

# **Tantric Buddhism and the Tibetan Book of the Dead**

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Tantric Buddhism suggests that everything has a sexual aspect. The Book of the Dead tells us that bardo experiences occur constantly in our daily life. Freud thought of Eros and Death as twin brothers. In this paper I will explore the relationship between Eros and Death by reading the Tibetan Book of the Dead as a Tantric text and framing the sexual experience in terms of moments and bardos.

The introduction to the Book of the Dead calls it "a book of space"(Trungpa and Fremantle 1) and describes life in that space as a stream of discontinuous moments separated by bardos. Einstein's Theory of Relativity tells us that there is no such thing as space without time or time without space. Therefore, life's moments must be some form of four dimensional space-time events, things occurring in a place for a period of time. Because the Book of the Dead does not say that space consists only of bardos and moments we cannot be sure if bardos are everything else or just a subset of everything else. It seems reasonable to assume that every four dimensional space-time event has the potential to be one of life's moments, even if it isn't. Therefore we can assume that bardos have three or less dimensions. For example, a bardo could be something with a time element but only two spatial elements or something with all three spatial dimensions but no time element (a description that may fit a fantasy or a fear.)

Psychological spaces seem huge. For example, The Book of the Dead describes many realms with many gods. Our attention is grabbed by the dramatic nature of the Tathagatas and their retinues, but they may not be the only things in that space. There may be things we can't see, either because they are out of our field of vision or we are ignoring them.

Does an event need to be noticed in order to be one of life's moments? Perhaps someone touches me in a loving way and I don't notice it. Is it part of my stream of moments or is it part of the gap between moments? If I notice it subconsciously but not consciously then what is it? If someone touches someone else in a loving way, is that part of my stream of moments?

If not all events are noticed, then there must be a critical mass for something to register in my psyche. Critical mass implies the existence of elementary psychic events which combine to form noticeable psychic events, just as atoms combine to form molecules and molecules cluster to make something large enough for us to notice.

Critical mass in our physical universe is related to things like weight, duration and spatial size. I have, in other papers, suggested that dimensions are archetypal and all psychological spaces, which I call [worlds of belief](#), have something archetypally equivalent to dimensions which measure the archetypal equivalents to size and movement. To accurately measure the size of things inside a psychological space, we need to know its dimensional archetypes. Psychological critical mass will be related to the dimensional archetypes of those worlds of belief. For example, if we are absorbed in the mandala of Aksobhya, the dimensional archetypes will probably be related to the wisdom of calm uncritical reflection. For us to notice something in that world, it will have to have a critical mass of uncritical reflection.

If there is a critical mass required before something is noticed as one of life's moments, then there must also be a critical mass required before a gap is noticed as one of life's bardos. For example, when I take my hand from my beloved's shoulder so I can hold her hand I leave one of life's moments and move to another. There is a bardo I must traverse between those moments, but there is not enough time or emotional intensity for me to feel ungrounded if her

hand immediately meets mine. However, if her hand avoids mine for long enough then there will be an opportunity for me to feel uncertain.

I believe archetypes are what tie elementary psychic events together into a unit that has enough psychological mass to become a noticeable psychic event. In other words, in order for me to notice something it must look “enough” like something else. This is both a simple elaboration and a radical extension of the idea that archetypes are somehow activated. It is simple because it states the rather obvious fact that not every stimulus is “enough” to activate every archetype. It is radical because it postulates that our first response is always archetypal. It implies that the archetype is the basic unit of perception.

I believe it is myth that weaves a group of noticeable psychic events into the threads and clusters that have meaning. Joseph Campbell tells us that "rituals of birth, adolescence, marriage, death, installation and initiation, together with the mythologies that support them, constitute the second womb, the matrix of the postnatal gestation of the placental homo sapiens"(37.) The points on this matrix are the moments, the spaces between them are the bardos and the mythologies are the psychic structures that span the bardos to connect the moments and create the matrix. I have also suggested in other papers that mythology itself is an archetype. The formation of this matrix then occurs when there is enough of the right kind of life's discontinuous moments to activate the mythological archetype in the collective unconscious and instantiate a myth to tie the activating moments together in a web of meaning.

There are almost always multiple myths connected to each of life's moments. A moment with a spouse could be connected to myths about children, career, home and love. Each of these myths would connect to different moments and each of those different moments would be connected to a variety of other myths. The result is a bardo filled with various myths. Our sense

of ungroundedness could be related to the number of myths attached to the life moment nearest our perception, a sort of mythic density of the bardo. A lot of myths, like a lot of physical bonds between a variety of anchors, creates a more stable structure. If there are only one or two myths, then the structure, like a hanging bridge, can sway. If there are a lot of myths then we are grounded in mythology and can handle uncertainty in one myth because we are so connected in other myths.

