

# INTRODUCTORY FOREWORD

By Lāma Anagarika Govinda

It may be argued that nobody can talk about death with authority who has not died; and since nobody, apparently, has ever returned from death, how can anybody know what death is, or what happens after it?

The Tibetan will answer: 'There is not *one* person, indeed, not *one* living being, that has *not* returned from death. In fact, we all have died many deaths, before we came into this incarnation. And what we call birth is merely the reverse side of death, like one of the two sides of a coin, or like a door which we call "entrance" from outside and "exit" from inside a room.'

It is much more astonishing that not everybody remembers his or her previous death; and, because of this lack of remembering, most persons do not believe there was a previous death. But, likewise, they do not remember their recent birth—and yet they do not doubt that they were recently born. They forget that active memory is only a small part of our normal consciousness, and that our subconscious memory registers and preserves every past impression and experience which our waking mind fails to recall.

There are those who, in virtue of concentration and other *yogic* practices, are able to bring the subconscious into the realm of discriminative consciousness and, thereby, to draw upon the unrestricted treasury of subconscious memory, wherein are stored the records not only of our past lives but the records of the past of our race, the past of humanity, and of all pre-human forms of life, if not of the very consciousness that makes life possible in this universe.

If, through some trick of nature, the gates of an individual's subconsciousness were suddenly to spring open, the unprepared mind would be overwhelmed and crushed. Therefore, the gates of the subconscious are guarded, by all initiates, and hidden behind the veil of mysteries and symbols.

For this reason, the *Bardo Thödol*, the Tibetan book vouch-

safing liberation from the intermediate state between life and re-birth,—which state men call death,—has been couched in symbolical language. It is a book which is sealed with the seven seals of silence,—not because its knowledge should be withheld from the uninitiated, but because its knowledge would be misunderstood, and, therefore, would tend to mislead and harm those who are unfitted to receive it. But the time has come to break the seals of silence; for the human race has come to the juncture where it must decide whether to be content with the subjugation of the material world, or to strive after the conquest of the spiritual world, by subjugating selfish desires and transcending self-imposed limitations.

According to Tibetan tradition, the *Bardo Thödol* is one of those works of Padma-Sambhava which were secretly hidden in order to preserve them for later generations, and which were to be revealed to the world when the time was ripe. However this may be, it is a fact that during the persecution of Buddhism by Langdarma, at the beginning of the ninth century, A.D., innumerable books of the earliest period of Tibetan Buddhism were concealed under rocks, in caves, and other places, to prevent their destruction. Since all members of the Buddhist Order and their supporters were either killed or driven out of Tibet, most of these buried scriptures remained where they had been hidden. Many of them were recovered during the succeeding centuries and designated *Termas*, a term derived from the Tibetan word *Gter*, pronounced *Ter*, meaning 'Treasure'. Those who discovered these spiritual treasures and propagated their teachings were called *Tertöns*, from Tibetan *Gter-bston*, pronounced *Tertön*, meaning 'Revealer of Treasure'.

This seems to me a far more reasonable explanation for the tradition of the *Tertöns*, which, significantly, is held in the oldest Schools of Tibetan Buddhism, like the Nyingmapa and Kargyütpa, than the theory advanced by certain Western critics, that these scriptures had been 'faked' by people who wanted to pass off their own ideas under the guise of ancient revelations. Such critics underestimate the religious sincerity and the deep respect for the sanctity of spiritual tradition which is engrained in every Tibetan, layman and *lāma* alike. To add to or omit from the Sacred Scriptures a single word or letter has ever been looked

upon by Tibetans as a heinous sin, which even the most impious would fear to commit.

Furthermore, these same critics underestimate the difficulties of forging and issuing such scriptures, for the forging would require a technical and critical knowledge of history and linguistics such as was not only unknown in Tibet, but such as would have required a master-mind for its execution. Had a genius of that sort existed in Tibet, he would have had no need to resort to the subterfuge of forgery, for he could have stood on his own feet, as did many scholarly geniuses who wrote and taught in their own name. Nor is it likely that men who could create and propagate such profound thoughts and lofty ideals as the *Termas* contain would stoop so low as to deceive their fellow-men. And when we consider that the literature in question is not a matter of a few isolated treatises but of about a hundred big volumes (according to tradition 108 volumes), running into tens of thousands of folios, then the theory of wilful deception becomes not only improbable, but absurd.

