designed to remind the practitioner throughout the meditation that death is definite, yet the time of death is indefinite, and at the time of death only Dharma practice will be of benefit. These meditations on death and dying are done repeatedly to help practitioners develop detachment and equanimity and to prepare them to meet death calmly and constructively.

Death forces us to confront our yearning for immortality, what Wallace (1993) calls “life’s oldest illusion,” and to recognize how we are “enmeshed in the chain of trivial concerns that fill daily life” (p. 11). Attitudes toward death are thus closely connected to a sense of personal identity, because death represents the loss of a person’s familiar identifications, especially the identification with this body and mind. Strong emotions such as anger or attachment to friends and possessions are viewed as serious impediments to mindful, meaningful dying and causes for disagreeable future rebirths.

From a Tibetan perspective, it is assumed that the mental events or moments of mental consciousness that comprise an individual’s mental continuum continue to arise after the physical elements disintegrate and eventually assume a new locus of physical components. This cycle repeats endlessly, each successive rebirth bringing a different identity with unique propensities as a result of its karmic ledger. Insight into the nature of consciousness is therefore central to the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of death and its consequences.

In the Tibetan Buddhist worldview, the “person” is a concatenation of physical and mental components or momentary events. All functional phenomena belong to one of three mutually distinct yet interrelated categories: matter (Skt: *kanthā*), consciousnesses (Skt: *jñāna*), and nonassociated compositional factors (Skt: *viprayukta-saṃskāra*) (Perdue, 1992, p. 354). Actions of body, speech, and mind create imprints

on successive moments of consciousness, and lie dormant in the mental continuum until conditions are conducive to their ripening, creating the conditions for further actions of body, speech, and mind. Each moment of consciousness conditions successive moments of consciousness. Actions of body, speech, and mind thus generate further actions, whether wholesome or unwholesome. Consciousness does not simply cease at the time of death, but gives rise to subsequent moments of consciousness, which continue into the intermediate state (*bardo*) that exists between the moment of death and the moment of the next rebirth. Because the moment of consciousness at the time of death conditions subsequent moments of consciousness into the next rebirth, the quality of consciousness (or “state of mind”) at the time of death is critical for determining the quality of the next rebirth. Consequently, Tibetan practitioners train their minds to remain calm and attentive during the stages of the dying process, throughout the intermediate state, and during the process of rebirth.

### Rehearsing One’s Dying

IN THE harsh climate of Tibet, death is a constant threat. Temperatures dip far below freezing and life is generally at the mercy of the elements. Tibetan practitioners take the Buddha’s teachings on death very seriously. At the portal to the next life awaits Yama, the Lord of Death. Eager to snap up the unsuspecting, he metaphorically weighs the deceased’s former actions, punishing evil deeds with terrifying consequences and rewarding good deeds with a happy destiny in the next life. The physical components of the person disintegrate within a given time span, determined by the quality of that person’s spiritual practice and the level of realization attained. The consciousness of an experienced practitioner may remain in meditation for some time and delay the decomposition of the body. After the physical components disintegrate, what becomes of them is inconsequential, and thus to offer the flesh and ground bones to vultures is not grotesque, but rather a commendable act of generosity. Since rotting flesh is of no use to the deceased or to the continuity of consciousness, it is considered an act of merit to donate the flesh to animals, especially “higher” animals, such as birds. *Chö*,



the ritual practice of offering one's body parts to spirits in meditation, appears to be a rehearsal for the dismemberment that follows actual death.

Precisely what happens after the moment of death is a matter of ongoing dispute among Buddhists, yet all schools concur that the mental continuum of an ordinary being takes another birth. Whether the next rebirth is pleasant or unpleasant is the result of one's previous actions, wholesome or unwholesome. For example, Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (1964) relates that when the life-continuum ends, an evil person is enveloped by the store of his or her evil deeds. First, the death consciousness arises and ceases, then the rebirth-linking consciousness arises, and due to the negative karma previously created, the signs of an unhappy destiny (the flames of hell, forests of knives, etc.) appear (p. 632). Conversely, when the life-continuum ends, a virtuous person is enveloped by his or her good deeds. After the death consciousness arises and ceases, the rebirth-linking consciousness arises, and the pleasant signs of a happy destiny (pleasure groves, heavenly palaces, wish-fulfilling trees, etc.) appear (pp. 633-634).

Buddhaghosa, the foremost commentator in the Pāli tradition, describes how like gives rise to like: The material (Skt: *rūpa*, form) gives rise to the material, while the immaterial (Skt: *viññāna*, consciousness) gives rise to the immaterial. In accordance with dependent arising (Skt: *pratītyasamutpāda*), the life-continuum begins from the rebirth-linking consciousness and continues until the death consciousness at the end of the lifespan (1964, p. 719). One assumes or "takes up" the corporeal aggregates that begin the life continuum and leaves behind or "puts down" the corporeal aggregates at the time of death. All the "formations" between birth and death—the varied experiences of life—are characterized by impermanence (Skt: *anitya*), unsatisfactoriness (Skt: *dukkha*), and selflessness (Skt: *anātman*). The "formations" are described as being selfless, because of being devoid of self, or "ownerless" (p. 721). The lifespan is divided into ten stages: "the tender decade, the sport decade, the beauty decade," and so on, with the formations disintegrating all the while and life careening uncontrollably toward its inevitable conclusion. The various stages of life are therefore in a ceaseless process of formation and

disintegration from moment to moment. The Indian Buddhist perspective on life and death is congruent with its perspective on the bipolar modality of phenomena: a thing can be either permanent or impermanent; there is no third alternative. Therefore, if a self were to exist, it would have to be either a permanent or an impermanent phenomenon. Buddhaghosa vigorously denies that any component of the being is transmitted from one life to the next, and his view is commonly held by Theravāda Buddhist practitioners today. The Pāli texts go to great lengths to establish that the "self," like all compounded phenomena, is impermanent and lacking in any permanent core.

In the *Abhidharmakośa*, Vasubandhu describes an intermediate state (*bardo*) of indeterminate length. A *bardo* being is said to be: (a) visible only to certain beings; (b) possessed of complete sense faculties; and (c) unimpeded by material obstacles. A *bardo* being lacks materiality, but nevertheless has a form which, although not visible to ordinary human beings, may be visible to other *bardo* beings, highly realized beings, and beings with the special capacity to perceive such a form. Because a *bardo* being is unimpeded by material obstacles, it is able to travel through walls, mountains, and other barriers. Such a being possesses complete sense faculties and is able to see, hear, smell, taste, feel sensations, and cognize. The being lacks materiality (Neumaier-Dargyay, 1997, p. 92), but still has the aggregates which are the basis for imputing the existence of a self. The ultimate destiny of the being is determined by its former actions (Skt: *karma*) in previous lifetimes, or more properly speaking, the being's destiny arises in dependence upon causes and conditions which propel it to its next rebirth. Only one who has practiced intensively in advance and gained sufficient control over the mind has the power to choose or avoid rebirth.

Although the standard Tibetan explication of death and rebirth is somewhat more complex and colorful, it is remarkably similar to Buddhaghosa's explication in the *Visuddhimagga*. Only the momentary aggregate of consciousness continues after death, with one moment of consciousness giving rise to and conditioning the next. Unless one has achieved a very high level of spiritual attainment, rebirth takes place "at the mercy of karma and delusion."

All Buddhist schools assert that the mental continuum, being nonmaterial, may travel from one life to the next without any time lapse, especially in the case of a sudden accident. In contrast to Buddhaghosa, who argues that rebirth *necessarily* takes place immediately, Tibetans believe that the consciousness transverses an intermediate state (*bardo*) for a period of up to forty-nine days. The *bardo* being seeks an appropriate rebirth in a series of seven intervals, each up to seven days in length. At each stage, the *bardo* being assumes an identity that presages that of its next rebirth. At the end of each interval, if an appropriate rebirth has not been found, the being experiences a “small death,” takes birth in another intermediate state (*bardo*), and assumes a new identity similar in form to the identity it will take in its eventual, material rebirth. Rather than appearing in the same form as in the last lifetime, the *bardo* being resembles the being it will become. These changing identities can be seen as analogs of the series of identities a single mental continuum assumes over the course of many, even infinite, lifetimes. Under the influence of defilements, particularly sexual desire, the mental consciousness of an ordinary being eventually is attracted to a couple in sexual union. As a result of this attraction, the consciousness enters the mother’s womb and conception occurs.<sup>3</sup>

The term *bardo* (Skt: *antarābhāva*) is most commonly used to refer to the intermediate state between death in one lifetime and rebirth in the next. In fact, the term may denote one of six intermediate (*bardo*) states: (a) birth (*skye ba’i bar do*); (b) dream (*rmi lam gyi bar do*); (c) meditative concentration (*bsam gten gyi bar do*); (d) death (*chi ka’i bar do*); (e) the afterdeath state of reality itself (*chös nyi bar do*, Skt: *dharmatā*); and (f) rebirth or “becoming” (*srid pa’i bar do*). The *bardo* of birth includes all the experiences and actions of waking reality from birth until death; the *bardo* of dream includes all experiences and mental events during sleep; the *bardo* of meditative concentration includes all mental events and realizations experienced during meditation practice; the *bardo* of death includes all events during the process of dying and the moment of death; the afterdeath *bardo* of reality itself includes all the mental events experienced once one regains consciousness after death; and the *bardo* of rebirth includes all the

experiences involved in seeking an appropriate next birth.<sup>4</sup> The *bardo* of rebirth ceases with the *bardo* of birth, and the cycle begins again.