For some reason, we can never stay at any one of life's moments. No matter how peaceful it is, we always leave our moments (or they leave us) and we enter a bardo on our journey to another of life's moments. It may be an infinitesimally small bardo connecting two very similar elementary events, a larger bardo between noticeable moments or a major bardo between mythologies.

Why are life's moments unstable? A traditional answer, that "time marches on," may confuse the cause with the effect because there is no law in physics that says time must move. So the reason that time marches on could be that life's moments are unstable, not the other way around.

Chaos theory offers an interesting way of looking at our movement through life's moments. What if those moments are unstable manifolds and we oscillate between moments connected by myths. For example, if moment A is connected to moment B through the Odysseus myth and moment B is connected to other moments via the Odysseus, Psyche and Flood myths, then we can only oscillate out of moment B through one of those myths into another of that myth's connecting points. There may be some sort of privilege to the myth which carried us into a moment so that it is always possible to continue oscillating within that myth. If there is no way for that myth to connect to a moment in a forward psychological direction, we could oscillate

back along the path from which we arrived at that moment. For example, if the only thread of the Odysseus myth connected to moment B is the one from moment A, then we could oscillate back to moment A. This would be what is considered being stuck in a myth.

The shadow side of the Tathagatas may be the chaotic influences that can change deterministic chaos into entropic chaos. Shadows never have three spatial dimensions so they can never be the four dimensional space time events that comprise life's moments. However, if we take something like a fear (which I previously speculated could be a three dimensional entity) and project a fourth dimension onto it, we will have a pseudo life moment. These pseudo moments could activate myths from our personal unconscious instead of the collective unconscious. If this happens, the pseudo moment Tathagata shadows become possible oscillation points. This distorts the bardo by making it seem like one of life's moments and this confusion brings us into the realm of entropic chaos where we see no patterns or strange attractors. This is generally the situation in life and enlightenment may be related to seeing the emptiness of these shadows where "Emptiness is the absence of what is false. Inseparable from emptiness is the luminosity - the presence of what is real, the basic ground in which the play of life takes place"(Trungpa and Fremantle xvi.) In this model, emptiness is the absence of a false fourth dimension.

This realization prevents them from being endpoints for myths and removes them from the oscillation possibilities. It clears the bardo of the myths they have activated and lets us see more clearly. Then we are left with the myths from the collective unconscious as our oscillation patterns.

The attachments for our third class quote Lama Yeshe as stating that "through the practice of Tantric transformation, desire gives birth to insightful wisdom, which in turn

consumes all the negativities obscuring our mind, including the desire that gave it birth”

(Mahaffey 11.)

How can we use this psychological model to understand the Tantric transformation from desire to insightful wisdom as navigation through this type of space? We can start by exploring the sexual moments, myths and bardos.

There are many sexual spaces. Some start with the first inklings of desire for intercourse through post orgasm cuddling. Some more complete spaces also encompass alternatives such as a desire for sensual hugging or no orgasm. Some spaces contain just parts of the possible whole, such as only kissing. Psychological space, like physical space, is probably fractal-like. If we cut up a sexual space, we will find sexual spaces in the elements. No matter how large or small the sexual experience, it will still contain the same elements.

The sexual space first takes shape when a critical mass of elementary psychic events activates the archetype of desire. If this archetype is nourished and enough other psychic events activate other essential archetypes, a sexual myth appears from the collective unconscious to connect these moments across the bardo. If, when we leave the moment of desire and enter the bardo we oscillate within the sexual myth, then we will reach another of life's moments to reinforce that myth. However, our own shadow Tathagatas also appear in the bardo and act as pseudo moments of fears and shadow realms. If we cannot see their emptiness (lack of four real dimensions,) then their power can activate our personal myths. This includes them in our oscillations and pollutes the bardo with our own local myths. The pollution is dependent on the power of the polluter and sexuality is very powerful. This murkiness prevents us from recognizing desire as the strange attractor that can bring us to the deterministic chaos of bliss. If we do see the emptiness of those shadows and refuse to give them the extra dimension of reality

that turns them into life's moments, then they will dissolve into the bardo, which is the process referred to as "insightful wisdom... consum(ing) all the negativities obscuring our mind"

The Book of the Dead deals with the space and time between death and rebirth. If we reimagine death as a desire for rebirth then the Book of the Dead deals with the space and time between a desire and its satisfaction. It also describes many opportunities to transform that desire into bliss, a topic also central to Tantric Buddhism. If that desire doesn't change, we have rebirth, but Tantric Buddhism teaches that we can transform that desire into illumination. A Tantric reading of the Book of the Dead might look at death as a sexual experience, see death as the yogic partner and wonder how to churn death.

There are a number of parallels between Tantric practices and the approach to death described in the Book of the Dead. Both involve shutting out the normal world. "In order to embark upon this journey of intimacy, the (Tantric) partners create a separate, hermetically sealed world that is invisible to humans and gods."(Shaw 167). Death also creates a world invisible to humans and possibly gods.

