



# Powa, Niguma, and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

The Western understanding of the Tibetan doctrines concerning death and the afterlife, as well as of rebirth and the Pure Lands, largely comes from the amazing popularity achieved by the *Bardo Todol (The Tibetan Book of the Dead)*. Originally translated by Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup and edited by Evans-Wentz, the 1927 edition from Oxford University Press quickly became an international success and received renderings into a dozen Western languages.<sup>1</sup>

Half a dozen subsequent translations of this extraordinary Tibetan work have appeared since that time, and the original by Kazi Dawa-Samdup and Evans-Wentz remains in print. Perhaps the most accessible of these alternative renditions is that by Francesca Fremantle and Chogyam Trungpa.<sup>2</sup>

The introductory verses to this famous classic state:

*It is said that those of superior capacity,  
The great yogis and yoginis,  
Should be able to attain liberation during this very  
lifetime  
By relying on the stages of Tantric yoga application.  
If they do not succeed in this, then they should apply  
The methods of consciousness transference at the time of  
death.*

*Even mediocre yogis can gain liberation through this  
transference.  
However, if they do not succeed in the effort,  
Then they should turn to a reading of this Bardo Todol,  
a text  
For achieving liberation through hearing in the bardo.*

In other words, the best Tantric practitioner can achieve enlightenment during his or her very lifetime. The next best should apply the yogas of transference at the time of death.

The Tibetan word for this transference is *powa* (consciousness transference), and includes both transference to the *dharmakaya*, which means the attainment of enlightenment through immersion with the clear light consciousness at the time of death and, for those unable to perform this yoga, the transference directly to rebirth in a Pure Land.

Finally, those who are unable to succeed in the transference yogas by means of personal application and proficiency should rely upon a reading of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*,<sup>3</sup> and either achieve liberation in the *bardo* (the state between death and rebirth), or else find guidance for rebirth in a Pure Land. The early sections of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* therefore concentrate upon teaching the deceased how to achieve liberation in the *bardo*; the later sections teach how to find the path to an auspicious rebirth in a Pure Land.

Concerning this latter method *The Tibetan Book*

Figure 65  
**Mandala Used in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead***  
Tibet; 18th century  
Pigment on cloth  
28 x 18.25 in. (71.1 x 46.4 cm)  
Rubin Museum of Art  
F1997.38.1 (HAR 557)

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* speaks of how a person can achieve any of the three Buddhist goals, both during life and following the moment of death. The three goals are full enlightenment, liberation, and rebirth in a Pure Land. In addition to these three, an accomplished *yogini* can take conscious rebirth in *samsara*, in order to fulfill the bodhisattva vow in more worldly ways.

This mandala of the 100 peaceful and wrathful deities that symbolize the death and rebirth process is a map to accomplishing those three ways, both in life and in death. The five Tathagata families, with their associated bodhisattvas and consorts, adorn the corners of the canvas. The five wrathful Heruka families are at the center. The six buddhas who work in the six realms of the world can be seen along the sides.

of the Dead states, “As for how to choose the place of rebirth, there are two methods. The first is the method for taking rebirth in one of the buddhafields. The second is the method for taking rebirth in the impure world in an ordinary womb in order to continue Dharma study, practice, and work in the human realm.”

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is based on a tradition of the mandala of 100 peaceful and wrathful deities (see figure 65). That is to say, the peaceful and wrathful buddhaforms that are experienced in the *bardo* visions that arise during the first two weeks following death are all drawn from this mandala. According to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, those who daily recite the *sadhana* (method of practice) of this mandala during their lifetime will recognize the *bardo* experiences in terms and forms expressed in the mandala and its inner meanings.

However, this Tantric system and its mandala are but one of many that are practiced by the various sects of Tibetan Buddhism. Every Tantric system has its own methods of using the experiences of dying and the *bardo*.

An important alternate tradition is The Six Yogas of Niguma. Brought to Tibet by the eleventh-century yogi Khyungpo Naljor, it was formulated by the great Indian female mystic Niguma as a synthesis of numerous Buddhist Tantric systems prevalent in eleventh-century India. The Niguma system of *bardo* yoga is a central pillar of the Shangpa Kargyu School (not one of the twelve Kargyu Schools, as the name would suggest, but a separate school altogether). The Shangpa does not exist as a separate school today, but its lineages from Niguma can be found in most of the major schools, having been absorbed and integrated many centuries ago.

The Niguma system uses dream yoga as a platform for experimenting with the *bardo* yogas. This is made possible because of the similarities between the dream body and the *bardo* body. In his commentary to this yoga system the Second Dalai Lama writes,<sup>4</sup> “They (dream and *bardo* bodies) are both made of light, and formed from five purified essences.” He then goes on to explain how dream yoga is practiced as an introduction to *bardo* yoga.