## Enlightened Ways of Dying

### Navigating the Journey to the Next Life

AS DEATH approaches, the dying person is encouraged to reflect on the impermanent, suffering, selfless nature of the mind and all other composite phenomena, as described in the early Buddhist texts. In addition, a person who is sufficiently trained will meditate on the luminous, empty, knowing nature of the mind, as described in the Mahāyāna texts, and be prepared to recognize the clear light nature of the mind when it appears in the afterdeath state. In the Tibetan tradition, a practitioner will also have received instructions and training on the stages of the dying process and how to recognize the physiological, psychological, and visionary indicators that occur at each stage. If the practitioner has rehearsed these practices and become thoroughly familiar with the stages of dying, it is possible not only to avoid unfortunate “migrations” after death, but also to achieve high spiritual realizations, including enlightenment, during the stages of the dying process and the intermediate state.

Tibetan medical lore explains how to determine the time of death by analyzing the urine of the critically ill patient and by reading the death pulse (Donden, 1986, pp. 99-101, 104-105). Of the four medical *tantras*, the second describes the signs of death in detail (p. 18). A composite of gross and subtle winds (*bar do rlung lus*, Skt: *antarābhavayukāya*) is said to continue during the intermediate state after death. Death is regarded as a process rather than a unitary event. The subtle winds and subtle body that continue after physical death are the basis for the only semblance of identity that survives an individual’s death.

In his translation of Padmasambhava’s *Book of Natural Liberation Through Understanding in the Between (Bar do thos grol)*, Thurman (1994) says:

Western science holds that a “flatline” on the EEG means cessation of heartbeat and brain



activity, and therefore represents death. The illusion of the subjective "I" in the individual consciousness, assumed by materialists to correspond with the presence of brain wave activity, should cease with the cessation of brain waves. Yet the picture of death as nothing in consciousness is not a scientific finding. It is a conceptual notion. There are many cases of people being revived after "flatlining" for some time, and they report intense subjective experiences. (p. 23)

Thurman (1994) applies Pascal's wager: If there is nothing after death, well and good; if there is something, we will not regret being prepared for it. Karma is described by Thurman as a process of psychobiological evolution, and Buddhist practice as the evolutionary technology needed to die lucidly and then to skillfully traverse the intermediate state.

### Tibetan Funerary Practices

AMONG BUDDHISTS, purifying the mind, absolving negative karma, creating positive karma, and loosening the bonds that bind an individual to the world are concerns not only for the living, but also for those in the intermediate state after death. The *Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo* (*Bar do thos grol*), the well-known Tibetan instruction manual for guiding the dying through the *bardo* between death and rebirth, is often an integral part of funeral rituals. The text, attributed to Padmasambhava and discovered by Karma Lingpa (1326-1386), is an example of the hidden treasure text (*gter ma*) genre of literature associated with the Nyingma tradition. The text guides the dying in: (a) recognizing the fundamental clear light nature of the mind at the time of death; (b) recognizing the true nature of the wrathful and peaceful deities that appear; and (c) achieving liberation from rebirth. Just as a prisoner on death row may experience a spiritual breakthrough, the intensity of the experience of dying can serve as a catalyst for spiritual awakening. It is believed that a highly competent practitioner may even achieve enlightenment in the *bardo*.

The Tibetan Buddhist tradition teaches that no matter how defiled one's ordinary consciousness may be, at its center lies a core of luminosity—the potential to become a fully enlightened Buddha. To realize the luminous nature of the mind at the moment of death is itself a liberation from the

delusions that obscure the true nature of the mind. The luminous, ultimately nonconceptual nature of the mind is also alluded to in early texts such as the *Anguttara Nikaya*. Although this understanding may also be developed through meditation practice while one is alive, the dying process presents an ideal opportunity to discover the clear light nature of the mind—the primary identifying aspect of all sentient beings. Without proper preparation, an individual is propelled after death into a new rebirth totally at the mercy of karma and delusion. Therefore, practitioners make efforts to gain control of the mind and train in navigating the stages of dying beforehand so as to remain calm and aware during the "journey" and achieve a desirable rebirth.

Actual practices vary according to the individual and the lineage. If a person has been a practitioner of a particular meditational deity (*yi dam*) or lineage of transmission, it is common to incorporate that practice and lineage into funeral proceedings. The goal is to achieve enlightenment "in this life, in this very body," but in case one is not able to accomplish this goal there still remains the opportunity to direct one's consciousness to a Pure Land after death. An extremely proficient adept can effect rebirth in a Pure Land even without experiencing the *bardo*. Such adepts are said to be "deathless"; the coarse physical body transforms into a pure rainbow body and leaves no corpse behind. When this occurs, rainbows appear in the clear blue sky and the practitioner's hair and fingernails are all that is left behind in the meditation cell. Reports of such phenomena are not uncommon in Tibetan cultural lore.

### *Phowa*: Transference of Consciousness

THE UNIQUELY Tibetan meditation practice known as *phowa*, "transference of consciousness," is a means of preparing for the journey to the next rebirth. By learning to control the winds of the body and consciously direct them through the psychic channels, practitioners also learn to successfully guide their consciousness from this life to a rebirth in a Pure Land at the moment of death. For one sufficiently trained in *phowa*, death is the culmination of the practice. Not only can one avoid an unfortunate future rebirth, but a competent *phowa* practitioner is able to collect the 84,000 winds of the body into



the central psychic channel and direct the subtle mind to a rebirth in a “fortunate migration” or a Pure Land.

The *Yoga of Consciousness Transference* text by Tsechokling Yeshe Gyaltzen, the *guru* of the eighth Dalai Lama, describes a *phowa* practice that focuses on Maitreya Buddha “wherein all energies of the body are withdrawn just as at the time of death and a meditational experience equivalent to death is aroused” (Mullin, 1998, p. 175). The practice preliminaries include the elimination of nonvirtuous mental states and the cultivation of virtuous ones by: (a) generating *bodhicitta*, the enlightened attitude of wishing to achieve the state of perfect Buddhahood in order to liberate all sentient beings from suffering; (b) accumulating merit; (c) meditating repeatedly on *bodhicitta*; (d) eliminating negativity through purification practices; and (e) aspiring never to become separated from *bodhicitta* (Mullin, 1998, p. 177). In the actual practice session, one first visualizes Maitreya Buddha in Tuṣita Pure Land, surrounded by countless *bodhisattvas*, and then invokes him to manifest at the place of practice. Next, one recites liturgies of offering, purification, invocation, and dedication, and visualizes a nectar of purification and blessings streaming from Maitreya into oneself. One visualizes blocking the subsidiary pathways of the body and invites Maitreya to the crown of one’s head. Concentrating on a drop of light in the central energy channel as being in the nature of one’s own mind, one invokes Maitreya, who fills the central channel with brilliant light. One then repeatedly visualizes the light drop at one’s heart, along with the vital energies, shooting up until it reaches the crown aperture and descending. In order to achieve the signs of perfect accomplishment, the practitioner must bear in mind the illusory nature of the practitioner, the consciousness, and the process of transference—the emptiness of “the three circles” (Mullin, 1998, pp. 181-187).

As the actual time of death approaches, one accumulates merit by giving away all one’s possessions and then, lying on the right side in the “lion posture,” begins the practice. Great care must be taken in the practice of *phowa*, however, to ensure that one’s consciousness does not accidentally leave the body before one’s lifespan is exhausted. Because the practitioner is consciously

identifying with the meditational deity, to eject the consciousness from the body and die prematurely is not only equivalent to suicide—a serious ethical transgression—but also slays the deity that is the object of identification. It is a widely shared value that Dharma practitioners should attempt to prolong their lives in order to fulfill their spiritual objectives. Long life empowerments (*tse dbang*) are among the numerous ritual enactments to prevent untimely death and prolong life. Collectively, these practices are designed to “cheat death” (Padmasambhava, 1998, pp. 196-197).

### **Chö: Deconstructing the Illusory Self**

THE MAHĀYĀNA teachings emphasize compassion, *bodhicitta*, and meditation techniques that erode the self-cherishing attitude. One well-known practice for eradicating self-cherishing and perfecting the virtue of generosity is *chö*, or “cutting through.” In this practice, one visualizes cutting off one’s limbs and other body parts, and symbolically offering them to hungry ghosts and other beings in need:

The *Chöd* [chö] rites were reputed to have been begun in the eleventh century by the Tibetan female mystic, Machig Labdron. In the myth surrounding her life, a male yogi in India transferred his consciousness into the body of a female foetus in Tibet and she was born with miraculous powers. It was during her reading of the *Prajñāpāramitā* that she achieved insight pertaining to the emptiness of all things, and developed the practice which uses visualizations of demons to overcome fears and dispel the notion of a belief in a “self.” In the practice, the meditator beats the rhythm of the chant with a large hand-held drum and simultaneously rings a bell, which is said to represent the feminine. At intervals a thigh bone trumpet is blown to summon the demons to a feast of the meditator’s ego. (Campbell, 1996, p. 209)

The practice aims at cutting through the delusions of the mind, particularly attachment to the body and the illusion of an independent self.

