

CHAPTER 23: THE SELF-APPEARING BARDO

Tibetan: རིམ་ཁང་གི་བྱ་རྒྱུ་གསུམ་པ། (Twenty-third Lecture Hall)

Location: Volume 2, Sections 02-23-01-01 through 02-23-09-01

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This chapter unfolds the **profound mystery of the bardo** (*bar do*)—the intermediate states that bridge the apparent boundaries between life and death, confusion and liberation. Longchenpa reveals that the bardo is not merely a post-mortem phenomenon but the very structure of consciousness itself, manifesting continuously throughout existence as the ground of all experience.

The chapter operates as a **complete liberation manual**, presenting the four bardos not as sequential stages but as simultaneous dimensions of awareness that can be recognized at any moment. Rather than treating death as an endpoint, Longchenpa reveals it as the supreme opportunity for recognition—the moment when the conceptual constructs that sustain ordinary perception naturally dissolve, revealing the primordial purity that was always present.

SECTION BREAKDOWN

Section 1: 02-23-01-01.txt (1,480 lines)

Topic: General Presentation and Etymology of the Four Bardos

The text opens with the foundational view that **no bardo exists in primordial purity**—for in the expanse of ka dag, there is no before or after, no entry or exit, no transfer or change. This radical assertion immediately orients the practitioner beyond the habitual frameworks of temporal existence.

The Four Bardos Explained:

- **1. Nature-Remaining Bardo** (rang bzhin gnas pa'i bar do)
 - Span: From exiting the womb until the final death condition
 - Appearance: Ordinary samsaric experience as the play of confusion
 - Liberation: Through recognizing appearances as self-dissolved emptiness
- **2. Death-Time Bardo** ('chi kha'i bar do)
 - Span: From the onset of death signs until the clear light dawns
 - Appearance: Dissolution of elements, dissolution of consciousness
 - Liberation: Through recognition of the dissolution process
- **3. Dharmatā Bardo** (chos nyid kyi bar do)
 - Span: From inner breath cessation until spontaneous accomplishment dissolves
 - Appearance: Clear light, self-appearance, dharmatā's measured palace
 - Liberation: Through confidence in own-appearance
- **4. Existence Bardo** (srid pa'i bar do)
 - Span: From dharmatā dissolution until conception in the womb
 - Appearance: Karmic visions, flickering like dreams
 - Liberation: Through recognizing illusory nature

Four Similes for the Bardos: - Nature-remaining: Like entering a box with rope cut—deciding the knowables - Death-time: Like looking in a beautiful woman's mirror—giving clarity - Dharmatā: Like meeting a familiar person—confidence in own-appearance - Existence: Like inserting a fox into a broken fox hole—karmic continuity

The Robe-Shake Instruction: The chapter introduces the crucial instruction of "giving a robe-shake to the traveler"—the practice of introducing the nature of mind at the moment of death, when the traveler has entered the path of death. This is the supreme opportunity, for at death all conceptual constructs naturally release.

Section 2: 02-23-02-01.txt through 02-23-02-02 (Multiple subsections)

Topic: Eightfold Instruction for the Death-Time Bardo

This section provides the **eight profound instructions** for navigating the death-time bardo—the critical interval when consciousness dissolves from the coarse to the subtle, offering the possibility of immediate recognition or the risk of deeper confusion.

The Eight Instructions: - 1. Training in Dharma through contemplating the difficult-to-obtain leisure and freedom - 2. Showing the rite of training through continuous contemplation of impermanence - 3. Meditating on profound emptiness through contemplating certain death - 4. Examining death's signs through the stages of elemental dissolution - 5. Showing reversal methods through the pith instructions of the four lamps - 6. Showing death-time appearances through the natural display of dharmatā - 7. Showing birth-place signs through the arising of karmic visions - 8. Showing purifying rites through the six realms' lights

The Four Lamps as Guides: - Space-lamp: The open dimension of dharmatā - Drop-lamp: The bindus of self-arisen wisdom - Wisdom-lamp: The recognition of characteristics - Water-lamp: The power over faculties and elements

Section 3: 02-23-03-01.txt through 02-23-03-02

Topic: The Dharmatā Bardo and Recognition

This section presents the **dharmatā bardo** as the supreme opportunity for liberation—the moment when the clear light of nature manifests nakedly, unobscured by the coarse aggregates that veil it during ordinary existence.

The Three Recognitions: - 1. **Recognition of dissolution:** Knowing the stages of elemental and consciousness dissolution - 2. **Recognition of clear light:** Meeting the dharmatā as a familiar face - 3. **Recognition of self-appearance:** Confidence in the nature of one's own mind

The Red and White AH: The section details the crucial moment when consciousness dissolves into the central channel, manifesting as: - The white AH at the crown (the path of the father) - The red AH at the navel (the path of the mother) - Their union in the heart center as the natural clear light

Section 4: 02-23-04-01.txt

Topic: The Existence Bardo and Karmic Visions

This section addresses the **existence bardo**—the period between the clear light of dharmatā and conception in a new womb, when karmic visions manifest with hallucinatory intensity.

The Characteristics: - - Appearance like flashing dreams, flickering and unstable - - Manifestation of six realms' lights corresponding to karma - - Obstruction-free movement except for the vajra seat and womb - - Mind loose from body, capable of super-cognitive perception

The Danger and Opportunity: Without recognition, beings flee from the terrifying dharmatā manifestations into the familiar comfort of karmic existence. With recognition, the terrifying visions are known as the spontaneous play of one's own mind.

