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The Buddhist View of Death: A Critical Study of the Tibetan Book of the Dead

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Abstract: The author bases his study on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, one of the world famous treatises on death, and asks the question: What is it in the Tibetan Buddhist's understanding of death that makes it accept the fact of death with a smile on the face? In *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the whole of life and death is presented as a series of constantly changing transitional realities known as *bardos*.

After understanding the event of death from a Tibetan perspective, the author analyses the experience of death in Buddhism and the salient features of death in Tibetan Buddhism. Then he makes an assessment and critique of the book. Finally, the author shows that Tibetan Buddhism has taken a very pragmatic approach towards death which not only acclimatises the human being, through the process of mediation, to the anxious period of the intermediate state after death, but it also has devised effective methods of accompanying the dying. Its insights offer valuable lessons to humanity for better living.

Keywords: Bardos, Death in Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, The Tibetan Book of the Dead.

Introduction

Let me begin the exposition of Tibetan understanding of death, by narrating an incident told by one of the famous lamas, Sogyal Rimpoche. Once an old monk, who went for his regular shopping in the morning, was brought back to accompany a nun who was dying. When he arrived, he said to the nun:

I think it is time for you to go. Now you have got to see whatever your teachers have taught you to see. This is the

time to put your visualizations into practice. Whichever form of the Buddha you can best relate to, unite your mind with that Buddha, and don't think about us here behind. We'll be okay. I'm going shopping now. When I come back, perhaps I won't see you, so goodbye.¹

It is said that during the entire time that the old man talked, he did so with a smile, and when he left the nun laughed. Imagine how any of us could die like her laughing. What a way to die and accept death, which may be not possible for us, modern humans. Let me narrate another story. As a boy I heard about the death of an evangelist's daughter killed in a car accident. The followers of the evangelists kept the dead body out for some days for a miracle to happen. They kept on praying and praying, but only in vain. In my view, this incident clearly reveals our present generations' attitude towards death. For us, death is the most unfortunate and unpleasant thing to happen. The whole industry of modernised hospitals often thrives on the perpetuation of the life-time of the dying and postponement of their death. Hence, the old man and the nun and their behaviour towards death in the above story might appear to be eccentric for us, but they are not. Rather, they were true to their Buddhist practice. They had read, studied, mediated on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and listened to it, at the deathbed of others. They both knew exactly what she should do as she entered her last conscious moments and could accept death gracefully.

What is it in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and in the Tibetan Buddhist's understanding of death that makes them accept the fact of death with a smile? We will seek answer to this question in the following pages.

Why Should One Die Peacefully?

From the Tibetan point of view, it is crucial that a person dies in a wholesome mind-state, with concentrated awareness, so that person's virtuous *karmic* imprint will ripen. If one dies in a negative mind-state, with a strong attachment to this life, with incomplete emotions and needs, an unwholesome *karmic* imprint will develop in the next life-form. Hence it is important that a person dies joyfully so as to be in a state of serenity and wholesomeness.² Humans have to be schooled in the process of dying so that they are able to face

the inevitable event of death. Tibetan Buddhism aims at familiarising the Buddhists with the fact of death through its famous treatise, '*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*' --- which they meditate upon while living, and which is read while dying and after death. As we proceed, we will see its teaching, which is significant not only for the dying and also for the living.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead

The Tibetan book of the Dead, i.e., *Bardo Thodol*, is used in Tibetan Buddhism as a breviary, and read on the occasion of death. It was originally meant to serve as a guide not only for the dying and the dead, but for the living as well. It is regarded by scholars as unique among the sacred books of the world as it significantly contributes to the science of death, of existence after death and of rebirth.

The Structure of the Book

In *The Tibetan book of the Dead*, *bardo* is divided into three stages, called *Chikai*, *Chönyidi* and *Sidpa Bardo* and accordingly, the book also has three parts.