Khyungpo Naljor himself said,<sup>5</sup> “The generation stage and completion stage yogas, and in particular

dream yoga and clear light yoga, are the means whereby the three *bardo* bodies are purified.” The three “*bardo* bodies” that he is referring to are the sense of physicality (or that of having a body) that we experience on three occasions: (1) the *bardo* of the waking state (i.e., the state between waking and sleeping); (2) the *bardo* of dreams (i.e., the state between going to sleep and waking up); and the *bardo* of the afterlife (i.e., the state between death and rebirth).

The idea of the six yogas is that one uses the first three of them—inner fire, illusory body, and clear light—as direct methods for achieving enlightenment during one’s life and the attainment of release from the round of compulsive birth, death, and rebirth based on suffering. However, if one does not get all the way to that destination, then one uses the auxiliary methods for achieving an auspicious rebirth. Two of the auxiliary methods are *bardo* yoga and *powa*. The sixth, or dream yoga, is connected with both the illusory body yoga and the *bardo* yoga, and so it can be viewed either as an “enlightenment in this lifetime yoga” or a yoga for training in the methods to be applied at the time of death for achieving enlightenment, liberation, or high rebirth at that time.

The Six Yogas of Naropa provides an approach to the death and *bardo* experiences that is somewhat similar to that of The Six Yogas of Niguma. Brought to Tibet by Marpa Lotsawa in the eleventh century, The Six Yogas of Naropa became the basis of all twelve Kargyupa sub-sects.<sup>6</sup> This system also does not rely upon the mandala of 100 peaceful and wrathful deities, nor upon the associated *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Instead it relies upon “three root yogas” for achieving enlightenment in this lifetime; and, if this effort does not take the practitioner all the way, then “three branch yogas” can be applied at the time of death. Again, one of the six is *powa*.

In both the Niguma and Naropa systems the body is prepared for *powa* when the person is still strong. The practitioner usually undertakes a meditation retreat of several weeks or months, until signs of success become manifest. The method opens the auspicious death channel, which is the crown aperture at the top of the head.

In his Niguma commentary the Second Dalai Lama writes:<sup>7</sup>

*One should make the observations for the signs of death and, when they occur, should apply the longevity methods. When these do not work and the signs of death are not turned away, the time has come to apply the actual transference yogas.*

He goes on to say:

*It is best to apply the training techniques before becoming too weak with illness. Once severe illness has set in, one will not be able to master the trainings, no matter how strong one's wish may be.*

The Niguma system speaks of how the Tantric yogas for the *powa* application are applied by means of a *kundalini* application, forcing the subtle energies up and down the central energy channel running through the *chakras*, from the main *chakra* at the sexual center up to the crown *chakra* in the upper regions of the brain. Energy is forced up and down this channel, using physical exercises and power breathing, until a blister appears on the crown of the head.

In old Tibet the stem of a particular herb would then be inserted into this blister, so as to keep it always open. A practitioner would keep the herb protruding out from his or her skull like this for several days after this sign of accomplishment had manifested. One can often see the mark caused by scar tissue on the head of a person who has successfully completed this retreat. The monastic tradition of shaving the head twice monthly renders the scar readily obvious on monks and nuns.

The Second Dalai Lama explains:<sup>8</sup>

*By means of the vase breathing technique and energy control application one causes the vital energies that operate in the doors of the senses to be withdrawn, and to be directed into the central channel. This must be accomplished in order to effect the transference competently. One cuts off eight of the nine paths of exit of consciousness, leaving open the golden passage, which is the brahma aperture at the crown of the head. It is through this golden passage that one will effect the transference to rebirth in a Pure Land or as a knowledge holder when the time comes.*

He then points out the four main *powa* techniques that were taught in Tibet: transference to the suchness of

*dharmakaya*; transference by the guru's blessings; transference of divine great union; and transference method of the unailing *dakini*.

The Niguma system uses the fourth of these. It gives two options: red and white. The red is symbolized by a red *dakini* flying through the heavens and the white by a white *dakini* offering her *yonis* (vagina) as the path of rebirth. We see both of these in the *tangka* shown here (see figure 66).

The Second Dalai Lama explains the associated meditation technique:<sup>9</sup>

*Begin by performing a guru yoga meditation as explained earlier. Offer strong prayers to be able to accomplish the transference yoga to whatever Pure Land is desired. Sitting in the vajra posture with legs crossed, place the hands on the thighs, and visualize yourself as Chakrasamvara in sexual union with Vajrayogini. The central energy channel runs straight up the center of your body, from a point four finger widths below the navel up to the brahma aperture, the thickness of a wheat straw.*

*At the base of the channel is the triangular dharmadaya, white outside and red inside, with two of its points toward the kidneys and the third toward the sex organ. Inside the lower aperture of the central channel is one's own mind in the form of a white Sanskrit syllable AH. It seems light and delicate, as though it could be blown away by the slightest breeze. Fix your mind upon it for some time.*