The practice of *chö* that developed in Tibet has its roots in early Buddhist texts, specifically the Jataka tales, the past life legends about Buddha Śākyamuni. In a past life as a *bodhisattva*, the Buddha is believed to have cut off the flesh from his own thigh and given it to a hungry tigress to

save her and her cubs from starvation. Namo Buddha, the sacred site in Nepal that commemorates this compassionate deed, is a popular destination for Buddhist pilgrims from around the world even today.

In one of the few academic studies of *chö*, Gyatso (1985) traces the practice to four main Indian sources: Āryadeva's *Tsigs bcad*, Nāro's *Ro sñoms*, Orgyan's *'Khrul gcod*, and especially Phadampa Sangye's *Zi byed* (p. 325). The practice is traditionally linked with the Prajñāpāramitā tradition, wherein offering one's body to sentient beings is extolled as an ideal practice of generosity (Skt: *dānapāramitā*), and generally features Vajrayoginī or another female deity or *dākinī*. Codified by the Tibetan *yogin* Machig Labdron (*Ma gcig lab kyi sgron ma*, 1055-1143), *chö* is a method for severing the tendency to cling to the body and the illusion of self (Powers, 1995, pp. 370-374):

Through offering up one's body—the focal point of physical attachments—one undermines the tendency to reify such dichotomies as subject and object, self and others, and conventional ideas of good and evil. Thus one recognizes that one's fears are only the result of mental afflictions, which themselves are empty of inherent existence. In order to confront them directly, a *chö* practitioner enacts a complex drama consisting of visualizations, rituals, and prayers in which deities and demons are initially conjured up, but later found to be insubstantial, utterly lacking inherent existence, and products of the mind. (p. 371)

Machig's birth narrative recounts her previous life as a *brahmin* dialectician in India. Advised by a *dākinī* to flee his opponents, the purified consciousness abandons the male *brahmin* body in a cave near Vārāṇasī and takes birth as Machig in Tibet. From early childhood, Machig gains renown as a *yogin* and eventually becomes the progenitor of the deconstructionist *chö* rite. As Powers (1995) notes, she "holds the distinction of being the only Tibetan lama whose teachings were transmitted to India" (p. 374).

### Guru, Deity, and Self

THE TANTRIC path speaks about one's mind becoming inseparable from the mind of the *guru* and the meditational deity. In the orthodox Buddhist context this is not possible, since each

individuated mental continuum evolves independently toward its own liberation or enlightenment. Individual mind streams do not simply conjoin. The statement that "one's mind becomes inseparable from the mind of the *guru*" therefore represents a conundrum. The most common interpretation is figurative: One's mind becomes enlightened just like the mind of the *guru*. Because the mind is by nature empty, all sentient beings have Buddha nature, the potential for enlightenment. Because one's mind is empty by nature, one can realize the *guru*'s enlightened state.

The Tantric meditations use procreative metaphors to symbolize transformation: the divine conjugal couple as the parents, the *maṇḍala* of the deity as the environment, the womb as the genitrix, and the practitioner as the embryo of enlightenment (Stablein, 1980, pp. 213-226). The Tantric meditations also speak about "generating the pride of being the deity," that is, pride in the visualization of oneself as inseparable from the meditational deity (*vidam*): Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Vajrapāṇi, Tāra, and others. This identification of oneself with a meditational deity—selected from an infinite number of different manifestations of enlightenment—is not merely symbolic. One takes pride in actually "being" the deity, manifesting all that being's enlightened qualities: compassion, wisdom, power, enlightened activity, and so forth. Since enlightened beings are also individuated, each one being the result of a long process of evolution, the identification of the practitioner with the deity is similarly problematic. In order to be consistent with the Mahāyāna hermeneutical framework, the identification must, again, be taken figuratively, that is, by juxtaposing the obscured mental continuum of the ordinary being and the unobscured enlightened awareness of the enlightened being.

### Relaxing Identifications: Self as Metaphor

THE BUDDHIST literature that was transmitted to Tibet included extensive discussions on the nature of the self. Misconceptions about the self are among the three fundamental misconceptions that lie at the root of all afflictions: (a) viewing what is impermanent as permanent; (b) viewing what is undesirable as



desirable; and (c) viewing what is selfless as having self. Clinging to the self is integrally linked with grasping at permanence, and both are causes of suffering. The identities we take from life to life are illusory and the images we have of ourselves are mere projections. Identifying strongly with these ephemeral identities is a source of great suffering and confusion, particularly when they shatter at the time of death.

The existence of a person does not require that all five of the psychophysical aggregates (Skt: *skandhas*) be present, but can be imputed on the basis of one or more of the aggregates: form, feeling, perception, karmic formation, and consciousness. For example, a being in the formless realm who possesses only the aggregate of consciousness may be imputed to exist on the basis of just that one aggregate. Existent objects, including persons, are necessarily the objects of a perceiving consciousness. The existence of a person, therefore, is imputed to exist by a perceiving consciousness that cognizes one or more of the five aggregates, for example, seeing the person's form or hearing the person's voice. It is not necessary to perceive all the aggregates of a person to generate a valid cognition of the person; one may validly infer the presence of a person by hearing the person's familiar voice or seeing the person's form.

Mahāyāna texts explain that the theory of selflessness applies not only to persons, but to all composite phenomena. This view is not limited to Mahāyāna, for the three characteristics of all phenomena are dissatisfaction (Skt: *dukkha*), impermanence (Skt: *anitya*), and selflessness (Skt: *anātman*). Like persons, the other "things" of everyday experience also exist as conventional realities which lack inherent reality. "I," "self," and "person" are mere labels; upon analysis, no ultimate referent can be found. The doctrine of selflessness does not mean that persons do not exist but only that permanent, partless, independent persons do not exist (Perdue, 1992, p. 364). Ultimately, in the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka definition, "self" denotes inherent existence. Hopkins (1983) enumerates seventeen synonyms of self in this sense: true existence, ultimate existence, substantial existence, objective existence, and so forth (p. 36). Even nonexistent phenomena are said to be selfless, for a self cannot be found anywhere.

In the *Collected Topics (bsDus grva)*, the logic primer used in the monastic universities of Tibet, the five psychophysical aggregates (Skt: *skandhas*) constitute the basis of designation of the person, but the five aggregates are also said to include all impermanent ("functional") phenomena. Impermanent phenomena that do not belong to the categories of form, feeling, discrimination, or consciousness are subsumed in the remaining category, compositional factor. Functional phenomena such as time, directional space, karma, *saṃsāra*, and persons belong to this category. On the basis of the aggregates, a person can be imputed to exist; without at least one of the aggregates (for example, consciousness), a person cannot be imputed to exist. If a person's consciousness can be shown to survive death, it can be concluded that a conventionally operative "person" survives death, even though it will no longer have the same identity as while alive.

In addition to the standard Buddhist description of the nature of self and selflessness, Tibetan scholars analyze the self in accordance with the Mahāyāna doctrine of the two truths. The self is a functional phenomenon that, like all phenomena, exists at the conventional level of truth, but is empty of true existence at the ultimate level. Conventional and ultimate levels of truth are mutually entailing in the same way that dependent arising (Skt: *pratītyasamutpāda*) and emptiness are mutually entailing. That is, each existent (to take the classic example, a vase) is empty and each has its specific emptiness (e.g., the emptiness of the vase). Even permanent phenomena can be termed dependent arisings, in the sense that they arise in dependence on their parts or in dependence on a consciousness that conceives them (Hopkins, 1983, p. 432).

The nature of the self is explained in terms of two distorted attitudes to be eliminated: self-cherishing and self-grasping. Self-cherishing denotes cherishing oneself more than others; self-grasping denotes grasping at oneself as being truly existent. The conventional antidotes to self-cherishing are loving kindness and compassion—cherishing others more than oneself. The ultimate antidote to self-cherishing is *bodhicitta*, the enlightened attitude of wishing to achieve the state of perfect Buddhahood in order to liberate all sentient beings from suffering. The conventional antidote to self-grasping is

meditation on impermanence—realizing the fragile, fleeting nature of one’s own existence. The ultimate antidote to self-grasping is the wisdom (Skt: *prajñā*) that directly understands the emptiness (Skt: *śūnyatā*) of all phenomena. This is an awareness of things “as they are,” without false projections such as “I,” “me,” and “mine.” The self is mistakenly perceived by ordinary beings as being truly existent, even though it exists in dependence on the five aggregates.<sup>5</sup> Further, the five aggregates are mistakenly perceived to truly exist, even though they exist on the basis of their constituent parts (“bases of imputation”). This imputed existence (Skt: *prajñaptisat*) is then misinterpreted as true existence.<sup>6</sup>

Once the practitioner eliminates the misconception of the self as existing independently of its bases of imputation, ignorance or “unknowing” (Skt: *avidyā*)—the root of all other delusions—is eradicated. When ignorance is eradicated, the first link in the chain of dependent arising that binds beings within *saṃsāra* is simultaneously destroyed. Nāgārjuna (2nd/3rd c.) expresses it this way:

Having seen thus the aggregates as untrue,  
The conception of I is abandoned,  
And due to abandoning the conception of I  
The aggregates arise no more.  
(In Hopkins, 1998, p. 97)

When the aggregates are no longer conceived as being truly existent, there is no self in which suffering can inhere, hence liberation from suffering is achieved.

