



The Therapeutic Psychology of "The Tibetan Book of the Dead"

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Source: *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Oct., 1997), pp. 479-494

Published by: University of Hawai'i Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1400299>

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THE THERAPEUTIC PSYCHOLOGY OF
THE TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD

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Although we usually conceive of death as the endpoint of life, there is an important sense in which death, as an aspect of change and renewal, is ever present throughout life: each passing moment “dies” as it becomes past experience; a new moment is constantly “born” as the future becomes present. From moment to moment, beginnings and endings perpetually coincide. At a more mundane level, we also frequently meet with another form of death—a counterpart to our familiar conception: our habitual patterns of expectation and reaction to circumstances often lead to a deathlike stagnation and unanimated redundancy within our experience. This narrowing of horizons, though certainly problematic, does not preclude the permanent possibility of experiencing a liberating transformation of character and a “rebirth” of personality. The implicit and explicit means to achieve such a personal transformation within our present lives, as described in *The Tibetan Book for the Dead*,¹ is the subject of this essay. My aim is to recall and reemphasize some of the affinities between the text’s therapeutic intentions and the goals of psychotherapy, in recognition of its practical, socially all-encompassing message. In the course of this inquiry, I will discuss how some authoritative commentators on the text, namely Carl Jung and Lama Anagarika Govinda, have drawn our attention away from the text’s more pragmatic and existential value as a handbook for more insightful and liberated living.

In ordinary practice, *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* is read aloud as part of a Tibetan Buddhist funeral ceremony: it speaks to the dead person who, as a disembodied spirit, is believed to persist within hearing distance in an after-death realm of transition, or *bardo*. This is a transitional realm through which a disembodied spirit passes between reincarnations.² The text’s manifest purpose is to offer the dead person repeated opportunities for enlightenment during the *bardo* experience, such as to avoid rebirth into a renewed condition of suffering. This transitional experience, most importantly, presents itself as a period of decision making: the dead person can choose either to become enlightened by giving up his or her “unconscious tendencies” that inevitably led to suffering, or the person can choose to remain bonded to those dispositions and become fated to circle once more through the patterns of his or her former existence. The text’s guiding words are intended to help the dead person choose the path toward enlightenment. On the face of things, then, the text articulates the mechanisms that cause a disembodied soul to gravitate toward reincarnation, and be directed toward the avoidance of suffering through an enlightening personality transformation.

Philosophy East & West
Volume 47, Number 4
October 1997
479–494

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The after-death experiences described in *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* begin with those immediately following bodily death, and end with experiences that occur just before the disembodied person is reborn into a new physical body. The initial after-death experiences are moments of perfect clarity and insight. These are short-lived, however, and soon fall off into partially enlightened modes of consciousness, which themselves eventually degenerate into increasingly hellish and horrific experiences of bewilderment, selfishness, and animal aggression. The latter, absolutely terrifying, states of consciousness arise as the disembodied consciousness, after having failed to forsake its unconscious tendencies time and time again in its descent through the stages of the *bardo*, approaches the moment of being reborn into a new physical body and the world of ordinary life. Though couched in religious terms, the text's underlying message is familiar and commonsensical: people who do not change their ways are fated painfully to repeat themselves.

Since the after-death states of consciousness range from the heavenly to the hellish, individuals of different personality types will see themselves reflected in one or another of the *bardo* states. If one is a relatively enlightened person, then one will feel akin to the visions within the more peaceful *bardos*; if one is a more violent and selfish person, then one will easily recognize the visions within the more hellish after-death states. The text assumes that no one to whom it speaks is a perfectly enlightened personality, so at each stage of the after-death experience, the dead person receives therapeutic advice on how to overcome his or her "unconscious tendencies," whether the tendencies involve ignorance in general, overwhelming desire, envy, jealousy, or aggression. At whatever level of mentality the dead person is at home, the text aims to release the person from the confines and sufferings that characterize that individual's particular psychological condition.

The manifest contents of the after-death states of consciousness are visions of various Tibetan gods and demons. These deities appear to be as "real" as life within the after-death experience, but the text instructs the disembodied consciousness to regard them as merely the dream-like reflections of its own inner self. The gods and demons can thereby be viewed as symbolic forms expressive of the disembodied consciousness' basic psychic tendencies. In this respect, *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* is a psychological document that characterizes basic personality styles and presents the principles of those personalities in a symbolic and condensed, yet fantastically realistic, manner.

