

Introduction to The Six Bardos

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To begin with it is necessary to generate the compassionate attitude to benefit all living beings; this is most necessary. Not only is it of immense benefit to others but it is also of immense benefit to yourself; this is the whole idea of spiritual practice. The definition of Dharma is that one can, by the process of cause and effect, eliminate all conflicting emotions and plant the seed of limitless happiness. All beings commit actions by body, speech and mind but it is on their attitude of mind that all actions depend. By the process of the enlightened attitude we can in turn benefit others in all our actions of body and speech. It is very important to realise that it is possible to change one's attitude from negative to positive.

Bardo is a Tibetan word meaning the interval or gap between two things. All living beings of the six realms undergo the experience of bardo states. Guru Rinpoche defined six such states and Milarepa referred to these many times in his songs. The Sixth Bardo, that between birth and death, is the most important of these as it is our current state. In connection to this we also experience the Bardo of the Dream State. This bardo reflects the habitual patterns we experience in our daily life. Ordinary people aren't able to recognise this state when it arises. The process which occurs at this time mimics the dissolution of the elements at the time of death. In this state one has the ability to travel places in a dream body but it is still very much a deluded state.

The third bardo experienced is the Bardo of the meditative state of Samadhi. Samadhi is a state of self recognition, a state of no distraction. The Tibetan word for this is samten. This state also occurs within the Bardo between birth and death but it is something which must be cultivated. Such a state benefits one's practice enormously, especially the practice of the Generation and Completion stages of Tantra. When outer appearances arise in samadhi they cause no distraction. Through the Samten Bardo it is also possible to experience the Dharmakaya, but this depends on one's recognition of it.

The fourth bardo is the Bardo of Suffering, which is the actual moment of death. When the five elements dissolve at this time one experiences a deep sense of loss and as a consequence much distraction. The Five Elements are: Earth, Water, Fire, Air (Wind), and Consciousness (Space). When the Earth element dissolves one experiences a strong feeling of heaviness. All one's actions require immense effort and are very slow, in fact not much action is possible at all at this time. The Water element is next to dissolve, then the Fire element. At this time one's body loses its heat. When the Air element dissolves one stops breathing. Consciousness then dissolves into even more subtle consciousness. A good

practitioner, one who practises properly, will not experience much suffering at this time whereas someone who has performed harmful actions in their life will.

With an accumulation of wisdom it is possible to recognise the dissolutions as they occur and also to experience the dharmata. Everyone who dies experiences these but not everyone recognises them. Recognition depends entirely on one's prior practice. Experienced meditators are able to meditate for a number of days after death. This is a sign of their undistracted experience of the fundamental state of jnana, mahamudra. I have seen a number of realised beings who have done this. H.H. Karmapa meditated like this for three days after he had died, and more recently, Kalu Rinpoche for seven days. Normally a body loses its lustre at the time of death, but in this instance there is a certain aura about it. There is also warmth in the area of the heart which is retained regardless of the weather. I once went to see a practitioner after he had died in a hospital. His body had been placed in a freezer a few days previous, but when I went to perform a ceremony on it, it was found not to be frozen and the area around the heart was quite warm. In such cases it is best to leave the body of the practitioner alone for as long as possible. For most accomplished practitioners, though, there's not enough time for them to practise and they go straight to a Buddha field.

If one goes through the bardo state, one then experiences the Bardo of Becoming – the Sipa Bardo. In this state one has a mind-body, a naked mind whose duration depends on one's karma. Generally this state lasts for no more than forty-nine days. During the first three weeks the dead person has tremendous difficulty separating from a deep sense of attachment and involvement with their previous body. They try to communicate with friends and so on, and are frustrated when they are totally ignored. They have the ability to travel through walls and journey to different places freely and unimpeded. Eventually they come to the realisation they are dead and let go of appearances, which are merely reflections of one's mind. Recognising this, a good practitioner will also recognise inseparability of their mind with that of their guru or deity. The appearances experienced at this time very much depend on one's previous familiarity with such forms and one's religion. After an initial period of three weeks the dead person then experiences more a sense of the life to come. This is more correctly the Bardo of Becoming. In extreme cases, where one is still attached to friends and family, this period takes longer to come about.