

Death in Vajrayana is About Living Consciously

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ABSTRACT: The truth that death can come to anyone, anytime, and anywhere has accompanied us since birth. Buddhists would say that the moment of birth is already the beginning of a dying process. Dramatically, living is akin to dying slowly every moment. Death is a big subject in Buddhism. In Vajrayana, a Tantrayana form of Buddhism in Tibet and surrounding Himalayan regions, it is covered in great depth in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The essence of the esoteric teachings is not only about dying consciously but more about living consciously.

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, Vajrayana, Buddhist Teachings, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *The Bardo Thodol*, Treasure Teachings, *Terma*, *Terton*, *Bardo*, Dakini, Guru Rinpoche, Yeshe Tsogyal, Karma Lingpa, Buddhist Path, Merits, Distractions, Karma, Causes and Conditions

Is death in Vajrayana about dying or living?

The COVID-19 virus emerged from Wuhan in China and spread worldwide at unprecedented speed and vigor, bringing suffering and deaths to millions. Generally, death is a grave and sad phenomenon, but it also offers a unique opportunity for a swift liberation in Vajrayana. “*The Tibetan Book of the Dead (Tib. Bardo Thodol)*” explains it in great depth. In this ancient Tibetan book, we will explore the questions on what it says about death, the dying process, dying consciously, and, finally, about living consciously.

Treasure teachings and the roles of female masters

One of the unique characteristics of Vajrayana Buddhism is the existence of treasure (Tib. *terma*) teachings, popularly prevalent in the oldest Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. There are many treasure teachings in different Buddhist texts (Rinpoche and Dorje 1991, 743-745). These hidden teachings are for future generations.

In the 8th century, Guru Rinpoche, a great tantric master and founder of Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet, devised an ingenious method of concealing numerous valuable teachings that were ahead of its time. Out of compassion, he hid these teachings for future generations and then assigned future treasure revealers (Tib. *terton*) to discover them at an appropriate time and propagate them for the benefits of all the sentient beings (Rinpoche 2003, 34-35). These *tertons*, except for a few celibate monks, mostly live in households with consorts (wives), children, and possessions. This choice of lifestyle is not for sensory enjoyment; on the contrary, a form of practice to transform every source of life experience for greater realization (Rinpoche 1997, 82).

There are two aspects to *terma* tradition: (1) the tradition of teachings that are discovered by realized *tertons* from sky, mountains, lakes, trees, and (2) the tradition of teachings in books and other forms entrusted to extraterrestrial beings to protect and hand over to the right person at the proper time (Rinpoche 1997, 57). There are many types of *terma*, such as earth *terma* (extracted from objects), mind *terma* (extracted from the minds of *tertons*), and pure vision *terma* (extracted from the visions by *tertons*).

Learning about the *terma* tradition in Tibet and some of the female and male treasure revealers will give you a glimpse of the vibrancy of this tradition that goes beyond gender and continues to thrive even today. Female *tertons* have played a pivotal role in the preservation and propagation of *terma* teachings. In the 8th century, the great Yeshe Tsogyal, one of the main twenty-five disciples of Guru Rinpoche, was instrumental in concealing many of the precious teachings of Guru Rinpoche as *termas* for the future generations.

The female masters are known as Dakini (Tib. *Khandro*). Dakini is not a gender-specific pronoun. It means an individual who freely moves in the unlimited pure space of the panoramic wakefulness (Drolma 2017, 27). The Dakinis are the protector of Vajrayana, like the security lockers in a private bank. Some do manifest in human forms to benefits sentient beings. A few wonderful examples are Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal (8th century), Sera Khandro (19th century), and Khandro Tare Lhamo (20th century). The latter two were renowned masters in their rights and active contributor to the living tradition of Dakini and treasure teachings in Tibet.

Introduction to “*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*”

The Bardo Thodol was one of the valuable *terma* teaching that was revealed by Great *terton* Karma Lingpa in the 14th century. It was introduced to the West by an English translation in 1927 by Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup, edited by W. Y. Evans-Wentz.

We have to overcome Distractions to Buddhist practice, and for many, death is a distraction in two ways: its unpredictable nature and its silence unnoticeable continuous occurrence. Due to these causes, a fallacy prevails that it might not occur soon. Continue to believe in living with future appointments and plans for months or years ahead.