I. Chikai Bardo

It consists of two sets of instructions: A) Instructions on the symptoms of death or the first stage of Chikai Bardo, wherein the primary light is seen at the moment of death.³ B) Instructions given immediately after death or the second stage of Chikai Bardo, wherein the secondary clear light is seen.⁴

II Chönyidi Bardo

This section consists of introductory instructions concerning the experiencing of reality during the third stage of the *Bardo*, called *Chönyidi Bardo*, when the karmic apparitions appear.⁵ This *bardo* is known as the *bardo* of the experiencing of reality as the dead get a glimpse of reality. These instructions have to be read over a period of fourteen days after death.

III. Sidpa Bardo

This section is made up of instructions on the intermediate state when the dead seeks rebirth or worldly existence. This section is

also known as 'the profound essence of the liberation by hearing.'⁶ It has two parts. Part one is about the after-death world that deals with the *bardo* body; its birth and its supernormal faculties, and speaks about characteristics of existence in the intermediate state, about judgement and about the dawning of the lights of six *lokas*. Part two deals with the details of the process of rebirth, i.e., the closing of the door of the womb and the choosing of the womb. This section on 'the closing of the door of the womb' gives the methods of closing the entrance to another birth. And the one on 'the choosing of the womb' deals with a) Transference into the pure Buddha-realm (to enter the Pure realm of complete joy, one needs to concentrate intensely on it to be born into that realm), and (2) choosing an appropriate womb entrance (to be reborn one needs to concentrate on being reborn in a body which can benefit all sentient being).

The Central Teaching of the Book of the Dead

1. Tibetan Understanding of the Event of Death

Tibetan Buddhism's view of death is marked by three things A) The presence of one's guru at the point of death. B) The reading of the *Tibetan book of the dead* at the death bed. C) The physical assistance rendered to the dying.

According to Tibetan Buddhism, it is desirable that one dies in the presence of the guru who can help the dying to go off joyfully and peacefully. He guides the dying with infinite compassion, wisdom and understanding. If the guru is not present, the dying person becomes aware of the master's presence within himself/herself, while a learned/elderly person or a monk can substitute the guru and does things that master normally does. During one's last breath, the guru first reads from the book some verses to set the dying person face to face with the clear light, and repeats it many times so as to impress it on the mind. When one is about to breathe the last, the guru turns the dying one over on the right side, which posture is called the 'lying posture of a lion' The throbbing of the arteries (on the right and left side of the throat) to be pressed. Thereby the vital-force (inner-breath) will not be able to return from the median-nerve and will be sure to pass out through the Bahminic

aperture.⁷ It is to be noted that even after the last breath, the vital force is thought to remain in the median-nerve so long as the heart continues to throb. When the breathing has stopped, the vital-force will sink into the nerve-centre of wisdom, which is located in the heart. The vital force is thrown backwards and downwards through the right and left nerves (called *Pingâla nâdi* and *Idâ nâdi*), and the intermediate state (*bardo*) dawns. As the breathing is about to cease, the instructions are given and the arteries are pressed (as mentioned above) so as to keep the dying person conscious with a consciousness rightly directed.⁸

At this moment, some instructions, which are given in the book of the dead, are to be read out, and to be repeated distinctively and clearly three or even seven times. This will recall to mind of the dying person the former setting-face-face (one-to-one instruction so called in this tradition) by the guru, while she/he was living. It will cause the naked consciousness to be recognised as the clear light. Recognising one's own self, one becomes permanently united with the *Dharma-Kaya* and liberation will be certain. This experience is called the first glimpsing of the *bardo* of the clear light of Reality, in its primitive purity, Dharmakaya unobscured.⁹

If unable to hold fast to that experience, one experiences next the secondary clear Light, having fallen to a lower state of the *bardo*, wherein the *Dharma-Kaya* is dimmed by *karmic* obscuration. This second stage dawns upon the thought body. The knower hovers within those places to which its activities had been limited. If at this time this special teaching, which is prescribed in the book, be applied efficiently, the deceased will attain liberation. For the karmic illusions will not have come yet, and, therefore, the dead cannot be turned hither and thither from her/his aim of achieving enlightenment.¹⁰ If not liberated even by the secondary clear light, then the third *bardo* or *Chönyidi Bardo* (the *bardo* of the experiencing of reality) dawns.

