

The Tibetan Book Of The Dead

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Introduction

Human beings have always been fascinated with the idea of death and dying, we are equipped with a natural tendency to know what lies beyond life “the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns”. The Tibetan Book of the Dead is a very unusual book in the history of recorded human thought. It is associated with a Buddhist sect that holds a belief in after-death experience in which a man passes through a world known as Bardo. Bardo refers to the experience between death and rebirth, where one remains for nine days only to reenter the womb again for another life. It is arguable that nobody can talk about death with authority unless or until one experiences death. We know that nobody has ever returned from that “undiscovered country”, but according to the Buddhists, every human being has experienced this phenomenon of death and life many times, but they don’t remember it.

Hence, the idea of reincarnation is the foundation for their belief in the art of death and dying, as we will see in the course of this paper. We will evaluate the general theme of the Book of the Dead, whether psychological or philosophical and the working of human consciousness according to Buddhism. The book has deep psychological and philosophical dimensions, the book is not merely about death but also life. One of the primary focuses of this book is to differentiate the two worlds: the material and the spiritual world. According to this book, man is stalled to realize his subconscious, and the Book of the Dead is a guide to the journey that one can take to realize one’s true self. The book is not about avoiding death but avoiding the impending snares of life to exit this constant and unending circle of life and death.

Discussion

According to the Tibetan tradition, Padma-Sambhawa wrote the text, and it was secretly hidden in caves and rocks until the right time to reveal its significance for the coming generations. These manuscripts are also referred to as the “hidden treasure” in Buddhist tradition. According to many Western critics, “the hidden” treasures were “faked” by people who wanted to pass their own beliefs in disguise for revelations. The criticism is invalid as they tend to belittle the religious sincerity attached to Buddhism. Furthermore, the Tibetan Book of the Dead contains hundreds of volumes written on tens of thousands of foils. Hence, a few “faked” isolated treatises are believable but improbable in the case of Bardo Thodol. The book follows the question “how to accept life and die”, and the meditation follows forty-seven days of trials. According to the Book of the Dead, life is a series of successive states of consciousness: birth-consciousness and death-consciousness. In

between two states is Bardo, this is where the transformation happens and this state is further divided into three stages; Chikhai, Chonyd and Sidpa Bardo.

On the surface the book is an instruction manual for the dead, these are verbal instructions to be born on a high plane. According to Brahmanism and Buddhism, the present universe is not an end in itself, but there is a series of an infinite universe that appear and disappear constantly. For them, the world is always in a mode of constant change and instability. In order to get out of this trap of endless birth and rebirth, one is required to detach, and this detachment is known as the Liberation from the cycle of birth and death. The liberation from the cycle is called Sangsara, the supreme state of void attained through Nirvana. Turning towards the text now, according to the first section of the book, after death, a person is in a state of trance, unaware that it has been separated from the body. This period is the first Bardo or Chikhai, and it is very important to note that a medical investigation has supported this position. According to scientist there is a very powerful hallucinatory that gives you the sights of fairies and other supernatural objects, the drug is named as DMT and scientists believe that this drug is present in human body as a natural substance.

Hence, the Bardo experience or the liberation by hearing can be compared to the psychedelic experience of DMT. The important thing of this stage is the inability of the subject to perceive its present state of mind. This experience is beautifully portrayed in Gasper Noe's *Enter the Void* (2009) movie; the movie is actually based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead. The movie is told from the first-person point of view to elaborate on the trance-like state of the mind and the uncertain position that one finds oneself in. The text is very esoteric, full of complex terminologies and mythological references, in the preceding passages a brief overview of the main stages is presented that would be evaluated henceforth. The first stage is about the experience of death and one's difficulty in accepting the reality that his body has been separated from his consciousness. The instructions are meant to be recited on the deathbed of the deceased. This is the reason that this section is named Liberation by Hearing on the After-Death Plane. The book states the following:

“O nobly-born, thou hast been in a swoon during the last three and one-half days. As soon as thou art recovered from this swoon, thou wilt have the thought, “What has happened!”

The above statement describes this condition of faintness, he is not aware of his present condition, he is not yet entered into his sub-consciousness but is still struggling to term with the loss of his body and still thinks that he is alive. Hence, the person is in a “swoon”, trying to remember the people of his life, his relations and so on. This stage is concerned with his worldly memories of the physical world when his mind was attached to his body. The following lines describe the connection between the body and the mind that the person is about to lose. Now the person will have visions of deities, one described as Vairochana as the text states:

“Then, from the Central Realm, called the Spreading Forth of the Seed, the Bhagavan Vairochana, white in colour, and seated upon a lion-throne, bearing an eight-spoked wheel in his hand, and embraced by the Mother of the Space of Heaven, will manifest himself to thee” (Karma et al., 2000). By this time, the psychological body and the intellect are transformed into space; the space is blue, and the vision is of a meditating figure often described in Buddhism as the figure with four faces perceiving every dimension of reality. The sight of the deep blue colour is terrifying, and one is inclined to be attracted towards the white light as the text proceeds. On this point as the book directs one must cling to the white light as it is the liberating force, once he realized it he would find the truth and hence can escape the cycle of existence. Nonetheless, he must be cautious and not fall into selfishness and pride but must accept it with utmost love and compassion.