The key instruction that, if acted upon, generates a liberating personality transformation is repeated at each level of after-death consciousness: whatever the contents of the particular *bardo* phase happen to be, the disembodied consciousness is instructed to regard the objects experienced within that phase as nothing more than its own psychological

projections. The assumption is that upon seeing one's own godlike or demonic reflection as having no more substance than the moon's shimmering image in a pool of water, the natural attachment to one's ego-centered personality will soften. By interpreting the godlike and demonic objectifications of one's personality as illusory, one will be able to see one's own individuality itself as illusory. In this way, forsaking one's ego-centered self-conception leads to enlightenment. With this issues an elimination of personal suffering, since suffering is believed to be caused by egocentric forces such as ignorance, pride, jealousy, envy, and desire—forces that are objectively embodied by the godlike and demonic visions. Regarding these deities as “empty” entails a recognition that the psychological forces that generate personal suffering have no substantial reality.³

The exposition above broadly characterizes the manifest purpose and meaning of the text—a meaning that recognizes after-death states of consciousness, images of gods and demons, and rebirth into a new material body either as a human or as some other form of sentient creature. Complementary to this manifest meaning, however, is a more symbolic meaning—one that reveals how *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* is pragmatically and existentially directed toward the “dead” who are still living, and not especially toward those who are clinically dead. To reveal this less obvious meaning, we need to examine more closely some of the key features of the manifest meaning, for these indicate that both the existence of gods and the existence of an after-death *bardo* realm are questionable.

With respect to the reality of the gods and demons that are experienced in the after-death state, we have noted that the text informs the disembodied consciousness that these deities have no substantial reality of their own. Indeed, this is the central illuminating principle of the text. Two memorable excerpts are as follows:

Through the instruction of his guru he will recognize them [the visionary deities] as his own projections, the play of the mind, and he will be liberated. It is just like seeing a stuffed lion, for instance: he feels very frightened if he does not know that it is really only a stuffed lion, but if someone shows him what it is he is astonished and no longer afraid. So here too he feels terrified and bewildered when the blood-drinking deities appear with their huge bodies and thick limbs, filling the whole of space, but as soon as he is shown he recognises them as his own projections or as yidams; the luminosity that arises later, mother and son, merge together, and, like meeting a man he used to know very well, the self-liberating luminosity of his own mind spontaneously arises before him, and he is self-liberated.⁴

[W]hatever you see, however terrifying it is, recognise it as your own projection; recognise it as the luminosity, the natural radiance of your own mind. If

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you recognise it in this way, you will become a buddha at that very moment, there is no doubt. What is called perfect instantaneous enlightenment will arise on the spot. Remember!⁵

These excerpts confirm that the gods and demons experienced in the after-death state, although they appear with a reality equal to the material objects in the world of the living, are indeed believed to be nothing more than manifestations of the dead person's own psychological states.⁶ They are merely symbolic forms that express conditions of either psychological liberation or psychological bondage and suffering. This suggests that the path to enlightenment in no way depends upon favors or obstructions issued from the realm of the gods and demons that populate the after-death state; the path depends upon initially recognizing the images of the gods as manifestations of oneself in various possible and actual forms. Self-recognition alone initiates the path to more satisfactory levels of consciousness.

Although emotionally powerful in its employment of metaphors like the image of the moon and the recognition of a fearsome lion as merely a stuffed animal, the text's key instruction for enlightenment rests upon a questionable line of reasoning. To see this, we can distinguish between the form and the content of the visions of gods and demons within the *bardo*. Their form is to "look real"; their content is the disembodied consciousness' individual personality structure. With regard to the deceptively realistic form of the visions, although the dead person might feel vaguely at home within one of the *bardos*, it is not initially obvious to the dead person that what is being experienced is simply a projection of himself or herself, and not some objective realm of gods and demons. The situation is comparable to a person, who asleep in the midst of a vivid dream, remains unaware that he or she is only dreaming. What the key instructions do is wake up the dead person to the true nature of the experience, such as the dissolving of the objective form of the experience. When the visions are seen as they truly are, they are appreciated as having no independent reality and hence no power over the dead person, as would be the case if they existed independently.