2. Tibetan Buddhism's Understanding of Intermediate State After Death

This intermediate state, called *Chönyidi Bardo*, is like a dream state, containing visions and images, wherein karmic illusions come to shine. At this point, the instructions in the book that is meant for

this Great Setting-face-face of the *Chönyidī Bardo* are to be read, which would present the dying with the opportunities for awakening or re-birth. The instructions are to be read over a period of fourteen days after death. The book gives a separate set of instructions for each day. The instructions on each of the first seven days consist of the following: 1) Introductory verses, which refer to the previous stage/day and states that the deceased should have attained liberation at the last stage but lost it due to their karmic impressions. 2) Type of people who have come to that stage.¹¹ 3) Description of the vision. During the first seven days, there will be a manifestation of one of the five elements, shining as a light whose colour will be different in each case: Heaven as deep blue on the first day, water as white light on the second day, earth as a yellow light on the third day, fire as a red light on the fourth day, air as a green light on the fifth day, a simultaneous shining of all four colours on the sixth day and a varied colour radiance will come to shine on seventh day. 4) Description of gods and goddesses reaching out to the dead as a dazzling, bright light in a particular colour coming from heavens. 5) Description of side by side appearance of dull light in the same colour coming from human world. 6) Advice given: a) not to fear the bright light, b) not be attracted by the dull light c) but to put trust in the grace of God 7) Plea to choose the right path and description of the good consequences if right path is chosen 8) Description of the dull light and the bad consequences of preferring it 9) A formula of prayer to God 10) The result of the prayer.

The instructions given to the dead from the eight to the fourteenth day is different, because the vision is different. During this period, there will be dawning of the vision of blood-drinking wrathful deities, whose colour will be different in each case. They are in all fifty-eight wrathful deities, some of whom will come to receive the deceased in each of these days. But the book exhorts the dead not to be afraid, as these deities are nothing but the embodiments of the intellect of the deceased, issuing forth from some part of the brain. The dead do not have to be really scared of them, as they are the tutelary deities of the deceased themselves. They are asked to believe in them, as in reality they are the manifestation of different Father-mother god-figures (like Bhagavan Ratna-Samhava, Bhagavan Vajra-Sattva and Bhagavan, Vairochana etc...). The book holds that

recognition of them and believing in them will bring liberation. It is interesting to note how Tibetan Buddhism deals with visions after death without fear. It tells us that apparition of reality at that stage is a matter of ones' own mind, and that the best way to deal with these objects of fear is the mere recognition of what they are.

From the Buddhist point view, the actual experience of death is very important. They believe that, though one's karma plays a vital role in one's next birth, one's state of mind at the time of death can influence the quality of one's next life. So at the point of death, in spite of the great variety of karmas one has accumulated, if one makes a special effort to generate a virtuous state of mind, one may strengthen and activate a virtuous karma, and so bring about a happy re-birth. This indicates that Buddhist's view of karma is not all deterministic and fatalistic provided one approaches death with a right and peaceful mind-set.

3. The Experiences of The deceased at Sidpa *Bardo*

At this *bardo* state, the body of the deceased is known as desire-body or mental body. The mind is no longer limited and obstructed by the physical body of this world. In the *bardo* of becoming the mind is endowed with immense clarity and unlimited mobility, yet the direction in which it moves is determined solely by the habitual tendencies of one's past karma. It can go right through any rock-masses, hills, earth and houses. Besides, it has other specific characteristics. It possesses all the senses. It is extremely light, lucid and mobile, and its awareness is said to be seven times clearer than in life. Thoughts come in quick succession, and we can do many things at once. It is also endowed with a rudimentary kind of clairvoyance, which is not under conscious control, but gives the mental body the ability to read others' mind. The body can see through three-dimensional objects. The mental body can see and be seen by other *bardo* beings, but cannot be seen by the living beings, except those who have developed this ability through deep experience of mediation. Because of the presence of the five elements in its makeup, the mental body seems to us to be solid, and we still feel the pangs of hunger. The mental body derives nourishment from burnt offerings made especially in its name.

