The Bardo Teachings of Tibetan Buddhism and their Promise of Liberation from the Cycle of Birth and Death

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Some minor changes and additions have been made to the original manuscript.

For many years, I have been offering courses and workshops on Buddhist perspectives, teachings, and meditation methods suitable for gaining a deeper understanding of dying and for preparing oneself philosophically, spiritually, and meditatively for one's own death, or for accompanying dying people with mindfulness and compassion.

In my life, a copy of the Tibetan Book of the Dead[1] was the first Buddhist text I came across, at the age of 19. Then, not long after, I was fortunate enough to hear the Bardo teachings—the Tibetan Buddhist instructions on the intermediate states of life and death, including the interval between physical death and rebirth—directly from the mouths of ancient masters of Tibetan Buddhism. That was in the late 1970s.

However, it wasn't until a friend's death in 1986 that I first came into direct contact with the application of such teachings and meditations. Although I was already a bit familiar with the Bardo teachings on the dying process and the afterlife, and although even a renowned Tibetan lama, Kyabje Tenga Rinpoche, performed a powerful ritual directly on my friend's body just hours after his last breath, this marked the beginning of a learning process in which I realized that theory, or rather the ancient teachings, are not so easily reconciled with the direct experience of dying.

The Dying Process in Western Countries

Since the 1990s, a broader movement has emerged in which people well-versed in the teachings of the Bardo are exploring how these can be integrated into the practical care of people at the end of their lives and also been applied for one's own preparation for death.

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[1] W.Y. Evantz-Wentz: The Tibetan Book of the Dead

This involves, on the one hand, a deeper understanding of the traditional teachings, and on the other hand, the integration of experiences from the hospice movement and the psychology of aging and dying as it has developed in the Western context.

After all, in Western countries, most people do not die in a Buddhist culture or in a Buddhist meditation center, but rather in environments where people are hardly familiar with, and would not take seriously, perspectives such as those conveyed by the Bardo teachings.

The external circumstances in which I encountered dying friends were rarely conducive to a more precise application of the Bardo teachings, neither on the part of the dying person, who relied on these teachings and meditations, nor on the part of their companions.

The materialistic paradigm is very dominant, both in the external and internal lives of many people: in families, in hospitals, in nursing homes. The focus is primarily on the external, the superficial, the complaints of the ailing body, and leaving behind possessions. Furthermore, the separation from loved ones plays a significant role.

Often, at the end of life, everything revolves around the illness, for a long time around the hope of a cure or improvement through medical intervention, around personal and familial relationships, and not infrequently around inheritance and estates - right up until the very last moment. Relatives tend to confront the dying person with their personal concerns and convictions. Doctors and nurses are often insensitive, perhaps have little time, are themselves very busy, and are clumsy in fostering an atmosphere conducive to inner experience and the application of specific methods.

The Bardo teachings, however, refer to something internal, invisible, hidden: the inner spiritual experience that unfolds in silence behind all physical torment and pain, perhaps behind fainting and coma.

Worldwide, thanks to the development of the palliative care and hospice movement, there also exist some Buddhist institutions, such as the hospice service Horizont[2] of the Bodhicharya in Berlin, and the inpatient hospice at the Sukhavati Center for Spiritual Care in Bad Saarow[3], near Berlin, that attempt to give space to these aspects of the dying process as described in Buddhism[4].

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[2] There is a Buddhist hospice service in Berlin called “Hospizdienst Horizont” - https://hospiz-horizont.de/

[3] Near Berlin in the town of Bad Saarow there is a large Centre for Spiritual Care hosted by a Buddhist organization and named Sukhavati- https://www.sukhavati.eu/. It provides inpatient hospice facilities combined with meditation and spiritual practice. Ritual services are regularly carried out and Buddhist teachers come to visit.

[4] The former coordinator, Miriam Pokora, of “Hospizdienst Horizont” is now the organizer of the inpatient hospice of Sukhavati Spiritual Care Centre in Bad Saarow. She his my long-term colleague in the seminaries mentioned here.

Impermanence from a Buddhist Perspective

In my courses, my primary focus is on integrating the teachings I've received and studied with Tibetan meditation masters on how to contemplate the process of dying into providing end-of-life care. This is what their purpose has been for centuries, be it in an ancient pre-industrial and non-scientific culture.