Revealing that the realistic appearance of the *bardo* visions is deceptive, however, does not entail that the psychological content expressed by these visions is itself illusory. If the objects in a dream, for example, are shown to the dreamer to be none other than a figment of his or her imagination (e.g., as when one teaches a child to see that the objects of a nightmare are simply imaginary), it does not follow that the psychological structure that that dream objectively presents is also a figment of the imagination. For example, an imaginary monster within a young child's nightmare could very well express the child's inner anxiety. So from the recognition that the objects of the *bardo* experience are illusory,

we cannot also conclude that the individual self that projects these objects is itself illusory. Such an individual self may indeed be illusory upon further reflection and in consequence of further argument, but this does not itself follow from the recognition that the dream-like visions have no substantial reality of their own.

These considerations lead us to examine another aspect of the dead person's dispositions of character or "unconscious tendencies" that the gods and demons symbolically express. Representative of the more enlightened states are buddha forms that embody the fusion of compassion and knowledge; representative of the more animalistic states are flesh-eating demons, who, screaming "strike" and "kill," tear corpses limb from limb. With respect to interpreting the text in a practical and existential manner, it is important to determine whether there is good reason to interpret these represented states of consciousness literally, as after-death states occurring in an actual, after-death *bardo*, or whether it makes more sense to regard the after-death *bardo* itself as another projection of consciousness. If the latter is the case, then the after-death *bardo* would indeed represent a transitional condition, but one that can occur only within living experience. It would also follow that the consciousness that projects the after-death *bardo* could be none other than that of a living, flesh-and-bones person.

It might be thought that a definitive interpretation of the after-death *bardo* realm, either as a literal or as a purely symbolic realm, would depend upon how the text characterizes the essence of consciousness. We shall see, however, that the description of the essence of consciousness within the text is logically independent of whether or not there are actual after-death states of consciousness. In view of this independence, it remains well within the text's overall spirit to interpret its references to the after-death *bardo* as purely symbolic and, hence, as potentially quite meaningful to those who cannot recognize an afterlife. This, as we shall see, characterizes Lama Govinda's view, although he arrives at this perspective through a different line of reasoning. Before considering his interpretation, though, we should briefly examine how the text describes the essence of consciousness, and note that this description neither implies nor precludes the existence of after-death states of consciousness.

In its description of the experiences immediately following death, *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* characterizes consciousness as it is in itself. This is the condition of consciousness that is regarded as the ground of all experience. We can consider three alternative translations (1927, 1975, and 1994, respectively) of a central passage:

Thy breathing is about to cease. Thy *guru* hath set thee face to face before with the Clear Light; and now thou art about to experience it in its Reality in the *Bardo* state, wherein all things are like the void and cloudless sky, and the

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naked, spotless intellect is like unto a transparent vacuum without circumference or centre.⁷

As soon as your breath stops, what is called the basic luminosity of the first bardo, which your guru has already shown you, will appear to you. This is the dharmata, open and empty like space, luminous void, pure naked mind without centre or circumference.⁸

Just as your breath stops, the objective clear light of the first between will dawn as previously described to you by your teacher. Your outer breath stops and you experience reality stark and void like space, your immaculate naked awareness dawning clear and void without horizon or center.⁹

These passages assert that at the point of death, the dead person initially experiences the true, “clear and void” nature of consciousness—a “luminous emptiness” or “shining void.” Soon thereafter, the dead person loses contact with this, the person’s own universal nature, and begins to experience more idiosyncratic objectifications of himself or herself in the form of godlike and demonic projections—projections that reflect the unconscious tendencies of his or her personality. The experiential movement of the book, understood literally, is thus from a universal and liberated consciousness that appears to present reality in itself, to more and more particularized and restricted forms of consciousness, which represent the limited reality of the dead person’s egocentricity. These latter forms do not represent consciousness in its purity, but consciousness as “*karmically* obscured” in its more familiar, benighted, and bewildered forms—ones that we can recognize as typical of ordinary consciousness.