During the first weeks of the *bardo*, one has the impression that one is a man or woman, just in the previous life. We do not realise that we are dead. We return home to meet our family and loved ones. We try to talk to them, to touch them on the shoulder. But they do not reply or even show that they are aware we are there. However hard we try, nothing can make them notice us. We watch, powerless, as they weep or sit stunned. Fruitlessly, we try to make use of our belongings. Arrangements are made to dispose of our possessions. We feel angry, hurt and frustrated. We are 'like a fish writhing in hot sand', says the book. In the *bardo* of suffering we relive all our experiences of the past life, reviewing minute details long lost to memory and revisiting places of past life. Every seven days we are compelled to go through the experience of death once again, with all its suffering, but with a consciousness seven times more intense than while living. All the negative karma of previous lives is returning, in a fiercely concentrated and deranging way. It is said that three abysses, white, red and black 'deep and dreadful' open up in front of us. However, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* says that they are our own anger, desire and ignorance.

We are assailed by freezing downpours, hailstorms of pus and blood, haunted by the sound of disembodied, menacing cries; hounded by flesh-eating demons and carnivorous beasts. 'These horrifying experiences, however intense they be, wherever they seem to be coming from, in the final analysis they arise only from our mind, created by our karma and returning habits. Some who have studied the near-death experiences in detail say that the 'life-review' of those who have undergone such experiences seems to suggest that, after death, we can experience all the suffering for which we were both directly or indirectly responsible.

The whole of the *bardo* of becoming has an average duration of forty-nine days, and a minimum length of one week. But some can even get stuck in the *bardo*, to become spirits or ghosts. One has to wait in the *bardo* until one can make a karmic connection with one's future parents. But those have lived extremely beneficial and positive lives, and those who have lived a harmful life do not have to wait in the intermediate state, because the intensity of the power of their karma sweeps them immediately on to their next rebirth.

The *bardo* stage of becoming also consists of a last-judgement, a kind of life-evaluation similar to the post-mortem judgement found in many of the world's cultures. One's good conscience, a white guardian angel, acts as one's defence counsel, recounting the beneficial things one has done, while the bad conscience, a black demon, submits the case for the persecution. Good and bad are totalled up as white and black pebbles. The 'Lord of death', who presides, then consults the mirror of karma and makes his judgement. The judgement scene described in the book has some interesting parallel with the life-reviews of the near-death experience of people. "Ultimately all judgement takes place within our mind. We are the judge and the judged."¹² A woman who went through a near-death experience says, "You are shown your life—you do the judging... you are judging yourself..... Can you forgive yourself? This is the judgement."¹³ The judgement also shows that what really counts, in the final analysis, is the motivation behind our actions, and there is no escaping the effects of our past actions, words, and thoughts. It means we are entirely responsible, not only for this life, but also for our future lives as well¹⁴.

As our mind is so light, mobile and vulnerable in the *bardo*, whatever thoughts arise, good or bad, have tremendous power and influence. Without a physical body to ground us, thought actually becomes reality. Hence, the key issue in the *bardo* of becoming is the overwhelming power of thought, which is greatly conditioned by whatever habits and tendencies we have allowed to grow and dominate us during our lives. If you do not check those habits and tendencies now in life, and prevent them from seizing hold of your mind, then in the *bardo* of becoming you will be their helpless victim. Even the slightest irritation can have a devastating effect. That is why traditionally only a person with whom the deceased had a good and loving relationship is asked to read *The book of the Dead*. Otherwise, the very sound of his/her voice could infuriate the deceased, with the most disastrous consequences. The mind of the deceased at this stage is likened to a flaming red-hot iron bar that can be bent in whichever form it finds itself before it rapidly solidifies. A single negative reaction can plunge the deceased into the most prolonged and extreme suffering. Just like a single positive thought in this *bardo* can lead directly to enlightenment. That explains

why *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* tries to awaken the memory of any spiritual practice the dead person may have had while living. The deceased are invited to recall their connection with spiritual practice, remember their master or Buddha or any other god, and invoke them with all their strength. If in life one has developed the natural reflex of praying in the time of difficulty to gods/enlightened beings, then one will spontaneously and instantly be able to invoke their names at this time of suffering too. Hence a virtuous life on earth is a prerequisite for a better transformation into the future.