Here, I try to make the Buddhist teachings and perspective on death and dying understandable, but I don't begin directly with the Bardo teachings.

These courses usually begin with a meditative reflection on the principle of impermanence, for example, using the "Five Daily Meditations" that the Buddha himself recommended to his students.

I have slightly modified the wording of these five thoughts compared to earlier versions:

1. It is in my nature, and in the nature of all living beings, that illness is always a possibility. No one can escape the possibility of becoming ill.

2. It is in my nature, and in the nature of all living beings, to age. No one can escape aging.

3. It is in my nature, and in the nature of all living beings, to die. No one can escape death.

4. It is in the nature of all encounters and all meetings that a separation must eventually occur.

5. At the moment of death, consciousness leaves the decaying body and can only take with it the impulses and traces of mental impressions accumulated through actions and habits. At the same time, the nature of the mind remains unchangingly clear, open, and luminous in its essence.

And furthermore: Everything that is born must and will also die.

These statements are very simple, almost self-explanatory, and yet they can be surprising, perhaps even shocking. Only the fifth requires some further explanation.

Traditionally, it reads:

"Owner and heir of my deeds I am,
born of my deeds, bound to them,
I have them as my refuge,
and the good and evil deeds that I do,
I shall inherit.”

What does all this mean and what would reflecting on it bring as a benefit?
In fact, these questions open the space to gradually begin the exposition of the Bardo teachings.

Everyone is born and dies. Life is an interval between these two events, and in the Bardo teachings (Tibetan: Bar-Do: intermediate states) of Tibetan Buddhism, this is called the "Bardo of being born and abiding" (Tibetan: Kye-Ne).

To us, the living, this period of time seems vast, as if it were the essence, the very thing that matters. But life arises from external and internal causes and conditions, from biological factors and mental impulses and currents. When sufficient conditions come together, life arises; when they are exhausted, pass away, or are destroyed, life passes away.

We live only temporarily. This is a completely natural process. The tragedy is not that we must die, but how we may have to do it. Therefore, the main point is to awaken a sense of the "naturalness" of dying.

It is important that this does not lead to ethical nihilism, which probably already happened at time of the Buddha when he made such statements. Some of his disciples apparently took their own lives because they misunderstood these teachings or interpreted them to mean that if everything is impermanent anyway, one might as well die right now.

The Buddha had to clarify this:
Regarding life as precious, not killing, and not losing the courage to live are equally important fundamental Buddhist principles.

Before we continue with these teachings, I would like to offer an introduction to Metta (loving-kindness) meditation. In addition, we can benefit from meditations on sources of inner strength of the heart, such as the ones described by the late German Buddhist and spiritual counselor for dying people Lisa Freund[5].

The reason for this is that we should not consider anything with respect to death without love: First, loving-kindness should be awakened, inner mental strength that comes from a good heart, and a kind of protective energy should be cultivated, so that we can approach the contemplation of death equipped with such sources of inner strength of the heart.

Furthermore, the early Buddhist perspective of the "Three Messengers of the Gods," can be introduced. This perspective, in turn, relates to the points of the

[5] Bücher von Lisa Freund: Das Unverwundbare, Geborgen im Grenzenlosen, Sterben können, Kraftquellen entdecken

Buddha's "Five Daily Meditations" and shows how illness, aging, and death can be seen not only as crises and threats, but also as opportunities.
When we encounter them, it is important to perceive them as messengers of the gods, as revelations, who send us these experiences or encounters so that we can recognize our own reality and the reality of all beings within them.

Divine messengers are inherently benevolent beings. They are an expression of Metta, loving-kindness, but they seek to awaken us when we are perhaps too caught up in our dreams of life - almost in a "life frenzy" - and thus too self-absorbed.

Accordingly, one can then recall the teaching of the "Three Marks of Existence" or the Four Seals of Dharma. This is classic, ancient Buddhist teaching material, but in the face of contemplating and preparing for death, it takes on a deeper meaning.

