

THE AFTERLIFE

TIBETAN AND THEOSOPHICAL VIEWS

We will first watch two short videos:

The Tibetan Book of the Dead – The Great Liberation (Intro): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u18ll1ZgwUE>

The Tibetan Book of the Dead: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_RSXRIHIEw



The Tibetan Book of the Dead, in its numerous English translations, is one of the best selling and most popular books in the genre of spirituality.

Sometimes students of Theosophy express favour, positivity, and endorsement for this scripture and imply that it is in harmony with the teachings of Theosophy as regards death, the afterlife, and rebirth. A number of those who praise and endorse the book have never actually read it, nor looked into its history and origins, but assume that since it is Tibetan and related to the subject of death, that it must therefore be more or less the same as what H. P. Blavatsky's Adept Teachers in Tibet and surrounding areas say and teach about the matter.

But this is not so. The Tibetan Book of the Dead not only presents a doctrine completely different and antithetical to that of the Masters and HPB but it also originates from a certain branch or school of Tibetan Buddhism to which they have very clearly expressed their opposition.

The Tibetan name for this book is "Bardo Thodol" which has been translated as meaning "The Book of Liberation upon Hearing in the Afterlife."

According to historians, it was written in approximately 800 A.D. by Padmasambhava, the mysterious Indian founder of the Nyingmapa School of Tibetan Buddhism, the original and oldest of the four main branches of Tibetan Buddhism. It is apparently based upon scenes and experiences which he saw in a vision. Padmasambhava is commonly attributed with having introduced Buddhism, originally an Indian religion, to the nation of Tibet. In fact, it had already been introduced but did not become widely accepted until Padmasambhava's efforts.

The form of Buddhism inculcated by Padmasambhava, whose devotees refer to him as “Guru Rimpoche,” is something profoundly different and at variance with the pure and noble teachings of Gautama Buddha. While no-one will argue that Padmasambhava possessed tremendous spiritual power, occult abilities, and mystical influence, he was – to put it simply – a tantric sorcerer. He is always described as having been frequently accompanied everywhere by one, two, or more women, who were his “tantric consorts,” with whom he engaged in various forms of sexual tantric practices. Theosophy does not deny that such practices can be powerful but it strongly maintains that they are dangerous and that “sexual magic” is in fact black magic.

The Nyingmapa School is often described as being little more than the indigenous Bon (sometimes spelt Bhon) religion of Tibet with a thin veneer of Buddhism laid over the surface. It is imbued with sexual imagery and practice which can hardly be regarded as merely symbolic and allegorical. Padmasambhava apparently felt that for Buddhism to ever gain ground in Tibet it would have to compromise with the Bon religion of the natives.

As for the Bon, which subsequently introduced a few Buddhist terms and images into its own practices and iconography, HPB referred to it as “a degenerated remnant of the Chaldean mysteries of old, now a religion entirely based upon necromancy, sorcery and sooth-saying. The introduction of Buddha’s name in it means nothing,” (H. P. Blavatsky, “Reincarnations in Tibet”). Many of the Nyingmapa lamas and monks themselves place particular emphasis upon “necromancy, sorcery and sooth-saying.”

The term “Dugpa,” found in various places in the Theosophical literature, is usually employed as a generic term or synonym for any kind of black magician, Eastern or Western. “Their pernicious work is everywhere in our way,” wrote the Master K.H. They are also sometimes referred to as the “Brothers of the Shadow.” In its origins, “Dugpa” is a Tibetan word and initially referred specifically to the sorcerers and black magicians of the Bon and Nyingmapa sects, as explained in HPB’s “Reincarnations in Tibet” article. It is primarily they who are the “Red-capped Brothers of the Shadow” spoken of by the Mahatmas.

Theosophy does not endorse or speak positively of any of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism other than the Gelugpa, founded by Tsong Kha-pa, who is said to have lived from 1357-1419. “Gelugpa” literally means “Virtuous Ones” or “Models of Virtue” and they are also known as the Yellow Caps or Yellow Hats, in distinction to the three older schools, which use only the colours red and black (not spiritual colours at all, unlike yellow, which was the original colour of the Buddhists’ robes in India) in their headwear. It is to the Gelugpa School that both the Dalai Lamas and Panchen Lamas belong.