*Then visualize either the white or the red dakini above your head, her appearance as described in the standard manuals. . . . Offer the following prayer, "O Mother Yogini, please guide me to the Pure Land of Dakinis, the Land of Bliss and Void. Meditation deity Vajrayogini, guide me to the Pure Land of Bliss and Void. Holy guru Vajrayogini, guide me to the Pure Land of Bliss and Void. Female Buddha Vajrayogini, guide me to the dakini's Pure Land of Bliss and Void."*

*One now draws in the subtle prana energies from above and below, and presses them into the syllable AH, while pressing with muscles of the abdomen and pelvic floor into the AH. One fixes the mind upon the AH in this way while directing the energies and applying the vase breathing technique.*



Lights in the form of hooks emanate down from Vajrayogini's heart, visualized above one's head. They strike against the syllable AH and pull upward on it. Simultaneously make the precise yogic movement with the lower spine as directed. This causes the lower energies to move upward. Intone the mantric syllable HIK. Visualize that the AH syllable enters the central channel and shoots upward to the brahma aperture. Then bring the prana energies down again, and visualize that the AH comes back down to its former resting place at the base of the channel. Repeat this process as many times as possible.

At the conclusion of the session, a stream of nectars flows forth from Vajrayogini's heart, descending down her body and exiting by her lotus aperture, entering one's brahma aperture and dissolving into the AH. One continues with the vase breathing technique throughout the application. It is well known that overly practicing the *powa* yoga can shorten one's lifespan, so engaging the vase technique in connection with the flowing of the nectars in this way is applied as a method of prolonging lifespan.

The sign of progress is that a blister will form on the crown of the head. The brahma aperture site will become itchy, and a drop of pus and blood will form there.

In this way the Second Dalai Lama briefly describes the meditation and yoga technique for the *powa* training as taught in the Niguma system. After the blister forms,



Figure 66  
**Powa Yogas of the Shangpa Kargyu Tradition**  
 Mongolia, date unknown  
 Pigment on cloth  
 16.75 x 12.25 in. (42.5 x 31.1 cm)  
 Rubin Museum of Art  
 C2003.50.11 (HAR 1090)

Chakrasamvara stands in sexual union with Vajrayogini at the center of the painting. The four *dakinis* of the mandala dance below. This is the Tilbu Lha Nga form of Chakrasamvara, or "Ghantapada's Five Dakini Mandala."

Buddha Vajradhara sits at the upper center, with the white and red *dakinis* in circles of light to either side of him. These two *dakinis* are used for the "white and red *powa*" techniques, two methods of consciousness transference to a Pure Land that are popular in the Shangpa Kargyu tradition.



the death channel has been cleared, and it becomes easy to die consciously and to leave the body by this most auspicious aperture when the actual time of death arrives.

The practice during life is done as described above. At the time of death, one engages in “the actual application,” which means the real transference from this world to the next. Consciousness is here pulled up to the central channel, to the *brahma* aperture (as before). But now it is held here, and is not brought back down. Instead, it is projected out of the body via the *brahma* aperture, where the blister had formed many years earlier by means of yogic training. Consciousness then enters into Yogini by means of her sexual passage. If one is doing the practice in connection with the Red Yogini, one’s consciousness travels to her heart, and if with the White Yogini it comes into her womb.

The Yogini then flies away to a Pure Land, taking one’s consciousness with her. One is then reborn there. Alternatively, one can make the determination to remain inside of the Yogini until an appropriate time comes for rebirth in the ordinary world as a Tantric adept in order to continue one’s practice and work for the benefit of the world.

The Tibetan tradition places great emphasis upon dying consciously. This is true in both sutra and tantra approaches. No Buddhist would hope to die unconsciously in his or her sleep, nor in a drugged stupor, no matter how painless this would be.

To the contrary, the aspiration is to die sitting up in meditation, or if one is too old or too weak from illness to accomplish this, then one should attempt to pass away while lying on one’s side in the lion posture, which is the position in which the Buddha passed away in his old age (see figure 16).

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* states:<sup>10</sup>

*If the yogi wants to attempt powa, or consciousness transference, then he should observe the signs of the death process as they arise, and look at them as clearly as watching them manifest in a mirror. Then when the signs of the final stage of death have arisen, he should recollect and apply the powa method of release. If this transference method is successful, then there is no need for a reading of the Bardo Todol text.*

*However, if the powa technique does not work, then the ritualist should sit near the body and clearly chant the Bardo Todol.*

Most Tibetan manuals on rebirth management suggest that if one should happen to meet with death before enlightenment is achieved, then one should attempt to either sit in meditation or assume the reclining lion posture. One should then observe the outer and inner signs of death as they arise. Traditional texts explain these as follows: the earth energies dissolve into the water energies, and one loses power over one’s limbs; water energies dissolve into air, and the heartbeat slows drastically; air dissolves into fire, and the breath stops flowing; air dissolves into fire, and the body starts to lose temperature. Fire then dissolves into space, which in this case is mind, and four types of radiances are experienced, leading up to and culminating in the fourth, which is the clear light of the moment of death.

