

## **Merging With The True Self While Dying**

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### **The Tibetan Book of the Dead**

I would like to speak a little about the 'Tibetan Book of the Dead'. The 'Tibetan Book of the Dead' is connected to the belief that is held in the Himalayas and generally in the East that the mind continues after death.

The moment of death is a crucial moment of our life. When we die all functions of the senses and the respiration cease, but the mind and the subtle energies that serve as its mount remain in the body for sometime. It is during that time that one experiences the luminous clarity that is the nature of the mind.

For ordinary people that moment of seeing the luminous clarity can be very short, like a snap of the fingers and the experience passes almost unnoticed. But for one who in life trained in the recognition and in remaining in that luminous clarity which is the nature of our ordinary mind, that moment can last days and the experience is crucial.

That is why the teachings related to 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead' speak about four *bardo* or intermediate states. The first intermediate state is our life itself, and if we want the moment of death to become really meaningful, we must not live like animals, only working for food, house and wealth.



Two wrathful Herukas, visions of the bardo from the Chenrezig Lhakhang at Lamayuru monastery in Ladakh.

We have to find the real purpose of our life. In Dzogchen, the highest teaching that we find in Tibetan Buddhism, it is said that the purpose of our life is to discover our true nature. That true nature is the very nature of the mind which is always with us, and that manifests nakedly at the time of death in all its luminosity.

**The Nature of the Mind**

When we say luminosity we do not really mean the appearance of a light. We are talking about the nature of the mind that has no form, no color, and whose nature is not easily expressible in words. We have mind and the nature of the mind, and just like fire and the nature of fire, these are not the same, yet not completely different.

Mind refers to the faculty I use, for example, now when I am talking, in order to coordinate some memories I have heard of the teaching. Mind is what you use when you try to understand what I am saying. But that mind is somewhat limited, it is judgement, it depends on the senses, on time and space.



passed there is this blue sky that appears which is like the nature of our mind. In truth, the blue sky is always there even if hidden by clouds. The nature of our mind never changes, regardless of what we do. It is always the same.

Usually people who practice a spiritual path think that in this way their mind will somehow transform and become different: this is not true. Their nature of the mind is always the same. If they think they are progressing along a path it just means that they have the concept of progressing. Actually there is nothing like that.

In our selves there is a kind of space, luminous, that has always been there. A space that as it was it will be, that does not improve nor get worse. In Dzogchen this space is called 'nature of the mind'.

It is unchanging and yet, the nature of our mind is not like a stone: we have feelings, thoughts, and emotions. But when we don't recognize the space that never changes within ourselves, we become dominated by the clouds of mind – feelings, thoughts and emotions.

During the intermediate state of life, a Dzogchen practitioner learns how to recognize, become familiar with and abide in that space. If we are able to be in that, we can have thoughts, feelings etc., but instead of being dominated by them we can use them. Therefore our life is very important, very precious, for during life we have the opportunity to approach the understanding of the nature of our mind, of what we really are.

### **The Luminous Clarity of Death**

But when we die what happens? It is almost like falling asleep. When we fall asleep our sense consciousnesses withdraw, and for a while even our mental consciousness doesn't function: this is a kind of non-conceptual state.

The same thing happens when we die: all the functions of our senses, our thoughts and emotions dissolve and we have the experience of that nature of mind, clear like a sky free from any clouds. Those who, in life, trained to become familiar with this sky-like space within themselves, now, at the time of death will meet the nature of mind, in its fullest and without any obstructions.

If one does not have that familiarity, having practiced in the life the transference of consciousness, there is, however, the possibility to transfer one's consciousness to a pure land where one can continue one's quest for realization. If even this is not possible, an experienced master can be called in to conduct a rite for the transference of consciousness of the deceased.



Buddha Aksobhya yab yum.

What happens when we nakedly recognize the nature of mind that appears to us at that moment? We discover our ground or being, what we really are. In the Dzogchen system this is called enlightenment. Enlightenment is not something that we attain after following a spiritual path, creating merits and developing wisdom. Enlightenment is our own real nature. And if we have trained in life, and we have not recognized that nature fully, we have the possibility to realize it very much at the time of death. This is the highest form of transference of consciousness, in which the consciousness is not going anywhere but remains in its own natural state of enlightenment.

To help the person to recognize the luminous clarity that appears as his or her own nature, a

passage of 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead' is read to the deceased, in order to help him to recollect what he practiced in life: this passage is a sort of pointing out the nature of mind.