Despite the fact that extensive references to Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism, including its history and origins, can be found spread all throughout the writings of H. P. Blavatsky, Padmasambhava is significantly left entirely unmentioned, even though the Nyingmapas themselves are referred to. She mentions Santarakshita, who is commonly spoken of alongside Padmasambhava, but for whatever reason declines entirely to mention or name Padmasambhava himself. He is certainly not revered, honoured, or held in high regard by HPB and her Teachers.

Although the Masters and HPB identify themselves with the Gelugpas, it must be understood that they do not represent or belong to Gelugpa-ism as it is generally understood – for not long after the time of Tsong Kha-pa sexual tantra became a central part of Gelugpa doctrine and remains so to this day, being openly promoted by the Dalai Lama and many others, who also nowadays promote

the Book of the Dead and other Nyingmapa teachings – but rather its almost entirely unknown esoteric undercurrent.

For now though, having shown what Theosophy would consider the murky and unsavoury origins of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, we must move on to examining and contrasting it with the Theosophical teaching on the same subject.

The term “Bardo” was actually first introduced to the West by Theosophy in the 1880s and not by W. Evans Wentz’s first publication in English of the “Bardo Thodol” in 1927. It literally means “between two” and refers to the period between death and rebirth or, in other words, the period between two lives. Both the “Bardo Thodol” and the Masters’ Esoteric Doctrine teach that there are three stages or sub-periods of the Bardo but this is where any similarity ends.

According to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Bardo state lasts seven weeks (49 days) for *everyone*. Far from being a peaceful, recuperative, or assimilative period of rest and bliss for the soul, it is more akin to a nightmare, with each of the “three bardos” being described in terms of a *test*. How one passes the tests determines whether he will be reborn (a) on Earth, as either a human, an animal, a demon, or a “hungry ghost,” (b) in a Heaven, or (c) in a terrifying hell.

The first of these three stages is called Chikhai Bardo, which is the actual moment of death, in which the individual finds himself facing a brilliant white light, like a tunnel of light, and then proceeds to enter into it. Having done so, he then finds himself upon the second stage of his journey, known as Chonyid Bardo, “The Bardo of Peaceful Deities and Wrathful Deities.” There he sees the great divine Buddha Vajrasattva and his consort Lochana blissfully engaged in sexual union. They, and other deities and celestial beings, begin to entice and tempt him. But the “Bardo Thodol” warns, “Do not be enticed by the soft light of the gods.” They may offer him advice and help but they may also pose a fatal trap. If he falls into this trap by succumbing to the seductions of the peaceful deities, he will be forced to encounter their opposite aspect, that of the wrathful deities.

After this, he comes face to face with the most intimidating figure of all – Yama, Lord of Death. Yama, frightful and fearsome, is waiting for him and proceeds to examine the deeds of the soul, weighing up his good deeds in the form of white pebbles and his evil deeds in the form of black pebbles. This is his positive Karma and his negative Karma.

If and when he manages to pass through the Chonyid Bardo, he emerges into the third stage, Sidpa Bardo, which leads to and results in the moment of rebirth. Padmasambhava’s sexual emphasis is prevalent throughout both the second and third bardos, since here in the Sidpa Bardo the soul finds itself completely surrounded by men and women engaged in passionate sexual intercourse. He has to choose which copulating couple he desires to be his future parents on Earth. Having decided, conception then occurs on the physical plane, at which moment the soul experiences a feeling of tremendous bliss, yet again akin to something sexual.

The next thing he knows he is again travelling through a tunnel but this time it is a dark tunnel with a glowing light at the end. The tunnel is the womb and the birth canal and the light is that which the newborn baby sees when it first opens its eyes.

As said, all of this reportedly occurs within exactly 49 days and the individual remains conscious, or at least almost so, all the way through from beginning to end. But while all this is going on, there are monks and lamas who are chanting the words of the “Bardo Thodol” every day back on the physical plane, so as to attempt to safely guide the soul through its difficult and dangerous journey.

