

# The Tibetan Book of the Dead: First Complete Translation

*By Padmasambhava*

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One of the greatest works created by any culture and overwhelmingly the most significant of all Tibetan Buddhist texts in the West, **The Tibetan Book of the Dead** has had a number of distinguished translations, but none encompassed the work in its entirety. Now, in one of the year's most important publishing events, the entire text has not only been made available in English but in a translation of quite remarkable clarity and beauty.

With an introductory commentary by His Holiness The Dalai Lama, who calls this translation "an extraordinary accomplishment undertaken with great care over many years" this complete edition faithfully presents the insights and intentions of the original work. It includes one of the most detailed and compelling descriptions of the after-death state in world literature, exquisitely written practices that can transform our experience of daily life, guidance on helping those who are dying, and an inspirational perspective on coping with bereavement. Translated with the close support of leading contemporary masters, including HH Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and learned scholars such as Khamtrul Rinpoche and Zenkar Rinpoche, His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, "I hope that the profound insights contained in this work will be a source of inspiration and support to many interested people around the world."

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"This new translation of The Tibetan Book of the Dead is a tremendous accomplishment." -**Francesca Fremantle, Buddhadharma magazine**

"Profound and unique, it is one of the great treasures of wisdom in the spiritual heritage of humanity." -**Sogyal Rinpoche**, Author of the **Tibetan Book of Living and Dying**

#### About the Author

Gyurme Dorje, Ph.D., is a leading scholar of the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

Thupten Jinpa, Ph.D., is the senior translator to His Holiness The Dalai Lama and president of the Institute of Tibetan Classics.

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Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Chapter 1 - Natural Liberation of the Nature of Mind: The Four-session Yoga ...

Chapter 2 - A Prayer for Union with the Spiritual Teacher, [entitled] Natural ...

Chapter 3 - Root Verses of the Six Intermediate States

Chapter 4 - The Introduction to Awareness: Natural Liberation through Naked Perception

Chapter 5 - The Spiritual Practice entitled Natural Liberation of Habitual Tendencies

Chapter 6 - Natural Liberation of Negativity and Obscuration through ...

Chapter 7 - Natural Liberation through Acts of Confession

Chapter 8 - Natural Liberation through Recognition of the Visual Indications ...

Chapter 9 - Natural Liberation of Fear through the Ritual Deception of Death

Chapter 10 - Consciousness Transference: Natural Liberation through Recollection

Chapter 11 - The Great Liberation by Hearing

Chapter 12 - Aspirational Prayers

Chapter 13 - A Masked Drama of Rebirth

Chapter 14 - Liberation by Wearing: Natural Liberation of the Psycho-physical Aggregates

Appendix One: Peaceful and Wrathful Deities and the Tibetan Book of the Dead

Appendix Two: Symbolism of the Mandala of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities

Notes

Bibliography

Glossary of Key Terms

Thematic Index by Chapter

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The translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* was carried out with the support of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and with the commentarial guidance of revered contemporary Tibetan masters including the late Head of the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism HH Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Zenkar Rinpoche and Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche.

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Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche)

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May all sentient beings,  
children of buddha nature,  
realise  
the ultimate nature of mind:  
insight and compassion,  
in blissful union.

### **Acknowledgements**

Our project began in 1988 when HH the Dalai Lama kindly offered to request HH Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, the late head of the Nyingma school, to give an oral commentary to me on key sections of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The Dalai Lama knew that various translations had been made of 'The Great Liberation by Hearing', our Chapter 11, but that so far no one had translated the entire *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. HH Dilgo Khyentse graciously agreed to the Dalai Lama's request and over a period of four weeks gave the empowerments and an incisive and illuminating oral commentary to the core elements of the text, which was eloquently translated each day by Sogyal Rinpoche.

While in Kathmandu, receiving the oral commentary from HH Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, I had the good fortune to meet Dr Gyurme Dorje, who had previously translated Longchen Rabjampa's commentary to the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*, the root text on which the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is based. During our first meeting, Gyurme agreed to make a new annotated translation of the entire *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a task he undertook with exceptional care and dedication over the years that followed. While Gyurme was working on the translation he was also employed at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London as a research fellow, translating into English the *Greater Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary* (*Bod-rgya tshig-mdzod chen-mo*). During this time, Gyurme worked closely with the highly regarded Nyingma master Zenkar Rinpoche, who is one of the foremost contemporary lineage holders of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Zenkar Rinpoche kindly advised Gyurme throughout the translation of our text and also gave an extensive oral commentary to us on Chapter 4, 'The Introduction to Awareness'.

