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## THE SURVIVAL OF CONSCIOUSNESS: A Tibetan Buddhist Perspective

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by

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Each one of us, deep down, cherishes a desire to live and to continue living, which is itself perhaps a strong indication of some basic intuition that there may be a life after death. If life or consciousness failed to survive death, there would be neither any meaning to life nor any ultimate justice. Nevertheless many people do claim that they believe there is no life after death. Yet, as we often discover in life, what we believe may have little or nothing to do with reality.

Sometimes people argue that since they do not remember their past lives, they can not have happened. However, this does not necessarily prove that they have not lived before. For example, earlier in this very life you may have undergone an experience of tremendous suffering. In the midst of its intensity, all the details will have seemed very close and very real. Now it has been over for so long that not only do you hardly remember it, but it even feels like it happened to someone else. Yet you are that very same person. In the same way, whether you have any memory of it or not, consciousness goes through various transitions and lapses of memory. Although you lose your identity when you die, you are still the same person. Losing your passport does not mean you cease to exist!

In Tibet, where reincarnation is accepted as a fact of life, even the reincarnated teachers do not necessarily remember all the details of their former lives. The main point about them is how the wisdom they have inherited from the past, which is deeply embedded in their consciousness, can be awakened and revealed.

There are those who comfort themselves in the thought that taking refuge in a belief in reincarnation will itself ensure them a desirable rebirth in the future, rather like one of the benefits to be had from joining an exclusive club. I once took part in a French television programme about reincarnation, in which everyone talked with great excitement about where they would like to be reborn, or the famous people they had been in previous lives. People do like to speculate about reincarnation. Yet this is missing the point completely. For the circumstances of our birth depend entirely on how we live **this** life now. That is the main point of life - and the main point of death.

Scientifically, it is impossible to prove whether there is life after death or not. But then it is equally impossible to prove whether there will be a tomorrow or not. The next minute is the reincarnation of this

minute, the next hour is the reincarnation of this hour, and today is the reincarnation of yesterday. In the same way, this life could be the reincarnation of a previous existence. It may be safer, at any rate, to give the survival of consciousness after death the benefit of the doubt. In the West, we have insurance policies against almost every conceivable eventuality. Yet ironically enough, as regards our own death, we have failed to insure for, or prepare for what is actually the greater part of life, namely eternity. Let alone the next life, we have neglected consciousness entirely.

If there is survival after death, the question that really needs to be answered is **what** survives, or **what kind** of consciousness survives. The most important issue here, that of understanding the nature of mind or consciousness has not been investigated scientifically in the West. Most investigations have limited themselves to looking at the projections of mind rather than at the mind that projects. For the one that suffers and the one that enjoys happiness are both the mind. The one who dies is the mind and the one who survives is the mind. This is why the whole Buddhist teaching, particularly on death and dying, centres around understanding the true nature of our mind, the true nature of our being.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead is now quite familiar in the West, but without understanding the background of its teachings, it could be more than a little confusing. It forms only part of complete cycle of teachings given by the remarkable figure Padmasambhava, who

brought Buddhism to Tibet and the Himalayan region, and is regarded by Tibetans as a second Buddha. These particular teachings demonstrate how, by realizing the nature of consciousness, the confused mind can be 'liberated into the original nature of the Buddha mind'. The actual title of the so-called 'Tibetan Book of the Dead' (which was coined by Dr. W.E. Evans Wentz for the first English translation) is the "Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo".

The Tibetan word 'Bardo' simply means the transition or gap between two realities. Padmasambhava expressed the whole spectrum of life and death within the context of six of these Bardos, three of life and three of death. Each has a set of teachings and meditation practices related to it. In these gaps the possibility of the nature of mind being revealed is particularly present. Actually, bardo experiences are happening to us all the time, and the objective of this approach is how to make use of these opportunities for awakening presented continually in life and death.

The three bardos of life are:

- from the moment we are born until we die - this lifetime
- the sleep and dream state
- the meditative state, or higher state of consciousness

The message continually spelled out in the Tibetan Book of the Dead is the need to prepare for death now, in life. Buddhist training places special emphasis on two factors - the realisation of the nature of mind on an absolute level, and the need to observe and value the working of Karma on a relative level.

