

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead*: Its History and Controversial Aspects of its Contents

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ABSTRACT: In recent decades, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (TBD) has attracted much attention from Westerners interested in Eastern spirituality and has been discussed in the literature on dying and near-death experiences. However, the history of the TBD has practically been ignored in that literature up to now. This history has been elaborated in detail by Tibetologist Bryan Cuevas (2003). To bring this history to the attention of scholars in the field of near-death studies, I present in this paper a summary of the TBD's development based primarily on the work of Cuevas (2003). The summary shows that the TBD was gradually elaborated within a specific Tibetan Buddhist context, the Dzokchen tradition. In comparing features of first-hand reports of the death and dying process as reported in the TBD with those reported in four other categories—Tibetan délok, near-death experiencers, mediums, and children who remember previous lives—I find that some features are consistent but that other key features are not. Because it seems likely that inconsistent features of the TBD reflect idiosyncratic dying and afterlife concepts of the Dzokchen tradition, scholars in the field of near-death studies and others should be careful about adopting the contents of the TBD without question.

KEY WORDS: *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Clear Light, bardo, délok, near-death experience

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A nobleman asked Master Hakuin: "What happens to the enlightened man at death?" He replies: "Why ask me?" The nobleman: "Because you are a Zen-Master!" Hakuin: "Yes, but not a dead one!"

A Zen Parable

In recent decades, Tibetan Buddhism has attracted much interest and many followers in the Western world. This interest resulted largely from the publication of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (TBD) by Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz and Lama Dawa Samdup in 1927. To date, the TBD is the most read treatise of Tibetan Buddhism outside Tibet (Cuevas, 2003). After the Chinese occupation of their country, Tibetans received worldwide attention for the first time. Their cultural and spiritual traditions attracted and continue to attract the further interest of many Westerners dissatisfied with, or finding enhancement to, their own traditions.

Not surprisingly, the Tibetan concept of dying and the afterlife presented in the TBD has also been discussed in a number of publications addressing its relation to near-death experiences (NDEs; e.g., Becker, 1985, 1994; Carr, 1993; Jorgensen, 2006; Lee, 2004; Masumian, 2009; Murphy, 2006; Ring, 1993; Rinpoche, 1992; Varela, 1997; Wilber, 1990). Some authors and many Western followers of Tibetan Buddhism hold the opinion that the TBD conveys a universally valid and objectively verifiable truth about dying and the afterlife (e.g., Coleman & Jinpa, 2006; Evans-Wentz, 1927; Govinda, 1993; Thurman, 1994; Wilber, 1990; personal experiences). In addition, most Tibetan Buddhists and many of their followers, but also critics (Murphy, 2006), have assumed that the author of the TBD was the legendary Indian guru Padmasambhava, who promoted Buddhism in Tibet during the 8th century. Because the TBD contains descriptions of experiences different from NDEs, Tibetan lamas and some of their Western followers have expressed the belief that NDEs are not factually related to dying but are experiences still belonging to the living state (Rinpoche, 1992; Varela, 1997). Francisco Varela (1997) went on to say that the skeptical considerations of the Dalai Lama regarding current studies and interpretations of NDEs are a strong caveat to Westerners, indicating that these studies might be misdirected and raise wrong expectations of what will happen during and after dying. Thus, in light of the teachings of the TBD, Varela recommended an "entire re-evaluation of the Western approach to NDEs," because the common understanding of NDEs might be based on "rather hasty interpretations" (p. 216).

However, old texts like the TBD usually have a vivid history, often leading to distortions and embellishments associated with the specific sociocultural and political background in which they developed. Thus, one should be careful about regarding such scriptures as sources of ancient universal truths before critically examining their history and contents.

The history of the TBD has been elucidated in a painstaking study by Tibetologist Bryan Cuevas (2003), containing about 900 footnotes and listing almost 450 Western references—not counting the many references available only in Tibetan, Indian, or Chinese language. Among scholars, this book is regarded as a seminal work (for book reviews, see e.g. Gray, 2004; Prats, 2005; Schaeffer, 2005), and it has been cited by several sources concerned with the history of the TBD (Cornu, 2009; Gyurme, 2006; Lopez, 2011). Cuevas argued that all the TBD translators, commentators, and interpreters have so far neglected its history in favor of presenting three interrelated approaches designed to fit modern Western thinking: scientific, psychological, and humanistic. The scientific approach was originally put forward by the first editor of the TBD, Evans-Wentz (1993), who stated that the TBD is mainly a scientific book “based on provable facts of human physiological and psychological experiences” (p. 110, my translation). Robert Thurman (1994) also stressed this attitude, among others: He designated the TBD “a scientific handbook on the realities and experiences of death” (p. 51). In a more recent edition of the TBD, Graham Coleman represented this perspective in stating that

the insights that are presented here come from those who have realised the ultimate nature of mind and thereby have experiential understanding of the processes of the mind in deep sleep, dreams, the waking state and throughout the process of dying and beyond. (Coleman, 2006, p. xxx)

Evans-Wentz also stressed the psychological background of the experiences described in the TBD. The most influential author to interpret the TBD in psychological terms was Carl Gustav Jung. In his “Psychological Commentary” on the TBD, Jung (1993) wrote that the book was “entirely created by the archetypal contents of the human subconscious” and, thus, provided access to the universal structures of the human psyche (p. 55, my translation). Jung’s psychological interpretation of the TBD appears to have strongly influenced following editions and commentaries on the TBD, including the editions by Fremantle and Trungpa (1975) and Lauf (1977).