Next comes the stage of rebirth. As the time for rebirth gets closer, one craves more and more for the support of a material body to be reborn into it. Different signs will begin to appear, warning you of the realm in which you are likely to take rebirth. Lights of various colours shine from the six realms of existence, and one will feel drawn toward one or another, depending on the emotion predominant in one's mind. Different images and visions will arise, linked to the different realms. As one becomes more familiar with the teachings of *Tibetan Buddhism*, one will become more alert to what they really stand for. If one were to be reborn as a god, one will have a vision of entering a heavenly palace with many stories. If one were to have a vision of tree stump, a deep forest, or a woven cloth, one is to be reborn as a hungry ghost. One must be able to identify them rightly. Hence familiarity of the teaching while living is very important so that right identification of the signs become easier in this *bardo*.

As these signs appear, one should be on guard not to fall into any of these unfortunate rebirths. But one will have intense longing for certain realms, and be drawn towards them too instinctively. One will rush to any place that seems to offer some security. The book warns of the danger that one may get confused and mistake a good birthplace for a bad one, or a bad one for a good one or hear the voices of one's loved ones calling, and follow these, only to find oneself being brought down to the lower realms. However, the situation is not all that precarious. One saving factor is that the moment one becomes aware of what is happening to one, one can actually begin to influence and change one's destiny. Swept by the wind of *karma*, one will be attracted to a place where one's future parents are making love; and because of *karmic* connection one

begins to feel strong attraction and desire for the mother, and aversion or jealousy for the father, which will result in one's being born as a male child, and the reverse a female. If one succumbs to these strong passions, that very emotion might draw one into a birth in a lower realm.

Now, in order to avoid being reborn or to direct our next birth, the *bardo* teachings give two specific kinds of instructions: Methods for preventing a rebirth or failing that, for choosing a good rebirth.

First, there are the guidelines for 'the *closing of the door of the womb*' or '*closing the entrance to another birth*'. The best method is to abandon emotions such as desire, anger, or jealousy and recognise that none of these *bardo* experiences have any ultimate reality. If one can realise this and then rest the mind in its true, empty nature, this in itself will prevent rebirth. The next best method to prevent rebirth is to see one's potential parents as the Buddha or your master or clan deity. And the very least, one should be able to create a feeling of renunciation against being drawn into feelings of desire, and to think of the pure realms of the Buddhas. This will prevent rebirth and may cause one to be reborn in one of the Buddha realms.

However, if one cannot do this, then there remain the methods of choosing a rebirth. If one wishes to be reborn, the most desirable thing to do is to choose that kind of human birth wherein one can pursue one's spiritual progress. If one is going to be reborn in a fortunate situation in the human realm, we are told by the teaching, one will feel as if one were arriving at a beautiful house, or in a city, or among a crowd of people.

Otherwise, generally one has no choice. One is drawn toward one's birthplace. However, the teaching of the book gives us hope. Now is the time for prayer. Even as one enters the womb, one can go on praying for liberation to happen. One can visualise oneself as any enlightened being, traditionally known as Vajrasattva. One can bless the womb one is entering as a sacred environment, 'a place of the gods'. Ultimately it is the mind's urge to inhabit a particular realm that impels one towards reincarnation in a particular realm.

Salient Features of Tibetan Buddhism

1. Bardo as a Continuum

In this book, the whole of life and death is presented as a series of constantly changing transitional realities known as *bardos*. *Bardo* literally means ‘between’ (*bar*) two (*do*)’ i.e., ‘between two states—the state between death and rebirth—and, therefore, ‘intermediate’ or ‘transitional [state].’¹⁵ The state of ‘*bar*’ can be described as a ‘no-man’s-land,’ and ‘*do*’ to a flowing river which belongs neither to this nor to the other shore, but there is little island in the middle, in between.¹⁶ Though the word *bardo* generally denotes the intermediate state between death and re-birth, but in reality, Tibetan Buddhism believes that *bardos* is occurring continuously throughout both life and death. It takes place all through one’s life. It is one continuum that encompasses the whole of one’s life and its experiences.