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Needless to say it has been a wonderful privilege for us to work with all those who helped to make this project possible. Our insights and skills as writers would not even register on the most sensitive of detectors compared to those of the composers of the original cycle of teachings or the lineage holders who gave the commentarial explanation that guided us. Throughout this endeavour therefore we have tried to substitute hard work and attention to detail for our lack of ability and to let the original magnificence of the text shine through the clouds of our shortcomings as much as we were able.

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GRAHAM COLEMAN  
*Bath, England*

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depicting the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities in Repkong style, which were commissioned by Gyurme Dorje in 2002, are from the studio of the late master artist Shawu Tsering of Sengeshong Yagotsang in Amdo.

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## **Introductory Commentary**

by His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama

The question of whether or not there exists a continuity of consciousness after death has been an important aspect of philosophical reflection and debate from ancient Indian times to the present. When considering these matters from a Buddhist point of view, however, we have to bear in mind that the understanding of the nature of continuity of consciousness and the understanding of the nature of the 'I' or 'self' are closely interlinked. Therefore, let us first look at what it is that can be said to constitute a person.

According to Buddhist classical literature, a person can be seen as possessing five interrelated aggregates, technically known as the five psycho-physical aggregates.<sup>a</sup> These are the aggregate of consciousness, the aggregate of form (which includes our physical body and senses), the aggregate of feeling, the aggregate of discrimination, and the aggregate of motivational tendencies. That is to say, there is our body, the physical world and our five senses, and there are the various processes of mental activity, our motivational tendencies, our labelling of and discrimination between objects, our feelings, and the underlying awareness or consciousness.

Among the ancient schools of thought, which accepted the notion of continuity of consciousness, there were several non-Buddhist philosophical schools which regarded the entity, the 'I' or 'self', which migrated from existence to existence as being unitary and permanent. They also suggested that this 'self' was autonomous in its relationship to the psycho-physical components that constitute a person. In other words they believed or posited that there is an essence or 'soul' of the person, which exists independently from the body and the mind of the person.

However, Buddhist philosophy does not accept the existence of such an independent, autonomous entity. In the Buddhist view, the self or the person is understood in terms of a dynamic interdependent relationship of both mental and physical attributes, that is to say the psycho-physical components which constitute a person. In other words our sense of self can, upon examination, be seen as a complex flow of mental and physical events, clustered in clearly identifiable patterns, including our physical features, instincts, emotions, and attitudes, etc., continuing through time. Further, according to Pr<sup>?</sup>sa<sup>?</sup>gika-Madhyamaka philosophy, which has become the prevailing philosophical view of Tibetan Buddhism today, this sense of self is simply a mental construct, a mere label given to this cluster of dependently arising mental and physical events in dependence on their continuity.

Now, when we look at this interdependence of mental and physical constituents from the perspective of Highest Yoga Tantra,<sup>b</sup> there are two concepts of a person. One is the temporary person or self, that is as we



exist at the moment, and this is labelled on the basis of our coarse or gross physical body and conditioned mind, and, at the same time, there is a subtle person or self which is designated in dependence on the subtle body and subtle mind. This subtle body and subtle mind are seen as a single entity that has two facets. The aspect which has the quality of awareness, which can reflect and has the power of cognition, is the subtle mind. Simultaneously, there is its energy, the force that activates the mind towards its object - this is the subtle body or subtle wind. These two inextricably conjoined qualities are regarded, in Highest Yoga Tantra, as the ultimate nature of a person and are identified as buddha nature, the essential or actual nature of mind.

Now, before we look more closely at the nature of the subtle body and mind, let us look at how the gross body and mind are thought to originate. The notion of dependent origination lies at the very heart of Buddhist philosophy. The principle of dependent origination asserts that nothing exists in its own right independent of other factors. Things and events come into being only in dependence on the aggregation of multiple causes and conditions. The process through which the external world and the sentient beings within it revolve in a cycle of existence propelled by karmic propensities and their interaction with misapprehension, attraction and aversion and conditions is described in terms of twelve interdependent links. Each cycle of the process begins with a misapprehension of the nature of actual reality. This fundamental ignorance acts as a condition for the arising of the propensities created by our past actions, mental, verbal and physical, which condition our dualising consciousness. Our dualising consciousness, in turn, conditions the qualities and mode of interaction of our psycho-physical aggregates, which condition our sensory fields, which generate contact, which generates sensations, and then in turn attachment, grasping, and maturation towards rebirth. At this point there is an interaction with the genetic constituents of the parents and subsequent interaction with the environment, and then finally we have birth, ageing and death. This cycle can be viewed as both illustrating the underlying processes of life, death and rebirth and as an illustration of the processes to be transformed on the path to liberation from suffering in cyclic existence.

