

The Tibetan Book of the Dead Isn't Just About Dying

Not too long ago, I sent a newsletter email containing a summary of an interesting interview from a magazine. Now, I am again presenting a summary of an article from another magazine that I have also found very interesting. The form of the summary is revised excerpts from a recent article in the November 2025 issue of *Lion's Roar* magazine, a Buddhist publication emphasizing Buddhism, Meditation, and Mindful Living. The subject of the entire issue is "A Buddhist Guide to Living & Dying" and the title of the specific article is "The Tibetan Book of the Dead Isn't Just About Dying" by Judy Lief, humbly presenting herself as an author, editor, and follower of the teachings of the late Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a well-known Tibetan Buddhist master who was part of the movement of Eastern wisdom teachers to America in the late 1960's and into the 1970's and beyond. He founded Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, which later became Naropa University. Ms. Lief was its first Dean and her husband is the current President.

Many translations and commentaries of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* have been written. I found Ms. Lief's article summarizing it to be quite lucid, articulate, grounded, and pragmatic. The overarching focus of her article suggests, as contained in the title, that this well-regarded treatise contains practical guidance for those still living, in addition to those in the dying process and thereafter. Her argument goes that while dying is a significant transition for an individual, life is full of constant transition, both great and small, as life is ever-changing, one foundational theme of Buddhist and other Eastern thought. Therefore, life as a constant flow of transition is always offering opportunities for spiritual growth through cultivating consciousness/awareness, similar to the opportunity afforded by cultivating an approach to conscious dying. She points out that although generally referred to as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the actual Tibetan name, *Bardo Thodo*, literally means "The Great Liberation Through Hearing", which contains a teaching in and of itself.

A few tidbits to whet your whistle and read the whole summary:

"We learn that it's not by clinging to security that we awaken but by resting in uncertainty."

"When you lessen your need for certainty and control, it's possible that a fresh new world may open up, hidden within the places you usually avoid."

Edited revised summary and excerpts from "The Tibetan Book of the Dead Isn't Just About Dying" by Judy Lief, an article in the November 2025 issue of *Lion's Roar* magazine. Edited summary by Steven J. Gold. All words other than in brackets [] are by Judy Lief, the author of the article.

In Eastern culture, the idea of an ongoing cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is the norm...the cycle of continuous arising and dissolving marks all experience, at every level, and it is endless.

[Human beings possess] deep-rooted emotional and habit patterns, and ...inherent wisdom...wisdom is always an option. Yet, even so, we generally choose confusion instead.

The Bardos as Opportunities for Awakening

Bardo means intermediate or in-between state. Any gap in life can be understood as a form of bardo. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* points to the opportunities for liberation that come up in...times of transition of one state to another...not limited to the ...in-between state that follows death.

...we're always in an in-between state, since in each moment we're in the uncertain ground between the past and the future. If you pay attention to these many in-between states, you can gradually familiarize yourself with the accompanying feel of groundlessness, which can be a doorway to liberation.

The bardo teachings are rich and complex. They are counterintuitive, in that they point to the tremendous potential in the very experiences we tend to avoid. We learn that it's not by clinging to security that we awaken but by resting in uncertainty. We may think we build strength by fortifying ourselves, but that kind of strength is brittle. It's from an honest connection to change and uncertainty that true strength takes root.

You can begin to connect with bardo experience in ordinary life by paying attention to the many simple changes that take place all the time. You can pay greater attention to daily transitions between now and then, this and that.

But too often we fixate on getting from here to there and miss those intermediate spaces, which are so open and vulnerable. Through mindfulness meditation practice, you can learn to be more at ease with uncertainty and groundlessness. When you cultivate an awareness of transitions, you may experience moments of openness and spiritual insight. You may begin to recognize that life itself is a continuous series of bardos. Fundamentally, when you lessen your need for certainty and control, it's possible that a fresh new world may open up, hidden within the places you usually avoid.

[At this point the author goes on to describe that the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is divided into chapters describing different bardo. She focuses on three: the *bardo of death*, at the time of the demise of the physical body; the *bardo of dharmata* "is-ness" that follows soon after death; and the *bardo of becoming*.]

The Bardo of Death takes place at the time of death, when the collapse of this life and the shock of impermanence leads to a powerful encounter with one's true nature or primordial awareness.

When we experience dying, we face the truth of impermanence in its most raw and unmediated form. As the body dissolves, the mind becomes unmoored. Mindfulness is the key to staying present during this experience of instability. Paying attention to experiences as they arise and dissolve is a key thread in the bardo teachings. They teach that in your darkest moments there's always the potential for awakening if you remain open.

According to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the moment of death is a gateway to liberation and an opportunity for profound realization. As your body dissolves, the luminosity of the undistorted mind arises, and you have an opportunity to attain liberation on the spot.

At this moment, you're brought face to face with the luminous clarity of your own mind, and the meditation instruction is simple: recognize it and rest. That sounds easy, yet for most of us the raw power of this experience is overwhelming, and when we're shown the true nature of our mind, we don't recognize it. We get confused, and we don't know whether we're coming or going, dead or alive. Our own wisdom mind has upset the apple cart, and we're in a sea of bewilderment.