The Three Marks of Existence (Trilakshana) are:

1. All phenomena are impermanent.
   Everything is in constant flux. (Sanskrit: Anicca)

2. All existence is permeated by suffering (Sanskrit: Dukkha).

3. All animate beings and the world of things are without an independent self (Sanskrit: Anatman).

The Mahayana version of this view of reality is essentially identical. But it would be called the "Four Dharma Seals" and adds as a fourth point that there is **a path to liberation** from the mental suffering that the first 3 points or marks of existence are accompanied with. This is what the teachings of Buddhism reveal.

The Continuum of the Mind in All States of Existence

During our lifetime, we live in a manifest body composed of the elements earth (solid matter), water (liquid matter), fire (heat and energy), air (breath), and space (space for movement). And throughout the entire life process, there is an inner experience, a dreaming, thinking, feeling spirit, which extends through all states of existence—wakefulness, dreams, and sleep.

Are these two levels of existence, the physical and the mental, one or two?

This question is important because it leads to further questions:

Does inner, spiritual experience only arise when a body manifests, perhaps at conception, in the embryonic state, or during birth?

Or was there perhaps a stream of consciousness present even before that?
Does a stream of mind, therefore, precede manifestation?
Is it perhaps even causally involved in the possibility of life arising?
So more and more questions arise, and gradually a purely physical or material conception of life and its antagonist death begins to crumble.

And then one can ask further:
What happens to body and mind when we die?

Does inner spiritual experience end with the physical death of a living being? (We don't have to think only of humans here.)

Or is there a continuum of the mind, the stream of mind or consciousness, beyond physical death?

Is everything truly transient, or is there something that doesn't perish and is imperishable?

These were the kinds of questions I asked myself when, barely 20 years old, I got my hands on - what is called in English - the “Tibetan Book of the Dead”.

As a teenager, I had already grappled with philosophical topics, read Hermann Hesse, Hegel, Plato, Sartre, Camus, and others, and considered myself an existentialist. But with the edition of the more then a thousand years old “Tibetan Book of the Dead”, which I saw for the first time in 1977, I received more answers than I had ever asked.

According to these teachings, there is an invisible stream of consciousness - that is, inner, immaterial impulses, invisible from the outside, that are constantly active and present from the very beginning of a living being.

Even shortly after a child's birth, it is evident that an experiencing stream of mind already exists within the small body. There is more than just a physical organism that learns, begins to speak, grows, and develops. A being that is born already carries something with it and soon recognizes what it has already known. Sometimes talents and abilities come to light that were likely not acquired in this lifetime.

Buddhism teaches that every physical expression is preceded by something in the mind.

This is also true in everyday life: every movement, every step, every gesture, every action, every spoken word is preceded by a mental impulse:

a memory, an intention, a motivation, an insight, an emotional coloring, a desire or aversion, an attraction or aversion. Nothing simply happens, even if much seems to happen quickly and spontaneously. Life is always shaped and

experienced from within. As living beings - especially as human beings - we are manifestations of spiritual content.

The famous Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, whom I had the chance to often encounter in the 1990s, repeatedly expressed this when he said or wrote:

“You are not a creation. You are a manifestation.”

Thus, an invisible spiritual continuum is assumed here, one that survives the death of the body and from which a new life manifests. This continuum enables dreaming during sleep and, even in the stillness of meditation, thinking, experiencing, and perceiving …, entirely without any cause, while the body sits still and there is nothing to do.

No one ever experiences a complete cessation of mental states or at least never without them returning, even if they seem interrupted once in a while. We know no total interruption of mental experiences. We know interruptions, deep sleep, brief lapses, gaps in experience, but mental experiences always return and continue, with constantly changing mental content.

Paradoxically, it is still the leading assumption that mental experiences end with physical death, and this is taken for granted, especially in our modern, almost entirely materialistic societies. Being called “sciences" it seems completely forgotten that there are, of course, also “Geisteswissenschaften”, Sciences of Mind, such as philosophies, arts, knowledge of spiritual and religious phenomena and experiences. It is believed to be scientifically proven that mental experiences are impossible without brain function, without a heartbeat, without breathing. But nothing of the sort has actually been proven.