The Second Bardo also known as Chonyid, at this stage the person is his subconscious, he's completely separated from his body. The second Bardo is divided into two parts; in the first part of the Bardo, the deceased meets the peaceful deities and, most importantly, the divine Father-Mother, the highest of all the deities in this universe. The interesting thing about this section is the underlying psychological implication of this part, as Carl Jung says in his commentary on the Tibetan Book of The Dead:

“The Gods are archetypal thought-forms belonging to the sambhogakaya. Their peaceful and wrathful aspects, which play a great role in the meditations of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, symbolize the opposites. In the nirmanakaya, they are the positive and negative principles united in one and the same figure.” (Jung et al., 1991)

Thus, in these passages, the central theme of Buddhism and the Bardo Thodol is reflected by expressing the oneness of all. Everything is one, the peaceful deities as well as the wrathful. It is only the deception of the human mind that creates this division, and the point is precisely summed up in the following statement:

“O nobly -born, thy present intellect, in real nature void, not formed into anything as regard characteristics or color, naturally void, is the very Reality, the All-Good, the Dharma-Kaya.” (Karma et al., 2000)

Dharma-Kaya is the highest state of the being that one can perceive. According to Chikhai, one is forced to recognize the subconscious, while in Chonyid, one is directed to recognize one's illusions that one perceives through the subconscious. Furthermore, a very perceptive point is raised in this stage of the journey of the mind; it suggests that all the distinctions, both good and bad, beautiful and ugly, dark and light, and good and good and evil, are the product of human subconscious and he must eliminate these differences for the blissful state of the mind, the one of the Father-Mother figure as we have seen above. This is a very postmodern thought of the elimination of bifurcation as proposed by the leading figures of 20th-century thought, such as Derrida and Foucault. Hence, the thought can

be equally suggestive and helpful in real life regarding the idea of happiness and sorrow. According to Bardo Thodol sorrow and pain are mere reflections of the subconscious in the world, when all is recognized as one, one is unable to feel happy or sad.

The final stage is known as the Sidpa Bardo or the Bardo of the rebirth. According to Bardo Thodol, there are six possible states of rebirth: devas, asuras, humans, animals, pretas, and hell. Devas are the saints, Asuras are the heroes and the great mythological figures; they are super-human figures. On the contrary, in the human category, one is born with physical disabilities. If one is born in the state of an animal, one is wild and impulsive and so on. Pretas refers to people who are neurotic and are unable to satisfy their desires. Lastly, hell, the people born in this state always live in a state of anxiety and depression.

Bardo Thodol is an insightful description of human psyche, the ideas like consciousness and subconsciousness are elaborated in varying symbols ranging from evil sources to colors and light etc. According to Bardo Thodol, the human psyche is the only reality, and as far as our conception of modern psychology is concerned, the assumption is not wrong. Hence, the book is not merely for the ceremonies of the dead but a treatise about the deep psychological workings of our minds. Furthermore, the book is not only modern in its conception of the human mind and soul but also daring and bold, as the following passage states:

“Thine own consciousness, shining, void, and inseparable from the Great Body of Radiance, hath no birth, nor death, and is the Immutable Light, Buddha Amitabha.” (Karma et al., 2000)

Many readers would find it blasphemous even in the 21st century, but the sheer beauty and intellect of these lines reflect that the dead man is the ultimate reality and the gods are radiant and dim reflections of our minds. On the other hand the book has a deep mystical view of the world, according to Bardo Thodol material and physical desires are bad because they cannot satisfy your incessant yearning for more and more and it is also the founding principle in Buddhism. For Bardo, the only underlying truth is the truth of “oneness” and “nothingness” at the same time. The idea of the self is also important in its conception of human identity.

For instance, the western conception of the “self” suggest that under many disguises of the self there is one “true and real self” and one is supposed to search for that “true self”. On the contrary, according to Bardo Thodol, the real self is having no self because when you become one with the universe, you are no more than you. Rather, you have transcended your old dualistic self. As mentioned earlier, the book is also about the art of dying, as we have seen in the first stage of the Bardo. If this is the case, then there are other books about dying and death, such as the Egyptian Book of the Dead, as well as many Churches from Italy, Rome, and Austria that incorporated these practices in their rituals. The Tibetan Book of the Dead teaches how to face death heroically and calmly, as it is not the end but the beginning of other possibilities, as we have seen in the brief

exploration of the practice.

Though the book addresses the dead and dying, the book is equally important for the living as every human being is always in a state of making an unmaking of one's self, and we don't need to obsess with the material and physical world. One can also argue about the Platonic undertones of the book, it suggests that mind/soul is the only reality of human existence, they just to realize it through meditation and contemplation. Hence, the idea that reality is mental is synonymous with that of the Platonic forms and the urge for the perfect and the Dharma-Kaya in Bardo Thodol. As for the Buddhist Dharma-Kaya, it is "the embodiment of all that is wise, merciful and loving" (Karma et al., 2000). The book also teaches the perils of thinking too much: "Abandon your notions of the past, without attributing a temporal sequence...cut off your mental associations regarding the future, without anticipation! Rest in a spacious modality, without clinging to [the thoughts of] the present." These teachings are not outdated, even the 21st century reader can give these thoughts serious considerations.

Conclusion

The Tibetan Book of the Dead deals with the issues of death as well as life because its primary concern is rebirth and redemption. The first stage, Chikhai Bardo, is about the psychic events that occur when someone dies. The second stage deals with the phantasmagoria of images, a dreamlike state of mind that is known in the book as karmic illusions. The third stage is about rebirth and is called Sidpa Bardo. The death is immediately followed by birth. The book teaches some of the most profound lessons during these stages: the idea of moderation, the search for truth no matter how hard it is, and the recognition of good and bad as the projection of our subconscious.

References

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