They begin doing so almost as soon as the person has died and chant the first sections while seated next to the corpse, before it is taken away to be disposed of. They believe that the departed soul can hear them and thus be helped by the recited words of Padmasambhava.

What does Theosophy say? These are some extracts from letters written by the Master K.H.:

“The man may often appear dead. Yet from the last pulsation, from and between the last throbbing of his heart and the moment when the last spark of animal heat leaves the body – the *brain thinks* and the Ego lives over in those few brief seconds his whole life over again. Speak in whispers, ye, who assist at a death-bed and find yourselves in the solemn presence of Death. Especially have you to keep quiet just after Death has laid her clammy hand upon the body. Speak in whispers, I say, lest you disturb the quiet ripple of thought, and hinder the busy work of the Past casting on its reflection upon the Veil of the Future.”

“ “Bardo” is the period between death and rebirth – and may last from a few years to a kalpa. It is divided into three sub-periods (1) when the Ego delivered of its mortal coil enters into *Kama-Loka* [Tibetan: Yuh-Kai] (the abode of Elementaries); (2) when it enters into its “Gestation State”; (3) when it is reborn in the *Rupa-Loka* of Deva-Chan. Sub-period (1) may last from a few minutes to a *number* of years – the phrase “a few years” becoming puzzling and utterly worthless without a more complete explanation; Sub-period (2) is “very long”; as you say, longer sometimes than you may even imagine, yet proportionate to the *Ego’s* spiritual stamina; Sub-period (3) lasts in proportion to the good KARMA, after which the *monad* is again reincarnated.”

“When man dies, his “Soul” (fifth prin[ciple].) becomes unconscious and loses all remembrance of things internal as well as external. Whether his stay in Kama Loka has to last but a few moments, hours, days, weeks, months or years; whether he died a natural or a violent death; whether it occurred in his young age or old age, and, whether the Ego was good, bad, or indifferent – his consciousness leaves him as suddenly as the flame leaves the wick, when blown out. When life has retired from the last particle in the brain matter, his perceptive faculties become extinct forever, his spiritual powers of cogitation and volition – (all those faculties in short, which are neither inherent in, nor acquirable by organic matter) – for the time being.”

“Every just disembodied *four-fold entity* – whether it died a natural or violent death, from suicide or accident, mentally sane or insane, young or old, good, bad, or indifferent – loses at the instant of death all recollection, it is mentally – *annihilated*; it sleeps its akashic sleep in the Kama-loka. This state lasts from a few hours, (rarely less) days, weeks, months – sometimes to several years. All this according to the entity, to its mental status at the moment of death, to the character of its death, etc. That remembrance will return slowly and gradually toward the end of the gestation (to the entity or Ego), still more slowly but far more imperfectly and *incompletely* to the *shell*, and *fully* to the Ego at the moment of its entrance into the Devachan.”

“Reviving consciousness begins after the struggle in Kama-Loka at the door of devachan, and only *after* the “gestation period”.”

HPB wrote: “The spirit is dazed after death and falls very soon into what we call “*pre-devachanic* unconsciousness”.” (“The Key to Theosophy” p. 151)

What are Kama Loka and Devachan?

Theosophy states that after physical death, we enter unconsciously into Kama Loka, which is the psychic atmosphere or “astral plane” surrounding and to some extent interpenetrating the physical plane.

How long we will remain there can be determined by various factors but primarily by the degree of sensuality and material attraction that characterised the life just lived. What takes place there is the separation between our lower, sensual, material nature and our higher and more spiritual nature.

The lower, sensual, more material side of our nature cannot enter into the heaven state and so it has to be cast off here in the intermediate state of Kama Loka. The more spiritually and less materially and sensually inclined and oriented, the swifter this will happen. It may only take a matter of minutes or may take several hours, days, weeks, months – or, less frequently, even several years – depending on the preponderance of the lower nature over the higher.

We will not usually be conscious while all this is going on. When the break between the lower and the higher eventually occurs, this is known figuratively speaking as the “second death.”

This will inevitably cause further shock to the soul and so we will then enter into what is known as the “gestation state,” a period and state of profound rest and inner recuperation, akin to the deepest sleep we can presently imagine. We cannot speculate as to how long this might last for but in some cases it is far longer than we might think.