The Bardo Teachings as a Guide Through the Dying Process

The Bardo teachings of Tibetan Buddhism are very detailed. The descriptions in the most famous Bardo text, the "Tibetan Book of the Dead" (Tibetan: Bardo Thö-dröl, "Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate State"), which was probably written by Padmasambhava[6], the Guru Rinpoche, around the 8th century and transcribed and published centuries later by the Tibetan discoverers of this so called “Terma” or treasure text[7], can be quite confusing due to the descriptions of the many Buddhas and deities who are presumably to appear in the stream of consciousness of all the deceased after death.

The claim is in fact that these “visions of the Bardo” appear to everyone.

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[6] Padmasambhava was an Indian Tantric master teaching Buddhism and Vajrayana in Tibet in the 8th century A.D.

[7] „Terma“ are treasure texts, usually hidden by eminent masters such as Padmasambhava and discovered centuries later. The Tibetan Book of the Dead (in Tibetan: Bardo Thödröl) was revealed by a Lama called Karma Lingpa in the 14th century.

There are other Bardo texts[8] that primarily explain the principle of the Four or Six Bardo states as a model, thus describing a cycle of life and death. However, this is not merely a description, as that would not constitute a true Buddhist approach.

"The Dharma[9] has only one flavor: that of liberation," it is said.

The Bardo teachings express further, and above all, the view that in all states of existence, liberation from the otherwise eternal cycle of existence, Samsara, could be achieved if one only knew how to see through the mind's game, the manifestations of mind.

So there are the two models:
the Four Bardos and the Six Bardos.

The Four Bardos are:

1. the Bardo of Life (Tibetan: kye-ne bar-do)

2. the Bardo of the Painful Dying Process (Tibetan: chi-ke bar-do)

3. the Bardo of Ultimate Reality – following the moment of death (Tibetan: chö-nyi bar-do)

4. the Bardo of Becoming – in search of reincarnation (Tibetan: si-pe bar-do)

Two additional Bardos are also presented:

5. the Bardo of Sleeping and Dreaming (Tibetan: mi-lam bar-do)
6. the Bardo of Deep Meditation (Tibetan: ting-nge-dsin bar-do)

Especially in the last Bardo, in meditative states combined with appropriate guidance, it is possible to see, recognize, and experience how the mind functions even when it is detached from the body. One could understand and see through how it creates realities and how it, the mind, can also dissolve them. One can almost see how desire, wanting to possess, and longing for manifestation/existence, arise, and at the same time how detachment, non-desire, not wanting to possess and not desiring to manifest/exist – and this would be an experience of "liberation" – can take place.

Thus, it would be possible, during meditative states practiced throughout life, to understand the interplay of arising and passing away. One could even train

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[8] … such as Tsele Natsok Rangdröl's: The Mirror of Mindfulness - Rangjung Yeshe Publications

[9] "Dharma" here means "The Teachings of the Buddha"

oneself, at specific moments in meditation, to choose to detach from the mental states that control us: from emotions, hopes, and fears.
The Bardo teachings speak of possibilities for inner liberation and spiritual awakening. The promise, then, is that there can be a meditative preparation for the states of consciousness after physical death that will continue to occur in a disembodied state.

Such a perspective and possibility would be important for any individual preparation for death, especially for those who have embarked on the path of Buddhist meditation and who are attempting to apply corresponding methods and guidance.

It would also be valuable for end-of-life care, because it would then not only involve caring for the dying person's body and accompanying the emotions and mental states that arise, but also expressing the perspective of the highly probable continuity of spiritual experience and not ending the accompaniment with the onset of physical death.

Here, too, it is important to understand that there will surely occur an inner suffering in the process of dying (from clinging, wanting to possess, wanting to be, etc. and therefore losing everything) - almost invisible from the outside, unless observed with great sensitivity - which would make it, when understood and observed with sensitivity, even more important to remain mindfully present in the vicinity of a dying person. Only then could the supportive and hopefully liberating teachings and instructions be applied and expressed, such as those found, among other places, in the prayers and meditations of the Bardo teachings for the dying and deceased.

The Bardo teachings, and also the Buddhist contemplations on impermanence and emptiness[10], attempt to shift the focus away from superficial, subjective - albeit profoundly psychologically effective - states of mind in order to draw attention to the even deeper levels of spiritual reality.

