

The Bardo – A Preliminary View

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As lands of mystery, both Egypt and Tibet have a great deal of esoteric material to offer to the student who is willing to study with patience so as to procure insights that will make a difference to their life-style. As much depends upon the attitude and flexibility of the student as on the esoteric materials themselves, and it is here that the earlier training of self-sensing, self-remembering, visualisation techniques and so on will pay dividends. In addition, we must have an extensive knowledge of natural and spiritual truths, and must be able to assimilate or generate fine substances that will help to consolidate the body of the soul. Spiritual energies are fluid, mobile and constantly subject to change: they are made stable, coherent and continuous when brought into close association with the denser materials, concepts, impressions and memories of the planetary world. That is why we must exist as earth-dwellers because there is no other way in which the soul can be born, stabilised and made immortal.

Egyptian and Tibetan teachings are of considerable help to us when we employ them within the broad framework of spiritual doctrine which we have been elaborating. If a system of inner development is true then it harmoniously relates to universal laws and principles. But should it be so specialised and unique that it does not relate to universals, then it may have nothing acceptable that will support our efforts. Many of the great ideas cherished in Tibet and Egypt are presented in symbolic form, and the real meanings must be uncovered through the science of correspondences. This is clearly seen in the Egyptian material where the hieroglyphs are themselves correspondences, but is not so apparent in Tibetan material where many subtle abstractions appear. In the Egyptian and Tibetan languages there are key words and phrases of considerable significance, and these must be learned. Without some appreciation of the subtlety of the written word we shall never be in a position to truly feel the qualities, values and meanings that we seek. Since we shall now examine Tibetan material, some brief comments on Tibet's cultural history are necessary.

Tibet has always been a province of China, but by virtue of its peculiar geography and altitude, developed linguistic and cultural features unique to itself. For ages the people followed a primitive animistic religion called Bon-pa in which shamanism was practised and a host of demons were worshipped and appeased. Owing to the lack of written records, very little is known about the Bon-pa religion. Following the death of Buddha in 477 BC, Buddhism slowly spread through India and surrounding countries and was introduced into China in the first century A.D. However, Buddhism did not enter Tibet until 632 A.D., during the reign of King Srongtsan-sgam-po. He was influenced by his two wives – one a Chinese princess, the other from Nepal – who were both ardent Buddhists. These women ordered sacred images, sacred books and Buddhist monks from India. The Buddhist monks invented the Tibetan script by modifying the Sanskrit devanagari to suit the spoken Tibetan word; they translated the Buddhist texts into Tibetan; and they propagated the teachings of Buddhism.

In the 8th century King Ti-sron-De-tsan summoned from India two outstanding and famous Buddhist theologians – Santa-Raksita and Padmasambhava. Padmasambhava ('Lotus Born')

entered Tibet in 747 A.D. and spent fifty years founding monasteries and teaching the Mahayana (Tantra-Yogacarys) doctrine. He overcame resistance from the Bon-pa religion and incorporated some of their deities into the Mahayana doctrine. He introduced the vajra or dorje (symbol of the thunderbolt) and made it a popular religious symbol. Eventually he was deified by the Northern Buddhists of Tibet. In 1040 the great Hindu priest Atisa entered Tibet and introduced reforms which led to the growth of Lamaism. About 400 A.D. the Tibetan monk Tson-Kha-pa founded the Gelugpa or yellow cap sect, and invented the dogma of 'living Buddha's' – that is priests and monks in whom famous saints and even deities were reincarnated. This dogma gave enormous temporal power to the lamas and led to the creation of a Grand lama.

In 1578 a certain lama – Tamche Kyenpa Sonam Gyatso Palzangpo, 'The All-knowing and Sublimely Glorious Ocean of Spiritual Energy' converted the Mongols to Buddhism. The Mongolian Khan found this name too difficult, and simply called him 'Ocean Lama'. The Mongolian word for 'ocean' is *Dalai*, and the title Dalai Lama remains to this day. The concept of a Dalai Lama, coupled with the theoretical dogma of reincarnated saints, led to the assumption that the Dalai Lama's represent a succession of incarnations of the same soul. However, this is dogma, not fact.