The humanistic approach focuses on the potential self-transformation that individuals could realize by proper study, understanding, and practice of the TBD's instructions. Lama Govinda (1993) exemplified this view by stating, "Under the guise of the science of death, the *Bardo Thödol* reveals the secret of life. Therein lies its spiritual value and universal importance" (p. 37, my translation). Thus, he viewed the TBD not only as a book designed to be addressed to the dying and dead but also as "a guide for initiates, and for those who are seeking the spiritual path of liberation" (p. 32, my translation). According to Cuevas (2003), the authors stressing the humanistic approach aimed at presenting ever more accessible versions of the text, resulting in an "easy-to-read and tradition-authorized 'guidebook for spiritual practice'" (p. 12). Govinda (1993) even argued that the Tibetan tradition of helping the deceased's soul on its path to liberation by reading particular TBD texts in the vicinity of the corpse is based on a misunderstanding that resulted from the ignorance of Tibetans regarding ancient initiation rites and the text's true spiritual meaning for the living.

However, according to Cuevas (2003), the TBD was compiled gradually and consists of a mix of locally determined materials that reflect the respective interests of specific traditions and monasteries. These aspects of the TBD's history are still neglected in much of the recent contemporary literature on it. For example, in the already-mentioned recent translation, Coleman (2006) maintained that "the complete Tibetan Book of the Dead is a comprehensive guide to both living and dying as originally taught by . . . Padmasambhava" (p. xxix), and in the inner title page of the book the editors credited Padmasambhava as the "composer" of the translated set of texts. Moreover, Coleman claimed that "the compendium of texts" known as the TBD represent an "abridgement" of the original texts ascribed to Padmasambhava (p. xl). Curiously, although Cuevas came to conclusions quite the opposite of Coleman's, Cuevas's work is cited approvingly in the historical sketch of the TBD in the same book (Gyurme, 2006).

To date, the history of the TBD has remained largely unknown and neglected in the field of near-death studies. To introduce the reader to that history, I first provide a summary of the TBD's development based on the work of Cuevas (2003). After this historical overview, I compare features of claimed first-hand dying and afterlife experiences as reported in the TBD with those features as reported in NDE research and survival research.

The History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead

The following summary of the history of the TBD is derived primarily from Cuevas (2003). Additional references indicate material not derived exclusively from his work.

Pre-TBD Tibetan Beliefs about Postmortem States

Prior to the appearance of the TBD, proponents of early Indian Buddhist traditions were already engaged in controversy regarding the status of an intermediate state between death and rebirth. Among others, devotees of the *Theravada* school rejected claims of such a state of existence. In fact, the Buddha never explicitly taught the existence of an intermediate state, although some formulations might be interpreted as such. Thus, proponents of other schools such as the *Sarvastivada* and the *Sautantrika* postulated its existence, but they still disagreed about how it should be understood. Formulated doctrinal expositions on the intermediate state existed as early as the 2nd century, for example in the voluminous book *Mahavibhasa*.

One of the most influential texts to emerge in the following centuries was authored by the prominent Buddhist teacher Vasubandhu in the 5th century. Motivated to compile all arguments that favored existence of the intermediate state and to settle differences about how it should be conceived, Vasubandhu developed a theory that became a standard presentation of early Indian views on postmortem states. It was adopted in the late 7th century in Tibet during the initial phases of the introduction of Buddhism. In general, this theory was based on *Sarvastivada* theories that implied four stages or intervals in the life cycle of sentient beings: (1) birth, (2) the period from birth to death, (3) death, and (4) the period from death to rebirth. For the latter interval, Vasubandhu described characteristics that also appeared in later Tibetan texts. For example, beings living in this intermediate state said to be visible only to other discarnate beings and to clairvoyants. Also, these beings supposedly eat odors, thus the Tibetan term “hungry ghosts.” These beings are hungry but cannot eat; therefore, they feed on the odors of burnt oblations. Moreover, beings in the interval from death to rebirth are said to be drawn to their next existences when they perceive their future parents having sex. In addition to Vasubandhu’s text, other important texts on intermediate states also existed in India, some listing up to 17 such states for one life cycle.

Concepts of the human afterlife prevailing in Tibet in pre-Buddhist times remain obscure. Certainly, attitudes towards the spirits of the deceased were strongly dominated by fear. Tibetans feared that spirits without a physical body become mischievous and seek to recover their lost life force by taking it back from the living, often from their own relatives. Thus, Tibetans developed funerary rituals that included overt techniques to safeguard the soul of the deceased along its path to its destiny and to restrain it from malicious ambitions towards previous family members.

However, the earliest Tibetan texts on funerary rituals, dating from the late 8th century, already showed Buddhist influences. The older indigenous concept of two opposing realms of gods and ghosts had been adapted to the concept of rebirth in the round of existence, Samsara. According to the manuscript *Showing the Path of the Dead*, the soul of a deceased person can follow one of three negative post-mortem paths—to hell, to the realm of hungry ghosts, or to the realm of animals—or can follow a fourth path leading up to the realm the deceased should strive to reach: the realm of gods. Family members are advised to assist the wandering soul of the deceased by calling his or her name, by giving instructions on the path to follow, and by reminding the appropriate mantras to recite. Such early texts show the continuity and blending of pre-Buddhist concepts about the afterlife and of funerary rites of more sophisticated Tibetan Buddhist traditions of later times.

The assumption that these pre-Buddhist concepts are represented by the so-called Bön tradition appears to be mistaken. In fact, the prevailing opinion among current Tibetologists—yet not among the Bönpo themselves—is that Bön represents an alternative form of Buddhism that developed into an organized and distinctive religious tradition in deliberate opposition to other Buddhist sects. This development occurred no earlier than the late 10th century—that is, after the so called “Dark Age” of Tibet that lasted from the middle of the 9th to the late 10th century when Buddhism was deprived of its rank as the official religion in Tibet. Most likely, Bön was only retroactively designated as an alleged pre-Buddhist tradition in Tibet (Cuevas, 2003, 2008; Kvaerne, 2002).