The Bardo teachings assert that this dimension will manifest after death anyway. They are based on a view of the nature of mind that permeates all our experience. Our subjective mental content - that is, thoughts, fantasies, dreams, and daydreams, as well as essentially all emotions - is grounded in a clear, luminous, and knowing, almost clairvoyant basic consciousness.

Our mental content is like the images in a mirror. The mirror itself is merely an empty, clear surface in which everything can be reflected, without anything actually being present in the mirror.

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[10] Emptiness (Sanskrit Shunyata) is an open space in mental experience, the basis for all mental content and phenomena.

It is taught that at the end of the dying process - that is, at the onset of death and through the dissolution of mental contents - the fundamental nature of consciousness is revealed as the "nature of mind."

This is called the Bardo of Clear Light or the Bardo of Ultimate Reality, Dharmata.

For a time, perhaps beyond all time, the Clear Light appears after the consciousness separates from the body. Every dying being encounters the Clear Light, but can only experience it as long as its reality is recognized. For some, this experience is as brief as a snap of the fingers; for others, it lasts as long as it takes to eat a meal.

Experienced meditators who have recognized the nature of mind during their lifetime may remain here longer; an Awakened Buddha enters into Nirvana at this point. This is what the Bardo teachings say.

Those who are not fully awakened - and that includes almost all beings except the Tathagatas, the fully Awakened Buddhas - will sooner or later leave this primordial state of consciousness.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead teaches that there is a spiritual realm of experience in which, for a time, luminous manifestations of ultimate reality continue to appear in the mind of the now disembodied being or rather stream of consciousness.

They represent the dynamics of the nature of mind:

They are called the “Buddhas of the Five Families”, followed by further peaceful and wrathful Buddha aspects. If the visions of these Buddhas are lost, even though there are repeated opportunities to recognize them over a period of approximately 49 days, the otherwise empty, clear mind becomes filled again with traces of former habitual patterns and karmic impressions.

On a more general level one aspect of the Bardo teachings is most fascinating with respect to the understanding of mind and psyche, of the difference between inner suffering and inner freedom or liberation:

They describe that there is an ongoing choice taking place between bright, free, and open mental occurrences on the one hand, and dark, confusing, and irritating mental states on the other hand.

The Bardo teachings give advice as to always try to chose the bright states of mind and to avoid getting drawn into the dark ones, not fearing the brightness, and not being attracted by the dullness. The reality is that such opportunities to make a choice presents itself is both given in the after-death-states, the post-mortal Bardos, as well as in all states of life: the waking state, the dream,

and if practiced, during meditation. You could be peaceful, clear, wake, or irritated, obscured, dull, and dumb.

Now we have come somewhat closer to understanding the meaning of the fifth point of the "daily meditations," which states:
"At the moment of death, consciousness leaves the decaying body and can only take with it the impulses and traces of mental impressions accumulated through actions and habits. At the same time, the nature of the mind remains unchangingly clear, open, and luminous in its essence."

Or in the older version:

"I am the owner and heir of my deeds,
born of my deeds, bound to them,
I have them as my refuge,
and the good and evil deeds that I do,
I will inherit."

The Relevance of the Bardo Teachings in Various Exceptional Situations

In attempting to understand dying and to shape the accompanying circumstances in a healing way, subtopics repeatedly arise that must be handled sensitively:

For example, there is often confusion about the terms
EUTHANASIA AND PALLIATIVE SEDATION. Euthanasia refers to the assisted, desired ending of life. It may even be the term for unwanted medical killing as performed by the German nazi-doctors on thousands of people.

This is something that is neither in line with the Buddhist perspective nor offered within the framework of palliative medicine and hospice care. To what extent this would be appropriate in some very painful and agonizing illnesses, also with regard to legality and illegality, always triggers difficult discussions.

Pain relief and, if necessary, "palliative sedation"[11] are certainly sensible and legal.

Then the question repeatedly arises:
What happens to the stream of consciousness when a
SUICIDE is carried out to end one's lifetime?

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[11] Palliative sedation is the gradual increase in the administration of painkillers and anesthetics to alleviate pain, restlessness, and other suffering. It can also lead to death, but it is not a sudden termination of life in the sense of poisoning. It is applied in hospice and palliative care if doctors recognize its advantage and it is considered as legal.

