

THE BARDO REALMS
After death, the after death.
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By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Death is something we tend not to talk about. Even if we are deathly sick, that word may not even come up, although it can't be far from the truth and certainly will be true for all of us at some point in our lives. What happens after death really is a mystery for most of us and there are all kinds of theories kicking around and not much confirmation. Here is what I understand happens after death, so let's talk about it some.

I personally don't know what happens, and if it has happened to me before, I don't remember. This is a tough spot to be in, but I am not alone in this. Here is what I do know. In my search for the truth through the people and ideas in my life, the clearest and most direct information I have found both about life and death has come from the Tibetan Buddhists.

For one, they don't blink at the subject of death, quite the reverse. They have studied it for centuries. All I can say is that so far everything else I have learned from the Tibetan Buddhists has turned out to be true and they are the most brilliant teachers (as a group) that I have ever found. I have no reason not to have confidence in what they have to say about dying, death, and what happens afterward. This brings up the question of the bardo, the intermediated states between death and the next rebirth. Just what are they?

As for my background, I have been interested in the bardos and the "Tibetan Book of the Dead" since the late 1950s; in the beginning I read whatever I could lay my hands on about this subject, but all those books pointed to knowledge through dharma practice. For the last 38 or so years, I have been involved in various Tibetan mind-training practices, and working with the same dharma teacher (a high Tibetan Buddhist lama) for almost 30 years. These practices include a couple of sets of what are called the Extraordinary Preliminaries (ngondro), and various additional yidam practices, not to mention rounds of mantras dedicated to Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha of the Padma Family, which traditionally has to do with death, dying, and rebirth in the Buddha Realm called, in Tibetan, "Dewachen." And of course, meditation.

I have also been instructed and empowered to practice what is called Phowa, one of the traditional Six Yogas of Naropa. Phowa is a very detailed technique for ejecting the consciousness from the body at the time of death, and this can also be used to help others in the period immediately following death. While I have also learned to read Tibetan, my knowledge of written Tibetan is still very inadequate.

An in-depth article on the bardo would be the size of a short book and I am in no way an expert. What I can do here is to go over, very generally, some of the main points about the bardo states, with the hope that this will give enough of an overview for you to decide if you want to

pursue this topic elsewhere on your own.

The Bardo

The Tibetan word "Bar-Do" means "gap," literally the space between two bodies or houses, the intermediate time between two places to live or lifetimes. Perhaps the most famous text on the bardo is the "Tibetan Book of the Dead." The Wylie transliteration of this title is "bar do thos grol," which transliterates in phonetics to "BAR-DO TÖ-DRÖL," and in English to something like "liberation by hearing on the after-death plane." At the very least, this is an interesting topic.

Although the popular misconception is that the bardo realms only take place after death, in fact the Tibetans make it clear that there are a number of different bardos, and we are in one of the bardo realms at all times. Here is a brief description of the six major bardos:

The first bardo, the "SHI-NAY BAR-DO," or "Bardo Between Birth and Death," is just that, a bardo that extends from the moment we are conceived until the moment of our death, our last dying breath. If you are reading this, you are in that bardo now.

The second bardo is the "MI-LAM BAR-DO," or "Dream Bardo," and this refers to the dream state we all have when we sleep. This is usually considered part of the first bardo. It is a separate kind of experience from waking life as we all know.

The third bardo, the "SAM-TEN BAR-DO," or "Meditation Stability Bardo," is also considered part of the first bardo, and refers to meditative states that can be experienced by the accomplished dharma practitioner. Some of these practices are what I keep suggesting are very, very useful in life.... and at death.

The fourth bardo is the "CHIK-KHAI BAR-DO," or the bardo of the moment of death, and is said to begin along with the signs of approaching death, and extends until a very short time after the last breath is taken. This is generally a fairly short-lived bardo.

The fifth, the "CHÖ-NYI BAR-DO" or "Bardo of the Experiencing of Reality," begins a short time after death, and usually lasts for a period of several days, a time during which most fall into a deep sleep or unconsciousness, and then gradually begin to awaken. It helps to know something about this bardo.

And the sixth and last bardo is the "SI-PA BAR-DO," or "Bardo of Becoming," which lasts from the moment of reawakening after the death swoon until the next birth is taken, which is an indeterminate period of time, usually put at 49 days, but it can be much longer.