In considering the influences on the *Bardo Thödol* of the pre-Buddhistic religion of Tibet, namely that of the Bön-pos, there must be taken into account the fact that all of those *Termas* attributed to Padma-Sambhava declare, in no uncertain terms, their adherence to him, the very personage who opposed and defeated the Bön-pos. These recovered scriptures cannot, therefore, be regarded as propagating Bön ideas.

Even though Padma-Sambhava did adopt into the Buddhist system some of the local Tibetan deities, to serve as guardians of the Faith, in doing so he did not give up one inch of Buddhist ground to the Bön-pos, but acted in perfect conformity with the principles of orthodox Buddhism, wherein, in all Buddhist countries, the deities of the Earth and of space have always been honoured and propitiated, as being protectors of the *Dharma*. Thus, the following Pāli verses are still recited, in the course of the regular *pūjā* (or ceremony of worship), by the followers of Theravāda Buddhism, in Ceylon, Burma, Siam, Cambodia, and elsewhere:—

'*Ākāsaṭṭhā ca bhummatthā, devā nāgā mahiddhikā,  
Puññāntaṃ anumoditvā, ciraṃ rakkhantu sāsanaṃ.*'

These verses may be rendered into English as follows:—

' May the beings of the sky [or of space] and of the Earth,  
*Devas* and *Nāgas* [i.e., gods and serpent-spirits] of great  
 power,  
 After having shared in the merit [of this *pūjā*],  
 Long protect the Sacred Doctrine.'

Any cultural influence, as between Buddhism and Bönism, was more in the nature of a one-way traffic than a mutual exchange of ideas; for the Bön-pos, who had no literature of their own, took over Buddhist concepts and symbols on a vast scale, and thereby created a literature and an iconography which so greatly resemble those of the Buddhists as to be almost indistinguishable to the casual observer.

There is also current the wholly arbitrary assertion that it was the Bön influence which encouraged laxity in the observance of Buddhist monastic rules in Tibet and led to a general decline in the standard of Tibetan learning and morality. Whoever has had the opportunity to stay for even a short time in one of the still existing Bön monasteries of Tibet, will have noticed, with surprise, that the rules of celibacy and monastic discipline are stricter there than in most Buddhist monasteries, and that for many of the major scriptures of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon a parallel can be found in the scriptures of the Bön-pos. They have their '*Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*,' their '*Pratīyasamutpāda*' (represented in a Wheel of Life of thirteen divisions), their *Tantras* and *Mantras*; and their deities more or less correspond to the various Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Devatas, and Dharmapālas of Buddhism.

It may seem paradoxical, but it is a fact, that whereas the older Schools of Tibetan Buddhism, despite their tolerance of local deities, succeeded in breaking the power of Bönism, it was the Gelugpas, the youngest and most vigorously reformed School, which re-introduced one of the most influential institutions of the Bön-pos, namely, State Oracles in Oracle-Temples, in all important monasteries of the Yellow Sect. The deities who are invoked in these Oracle-Temples are exclusively of Bön origin. Among the older Buddhist sects, and especially among the Kargyūtpas, no such Oracle-Temples exist. This shows that the Old Schools, contrary to common belief, are less under the influence of Bönism than the Gelugpas, in spite of the Gelugpas' reforms and stricter

monastic discipline. This stricter monastic discipline of the Gelugpas really brings them nearer to the above-mentioned puritanism of the Bön-pos.

We must, therefore, beware of sweeping statements, as to what can be attributed to the influence of Bönism and what not. Especially is this so because we do not know of what the teachings of Bön consisted before the advent of Buddhism, although we can safely assume that they were animistic, the spiritualised forces of man and nature being worshipped, chiefly in their awe-inspiring and terrifying aspects; and certain rituals were performed for the benefit and the guidance of the dead. Such religious practices as these are commonly found in almost all early civilizations; and they prevailed in India as much as they did in Tibet. This 'animism' permeates all Buddhistic texts, wherein every tree and grove, and every locality, is held to have its own peculiar deities; and the Buddha is represented as discoursing with gods and other spiritual beings, inhabiting the Earth and the realms beyond, as if that were a most natural procedure. Only a completely intellectualized and Westernized Buddhism, which attempts to separate the rational thought-content of Buddhism from its equally profound mythological elements, can deny this animistic background and with it the metaphysical foundations of Buddhism.