Although the text states that the gods and demons experienced in the after-death states are the projections of the dead person’s consciousness, the excerpts above still leave indeterminate the status of consciousness as a “luminous void.” It could be that, although the gods and demons are illusory, that the experience of the “luminous void” is not. On the other hand, it could be that the experience of the “luminous void” as representative of an actual after-death state of consciousness is also an illusion. There are thus two questions to be distinguished: (1) should a reasonable reading of the text recognize any after-death states of consciousness at all? (2) if it is reasonable to recognize after-death states of consciousness, which, if any, reveal either consciousness as it is in itself or reality as it is in itself? The manifest meaning of the text suggests that there are after-death states of consciousness, and that only the experience of consciousness as “clear and void” is truly revelatory. It remains unclear whether what is revealed is the nature of consciousness independent of the nature of reality or the nature of consciousness as nature of reality, but the spirit of the passages suggests the latter.

Consistent with the key passages cited above are two alternative positions: (1) reality is consciousness, and this is immediately known when consciousness is in the state of luminous emptiness during this life and/or during the initial after-death *bardo* state; (2) reality in general is indeterminate or indeterminable, but the reality of consciousness in itself, whatever its relation to reality in general happens to be, is a luminous emptiness. Both of these alternatives are consistent with the existence of after-death states of consciousness; both are also consistent with the nonexistence of after-death states of consciousness.

With regard to the second of the alternative views above, some further explanation may be appropriate, since one might believe that the claim that “all reality is consciousness” entails the existence of after-death states of individual consciousness. This, however, would not follow. There need not be after-death states of an individual’s consciousness (i.e., a dead person or “ego” who has after-death experiences), since at the moment of actual bodily death it is possible that every individual consciousness completely, and without a moment of personal reflection, dissolves into the universal consciousness, just as a raindrop dissolves into the ocean.

From an analysis of the text’s explicit claims about the nature of consciousness, then, we are left without a definitive position regarding the actuality of after-death states of consciousness that a dead person, as such, might experience. That is, if we accept that consciousness is essentially a luminous void, this alone does not imply the existence of after-death states of consciousness. We must subsequently approach the latter issue from a different angle, for example through an inquiry into the universality of the states of consciousness described in the after-death realm.

It is safe to assume that anyone who lives and dies in a place communicationally dissociated from Tibet in either time or space (e.g., ancient Peru) is not likely to experience Tibetan Buddhist gods in an after-death state of consciousness. Even supposing, quite remotely, that such a person had after-death experiences of the kind described by *The Tibetan Book for the Dead*, the entire symbolic meaning of the gods—a meaning revealed to the dead person by exposure to *The Tibetan Book for the Dead*—would be virtually meaningless.¹⁰ This fact alone goes very far in leading us to question the universality, not to mention the very reality, of the after-death visions of gods and demons described in the text. If, however, we were to acknowledge the existence of after-death states of the very general kind that the text describes, then perhaps a plausible position would be to maintain that after one dies, one experiences a series of basic human personality structures in some symbolic form or other.¹¹ Without some guide to the experiences, though, there would still be little possibility for salvation or enlightenment. The possi-

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bilities for the dead person's enlightenment depend so heavily upon the instructions given in *The Tibetan Book for the Dead*, or upon some comparable text or person who can fully communicate these instructions, that without such guidance, the person will regard the symbolic forms as realities, and not as projections of his/her own personality. Moreover, there remains the issue of whether there is indeed any communicational interface at all between the world of the living and the world of the dead, let alone one that can be crossed simply by means of inspired vocalization or mental concentration.

Such complications suggest that it is more reasonable to interpret the text as directed more toward the living than toward the dead, and directed more toward psychological realities than toward metaphysical ones. This leads us to regard the text mainly from a psychological and therapeutic perspective. Quite consistent with this is the essential spirit of Buddhism as a practice-centered, and not speculation-centered, outlook. Chandradhar Sharma describes this well:

[Buddha] repeatedly told his disciples: "Two things only, my disciples, do I teach—misery and the cessation of misery." Human existence is full of misery and pain. Our immediate duty, therefore, is to get rid of this misery and pain. If instead we bother about barren metaphysical speculations, we behave like that foolish man whose heart is pierced by a poisonous arrow and who, instead of taking it out while away his time on idle speculation about the origin, the size, the metal, the maker and the shooter of the arrow.¹²

