

Buddhism and Death

The Greatest Impermanence

Although most religions have rites of passage for the dead, their teachings about death itself (and what follows it) are few and far between. Religions' vagueness and mystery surrounding this subject is reinforced by death being a taboo topic in many cultures. Buddhism, in contrast to most other faiths, deals with it head-on, in a very frank and quite detailed way, both in theory and in practical preparation. The Buddha himself described death as the 'the greatest of all teachers', '*the* sickness' and 'the most important manifestation of impermanence'. It is helpful to recall that most Buddhist cultures, even well into this century, were made up of integral, extended families in which ageing and dying happened in the home and not in external institutions such as old peoples' homes and hospitals. People were confronted with mortality as a real and recurring feature of daily life. It led to many natural questions and was a constant reminder of the Buddha's teachings on impermanence..

Since Buddhism's earliest days, Buddhist monks have gone to funeral grounds to observe bodies left there to be eaten by wild animals and insects. This may seem macabre and gruesome at first, to a modern Western mind, but for monks it is an invaluable and time-saving device. Many people have to wait decades — until parents or spouses die — to go through the unique learning cycle afforded by observing death at close hand. The meditator, calmly observing the waxen, inanimate corpses deposited daily in charnel grounds, takes only days or weeks to understand the point: the vital distinction between the body and the mind which animates it. Believing in reincarnation, he or she sees the biological shell as a guest-house in which the travelling consciousness sojourns but briefly, soon to go to another, quite different, place. This almost endless, age-old journey will involve staying in hundreds, thousands, of such temporary residences until liberating truths finally release the weary traveller. Observing this ephemeral fragility of life can sow the seeds of great compassion for those who cling to it as though it would never end. Most importantly, awareness of death leads to a awakened appreciation of every precious moment of life. Each hour, each day, becomes a fresh

opportunity for working for the long-term spiritual well rather than inconsequential material pleasure. On a deeper level, death is not only a physical reality but also a powerful metaphor for the psychological death of ego which must occur before the mind is liberated into limitless wisdom.

Preparing for death

Buddhists prepare for death in many ways, depending upon how well they have learnt to master their own minds, through meditation. In one way, the finest and most thorough training is simply to lead a good and virtuous life — physically, verbally and mentally. The good karma this creates and the wholesome, virtuous mental reflexes it develops will become one's best friends at the time of dying and in the after-death experiences, when spontaneous reactions and the mighty drive of karma prevail.

People used to meditation on specific Buddhas and bodhisattvas — and in particular on Buddha Amitabha and bodhisattva Avalokitesvara — will find special support at the time of death. Through familiarity, they will welcome the experience of these beings of light coming to receive them into their paradises. Most other people are so totally overawed and frightened by such brilliant experiences that they turn away from them and shelter in mind's shadows. Those who have gone beyond the *creative phase* of meditation and who have experienced voidness in its *ultimate phase* will maximise the brief opportunity occurring soon after death, when the relative mind dissolves into its absolute nature, like a raindrop falling back into the ocean. There will be natural and lasting bliss and peace. For most other people, it passes elusively, like a flash.

Other Buddhists train in the *pardo* (see following pages) teachings. By familiarising themselves with the long succession of experiences and hallucinations which follow death, they prepare themselves for the real thing, rather like karate students going through the various motions of combat in training for true conflict. Even if, when the actual moment comes, they themselves are incapable of mastering the situation in the traumatic, dream-like state between lives, they may nevertheless respond more readily to the psychic guidance given by lamas and friends reciting the traditional *pardo* prayers designed to lead them through the experiences and into a good rebirth.

Yet other accomplished meditators perform the profound consciousness transference (*po-wa*) practices

of vajrayana. These enable the mind to be forcefully or peacefully (depending upon the prowess of the meditator) fused with the primordial enlightened mind of Buddha, either temporarily or permanently. Finally, those of unwavering faith will experience their guru or their yidam coming to welcome them away from the coarse, dark limitations of this life into the boundless light and truth that is mind's true nature.