Simultaneous to the four elemental energy dissolutions described above, and the manifestation of their outer signs, one experiences according inner signs. They arise as states of consciousness traditionally described by the metaphors of a miragelike appearance, a wisp of smoke, flickering fireflies, and shimmering butterlamp light, respectively. Then the subtle male energies of the mind dissolve, and one experiences a white moonlike flash. The female energies of the mind dissolve, and the mind experiences a red sunsetlike flash. Male and female energies of mind collapse together, and one swoons into complete darkness. Consciousness prepares to leave the body, and the primordial clear light mind arises.

The best practitioner can then achieve enlightenment by linking to and blending with this clear light *dharmakaya*. The intermediate will be able to enter the *bardo* consciously and apply the Tantric yogas in the *bardo* in such a manner as to use the *bardo* body as a semblance of a *samboghakaya* body, thus reversing the process and returning to the clear light, where enlightenment is achieved. A reading of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* can help to facilitate this transition.

Finally, the practitioner who lacks the confidence to attempt either of these approaches can apply *powa* at this time. As is said in the above passage, no *bardo* is then experienced. Consequently there is then no pur-

pose in commissioning a reading of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. One by-passes the *bardo* altogether and takes immediate rebirth in a Pure Land.

*Powa* is taught within the larger context of Tantric Buddhism, which is a branch of the Mahayana. Consequently the emphasis is on the bodhisattva precept to always be of greatest benefit to others. This means using one's natural lifespan to its fullest limits. The issue arises, because from the time one completes the *powa* training, one has the power to project consciousness out of one's body directly to a Pure Land, thereby ending one's life prematurely.

Most *powa* manuals speak of this issue, and point out that making a premature transference is equivalent to suicide, and therefore is a contradiction of the bodhisattva vow. One should only apply *powa* as "actual application" when the full signs of the death have naturally manifested. Tsongkhapa quotes the Buddha on the point:<sup>11</sup>

*Perform transference when the time comes.  
To do so earlier is to assassinate a deity. . . .  
Therefore the wise make effort to accomplish skill  
In recognizing the signs of death as they occur.*

He goes on to explain that the accomplished practitioner will develop skills in reading signs of death. When they occur, he or she will first attempt the yogas for life extension and for turning away untimely death. Only if these do not work is *powa* an option. Then when the actual moment of death arrives, he or she observes the energy dissolutions as mentioned above, and makes the transference after the heart and breath have stopped.

The First Dalai Lama wrote a rather charming little work on the threefold practice of observing for the signs of death, the life-extension yogas that can be used to turn back the signs of death, and, if these yogas fail, then the methods of engaging the *powa* techniques. He states:<sup>12</sup>

*Various methods for preparing the mind for death have been taught in both the sutra and tantra paths. To list but a few of the Sutrayana methods, there is one called "Transference by means of the Instruction of the Thatness of Being," which is a vipassana technique that observes the profound shunyata nature of the moment of death. Then*

*there is the lojong (mind-training) method of meditating on the conventional bodhicitta of love and compassion at the time of death, of which there are many variations or lineages. Then there is the famous lineage uniting both Sutra and Tantra from the lineage known as "Instruction on the Three Essential Moments," which is based on the instruction "Abandon all attachments, and offer your body as a gift to all sentient beings. Unite with the seed of light and transfer to the Tushita Pure Land."*

*As for the exclusively Vajrayana methods, there are too many of these to list here. To name but a few: The Transference to the Three Kayas; the Avalokiteshvara Transference Instruction; the transference methods from the dakini tantras (i.e., the Chakrasamvara Tantra, the Vajradaka Tantra, the Vajrayogini Tantra, the Hevajra Tantra, the Samputa Tantra, etc); the exclusive Lamdrey methods (i.e., "Path and Fruit" a special name for the packaging of the Tantric tradition in the Sakya School); transference by means of the four Tantric initiations, such as transforming appearances by means of the vase initiation, etc; Transference by means of Mantric Syllables; and Transference by means of the Orb of Light. One should train in whichever of these is most appropriate with one's own abilities, background, karmic propensities, and subconscious inclinations, as determined in consultation with one's guru. Become proficient in the practice when strong and healthy. Then when death occurs you will be able to easily engage the method and make the transference.*

As mentioned above by the First Dalai Lama, the *powa* methods are diverse, and there are many from which to choose. Most Tibetans use one of the Vajrayana techniques, and the methods from the *dakini* tantras is probably the most widespread. All of these methods are based on the principles outlined by the Second Dalai Lama in his discussion of the Niguma lineage.