This last bardo, the "Bardo of Becoming" is what most people mean when they use the word "bardo." In the next blog we will look at some of the basic ideas of the bardo realms.

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Before we continue with the discussion of the bardo, a KEY concept to understand is our own ignorance of enlightenment, whatever that is. According to the Buddhist teachings, we are now and have always been (since the beginning of time) in a state of profound 'ignorance'. We have all heard that term before, and many religions say the same thing, that ignorance is the cause of this or that. Ignorance, therefore, is an important term to understand.

Buddhists do not subscribe to the idea that we once were enlightened, but have somehow fallen (Plato), that we originally knew but have now forgotten a pristine state. The Buddhist view is that we have forever been ignorant. And ignorance, here, means (literally) to-be-ignoring-the-truth, ignoring what is true. Ignorance is not simply some state of unconsciousness or stupidity, but an active ignoring of the true nature of the mind and that true nature is right in front of us all the time.

It takes effort to ignore the truth, and this ignoring is a deeply ingrained habit extending back endless years and lifetimes. We do it habitually. We have always done it. We will always continue to do it, unless and until we learn otherwise. It is responsible for most of our pain and suffering. The sad thing is that we seem to prefer to remain ignorant.

Mind Training

If we understand the nature of ignorance, then we can better grasp what all the to-do about meditation and mind practice technique is all about. Meditation is not, as many people like to think (various relaxation techniques or therapies), but rather (to the Tibetans) active techniques to examine the mind and its nature, to get to know it. How are ignorance and meditation connected to the bardo?

I have used this illustration before, the old kids' game of Pick-Up-Sticks. There are all of these colored wooden sticks about the size of darning needles. We would scatter the sticks in a pile, and the game was to pick the pile apart, stick by stick, without disturbing the rest of the pile, until all the sticks were gone. We could also use the old analogy of the layers in an onion.

Mind training techniques are somewhat similar, in that the mind, and particularly our concept of the Self and its attachments, is examined and carefully picked apart until there is nothing left - nada. When you take all the layers of an onion apart, there is nothing in the center. So it is (the Buddhists teach) with our personal sense of the Self. The Self (our self) is said to be a composite of our positive and negative attachments, and can be picked apart until nothing remains at its core. And this is the "why" meditation techniques are so useful.

My point here is that these meditation techniques are about the only way to pick through our ingrained habit of attachments and ignorance, and to reach the point where we actually begin to

cease-to-ignore what we have been ignoring since time immemorial, and start to pay more attention and just wake up. Using meditation techniques, we gradually reach the end of our own ignorance; we manage to stop ignoring, and begin to have awareness and awaken.

Remember that the Sanskrit word "Buddha" means 'to awaken' - to become aware. Buddhahood is simply the end of ignorance and the advent of full awakening. So, what's my point, and what does all of this have to do with the bardo states?

Meditation and the Bardo States

Tibetan Buddhists are VERY concerned with the state of our mind at the moment and time of death, and a considerable amount of Buddhist meditation practice is little more than working to prepare the mind for that moment when we each will die. Why?

Because it is at that moment, when we are suddenly freed of all of our senses, personal habits, and body that we come face-to-face with the unvarnished reality, just what we have been ignoring all of this time - the true nature of the mind. The Tibetans say that after we die we are suddenly nine times as aware as we were in life, many times more aware of just everything in our mind AND in the world around us. It is also said that we are very, very sensitive, like the skin of a newborn baby. It is like a veil has been lifted. We have a unique opportunity for realization.

In that much-more aware state, it is far easier for us to get past our habitual patterns of ignorance (of ignoring) and to see the true nature of our mind, which at that point begins to appear to us. We each will have that opportunity sooner than we think. I love the anecdote of the Ven. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche speaking to a group, when his opening words were: "Some of us here will die soon, the rest a little later."

Yet seeing the "true nature" of the mind, due to our endless ignoring of it, is not a walk in the park. Most are confronted with it with no training or preparation.

The Tibetans use the analogy that this "true nature" appears to us in the form of various brilliant colored lights – stark to stunning in their effect. Depending upon our particular habit of ignorance, these lights can appear to us as very, very bright, blinding us with their brilliance, and sending us fleeing to the shadow of rebirth, or these lights can be seen and recognized as what they actually are, the true nature of our mind - something that has always been there with us.