Buddhism in general issues from the perception and experience of suffering in this world of the living, and is grounded upon fundamental prescriptions to alleviate this suffering. Given this pragmatic emphasis at the core of Buddhist insight, it would be consistent to interpret *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* as predominantly written for the "dead" of *this* world—those whose lives are tangled within cycles of desire, jealousy, envy, hatred, and aggression that generate continual suffering. This would include everyone at one time or another during their lives. The existence of suffering within this life is an absolute certainty; the existence of after-death states of consciousness is a matter of speculation and interpretation.¹³ It is commonly said that *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* is a book for both the dead and the living. The present interpretation suggests that it is certainly a book for the living, and perhaps one for the dead.

If we consider *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* as certainly a book for the living and maybe one for disembodied souls, then Carl Jung's authoritative and respected psychological commentary on the text stands in need of reevaluation.¹⁴ This is not because Jung acknowledges the existence of an afterlife; it is because his psychological interpretation draws the reader away from those very parts of the text that address living people

who now suffer. This, as we shall see in a moment, is partly the result of Jung's interest in showing how his own psychological theory fits the text more comprehensively than Freud's.

Before considering the details of Jung's psychological commentary, it is important to note why either Jungian or Freudian psychology is compatible at all with the spirit and meaning of the text. This has been alluded to above, and arises from the very close affinity between the character of ordinary dream consciousness and the after-death experiences described in *The Tibetan Book for the Dead*. It is well known that both Freud and Jung interpret dreams as symbolic of fundamental psychic contents. According to Freud, these contents are basic sexual tensions; according to Jung, they are universal thought structures, or "archetypes." Independently of the accuracy of Freud's or Jung's views on the specific nature of dream contents, both believe that although the items experienced within any particular dream have no objective reality of their own, they nonetheless symbolically reveal the psychic nature of the person who dreams. Similarly, with the possible exception of the initial experiences of the "luminous void," the after-death states of consciousness described in *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* are understood to represent symbolically the nature of the dead person's individual personality, as represented by deity-like objectifications of his or her "unconscious tendencies"—tendencies that lead the person into cycles upon cycles of rebirth and suffering.

This affinity between ordinary dream states and the after-death states of consciousness described in *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* establishes a close connection between the Western practice of psychoanalysis and the Tibetan Buddhist concept of rebirth: successful psychotherapy entails a rebirth of personality. The goal of psychoanalysis is to improve an individual's psychological health by revealing to the individual that individual's basic psychic structure and constellations of inner conflict. Within Freudian and Jungian analysis, this structure is discerned through an examination of the person's dreams (among other methods), since dreams are regarded as the symbolic manifestations of the person's psychic energy. *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* comparably aims to bring an individual into a condition of increased psychic health (i.e., enlightenment) by displaying the individual's "unconscious tendencies" symbolically and objectively, such as to allow the individual subsequently to render these forms ineffectual within his or her psyche.

For example, if an individual is angry and violent, the text powerfully and shockingly illustrates the world of angry and violent people for the individual to contemplate, and then urges the individual to reinterpret that world as akin to no more than a reflection in a pool of water (i.e., as illusory). The procedure aims to dissolve the meaning and reality of the individual's former world by detaching the individual from involvement

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in that world, and by allowing the person thereby to become “reborn” into a more enlightened condition as a new personality. In these basic ways, both the psychoanalytic method of dream interpretation and the modes of visionary interpretation and liberation expressed in *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* aim to alleviate psychic suffering and to restore mental health. Both are fundamentally therapeutic in their inspiration and aims.