This concept of 'reincarnation' must be examined carefully because it contains principles that are thoroughly understood by genuine initiated beings, but grossly misunderstood by untrained minds, half-baked Western occultists, Theosophists and others. Amongst the monks of Mahayana Buddhism there is a special class of priests known as *bLama* (Lama) or *spru-sku* (Tulku). The term *Lama* means a guru, a superior, a spiritual teacher. *Tulku* specifically means 'emanation body' and describes a special mode of spiritual expression or manifestation whereby the energies, thoughts, love and wisdom of some bygone saint or evolved person is inwardly present with a qualified and developed individual. This is not the same thing as 'spiritual possession' whereby a shaman or medium goes into trance and is under the control of a possessing entity for a short period. The Tulku has his own personality and individuality and is always calmly in control of his own life. By his training and sensitivity he can deliberately draw upon the deeper wisdom which is emanated to him from a superior spiritual being or community.

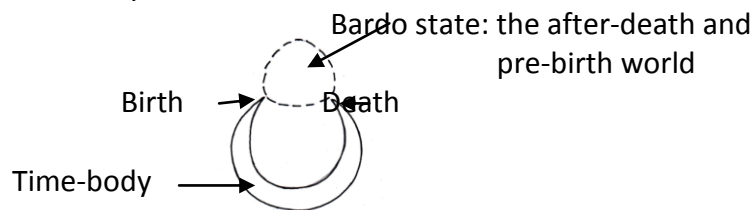
Indeed, the ordinary monks and lay-people of Tibet, Nepal, Ladakh, Zanshar and other communities can readily tell when a lama is exercising his own personality and when he is drawing upon higher influences. Such is the nature of Tibetan Buddhism that successions of lamas or tulkus become sensitive to the same or similar spiritual sources of higher emanations and thereby preserve a continuity of influence and inspiration. There is no reincarnation of the same 'soul' but rather a repeated reception and manifestation of the same emanative sources.

However, the dogma of reincarnation is very strong among less knowledgeable monks and lay-people as the following account shows. Some 50 years ago the Abbot of a Tibetan gompa or monastery died and one of the head monks became concerned about providing a vehicle for the abbot's reincarnation. He decided to go to a nearby village and have sex with one of the women so that the soul of the abbot could return to earth. On his way to the village he saw two donkeys copulating and concluded this was indeed fortunate because the

'soul' of the abbot could now reincarnate. Such is the irrationality of crude and unreal beliefs.

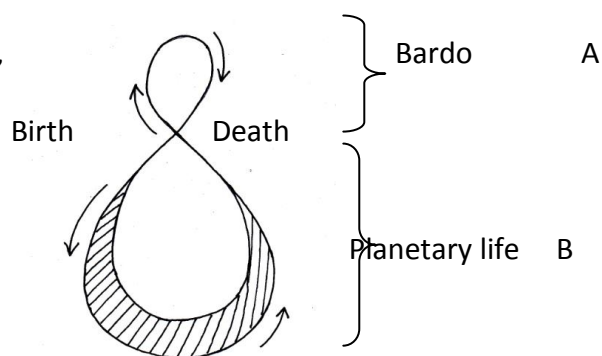
Many important Tibetan writings and teachings are built around this idea of yang-tshe or rebirth, and one of the most important esoteric documents is the *Tibetan Book of the dead*. Its proper title is Bardo Thos-Grol or *Bardo Thodol*. *The Bardo Thodol* is concerned with something that has to be heard between two states for the sake of acquiring freedom, consciousness and escape from pain and error. Our task is to understand what these two states involve and what must be heard and learned. On the basis of widespread indo-Tibetan belief in rebirth or reincarnation we can initially infer that *death* and *birth* are these states. Furthermore, it is assumed that an interval occurs between death and rebirth, and during this interval something can be done to modify the life of the individual.