Going back to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a passage states:

*It is best if the person has the ability to effect the transference of consciousness just when the breath stops. However, if there is no confidence that this can be done, then the ritualist should begin reading the instruction when signs of imminent death arise, reciting repeatedly as follows into the ear of the dying person.*



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Figure 67

**Padma Sambhava and the Transference to Sukhavati**

Tibet; 19th century

Pigment on cloth

26.5 x 19.5 in. (67.3 x 49.5 cm)

Rubin Museum of Art

C2006.66.440 (HAR 897)

This dramatic painting of Padma Sambhava expresses the importance of controlled death as an important key to controlled rebirth. The theme is illustrated by the vignette along the left of the painting, in which we see a yogi passing away while seated in meditation. A ritualist sits beside him, reading *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* aloud in order to assist him.

Dying consciously while seated upright in meditation is the ideal Buddhist death. The dying person controls and follows the dissolution of the elements as the death process sets in, and when the clear light of death arises, he holds to it.

Although the outer signs of death are complete, the body will not decay nor enter a *rigor mortis* state for as long as the meditator remains focused in the clear light of death. Great yogis often sit in this state, known in Tibetan as *tukdam*, for days or even months. Those who have not attained enlightenment during their lifetime can achieve it at this time.

Beings who have not achieved enlightenment can also leave the body in a controlled manner, and direct their consciousness to an appropriate rebirth in a Pure Land. This is represented in the painting by the image of Buddha Amitabha standing above the house of the dying person. Alternatively, one can attempt to direct the flow of the *bardo*, or after-death experience, in such a way that one achieves a rebirth in the human realm as a Tantric practitioner.

Other scenes at the upper section of the painting depict additional optional departure routes and their according Pure Lands. The top center, for example, is probably the Akanistha Pure Land of Mahavairochana, which is described in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Buddhas and other emanations come and go on rainbows, as they work from there to bring benefit to the world.



In other words, *powa* can be accomplished not only by personal application but also by means of the assistance of a skilled ritualist.

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* describes how the ritualist should proceed. He should begin by saying to the dying person:

*O child of noble character, whose name is Such-and-Such, the time has come to choose a path. The breath has ceased, and the clear light of death is about to become manifest. This is known as the "first bardo, the clear light experience."*

*Previously your teacher had induced a clear light mind experience within you. Recollect this clear light mind now: empty like space, the final void nature of all things, radiant emptiness without inner center or outer boundary. When this clear light consciousness arises, recognize and retain it, and rest within that sphere. Listen as I read this pointing out to you.*

The text then goes on to explain that when the breath stops, the ritualist should move the position of the body into the lion posture, placing it on its right side with the right ring finger pressed against the right nostril, just as is done in the training in the yogas of sleep and dream. Simultaneously he should press on the two energy pathway points associated with sleep. This will encourage the subtle energies to remain in the central channel *avadhuti* and will also encourage the consciousness to eventually leave the body by the crown aperture.

It continues:

*The actual reminder is then given, for this is the time that all beings experience the first bardo, called the "dharmata of clear light," and the "irreversible experience of dharmakaya mind." How long this state (of clear light dharmakaya mind) will continue in a given individual will vary in dependence upon conditions such as the positive or negative quality of the vessel, the pace at which the energy dissolutions occurred, the level of Tantric training the person achieved during his or her lifetime, the quality of the person's shamata power (meditative concentration), and the condition of the subtle energy pathways.*

*During this period, the pointing out should be repeatedly read. The sign (that the clear light experience has ended*

*and consciousness has left the body) is that a drop of yellowish liquid will be released from the aperture of the sexual organ. In general it is said that this clear light mind manifests for only a few finger snaps of time in someone who is pressed by strongly negative karma, whereas it can continue for a very long time in more highly evolved people.*

Naturally it is best if the dying person is able to apply the yoga himself, without any assistance. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* points out that this will not always be possible, and if this is the case, then a guru, a *vajra* brother, or someone with whom the deceased had a close spiritual relationship should sit to the side, observe the signs of the dissolution of the subtle elemental energies, and point them out, saying:

*Pay attention. It seems that now the earth energies are dissolving into the water energies. You are losing the ability to move your limbs. Observe the inner signs.*

*Now the water energies are dissolving into the fire energies. Your heartbeat is growing faint. Observe the inner signs.*

*Now the fire energies are dissolving into the air energies. Your bodily temperature is dropping. Observe the inner signs.*

*Now the air energies are dissolving into the mind energies. Your breath is ceasing. Observe the inner signs.*

In this way, the ritualist points out the outer signs and prompts the dying person to remain aware of the inner ones. He continues:

*Pay heed, one of noble character. The time of your death has come. Keep your mind clear and alert. Pay heed. As you enter the death state, meditate on love, compassion and the enlightenment aspiration. Generate the thought, "For the benefit of all living beings I will achieve peerless enlightenment."*

*In particular, generate the strong resolve that for the benefit of all beings you will recognize the clear light of death as the dharmakaya, and will accomplish the siddhi of mahamudra enlightenment in order to be of benefit to all living beings.*

*Moreover, resolve that if buddhahood is not gained when the clear light arises and you must enter the bardo, then*

*you will recognize the bardo as the bardo (and not be drawn into the illusory experiences and appearances). Resolve to transform that bardo body into a buddha form with realization of mahamudra integration, and then manifest countless forms to benefit those to be trained, bringing benefit to living beings as vast in number as the measure of space.*

These words should be read clearly and gently, with lips close to the ear of the dying person.