The real “I” will eventually emerge from the gestation state and enter into the heaven state which Theosophy calls Devachan, a Tibetan term meaning “abode of the gods.” Consciousness returns at the door of Devachan. It is not a location or a plane but a state. It is actually quite different from the popular religious conceptions of Heaven.

For a start, everyone has their own personal Devachanic state and each of us creates it for ourselves unwittingly out of our own consciousness. It is the exact representation and experience of what we had believed, hoped, and expected Heaven to be like while we were still alive on earth.

It is a perfect state of the utmost bliss, peace, and joy. There is not even the faintest shadow, hint, or trace of sorrow, disappointment, suffering, or pain there. Everyone and everything we had hoped to be there *will* be there because it is our own mental creation. In Devachan there is no memory or awareness of having died or even of there being such a thing as death. Bliss, peace, and joy prevails unflinching throughout. Being a temporary, subjective, and self-created experience, it is really a type of dream but a dream as vivid, tangible, and well defined as life on earth.

Seemingly, none of the many accounts which exist today of Near Death Experiences and past life recollections of “Heaven” bear any similarity to the tests, trials, temptations, and torments so vividly portrayed and described in the Tibetan Book of the Dead. The tunnel of bright white light seems to be the only thing they have in common. It may be possible, of course, that those who *believe* what the “Bardo Thodol” says will experience something like that after death but this only serves to reinforce the Theosophical teaching that after death one experiences exactly what one *expected* to experience.

In opposition to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, Theosophy also teaches that:

- (1) A human being can only be reincarnated as a human being and only on the Earth.
- (2) We cannot consciously choose our own parents, family, or place or time of birth – “He does not ask to be born, nor can he choose the parents that will give him life,” (HPB, “The Key to Theosophy”

p. 139) – since our future parents and other related matters are determined for us by our own Karma, i.e. by causes we have previously set in motion during Earth life.

(3) During the Bardo, the soul cannot be contacted or communicated with by those left behind on the physical plane, and

(4) The length of time between death and rebirth varies for each individual and in almost every case would be much longer than a mere 49 days.

“How long does the incarnating Ego remain in the Devachanic state? This, we are taught, depends on the degree of spirituality and the merit or demerit of the last incarnation.” So says HPB on p. 145 of *“The Key to Theosophy,”* whilst William Q. Judge reminds us in *“The Ocean of Theosophy”* (p. 77) that *“It must be borne in mind that each ego for itself varies the length of stay in the post-mortem states. They do not reincarnate at the same interval, but come out of the state after death at different rates.”* But when it is said that we ourselves vary *“the length of stay”* in those states, this does not mean that we do so consciously, but rather that those states of the Bardo are Karmic effects, productions arising from the nature and character of our actions and thoughts during the lifetime just ended.

The duration of our stay in Devachan will be in exact accordance with the amount and force of the good or positive Karma that we accrued during the preceding lifetime. This is what sustains and prolongs our Devachanic experience. This will naturally vary greatly from person to person. For one, Devachan may last 1,000 years or even longer. Alternatively it may perhaps last several hundred years or just several decades. Some people return to earth life after just a few years, primarily if the attraction for physical and material existence is a strong force within their soul.

Either way, our Devachanic state will eventually begin to fade out and draw to a close, coinciding with the process of the reincarnation of our soul, from conception, through pregnancy, and finally culminating in our rebirth on the physical plane.

We will then have dropped and discarded forever the personality and persona of the previous lifetime and will be embarking upon a new lifetime, incarnated *in, through, and as* a brand new persona, shaped and determined by our own past Karma. And so the journey of ongoing inner evolution and unfoldment continues.

Although Theosophists have deep and sincere sympathy and support for the Tibetan people in their sufferings and struggles against tyrannical injustice, we do not go along with the naive but all too prevalent idea that everything that comes from Tibet is automatically good, true, and wonderful, just because of its Tibetan-ness. Similarly, although we emphasise and praise the spirituality, civilisation, and glorious cultural and religious heritage of India and her people, we are careful not to fall into the trap of *“India worship”* and are well aware that that great nation is currently in a very sad state of spiritual degradation and decline.