All *bardo* experiences are situations in which we have emerged from the past and we have not yet found the future, but strangely enough, we happen to be somewhere. We are standing on some ground, which is very mysterious. No body knows how we happen to be there. That mysterious ground, which belongs neither here nor there, is the actual experience of *bardo*. It is closely connected with one’s experience of ego, including all sorts of journey through the six realms of world, the six *bardo* states, which Tibetan Buddhism mentions¹⁷: 1. *bardo* between birth and death, which refers to the normal waking state between birth and death; 2. dream *bardo*, the period between falling asleep and awakening; 3. meditation *bardo*, a state of cessation in which the senses are withdrawn from external objects and the mind is focused on an internal object of observation 4. *bardo* of becoming, the period between the moment of death and rebirth 5. reality *bardo*, the time of unconsciousness that beings experience when overwhelmed by death, so called because during this time the mind returns to its primordial nature and 6. *bardo* of birth which begins at the moment of rebirth into a new lifetime, immediately after the *bardo* of becoming. Of these six, the first three relate to life (birth to death, sleep to dream, self to nothingness) and the next three relate to death (the moment before death, luminosity

of things-as-they are, and the becoming). The subject matter of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* concerns the last three *bardos*.

Experience of each state is real, potent, impressionable, but generally we do not find that there is any link between those potent experiences. It is like going through air pockets—emotionally, spiritually, domestically, politically.¹⁸ All of us go through all these processes. The six experiences of *bardo* come in—in each moment, each situation.¹⁹ Each of the six types of *bardo* is individual and unique in its own way. Each of this is an isolated situation on the one hand, but on the other hand they have developed and begun to make an impression on us, penetrating through us within that basic space or basic psychological background. Hence it is very important that all of us know about the *bardo* experience. “And in fact it is much more fundamental than simply talking about death and reincarnation and what you are supposed to experience after you die. It is more fundamental than that.”²⁰

2. Tibetan Buddhism: Good News for the Living ?

A reflection on what death means and its implications for ‘life after death’ (i.e. the truth of impermanence) can enable us to make the best use of this life while we still have time, and ensure that when we die it will be without remorse or self-recrimination at having wasted our lives, as one of the Tibet’s famous poets, Milarepa, puts it “my religion is to live-and die-without regret.”²¹

To understand what happens at death is to be aware of the nature of the mind. Realisation of the nature of the mind is the key to understanding life and death. “For what happens at the moment of death is that the ordinary mind and its delusions die, and in that gap the boundless sky-like nature of our mind is uncovered. This essential nature of mind is the background to the whole of life and death, like the sky, which folds the whole universe in its embrace”²²

If all we know of the mind is that aspect of the mind which dissolves when we die, we will be left with no idea of what continues. We will have no knowledge of the deeper reality of the nature of the mind. It is important to familiarise ourselves with the nature of the mind while we are still alive. We then will be prepared when it reveals itself spontaneously and powerfully at the moment of death. Now

according to Tibetan Buddhism, meditation is the only way we can repeatedly uncover and gradually realise and stabilise that nature of the mind.

Tibetan Buddhism urges us to accept death now, while we are still alive. Otherwise, we will pay dearly throughout our lives, at the moment of death, and thereafter. Besides, we will not be able to live our lives fully. We will remain imprisoned in the very aspect of ourselves that has to die. This will rob us of the basis of the journey to enlightenment, and trap us endlessly in the realm of illusion.

If we are prepared for death, there is tremendous hope both in life and in death. There is a “possibility for an astounding and finally boundless freedom, which is ours to work for now, in life—the freedom that will also enable us to choose our death and so to choose our birth. For someone who has prepared and practised, death comes not as a defeat but as a triumph, the crowning and most glorious moment of life.”¹