From the Buddhist perspective, mind has two aspects: the ordinary mind known in Tibetan as SEM, and the 'fundamental consciousness' or clarity of mind known as RIGPA. The ordinary mind, SEM, includes that sense of self that we would like to continue. Since we want ourselves to continue, mistakenly we wish the ordinary mind to endure, because it is the **only** indication we have of our existence. Yet in reality there is another aspect of ourselves which we have not realised, beyond the ordinary, superstitious mind; this is our real nature, which does not die, but just survives. The whole point of the Buddhist teaching is, through meditation and practice, to realize this nature of mind which is beyond birth and death. When you have mastered this, and have the confidence and knowledge of being able to recognise it for yourself, then when you go through transitions, you are prepared. At death, you can let go of this life more confidently, in the realisation that you are not really losing anything at all - in fact you are only gaining.

In all religions, there is an underlying theme that every one of us has an inherent essential quality of goodness. Buddhists call it 'Buddha Nature'. In the process of our evolution, it is that goodness which we are all trying to uncover or free. Whenever we perform a positive action it moves us towards that goal; our negative actions further inhibit or obscure it. The reason we suffer in this life is that we are not true to our nature. At the same time, suffering is a teaching. Sometimes it seems that the very reason why we suffer in this life is to

free that goodness we have. Otherwise why do we evolve? There has to be a point; life is not a joke, it is for real.

At the heart of reincarnation lies the principle of Karma. There is no greater mistake than to think that Karma and reincarnation are simply theories of predestination. Actually the future is in our own hands, and in our own actions. As Buddha himself said: "If you want to know your past life, look into your present condition. If you want to know your future life, look into your present actions". In other words, the way in which we conduct this present life is the very key to the future. The word 'Karma' means action. Our every action is powerful and already pregnant with its consequences. However, we fail to see the natural evolution of Karma because the results do not mature immediately. Instead, whenever happiness or difficulties crop up, we simply call them 'good luck' or 'bad luck'.

In the East, home of the greater part of the world's population, life after death is a reality. Yet believing in reincarnation alone will not 'save' you. Much more to the point is how a person uses this understanding as a basis for leading a positive life. A good Buddhist actually lives karma rather than simply believing in it.

In Buddhism we explain the process of confusion in terms of what are called in Tibetan DIGPA and DRIBPA. Both are rooted in the unawareness caused by our stubbornness and ignorance. DIGPA, negative actions or neurotic crimes, comes the closest in Buddhism to the concept of 'sin'.

DRIBPA, obscuration or defilement, is created when we perform a negative action, just like a cloud of smoke is given off by a fire. These obscurations in the mind create further unawareness and mindlessness. In unawareness we are most prone to negative actions, with the result that, mindlessly and unconsciously, we again create negative karma or DIGPA, which in turn produces more obscurations. Thus, it becomes a vicious circle. In a nutshell, karma affects our mind, which in turn affects our actions and our life.

As the great Tibetan master, Longchenpa, said, the only way to end a circle is to cut it. Right there where you cut it is the beginning and the end. If only we were to recognise right now, enlightenment is in this very moment, confusion ends here and now. In this moment we can do it, beginning with ourselves, and with our own mind.

The first step is to consciously be more mindful, as when you are, there will effectively be less obscuration. Mindfully you try to avoid negative actions, and at the same time you develop mindfulness by disciplining the mind in meditation, through a practice like simply watching the breath and developing concentration through focusing on one simple action. Once developed, that mindfulness itself clarifies one's awareness, and banishes obscurations.

Another important element in the Buddhist training and preparation for death is how, through contemplation as well as meditation, the individual works towards an emotional acceptance of

death, and learns how to make use of the crises, upheavals and changes of life. These changes or small deaths that occur so frequently in our lives are a living link with death, prompting us to let go and revealing the possibility of seeing, in the gap they open up, the sky-like, empty, open space of the true nature of our mind. In the transition and uncertainty of change lies the opportunity for awakening.

Then there is the complete training in meditation and purification, which culminates in the student being introduced directly to the nature of mind by the teacher. This is then integrated and stabilised through practice. In this process of integration, all thoughts and emotions are liberated. When you are able to do this successfully, then at death you are able to remain in the recognition of your true nature. Our ultimate aim is, over the course of many lives, to discover our fundamental mind. Slowly it is revealed; when it is completely realised, that is enlightenment.

So more important for an individual than a scientific proof of the survival of consciousness is what it really means to him or her, and what he or she does about it. From a deep understanding, a personal conviction is born; to all intents and purposes, that is a scientific discovery. If someone actually realises the continuity and meaning in life, and the effects of their actions, then there is a point to leading a good life. When we really pay attention to our own actions, then the future is in our hands. So the very best way to help yourself prepare for the time of death is to begin with what you do now.