On the other hand, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is reminding and teaching us that we are dying every millisecond. It has never stopped since our birth from our mothers’ wombs. There is no way you can prevent this from happening.

In simple terms, the Tibetan word *bardo* means the experience between death and birth. “*Bar*” means in between, and “*do*” implies island or landmarks between two things (Fremantle and Trungpa 1987, 10). “*Thodol*” means liberation upon hearing. In the Nyingma lineage, death has never been negative because one will never appreciate life without death (Khyentse 2011a). It is precious teaching about life and death—more precisely living and dying.

The six *Bardos*

There are six types of *bardo*: the first *Bardo* of birth and life from conception to death. It is a gap between when you are born and when you will die—the entire life in this world; the second *Bardo* of dreams. It is the gap when you start dreaming, and the moment you wake up—the period of being virtually active; the third *Bardo* of meditation. It is the gap when a meditator starts a meditation session and all the experiences during concentration; the fourth *Bardo* of the moment of death; the fifth *Bardo* of the luminosity of the true nature; and the sixth *Bardo* of becoming for the next life.

According to Buddhism, we are made of the five elements: wind, earth, water, fire, and space. The dissolution of these five elements occurs, marking the fourth *bardo* of the moment of death. At this stage, a dying person goes through different experiences during this period until the final death (Khyentse 2011b-2011m):

- Dissolution of wind element: loss of appetite and body warmth,
- Dissolution of earth element: the body feels heavy and asks to lift the body,
- Dissolution of water element: drying of body moisture and feeling nervous and irritated,
- Dissolution of fire element: fading of body warmth and breathing becomes chilly,
- Dissolution of wind element: choking and long and noisy breathing,
- Dissolution of consciousness: the outer breathing sops (clinical death), and
- Appearance of luminosity: meeting of a white drop falling from the head, and the red drop is rising from the navel—both meeting at the center of the heart giving rise to the appearance of luminosity.

The luminosity is the true nature of our mind. The great Dudjom Rinpoche explains that when a practitioner achieved stability in recognizing luminosity during meditation and can recognize it during the fourth *bardo*, the liberation is achieved (Rinpoche 2003, 66-67). But this is not easy to accomplish, possible only by a very few excellent practitioners having many years of meditation

practice. Also, in this lifetime, if you have a strong propensity for anger, the negative emotion may well continue into the next life; likewise, the positive memory of love and compassion practiced in meditation will remain intact in the next life as well (Khyentse 2018, 93).

After passing through the *Bardo* of the moment of death, the person enters the *Bardo* of the luminosity of the true nature. In the next twelve days, the peaceful and wrathful deities of the five Buddha families manifest themselves. The five Buddha families are:

1. Buddha Vairocana: appearing in white representing ignorance,
2. Buddha Aksobhya: appearing in blue representing hatred,
3. Buddha Ratnasambhava: appearing in yellow representing pride,
4. Buddha Amitabha: appearing in red representing desire, and
5. Buddha Amoghasiddhi: appearing in green representing envy.

With the most incredible compassion, all the Buddha families appear in peaceful forms with their retinue to remind the *bardo* being to recognize all the projected emotions as the projection of their own mind. Unable to recognize the peaceful forms, all the Buddha families once again appear in different colors but now in wrathful forms (Herukas) with their respective entourage to once again remind the *bardo* being to recognize them. In essence, the peaceful deities represent fear and wrathful deities, hope (Fremantle and Trungpa, 1987, p. 26). To familiarize and aid practitioners to recognize them in the *bardo*, these Buddha families are depicted in many of Tibetan religious paintings (Tib. *thangka*) and sacred dances (Tib. *cham*) performed in monasteries.

The first three weeks are crucial because the deceased has the same perceptions as they had during living (Rinpoche 2003, 72). During this *bardo*, Guru Rinpoche advises a *bardo* being to recognize every experience as a projection of one's mind, to develop faith in the Buddhas, and pray to all the Buddhas with complete devotion.

