

## Revisiting the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and *The Psychedelic Experience*

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**U**ndoubtedly the best-known text in world religious literature concerning itself with the afterlife and the process of reincarnation is the *Bardo Thödol*, popularly known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. This book, in a translation by W.Y. Evans-Wentz, served as the text which Leary, Alpert and myself used as the basis for our guidebook on psychedelic states, *The Psychedelic Experience*, first published in 1964. In the years since its publication I have received many letters and comments to the effect that while most actual psychedelic experiences did not follow the idealized sequence of three stages laid out in the *Bardo Thödol*, what people appreciated about our manual were the recommendations to think of the psychedelic experience as an opportunity for psycho-spiritual practice and learning.

The original *Bardo Thödol*, is attributed to the legendary 8th century Indian Buddhist adept Padmasambhava, who brought Buddhism to Tibet. According to Buddhist scholar (and erstwhile participant in the Harvard psychedelic studies) Robert Thurman, who has published a more recent translation, the title of the work should more accurately read *The Great Book of Natural Liberation Through Understanding in the Between*. “Between” (as a noun) is Thurman’s translation of the term bardo, – a somewhat odd linguistic choice for the concept which Evans-Wentz translated as “intermediate state.” Actually, there are three bardo states described in the *Bardo Thödol* as being between life and death; and there are three additional bardo states, mentioned in appended *Root Verses*, that occur between birth and death – the waking life, dreaming and meditating.

Thus, it is clear that the term bardo refers to what in Western psychology is called a “state of consciousness.” As I point out in my book *MindSpace and TimeStream*, a state of consciousness is always defined by a division of time between two transition points, – for example, “sleep” is the state between falling asleep and waking up. Whereas the Indian Vedanta identifies four common states – waking, sleeping, dreaming and meditating, Buddhist teachings mention three, combining the sleep and dream states. In the above-mentioned *Root Verses* and other Tibetan Buddhist texts, there are descriptions of six yogas – practices for becoming lucid and liberated in each (or from each) of the six bardo states. In recent years, several Tibetan lama-teachers have expounded on the yoga of dreams – and such teachings converge with Western psychological research on the induction of lucid dreaming.

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The *Bardo Thödol* concerns itself with providing guidance for the dying person on how to find their way through the three bardo states, giving detailed and explicit instructions how people can be helped to make the most favorable kind of re-birth possible. It teaches that liberation from the samsaric round of conditioned existence can occur in, or from, any of the bardo states, if we understand and remember the teachings, recognize the bardo state we are in, and choose the most enlightened conscious option available to us.

The teachings of the *Bardo Thödol*, in outline, are that immediately at death, in the bardo of the moment of dying, highly proficient meditators who can maintain one-pointed concentration will be able to attain liberation. Most people are not able to concentrate, however, get caught up in fear and confusion and enter into the second phase, called the bardo of the experiencing of reality, in which there are visions of “peaceful and wrathful deities.” The deceased is reminded not to be overwhelmed by either the heavenly or the hellish visions, but to remember that they are all projections of one’s own mind. Due to lack of training and/or preparation on the part of most ordinary people, the bardo traveller, after repeatedly lapsing into unconsciousness, then finds himself in the third phase, the bardo of seeking rebirth, in which he wanders about seeking to orient himself again to ordinary existence.

Although the *Bardo Thödol* does not explicitly mention the prenatal epoch as such, we can find in the teachings of the after-death bardo states some suggestive parallels with findings now emerging out of the work of prenatal regression therapists and past-life therapists. My own understandings of these areas have been deepened by my own participation in such explorations, using psychological, shamanic, yogic and alchemical methods, which I call divinations, for myself and with individuals and groups. At times, my explorations have involved the amplification of perception through psychedelic substances (where this was permissible).

The work of the prenatal regression therapists has uncovered cellular memories of conception, including the impact of the attitudes and expectations of father and mother at the time of conception. Past-life therapists now speak of a series of learning experiences undergone by the soul during the interlife period, that can be remembered in deep trance states. Prior to what is experienced as the descent into form at conception, there is a meeting with a group of meta-physical human spirits, called the soul council, at which the decision to incarnate is made, according to one’s intentions, choosing the parents and circumstances of one’s incarnation or rebirth.

According to the *Bardo Thödol*, in the phase of rebirth the traveler in the intermediate realms is repeatedly admonished to remember where he is, and that his thoughts and intentions will profoundly affect the kind of experience he/she may have. The deceased is reminded of the six possible worlds of samsara (existence) into which he might find him or herself drifting, carried along by the karmic propensities of their previous existence. They are advised to avoid the hell worlds, and the worlds of pretas and asuras, but, if rebirth is unavoidable, to go with the heavenly worlds of benign spirits (devas) or the

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human world – considered to be offering the best opportunities for liberation.

Then follow a series of instructions on how to “close the womb-door,” the point here being to delay the rebirth as long as possible, so that one can prolong one’s stay in the higher planes and avoid being sucked into unfavorable birth forms by one’s karmic propensities. The first method of closing the womb-door is to remember that you are in this bardo of rebirth and to focus on positive intentions: “this is a time when earnestness and pure love are necessary.” The second method of closing the womb-door is used as the deceased has visions of males and females coupling: he/she is to think of them as a divine Father-Mother pair, and withhold from joining them. The third, fourth and fifth methods of closing the womb-door involve further ways of dealing with the visions of a man and woman copulating.

When we wrote *The Psychedelic Experience*, we interpreted these passages in the *Bardo Thödol* as referring to the sexual hallucinations that are not uncommon in psychedelic states. In the light of my subsequent experiences and of the literature

on prenatal regression therapy, I now believe that the visions of couples copulating refer to memories of our own conception. In directed hypnotic and psychedelic trance states, people can remember, as souls, choosing the parents and existential conditions of their conception and birth to come and how that choice relates to their life-purpose. I myself have come to understand how my choice of parents of different nations (Germany and England), that were soon to be embroiled in world war, related to my life’s work or mission. I know of artists or musicians, who remember choosing, as souls, to be conceived and born into a family where their artistic inclinations can be nurtured.

According to the *Bardo Thödol*, if after using the various methods of preventing or postponing rebirth by meditating with conscious intention on light, one is still drawn into a womb for birth, the deceased is given instructions for “choosing of the womb-door.” The soul is advised to choose a human birth in an area in which religion prevails, and, “being born so, be endowed with great merit so as to be able to serve all sentient beings. Thinking thus, direct your wish, and enter into the womb.” This is then, the moment of conception, where the soul descends from the higher realm where it has made its choice for a particular incarnation, in a particular family at a particular place and time.

To summarize, the instructions for the most favorable kind of re-birth, are: to delay the return from the light- and wisdom-filled heaven worlds as long as possible, and when the time comes, which you know by seeing the acts of conception between men and women, to choose a birth family where the likelihood of coming into contact with spiritual teachings are greatest. The ending of the interlife period is the beginning of the bardo of rebirth: the decision is made to reincarnate, in a blending of karmic tendencies and conscious choice, and conception takes place in a fleshly human womb. This rebirth phase then ends with the actual physical birth, nine months later, when we start cycling through the three bardos of waking life, dreaming and meditating. •