The main emphasis of practice in the Buddhist tradition is to let go of attachment, and to let go of the conditioning and habits which make up the cloudy level of mind. When we die, whatever memories we have gathered in this life die, utterly. When we are reborn we develop a fresh memory. But deep down karma is registered as a person's basic character or disposition. Karma affects their whole being.

Regardless of whether we remember our past lives or not, our true nature exists, and it survives. The moment of death is the moment in which we can break through and gain liberation. If we fail, it is because we do not let go. The reason we do not let go is that we hold onto our ways and these become the nucleus of our new life. Our future birth is dictated by our old ways. We may not be able to surrender completely; there may be some karmic residues. Yet however much we are able to surrender, that much more our karma becomes free or purified, thereby determining a better rebirth.

The bardo of this lifetime embraces the other two bardos of life, sleep and dream, and the meditative state. All three, if used well, are opportunities for realizing the nature of consciousness. Through becoming more sensitive to the gap or transition, we are more prepared for it when it occurs in a more powerful way at death. Through meditation itself we arrive at a clearer understanding of mind and familiarise ourselves with its true nature. The dream state can also help us to understand better the awakened state and develop a more

detached and humorous attitude to life. A spiritual practitioner can work with sleep; since maintaining awareness during sleep is a way of rehearsing for death; likewise dream is analogous to the bardo state after death. Sleep and dream can also be used by a meditator to reflect whether his practice is working or not.

During a day we experience different levels of consciousness: our waking state is the grossest, dream less so, and deep sleep the most subtle. Similarly in life and death, our ordinary life represents the grossest level of consciousness, the intermediate state between death and rebirth is subtler, and death itself is the very subtlest.

The three bardos of Death outlined by Padmasambhava are:

- the bardo of the moment of death, which is the time between the onset of the process of dying and its culmination in death;
- the bardo of 'dharmata' - the 'essence of things as they are', when the nature of consciousness manifests in the form of visions;
- the bardo of becoming, from the time when the consciousness leaves the body until the next birth.

Mind has many levels. Here it is a question of whether you can hang on to the one that survives and let go of the one that dies, like backing the right horse. What dies at death is the grasping that dilutes the pure energy of our mind and clouds its natural space. When that grasping habit dies at the moment of death, if we let go, the possibility of awakening presents itself most

prominently. Just as when clouds evaporate, the clear sky is naturally there, what survives after death and change is what is true. And in this truth, enlightenment takes place. This is the Buddhist sense of eternity, the space where even discontinuity is part of a fundamental continuity.

When, at death, all the gross aspects of our body die, our ego dies, memory dies and the many outer levels of consciousness peel off and die as well. We die into our essence, our true nature; from there we are born again. Knowing the nature of mind, and maintaining the larger view affords us the courage to let go of all the smaller aspects of ourselves, like our attachments, at death.

Although the fundamental mind or RIGPA is always present, usually it is hidden behind the cloud-like screen of our thinking mind. Occasionally though, inspired by meditation or certain situations, we are awakened to a deep knowledge of the fundamental essence of mind. At the moment of death, when the ordinary mind dies completely, we experience complete enlightenment. That is the birth of RIGPA in its fullness. Though this experience happens to all of us when we die, the point is how we die, depending on whether we have practised or not. For a spiritual practitioner, the moment of death is the crowning spiritual moment. Because he or she has been practising, when they experience the essence of the mind, it is familiar, and they can unite with it, thereby attaining enlightenment.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead describes many opportunities for liberation in the three Bardos of death. It is designed to be read to a dying person who has practised in this tradition and is therefore acquainted with it, so as to awaken their recognition and introduce the nature of mind at each juncture.

Entering the **Bardo of the Moment of Death**, when the signs of death indicate that death is inevitable, a person should gather together all their strength, and, instead of worrying or thinking too much, they should focus on the essence of their spiritual practice. The individual's state of mind is of paramount importance at the moment of death, and it is essential they are not distraught or disturbed. Hence a peaceful and loving atmosphere, an opportunity to make this last period of life really meaningful, a chance for forgiveness and clearing up unfinished business, and, above all, abandoning attachment, all contribute towards a person's ability to surrender at the moment of death.