In the Himalayan regions there is the custom of leaving the body of the dead person for three days without moving it because that person, if he or she is a spiritual practitioner, may be in the state of the luminous clarity. Some practitioners may stay longer in that state, 8 days, 10 days, or even a month. The body is clinically dead but the mind is still there and there are signs of this because the body does not decay, it remains seated, the head is still straight and the complexion clear.

For example a few years ago, when I was living in Darjeeling (India) working on translations, an old monk from the Drukpa Kagyu tradition helped me to understand details of the biography of Shakya Shri, a famous lama of the past. After a year or so the monk died. When I came to know that he had passed away, I went to give my condolences at the monastery where he lived. The monks had arranged his body in the middle of the temple and kept it there for eight days. His body was exhibited so that everyone could see him. He was dead but his complexion was fair as if still alive, and there were no signs of degeneration of the body. When I visited his dead body, I saw rainbows that from the sky landed exactly over the house where his body was displayed,

There are also other signs indicating that the deceased is in a state of luminous clarity, such as a slight heat in the region of the heart, etc. Then, when the head droops, liquid comes out of the nose, and the complexion of the face changes, these are signs that the mind has left the body.

When the body of a good practitioner is cremated many signs of his or her realization can manifest. There can be external signs in the environment like rainbows, colored clouds, strange lights appearing in the sky, etc., and these signs are described in detail in some Dzogchen scriptures. Moreover, at the cremation, among the ashes there may appear many relics of different colors, originating from different parts of the body, and also a kind of red powder called *sindura*.

I remember that some years ago I was in Tashi Jong, a place in India where a wonderful yogin had passed away. Raimondo Bultrini, a journalist friend of mine, and I went by that monastery and the late Dorzong Rinpoche, the lama in charge of the monastery, showed us the relics of that yogin. These were very small, perhaps 1 mm in diameter, in nice colors like turquoise and red. He gave us a magnifying glass so that we could see them. When we looked through the glass we saw that they were perfectly formed miniature conch shells. Sometimes letters may appear or the form of letters or deities on the bones left after the cremation. So all of these signs indicate that a person has achieved a high level of realization.

### **Intermediate State of Reality**

For one who, at the moment of death, recognizes his or her own real nature there is no intermediate state afterwards. But if a person does not have that understanding, after the experience of the luminous clarity he becomes unconscious for three and a half days and when he

wakes up from this state he enters what is called the intermediate state of reality.

This is the intermediate state in which the real nature of the mind manifests fully and nakedly. During this intermediate state, our usual judgment, the thinking mind, is not active so the visions we have come directly from the pure potential of the nature of our own mind.

Therefore, if in life we have been introduced to the practice of the peaceful and wrathful deities, such visions can appear to us in the intermediate state. But of course, these visions do not appear to everyone, even those Tibetans who have not received that type of introduction, explanations and so forth, will not have these visions.



First image of srid pa bar do. The inscriptions read: 'Many particular appearances arise: fierce winds, karmic flesheaters and cannibals brandishing many weapons, being followed by wild beast from the back, a very thick darkness in the front, hail storms, mountains collapsing, floods, blizzards, fire spreading, great winds, falling from a white, a black and a red mountain.

However, everybody will hear thundering sound and see blazing lights, which are the manifestation of the very nature of reality. If we have been introduced to the principle that things manifests from our real nature through sound, light and rays, when we have these experiences we will not be startled or afraid, but recognize them as one's energy.

And if we were introduced to the principle of peaceful and wrathful deities during our life, then in the intermediate state of reality we will recognize them as oneself and merging with that, attain realization at that time.

Now I want to explain a little what these deities are. First of all they are not something unrelated to ourselves: they represent our psychophysical makeup, that is, the various aspects of our body and mind, everything that constitutes our person. When we speak of the peaceful deities mainly we are talking about the five Dhyani Buddhas that represent our own psychophysical constituents. For example, there is Vairochana, white, that represents our body. Akshobhya, blue, that represents our consciousness. Ratnasambhava, yellow, that represents our feelings – pleasure, pain etc. Amitabha, which represents our mental recognition of things. Amoghasiddhi, which represents our volitions. Their female counterparts instead symbolize the elements of our body – earth, water and so forth.

The Five Buddhas also represent our emotions, the pure aspect of these emotions. Generally in Buddhism emotions are considered to be like poisons. Of course, if we have a low capacity this may be true, but if we have the ability to recognize the nature of our own mind, emotions can be helpful on the path to self-realization.

Also the nature of our mind it is not mere empty space, a nothingness; it is also energy, potentiality of perceiving and appearing as anything whatsoever; these two aspects of calm emptiness and moving energy, are the very principle connected to the peaceful and wrathful deities, respectively.