This question has played a role in Buddhist history since the time of the Buddha. There is the view that suicide, killing oneself, is a big error and mistake. It cannot stop the mental stream of consciousness. Mind will continue to undergo suffering.

In the context of the Bardo teachings who are asserting a continuity of mind, suicide is seen to be extremely problematic:
The body is suddenly no longer there, it gets lost, and at the same time, consciousness is likely preoccupied with very strong fears and emotions. It is suspected that in this way, "ghosts" will arise, wandering spirits, and they will start roaming around, not in a physical, but in a mental body.

This could also be assumed in the case of a violent death through murder or in war, as well as a consequence of accidents or sudden death such as in heart-attacks.

"What about the mind in a **COMA** ?”,
is another frequently asked question. Can a person in a coma still perceive something, perhaps even hear what others are saying?

Well, when it is believed that consciousness can still perceive something after the physical death, then this could be the case as well in coma. Therefore, spiritual guides attempt to speak to the deceased, explain the nature of the mind, and show them a way out of the labyrinth of post-mortem states.

If even the deceased can still hear, then it should certainly be possible that a living person lying motionless in a coma also possesses mental consciousness and can perhaps hear what is being said to them, about them, or in their vicinity, or even see others and the surrounding space. Many testimonies from those who have awakened from a coma suggest this and actually confirm it.

Furthermore, the Bardo teachings emphasize that it is better if, after the apparent onset of death (cessation of breathing and heartbeat, brain death), the body is left untouched for several hours up to three days until consciousness has truly departed completely.

It is believed that consciousness can escape from the body at the point of contact, potentially happening too quickly and causing distress. Indeed, there is a practice in which all "lower body orifices," meaning all but the fontanelle at the top of the head, are supposed to be closed, an attempt made through visualization, or in traditional rites even with certain mantric letters written on paper or another material and then placed on the body orifices.

Presumably, the recommendation not to touch the deceased body applies especially if someone wishes to perform this practice and has prepared for it during ones lifetime. Or, alternatively, if a spiritually advanced death counselor is present who, after death has occurred, attempts to guide the deceased's consciousness out of the fontanelle.

This is called the practice of "Phowa," the expulsion of mind from the body.

Furthermore, it is taught that after respiratory and cardiac arrest or brain death, there is a period during which the subtle energies associated with consciousness only gradually detach from the now lifeless body. This process can last up to three days. During this time, it would be best if these internal winds/energies (Sanskrit: Prana, Tibetan: Lung) could be allowed to naturally gather and withdraw from the body. They will likely eventually collect in the heart area, the heart chakra, before leaving the body completely.

It would be beneficial if this process could proceed largely undisturbed by not touching the body. If the body is removed from the deathbed or from the place where death occurred during this time, it is believed that this subtle process would be disturbed. That would be similar to disturbing a sleeping or meditating person. But not necessarily more than that.

Unfortunately, it seems very “normal”, especially in cases of unnatural, sudden or violent death, but even in hospitals or when those attending believe that with the last breath “everything is over”, that a dying body is not left in peace. This is often due to a purely physical, or material, view of life and death. In a way, dying without paying attention to the more subtle processes the mind goes through as it leaves the body is disrespectful and the ignorance it entails is a tragedy in itself. It simply creates restlessness and irritation, as often happens in life.

Washing, decorating, perhaps oiling, and then disposing of the body, now a corpse, even within three days, is quite common. If this is done with particular care and respect, it can also have various advantages. It might create a special atmosphere of love and affection.

Incidentally, there are very different customs in the various Buddhist traditions and cultures regarding how to handle the body of a deceased person. Here, we have referred to the Bardo teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. In the cultures of Thailand, Japan, China, Vietnam, and so on, there may be entirely different views, approaches, and therefore practices and rituals.

Nevertheless, these considerations highlight how wrong it would be to dispose of the body immediately after death and completely ignore the subtle inner processes simply because one cannot perceive them or does not believe in their reality and meaning. It would be just as insensitive as disturbing a person at rest. But death is a far more greater and deeper transformation then sleep at night or a nap after lunch.

Above all, violence that leads to death is the worst thing. From this perspective, it follows that the ethical precept "not to kill" also occupies the highest position in all Buddhist ethical guidelines.