The notion that there is a connection between this life and the events of both our previous existence and our future existence, follows from the Buddhist understanding of the natural law of cause and effect. For example, although we can speak of yesterday's weather and today's weather as distinct, today's weather is inextricably linked with the weather patterns of yesterday. Even at the bodily level, in the case of our physical health for example, we know that events in the past affect the present and those of the present the future. Similarly, in the realm of consciousness the Buddhist view is that there is also this same causal continuum between the events of the past, present and future.

The Buddhist understanding of the continuity of personal experience, including our memories, can also be considered here. The Buddhist view is that the continuity of personal experience is primarily founded on the capacity for retention, which can be further developed during one's meditative practice in this life. However, generally speaking, it is thought that if a person dies after a prolonged period of illness that has led to a prolonged degeneration of both physical and mental capacities, there will be a greater chance of many of the personal characteristics, including memories etc., being lost. On the other hand, in the case of someone who dies a sudden death, when the mind-body relationship at the gross level is still very firm, it is thought that there is a greater chance of carrying forward the acquired characteristics and memories, etc. Nonetheless, in both cases, the characteristics carried forward from a previous life are generally thought to be most strongly felt at an early stage of one's rebirth. This is because the personal characteristics of the previous life are thought, generally speaking, to be quickly overwhelmed by the developing characteristics inherited from the parents of the present life. Nonetheless, as I have mentioned, much depends in this respect on the individual's capacity for recall and this capacity for recall is dependent on a deepened retentive training acquired in this lifetime.

Now, let us look at the possible states of existence one can be born into. From the Buddhist perspective, rebirth in conditioned existence can take place in one of three realms: the formless realm, the form realm or

the desire realm. The form and formless realms are fruits of subtle states of consciousness, attained upon the realisation of certain meditative concentrations. Our realm, the desire realm, is the most gross of these three. Six classes of beings are described as inhabiting the desire realm: gods (mundane celestial beings whose primary mental state is exaltation), antigods (who are predominantly hostile and jealous), human beings (who are influenced by all the five dissonant mental states), animals (who are under the sway of delusion), anguished spirits (who are under the sway of attachment and unsatisfied craving) and hell beings (who are overwhelmed by hatred, anger and fear). In the literature of Highest Yoga Tantra, the evolution of all the three realms of conditioned existence are described in terms of differing expressions or states of energy and, as I have mentioned, it is said that our fundamental ignorance is the root of conditioned existence and that karmic energy is its activating force. In the Buddhist view, therefore, it is the nature of our habitual tendencies that generates our future existence, driven by the natural law of cause and effect.

Further, when we observe the patterns of arising and subsiding that underlie the dynamic nature of the physical environment, the cycle of days and nights and the passing of the seasons, for example, and we observe how matter arises from insubstantial subatomic particles and we look at the patterns of causal connectedness in the arising and dissolution of our mental experiences from moment to moment, across the differing phases of deep sleep, dreams and our waking state, the notion of continuity of consciousness can come to be seen to be in accord with both the nature of our environment and the nature of our mental experience. Certainly, it has often been argued that one advantage of accepting the notion of continuity of consciousness is that it gives us a more profound ability to understand and to explain the nature of our existence and of the universe. In addition, this notion of continuity and causal interconnectedness reinforces a sense of consequences for our own actions, in terms of both the impact on ourselves and the impact on others and the environment.

So, in summary, when considering the notion of continuity of consciousness we must bear in mind that there are many different levels of greater or lesser subtlety in the states of consciousness. For example, we know of course that certain qualities of sensory perception are dependent on the physical constitution of the individual and that when the physical body dies, the states of consciousness associated with these sensory perceptions also cease. But, although we know that the human body serves as a condition for human consciousness, the question still remains: what is the nature of the underlying factor or essence that accounts for our experience of consciousness as having the natural quality of luminosity and awareness?

Finally, then, when considering the interrelationship between mind, body and the environment at the subtle level, we know that material things are composed of cells, atoms and particles and that consciousness is composed of moments. That is to say that mind and matter have distinctly different natures and therefore have different substantial causes. Material things come into being based on other material entities such as particles, atoms and cells and the mind comes into being based on a previous moment of mind, which is something that is luminous and has the capacity to be aware. Each moment of awareness therefore depends on a previous moment of awareness as its cause. This is the reasoning upon which Buddhist logic asserts that there is at the level of subtle mind and subtle wind a beginningless continuum of mind and matter.