Now, the usual rebirth doctrines taught in India indicate that the karma engendered during the course of life determines one's after-death state, but here in the *Bardo Thodol* it is asserted that during the Bardo state after death changes can be brought about. Karma is therefore not all powerful but can be overcome to some extent by means of special doctrines and methods. If we use Ouspensky's diagram of the time-body we can visualise the Bardo state more clearly:



This primitive diagram enables us to appreciate that in the after-death realm there is a 'breathing space' in which the consciousness-principle can reorganize itself, review its planetary life and receive instructions that will improve its lot. In view of the widespread Tibetan belief in reincarnation the Bardo state can be thought of as a pathway leading from death to rebirth, as shown in the following diagram:

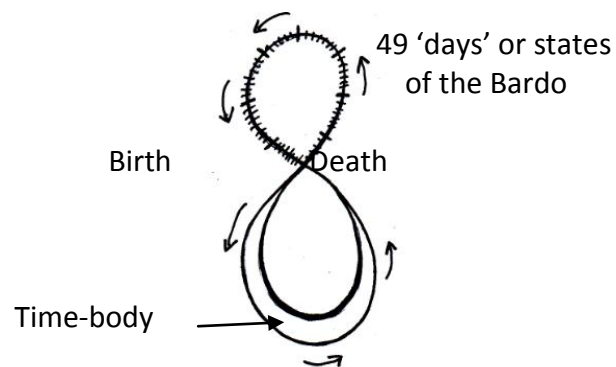
This indicates a Moebius Band, which also illustrates continuity.



It is important to note that from the viewpoint of B, A is the Bardo state, while from the viewpoint of A, B is the Bardo state. Think carefully and try to ascertain which Bardo state you now occupy.

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* traditionally divides the after-death Bardo into 49 levels or states called *days*. Here, $49 = 7 \times 7$ which is an octave of octaves, and so represents a

fullness of spiritual experience. If we include this totality of states in our diagram then we have a good representation of the exoteric form of the Tibetan doctrine.



According to the Bardo Thodol the energy of death projects the individual consciousness-principle into the highest state of Reality which the Tibetan sages call *strong-pa-nid* or the Voidness. To realise the Shining Void or the Clear Light of the Void is to enter into the unlimited Dhara-Kaya, Chos-sku. This is the goal which is sought by all Tibetan esoteric schools. In this state, which is beyond consciousness, there is complete absence of form and colour, but absolute fullness of Life, Love and Energy. The Void is not total emptiness or nothingness; it transcends form, function and any kind of limitation or imposed organization. It is the complete essence of Being and is total Bliss. It is the highest and purest Divine state. Because there is absence of form, colour or any other types of differentiation, the Void is absolutely clear and shines with a dazzling resplendence. It is utterly beyond anything known to or imagined by the ordinary person. If a person is psychologically and spiritually pure, does not hanker after earthly things, is free from karmic habits and is willing to renounce their little personal self completely, then they will see, experience and enter into the incredible fullness of the Void, and in this way become one with it. During the process of dying a lama reads from the Bardo Thodol and speaks into the ear of the dying person (see Tibetan Book of the dead p 95-96).

The purpose of this instruction is to awaken the dying person to the realization that they are in a clear, void state and should make an effort to see, enter and identify with the clear light of the Void. If the consciousness-principle of the deceased hears and obeys the instruction they may gain full liberation from the finite state and blend with the All. This is the Thodol, or liberation by hearing.