In his psychological commentary to *The Tibetan Book for the Dead*, Carl Jung points out how the text first describes the highest stage of consciousness in the experiences immediately after death, and then goes on to describe more and more animalistic forms of consciousness. Addressing the Western reader, and intending to offer a more familiar orientation toward the text, Jung offers a “reverse” reading that begins with the more common states of consciousness and gradually progresses toward the more enlightened states. Reconceptualized in this way, the series of *bardo* experiences forms an ascending path reminiscent of the Christian conception of spiritual development—a path that begins with imperfect and finite humanity and extends toward a perfect and infinite God. Dante’s *Divine Comedy* would clearly exemplify this conception, as it begins with a description of hell and then progresses to descriptions of purgatory and heaven.¹⁵

Complementary to his intention to provide the Western reader with a more familiar orientation toward the text, Jung urges a “backwards” reading for the purpose of contrasting his psychological theory with Freud’s. Near the very end of the after-death experience (which Jung reads as the “beginning”), the text most intriguingly describes the psychological effects of assuming a specifically male or female identity: the assumption of a male identity generates love for one’s mother and aversion toward one’s father; the assumption of a female identity generates love for one’s father and aversion toward one’s mother. Since *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* was composed as early as the eighth century A.D., quite independently of the development of Western psychoanalysis, these observations offer some startling confirmation of Freud’s core insights into the development of sexual identity.

Rather than wholeheartedly acknowledging that *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* confirms Freud’s insights, Jung points out that the sexual attitudes noted by Freud originate and operate only within what the text describes as the most primitive and unenlightened form of consciousness (i.e., in ordinary, day-to-day consciousness). Jung takes this as evidence that, with its strong emphasis upon sexuality, Freud’s psychological theory penetrates only into the elementary layers of the psyche. He adds that when we progress to the less instinctual, and more enlightened, conditions of consciousness, we reach levels that are better comprehended by Jung’s own theory of archetypes.

his interest in criticizing Freud's psychological theory, his commentary on *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* has the subtle effect of leading the reader away from the text's vivid descriptions of the less enlightened forms of consciousness. The problem with this approach, however, is that it fails to recognize that almost everyone, at one time or another, lives within these more animalistic stages of sensual pleasures, sexuality, and desire, and that by downplaying the text's prescriptions for overcoming psychic bondage within such conditions, one undermines the potentially widespread effectiveness of the text's practical application.

As a handbook whose intention is to reveal the path to enlightenment to the great majority of those who are now alive, *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* speaks to the large audience of individuals who must start along this path from one of the lower realms. The text itself acknowledges that only a mere handful of people—those who have practiced meditation their entire lives—end their life in a highly refined and illuminated psychological condition. Since most people do not live with a consciousness of this sort, there is an important sense in which the basic orientation of Jung's interpretation is implicitly counterproductive: it draws our attention away from that part of the text that speaks to most people. This suggests that reading the text from its natural beginning is the most appropriate way to experience the work: the reader begins with a description of the ideal, enlightened state of mind, and gradually descends into more and more hellish conditions until—if one is a typical person whose daily consciousness is informed with reports, and perhaps experiences, of wars, sickness, poverty, and crime—one encounters a reflection of one's daily world of ignorance, envy, jealousy, and violence mirrored near the end of the book. The experience of reading the text in this way indicates to the reader exactly how far he or she actually is from an enlightened condition, and allows the reader to interpret his or her present condition (assuming that the person is in a condition of ordinary consciousness) as the culmination of many levels of spiritual loss. Such an experience of self-recognition is exactly what the text intends to generate in its readers.

Similar to Jung, Lama Anagarika Govinda offers a psychologically centered interpretation of the text. The following excerpt summarizes his view:

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 *dhyana*, 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*).

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All this is clearly described in *The Root-Verses of the Six Bardos*, which together with *The Paths of Good Wishes*, from the authentic and original nucleus of the *Bardo Thödol*, is that source 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.¹⁶

Lama Govinda interprets the text as referring primarily to “different states of consciousness of our life,” and in this respect his account is directed toward the living, and less toward disembodied spirits. At the same time, though, we can ask how many of the living are taken into consideration within his view. This question arises because Lama Govinda’s attitude toward the text’s essential meaning is clearly aristocratic: he refers to the text’s true meaning as accessible only to “initiated disciples” in Tibetan meditative practice. Although he regards the text as a psychological document—as “a key to the innermost recesses of the human mind”—he maintains that this “key” is far from accessible to everyone:

Only he who has ears to hear, i.e., who has prepared himself in life for the call of liberation and has made himself receptive for it by training his inner organ of hearing, can respond to the call and follow it. Only he who has opened his inner eye can see the redeeming visions. Those, however, who have neither developed the faculty of inner hearing nor that of inner vision, cannot be benefited by merely listening to the recital of the *Bardo Thödol*.¹⁷