3. Meditation: A Process of Facing Death

Tibetan Buddhism’s view of death takes cognizance of the natural fact that human beings tend to avoid admitting death as an immediate threat in their own lives. Indeed, this refusal to acknowledge the imminence and impermanence of death is regarded in Buddhism, in general, as a fundamental cause of the confusion and ignorance that prevents the spiritual journey towards liberation. Progress towards enlightenment is achieved not by cowering back from death, but by encountering it already while you are live. Therefore, to facilitate the encounter with the inevitable, Tibetan Buddhism offers several detailed meditative strategies. These death meditations enable Buddhist practitioners to face seriously the truth of impermanence and, in turn, to comprehend the true nature of human existence. Mindfulness of death engenders both control and freedom; it brings about control in the sense of curbing the desire for permanence and security, and it promotes freedom by offering the meditator an enduring glimpse of the Buddha’s liberating wisdom. The clear advantages of regularly contemplating one’s impermanence and death make such meditations supreme among the various types of Tibetan Buddhist mindfulness training. Taking the practice seriously

helps to inspire further spiritual endeavor, overcome the delusions of permanence and immortality, and increase the probability of a virtuous life and subsequently a good experience of death. Besides, as mentioned elsewhere, one's right view of death not only helps one to face death peacefully at the moment of death, and to accept it without fear while living, but it can also guarantee a final liberation or at least a better and a happy rebirth.

For these reasons, Tibetan Buddhism strongly recommends that one seeks to obtain a right knowledge of death through the process of meditation. Through repeated acquaintance with the process of death in meditation, an accomplished meditator can use his or her actual death to gain great spiritual realization. That is why, according to the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, the experienced practitioners engage in meditative practices as they pass away.

Assessment of Tibetan Buddhism's View of Death

1. After Death Experience: A Matter of Mind?: One of the important suggestions provided for one's liberation in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which is not to be found in other religions, is the constant and persistent reminder given to the dead to be aware of projections and unconscious tendencies that emerge. Appearing in the forms of frightening and peaceful deities, these projections arise from one's own mental body. Interestingly, it states that even the Lords of death too emerge from this mental body, have no solid substance and therefore one need not fear them. When such projections arise, the *bardo* body is asked to pray with deep devotion to gods and Buddhas, which can lead one to liberation.²⁴ Thus Tibetan Buddhism not only reveals to the deceased the real nature of the different forms of apprehension after death, but also provides means and suggestions to overcome them, thus accompanying the dead in their struggles for liberation.

2. Freedom of the Dead: One of the most outstanding parts of Tibetan Buddhism's understanding of the deceased and the life after death is the role, the intellect and the will of deceased can play in determining one's future destiny. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* often exhorts the dead in the *bardo* stage not to be led either by fear towards one form of reality or by attraction towards another form of

reality. Often repeated exhortations such as ‘think’ ‘recognise’ ‘do not be fond of’ ‘look not at it’ ‘avoid’ ‘believe in’ etc. clearly indicates a possibility of choice for the dead as regards the activities of the intellect and the exercise of the will. However, it does not in anyway imply a total voluntary freedom, as the different forms of thought and the propensities of the will that affect the dead at this *bardo* is *very much conditioned* by one’s own past life in the world. But what cannot be denied is the range of options before the dead, which makes Tibetan Buddhism’s understanding of life-after-death very different from that of Christianity.

3. The Compassionate Role of Lama: One of the beautiful things of Tibetan Buddhism is that, a lama or a Guru, unlike a Catholic priest, is a not only spiritual teacher but also a therapist-cum-spiritual healer, who helps and guides the sick and the dying people with infinite compassion, wisdom, and understanding. Christianity, as a religion, has to take a cue from Tibetan Buddhism as to how its religious leaders(the priests) can prepare the people to face death without fear, to accompany the dying into next life with compassion, and to treat the dead with tremendous respect.

4. Near-death Experience: The western writers who have studied both *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and the account of near-death experiences see tantalizing parallels between the two. Some of the experiences of the so-called dead such as the appearance of light at the final stages of the near-death experience, the out-of-body experience wherein the dead can see their body as well as environment around them, helplessly watching relatives and frustratingly trying to communicate with them, the experience of having a perfect body, uninhibited mobility and clairvoyance, the surprise of meeting others who had died before visions of different realms such as inner worlds, paradises, cities of light with transcendental music, tormenting feelings of loneliness, gloom and desolation, are found, both in the accounts of near-death experiences²⁵ and in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, as we have seen. This reveals the wealth of experience as regards the reality of death that is contained in this book, which needs to be uncovered.