The Mind's True Nature

In summary: right after death we have a chance to see the actual nature of our mind, but the shock of the difference between what we habitually are used to seeing while living and our mind's true nature may be more than we can stand, frightening us so that we turn away.

Using a metaphor: it is said that the brilliance of this sudden illumination is so very great, so stark, that we cannot easily recognize it as the truth that it is, and instead turn away from it,

seeking out some place that is darker and more familiar to us, like our age-old ignorance once again. We agree to forget what we find too hard to look right at. We have never become familiar with the true nature of the mind during life.

In that brief moment, we can, instead of recognizing that brightness as our own true nature, turn downward and choose yet another lifetime of continued ignorance, and thus: rebirth and the many forms of suffering. And there is a kicker. There is no guarantee that we will merit another lifetime in human form; we can easily fall into a lower birth such as an animal or whatever, thus further complicating things. And that is an understatement. The state of our own mind and karma determines this.

I am very much generalizing here, so please don't forget that this is just a metaphor. The point here is that instead of awakening from our ignorance, after all this time, we can fall right back into it. In fact, we run to it and choose it rather than wake up to the truth.

However, if we can stand the shock of looking at the truth, the utter brilliance of it, then instead of falling back into ignorance, another birth and lifetime, we have the opportunity to hold that realization and become enlightened enough to not seek a rebirth at all, but remain in a realized state. Each of us has this chance of realization soon after the moment of death. This fact and opportunity is very important to Tibetan Buddhists.

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I apologize that this particular blog is so didactic and explanatory. It is my hope that understanding a little about how the Tibetans approach the bardo state will be useful for some of you.

Many Buddhists have a dilemma that is worth understanding. On the one hand, we follow the dharma path to awareness and enlightenment as taught to us by the historical Buddha. However, we are not yet enlightened; we are not there yet, which suggests that our practice is to-be-continued in another life.

In order to continue our practice, we actually have to merit another human rebirth, and the Buddhists suggest that the human realm is the best realm to practice dharma. However, just because we are human now does not guarantee that we will achieve a human birth in our next life. That depends on what we do in this life. We could very easily blow this lifetime's opportunity and, due to our karma, be reborn as an animal or even something lower (or higher). Neither the lower realms nor the higher realms are conducive to dharma practice and enlightenment. Do you see the problem? Let me explain.

In a perfect world, the teachings of the Buddha, if we follow them and practice them should theoretically insure that if we cannot reach enlightenment in this life, we can continue on the

dharma path in our next life, provided we merit and achieve another human rebirth. But the Buddha's teachings include being reborn in many realms, some of which could last a very, very long time. Naturally, we assume that should we not achieve enlightenment in this life (very likely for most), we will surely make real progress in our next.... human life. The rub is that there is no guarantee we will have another opportunity like this human life any time soon. Hmmm.

So, although we are practicing dharma, it is understandable that a certain amount of our attention may be paid as how to insure a human rebirth next lifetime. In other words, we don't have undivided attention in our dharma practice, but rather divided attention. We will get to this issue later on. With this concern in mind, let's continue looking at the bardo experience.

A significant amount of all Buddhist meditation practices are done to better prepare the mind of each of us for that singular moment of death and the coming face-to-face with the true nature of our own mind. And here is a crucial point: we don't have to wait until we die to begin recognizing the true nature of our mind. We can do it right here in this lifetime, now. Of course, that is just what the Buddha did.

As I like to say, "We can go to meet our maker." We can train for this coming after-death experience. And that is what many forms of meditation are all about or lead to - recognizing the true nature of the mind. All that remains is for us to take steps to learn how to do this, which is what meditation practice is all about.

In fact, the closer we can come to recognizing the true nature of our mind in this, our waking life, the greater chance we have of recognizing that same nature in the after-death state, thus achieving a more enlightened state, one in which we see clearly ourselves and can begin to benefit others, as well.

With true mind recognition, we won't turn away into a darker place (a womb, for example), but will walk directly on and embrace the light and realize our mind's true nature from that point forward. As for what happens then, this would require a whole book and I am not aware enough to even write it. I still have lots of questions myself and am trying to explain some of this to readers so we can discuss it.