In Northern India, the Buddhist concepts of the intermediate state between death and rebirth as established in the 5th century were amended only slightly until the tantric cults spread across this region in the 7th and 8th century. The tantras are a huge set of unorthodox esoteric texts on various matters of spiritual practice. These tantric

traditions were introduced into Tibet through convoluted pathways beginning in the 11th century and contributed to the formation of numerous competing sects during the renaissance of Buddhism after the Dark Age.

A significant tantric innovation concerning the intermediate state between death and rebirth was its division into distinguishable intervals. Important Indian teachers whose concepts shaped the Tibetan reinterpretations of the intermediate state were Tilopa (~988–1069) and his follower Naropa (~1016–1100), whose chief disciple was the Tibetan translator Marpa (~1012–1097). Marpa introduced a new concept of this intermediate state into Tibet and transmitted it to a disciple famous throughout the country, Milarepa (~1040–1123). However, at least 15 different Tibetan traditions of instructional advice on the postmortem intermediate state, the postmortem bardo, existed in the 13th century. Tilopa aimed at organizing different tantric instructions into a coherent system; it included “deity yoga” as the most effective practice to block “the womb door”—that is, reincarnation. Deity yoga refers to meditation practices to generate visualizations of specific Buddhist deities. Naropa developed Tilopa’s concept into further complexity, and he advised yogic practitioners to recognize the Clear Light as a means for liberation. But it appears that only in the instructions of Marpa was the experience of the Clear Light directly linked to the bardo beginning at the moment of death. Moreover, this Clear Light was said to be only recognizable for those who achieve instant enlightenment at this moment—“superior” yogis; others would have to proceed with deity yoga and other meditation practices in the bardo. Milarepa put forward a further proliferation of different bardo states. He introduced many subcategories, suggesting that all major experiences of existence could be divided into a graded series of intermediate states.

However, by the middle of the 13th century, a sixfold structure of the bardos experienced within one cycle of Samsara became the preferred format in many Buddhist traditions. Still, these conceptions of the six different bardos were often not congruent, and other bardo classifications ranging from two to five also existed.

A specific sixfold bardo concept of particular relevance for the TBD developed within the Tibetan *Dzokchen* tradition in parallel to the tantric transmission lines. In Dzokchen cosmogony, a ground luminosity often described as Clear Light lies at the bottom of all existence. Stirred by a primordial gnostic wind, the cosmos begins to spiral outward from this fundamental ground, beginning with the

manifestation of five rainbow-colored lights, at some point leading to the emergence of the five elements that constitute physical matter. If beings fail to recognize the fundamental nature of the cosmos as luminous radiance, which in fact is also their own fundamental nature, dualistic awareness sets in. They begin to perceive subjects and objects and to enter the cycles of Samsara. However, the Clear Light of reality itself remains always present. It is said to be experienced—if only in glimpses and not in its entirety—in various altered states of consciousness or in the transitions leading to them, such as in fainting, in sneezing, in the first instants before and after dreaming, and during orgasms. But the primordial Clear Light in its entirety could be experienced only at or immediately after the moment of dying—and in profound states of meditation specifically designed to apprehend it.

In contrast to postmortem bardo concepts of other Tibetan traditions, in Dzokchen the concept of the brief moment of Clear Light experience at the moment of death was expanded to span an entirely new conceptual space within the “bardo of reality itself.” Most notably, the experience of the vision of 100 peaceful and wrathful deities, a vital feature of the TBD, was inserted into this enlarged bardo concept. During this vision, a defined sequence of peaceful and wrathful deities is supposed to appear in front of the deceased, each deity being characterized by specific colors and symbolic attributes. Typically, the deceased will react with strong emotions when encountering these visions and, especially in the later stages of this bardo, most likely with considerable fear. Therefore, the frightened wanderer in the bardo is continuously instructed by a lama sitting next to the dead corpse to recognize the appearing figures as subjectively-produced illusions. These deities belong to a particular visualization set for meditation that originated in *Mahayoga* tantras and that was embellished and inflated in the manner described in the TBD only within the Dzokchen tradition. By the 14th century, the experience of this mandala had become established as an essential feature within the Dzokchen concept of the “bardo of reality itself.”

It is important to note that the primordial Clear Light in Dzokchen is not associated with any color or light in the usual sense. Rather, it represents the fundamental source of everything including color and light. It is regarded as a colorless and featureless presence, or a very subtle non-dualistic state of awareness or mind difficult to describe. For instance, Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche (1998, p. 146) described the Clear Light as the unity of emptiness and clarity in which “Clear”

refers to the primordial emptiness at the foundation of existence and “Light” to clarity and pure innate awareness. In Coleman and Jinpa (2006), the original Tibetan term *‘od-gsal* is not translated as Clear Light but as “Inner Radiance” (pp. 227ff) that is the essential nature of all cognitive events (p. 478).