It is through reflection on the above themes: the law of cause and effect, dependent origination, the dynamics of our physical environment, and, based on our analysis of the nature of mind, the mode of the arising and subsiding of thoughts, the shifts in the modalities of our consciousness between deep sleep, dreams and our waking state, etc., that the notion of continuity of consciousness may first become established as relevant to the understanding of our current condition. Once the notion of this continuity has been confirmed, through reflection and experience, then it becomes logical to prepare oneself for death and for future existences.

Now, as to the nature of the actual preparation itself, this will depend on each individual's depth of spiritual aspiration. For example, if an individual is simply seeking a favourable rebirth as a human being, there is no

need to engage in a sophisticated meditative path related to the processes of death and rebirth. Simply to live a virtuous life is seen as sufficient. Similarly, in the case of those who are seeking personal liberation from conditioned existence and also in the case of those whose practice is confined to the sūtra level of the Mahāyāna path, their meditative preparation will be limited to ensuring the attainment of successive forms of existence that will be conducive to the continuation of their journey towards enlightenment. For these three kinds of individuals, no actual techniques for utilising the time of death as an essential element of the spiritual path have been set down in the classical Buddhist literature. Nevertheless, since the understanding of the processes of death, the intermediate state and rebirth are crucial to our understanding of the nature of existence, we do find extensive discussion of these three processes, even in the texts which relate to the aspirations of these three kinds of persons.

It is exclusively in tantra, however, and particularly in Highest Yoga Tantra, that the methods for utilising the processes of death, the intermediate state and rebirth are specifically taught as the basis for achieving liberation from cyclic existence. These methods involve the development of a skilful relationship with certain experiential stages that an individual actually induces with the intention of enhancing spiritual realisation and the fruition of their capacities as a human being.

Generally speaking, the practices of Highest Yoga Tantra present a spiritual path which enables the individual to attain complete buddhahood within a single lifetime, prior to the moment of death. Yet, for those who are unable to achieve this, it becomes crucial to use the transformative opportunities offered by the naturally occurring processes of death, the intermediate state and rebirth. Hence, in Highest Yoga Tantra, it is not merely the preparation for a more developed future rebirth which is important, but of more fundamental significance is the personal preparation for using one's own death and subsequent states as a means of achieving liberation.

In the literature of Highest Yoga Tantra, as I have mentioned, the three realms of conditioned existence into which a human being may be born are described in terms of differing expressions or modalities of energy (*rlung*) and it is said that our fundamental ignorance is the root of conditioned existence and that karmic energy is its activating force. Further, from the tantric perspective, death, the intermediate state and rebirth are also seen as nothing other than differing modalities of karmic energy. The point at which the gross levels of energy are completely dissolved and only the subtle energies remain is death. The stage at which these energies unfold into a more manifest form is the intermediate state, and the stage at which they eventually manifest substantially is called rebirth. Thus, all three states are differing manifestations of energy (*rlung*). Based on this understanding, since death is the state when all the gross levels of energy and consciousness have been dissolved, and only the subtle energies and consciousnesses remain, it is possible for an advanced yogin to meditatively induce a state which is almost identical to the actual experience of death. This can be achieved because it is possible to meditatively bring about the dissolution of the gross levels of energy and consciousness. When such a task is accomplished, the meditator gains an enormous potential to progress definitively in his or her spiritual practice. For at the stage, when the experience of fundamental inner radiance is genuinely effected through such a method, the yogin gains the capacity to actualise the illusory body of the meditational deity - thus ensuring the realisation of perfect buddhahood in this lifetime.

This achievement of perfect buddhahood entails the actualisation of the three dimensions or bodies of a buddha (*trikāya*). These fruitional bodies are related both to our ultimate natural state and to the emanational qualities of full enlightenment. Interestingly, we see exactly the same pattern of dimensions in our ordinary existence. Death is the point at which both the physical and mental fields dissolve into inner radiance and where both consciousness and energy exist at their most subtle non-dual level, as in deep sleep. This mode in its fruitional state is the Buddha-body of Reality (*dharmakāya*). Then, from within this essential or natural state, one enters into the intermediate state, where, although there is perceptual experience, the phenomenal forms are comparatively subtle and non-substantive, as in a dream. This mode in its fruitional state is the

Buddha-body of Perfect Resource (*sambhogak?ya*). Then, from this state, one assumes a grosser physical existence culminating in actual rebirth, as in our normal waking experience. This mode in its fruitional state is the Buddha-body of Emanation (*nirm?n?ak?ya*). Thus, we see a direct parallel between the three natural states of our existence and the three dimensions of a fully enlightened being.