However, the luminous clarity of mind described in the bardo teachings is not foreign to us or other-worldly. It's always present, hidden beneath our distractions and fears. Death simply strips away the layers that obscure it. The good news is that we don't need to wait until we die and just hope for the best. We can cultivate glimpses of mind's luminous nature through our meditation practice and through Buddhist teachings that point it out. We can begin to make acquaintance with our inherent wisdom, and the more we do that now, the more likely we'll be able to recognize its full arising in the bardo of death. [However], if you don't recognize the luminous clarity of mind in this bardo, you move on to the [next bardo].

The Bardo of Dharmata/Isness takes place next as your consciousness, ungrounded by the physical body, encounters an overwhelming display of your mind's projections.

In this bardo, you're confronted head on with the power of your own projections, because without the physical body to ground it, the mind runs wild. You're brought to the razor-sharp boundary that separates wisdom from confusion, sanity from neurosis. It's like the battle of the titans: extreme wisdom versus extreme confusion.

[The author goes on to describe that sounds, images, visions of peaceful and wrathful deities may arise, all as one's own projections, reflections of one's own mind. They are not to be worshipped, but rather regarded as mirrors depicting "the vital energies of our own

minds – our insights, habits, and emotions. They’re a map of our mental universe, which contains all of this and more.” She goes into some detail about these various deities, and then concludes]:

Your encounters with the deities at this stage are abrupt and direct. You’re in a world of fear. Yet as soon as you realize that these deities are not external threats but aspects of your own mind, the fear dissolves. When you recognize them as your own projections, recognition and liberation are simultaneous. You’re liberated on the spot. [However,] if you have not recognized the nature of mind in [this bardo, you move on to the next.]

The Bardo of Becoming arises when the energy and groundlessness become too much, and you desperately seek to resolidify by taking birth once again. [The author goes onto describe various facets and machinations involved in taking on a new body in rebirth.]

Conclusion

[The author concludes the article by emphasizing] *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a guide for living as much as it is for dying. It raises questions that are just as relevant in this life as they are after death: What do you do when your seemingly solid world collapses? How can you hold steady in a swirl of intensified emotions and mental speediness? When you are hit with the truth, gently or abruptly, how can you cultivate the courage to stay with it rather than run away? How can you break the habit of being so attached to what’s familiar that you keep repeating it over and over?

The Tibetan Book of the Dead reminds us that awakening is always available. No matter how stuck we may feel, and how often we miss the mark, awakening is an open invitation. The realms of confusion that ego spins so cunningly and that seem so very solid are mere overlays.

The pages of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* are filled with practice instructions. The most fundamental one, repeated over and over is: Pay attention! Don’t let your mind wander! Especially in times of intensity or fear, instead of checking out, we need to hold our mind. Even at the time of death we can hold steady.

The closer we pay attention, the more we learn not to believe everything we think or see. In heightened times, we’re especially prone to deluded perception, and we’re easily fooled by believing in our own projections. How often have we gotten in trouble or freaked out about something that turned out to be a product of our own imagination? To see clearly and to overcome fear and false hope, it’s essential to recognize the damaging power of projections, as true in life as after death!

May the bardo teachings of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* ...introduce you to the luminous clarity that is your inherent birthright.

Editor's observations and critiques from a Torah-Veda perspective.

It is almost inevitable when I read anything of any length from a Buddhist perspective, that I will take issue with some of what has been said, although agreeing with around 85% of what is said. And such is the case here. So here are my critiques:

1) A sentence I didn't include in the summary: "Even at the time of death we can hold steady, one breath at a time." This one is just downright puzzling to me because I believe it is pretty universally accepted that at the time of death, breathing ceases.

2) I have read other Buddhist writings referring to luminosity, but not as often as she does in referring to the nature of mind being luminous. In Torah and Veda sources, there is great significance ascribed to luminosity, but not to the mind being the generator of luminosity/luminous of its own accord as she seems to be saying. The more apt descriptions I have found from Torah and Veda sources and that I have personally experienced is that the mind at its most purified is akin to a mirror or transparent crystal/gem. It can become illuminated through efforts of cleansing and ultimately as a blessing of grace, so it can open to a luminosity not of its making. For example, the title of the Buddhist text often translated as "The Diamond Sutra" in the Sanskrit original more closely means something similar to the Vedantic text, "The Crest Jewel of Discrimination". The Sanskrit for the Diamond Sutra contains the word "vajra/thunderbolt" combined with a word meaning "cutting" to attain "prajna/wisdom". But the crystalline nature of a purified mind is a reflector/transmitter of luminosity, not the source of luminosity. The mystery of luminosity is that it is self-generating, and the purified mind reflects it, but is not it, just as the moon reflects the brilliance of the sun but is not a generator of light as the sun is.

3) The Atman/Anatman debate. I am not going to go into detail about this, as I devote an entire chapter to it in my book, *Torah-Veda*. Suffice it to say here that the author repeatedly refers to the reader as a "you" who is going through experiences after bodily demise. Therefore, "you" is something more than a bodily physical being, who enters the post-death bardos with opportunities for full liberation/awakening or else takes on another bodily existence in the rebirth process. This "you" has a mind that survives bodily demise but appears to be more than a purified mind. This "you" has the capability to retain attention if not overwhelmed by its unpurified mind's projections and machinations. So what is this "you"? Whatever it is, Buddhists insist on not calling it a "soul", although it sure sounds like one.