#### Persons, Bodhisattvas, and Buddhas

A FURTHER TOPIC to consider is what death means to a *bodhisattva* or a Buddha. Do *bodhisattvas* and Buddhas die like ordinary mortals or are they beyond death? What does death mean for an embodied Buddha such as Śākyamuni who has transcended conceptual thought? What does it mean for a *bodhisattva* who willingly defers liberation for the good of the world? Does the *bodhisattva* ideal contribute to the illusion of self or undermine it? To strive for Buddhahood requires not only much dedication and conviction, but also tremendous self-confidence, even pride: the aspirant must vow “to liberate all beings without exception, and to take

the responsibility for establishing each and every one in the state of perfect Buddhahood.” Is the wish to liberate all living beings a form of self-sacrifice or is it, as Trungpa Rinpoche reportedly once said, “the biggest ego trip that ever happened?”

In the early Buddhist texts, a Buddha like Śākyamuni is portrayed as an ordinary human being who, through diligent practice, achieves the state of *nirvāṇa* and passes away (“enters *paranirvāṇa*”), more or less like any other person, although perhaps with more equanimity and wisdom. Prior to enlightenment, a *bodhisattva* is a selfless practitioner who aims at liberating all sentient beings, but is otherwise vulnerable to death and rebirth, just like everyone else. As the Mahāyāna teachings evolved, these concepts began to change as the Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* progressively assumed more mythic proportions.

Even in pre-Mahāyāna texts, a practitioner who successfully attains the state of a fully enlightened Buddha is no longer subject to birth and death and is therefore liberated from cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*). The Mahāyāna texts explicitly state that one who has achieved the status of a *bodhisattva* has also achieved the power to determine one’s future rebirth. Unlike ordinary beings who are “thrown” to the next rebirth “at the mercy of *karma* and delusion,” a *bodhisattva* achieves the power to emanate multiple bodies in multiple world systems in order to benefit sentient beings. The motivating force behind the *bodhisattva*’s endeavors is not pride or egotism, but boundless compassion.

In Tibet, the belief in the *bodhisattvas*’ power to reincarnate intentionally became institutionalized in the *tulku* system, in which reincarnate lamas are recognized in childhood, revered as being the reembodiments of specific highly realized practitioners, and singled out for special treatment and education. The word “*tulku*” is the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit word “*nirmāṅkāya*,” signifying the emanation body in the *trikāya* theory of the Buddha. The oldest *tulku* lineage, that of the Karmapas, began with Tüsum Khyenpa (1110-1193) and continues until the present, with the 17th Karmapa, Ugyen Trinley Dorje, who recently escaped Chinese domination and defected to India.

Unlike the *bodhisattvas* who intentionally take rebirth in *saṃsāra* to benefit sentient



beings, Buddhas are viewed as perfectly enlightened beings who benefit sentient beings through methods that do not necessarily require taking an ordinary birth. For this reason, the texts refer to the ultimate attainment of Buddhahood as achieving “the deathless *dharmakāya*” (formless, enlightened wisdom aspect of the Buddha). These various identities and permutations within the different Buddhist traditions are, like all phenomena, ultimately devoid of abiding identity. Whereas the enlightened awareness of a Buddha is permanent, the Buddhas, *bodhisattvas*, *arhats*, and ordinary beings alike are identity-less, operating on a ceaselessly changing, conventional level of reality. Even the *bodhisattva* who is recognized as the reembodiment of a spiritual adept, manifesting the predispositions of an earlier incarnation, represents simply another phase in a continuous series of conventional identities.

### Consciously Dying

THE TIBETAN Buddhist tradition has developed a panopoly of methods to cultivate conscious dying. By training in mental discipline, practitioners learn to control their various levels of conscious awareness and reach a point where it is even possible to separate the gross and subtle levels of the mind and the body. Proficiency in controlling the levels of consciousness is specifically useful during the dying process. For this reason, the experience of dying is simulated and rehearsed in meditation practice. Learning to recognize the “clear and knowing” nature of the mind enables a practitioner to understand the mind not only while living, but also, and more importantly, while dying, and during the critical junctures between life, death, and rebirth.

The preliminaries for conscious dying include a series of reflections on the nature of death, its implications, and its inevitability (Coberly, 2001; Mullin, 1998, pp. 54-58). Meditating on death, one first reflects on the fact that death is definite, by considering that: (a) death comes to everyone; (b) the lifespan is constantly diminishing and cannot be extended indefinitely; and (c) while one is alive, little time is spent on mental cultivation. In the second part of the meditation, one reflects on the fact that the time of death is indefinite, by considering that: (a) the human lifespan is uncertain; (b) the causes of death are many and the conditions for supporting life are few; and (c)

the body is very fragile. In the last part of the meditation, one reflects on the fact that at the time of death, only mental cultivation is of benefit, by considering that: (a) friends and relatives are of no further use; (b) possessions are of no further use; and (c) one’s body is of no further use. Serious reflection on these topics can motivate a person to abandon worldly concerns and concentrate intensively on spiritual practice.

Another method of meditating on death is to visualize the dissolution of the elements of the body and mind that occurs during the stages of dying (Coberly, 2001; Lati Rinpoche & Hopkins, 1979, pp. 32-48). The dissolution of the elements of the mind and body (earth, water, fire, wind, and consciousness) occurs in conjunction with the dissolution of the five aggregates, accompanied by specific physical, external, and internal signs. For example, as the earth element, representing the form aggregate, dissolves, the most solid constituents of the body (bones, teeth, and nails) begin to disintegrate, and the body feels weak and heavy; internally, one feels depressed and sees a mirage-like appearance. In this way, a practitioner meditates on each of the signs that appear as all of the subsequent elements dissolve in sequence: earth, water, fire, and wind. Next, consciousness dissolves in three stages: the consciousness of white appearance, the consciousness of red increase, and the consciousness of black appearance. As the last of these dissolves, the clear light of death appears. The luminous refractions in rainbow colors represent the six realms of rebirth: white for the god realm, green for the demigod realm, yellow for the human realm, blue for the animal realm, red for the hungry ghost realm, and black for the hell realm. At this point, the consciousness of most beings takes rebirth, impelled to one realm or another by familiar longings and projections.

A uniquely Tibetan method of death meditation, mentioned earlier, is *chö* (*chod*), “cutting through.” Other examples are the visualization techniques described in the Tantric texts transmitted from India and still practiced in the Tibetan tradition today. Through meditative experience, imagining oneself to be an enlightened being, the developing stage of Tantric practice aims at purifying birth, death, and the intermediate state between death and rebirth (Guenther, 1986, p. 44). The visualization of meditational deities, female and male, consciously and continuously

during these critical stages has the effect of eliminating unproductive and unwholesome states of consciousness, or “impure manifestations.” In this way, “death is not a passage into nothingness, but a way of existing as an end attained; everything that has prevented authentic being, has ‘died’” (Guenther, 1986, p. 45, n. 5).

During the intermediate state, the aim is to be completely aware when death occurs and to recognize the clear light nature of consciousness when it appears, without fear or distraction. The process of purification and attunement that occurs when one remains alert and fully mindful of the clear light nature of the mind during the *bardo* is an opportunity for successive levels of realization, even liberation. Just as during the dream state between sleep and wakefulness (*rmi lam bar do*), the subtle consciousness is said to “ride” on a subtle body. Because this state is an opportunity to recognize the “indivisibility of motility and mentality,” that is, the changing nature of consciousness, Guenther (1986) calls it an “intermediate state of possibilities” (pp. 83-86). It is not that these subtle states of consciousness are not present during ordinary waking life, it is just that most people are so absorbed with grosser levels of consciousness that they remain unaware of them. However, after the gross body disintegrates, along with the grosser levels of consciousness, most people have an increased opportunity to become more aware of these subtle levels of consciousness. Unfortunately, unless people have familiarized themselves with these more subtle levels of consciousness through meditation practice, they will be unable to recognize and work with them during the intermediate state and the opportunities presented at death will be wasted.