*Pay heed, Oh child of noble character who is called Such-and-Such. Listen well. The pure clear light of the dharmata is now arising. Please recognize it. Oh child of noble character, this pristine state of consciousness that you now experience has no limiting factors such as parts, isolates, or color. It is in nature the pure void itself. It is the dharmata in the nature of the All Good Female Buddha Samanthabhadri, the emptiness nature of your own mind. But it is not an emptiness that is a mere nothingness; rather, it is the unobstructed radiance of your own mind in the nature of the All Good Male Buddha Samantabhadra.*

*It is the void that is the non-inherent nature of your own mind, inseparable from and non-dual with the primordial radiance of that same mind. Thus, it is a Buddha's indivisible dharmakaya.*

*Rest within this great sphere of light that is the non-duality of the radiance and void nature of your own spirit, and become a radiant Amitabha Buddha beyond birth and death.*

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* points out that this initial stage of the death experience is the ideal time to apply the *powa* methods for transference. Here the transference to clear light *dharmakaya* was described in brief by the ritualist. If the dying person succeeds in it, then enlightenment is instantly achieved.

Alternatively, any of the other *powa* methods could be applied at this time. However, if the clear light *dharmakaya* transference is attempted but fails, then the person enters the *bardo*, and there is no turning back. He or she must then apply the *bardo* yogas from within that environment.

Again, these *bardo* yogas are taught in detail in

Tantric systems such as the Six Yogas of Niguma and the Six Yogas of Naropa. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* teaches them as a reading or liturgy, to be spoken near the body of the deceased. Because the *bardo* body is very supple and pliable, it easily can be transformed from one state into another. Hence liberation or even enlightenment is possible at any moment. Moreover, rebirth in a Pure Land can also be attempted. Most Tantric manuals recommend the former because of the great potential of the *bardo* state and suggest leaving the attempt for rebirth in a Pure Land for late in the experience, to be engaged only if and when the attempts at liberation and enlightenment have failed.

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* follows this same approach. The *powa* techniques applied at the time of death were unsuccessful, and so the deceased has entered the *bardo*. There again the deceased did not gain success either through personal effort of the *bardo* yogas, nor from the point-out instructions given by the ritualist in his chanting. It is now a late stage of the *bardo* evolution. The karmic forces sustaining the *bardo* body are waning, the soul of the deceased has grown weary from its wandering, and he or she is beginning to seek a suitable place of rebirth.

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* speaks of two methods for choosing a place of rebirth. One is for taking rebirth in a pure buddhfield, the other for taking rebirth in the impure world in an ordinary womb in order to continue dharma study, practice, and work in the human realm.

The ritualist instructs the deceased to generate the thought:

*How unfortunate I am. While countless others have achieved full buddhahood, or at least become aryas or arhats, I continue to wander lifetime upon lifetime since beginninglessness in the muddy swamps of samsara. I am exhausted with samsara, and want no more of it. No more will I be reborn in the ordinary world. Instead I will rely upon Buddha Amitabha, who vowed to bring all beings who call upon him to Sukhavati, the Pure Realm of Joy. No more birth from wombs or eggs for me! Instead I will take rebirth inside a lotus in Sukhavati right now.*

The text states that by fixing this thought clearly in one's mind and holding firmly to it, one will instantly

take rebirth in Sukhavati, Amitabha's pure paradise in the west.

It also states that there are numerous other bud-dhafields into which one can take rebirth and mentions Maitreya Buddha's Pure Land of Tushita, as well as many others, recommending that the deceased be encouraged to recollect and aspire to whatever Pure Land was his or her ideal during life.

The Seventh Dalai Lama once wrote a beautiful little poem entitled "Meditation on the Ways of Impermanence." In it, he embodies in a simple and down-to-earth manner many of the ideas expressed in the art and literature of life, death, and the Buddhist paradises.<sup>13</sup>

*To my lama, who is my refuge and spiritual father,  
The recollection of whom dispels all sadness,  
I turn for spiritual inspiration;  
Bless my mind with your transforming powers,  
That the thought of death may never evade me,  
That I may practice the holy Dharma perfectly.*

*On the golden mountains far in the distance,  
Rings of mist hang like belts on the meadows.  
Now seemingly solid, so soon they dissolve.  
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.*

*In spring, the season of warmth and growth,  
The stalks of the crops were turquoise green.  
Now, autumn's end, the fields lie naked and parched.  
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.*

*On each branch of the trees in my garden  
Hang clusters of fruit, swelling and ripe.  
In the end, not one piece will remain.  
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.*

*From behind the peaks of Mount Potala  
The sun rose like an umbrella in the sky.  
Now it has gone, fallen behind the western ranges.  
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.*