The thirteenth day marks the beginning of the *Bardo* of becoming for the next life until forty-nine days. In this period, the *bardo* being is dictated by the law of karma that drives them to their next life. The causes and conditions of our past life will determine the future result of the next rebirth. Even during this challenging time, Guru Rinpoche advises to call out to the gurus or the Buddha or the three jewels or remember the good merits in the previous life to remind oneself that all phenomena are just a projection of one's mind. The *bardo* being should try to be reborn in the upper realms (gods, asura, and human) and avoid to lower three realms (animal, hell, and ghost). To a Buddhist, human rebirth is the most precious because it offers the most optimal causes and conditions for practicing the Buddha Dharma. Overall, Guru Rinpoche always advised remembering the teachings of “*The Bardo Thodol*” during all the six *bardos*.

Out of six *Bardos*, the first three are about the practices meant for when we are alive. Only through meditation, a Buddhist practitioner can realize the true nature of mind. So that at death, one can recognize all sounds and images as mirage or projections of our minds—nothing more and nothing less.

The details of different practices in the book are beyond the scope of this article. If you are interested to learn more and can read Tibetan, “*The Bardo Thodol*” by Karma Lingpa is an excellent guide. For English readers, amongst many, there are some fine reference books such as “*The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo*” by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and “*Living and Dying: How to Prepare for Dying, Death and Beyond*” by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche.

***The Bardo Thodol* is more about living consciously**

The moment of death offers excellent potential to be liberated because a *bardo* being experiences the pure Buddha-nature, and liberation is achieved upon recognition (Khyentse 2018, 51-52). This feat is only possible if, during the time of living, one has often meditated consciously, diligently, and as a

result, not only recognized the true nature of mind but also persistently familiarized with it throughout life.

One method of living consciously is also by convincing yourself that you are dying every moment—being conscious of it. Death is not a one-time event instead of an ongoing process that is happening even when I am writing this article. Because of its quietness and subtlety, often, it gets ignored or evades the radar of our attention. Desired or undesired, it will continue to occur.

Becoming conscious of this process will help us make the best of our time in this world, be it with your family, friends, or colleagues. Aware that you will die alone and naked will also help to see the illusory nature of our existence. In Buddhism, death is just the end of the physical body but not of our mind. It will continue its journey into the different phases of *bardo* before taking a rebirth. This recognition will offer another perspective to living a conscious, meaningful life.

Being conscious of the ongoing process of death and the aim of getting liberated during the *bardos* has the potential to incite a seeking of a Buddhist path that offers methods to recognize the true nature of mind and to get accustomed to it through diligent practice.

Death is a great teacher

You feel very sad when death happens to your loved ones, and when you see the dead bodies, it becomes so unbearable.

You become speechless and numb, realizing that you can never speak to them and share your emotions again. A moment of truth prevails: recognizing the importance of sharing your thoughts with your loved ones while they are still alive is more urgent than regretting over the missed opportunities when they are dead. Sharing your compassion and love has more significant meaning than living with tormented memories.

Acknowledging that we are dying every second is a good starting point. Even more important is remembering the love, care, affection, and compassion that our parents bestowed upon us since we were toddlers. When they become old and still alive, reciprocate them with more love and compassion. Visit them in care or nursing homes and present them with flowers and chocolates and have lunch or dinner with them. Say to them how important they are in your lives and how much you appreciate and love them. Make them feel precious even when they are old and helpless. In this way, you can transform the inevitable death into powerful practical compassion of conscious living.

Conclusions

Death will come to everyone irrespective of age or social status, as the one thing that is true since our birth. In the book of *The Bardo Thodol*, birth is the beginning of the dying process. Realizing and remembering it throughout our lives is one of the central teachings of this practice.

When a person is clinically dead, it is not the end but a beginning of a journey into the three latter *bardos* until the time of rebirth, which marks a start to the whole cycle of the six *Bardos*. While being alive, we must practice the Dharma to realize the true nature of our empty mind. Make this realization as part of our thinking and habit. When death comes, we will recognize this true nature of mind when revealed to our unobstructed awareness during the *Bardo* of death and the *Bardo* of luminosity. Upon recognition and be able to meditate upon will bring about liberation. Guru Rinpoche teaches us to contemplate not only about dying consciously but also about living a conscious, meaningful life.

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This article is part of the book that the author currently is completing for publication in 2021. The book's topics include blessings in Vajrayana. The book will tell you much more about Buddhism

and the four truths, Dzogchen and Guru Rinpoche, meditation and Guru Yoga, and treasure teachings and *The Bardo Thodol*.

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