Now, common sense tells us that instantaneous liberation is not possible. A person who has been thoroughly immersed in material pursuits and is ruled by negative emotions cannot suddenly awaken to Infinite Love and Good, and blend with it. Clearly The *Bardo-Thodol* instruction is only a reminder of what has already been learned and practised during the course of planetary life. And it is here that the esotericism of the *Bardo-Thodol* becomes clear: the reception of higher instruction, obedience to this instruction and a way of life in accordance with esoteric doctrine, is the Way of Liberation. The quality of Bardo existence is determined not merely by automatic karma but by means of transformation brought about by the concentration in oneself of the highest and finest celestial energy-states. We shall shortly return to this theme.

The Bardo is symbolically depicted as being composed of a series of psychospiritual states, and the text of the *Bardo-Thodol* describes how these states operate. If the consciousness-principle of the deceased person is unable to integrate with the Clear Light of the Void it slips down to a slightly lower state where a blue colour fills awareness. Again, if the person cannot establish a connection with this celestial or Buddha level transition to the next lowest state takes place. Should a person be spiritually dull and bound to sangsara they may slide down through all the Bardo states and then undergo planetary rebirth.

Clearly, the Bardo in this representation is a scale of being which displays and measures the degree of inner awakening and development. From one point of view, the scale-like Bardo portrays the invisible inwardness of a person in a manner that can be conceptually grasped and employed as a guide to self development. We do not see this inner part of ourselves under ordinary conditions because our spiritual structure is twisted or rotated into another dimension. By means of appropriate investigation we can discover the nature of our inwardness and just where we stand on the scale of being. There is no need to wait until we die to find out who and what we are, and then find it is too late to do anything about it.

Our inward Bardo state is our very life because it is the record of all deeds and events experienced by us, and faithfully returns every thought, feeling, attitude, hostility, resentment, fear, rage, suspicion and deceit we have entertained. These, with our beliefs, knowledge, affirmations and will shape and build our spiritual life. When life is at an end we are what we have built into the Bardo body and this decides the level on which we can stand.

We shall now proceed to learn an esoteric technique of great simplicity and considerable value. Over the last few decades many documents and teachings which were once carefully guarded in Tibet have become sparingly available in the West. The following procedure has been used by Tibetan high lamas for about 1000 years and is very beneficial in its operation. Bear in mind what has been said before that it is what you do with the method that makes it effective.

Visualize a large, multicoloured lotus flower located on the top of your head. Seated on the lotus is a Divine Figure. For the Christian this will be the shining image of Christ; for the Hindu it will be the image of Krishna; for the Buddhist it will be Buddha; a Muslim may select the image of the Archangel Gabriel, and a Jew may visualize Abraham or Moses. Try to see the Sacred Figure emanating white light in all directions throughout the entire universe. Mentally see that Figure as the embodiment of the highest wisdom, love, purity, holiness and energy. Continue to meditate upon this figure for some minutes until you feel that a degree of rapport has been established. Then mentally offer yourself to it with humility and sincerity and telepathically commune with it by means of mental prayer. Feel that you are able to take refuge in the shining light and sense the all-pervading protection which the Figure provides.

Mentally see the head of the figure shining brilliantly with white light and visualize it as flowing into and filling your own head. While this is taking place inwardly pray that all thoughts, memories, concepts and reasonings will be purified and clarified. Next visualize a lovely red colour in the throat of the figure and mentally transfer this to your own throat.

Pray for the purification of speech and expression. See a rich blue light from the figure flowing into your own heart, and pray for removal of negative feelings and the purification of emotions. Finally, visualize multicoloured lights in all parts of the figure and see these lights flowing into the corresponding regions of your own body.

While this is taking place aspire towards nobility, dignity and elevated qualities of action, thought, feeling and sentiment. Again repeat the experience of taking refuge in the Sacred Figure. The last step is to visualize the figure melting into pure Light which enters the crown of your head, flows into the heart, and there becomes inseparably united with your own spirit.

This is a preliminary exercise of what the Tibetans call the Lo-jong, or spiritual transformation method. In its fully developed form Lo-jong helps us to transform every action, feeling and thought we experience into a spiritually significant event. Carry out the exercise 3 times a week for about half an hour.