So when we wake up from the unconscious state that follows the experience of the luminous clarity in the intermediate state of death, on the first day we have a vision of Vairochana and his entourage. Vairochana represents the pure aspect of ignorance as the wisdom of the true nature of reality. As for all the other four wisdoms, we should know that the wisdom of the true nature of reality is not the wisdom of some enlightened being separate from us, but a facet of the nature of our own mind.

At that time a bright light appears which symbolizes that wisdom which comes from the heart of Vairochana and reaches our heart. The light that symbolizes the wisdom of Vairochana is like a rope that connects us to that vision in front of us which represents Vairochana's wisdom, a bridge to our true Self. But at the same time we have another light that reaches our heart. This is the dim white light of the world of celestial beings and is like a path which has been created by our own habitual tendencies that we accumulated during our life.

For example, if we had a lot of ignorance, this habitual tendency becomes the path that leads to an existence in the future that bears the same aspect. Maybe we will become a celestial being who, out of ignorance, spends its life completely distracted by pleasure. So we have these two possibilities – either we recognize the light of wisdom that is our own wisdom or we go for a light that is a path that has been created by our habitual tendencies and will lead to another conditioned and repetitive form of life.



The assembly of the fifty-eight wrathful deities with their entourage.

On the second day Akshobya appears, a blue Buddha which represents the pure aspect of anger as the mirror like wisdom.

On the third day there is a vision of Ratnasambhava which symbolizes the pure aspect of pride which is the wisdom of sameness.

On the fourth we have the vision of Amitabha which symbolizes discernment and the pure aspect of attachment which is the wisdom of discernment.

On the fifth day there is the vision of Amoghasiddhi which symbolizes the pure aspect of jealousy, the wisdom which accomplishes all actions.

So on each day we have a light of wisdom from the heart of a Dhyani Buddha that reaches our heart as well as a faint light from one of the realms of existence. The bright lights are those of wisdom and the faint lights those of the realms of existence. When our emotions, such as attachment, have piled up throughout our life, like a pile of cow dung, when we die, their potential becomes our vision or life in the future.

We have six main emotions corresponding to the six realms of existence: ignorance-celestial realm; jealousy-realm of the titans; anger-hell realm; pride-human realm; attachment-realm of tormented spirits; and all different kinds of emotions-animal realm. This is the particular association emotions- realms that we find in 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead'.

For example, if we accumulate enough anger in our life, at the moment of death we enter a vision of hell, so this is what is meant by taking birth as a hell being. Some people may ask whether this

vision of hell is real or not. It is real, just as every subjective perception and vision is real for oneself. Yet hell does not exist anywhere outside one's vision. However, other beings who have the same *karmamay* share that vision, and for that reason the realms of existence are basically visions created by the shared collective *karmaof* beings.

When the bright lights of the wisdoms of the five Dhyani Buddhas appear together with the faint lights of the six realms of existence, we have the choice to let ourselves be taken by the light of wisdom or by the light of a realm of existence. But of course, we are dead and the habitual tendencies we created in life may influence this choice. Thus reading the instructions of 'The Book of the Dead' works as a reminder for the deceased to follow the light of wisdom.

Thus, on the first day of the intermediate state of reality the instructions of 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead' read, "From the centre of the universe appears Vairochana, white, from his heart the light of wisdom comes towards your heart, but there is also another light from the celestial realm created by your habitual tendencies. Don't go after the light of the celestial realms but follow the light of wisdom." If, listening to the instructions, the deceased follows the light of wisdom, he or she will merge with Vairochana.



Elio Guarisco

This does not mean that the person will merge with a statue or a painting, or with another being which is different from himself, but with aspects of himself that manifest outside. Realizing that whatever vision we see outside, is in reality ourselves, we come back to the original ground of being which has always been enlightened before the dualistic vision of subject and object emerged from it. We overcome the sense of duality of us being the observer and the world the observed. We

realize that everything that appears, all the universe, is in reality our own self.

If we were to realize this in life we would know that, as Tilopa, a famous Indian *siddha*, said: "Vision is not a problem. Clinging to the vision in dualistic terms is the problem." So it doesn't matter whether we have good or bad visions, that is fine. But if we cling to them, it means that we see something different from ourselves, and this is a deception.

On the sixth day of the intermediate state of reality the wisdom of the five Dhyani Buddhas manifests simultaneously from the hearts of the Rigdzin or awareness holders, together with the faint light of the animal realms.