Neither can be done alone. Tantric Yoga requires a partner (real or imagined) and the Book of the Dead requires someone to read to the dead person. In Tantra it's a matter of combining the energies of the partners while the dead person is the recipient of energy from the various Tathagatas. The Tathagatas and the lights blazing from their hearts are similar to the Tantric energy winds in the central channels. Stirring the cosmic ocean with Tantric Yoga may be similar to the way death churns the realms and brings the Tathagatas with their potent, liberating nectar.

Both involve visualization. There are "elaborate visualization and other yogic processes necessary for Tantric union, specifically, the ability to make the currents of inner energy enter,

abide and dissolve in the central channel of the psychic body"(Shaw 148.) A central part of the reading of the Book of the Dead is designed to explain to the dead person what she will see and help her understand what to do and not do with the energies of the Tathagatas.

Mandalas are important in both. In Tantric Buddhism "the inner anatomy of a woman's sexual organ is seen as a mandala"(Shaw 159) and the wisdom of the Tathagatas is encoded in mandalas.

Both deal with negative energies. "Tantric Buddhist yoga hinges on the belief that negative emotional and cognitive patterns become lodged in the psychic body in the form of knots and blocks in the subtle psychic channels"(Shaw 147) and the Book of the Dead warns us of the seductive negative nature of various energies that are in the way of Buddhahood.

Vajra is important early in both processes in order that female energy can be activated and turn a rigid situation into the flowing living nectar of life. Tantra tells us that "Churning the female partner with the diamond scepter is the efficient cause of the nectar of buddhahood"(Shaw 151) and The Book of the Dead tells us that Vajra comes on the second day. Lasya, one of the Bodhisattvas, shows the majesty and seductiveness of the feminine principle and Vajra's consort "provides the exit or activation of the whole thing, the element of communication from solidness into a flowing, living situation" (Trungpa and Fremantle 17.)

Both recognize the importance of adorning and worshipping yet caution against being attached to this very human pleasure. The third day in the bardo brings the Bodhisattva Mala, the goddess who offers all sorts of adornments, garlands, necklaces, and bracelets along with Dhupa, who carries incense (Trungpa and Fremantle 19.) The shadow side of the third day is the human realm. It's important in Tantric practices for the man to offer adornments to the woman and we are warned that "It is very easy for this worship to cause a loss of mindfulness and increase

desire and attachment"(Shaw 162.) This increased desire and attachment is part of the shadow side of the human realm.

"On the fourth day of the bardo of dharmata Amitabha will appear from the red western realm of bliss together with the light path of the hungry ghosts. ...You will also see the soft yellow light of the hungry ghosts tempting you into the realm of hungry ghosts."(Trungpa and Fremantle 44.) Similarly, Tantra speaks of " the real offering of the union of bliss and emptiness" and warns that "in the midst of intense desire...it may be helpful to imagine oneself as a thirsty person pursuing a mirage in the sky"(Shaw 161.)

Trying to understand the common threads between Tantric Buddhism and the Tibetan Book of the Dead has made me wonder if the Book of the Dead is not a book of space but a book of moving through space. It has also led me to a model of psychological space in which the bardo is at least as interesting as the moments because it is the home of the myths, thus suggesting a fundamental connection between myth and emptiness.

## Works Cited

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This book is the first English language translation of the famous Tibetan death text, The Great Liberation upon Hearing in the Intermediate State. Also known as the Bardo Thodol which means "liberation by hearing on the after death plane" (Bardo: after death plane, Thodol or Thotrol: liberation by hearing), it was originally written in the Tibetan language and is meant to be a guide for those who have died as they transition from their former life to a new destination. The work has been traditionally attributed to Padma-Sambhava, an Indian mystic who was said to have introduced Buddh... Tibet: A Spiritual Civilization. Tibet's Present Plight. Buddhism in Summary. Tibetan Ideas About Death. CHAPTER 2 • The Tibetan Science of Death. This book is dedicated to the brave and gentle people of Tibet, who have suffered and are suffering one of the great tragedies of our time. The entire world is turning its back, due to fear and greed, while the Chinese government pursues its systematic campaign of genocide. May the conscience of all people cry out in one voice! Tibetan Buddhism combines the essential teachings of Mahayana Buddhism with Tantric and Shamanic, and material from an ancient Tibetan religion called Bon. Although Tibetan Buddhism is often thought to be identical with Vajrayana Buddhism, they are not identical - Vajrayana is taught in Tibetan Buddhism together with the other vehicles. History. Buddhism became a major presence in Tibet towards the end of the 8th century CE. Nyingmapa: Founded by Padmasambhava, this is oldest sect, noted in the West for the teachings of the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Kagyupa: Founded by Tilopa (988-1069), the Kagyupa tradition is headed by the Karmapa Lama. Important Kagyupa teachers include Naropa, Marpa, and Milarepa.