Emergence of the TBD

Having provided a general outline of the developments that have shaped beliefs about postmortem states in Tibet prior to the emergence of the TBD, I now briefly describe the history of the TBD itself. It is said that its scriptures were authored and hidden by the famous yogi Padmasambhava in the 8th century and excavated again by an obscure visionary, Karma Lingpa, in the second half of the 14th century. Traditionalists assume that enlightened lamas thereafter transmitted these texts until their recent widespread publication. The texts assembled in the TBD are originally entitled *Great Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo* and are embedded in a much larger text collection entitled *The Self-Liberated Wisdom of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities*. However, the original texts at the heart of the *Great Liberation upon Hearing* collection were not transmitted unchanged. The primordial scripts must have been comparatively small and were embellished and supplemented to a degree that it is now impossible to trace. It is likely that some of the ritual prayers usually found in the appendix of the TBD constitute the primary conceptual nucleus of the scriptures constituting the *Great Liberation upon Hearing* collection. Karma Lingpa himself may have begun to comment and organize the original texts but had not completed the task by the time of his early death. Thus, only a short time after his death, others close to him—most likely his father and son, who both outlived him for many years—reordered and revised the scripts.

Over time, numerous other authors continued to extend, elaborate, comment upon, and reorder these texts. Most of the scriptures constituting the *Self-Liberated Wisdom* collection were transmitted through several different transmission lines, each being adapted to the respective attitudes of their sects and monasteries. On the contrary, the subset of texts constituting the *Great Liberation upon Hearing* set were exclusively transmitted through a single line of succeeding individuals who predominantly drew upon the bardo concept of the Dzokchen tradition. Among others, two lamas provided important contributions to the process of elaborating the texts: Gongra Lochen

Zenphen Dorje (1594–1654) and Peling Sungtrül Tshültrhim Dorje (1598–1669). Rikzin Nyima Drakpa (1647–1710) performed the final redaction and organization of the *Great Liberation upon Hearing* into a layout that was appealing to many different Buddhist sects. A few decades after his death, the technique to duplicate books by using wooden blockprints was established in Tibet and allowed for the distribution of the *Great Liberation upon Hearing* throughout large parts of the country. Different funeral liturgies and bardo concepts without the mandala of the 100 peaceful and wrathful deities also existed at that time in Tibet but gradually lost importance. However, some have continued to be transmitted to the present day. A notable example is the process of dying and the concept of the bardo states described in the literature of the Gelukpa sect of the Dalai Lama (Carr, 1993; Dalai Lama, 2004; for details of these differences, see below).

In the 1920s, Lama Dawa Samdup translated only a part of the texts that constitute the entire collection of the *Great Liberation upon Hearing*. In 1927, Evans-Wentz edited and published these translated texts that became famous under the title *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. However, Tibetans who live in important monasteries in the Indian exile usually read to the souls of the deceased a text, the *Religious Liturgy of the Self-Liberation of Karmic Latencies*, that is not contained in the translated selection of Wentz, Samdup, and followers. Instead, as Govinda (1993) assumed, the texts chosen for translation in the TBD are regarded as a set of meditation guidelines for advanced Dzokchen practitioners.

In sum, the bardo concept depicted in the *Great Liberation upon Hearing* had developed over centuries, gradually unfolding within a specific sociocultural context to its form in the translations and editions of the present day. Given its known history, the notion that the TBD consists of texts authored many centuries ago by Padmasambhava cannot be upheld. Moreover, the opinion that the TBD is basically a scientific and psychological text leading to repeatable, verifiable experiences revealing the truth about dying and a putative afterlife state seems rather doubtful. In the following section, I identify various features of the dying process and the afterlife as depicted in the TBD and then compare those features to dying features reported in other purported first-hand accounts.

Dying and Afterlife Concepts of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and Its Context

The Dying Process as Described in the TBD and Associated Doctrine

To begin, I give a brief six-phase outline of the dying process and the experiences during the postmortem bardo state according to the TBD (e.g., Coleman & Jinpa, 2006; Evans-Wentz, 1993) and the associated doctrine. In most cases, I follow a description of the phase with contradictory perspectives from various sources.

1) The dying process starts with the loss of the bodily senses in a defined sequence: The eyesight is lost first, then the ability to hear, then the sense of smell, followed by the sense of taste and, lastly, the sense of touch. Bodily death is complete when inhalation stops. According to Tibetan tradition, a human soul cannot stay in a corpse without breath and has to leave it.

Comment: The sequence of the loss of senses differs in the contemporary literature on dying. It is generally assumed that the sense of hearing is the last to function (Brayne, 2010; Varela, 1997). This assumption is in accordance with the conditions of trance states. Here, the sense of touch is often already lost when hearing is still possible. These findings may cast doubt on the reliability and the alleged universality of the Tibetan definition of the dying stages. However, in my review of literature, I found no substantial reference to the loss of smell and taste in the course of the dying process.

2) Briefly before or during the soul's departure from the body after breathing has ceased, or, in the case of a period of unconsciousness that sometimes occurs after dying, when the soul resumes consciousness, the primordial Clear Light of reality itself dawns. This experience will usually pass in an instant but may also endure for a longer period of time if the dying person has been trained to comprehend this state of awareness. The individual has only this one opportunity to recognize and maintain awareness of this primordial Clear Light; if one fails in this opportunity, one's awareness subsequently bedims.

Comment: The Gelukpa sect holds a somewhat different view on this process. Here, the Clear Light usually does not emerge immediately after the cessation of breath. Prior to the experience of the Clear Light, a defined sequence of dissolution of elements commences, which gives rise to increasingly subtle and non-dualistic levels of consciousness. In the first phase, a vivid appearance of white

emerges, followed by an appearance of a vivid red-orange in the second phase. In the third phase, a vivid black experience dawns, and only after this experience the subtlest of all states of consciousness manifests, the entirely non-conceptual and non-dualistic Clear Light. Only then, full bodily death has occurred (Dalai Lama, 2004, pp. 146–150). Whereas the Gelukpas write of only this single Clear Light experience, proponents of the Dzokchen tradition hold that this experience is followed by the experience of a secondary, duller Clear Light that appears after the experience of the primordial Clear Light has ceased (Carr, 1993, p. 73; Coleman & Jinpa, 2006, p. 232; Evans-Wentz, 1993, p. 173).