## Personal Identity in the Afterdeath State

### *Bardo: Between Death and Rebirth*

ACCORDING TO the historical overview of the *bardo* by Cuevas (1999), the concept of an intermediate state (Skt: *antarābhava*) that was originally presented in the Abhidharma literature, especially that of the Sarvāstivāda school, referred specifically to the intermediate state between death and rebirth (pp. 2-6). In the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, Vasubhandu (1988) cites mention of the *antarābhava* as one of seven

possible existences (Skt: *bhava*) mentioned in the *Saptabhavasūtra*, as an incipient being in the *Āśvalāyanasūtra* (vol. 2, pp. 386, n. 500) and as one type of *anāgāmin* (“non-returner”) mentioned in various texts in the Pāli canon:

The Blessed One teaches that there are five types of Anāgāmins: one who obtains Nirvāṇa in an intermediate existence (*antarāparinirvāyin*), one who obtains Nirvāṇa as soon as he is reborn (*upapadyaparinirvāyin*), one who obtains Nirvāṇa without effort (*anabhisamāskāraparinirvāyin*), one who obtains Nirvāṇa by means of effort (*abhisamāskāraparinirvāyin*), and one who obtains Nirvāṇa by going higher (*ūrdvasrotas*). (vol. 2, p. 386, n. 507)

A classification of three types of *antarāparinirvāyin* by duration and place appears in both Pāli and Sanskrit texts (vol. 2, pp. 386, n. 507). The *Mārasūtra* mentions the case of a negative spirit (Skt: *māra*) named Dūśin who, because of his grave transgressions, was reborn immediately in hell without any intermediate (*antarā*) dwelling (*vāsa*) (vol. 2, p. 389).

In time, the concept of an intermediate state (*bardo*; Skt: *antarābhava*) became elaborated into four stages: (a) birth, (b) life, (c) death, and (d) the interval between death and rebirth. Three of these stages gradually became identified with the three bodies (Skt: *trikāya*) of a Buddha: *dharmakāya*, *sambhogakāya*, and *nirmanakāya*. By understanding the nature of one’s own mind as the union of clear light and emptiness, one recognizes the clear light of death as the *dharmakāya*, or “truth body.” By consciously directing the visions and experiences of the intermediate state, one transforms the *bardo* into the *sambhogakāya*, or “enjoyment body.” And by consciously directing the rebirth process, one transforms birth into the *nirmanakāya*, or “emanation body” (Powers, 1995, p. 289). The synthesis thus represents an integration of the ordinary processes of death, intermediate state, and rebirth with the generation and completion stages of Tantric practice. Through the practice of “deity yoga,” visualizing oneself in the aspect of an enlightened being, one simulates the state of enlightenment. In this way, the adept becomes skilled at closing the door to further rebirth, a practice known as “obstructing the *bardo*.” At the same time, the practice of assuming an alternative, enlightened identity undermines the individual’s allegiance to accustomed mistaken



identifications. By extension, the practice undercuts the individual's customary perceptions of reality *in toto*.

The eleventh-century Indian master Nāropa (1016-1100) innovatively drew correlations between several sets of three. He relates life, death, and rebirth to the *trikāya* doctrine, to the three levels of practitioners (dull, medium, and sharp), and to the visions that appear to the dying, in what has become a standard Tantric practice formula in the New Translation Schools of Buddhism in Tibet. Nāropa's Tibetan disciple Marpa Lotsawa (*Rje btsun lho brag pa*, 1012-1097) further developed this schema by integrating a three-fold doxographical formulation of the *bardo* into foundation (correct view of emptiness), path (practice method), and fruit (attainment of enlightenment). Marpa's disciple Milarepa (*Mi la ras pa*, 1040-1123) further elaborated these ideas in *The Song of the Golden Rosary*. Building on the ideas of Milarepa and others, Yangönpa (*Yang dgon pa*) arrived at a modified list of six *bardos*, namely: (a) the natural state; (b) ripening from birth to death; (c) meditative stabilization; (d) karmic latencies and dreams; (e) dying; and (f) becoming. The ultimate objective of the practice is to utilize the stages in the process of dying and becoming to achieve realization and avoid rebirth. The "bardo of reality itself" (*chos nyid bar do*) began to appear in the twelfth century, apparently derived from the Nyingma (*rNying ma*) tradition.

Grasping is said to be the root cause of continual rebirth in cyclic existence. Two types of grasping are elucidated by the Mahāyāna tradition: grasping at persons (the "self") and grasping at phenomena as being truly existent, although they are not. To counteract grasping, the Buddha taught the impermanent, unsatisfying, illusory nature of self and phenomena. He taught that all phenomena are empty like foam, water bubbles, mirages, echoes, plantain trees, dreams, reflections in a mirror, and conjurers' tricks. Other means of counteracting grasping at personal identity are found in the visualization practices taught in the Vajrayāna tradition. Here, one imagines oneself in the form of an enlightened being (the *vidam*, or meditational "deity") in a completely pure realm surrounded by other similarly enlightened beings. This type of visualization practice is taught as a means to cut through the habitual

tendency to grasp at the perception of a substantial self. Because it accustoms the individual to a different mode of perception and engenders an awareness of the arbitrary and flexible nature of personal identifications, it is recommended in preparation for death:

If you gain realization in this practice of the pure body, then during the transitional process following death, it is certain that you will be liberated. It is best if you can be liberated when the peaceful emanations arise and, if not then, when the wrathful appearances arise. (Padmasambhava, 1998, pp. 149-150)

To visualize oneself in the form of a meditational deity removes all fear when the peaceful and wrathful archetypes of enlightened mind appear in the *bardo*. Further, by identifying with the form and enlightened qualities of the deity at all times, one actualizes or "becomes" the deity.<sup>7</sup> Through a process of simulation, one's ordinary identity and environment become transformed into an enlightened identity and pure environment. Ordinary deluded pride based on self-cherishing and grasping is replaced by the pride of being the deity, based on compassion and the wisdom which directly realizes emptiness.

*The Profound Dharma of the Natural Liberation Through Contemplating the Peaceful and Wrathful: Stage of Completion Instructions on the Six Bardos*, a treasure text (*gter ma*) attributed to Padmasambhava and discovered by Karma Lingpa (*Kar ma gling pa*, 14 c.), names the intermediate states slightly differently than Yangönpa does.<sup>8</sup> It also lists them in a different order as the *bardos* of (a) living, (b) dreaming, (c) meditative stabilization, (d) dying, (e) reality itself, and (f) becoming. Yangönpa's description of the *bardo* of the natural state is roughly equivalent to Padmasambhava's *bardo* of reality itself. The following discussion will consider these six states one by one.

### The Bardo of Living

THERE ARE four contemplations that are fundamental for subduing one's mind and attaining liberation: (a) the preciousness and rarity of a human rebirth; (b) death and impermanence; (c) the sufferings of cyclic existence; and (d) the law of cause and effect (Padmasambhava, 1998, pp. 3-51; Dhargyey,

1974, pp. 39-97). These are known as “the four thoughts that turn one’s mind to the Dharma.” Next, one settles into the posture with seven features, and rests the body, speech, and mind in their natural states.<sup>9</sup> While generating the pure motivation of wishing to achieve awakening for the good of all beings, an unwavering awareness that extends beyond the meditation session into the actions of everyday life is cultivated. Some meditation methods focus on a specific object, while others have no focus, like boundless space. Generally speaking, these approaches are typical of the Gelug (*dGe lugs*) and Nyingma schools, respectively. The Gelug school presents a gradual approach in which the mind is purified of delusion and eventually transformed into the perfectly enlightened knowing of a Buddha; the Nyingma presents a Ch’an Buddhist-like approach in which the mind is regarded as being primordially liberated and the Buddha nature (Skt: *tathāgatagarbha*) as already manifest (Dhargyey, 1974, pp. 103, 207). Both schools, and the Sakya (*Sa skya*) and Kagyu (*bKa’ brgyud*) schools as well, turn their attention to meditation on the true nature of the mind itself. According to Gyatrul Rinpoche, a Nyingma lama, this naturally luminous awareness is “the cause of omniscience.”

The awareness in question is simply natural, ordinary awareness without any type of modification, without any fabrication. It is without beginning; it is without birth, remaining, or cessation. Failing to recognize its nature, we enter into dualistic grasping, grasping onto ourselves, grasping onto others, grasping onto our own personal identity, grasping onto the identity of other phenomena. In this way we grasp onto that which is nonexistent as being existent. As a result of that, we continue to wander in the cycle of existence. (Dhargyey, 1974, p. 124)

In the words of Padmasambhava, this awareness is “inseparable clarity, awareness, and emptiness,” “the stainless sole eye of primordial wisdom” (Dhargyey, 1974, p. 126). In this view, the present human life is *the* most precious window of opportunity for manifesting primordial wisdom. By transforming the *bardos* of living, dreaming, meditative stabilization, dying, reality itself, and becoming, those with sharp faculties are able to manifest enlightened, omniscient awareness in this very body, in this very life. Failing that, the

*bardo* concept may still have practical value in facilitating a positive experience of dying.