As does Jung, Lama Govinda interprets *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* in a way that draws our attention away from its generally applicable therapeutic aspects. He directs our attention toward the more enlightened states of consciousness, but precludes the experience of these states to all but the properly initiated. Insofar as only a small group of people practice Tibetan meditation, the true meaning of *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* will, in his opinion, remain a “secret” doctrine.¹⁸

The Tibetan Book for the Dead may indeed contain subtleties of meaning that are accessible only to those who have practiced Tibetan meditation for decades. To privilege this level of knowledge as the essential meaning of the text, however, leads one’s focus away from the less enlightened states of consciousness—those states of consciousness that are typical of the majority of the human population. Just as Jung downplays the more instinctual and bewildered states of consciousness due to his interest in revealing the limit of Freudian psychology, Lama Govinda, due to his keen interest in the meditational experience of higher states of consciousness, similarly focuses our attention on the more elevated and more inaccessible states of human awareness.¹⁹

The prevailing spirit of *The Tibetan Book for the Dead*, however, opposes aristocracy and elitism. It is clearly a book addressed to every-

one, independently of the reader's capacity for profound insight or abstraction. The book offers a series of opportunities and procedures for achieving enlightenment, such that if one fails to comprehend the path to enlightenment at one level, then one receives another chance at another level. The book begins by addressing the most receptive people, and tells them simply to consider their experiences in a certain way (namely to regard their experiences as the result of their own psychological projections). If they can do so, then enlightenment follows. If the text's instructions are impossible to follow with such ease, then the reader moves into a less enlightened condition and receives the same instructions as before, with some added incentive. Sometimes more gods appear to assist the person, with the hope that the increased social presence of the gods will cause the person to adhere to the text's directives. If this effort to enlighten the person again fails, then the same message is introduced once more, except that it is accompanied by more and more terrifying imagery. At some level of consciousness, it is hoped that the person will finally achieve the awareness to interpret his or her world in a more enlightened way. At every level of consciousness, then, there is a prescription for enlightenment. At every level of consciousness it remains possible—if only the correct mode of interpretation were to be adopted—to spring instantaneously into an enlightened condition.²⁰ The following passage unequivocally displays this socially all-encompassing interest of the text:

Up to now there have been seven stages in the dangerous pathway of the bardo of the peaceful deities, and by being shown at each of the stages, even if he has not recognised at one he will have at another, and boundless attainments of liberation occur. But although many are liberated like this, sentient beings are great in number, bad karma is very strong, the neurotic veils are heavy and thick, the unconscious tendencies last for a long time, and this cycle of confusion and ignorance neither wears out nor increases, so there are many who are not liberated but wander downwards, although they have been shown accurately in this way.²¹

Addressed here is a far more widespread audience for *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* than is emphasized by either Jung or Lama Govinda. Both interpret the text convincingly in their efforts to understand its profound psychological import, but in terms of the text's function as a therapeutic tool to lead any person to enlightenment, independently of whether that person is intrinsically closer or further from an enlightened condition, Jung and Lama Govinda offer interpretations that leave most suffering people behind.

The Tibetan Book for the Dead is a book written especially for benighted and bewildered souls. It acknowledges that enlightenment is difficult, and that it takes many repetitions of the key message for there to

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be any significant spiritual effect. It repeats its message that we, and only we, are the source of our desires, our interpretations, our evaluations, our pleasures, and our fears, and that we can render such sources of suffering ineffectual, if we were only to interpret the apparent seriousness and significance of the world as the play of our own creation. In this respect, *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* is a book of practical wisdom comparable to Epictetus' *Handbook*; it offers a set of advisories intended to reduce suffering and to guide all people, not just the select initiates, toward a rebirth of personality and composure—a rebirth to take place not within a life after clinical death but within our very present life.