The Buddhist universe is alive through and through; it has no room for inert matter and mere mechanism. And what is more, the Buddhist is alert to all possibilities of existence and to all aspects of reality. If we have read of the fearful apparitions which surrounded the Buddha during the night preceding His Enlightenment, we need not search for Bön influences in relation to the animal-headed monsters that appear from the abyss of the subconscious mind in the hour of death, or in the visions of meditation. Wrathful deities, demons in animal form, and gods in demonical guise are as much at home in Indian as in Tibetan tradition. Despite the popular usages to which the *Bardo Thödol* has been put in connection with the death rituals—and herein, probably, is discernible the only trace of Bön influence worth considering—the central idea and the profound symbolism of the *Bardo Thödol* are genuinely Buddhistic.

The Tibetans themselves have put forth considerable effort

to free their Scriptures from errors and non-Buddhistic accretions, and to ensure the correctness and reliability of their traditions. After the rules for the translation of Sanskrit texts and the necessary corresponding Tibetan terminology had been established by the early Tibetan translators and pioneers of the *Dharma*, 'translators were explicitly forbidden to coin new terms. When this was unavoidable, they were directed to report the matter to a special Tribunal, called "the Tribunal of the Doctrine of the Blessed One," attached to the royal palace. The translation of Tantric works could be undertaken with the king's permission only. These rules were promulgated by King Ti-de Song-tsen (Ral-pa-can, 817-36 A.D.) and have been followed by all Tibetan translators ever since.'<sup>1</sup>

With the advent of wooden block-prints, similar precautions were taken, not only with regard to translations, but with regard to all religious literature. Thus it became a rule that no religious book could be published without the sanction of the highest spiritual authorities, who appointed qualified proof-readers and scholars to prevent faulty renderings or unwarranted interpolations. This, however, did not interfere with the diversity of interpretations by the various acknowledged Schools and their Teachers. The chief purpose was to prevent the degeneration of established traditions either through carelessness or ignorance of unqualified copyists and interpreters.

It is for this reason that the authorized block-prints contain the most reliable versions of the generally accepted traditional sacred texts. But hand-written books, although sometimes suffering from mistakes in spelling and from other errors of the copyist, who often shows lack of understanding of the archaic or classical language of the text, are, nevertheless, valuable, especially if they go back to originals of greater antiquity than those of the current block-prints, or if they represent some lesser known tradition handed down from *guru* to *chela* through many generations.

If, therefore, I direct the reader's attention to certain differences between the officially accepted version of the block-print and that of the manuscript, which formed the basis of Lāma Kazi Dawa

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Dr. George Roerich, *Introduction of Buddhism into Tibet*, in *Stepping Stones* (Kalimpong, 1951), Vol. II., No. 5, p. 135.

Samdup's translation, I do not wish to question the value of the manuscript, but merely to throw light upon some important points of Buddhist tradition, which may lead to a deeper understanding, not only from the historical, but, likewise, from a spiritual point of view.

Indeed, it is the spiritual point of view that makes this book so important for the majority of its readers. If the *Bardo Thödol* were to be regarded as being based merely upon folklore, or as consisting of religious speculation about death and a hypothetical after-death state, it would be of interest only to anthropologists and students of religion. But the *Bardo Thödol* is far more. It is a key to the innermost recesses of the human mind, and a guide for initiates, and for those who are seeking the spiritual path of liberation.

Although the *Bardo Thödol* is at the present time widely used in Tibet as a breviary, and read or recited on the occasion of death,—for which reason it has been aptly called 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead'—one should not forget that it was originally conceived to serve as a guide not only for the dying and the dead, but for the living as well. And herein lies the justification for having made *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* accessible to a wider public.

Notwithstanding the popular customs and beliefs which, under the influence of age-old traditions of pre-Buddhist origin, have grown around the profound revelations of the *Bardo Thödol*, it has value only for those who practise and realize its teaching during their life-time.

There are two things which have caused misunderstanding. One is that the teachings seem to be addressed to the dead or the dying; the other, that the title contains the expression "Liberation through Hearing" (in Tibetan, *Thos-grol*). As a result, there has arisen the belief that it is sufficient to read or to recite the *Bardo Thödol* in the presence of a dying person, or even of a person who has just died, in order to effect his or her liberation.

Such misunderstanding could only have arisen among those who do not know that it is one of the oldest and most universal practices for the initiate to go through the experience of death before he can be spiritually reborn. Symbolically he must die to his past, and to his old ego, before he can take his

place in the new spiritual life into which he has been initiated.