### The Bardo of Dreaming

THE INSTRUCTIONS on dreaming go hand in hand with the instructions on the illusory body, cultivated through meditation during the daytime. Retreating into solitude and generating an altruistic motivation, one meditates on the mutable, illusory nature of one’s body and all other appearances, and how grasping at these binds beings within cyclic existence. On the basis of this practice, called the “pure illusory body,” one also trains in the practice of dream yoga. The first step in dream yoga is to begin seeing the phenomena of everyday waking reality, as well as the one perceiving them, as lacking in any essence and thus not different from a dream or an illusion. Next, one goes to bed in the evening and lies in the “lion posture,”<sup>10</sup> while clearly visualizing oneself as one’s preferred meditational deity (*vidam*). The immediate aim is to learn to recognize dream states for what they are, in anticipation of apprehending the intermediate state after death for what it is. A series of visualization exercises are employed to sharpen this awareness. For example, during the dream state, one may imagine jumping into a raging river, then experiencing it as bliss and emptiness. Understanding the illusory nature of the phenomena that appear in dreams, one practices transforming them—multiplying, collapsing, and changing them into various shapes and sizes. Progressively, as one continues to practice, a clear recognition of the dreamlike, illusory nature of all phenomena and all appearances, waking and sleeping, occurs.

Central to the practice of dream yoga is vivid visualization on the clear light that appears as one falls asleep, until eventually the clear light dawns naturally, clear and empty, during the dream state:

To apprehend the clear light in the nature of reality-itself, you who nakedly identify awareness should position your body as before, subdue your awareness, and in vivid clarity and emptiness focus your awareness at your heart, and fall asleep. When your sleep is agitated, do not lose the sense of indivisible clarity and emptiness. When you are fast asleep, if the vivid, indivisibly clear and empty



light of deep sleep is recognized, the clear light is apprehended. (Dhargyey, 1974, p. 164)

The clear light appears to all sentient beings at the time of death, but one must be skilled to recognize it for what it is. The clear light also appears at the junctures between wakefulness and sleep, and sleep and wakefulness; but again, one must be skilled in order to glimpse it (Varela, 1997, pp. 122-130):

[The mind of clear light] manifests at periods when the grosser levels of consciousness cease either intentionally, as in profound states of meditation, or naturally, as in the process of death, going to sleep, ending a dream, fainting, and orgasm. Prior to its manifestation, there are several stages during which a practitioner experiences increasingly subtler levels of mind...The winds (or currents of energy; *rlung, prāna*) that serve as foundations for various levels of consciousness are gradually withdrawn, in the process of which one first has a visual experience of seeing an appearance like a mirage...billowing smoke...fireflies...sputtering butter-lamp...a steady candle flame. With the withdrawal of conceptual consciousnesses, a more dramatic phase begins, at which point profound levels of consciousness that are at the core of experience manifest. (Hopkins, 1992, p. 244)

Even the interval between the cessation of one moment of consciousness and the arising of the next may be an opportunity for glimpsing the clear light.

The identification of one's consciousness with the clear light totally supplants identification with ordinary personal identity. Thus dream yoga is an opportunity to rehearse recognizing the clear light that will appear during the *bardo*. Done well, with perfect wisdom and awareness, the identification of one's consciousness with the clear light will serve as a catalyst for the manifestation of the *dharmakāya*—the perfectly enlightened awareness of the Buddha one becomes. This obviously is the culmination of the practice: the "clear light natural liberation of delusion" (Padmasambhava, 1998, p. 168). One's usual deluded identification is replaced by a thoroughly awakened identification that is beyond the ability of ordinary consciousness to perceive. Whether achieved while awake, asleep, meditating, dreaming, or dying, the *dharmakāya* is at once an evolution of one's ordinary deluded

stream of consciousness and an entirely new, omniscient state of awareness.

### The *Bardo* of Meditative Stabilization

AMONG THE five aggregates that comprise the Buddhist sense of self-identity, consciousness is unquestionably central. Consciousness, which is synonymous with awareness, is defined as "clear knowing." Thus, according to the teachings of Padmasambhava, to overcome the instinctive grasping at personal identity, it is necessary to relinquish grasping at awareness itself. This can be accomplished through practicing the *bardo* of meditative stabilization.

No matter how profound the teachings or our realizations, there remains the possibility of pride and attachment, further obstacles to liberation. To prevent pride and attachment from arising, one must go beyond a merely intellectual understanding to a state of direct awareness. Gyatrul Rinpoche comments, "Just as a sword cannot cut itself, and the eye cannot see itself, we have been unable to recognize our own nature" (Padmasambhava, 1998, p. 172). This seems to point to a self-aware consciousness such as is posited by the *Yogācāra* school, but Padmasambhava does not analyze it as such. In any case, the reference is to the unenlightened, untrained mind. It is through training the mind that one becomes aware of one's own mind. Questions about whether a separate consciousness is required to observe mental consciousness and whether the mind resembles a mirror that sees itself are not questions that concern contemplatives; for them, the goal is to go beyond conceptual thought, and experience is the only relevant teacher.

The notion of going beyond conceptual thought is not limited to any particular Buddhist school, of course. For example, the rigorously analytical Gelug and Sakya schools acknowledge that direct insight into emptiness is a nonconceptual awareness. In these schools, practitioners on the ten *bodhisattva* stages from the Path of Insight until enlightenment meditate by alternating theoretical analysis of emptiness with calm abiding (Skt: *śamatha*), using emptiness as the object of meditation. The meditation session begins with theoretical analysis of emptiness that continues until a very clear realization of emptiness is gained. At that point, the

practitioner meditates single-pointedly on emptiness itself until meditative stabilization (Skt: *samādhi*) is achieved. When the power of concentration begins to decline after meditating for some time, the practitioner returns to analytical meditation focused on emptiness. In this way, the two practices are alternated—analysis of emptiness and unwavering concentration on emptiness—for the duration of the session. When the meditation session ends, an intellectual understanding of the empty nature of all phenomena is retained, ordinary phenomena continue to appear on the conventional level. In the postmeditation state, the practitioner accumulates merit through various other means; direct insight into emptiness (Skt: *vipāśyanā*) is achieved primarily through formal meditation practice.

In Tibet, a doctrinal dispute developed between adherents of two different views of emptiness. The *rang tong* (*rang stong*, “self-empty”) view, which is prevalent in the more analytical Gelug and Sakya schools, asserts the emptiness of all phenomenon, including emptiness, and denies the existence of an absolute reality. The *zhen tong* (*gzhan stong*, “other-empty”) view, which is more prevalent in the Kagyu and Nyingma schools, asserts that the “other”—apparent reality—is empty, but there is an ultimate reality (Skt: *buddhajñāna*) that truly exists. Adherents of the *rang tong* view interpret *tathāgatagarbha* (Buddha nature) as the emptiness of inherent existence of the mental continuum that enables sentient beings to achieve enlightenment. The *tathāgatagarbha* was taught for non-Buddhists and needs to be interpreted because, if it were taken literally, it would amount to the same thing as a soul (Williams, 1989, p. 106). Adherents of the *zhen tong* view take the *tathāgatagarbha* teachings literally and accept the existence of an ultimate reality that exists inherently (Williams, 1989, p. 107). The fact that all beings have the *tathāgatagarbha* means that they have the enlightened awareness of a Buddha, which is just temporarily obscured. When the obscurations are removed, the *dharmakāya* is revealed; therefore, *tathāgatagarbha* and *dharmakāya* are identical. While both approaches aim at nondual, nonconceptual awareness, their philosophical differences, especially their articulations of

ultimate truth, have crystallized into what is known as the *rang tong/zhen tong* debate.

### The *Bardo* of Dying

FOR THOSE who have not had time to meditate or are not trained in the practices of the illusory body, dream yoga, and the clear light, Padmasambhava provided instructions on the *bardo* of dying. If one engages in the transference of consciousness before actual death has occurred, it is equivalent to committing suicide, therefore it is crucial to ascertain without doubt that death has occurred before *phowa* is begun. For a practitioner of deity yoga who practices identification with a *vidam*, to transfer the consciousness prematurely is said to be equivalent to murdering the deity. There are various means of “cheating death”—specific Buddhist practices for longevity such as saving animals’ lives and the practices of Amitāyus and White Tārā—that may be attempted. If these are unsuccessful and death becomes certain, one prepares to experience the stages of dying as the gross body and mind disintegrate.<sup>11</sup> When the clear light of death appears, the gross self imputed to exist in dependence on the gross body and mind has disintegrated, and a subtle self imputed to exist in dependence on the subtle energy-mind has taken its place (Varela, 1997, p. 125).

The practice of *phowa* (transference of consciousness) begins with a review of the four thoughts that turn one’s mind to the Dharma: the precious human rebirth, impermanence, suffering, and the law of cause and effect. After gaining clear insight into the defects of cyclic existence, one develops renunciation—the determination to be liberated from cyclic existence. Sitting in meditation posture, one then visualizes blocking the “apertures of cyclic existence” (anus, genital opening, urinary opening, navel, mouth, nostrils, eyes, and ears), departure through which results in rebirth within the six realms of cyclic existence. One visualizes a central psychic channel extending from below the navel to the crown *chakra* at the top of the head and flanked by subsidiary channels on the right and left. One then concentrates on forcefully drawing the winds and energies of the body up through the central psychic channel along with a radiant



white “drop” (Skt: *bindu*) in the nature of awareness, and directs them out through the Brahmā aperture at the crown of the head. Except at the time of death, one then visualizes the white drop descending and coming to rest at a point below the navel.