NOTES

- 1 – Although the English translation of the *Bardo Thödol* (The great liberation through learning in the bardo) has been titled *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, it is not quite a book “of” the dead, but rather a book “for” the dead. Since the latter is more aptly descriptive, I will refer to the *Bardo Thödol* as *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* throughout this essay.
- 2 – In Robert Thurman’s translation of the text, the *bardo* is simply referred to as “the between.” See Robert A. F. Thurman, trans., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (London: Aquarian Press, 1994).
- 3 – For example, both desire and hatred betray a deep attachment to objects. By eliminating this bondage to objects, the person is freed from compulsions and aggressions.
- 4 – Thurman, *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, p. 68.
- 5 – Francesca Fremantle and Chögyam Trungpa, trans., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1987), p. 64.
- 6 – The analogy between the experience of the visionary deities and the experience of ordinary life is obvious, since both are regarded within Tibetan Buddhism as having no more substance than a dream. Just as the reality of the visionary deities issues as an effect of consciousness’ own activity, so does the reality of ordinary life.
- 7 – W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 91.
- 8 – Fremantle and Chögyam Trungpa, *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, p. 35.
- 9 – Thurman, *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, p. 122.
- 10 – One might believe that an ancient Peruvian could significantly respond to the universal, or archetypal, meanings of the Tibetan

gods, if such gods were to appear to that person in an afterlife state. Although such a hypothesis may appear plausible, it is dubious in view of Lévi-Strauss' observations on the semantic character of mythic symbolism. His critique of Jung's theory of archetypes is particularly appropriate in the present context:

Ancient philosophers reasoned about language the way we do about mythology. On the one hand, they did notice that in a given language certain sequences of sounds were associated with definite meanings, and they earnestly aimed at discovering a reason for the linkage between those *sounds* and that *meaning*. Their attempt, however, was thwarted from the very beginning by the fact that *the same sounds were equally present in other languages although the meaning they conveyed was entirely different* [emphasis added]. The contradiction was surmounted only by the discovery that it is the combination of sounds, not the sounds themselves, which provide the significant data.

It is easy to see, moreover, that some of the more recent interpretations of mythological thought originated from the same kind of misconception under which those early linguists were laboring. Let us consider, for instance, Jung's idea that a given mythological pattern—the so-called archetype—possesses a certain meaning. This is comparable to the long-supported error that a sound may possess a certain affinity with a meaning: for instance, the “liquid” semi-vowels with water, the open vowels with things that are big, large, loud, or heavy, etc.[.] a theory that still has its supporters. Whatever emendations the original formulation may now call for, everybody will agree that the Saussurean principle of the arbitrary character of linguistic signs was a prerequisite for the accession of linguistics to the scientific model. (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf [New York: Basic Books, 1963], pp. 208–209)

- 11 – Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup approaches this view. See Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, pp. 33–34.
- 12 – Chandradhar Sharma, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1964), p. 70.
- 13 – In his introduction to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Chögyam Trungpa, himself a respected representative of Tibetan thought, mentions that “one never knows” whether or not the meditative experiences that indicate the existence of after-death states are indeed veridical. See Fremantle and Chögyam Trungpa, *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, p. 12.
- 14 – His psychological commentary first accompanied the 1938 Swiss edition (*Das Tibetanische Totenbuch* [Zürich: Rascher Verlag, 1938]) and later, the 1957 English edition.
- 15 – We should note, however, that this progression from finite humans to an infinite God is an abstracted part of a larger pattern. The Old

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Testament initially describes a perfect condition (Adam and Eve before the Fall) that degenerates into a more painful condition (Adam and Eve after the Fall). The fuller conception thus involves an initial descent/departure from a divine condition, and a subsequent ascent/return to this condition. In this respect, the sequence of psychological states described in *The Tibetan Book for the Dead* is not as foreign to Western sensibilities as it might at first appear, since it compares to the Biblical episode of the Fall.

- 16 – Lama Anagarika Govinda, "Introductory Foreword," in Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, p. lxi.
- 17 – Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1974), p. 123.
- 18 – This aristocratic conception of "secret" is described in Alexandra David-Neel's *The Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1967), p. 3.
- 19 – Lama Govinda comprehensively described these various realms of inner experience in *Creative Meditation and Multi-Dimensional Consciousness* (Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House, 1976).
- 20 – See the excerpt cited in note 4 above.
- 21 – Fremantle and Chögyam Trungpa, *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, p. 57.