The dead or the dying person is addressed in the *Bardo Thödol* mainly for three reasons: (1) the earnest practitioner of these teachings should regard every moment of his or her life as if it were the last; (2) when a follower of these teachings is actually dying, he or she should be reminded of the experiences at the time of initiation, or of the words (or *mantra*) of the *guru*, especially if the dying one's mind lacks alertness during the critical moments; and (3) one who is still incarnate should try to surround the person dying, or just dead, with loving and helpful thoughts during the first stages of the new, or after-death, state of existence, without allowing emotional attachment to interfere or to give rise to a state of morbid mental depression. Accordingly, one function of the *Bardo Thödol* appears to be more to help those who have been left behind to adopt the right attitude towards the dead and towards the fact of death than to assist the dead, who, according to Buddhist belief, will not deviate from their own *karmic* path.

In applying the *Bardo Thödol* teachings, it is ever a matter of remembering the right thing at the right moment. But in order so to remember, one must prepare oneself mentally during one's life-time; one must create, build up, and cultivate those faculties which one desires to be of deciding influence at death and in the after-death state,—in order never to be taken unawares, and to be able to react, spontaneously, in the right way, when the critical moment of death has come.

This is clearly expressed in the Root Verses of the *Bardo Thödol* as rendered in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*:—

[ ' O ] procrastinating one, who thinketh not of the coming of death,  
 Devoting thyself to the useless doings of this life,  
 Improvident art thou in dissipating thy great opportunity;  
 Mistaken, indeed, will thy purpose be now if thou returnest  
 empty-handed [from this life].

Since the Holy Dharma is known to be thy true need,

Wilt thou not devote [thyself] to the Holy Dharma even now?'

It is recognized by all who are acquainted with Buddhist philosophy that birth and death are not phenomena which happen only once in any given human life; they occur uninterruptedly. At every moment something within us dies and something is

reborn. The different *bardos*, therefore, represent different states of consciousness of our life: the state of waking consciousness, the normal consciousness of a being born into our human world, known in Tibetan as the *skyes-nas bardo*; the state of dream-consciousness (*rmi-lam bar-do*); the state of *dhyāna*, or trance-consciousness, in profound meditation (*bsam-gtan bar-do*); the state of the experiencing of death (*hchhi-kha bar-do*); the state of experiencing of Reality (*chhos-nyid bar-do*); the state of rebirth-consciousness (*srid-pa bar-do*).

All this is clearly described in *The Root-Verses of the Six Bardos*, which, together with *The Paths of Good Wishes*, form the authentic and original nucleus of the *Bardo Thödol*, around which the prose parts crystallized as commentaries. This proves that we have to do here with life itself and not merely with a mass for the dead, to which the *Bardo Thödol* was reduced in later times.

The *Bardo Thödol* is addressed not only to those who see the end of their life approaching, or who are very near death, but to those who still have years of incarnate life before them, and who, for the first time, realize the full meaning of their existence as human beings. To be born as a human being is a privilege, according to the Buddha's teaching, because it offers the rare opportunity of liberation through one's own decisive effort, through a 'turning-about in the deepest seat of consciousness,' as the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* puts it.

Accordingly, *The Root Verses of the Six Bardos* open with the words:

' O that now, when the *Bardo of Life*<sup>1</sup> is dawning upon me,  
 —After having given up indolence, since there is no time to  
 waste in life—  
 May I undistractedly enter the path of listening, reflecting,  
 and meditating,  
 So that, . . . once having attained human embodiment,  
 No time may be squandered through useless distractions.'

<sup>1</sup>Lāma Kazi Dawa-Samdub has here 'Birthplace Bardo'. Apparently his manuscript has '*skyes-gnas*' instead of '*skyes-nas*', which is found in the block-print. The latter means, literally, 'having been born', that is, having been born into the state men call life. '*Skyes-gnas*' refers to the womb, the 'place' (*gnas*) of birth; and this is the subject of the sixth verse, dealing with the *bardo* of rebirth, which, therefore, cannot be meant here, for otherwise there would be only five *bardos* instead of six.