When it becomes clear that actual death is sure to soon occur, it is beneficial to first give away all one’s possessions. Whether the generosity is actual or visualized, it creates merit and prevents attachment—the greatest hindrance at the time of death. In fact, objects of attachment or aversion are best removed from a dying person’s room, lest they spark unwholesome mental states. Next, one regrets transgressions of the precepts and “restores” them through a ritual confession of faults. Then, sitting in meditation posture, if possible, or in the lion posture, if not, the practice of *phowa* is begun. One reflects:

Now I am dying. So in general in the three realms of the cycle of existence and in particular in this degenerate era, I rejoice that I can transfer my consciousness while having the companionship of such profound instructions as these. Now I shall recognize the clear light of death as the Dharmakāya. I shall send out immeasurable emanations to train others according to their needs, and I must serve the needs of sentient beings until the cycle of existence is empty.

(Padmasambhava, 1998, pp. 208-209)

If the practice of *phowa* is successful, a drop of blood or lymph will appear at the crown of one’s head.

If the practice is not successful, one continues through the visualizations, either summoning the visualizations oneself or by having a spiritual mentor or friend recite the instructions in one’s ear. If the clear light of death is recognized as inseparable from the clear light nature of the mind or *dharmakāya*, it is possible to become freed from rebirth once and for all, and to achieve either perfect enlightenment or rebirth in a Pure Land where enlightenment can be quickly attained. This is called “the meeting of the mother and child clear light,” because it mixes the “mother” clear light of death with the “son” clear light which dawns, through meditation, during sleep and the waking state (Lati Rinpoche & Hopkins, 1979, pp. 47-48). If this

highest “pristine *dharmakāya* transference of consciousness” is successful, it is confirmed by serene skies and a sustained physical radiance.

If the *dharmakāya* transference is unsuccessful, one attempts the transference of the *sambhogakāya* (“enjoyment body”), the aspect of an enlightened being that manifests in a Pure Land. Sitting in meditation posture, if possible, one visualizes the meditational deity at the crown of the head and focuses single-pointedly on a white drop (Skt: *bindu*) or seed syllable at the base of the central psychic channel. As in the *phowa* meditation, the vital energies are driven up the central psychic channel to the crown aperture and absorbed into the heart of the meditational deity visualized there. If the transference is successful at death, one becomes a Buddha in *sambhogakāya* form, confirmed by the appearance of deities, rainbows, and relics. If the transference is not successful at the moment of death, one continues the practice during the intermediate state.

If the *sambhogakāya* transference is unsuccessful, one attempts the transference of the *nirmāṇakāya* (“emanation body”), the aspect of an enlightened being that manifests in the desire realm, for example, in ordinary human form. Lying on one’s right side, offerings of body, speech, and mind are made to the representation Buddha visualized in front of one. Such a visualization helps to break through the possessiveness that arises from a strong identification with one’s ordinary body, speech, and mind. Imagining a red and a white drop in the central psychic channel, one pushes them forcefully upwards until they emerge from the left nostril and dissolve into the heart of the Buddha visualized in front. If the transference is successful, once death occurs one becomes a Buddha in *nirmāṇakāya* form, attested by the appearance of clouds and rainbows in auspicious shapes, and flowers falling from the sky. If the body is cremated, the skull remains undamaged. If the transference is not successful at the moment of death, one continues the practice during the intermediate state.

The crown aperture is regarded as the pathway to the Pure Land, whether this be the Pure Land of Amitābha, another Buddha, or the *ḍākinīs* (enlightened beings in female form), and the departure of the consciousness from this aperture signals the achievement of liberation.

Departure of the consciousness from the apertures in the upper part of the body is said to lead to fortunate “migrations,” while departure from the lower apertures indicates rebirth in unfortunate states. Because one’s state of mind, especially at the moment of death, is such a powerful indicator of one’s immanent destiny, even beginning practitioners are advised to go for refuge (in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha), generate the *bodhicitta*, take precepts, and generate wholesome thoughts as death approaches. After a practitioner has died, a companion may even direct the deceased’s attention to a Buddha on the crown of the head, touch the crown, or gently pull the hair at the crown aperture to nudge the consciousness toward a higher realm of rebirth. Reciting the names of the Buddhas (Ratnaśikhin, Amitābha, etc.) and reading the *Liberation Through Hearing* (known as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*) are also beneficial for helping a person in the *bardo* achieve liberation or a higher rebirth.

#### The *Bardo* of Reality Itself

THE FIFTH intermediate state, the *bardo* of reality itself, is an opportunity to identify the nature of reality itself (Skt: *dharmatā*) and achieve the natural liberation of seeing. In the Nyingma tradition, this is understood as the practice of Dzogchen, “the Great Perfection.” Dzogchen involves prescribed postures and gazes, awareness of the outer and inner “absolute natures” (apprehended as the cloudless sky and a lamp), and learning to hold, expel, and stabilize the vital energies of the body, aimed at realizing primordial wisdom. These practices cause four visions to arise: (a) the direct vision of reality itself; (b) progressing experience; (c) consummate awareness; and (d) extinction into reality itself (Lati Rinpochoy & Hopkins, 1979, p. 243). Unlike the practices discussed earlier that employ extensive visualizations and recitations, these visions arise independently without ideation. Absolute nature refers to primordial wisdom: clear luminous awareness and emptiness. With practice, “*bindus* of the strand of one’s own awareness” appear in the form of primordial wisdom, emanating lights and containing the five divine embodiments of Buddhas with their consorts. Stabilizing a vision of consummate

awareness over time, one eventually emanates the *sambhogakāya* effortlessly. The “vision of extinction into reality itself” is the ultimate attainment achieved through the Tantric tradition of Dzogchen. Proponents assert that this culminating attainment is higher than what is possible in the *sūtra* (non-Tantric) tradition, although the descriptions of omniscient Buddhahood (“knowing all that is, as it is”) are identical both in Dzogchen and other Tantric traditions.

#### The *Bardo* of Becoming

THE FINAL *bardo*, the *bardo* of becoming, is for those who have not succeeded in any of the preceding five transitional processes and are therefore subject to taking rebirth. After realizing oneself to be dead and wandering in the intermediate state, one visualizes arising in the form of a meditational deity in a pure Buddha realm where all beings are in the form of the deity and all sounds are the sound of the deity’s *mantra*. Generating a visualization of oneself as the deity, as in the generation stage of practice, one becomes a *vidyādhara* (“knowledge holder”) in the form of one’s *vidam*. By this practice, one erodes the illusion of a fixed personal identity and learns how to close the door to future rebirth in a womb. As a *vidhyādhara*, one can travel to any Pure Land or anywhere else.

Padmasambhava’s text describes several ways of “closing the entrance to the womb”: (a) by becoming a divine embodiment; (b) by imagining your spiritual mentor with consort; (c) by the practice of the four blisses; (d) by the antidote of renunciation; (e) with the clear light; and (f) with the illusory body (Lati Rinpochoy & Hopkins, 1979, pp. 257-273). Due to habitual attachments to sexual desire, untrained sentient beings ordinarily and automatically gravitate to situations of sexual activity. One who will take rebirth as a female feels attracted to the male partner and one who will take rebirth as a male feels attracted to the female partner, and due to this sexual attraction one enters the womb of one’s future rebirth. However, if one is consciously able to turn away from the womb and visualize oneself in the form of a meditational deity in union with the deity’s consort instead, it is possible to “block the entrance to the womb,”



meaning that one will not take rebirth in the ordinary way. Although rebirth may still occur, the practice sows the seeds for the achievement of *siddhis* (extraordinary accomplishments) both in the present and in future lifetimes, including the supreme *siddhi* of perfect enlightenment. The practices for closing the entrance to the womb are therefore one last opportunity for attaining realization and final awakening.

### Analyzing the *Bardo*

THE CONCEPT of a *bardo* being who traverses an intermediary liminal stage between death and rebirth makes sense within a context that accepts karma and the recycling of consciousness as fundamental. Although Theravāda Buddhist adherents deny the existence of such an interval and insist that rebirth occurs the moment after death (“arising-*citta* immediately follows falling-away-*citta*”), Harvey (1995) finds evidence in the early texts to support the idea of an intermediate state (*Paṭṭhāna* I.312-13, in Harvey, 1995, p. 98). In a passage from the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha refers to a time, fueled by craving, “when a being lays aside this body and is not arisen (Skt: *anuppanno*) in another body.” Harvey shows that the time referred to here cannot be the period of gestation in the womb, because “arising” (Skt: *anuppanno*) can be distinguished from “becoming” (Skt: *bhava*), the condition for birth (Skt: *jāti*) in the twelve links of dependent arising (Skt: *pratīyasamutpāda*), and therefore refers to conception (Harvey, 1995, p. 99). The Abhidharma literature of early Buddhism asserts that both the mind and body sense bases are present from the time of conception, and therefore conception is clearly the start of new life (Harvey, 1995, p. 99).<sup>12</sup> The *Saṃyutta Nikāya* passage leaves open the possibility of an interval between death and rebirth.