5. Psychological Reading of *Bardo*: As we have seen in the article, *bardo* is usually associated with life after death. But it can

also be looked at differently. Some Tibetan spiritual masters, like Chögyam Trungpa,²⁶ prefer to see *bardo* as the peak experience of any given moment. According to them, our experience of the present moment is always coloured by one of six psychological states: the god realm (bliss), the jealous god realm (jealousy and lust for entertainment), the human realm (passion and desire), the animal realm (ignorance), the hungry ghost realm (poverty and possessiveness), and the hell realm (aggression and hatred). In relating these realms to the six traditional Buddhist *bardo* experiences, they insightfully delineate the familiar psychological patterns of embodied human life, and show how they present an opportunity to transmute our daily experiences into freedom.

A Critique of Tibetan Buddhism's View of Death

1. Description of the *bardo* stage is very mystical and mysterious. It may not make much sense to non-Buddhists and to the rational human beings, if one takes them to be the real state of affairs. However, the book warns us that it is only the projection of one's own thoughts, desires, fears and anxieties with regard to the future. If that is case, why such an elaborate description of something which is not so significant? Is it not disproportionate to elaboration on the process of rebirth on which the book does not have much to say except speaking about the closing of the womb door and choosing of the womb birth.

2. Its account on judgement resembles very much of what is found in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. However, it does not deal with the question of the type of good actions which are rewarded and the bad actions that are condemned, as it is described in other traditions. In particular, one relationship with the others, especially one's duty and commitment towards the poor, the needy and the suffering are hardly discussed in this judgement. Nor do they figure anywhere in the extensive description of the deceased's fears/anxieties in the *bardo* stage. Absence of the social dimension of human life is the biggest lacuna of the Tibetan Buddhism's understanding of death.

Conclusion

The problem of death has been a universal problem for all people at all times. Different cultures, different religions and people of

different historical times have been attempting to theorise on this inevitable dimension of life, and have thus contributed to a more comprehensive understanding death and life after death. One of the most significant approaches towards the reality of death has been gifted to humanity by Tibetan Buddhism. As we have seen, its teaching on death has taken a very pragmatic approach towards death in a manner that not only acclimatises the human being, through the process of mediation, to the anxious period of the intermediate state after death, but it has also devised effective methods of accompanying the dying. Its insights offers valuable lessons to humanity for better living. The age-old Tibetan Buddhism's treatise on death dovetails with the ever-growing modern literature on life after death based on the new findings of near-death experiences. It might perhaps indicate that, when it comes to the ultimate questions in life, what is ancient is infinitely wise and incredibly valuable.

Notes

1. As quoted in Kenneth Kramer, *The Sacred Art of Dying*, New York: Paulist Press, 1988, p. 70.
2. Cf. Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Nodia: Rupa & Co, 1992.
3. Evans Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, London: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 89.
4. Ibid., p.97.
5. Ibid., p.101.
6. Ibid., p.153.
7. Cf. Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.
8. For the nature of the Death-consciousness determines the future state of the 'soul-complex,' existence being the continuous transformation of one conscious state into another.
9. Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, pp. 92-97.
10. Ibid., pp. 97-101.
11. For instance, those who have come to the second day are the ones who are overcome by illusions, to the third day are the one's who could not overcome pride, to the fourth day are the ones who have failed in observance of vows etc..
12. Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, p. 292.

13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Wentz. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, p.28.
16. Trungpa deems it as the present experience, the immediate experience of nowness—where you are, where you are at. Cf. Chogyam Trungpa, *Transcending Madness: The Experience of Six Bardo*, London: Shambhala Publications, 1992. p. 3.
17. Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* , p.102.
18. Trungpa, *Transcending Madness*, p. 4.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Kramer, *The Sacred Art of Dying*, p.71.
22. Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of the Living*, p.12.
23. Ibid., p.14
24. Kramer. *The Sacred Art of Dying*, p. 75.
25. Cf. Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, pp. 319-336.
26. A stimulating work for this type of reading of bardos is Chögyam Trungpa, *Transcending Madness: The Experience of Six Bardos*.