Listening, reflecting, and meditating are the three stages of discipleship. The Tibetan word for 'listening', or 'hearing', *thos* in this connection, as well as in the expression '*Thödol*' (*thos-grol*), cannot be confused with the mere physical sense-awareness of hearing, as may be seen from the Tibetan term '*nyan-thos*,' the equivalent of the Sanskrit word '*śravaka*,' referring to a 'disciple,' and, more particularly, to a personal disciple of the Buddha, and not merely to one who by chance happened to hear the Buddha's teaching. It refers to one who has accepted this teaching in his heart and has made it his own. Thus the word 'listening,' in this connection, implies 'hearing with one's heart,' that is, with sincere faith (*śraddha*). This represents the first stage of discipleship. In the second stage, this intuitive attitude is transformed into understanding through reason; while, in the third stage, the disciple's intuitive feeling, as well as intellectual understanding, are transformed into living reality through direct experience. Thus intellectual conviction grows into spiritual certainty, into a knowing in which the knower is *one* with the known.

This is the high spiritual state vouchsafed by the teachings set forth in the *Bardo Thödol*. Thereby the initiated disciple attains dominion over the realm of death, and, being able to perceive death's illusory nature, is freed from fear. This illusoriness of death comes from the identification of the individual with his temporal, transitory form, whether physical, emotional, or mental, whence arise the mistaken notion that there exists a personal, separate egohood of one's own, and the fear of losing it. If, however, the disciple has learned, as the *Bardo Thödol* directs, to identify himself with the Eternal, the *Dharma*, the Imperishable Light of Buddhahood within, then the fears of death are dissipated like a cloud before the rising sun. Then he knows that whatever he may see, hear, or feel, in the hour of his departure from this life, is but a reflection of his own conscious and subconscious mental content; and no mind-created illusion can then have power over him if he knows its origin and is able to recognize it. The illusory *Bardo* visions vary, in keeping with the religious or cultural tradition in which the percipient has grown up, but their underlying motive-power is the same in all human beings. Thus it is that the profound psychology set forth by the *Bardo Thödol*

constitutes an important contribution to our knowledge of the human mind and of the path that leads beyond it. Under the guise of a science of death, the *Bardo Thödol* reveals the secret of life; and therein lies its spiritual value and its universal appeal.

The *Bardo Thödol* is a treatise which needs more than philological knowledge for its translation and interpretation, namely, a thorough knowledge of its traditional background and of the religious experience of one who either has grown up in the tradition or who has imbibed its tradition from a competent living *guru*. In times of old 'it was not considered that the mere knowledge of language sufficed to make a man a "translator" in any serious sense of the word; no one would have undertaken to translate a text who had not studied it for long years at the feet of a traditional and authoritative exponent of its teaching, and much less would anyone have thought himself qualified to translate a book in the teachings of which he did not believe.'<sup>1</sup>

Our modern attitude, unfortunately, is a complete reversal of this; a scholar is regarded as being all the more competent ('scholarly') the less he believes in the teachings which he has undertaken to interpret. The sorry results are only too apparent, especially in the realm of Tibetology, which such scholars have approached with an air of their own superiority, thus defeating the very purpose of their endeavours.

Lāma Kazi Dawa-Samdup and Dr. Evans-Wentz were the first to re-establish the ancient method of *Lotsavas* (as the translators of sacred texts are called in Tibet). They approached their work in the spirit of true devotion and humility, as a sacred trust that had come into their hands through generations of initiates, a trust which had to be handled with the utmost respect for even the smallest detail. At the same time, they did not regard their translation as final, or infallible, but rather like the pioneer translations of the *Bible*, that is, as being a starting-point for ever deeper and more perfect renderings in accordance with our growing acquaintance with the sources of Tibetan tradition.

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Ananda K. Coomaraswami, *Hinduism and Buddhism* (Philosophical Library, New York, n.d.), p. 49; and Marco Pallis, *Peaks and Lamas* (Cassell & Co., London, 1946), pp. 79-81. The latter is probably the best and most readable introduction to Tibetan Buddhism which so far has been written.

Such an attitude is not only the hall-mark of spiritual understanding and true scholarship, but it makes even the reader feel that he is treading on sacred ground. This explains the deep impression which *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, as well as the other complementary volumes of the Oxford Tibetan Series, have made upon thoughtful readers all over the world. The outstanding success of these works was due to their convincing sincerity and seriousness of purpose. Indeed, the world owes a great debt of gratitude to these two devoted scholars. 'Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti': 'The best of all gifts is the gift of Truth.'<sup>1</sup>

### THE BUDDHA'S REMEMBERING

'In recollection all former births passed before His eyes. Born in such a place, of such a name, and downwards to His present birth, so through hundreds, thousands, myriads, all His births and deaths He knew.'

*Ashvaghosha's Life of the Buddha*  
(Samuel Beal's Translation).

<sup>1</sup>Cf. *Dhammapāda*, xxiv, 21.