Even if the *bardo* being is impervious to physical harm, Tibetan texts make it clear that the body of the deceased should not be disturbed, since to disturb the body can disrupt the consciousness. Unless the deceased has developed excellent powers of concentration and compassion while alive, this disturbance is likely to distract the mind and can arouse anger that will affect the consciousness adversely and negatively influence the being's future rebirth. Although the term

“deceased” indicates that an individual is clinically dead, it should be understood that the consciousness, in this view, may continue to be active. A number of pertinent factors can affect a person's experiences not only at the time of death, but also in the *bardo* (if there is one), and in the next rebirth. For example: (a) the circumstances surrounding the death; (b) the person's level of mental development; (c) the person's actions in the present and previous lifetimes; (d) the quality of the last moment of consciousness; and (e) the environment surrounding the person during the transition from one life to the next all have an effect. Let us consider these factors one by one.

First, the circumstances surrounding the death may be peaceful or traumatic. Many factors determine this, such as whether the death is timely or untimely, or the person is conscious or unconscious, or in pain or not in pain. The most favorable circumstances are a peaceful death that is the result of natural causes and takes place in a pleasant environment. The least favorable circumstances are a sudden violent death that occurs in an angry, fearful, or hateful atmosphere.

Second, the person's level of mental development will determine what intellectual resources the person brings to the experience of dying. The level of mental development can also determine, at least in part, whether the person is conscious or unconscious in the moments leading up to death, and whether the person is mindful at the moment of death and during the transition to the next rebirth, if there is one. The optimum circumstance, from a Buddhist point of view, exists for the practitioner who has gained mastery over the mind, eliminated all negative mental factors, cultivated all positive mental factors, and is able to die consciously. The worst circumstance exists when a person has no control over the mind, is thus under the influence of negative emotions (whether conscious or unconscious), and therefore cannot help but generate thoughts of anger and hatred during the process of dying. From a Theravāda Buddhist perspective, the skilled practitioner described here will become an *arhat* without remainder (Skt: *nirupadhiṣeṣanirvāṇa*), that is, he or she will achieve liberation from rebirth and leave no aggregates behind. From a Mahāyāna perspective, the skilled practitioner will die peacefully and be able to concentrate on following the bright



colored lights associated with the Buddhas, and as a result achieve either rebirth in a Pure Land or attain the perfect enlightenment of a Buddha. A Tibetan Buddhist practitioner can achieve this through such practices as *phowa*, *chö*, and various other Tantric practices. All Buddhist traditions agree that a person who has no control over the mind will take rebirth at the mercy of karma and the delusions present in the mind. The *bardo* texts further state that beings who are unaware or frightened by their experiences will naturally gravitate, in accordance with their karma, to the dull lights associated with the six realms of rebirth.

Third, the person's actions in the present as well as in previous lifetimes will condition the experiences during the dying process and the *bardo*. A virtuous person will have accumulated the merit required to be reborn in a fortunate realm, whereas a nonvirtuous person will not have accumulated such merit, and will be reborn in an unfortunate realm. The strongest imprints on the mental continuum are said to ripen first and the imprints that are the most recent are likely to be the strongest.

Fourth, the quality of the last moment of consciousness is said to be a decisive factor in determining the quality of the next rebirth. For example, even if the circumstances of death are unfavorable, the person's past actions have been generally negative, and the mind is untamed, there is still a possibility of generating a positive final moment of consciousness that could lead to a positive rebirth. Because each moment of consciousness is conditioned by the moments that have gone before it, the likelihood of an untrained, nonvirtuous person being able to generate a positive moment of consciousness at this critical juncture is extremely unlikely, especially when the death occurs under unfavorable circumstances, such as violence. Still, according to the texts and commentaries, there is a possibility.

Finally, the environment surrounding a person facing death can have a powerful influence. Even a skilled practitioner with good karma who is dying a natural death under favorable conditions may experience an unwholesome moment of consciousness at the time of death, due to some unexpected negative circumstance. If a person has developed perfect

concentration, completely eradicated all mental delusions, and developed all positive mental qualities, it is impossible for an unwholesome consciousness to arise, for the person is either an *arhat* or a Buddha and therefore not subject to rebirth, or a *bodhisattva* and therefore not subject to uncontrolled rebirth. A person who has not attained these qualities, however, is vulnerable to outside influences and it is possible that an unwholesome consciousness may arise. Even a highly skilled practitioner can conceivably be affected by anger, hatred, or desire in the immediate environment and may as a result generate an unfavorable last moment of consciousness. Similarly, a person who has negative karma and an uncontrolled, nonvirtuous mind is vulnerable to outside influences and it is possible that a wholesome consciousness may arise. For example, such a person could conceivably be affected by a calm, loving, and compassionate immediate environment that results in the generation of a positive state of mind at the moment of death.

For this reason, Buddhists are concerned with creating a peaceful, loving environment for the dying. A teacher or spiritual friend may be invited to advise the dying person in accordance with the Buddha's teachings, and especially to remind the person that death and dissolution are inevitable for all living beings. Tibetan Buddhists may place images of enlightenment, such as Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*, within the dying person's range of vision. Family and friends who believe in the efficacy of merit will make offerings to monasteries and the Saṅgha, donate charity to the needy, chant *sūtras* (scriptures) or prayers or the Buddha's name, and dedicate the merits of these practices to the dying or just deceased person. All these efforts are aimed at creating a favorable environment, accumulating positive karma, and nurturing a positive state of mind to ensure a favorable transition from this life to the next. Even those who are not convinced about the existence of future lives, the efficacy of merit, the existence of the *bardo*, or the possibility of attaining higher rebirth and enlightenment generally feel that it is worthwhile to observe these traditions, just in case there may be some benefit.

The result of these beliefs and practices is fulfilling, both personally and socially. For



example, providing a serene environment for a dying trajectory brings a sense of peace and well-being not only to the dying person, but to the family and friends as well. To conduct one's life in accordance with Buddhist guidelines (e.g., engage in wholesome actions, avoid unwholesome ones, cultivate mental discipline, concentration, and compassion) helps to allay everyone's fears about a person's future after death and can put the mind in a positive frame at the moment of death. To engage in positive actions on behalf of the deceased—the practice of generosity, recitation of *sūtras*, and other meritorious actions—is psychologically beneficial for survivors, and helps to alleviate grief, a sense of loss, or a sense of remorse. In this way, Buddhist beliefs and practices are of practical benefit for both the dying person and the family. As an added benefit, if there is a *bardo*, the deceased is in a position to negotiate it with maximum skill and benefit. And, if there is a future life, the deceased is more assured of a favorable one. Therefore, quite independently of its ontological status, the primary value of the *bardo* concept may be that it helps to facilitate a positive experience of dying.

### Notes

1. Italicized words in parentheses are Tibetan unless otherwise noted.
2. Samuel suggests that *la* (soul) and *lha* (deity) are related concepts that may have a common source, but according to my sources the two concepts are distinct. While there may be some overlap, *la* resembles a personal soul whereas *lha* is an external deity.
3. Birth from a womb is actually only one possible mode of birth mentioned in the Indo-Tibetan tradition, the others being birth from an egg, birth from warmth and moisture, and birth by miracle.
4. The *bardos* are described variously in a number of books. Tsele Natsok Rangdrol (1994) speaks of four *bardos*: the natural *bardo* of this life, the painful *bardo* of dying, the luminous *bardo* of the wisdom of great bliss (Skt: *dharmatā*), and the karmic *bardo* of becoming. Thurman (1994, p. 35) reminds us that these Buddhist schemata of enumeration are heuristic devices.
5. The mistaken sense of a self may also arise in dependence on the six elements: earth, water, fire, wind, space, and consciousness, but the analysis of self in terms of the five aggregates is most common.
6. Here I use the term "true existence" rather than "inherent existence," since the Svātantrika-Madhyamaka

school accepts the inherent existence of phenomena but, along with the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka, does not accept true existence.

7. The term "deity" is a misnomer. The meditational deities (*vidam*) visualized in these practices are not denizens of the god realms, but fully enlightened beings such as Amitābha, Ratnasambhava, Hayagrīva, Vajrapāni, and Yamantaka, or *bodhisattvas* visualized as enlightened beings.
8. *Zab chos zhi khro dgongs pa rang grol las rdzogs rim bar do drug gi khrid yig*. Translated by B. Alan Wallace, with commentary by Gyatrul Rinpoche, in Padmasambhava (1998), pp. 81-273.
9. Legs crossed, hands in the lap, spine straight, shoulders level, chin tucked in, lips gently shut, tongue against the upper palate, and eyes gently shut.
10. Lying on one's right side, with the right hand placed under the right side of one's head and the left hand placed on the left thigh. This posture is said to facilitate the transfer of consciousness to a Pure Land at the time of death.
11. These stages are described in detail in Lati Rinpoche and Hopkins (1979), pp. 13-20, 29-48.
12. According to Harvey (1995), the *Kathāvathu* mentions the opposing view that all the sense organs are present from the beginning. There is no mention of implantation in the early accounts.

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