Thus each day, when a different peaceful deity appears we have the possibility to attain freedom from dualism. If this does not occur, the same deities will manifest to us in wrathful forms, more difficult to recognize as our own self-manifestations if we have not been familiar with them during our lifetime. These wrathful deities inspire fear. Compared to their huge bodies, we are like small insects in front of their feet. If that deity moves a toe we will be squashed like a small ant.

### **The Words of the Book of the Dead as a Reminder**

On each day of the post mortem state a part of the 'Tibetan Book of the Dead' is read to the deceased so that he can recognize the visions that appear to him or her.

At this point, we use the instructions of 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead' which is especially related to the post mortem state. The post mortem state is also explained in classic Buddhism, but in the tantra the explanations are more extensive, and for some reason became crucial and very detailed in the Dzogchen teaching.

The 'Tibetan Book of the Dead' belongs to a particular tradition which in Tibet is known as the *terma* tradition in which some teachers discover scriptures, objects, etc., that have been hidden for a long time in rocks, mountains, temples etc. Sometimes these teachings are not material objects that are discovered in the outer environment but revelations that come to a person, in dreams or the waking state.

In the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism they say that these kinds of revelations are connected to the original teachings of Padmasambhava, the master who brought Buddhism to Tibet. The guidance and instructions contained in 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead' are considered to be teachings of Padmasambhava.

The book was discovered in the 14th century by Karma Lingpa when he was a fifteen-year old boy in the mountains in Tibet. Its teachings, which became widespread in Tibet, present specific instructions to guide the dying person to recognize what happens to him or her at the moment of death, to recognize the visions of the intermediate state of reality, and to assist him or her to

choose, if liberation has not been attained before, a favorable rebirth.

But the 'Tibetan Book of the Dead' gives instructions to the dead person – “Now, such and such wrathful deity, which is such and such color, with such and such face, holding such and such implements, etc., will manifest to you. Don't be afraid! That deity is issuing from your own mind. Again you have a possibility to recognize this. Again you have a possibility to rejoin with your original ground of being”.

Thus, if we have had introduction to and are familiar with those deities during our life, 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead' can be an important tool to re-awaken recognition in the deceased. If we did not develop such familiarity during our life, recognition becomes difficult.



The inscription reads: 'On the seventh day from the pure land of Khechara, the Vidyadhara deities come to meet [the deceased]. From the Vidyadharas appear the five consorts and around them, a

numberless assembly of dakinis appears: those from the cemeteries, those of the four families, those of the three places, those of the twenty-four sacred places, along with male and female warriors, protectors and guardians.' Each Vidyadhara is identified by an inscription: rNam par smin pa'i rig 'dzin, Sa la gnas pa'i rig 'dzin, Tshe la dbang ba'i rig'dzin, Phyang rgya chen po'i rig 'dzin, Lhun gyis grub pa'i rig-'dzin. A five-coloured light of co-emergent pristine cognition (Lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes) emanates from the heart of each Vidyadhara and reaches the heart of the deceased, together with the green dull light of the animal realm (dud 'gro'i 'od ljang-khu).

### **Intermediate State of Rebirth**

When the intermediate state of reality ends we enter the intermediate state of rebirth, which means that we are on the path to take another body. During that time, the imprints of our past actions all come back to influence us, like clouds amassing in the sky. Now, it is more difficult to have recognition of our real nature. Sometimes we may have the vision of a crowd of angry people that chase us from behind with war cries trying to catch and kill us, like in a war and when, in fear, we run away, we enter darkness, or a hurricane, snow blizzard, or hail. Wanting to escape from this suffering the desire for another body and another existence grows.

At this point the many instructions in 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead' can help the person first of all not to take rebirth and then if he has to, to choose a good one. In fact at that point, while running away from various sufferings the deceased has visions of his future parents in sexual intercourse and wants to enter into the midst of their union. If he does, he is reborn. He may be reborn as a human, but if they were two dogs having sexual relations he may wake up as a small dog, perhaps as a pet in a nice house or as a dog abandoned on a street in India.

Moreover, the 'Tibetan Book of the Dead' instructs the deceased on the signs that he or she should follow or not. These are signs that indicate the realm or the continent in this world where he may be born. These instructions will help the deceased to find rebirth in a favourable place where he can continue the path of self-realization he or she started in the previous life.

The main crucial message of 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead' is connected to recognizing the vision you have as your own self and that is why this teaching is very much connected to Dzogchen and in particular to *thogal* practice.

Thus the 'Tibetan Book of the Dead' it is not just a fabulous book to read, but a reminder of the need to apply and practice the teachings in life so that one will be prepared to face the moment of death and the after death.