To help a dying person is to help them towards understanding the nature of mind. When a practitioner approaches death, their practice makes them self-sufficient, although obviously they can benefit from loving support. But when we come to help someone who has no spiritual experience in their life to support them, we find that it is our love itself which can draw out the spiritual in them, and bring out their spiritual essence. Love can help a person come to terms with dying. The more they accept, the more they can understand.

It is also very important for a person to maintain their awareness at the moment of death. If they fail to do so, then their consciousness will be interrupted, and there will be no memory, as they will have moved on to a different dimension of being, a domain where the previous consciousness has no way of recalling or feeling familiar. This is why most of us are afraid of what will happen after; since we have not worked with mind, we have no idea what we will experience.

Remarkable parallels can be found between the phases of the 'core experience' and other aspects of near-death phenomena, as recorded by authorities such as Moody, Sabom, Ring and Grey, and the very precise description of the experience of dying and death contained in the traditional teachings associated with the Tibetan Book of the Dead. The process of dying itself begins with the 'stages of dissolution'. This dissolution is actually the reverse process of birth. At the time of conception, the consciousness of the would-be child is blown by the 'wind of karma', or inclination, to the spot where the future parents are making love. Seeing them, it becomes involved and a feeling of attraction or aversion is generated; attraction to the mother and aversion to the father will result in a male child, and the reverse a female. At the moment when the sperm and ovum unite, the consciousness is sucked in, and the elements within the father's and mother's essence provide the basic constituents for the body. Subsequently, the father's essence rises to the level of the head, and the mother's descends to reside below the navel, at the level of the womb.

The process of death, then, begins with the dissolution of the elements into one another, along with the simultaneous dissolution of the psychological components or 'aggregates' of ego, namely form, feeling, perception, intellect or concept, and consciousness. The stages of the dissolution are each marked by identifiable external, physical signs as well as inner experiences. The earth element dissolves into water, water into fire, and fire into air. When air dissolves, the person breathes out and can hardly breathe in. Finally, even the outbreath ceases. At that time the inner air dissolves into the central channel. The father's essence descends, producing a vision of whiteness likened to looking through a window and seeing 'the autumn moon'. Then the mother's essence rises, when there is a vision like a red sunset. As they meet at the heart and fuse, the consciousness faints into a dark, empty space.

The mind dies only for a moment. When you awaken, you experience the sheer luminosity of mind, the subtlest level of consciousness, which is compared to an 'immaculate dawn sky in autumn'. The crucial issue is how prepared we are at the moment of death, and consequently how we react. A person whose energies are very closed, or who has not done much spiritual practice, can remain in this state of darkness for quite a while. Then the luminosity, the experience of the enlightened mind, appears for only a second or two. On the other hand, for a practitioner the consciousness faints for only a short period, after which it awakens to the vision of the enlightened mind.

As the nature of mind, with its energy of tremendous luminosity dawns, an extremely adept practitioner can simply recognise it as the nature of his mind. Connecting it to his own awakened state, he maintains full awareness and merges with it, hereby attaining liberation. For other the point when the outer breath is ceasing but the inner breath is continuing, is the time when the reading of the Tibetan Book of the Dead to the dying person is begun, or, if he or she has been trained in the meditation practice of PHOWA, the direct Transference of Consciousness into the enlightened state, they are assisted in effecting this practice.

All the conditioning, everything that has clouded the enlightened mind has fallen apart, and the true nature of reality presents itself nakedly. Here the consciousness enters the **Bardo of Dharmata** -'as it isness', or nature of reality. When one fails to recognise this first vision of luminosity, it dissolves and disappears. Now the mind begins to free itself of its projections. As its blockages are freed, energy is released, and explodes as visions of colour, sound and light, depicted in the tradition of the Tibetan Book of the Dead as the 42 peaceful and 58 wrathful deities.

This energy has the quality of the subtle elements, earth, water, fire, air and space. The consciousness experiences all the various aspects of the mind, like anger, desire, ignorance and so on, which are the blocked energies of our inherent nature. As they are unleashed and opened up, they emerge in their own wisdom form, with tremendous light

and brilliance. All depends on whether a person can recognise these visions as projections of their own mind, nothing but their inherent wisdom. For if they can take refuge in this brilliant light of wisdom, the freeing of these energies, then this is another opportunity for liberation.