And I should point out that this kind of after-death experience does not seem restricted just to the Tibetan Buddhists. The Buddhist are very quick to say that these after-death experiences, just as they are described in the Tibetan Book of the Dead, will appear to all of us, regardless of religious upbringing - Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and so on. It is not just a "Buddhist" thing.

Pure Land Buddhism

Earlier I mentioned how the attention of a dharma practitioner can be divided between the historical dharma of the Buddha, and awakening at the time of death, as well as a concern for being reborn in our next life as a human. It is a little more complicated than that, so here goes.

In many Asian countries, there is what amounts to a cult of devotees who are practicing the meditation techniques that we have been mentioning here, and who want to achieve liberation at the moment they enter the bardo, and by that realization to thereby skip the bardo states (described) above and go straight on to being a realized being at one level or another. This is the principal concern of what is called the Pure Land School of Buddhism, and I need to at least introduce you to this concept of the pure lands or Buddha fields. It will help to explain this whole movement.

In brief, a Buddha field or "pure land" is a realm spontaneously produced by the sheer merit of a Buddha achieving enlightenment, a place where enlightened beings can go and congregate. There are a great many Buddha fields, and it is considered very advantageous for each of us to ultimately get there, a place where we can most benefit ourselves and also other sentient beings. Sounds a lot like heaven, doesn't it?

That being said, there is one Buddha field that is traditionally the easiest to gain entry into. Why it is easy is a long story, but in brief, one particular Buddha (Amitabha) aspired deeply that his Buddha field be accessible to almost anyone who aspired to reach it. And so it is.

Amitabha's Buddha Field

Even ordinary people who aspire to this realm can obtain it. This particular Buddha field is called in Sanskrit "Sukavati" and in Tibetan "Dewa-chen." It is (for the reasons mentioned above) the most popular Buddha field, because any of us can aspire to go there and actually have a chance of achieving that goal, even if we are not fully realized or enlightened right now. Otherwise, it can take many lifetimes, perhaps even entire kalpas (an endlessly long time) to become enlightened and reach one of the Buddha fields.

By going to a Buddha field, we cease to take births, and instead are enlightened and can be of great help to all other beings. This form of Buddhism that wants to reach Dewachen (Sukavati) is called "Pure Land Buddhism," and it is (in one form or another) immensely popular in China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and of course Tibet.

By understanding the idea of Dewachen, perhaps you can begin to see the great concern with the bardo states, in particular why the 'Bardo of Becoming', the one we encounter soon after dying, is so important to Buddhists. It is at this point of death that, if we are mentally and spiritually prepared, we can recognize the true nature of our mind and pass directly into the Buddha field of Dewachen, bypassing the various bardos, and ceasing to be reborn. Nice work if you can get it.

I mentioned earlier that there can be two separate, but related, kinds of dharma practice going on here. On the one hand there is the traditional path to enlightenment that the Buddha pointed out, and on the other the more immediate need to do enough dharma practice this lifetime to either become enlightened in the bardo or at the very least to once again merit having a human

rebirth, and not be reborn in still lower realms. As you can see both paths are related, but also the worry to be liberated in the bardo right after death can take up a lot of the energy we might have used to attain total enlightenment just as Buddha did, gradually but as soon as possible. It is a kind of Catch-22.

As my teacher has often pointed out, we are (those of us living today) all of the souls who have never up to now, through all millennia, managed to stop ignoring the way things actually are long enough to become enlightened. We are, as he says, the stragglers, the hard cases, the dregs.

So, that is a brief account of the urgency to get to Dewachen, the nearest and most easily accessible Buddha field. And, since the main entrance to Dewachen is at the beginning of the bardo (shortly after death), this explains some of the concern with and study of the bardo. But what happens to those of us who can't get on board that train to Dewachen, and that is probably most of us?

Well, Dewachen aside, that is what all of the rest of the tradition of the bardo states is all about. If you do not make it to Dewachen, that is, if you turn away from the bright lights (if you do not recognize the true nature of the mind) and back into ignorance, then you enter the Bardo of Becoming, and eventually take another life, and not necessarily as a human being, as I mentioned earlier. This fact induces a certain urgency to practice.

This is not the place, and I am not the expert you need to properly describe in great detail the various bardo realms. I am only sharing what I understand of all this. I wish I were an expert and that all of us were enlightened, including me. Perhaps this is enough for now. I hope this has been understandable.