Regarding the Tibetan Book of the Dead, it may be argued that it is to be understood symbolically and esoterically, perhaps as a guide to initiation, and that the number 49 – admittedly a very significant number esoterically – may perhaps refer in some highly obscure and veiled way to the seven sub-principles of each of the seven principles and seven sub-planes of each of the seven planes spoken of in the Theosophical teachings and collectively referred to therein as the 49 Fires. But this celebrated scripture is read and understood *literally*, by both Tibetans and others, and

whatever possible esoteric meaning may be embedded within it would seem rather questionable anyway, considering its origin and authorship.

In fairness to Walter Evans Wentz, the first translator into English of the “Bardo Thodol,” it must be mentioned that he was a keen admirer of the work and teachings of H. P. Blavatsky and always spoke highly of her. He quoted excerpts from her book “The Voice of the Silence” in his own book entitled “Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines.” He also said that “The late Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup was of opinion that, despite the adverse criticisms directed against H. P. Blavatsky’s works, there is adequate internal evidence in them of their author’s intimate acquaintance with the higher lamaistic teachings, into which she claimed to have been initiated.”

Yet the “higher lamaistic teachings” into which HPB had been initiated were far removed from the Tibetan Book of the Dead and anything of a Nyingma nature.

Discrimination and discernment must always be used by those who seek after Truth. Just because something is “spiritual” it does not necessarily mean that it is something good and worthy of pursuit. It is not “unspiritual,” intolerant, or closed-minded to criticise and warn against certain teachings, philosophies, and practices. On the contrary, Theosophists are compelled, particularly in articles written by HPB such as “On Pseudo-Theosophy,” to do precisely this, if they would truly be of benefit and service to their fellow man, rather than hold to the “everything’s good, everything’s wonderful” attitude which characterises so many spiritual movements today, although of course the way in which this is done is of prime importance.

The Theosophical teaching regarding what happens when we die must become far better known than it currently is. When that happens, it will be found that it answers and explains so much. For this purpose a vast collection of quotations on the subject have been assembled into chronological order in the handout “When We Die” (available free of charge here at the Lodge and also on the website at <https://www.theosophy-ult.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/when-we-die-theosophy.pdf>) and all who are interested are invited to read and study it carefully.

Theosophy itself cannot be understood if we lack a clear understanding of what it has to say on this all-important subject, for as HPB stated in “The Key to Theosophy” (p. 116): “I must tell you one thing; and this is that unless you have studied thoroughly well the separate functions assigned to all the human “principles” and the state of all these *after death*, you will hardly realize our Eastern philosophy.”

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DEVOTIONAL READING

From "The Voice of the Silence" (p. 31, original 1889 edition) translated by H. P. Blavatsky from the Book of the Golden Precepts:

"Thy shadows live and vanish; that which in thee shall live for ever, that which in thee *knows*, for it is knowledge, is not of fleeing life: it is the man that was, that is, and will be, for whom the hour shall never strike."

From the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore:

The day will come
When the sight of this earth will be lost
I will take my leave in silence
As the stars look on

I know the sun will rise again
The hours will still bring pleasure and pain
In heaving waves.

When I think of the end, time crumbles
I see by the light of death
That the lowliest existence is rare
And the worst moments are precious

What I longed for will be set aside
The things I pursued in vain —
Let them pass
Let me turn
To things I overlooked
And carelessly threw away
To possess them truly until they are mine

As the stars look on.

~

From time to time I feel the moment for travel has come.

On the day of leaving, cast a veil
of humble sunset-glaze.
Let the time to leave
be quiet, still. Let no pompous memorials
build the hypnosis of grieving.
Let the lines of trees by the departure door
bestow the tranquil chanting of earth
on quiet heaps of leaves.
Let night's soundless blessing slowly descend,
iridescent offerings of the seven stars.

~

The first day's sun
questioned
the new appearance of being —
Who are you?
There was no answer.

Years went by.
Day's last sun
asked the last question from the shores of the west
in the soundless evening —
Who are you?
There was no answer.