3) After or during experiencing this Clear Light, the consciousness of the dying person is freed from the physical body. At this point, the individual may have veridical out-of-body experiences (OBEs)—see people surrounding the deathbed, etc. Usually, the discarnate individual will not recognize for some time that he or she has died and may stray around earthly locations of personal importance.

4) Soon after, the visions of deities from the mandala of the 100 peaceful and wrathful deities will dawn. Also, imaginations of heaven, hell, or otherworldly landscapes will arise according to the individual's culture, belief system, and Karma. Thus, these visions will vary from individual to individual and are considered entirely subjectively produced: The deceased is regarded as “the only spectator of a wonderful panorama of imagined visions” (Evans-Wentz, 1993, p. 108, my translation). Yet, while in the bardo, the deceased may also meet other discarnate individuals, including relatives and/or friends (Rinpoche, 1990; Varela, 1997).

Comment: There is an apparent contradiction in stating that the postmortem bardo state is an entirely subjective production of the deceased and acknowledging that the deceased can meet with other deceased people. Bardo visions that include meeting and communicating with other discarnate people cannot be classified as solely illusory. Thus, interpretations of the TBD resting on the assumption that the experiences of the postmortem bardo are completely subjective and of a purely psychological nature (e.g., Evans-Wentz, 1993; Jung, 1993; Wilber, 1990) do not cover the whole spectrum of experiences and are not sufficient.

Moreover, it is of interest that the mandala of the peaceful and wrathful deities is not contained in the afterlife concept of the Gelukpa sect (Carr, 1993, p. 73). Here, the dissolution of elements before death follows a strict order that is simply reversed in the bardo state,

finally leading to reincarnation. Karmically determined visions, either pleasant or terrifying and indicative of the type of rebirth to occur, can be experienced in the early stages of dying *before* the onset of the experiences of the increasingly subtle levels of consciousness including the Clear Light, and later on a second time, as the rebirth process is consolidating (Dalai Lama, 2004, p. 127 & 195). The Dalai Lama maintained that these and other “minor variations” between various Tantras and writings of various sects (for other discrepancies see Carr, 1993, p. 73f, and Dalai Lama, 2006, p. xxiii) are due to the different internal appearances that different yogis experience during the process of dissolution, because they have focused their attention on different aspects of this process (Dalai Lama, 2004, p. 124).

5) In the TBD, the karmic visions of the mandala of the peaceful and wrathful deities constitute a crucial and large part of the bardo existence and usually take 14 earthly days. As soon as they cease, the deceased enters a different bardo state in which one encounters a life review and its judgment by the Lord of Death, Yama. However, this judgment and Yama also are regarded as subjective illusions that one ideally recognizes as such and transcends.

Comment: Many near-death experiencers (NDErs) have experienced a life review and a judgment. In typical Western NDEs, the life review consists of a self-judgment of one’s own life, sometimes presented as the “panoramic life review.” In cases of NDErs from Asia, the judgments often match the details described in the TBD and also include Yama as judge (Bailey, 2001; Cuevas, 2008; Murphy, 2001; Pasricha, 1995, 2008). However, in all NDE cases, these judgments take place within a few earthly minutes, hours, or days, not after about 14 earthly days. In general, time seems to play a different role during the more transcendental facets of NDEs than in normal life. It is possible to experience a prolonged NDE when the body was lifeless for only a comparably short time, and many NDErs struggle to find words for describing their altered sense of time during their experience. An equally altered sense of time is reported from many states of altered consciousness including mystical experiences (Mattiesen, 1925). It seems that the perception of time during such experiences cannot be related 1:1 to measurable time in the physical domain. These findings raise doubts about interpreting literally the 14 days of existence in the bardo state, an issue discussed in more detail below.

6) Finally, the discarnate soul becomes driven to choose the circumstances of one’s next birth. The overall duration of the bardo existence is 49 earthly days.

Comment: There is no consensus among Tibetan Buddhists regarding the interpretation of the 49 days period. In esoteric interpretations as proposed by Lama Dawa Samdup, the number 49 is not to be taken literally but refers to the quadrate of the holy number seven. In the Hindu and the Tibetan Buddhist cosmology, there are seven layers of worlds or planetary globes, each of which contain seven modes of existence. In sum, there are 49 possible states of existence, symbolized by the 49 days of the postmortem bardo existence (Evans-Wentz, 1993, p. 81). However, most Buddhist schools, including the Gelukpa sect of the Dalai Lama, have maintained an exoteric interpretation and postulated that the number of 49 days must be taken literally. According to this view, reincarnation will take place after a maximum of 49 days (Varela, 1997). Rinpoche (1992) has taken an intermediate position, stating that the bardo has an average duration of 49 days (p. 291). He also maintained that some deceased persons can get stuck in the postmortem bardo and become spirits or ghosts, a widespread belief among Tibetans. Yet, the Dalai Lama admits that this notion is hard to reconcile with his view of Tibetan Buddhism (Varela, 1997, p. 203).

Afterlife Features Contained Exclusively in the TBD and Related Doctrine

In the following material, I examine more closely some features of the TBD and related scholarly Tibetan dying and afterlife doctrine. Table 1 lists several of these features and compares their presence in other purported first-hand dying and afterlife experiences from various sources. Among these purported experiences are those of the Tibetan délok. The délok were people who returned from states of assumed death and described their experiences. They were mostly ordinary Tibetans untrained in the scholarly Tibetan Buddhist doctrine but also included some lamas and monks (Bailey, 2001; Cuevas, 2008; Epstein, 1982, 1989).