However, this is difficult for a person who has not the experience of practice, that trust and stability that come from understanding the nature of mind. We are more prone to taking refuge in our old habits, rather than simply letting go; we are more inclined towards anger, for instance, than to its pure and liberated counterpart. For at the same time, out of our basic tendency towards grasping, built up during life, come a range of experiences of instincts such as aggression, greed, stubborn stupidity, passion, jealousy, arrogance and self-intoxication. These energies manifest as a soft, cosy light, less challenging and overwhelming than the light of wisdom. If our reaction is instinctive, then accordingly we progress to a rebirth determined by the confused and diluted energy with which we identify.

For most people, the descriptions of these visions as detailed in the Tibetan Book of the Dead might seem rather strange. Everybody, being composed of the same psychological components and elements, will go through them, but western people probably experience them in forms that are more familiar. The main principle of the visions is not so much what they are, but how a person relates to them. Their form provides a reference



point for the practitioner, who is able to attune to the energy, luminosity, and quality of the vision.

If a person fails to recognise these visions as projections and thereby gain liberation, then the visions dissolve. It is at this point that the consciousness leaves the body and continues its journey into the **Bardo of Becoming**. It now possesses a 'mental body' which has a number of characteristics. It is very light and lucid, and the consciousness is said to be nine times clearer than in life, clairvoyant, and possessing miraculous powers. It is similar to the body of the previous existence but perfectly complete and in the prime of life. It can move unobstructed almost anywhere, and travel just by thinking, although its only light is a dim glow illuminating the space immediately in front of it. The consciousness undergoes various experiences in the Bardo, for example: it repeats all the experiences it has in life, returning to places where even it once just spat; it goes through all kinds of terrifying experiences; and it has experiences of where it is to be reborn. At first it does not realize it is dead, and tries to converse with its family, only to receive no response, which causes it tremendous distress. When it sees its relatives weeping, disposing of its possessions, and not laying its place at the table, it realizes that it is dead. It can, however, see and converse with the many other travellers in the Bardo world whom it will meet.

Many of the qualities of the mental body, i.e. the heightened clarity of consciousness, mobility, supernatu-

ral perception, increased susceptibility to influences, ability to concentrate and meditate when instructed, and keenness of attention due to the intensity of fear in the Bardo, in fact render it more accessible to spiritual help from the living in the form of practice and charity dedicated in their name, or simply even good thoughts directed towards them. This holds true especially during the first 21 days after death. The whole bardo experience associated with death is said to have an average duration of 49 days, of which the first 21 are more involved with the life just lived, and the rest more associated with the life to come.

As the consciousness is so extremely light and mobile, whatever thoughts arise, good or bad, are very powerful. Hence a reaction such as anger, for example, on observing rituals carelessly performed on its behalf, or greedy relatives squabbling over its possessions can be very potent and dangerous. The Book of the Dead therefore urges the consciousness to guard against impure thoughts, feelings such as aggression and fear, and attachment to its former possessions. At the same time, the Book of the Dead seeks to awaken the dead person's connection with any spiritual experience he might have had, and once again gives instructions on using this opportunity to recognise the nature of mind and be liberated. "Do not be distracted", it advises, "this is the dividing line where Buddhas and sentient beings are separated". It is said of this moment:

'In an instant, they are separated, In an instant, complete enlightenment'."

There are then instructions on how to recognise signs of the next rebirth and thereby avoid an unfavourable one, and how to select a birth in the human world, where one may once again encounter the teaching.

So here we have taken a brief glance at the Buddhist view of the survival of consciousness, and traced its passage through life and death. What emerges throughout is the stress emphatically placed on the understanding of the nature of consciousness, or mind, as the ultimate goal of life, essential for preparing for the moment of death and for dying free of regret. The whole point of the Buddhist teachings was, in a sense, summed up by Milarepa: "not to be ashamed of myself when I die". An ordinary person who had this perspective of the continuity of consciousness throughout a series of lives would certainly never despair in life, nor

be reduced to the point of suicide. How consciousness will survive after death depends on its immediate condition, what state it is in at this very moment. To take care of the future, we need to attend to the present, the consciousness we have **now**. We tend to be very concerned about the consciousness which will survive, but, as we have seen, this very consciousness is itself the whole basis for our work, and evolution. Our response should be to cultivate a deeper awareness of ourselves. An understanding of that fundamental consciousness which we all share can only inspire in us a more caring attitude and a more positive, responsible approach to life. Going beyond the individual, such an awareness could play a very significant part in furthering a more enlightened outlook in the world and encouraging that peace and harmony for which we all yearn.



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