*They die old, they die young, day upon day.  
I am asked to throw their souls to a Pure Land  
Or to prophesy their conditions of rebirth.  
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.*

*Gray clouds cover the sky, obscuring it;  
The first drops of rain are about to fall,  
To be scattered everywhere by the dark, red wind.  
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.*

*In the belly of the vast plateau below me,  
The campfires of visiting traders glow like stars;  
But tomorrow they depart, leaving only refuse.  
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.*

*Warm summer days, the earth thronging with life;  
The minds of the people are lost in gaiety.  
Suddenly the cold winter wind crashes them down,  
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.*

High above, turquoise dragons roared in harmony;  
Around me, cuckoo birds chattered sweetly.  
But times have changed; where are they now?  
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

Dharma, the precious teachings of the Awakened Ones,  
Is a medicine supreme, curing all the mind's ills.  
These days many saints of old look down from Pure Lands.  
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

Hard it is to leave the mother who carried us,  
And hard to part from relatives and friends;  
Yet as the years pass, our links with them corrode.  
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

A young man, with teeth for the future,  
With plans for months and years ahead, died,  
Leaving but scant traces. Where is he now? Gone!  
My mind turns to thoughts of my death.

Buddha attained the glorious, immortal vajra-body,  
Yet he still enacted a death scene.  
This body of flesh, blood and bone, covered in skin,  
Like a bubble of water, is bound to perish.

From very birth a child sees his parents age,  
Sees them each day come closer to the grave.  
How can you say to me, "But I am still young?"  
I warn you there is no hope of hiding from death.

Spirits were high with expectations this morning  
As the men discussed subduing enemies and protecting  
the land.

Now, with night's coming, birds and dogs chew their  
corpses.

Who believed that they themselves would die today?

Look and ask among the people of your land  
For anyone even a hundred years old.  
You will be lucky to find even one!  
Do you not think your own death certain?

If you look closely at and contemplate deeply  
The people and things that appear around you,  
You can see that all are in constant flux.  
Everything becomes the teacher of impermanence.

I remember this body when it was a child,  
And as it gradually took the form of a youth.  
Now its every limb is twisted and worn.  
It is my own body, yet it delights not even my own eyes.

The mind itself is impermanent, constantly oscillating  
Between feelings of pleasure, pain and indifference,  
The fruits of positive, negative and neutral karmas.

Look where you will, at yourself or others,  
Life passes like a flash of lightning.  
When Yama's agents surround you, intent on murder,  
What do you think will happen to you?

Relatives, friends, wealth and property  
Shine with splendor in the eyes of worldly people;  
Thus, they bind themselves in shackles of attachment.  
This pathos; how will it end?

Body lying flat on a last bed;  
Voice whispering a few last words;  
Mind watching a final memory glide past:  
When will that drama come for you?

If you create nothing but negative karma,  
You will stand naked of instincts to benefit the hereafter.  
Where will you go after death?  
The mere thought of it makes you flinch.

Therefore I myself and beings like me  
Should leave behind meaningless ways  
And entrust ourselves to the gurus, yidams and dakinis,  
Begging them to prepare us for death's road.

In order to die well, with the joy and confidence  
Of being within the white rays of spiritual awareness,  
It is essential to begin readying yourself now.  
Familiarize yourself with the profound sutras and tantras.

By this song may those like me,  
Irreligious people little better than savages,  
Be caught in the flames of renunciation.  
May they evolve in spirit  
And may they attain to liberation.

22. Website: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shambhala>

23. This is the author's own translation of the Sixth Panchen's text.

## A Few More Buddhafields, Just for Fun

1. "Sutra of the Medicine Buddha," translated and annotated under the guidance of Dharma Master Hsuan Jung by Minh Thanh and P. D. Leigh (North Hills, CA: Buddha Dharma Education Association, International Buddhist Monastic Institute, 2001) 18–19.

2. The passages are from an oral teaching given by Rinpoche, available at <http://www.dharma-haven.org/thrangu-medicine-buddha.htm>.

3. Website: [http://www.lamayeshe.com/lamazopa/daily\\_prac.shtml](http://www.lamayeshe.com/lamazopa/daily_prac.shtml).

4. Edited from the version on the Zambala website, <http://www.suite101.com/discussion.cfm/buddhism/64797>.

## Tushita Revisted

1. As so often happens, a large number of great beings inspired this renaissance. One was Tsongkhapa, the master from the Kokonor region of Amdo who came to Central Tibet and studied under many of the most illustrious masters of his day, fusing together all of the strongest lineages from the Sarma (New Schools), and then housing them in his newly established Ganden ("Tushita" Monastery). Another was Longchen Rabjampa, the genius who gathered up the diverse threads of the doctrines of all the old lineages in Tibet extant at the time and fused them into a coherent whole. Longchenpa is really the founder of the Nyingma School as we know it today. There was no "Old School" before him, just a hodge-podge of pre-eleventh-century lineages. The great Buton Rinchen Druppa, working a generation earlier, had done much the same for the Sakya School. The list is long and impressive.