As the Table contents illustrate, many features are shared among all categories of purported first-hand dying and afterlife experiences. However, some elements are present only in the TBD. Even the folklore of the Tibetan délok shares more similarity with contemporary (Asian) NDE accounts than with the contents of the TBD, and even some experiences reported by lamas and monks are not congruent with the TBD (Cuevas, 2008; Epstein, 1982). In fact, no délok account contains all elements of the dying process and the afterlife experience

Table 1: Comparison of Features of Five Categories of Claimed First-hand Dying and Afterlife Experiences from a Variety of Sources

Feature	Category				
	TBD ¹	Délok ²	NDErs ³	Mediums ⁴	Children ⁵
Temporary bewilderment / dull mind / unconsciousness	x	x	x	x	x
Experience of the Clear Light	x	?			
Sense of rising from the physical body, veridical OBEs	x	x	x	x	x
Sensation of darkness, passing dark chasms or tunnels	?	x	x	x	(x) ⁶
Living on in a “subtle body” with an outlook like the physical body	x	x	x	x	x
Encountering (beings of) lights different from the Clear Light	x	x	x	x	(x)
Meeting other deceased people and/or religious figures	x	x	x	x	x
Seeing earth-like landscapes in the afterlife realm	(x)	x	x	x	x
Experiencing the mandala of the 100 deities or cultural equivalents	x				
The afterlife experiences being an illusionary vision	x				
Life review and/or life judgment	x	x	x	x	(x)
49 days of afterlife existence	x				

¹⁻⁵ below: selected sources for each Table category:
¹ TBD: Coleman & Jinpa (2006); Evans-Wentz (1993); for more editions of the TBD see main text of this paper
² Tibetan délok accounts: Bailey (2001); Cuevas (2008); Epstein (1982, 1989)
³ reports of near-death experiences: Crookall (1960, 1970, 1978); Holden, Greyson, & James (2009); Moody (1975); Ring (1980); van Lommel (2010)
⁴ reports from allegedly deceased persons describing the dying and afterlife experiences through mediums: Bozzano (1930); Crookall (1974, 1978); Cummins (1965, 1967)
⁵ reports of children who claim to remember having died in a previous life and having lived in a disincarnate state between the previous and the present life. Examples can be found in Bowman (2003), Haraldsson (2000), Harrison & Harrison (1991), Playfair (2006); Rawat & Rivas (2005), Sharma & Tucker (2004), Stevenson (1975, 1977, 1983, 1997), and Tucker (2006). For a brief overview not covering all of the details presented in Table 1, see Stevenson (2001, pp. 111f, 270).
⁶ Parentheses indicate that the given feature is sometimes reported but is not shared among all or most important texts, experiencers, or communicators.

defined in the TBD and the related literature of the religious elite of Tibet (Epstein, 1982, p. 32). In particular, four items appear to be contained exclusively in the TBD:

1. The experience of the Clear Light
2. The vision of the mandala of the 100 deities or culturally determined equivalents
3. The claim that the afterlife state is entirely subjective (with the possible exception of meeting other discarnate entities)
4. The claim that the duration of the afterlife state does not exceed 49 earthly days

Feature 1, the Clear Light, is said in the TBD to dawn during or immediately after dying, that is, after the cessation of breathing or immediately after a subsequent period of unconsciousness. Jorgenson (2006) argued that the experience of the Clear Light might be closely related to experiences of lights that NDErs sometimes encounter. However, on several accounts, NDE light experiences seem not to be compatible with Clear Light doctrines of the TBD and the Gelukpa sect.

Regarding timing of the appearance, in the latter doctrines, the dawning of the Clear Light marks the beginning of the postmortem bardo and thus always precedes OBEs and further bardo experiences. By contrast, NDErs usually report that they encountered the lights in later stages of their experiences. Thus, if lights are experienced during or after the OBE aspect of NDEs, they need to be regarded as different from the primordial Tibetan Clear Light simply because of the timing of the experience.

Regarding the nature of the light, in Tibetan doctrine the Clear Light is colorless and featureless. By contrast, NDErs typically report color, often brilliant white or golden, and the profound feature that the light is an all-knowing, all-loving being. In addition, lights in Western NDEs differ considerably from one NDE description to another and are by no means part of every NDE; indeed, encounters with ineffable lights are absent in many distressing NDEs (Bush, 2009) and in many NDE reports from non-Western cultures, particularly hunter-and gatherer societies (e. g., Counts, 1983; Green, 2008; Kellehear, 2009; McClenon, 2006; Murphy, 2001; Wade, 2003). However, the number of such reports has been quite limited, and if additional NDE reports from these non-Western societies were collected, they also might include examples containing light (compare Nahm & Nicolay, 2010).

Regarding return to physical existence, according to Tibetan doctrine, no one except advanced meditation practitioners can return to physical life after experiencing the Clear Light (Varela, 1997). By contrast, numerous NDErs have experienced light in their NDEs and subsequently returned to physical life.