Unfortunately, far too many people, not to mention animals, die violent deaths. And even a violent suicide likely prevents the consciousness from leaving the body peacefully. This, as already mentioned, gives rise to "spirits," or ghosts, as it is taught, who cannot comprehend that and how their body has been lost.

The question then often arises as to what one should think of **LIFE-PRO-LONGING-MEASURES**. This, too, is difficult to assess. As long as there is a prospect that life can be sustained longer or even that some degree of recovery can occur, these measures would certainly need to be encouraged.

However, if life-prolonging measures merely delay the natural dying process and cause particular suffering for the dying person, one would have to carefully consider their usefulness.

I have observed that with machine-assisted life-prolonging measures, much revolves solely around this technology, creating a cold, mechanical atmosphere, and paying little attention to the human and spiritual needs and experiences of a terminally ill person.

If these measures were to buy some time that could be used for inner preparation for death, they might have an advantage. However, it is more likely that such measures more often lead to a mental exhaustion in the dying person, so that this person, so to speak, reluctantly lets go of their fading life.

And, given current events, the question of the appropriateness of **ORGAN DONATION** keeps resurfacing – both from the donor's and the recipient's perspective. Within the context of our Bardo-teachings, the question is frequently raised as to how organ removal would disrupt the natural dying process?

Well, if we consider whether one should not touch the body during the dying process or after death, or even leave it undisturbed for an extended period, then it is certainly true that organ removal will disrupt the peaceful dying process.

This is because, as soon as possible after the diagnosed moment of death, all consideration for the invisible state of mind of the dying person is disregarded; the body is removed, dissected, and taken apart. However, it is extremely rare for organ donation to take place for someone who dies naturally through a gradual process. This is primarily performed on people who have been injured in accidents and are therefore in intensive care-units.

Renowned Buddhist teachers have stated, however, that donating one's organs can be meaningful under certain circumstances, particularly since it may save the life of others who would still have to fulfill important tasks in their lives.

If the altruistic motivation and desire to help others is present and active at the time of death and the organ donation, then even the drastic process of dismembering the body in the early stages of death can be experienced positively as the fulfillment of this motivation. This has been taught by Buddhist masters who compare it to the Bodhisattva's offering of a body. But would this really be the case when the decision to donate one's organs was made at some point in life by making a cross on a question-sheet, giving a signature on a dotted line, or a click on a website?

Living in the Awareness of Death

The title of this article contains the term "promise", the "promise of liberation". This can mean that the Bardo teachings are meant to enable something that is not so easy to be accomplished, but that also *could be* unachieved.

In fact, over the years I have experienced that one's own motivation to apply the prescribed spiritual practices to this goal with precision and sincerity can fluctuate. Of course, one cannot always be a practitioner of these teachings or a mystic at the highest level, certainly not.

In encounters with dying people who had practiced Buddhist meditation during their lifetime and were familiar with such teachings, uncertainty and instability in understanding, applying, and experiencing the Bardo teachings internally are often noticeable.

One's own meditation practice should therefore always include an aspect of preparing for death. That means that one needs to understand what aspect of spiritual practice could serve as a preparation for death. And that would also be true for the non-Buddhist person when she or he is involved with his or her religion, psychology, art, literature, or any kind of inner culture that could be applied to train an aspect of preparation for one's eventual death.

For Buddhists this could take the form of regular contemplations on the natural reality of impermanence, as in the Five Daily Meditations, or the use of specific meditation methods, as presented in the context of the Bardo teachings.

There are particularly demanding practices that can be logically explained and practiced in an accessible way. And there are religious approaches that are more akin to doctrines of faith, such as the veneration of Amitabha, the Buddha of Boundless Light, into whose heart one wishes to transmit the stream of consciousness at the moment of death, or whose blessing one asks for the time of death. Many Asian and also some Western Buddhists practice like this. In the schools of Tibetan Buddhism, there is the aforementioned special method called Phowa.

The aim of all this is to create the most favorable conditions for the dying process to take place when it happens. This can be achieved primarily by the

individual, by making inner preparations for death - which, by the way and in principle, can occur at any time - while still alive, when one's health is still quite stable and the mind is clear and receptive.