Forever In-Between: *Pardo*

Buddhists believe nothing lasts. Everything is always in a state of change. When viewing things with microscopic precision, it becomes clear to them that, in the world of mind, consciousness is renewed every split second and that, in the world of matter, atomic particles are always in flux and movement. Tantric teachings describe all existence as a migration from what was to what will be. In that sense, all is *pardo* or 'in-betweening'. However, this continual flux, viewed macroscopically as beings' lives, has four distinct phases, each with its own very specific type of experience.

Being born and being alive is known as the *this life pardo*, the most powerful phase of them all. In it, one has more control over the mind than in the other three *pardo* and can choose lucidly how to act physically and verbally. The period at the end of life, as one dies, is the *traumatic dying pardo*. The breakdown of the biological support of life during this period engenders a series of moods and feelings which are hard to dominate. The moment immediately after death, usually very brief, when the primordial nature of existence manifests, is the *expanse of purity pardo*. The ensuing dream-like state between lives, in which one has little or no choice of action, is known as the *becoming pardo*.

The Traumatic *Pardo* of Dying

What exactly do Buddhists believe happens at death? It can be summed up technically as the progressive cessation of activity of the five bio-dynamic forces (*prana*) and the resorption of the bodily elements.

As the digestive bio-dynamic (Fire Companion *prana*) degrades, food can no longer be digested and bodily heat diminishes, from its extremities inwards. As the oxygenating bio-dynamic (Life Sustaining *prana*) degrades, the mind becomes unclear and confused. As the excreting bio-dynamic (Downward Expeller *prana*) degrades, one can no longer eliminate bodily wastes. As the energising bio-dynamic (Upward-Moving *prana*) degrades, one can no longer eat or drink and finds it increasingly difficult to breathe. When the motility bio-dynamic degrades, the limbs can no longer function and the blood vessels shrink.

As the earth element dissolves into the water element, one can no longer stand, the head lolls, the face

takes on a grey complexion and one loses saliva. One feels dull and depressed. When the water element then dissolves into the fire element, the mouth dries up and the tongue becomes hard and twisted. One feels hazy and irritable. As the fire element dissolves into the wind element, the body loses its warmth and the breath feels cold on the nose and lips. One vacillates between clarity and confusion. When the wind element then dissolves into consciousness, the breath starts to rattle and the eyes roll upwards. Inwardly one is bewildered and can hallucinate, positively or negatively depending upon one's karma.

Simultaneously, the five secondary pranas, governing the senses, disappear. One can no longer clearly perceive external forms, sounds, odours, tastes or physical sensations. Then, consciousness dissolves into space and breathing stops. The body lustre fades and rapidly becomes cadaveric but there remains a slight warmth around the heart. Some texts say that, in certain cases, some people can still recover at this point. Beyond it, there is no hope.

The mind is then left to experience the fruits of its own actions and the enormous range of possibilities from this point onwards is largely dependent upon mental habits while alive. Those well-trained in meditation have a chance to fuse into the clear light of absolute reality, which shines soon after death. Others may have beautiful experiences. Others, on the contrary, may be terrified and enter a long-enduring nightmare.

The Primordial Purity *Pardo*

As the components of this life's consciousness collapse back into what is eternal and universal, there is a short but vital opportunity to fuse with the Buddha within. Very experienced meditators can use this to the full but, for most people, it is a brief and unrecognisable flash to which they react with all the reflexes of personality, thereby steering themselves away from the eternal and back into the stream of rebirth.

The Becoming *Pardo*

Rebirth does not happen immediately after the moment of primordial purity. Before the next conception comes the 'intermediate state' (*becoming pardo*) experience, familiar to many people

through what has become known as 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead'. This title was borrowed by Evans-Wentz from the famous Egyptian Book of the Dead but the parallel between the two books is far from obvious. A more precise translation of the Tibetan text's title would be *Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State*. The work is, in effect, a vivid description of the forty-nine main stages of experience following death, along with instructions about how best to relate to them. The text is read into the dying person's ear, and can also be recited by lamas or by relatives, as a prayer, during the forty-nine days following death, in the hope of guiding the deceased's mind in its confused travels.

The above are but a few general details from the complete trainings for death given in tantric texts. Advanced meditators, in long retreats, prepare their minds systematically for all these experience and there were two special places in Tibet where yogis could actually go through a simulation of the forty-nine-day *pardo* in the total darkness of a special retreat centre.