2. The exact meaning of Dzingchi seems unclear. Perhaps it is simply an old place name for the valley in which the temple was originally built. I asked my old friend and world-renowned Tibetan lexiconographer Tsepak Rigzin to look into the matter. He informed me that "Dzing" simply means pond, whereas "chi" could mean central, outer, or even lower. He felt it probably was a place name from King Songtsen Gampo's time (early seventh century), given in reference to the location of the valley in context to Olkha Cholung.

3. See figure 58. The frescoes under discussion were those of the Thirty-five Buddhas of Purification. Tsongkhapa famously offered 100,000 full-body prostitions to each of these thirty-five during his five-year retreat in Olkha Cholung. During this time, he fasted, eating only a handful of juniper berries each day.

4. From Tsongkhapa's collection of mystical songs and poems. Author's translation.

5. This poem is known by heart to many Tibetan monks, because it became incorporated into the Monlam Chenmo (Great Prayer Festival), a sacred music festival created by Tsongkhapa in 1410. It became an annual fifteen-day event celebrated in most monasteries throughout Central Asia. It was held on a grand scale at the Jokhang in Lhasa, with more than 20,000 monks attending. Although created by Tsongkhapa, founder of the Gelukpa School, it was quickly adopted by all schools. I included a translation of it in *Selected Works of the Dalai Lama I* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1981).

6. Western literature today often refers to this lake simply as "The Oracle Lake."

7. Yeshe Tsemo had been an important disciple of the First Dalai Lama. He later became abbot of Tashi Lhunpo for a term. His first-hand accounts of the creations of these two great works of art are important sources of knowledge in Tibetan art history. Unfortunately both were stolen and destroyed by the Chinese Communists in the 1960s.

8. Lama Drom was the lay disciple of Atisha. It was Drom who formulated Atisha's lineages into what became known as the Kadam School. The First Dalai Lama was informally thought of as being his reincarnation. This passage from the Second's biography, written in 1530, makes this obvious.

9. This is the Panchen who died in 1989 under suspicious circumstances. He has two reincarnations.

10. See note 9 in the chapter titled *How the Pure Lands Are All around Us*.

## Powa, Niguma, and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

1. Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup was a school teacher with a good command of the English language and a deep desire to make Tibetan literature available to an international audience. Evans-Wentz happened to meet him while traveling in the Darjeeling and Sikkim regions of India, and the two became friends. The lama translated, and the traveler translated. Dawa-Samdup died a few years later, and Evans-Wentz inherited his translations. Evans-Wentz published them in four volumes, all with Oxford University Press: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*; *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines*; *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*; and *The Life of Milarepa*. These were the first authentic translations of Tibetan classics to appear in English. They remain relevant reading today, three quarters of a century later.

2. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, trans. and annot. Francesca Fremantle and Chogyam Trungpa (Boulder and Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1975).

3. In the Nyingma tradition a ritualist will generally chant this book aloud beside the corpse of the deceased once a day for a number of days, with each reading taking three or four hours. The corpse then will usually either be cremated or will be cut into pieces and offered to the birds. It is not unusual to have the ritualist continue doing one reading a day until forty-nine readings have been completed.



4. The Second Dalai Lama's father was the head of the Shangpa Kargyu lineages in Tsang, and as a result the young lama received training in these traditions from a very young age. He wrote two texts on the Six Yogas of Niguma, as well as numerous treatises on other Shangpa practices.
5. The Second Dalai Lama gives this quote in his *Tri Yig*, or longer commentary. The idea of purifying the physical body during these three states means understanding the illusory nature of all objects of the five senses, and thereby freeing the mind from the bondage of the duality grasping syndrome.
6. The first English translation of a text on these Six Yogas appeared in the Kazi Dawa-Samdup and Evan-Wentz book *Tibetan Yogas and Secret Doctrines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935). They translated the brief commentary by the great sixteenth-century Drukpa Kargyu master Pema Karpo.
7. This is also from the Second Dalai Lama's *Tri Yig*. Author's translation.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Author's translation. Gene Smith of [www.tbrc.org](http://www.tbrc.org) kindly sent me a scanned Tibetan version of the text from his private collection.
11. The Second Dalai Lama quotes this passage in his *Tri Yig* on the Six Yogas of Naropa, stating the source as *The Vajradaka Tantra*. Tsongkhapa also wrote a text which is popularly known as *Powa Chenmo (Great Treatise on Consciousness Transference)*. Readers fluent in Tibetan can refer to it for more detail on the *powa* traditions of Tibetan Buddhism.
12. From the First Dalai Lama's commentary to the lineages descending from the eleventh-century Indo-Nepali female mystic Siddharani, known in Tibetan as Drubpai Galmo. Author's translation.
13. From the Seventh Dalai Lama's *Nyam Gur (Songs of Realization)*. Author's translation.

# Buddha in Paradise

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