Trying to explain the above-mentioned inconsistencies, Tibetan lamas have proposed that NDErs encountering a brilliant light did not experience the primordial Clear Light and that their experiences still belonged to the “bardo of life” (Rinpoche, 1992; Varela, 1997). Whereas the first proposition seems likely, the second seems doubtful for two reasons. First, as already mentioned, cessation of breathing immediately triggers experience of the Clear Light, according to the TBD—but not according to the Gelukpas’ concept of the dying process; see Dalai Lama (2004). Consequently, every NDE involving the cessation of breath should be regarded from the perspective of the TBD as a true dying experience. In fact, cases of people who did not breathe any more can be found in both the near-death literature (e.g., cases of drowning) and the narratives of Tibetan *délok* (Cuevas, 2008). Still, these persons reported experiences that deviated from the norm described in the TBD. Second, it is important to note that the Dzokchen practitioners who elaborated or allegedly verified the contents of the TBD either were continuously alive or always, after supposedly meditating in bodily states on the brink of death, returned to life—just as the NDErs did. Thus the visions of the Dzokchen practitioners could likewise belong to the “bardo of life,” conceivably superposed by the purposeful generation of the expected meditation visions. At least, it remains doubtful whether alleged experiences of dying described by meditators following a prescribed procedure should be regarded as more objective than those described by people who, according to modern standards, were regarded as clinically dead but subsequently revived.

It is known that minute details of the contents of profound mystical experiences that often are accompanied by an overwhelming feeling of absolute and undeniable truth can still be shaped according to the belief system and tradition of the practitioner (Mattiesen, 1925), and the Dalai Lama has acknowledged that the differences in the Tibetan concepts of dying need to be attributed to the different meditation foci applied (Dalai Lama, 2004, p. 124). Similarly, some aspects of NDEs seem to contain socio-culturally or even linguistically determined differences, as is demonstrated by comparisons from Western NDEs of former times with contemporary Western NDEs

(Nahm, 2009; Zaleski, 1987) and comparisons of NDEs from different cultures (Kellehear, 2009).

To summarize, it seems very likely that the Tibetan Clear Light is experienced only by advanced practitioners of meditation techniques specifically aiming at its recognition. Even if the experience of the primordial Clear Light should be a universal feature of the dying process, it apparently passes unnoticed in the vast majority of NDErs across the globe—just like most of us humans seem to miss the experience of its lower derivatives when we sneeze.

Feature 2, the experience of the 100 peaceful and wrathful deities, is a long and crucial stage of the postmortem bardo and holds a central position in the TBD. As shown above, it is rooted exclusively in the Dzokchen tradition. It was and is missing in other Tibetan lores concerning the afterlife such as those of the Gelukpas and was spread throughout Tibet only 200–300 years ago. It is missing also in the findings of survival research up to the present day (for references, see the next section on Feature 4 and Table 1). The defined sequence of the deity visions of this mandala, always starting with the peaceful deities and ending with the wrathful deities, is also difficult to reconcile with those distressing NDEs that begin with unpleasant experiences (Bush, 2009). Therefore, arguing that NDEs are pleasurable experiences because NDErs only catch first glimpses of the always-blissful beginning of the bardo experience (Wilber, 1990) does not account for the full spectrum of NDEs. Thus, there seems little reason to regard the experience of the mandala of 100 deities as a universal feature of the putative postmortem bardo.

Feature 3, the claim that the afterlife state is an entirely subjective illusion, reflects typical Tibetan Buddhist thinking. In fact, from a Buddhist perspective, even normal daily life is typically regarded as a mere subjective illusion. Therefore, it is desirable that Tibetan authorities specify more exactly the precise meaning of the alleged “subjective illusion” of the postmortem bardo state and its relation to the “subjective illusion” of daily life. As already mentioned, the precise meaning of subjectivity/objectivity of experiences in the bardo state is ambiguous and requires clarification, as actual intersubjective communication with other discarnate spirit agents is deemed possible. Proponents of other lores on the afterlife also acknowledge that dreamlike and subjective illusions do occur, but they usually stress that the afterlife in general takes place in a realm of existence with a reasonable quality of objectivity and intersubjectivity, similar to life in physical bodies.

Feature 4, the 49 days of bardo existence, is known only in Tibetan Buddhism. Yet, as shown above, not all schools read this number literally. Therefore, the literal interpretation put forward by, for example, the Dalai Lama is not the only interpretation available and should be regarded with caution. In fact, the 49 days are not even manifested in the only examples in which the identities of purported reincarnations of former personalities were investigated and/or confirmed in Tibet, the *tulkus*. These individuals are regarded as highly developed spiritual beings who are usually incarnated as lamas on earth and who can determine the circumstances and manner of their rebirths. Here, exactly 49 days seems a rarely if ever reported timespan between the two lives of a *tulku*. It is often shorter and sometimes also much longer. In the cases that exceed 49 days, tradition assumes that these individuals had spent the additional amount of days or years in a heavenly realm before descending to earth again. However, this kind of rebirth control is said to be not available for the average human being (Bärlocher, 1982, vol. 1, pp. 75, 338f, 450f).

The literal interpretation of maximum 49 days of existence in post-mortem bardo is also inconsistent with findings derived from observations in the context of survival research that suggest *prima facie* that discarnate souls can exist much longer. Although one cannot claim that these observations conclusively prove human survival of bodily death, it is remarkable that all available data that point towards this direction do not support the literal 49-days interpretation. The observations made in context of survival research relate to apparitions and hauntings (Arcangel, 2005; Barrett, 1926; Flammarion, 1923; Fontana, 2004; Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 1995; Lambert, 1923; Mattiesen, 1936–1939; Osis & Haraldsson, 1997; Sidgwick, Johnson, Myers, Podmore, & Sidgwick, 1894; Wright, 2002), alleged communications of the deceased through mediums (Crookall, 1974, 1978; Cummins, 1965, 1967; Fontana, 2004; Gauld, 1968; Mattiesen, 1936–1939; Roy, 2008), examinations of cases of the reincarnation type (Rawat & Rivas, 2005; Sharma & Tucker, 2004; Stevenson, 1974, 1997, 2001; Tucker, 2006), and investigations of cases of the possession type (Crabtree, 1997; Rogo, 1987; Stevenson, Pasricha, & McClean-Rice, 1989).