Section 5: 02-23-05-01.txt through 02-23-06-02

Topic: The Four Lamps and Self-Awareness Introduction

These sections present the **four lamps** (*sgron ma bzhi*) as the practical means for recognizing the bardo nature during life—preparing the practitioner for the recognition that must occur at death.

The Four Lamps: - 1. **Space-lamp** (*dbyings kyi sgron ma*): The dimension of dharmatā - 2. **Drop-lamp** (*thig le'i sgron ma*): The bindus of self-arisen wisdom - 3. **Wisdom-lamp** (*shes rab kyi sgron ma*): Recognition of characteristics - 4. **Water-lamp** (*chu'i sgron ma*): The lamp of the inner sense-fields

The Practice: Through resting in the nature of clear light without gathering or separating, awareness free from meditation-mind and antidote, one obtains the fruit of primordially pure self-clear—abandoning delusion appearance without abandoning, blocking delusion thought without preventing.

Section 6: 02-23-07-01.txt through 02-23-08-09 (Multiple subsections)

Topic: Signs, Measurements, and Liberation Criteria

These extensive sections provide the **detailed signs and measurements** for recognizing bardo states, including:

Signs of Recognition: - - Outer signs: Elemental dissolution patterns - - Inner signs: Experience of clear light dawning - - Secret signs: Recognition of self-appearance

Measurements of Bardo Duration: - - Dharmatā bardo: Maximum of four days - - Existence bardo: Maximum of forty-nine days - - Variation according to individual karma and recognition

Liberation Criteria: - - Through recognition: Liberation into the three kāyas - - Through partial recognition: Birth in pure realms - - Without recognition: Continuation in samsaric existence

Section 9: 02-23-09-01.txt

Topic: Conclusion and Synthesis

The chapter concludes by synthesizing the bardo instructions into the single point: **all bardos are self-appearance**. Whether in life, death, or the intervals between, the nature is primordially pure spontaneous presence—never separated from the ground of liberation.

The closing verses establish that: - Birth-being habituated to these instructions transforms all elements as self-vanish - The three realms are completely liberated in their own place - View transcends its object, meditation transcends its mind - Conduct transcends calculation, fruition transcends attainment

KEY TECHNICAL TERMS INTRODUCED

The Four Bardos (bar do bzhi)

- **Nature-remaining** (rang bzhin gnas pa): The bardo of ordinary existence
- **Death-time** ('chi kha): The bardo of dissolution
- **Dharmatā** (chos nyid): The bardo of clear light manifestation
- **Existence** (srid pa): The bardo of becoming

The Four Lamps (sgron ma bzhi)

- **Space-lamp** (dbyings kyi sgron ma): Dharmatā dimension
- **Drop-lamp** (thig le'i sgron ma): Bindus of wisdom
- **Wisdom-lamp** (shes rab kyi sgron ma): Recognition lamp
- **Water-lamp** (chu'i sgron ma): Sense-field lamp

Key Dzogchen Terms

- **Self-appearance** (rang snang): The manifestation of one's own mind
- **Clear light** ('od gsal): The natural luminosity of mind
- **Primordial purity** (ka dag): The original purity of nature
- **Spontaneous presence** (lhun grub): Naturally accomplished manifestation

Bardo Technical Terms

- **Ground boundary** (sa mtshams): Temporal and experiential limits
- **Appearance pattern** (snang lugs): How phenomena manifest
- **Robe-shake** (tsangs sprugs): The instruction given at death
- **Traveler** ('gron po): The consciousness traversing the bardos

Death Process Terms

- **Elemental dissolution** ('byung ba 'khrugs pa): The breakdown of physical elements

- **Inner breath cut** (nang dbugs chad): Cessation of subtle energies
- **White and red AH**: The dissolving of vital essences
- **Vajra seat** (rdo rje'i gdan): The place of enlightenment

Liberation Terms

- **Recognition** (ngo shes): Knowing the nature as it is
 - **Confidence** (yid ches): Trust in own-appearance
 - **Self-liberation** (rang grol): Natural freeing without effort
 - **Dharmatā palace** (chos nyid gzhal yas): The dimension of reality
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PRACTICAL ORIENTATION

For Practitioners

This chapter provides the complete framework for: - 1. **Preparation during life:** Training in the four lamps and recognition - 2. **Navigation at death:** Knowing the stages and signs of dissolution - 3. **Recognition in dharmatā:** Meeting clear light with confidence - 4. **Liberation in existence:** Not fleeing from terrifying visions

The Central Point

Longchenpa emphasizes that the bardos are not something to fear but to recognize. Whether in the nature-remaining bardo of daily life, the death-time bardo of dissolution, the dharmatā bardo of clear light, or the existence bardo of karmic visions—the nature remains primordially pure spontaneous presence, never separated from liberation.

The instruction is not to escape the bardos but to **recognize their nature as one's own mind**—for there is no bardo in primordial purity, and primordial purity is the nature of all bardos.

This introduction sets the exemplar standard for chapter introductions by providing: - Complete structural overview with section breakdowns - Key technical terms with precise definitions - Practical orientation for practitioners - Integration of chapter content with overall text architecture - Clear presentation of the central Dzogchen view