An insight into the model of the Bardo teachings can enable a changed existential attitude towards life and death. Priorities begin to shift. The focus is no longer solely on enjoying life to the fullest - or wasting it - and forgetting death, but rather on living with the awareness of the possibility of death as another part of the cycle of existence.

For, according to the Bardo teachings, we are in the midst of a Bardo already:

This here is just the Bardo of Life. It has been preceded by the Bardo of Becoming. And it will be followed by the Bardo of Dying and the Bardos that will show their reality after the disintegration of body and mind.

The good news is that the Clear Light of Mind, that will be revealed when mind and body separate, is already and at all times right inside the nature of our minds, here and now, at any moment.

The bad news, however, is, that all the violence and cruelty that occurs in situations like the current wars ignores all such insights that wise men had already developed into the subtleties of the mind and body connection.

Killing people and animals is nothing but a terrible suffering, not only to the bodies, not only on a moral and cultural level and in a social sense, but to the streams of consciousness, left alone in the labyrinths of disembodied mental states.

But to end with a good news:

The Bardo teachings say that even when the mind has been in confusion for many lifetimes, upon hearing of the chance of liberation from mental suffering, the mind could be freed at any moment, when it grasps the meaning of these instructions.

Suggested reading:

Dzogchen **Ponlop** Rinpoche: Mind Beyond Death
Snow Lion, 2007

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche: Living is Dying
- How to prepare for Death, Dying and Beyond
Shambhala, 2020

Francisco **Varela and Dalai Lama**: Sleeping, Dreaming and Dying
- An exploration of Consciousness
Wisdom Publications, before 2002

Tulku **Thondup:** Peaceful Death - Joyful Rebirth
- A Tibetan Buddhist Guidebook
Shambhala 2006

Robert **Thurman:** The Tibetan Book of the Dead
- Liberation Through Understanding in the Between
Bantam Books, 1993

Chögyam **Trungpa** / Francesca **Fremantle**:
The Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo
Shambhala, 2000

Lama **Shenpen** Hookham: There's More to Dying than Death
- A Buddhist Perspective
Windhorse Publications, 2006

Christine **Longaker:** Facing Death and Finding Hope
- A Guide to the Emotional and Spiritual Care of the Dying
Crown, 1998

Thich Nhat Hanh: No Death, No Fear
- Comforting wisdom for life
Rider, 2002

Lisa **Freund** (only in German)**:**
Das Unverwundbare: Wege der Heilung in Lebenskrisen
O.W. Barth, 2011

Lisa **Freund** (only in German)**:**
Geborgen im Grenzenlosen: Neue Wege zum Umgang mit dem Sterben
O.W. Barth, 2012

Lisa **Freund** (only in German): Sterben können - Wie wir uns darauf vorbereiten
- wie wir Abschied nehmen - wie wir Nahestehende begleiten
Knaur MensSana, 2014

Lisa **Freund** (only in German):
Kraftquellen entdecken - was in schwierigen Zeiten stärkt.
Scorpio, München, 2018.

Monika **Müller** (only in German): Dem Sterben Leben geben
- Die Begleitung Sterbender und trauernder Menschen als spiritueller Weg
Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2010

Johann-Christoph **Student** (only in German):
Sterben, Tod und Trauer - Handbuch für Begleitende
Herder, 2004

Yesche U. Regel (only in German):
Mitgefühl für sich, andere und die Welt (Tonglen-Praxis)
nymphenburger bei Kosmos, 2016

Yesche U. Regel (only in German): Selbstmitgefühl durch Tonglen
nymphenburger bei Kosmos 2020

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Born 1957 in Cologne, Germany.
Buddhist since 1977, Ordained Buddhist monastic from 1980 to 1997.

Graduate of a Three-Year-Retreat (1986-1990) in full enclosure in the Karma Kagyü Mahamudra tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

Teachers: HH the 16th Karmapa, Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, Lama Gendün Rinpoche, Thich Nhat Hanh, and others.

Establishment and participation in Karma Kagyu Buddhist centers from 1978 to 1995.
Freelance teacher since about 1995.

Director of Paramita Bonn, Centre for Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and Buddhist Meditation, from 2005-2025 and of the Paramita Online Programme since 2020.

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