Ian Stevenson published the most compelling studies so far that indicate that at least some memories and habits of deceased persons are present once again in individuals who are born after the former person's death. He reported that in 10 different cultures the median interval between the death of the previous person and the birth of the

new individual ranged from four to 141 months, with variation probably due to respective belief systems (Stevenson, 1986); even the lowest of these numbers exceeds the approximately 1.5 months identified in the scholarly Tibetan doctrine. In addition, practically all folklore and religious traditions concerned with discarnate souls and varieties of ghosts—including shamanism (Eliade, 1974), Tibetan folklore, and délok accounts—are not compatible with this particular aspect of the scholarly Tibetan doctrine.

Like many NDErs, some délok reported having met deceased individuals who died much longer than 49 days ago (Cuevas, 2008). This experience, however, is regarded as impossible in the orthodox Tibetan view. Here, whereas meeting with other physically deceased entities is generally deemed feasible in the postmortem bardo, meetings with such entities who were deceased longer dead than 49 days need to be regarded as subjective illusions (Varela, 1997). This line of reasoning appears suspect as having being constructed *ad hoc*. But consequently, because encounters with persons who died longer ago than 49 days are common in NDEs, they constitute one more reason why NDEs are regarded as illusions in the formal Tibetan doctrine (Varela, 1997). This and other contradictions to the doctrine might have been another reason why the délok accounts were not welcomed by scholarly Tibetan traditions. Still, they were tolerated because they also contained emphatic advertisements for Buddhist virtues and for belief in the religious establishment.

In summary, there is no independent evidence supporting the notion that the feature of 49 days between physical death and rebirth should be taken literally. Rather, based on different lines of evidence from a variety of sources including the findings of survival research, which seem entirely ignored by most adherents of Tibetan Buddhism, the 49-days notion seems unwarranted.

Conclusion and Outlook

The examination of the history of the TBD shows that, contrary to what followers of Tibetan Buddhism usually assume, it was not revealed as a coherent text by Padmasambhava in the 8th century. Many of its contents were gradually elaborated by individuals forming a single transmission line within the Dzokchen tradition and were adopted by other Tibetan traditions only 200–300 years ago. Moreover, important aspects of the dying and afterlife concept described in the TBD are inconsistent with the results of survival re-

search, NDE research, and practically all other lores on dying and the afterlife, including Tibetan folklore. Thus, it is questionable that the TBD holds the key to unravel the mysteries surrounding death, as proposed specifically by authors stressing its alleged scientific value (Evans-Wentz, 1993; Thurman, 1994).

In fact, even Tibetan scholars are in disagreement with respect to the interpretation of core features of the Tibetan doctrine, such as the duration of 49 days of existence in the bardo from death to rebirth. Those like Lama Dawa Samdup take the 49 days not as a fixed period of earthly time but as a symbol with a deeper meaning. However, such esoterical interpretations go much further than simply relativizing the duration of the possible postmortem bardo existence or taking numbers as symbols. They affect almost any aspect of the orthodox Tibetan Buddhist doctrine. Lama Dawa Samdup even questioned the widespread Buddhist assumption that sinful humans can reincarnate as animals, especially as insects (Evans-Wentz, 1993). Clearly, the esoterical interpretation of the TBD—be it intended by its composers or not—would be much more in agreement with the concepts of other traditions, findings of survival research, and research on NDEs.

Thus, it is advisable not to take the contents of the TBD for granted without questioning, especially in their literal form. To harken back to Varela, an unquestioning acceptance might be a too hasty interpretation. One should be aware of the possibility that the TBD promotes inaccurate expectations about what will happen during and after death—with the possible exception of those who are experienced in specific meditation practices designed to comprehend and transcend the putative illusory nature of all existence.

However, it should also be stressed that there are striking congruencies between the contents of the TBD and other lores on dying, including the Tibetan *délok* accounts, NDEs, and observations made in various disciplines of survival research (see Table 1). The following features of purported dying and afterlife experiences appear to be consistent across these varied sources:

- 1) Experiencing OBEs after the cessation of vital body functions
- 2) Living on in a “subtle body” with an outlook and shape like the former physical body, but usually not perceivable for those still in their physical bodies
- 3) Entering an at least partly objective and intersubjective afterlife realm with earthlike features in which one might meet other deceased people
- 4) Experiencing a life review and/or judgment

Therefore, despite some inconsistencies in specific details, the experiences described in the TBD can be regarded as an important supplement to the depictions of the putative afterlife conditions given by other sources. It may be that this concordance of different sources is more than a trivial result of identical hopes and fears of human beings around the globe. These concordant features might represent the fundamentals of an afterlife that will be encountered by most or all human beings. Although we humans cannot be certain about this conjecture, it seems advisable not to reject the possibility that it is accurate. In case there is something like an afterlife, many sources are in agreement that mental preparation is very useful, particularly for coping with the initial period of bewilderment shortly after death.

To conclude, I would like to draw attention to the importance of collecting NDE accounts from highly advanced Tibetan lamas. Because many of them suffered enormous physical and psychological distress under the Chinese oppression or their escape across the Himalayas, this task might be possible. If they would report NDEs fully consistent with the TBD, they would contribute an essential step forward towards understanding how and to what extent individuals can modify their NDE contents by training. I suspect that a finding such as this would have far-ranging consequences for research on NDEs, the *ars moriendi*, and perhaps also the shaping of a potential afterlife.

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