Now, since actualisation of these three dimensions can be effected through the transformation of the three ordinary states of our existence, we find an array of practices which contain specific meditative techniques focusing on those attributes which the three ordinary states of existence and the three buddha-bodies have in common. Through these practices a continuity is developed between the ground or base (the ordinary state), the path, and the fruition (the buddha-bodies). In order to highlight the potential for liberation which exists in the skilful transformation of the ordinary states of existence, the great Indian Buddhist master N?g?rjuna uses the term '*k?ya*' even when describing the three ordinary states. Thus, the dimension (*k?ya*) of the moment of death is equated with the basic *dharmak?ya*, the dimension (*k?ya*) of the intermediate state with the basic *sambhogak?ya* and the dimension (*k?ya*) of the rebirth process with the basic *nirm?n?ak?ya* .c Thus, it is said, that through the meditative ability of an accomplished yogin, a genuine assimilation takes place at the actual moment of death, upon entering the intermediate state and upon beginning the process of rebirth.

With respect to training in these practices, a similitude of such an assimilation can be effected during the waking state, through generation stage practices, and during sleep, through dream yoga practices.

In tantra the practice of imaginatively generating the meditational deity, that is to say, the practice of tantra's generation stage, is a unique path by which the three fruitional dimensions or buddha-bodies are brought into the path of one's practice. It is through understanding the profundity of this method that the tantric approach can be fully appreciated. The process of generating oneself as the meditational deity is the means by which the indivisible union of the realisation of emptiness and the realisation of perfect awareness is brought to fruition. This accomplishment directly counteracts the ordinary perceptions and apprehensions which underlie our ordinary dualistic experience. It is this accomplishment that culminates in the realisation of the ultimate nature of mind, the Buddha-body of Reality, the state beyond ordinary thought, where there is no longer any trace of the misapprehension of the nature of reality, of attachment or of aversion - only pure radiant awareness.

The practice of generating oneself as the meditational deity is found in all four classes of tantra. However, these methods are taught in their most sophisticated forms in the class of Highest Yoga Tantra. Depending on the spiritual capacities of the practitioner the tantras describe a graduated series of methods for generating oneself as the meditational deity. In the New Translation schools there is a systematisation according to four levels of capacity and in the Nyingma (or Old Translation) school the highest level of practice is further subdivided into three methods: Mah?yoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga.

In the primary stages of tantric practice, in order to train oneself in the actualisation of the three buddha-bodies, as I have mentioned, the yogin first engages in the practices of the generation stage of meditation. The generation stage is like an imaginary rehearsal of the actual processes. Then, in the perfection stage of meditation, however, the experiences of entering the Buddha-body of Reality and actualising its emanational states, the Buddha-body of Perfect Resource and the Buddha-body of Emanation, are not imagined but real, and even involve certain physiological changes occurring in the yogin's body. Crucial to all these practices is the process of the dissolution of the gross consciousnesses and energies of the practitioner. Here, the practice of Highest Yoga Tantra underlines the importance of interrupting or cutting off the gross energy which serves as a vehicle for conceptual elaborations. Thereby, hypothetically speaking, if the individual succeeds in interrupting the flow of karmic energy, then, even if the propensities for fundamental ignorance remain, they will be rendered impotent.

As I have noted above, if we observe carefully, we can see a basic pattern of emergence and dissolution which is common to both animate and inanimate phenomena. Among inanimate phenomena the processes of arising start from the very subtle and develop into the more gross. That is: there is an emergence from empty space, and a progression to movement or energy, to heat or light, to moisture or liquidity, and finally to solidity. The dissolution is the reverse of this sequence. This process of arising and dissolution also occurs in the body. In tantra, the process of dissolution of the physical elements which constitute a human body is described as beginning first with the dissolution of the earth element, followed by the water element, the fire element, the wind element and, finally, at the point at which only the space element is prominent, all the gross levels of energy and consciousness have dissolved. Then, in a further series of dissolutions, this stage gives rise to the experiences which are called: 'whitish appearance', followed by 'reddish increased appearance', 'blackish near attainment' and finally there is a culmination in the full experience of inner radiance called 'the attainment'.d

Because the stages of dissolution are natural processes, imagining these is of pre-eminent importance in the generation-stage practices of visualising the meditational deity.

Both in the New and Old Translation schools, the actualisation of inner radiance, the point at which all our gross consciousnesses and energies have been dissolved, is the primary intent. This is the essence of the Great Perfection (Dzogchen) practices of the Nyingma tradition, of the Union of Emptiness and Luminosity Based on the Sameness of Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa practices of the Sakya tradition, of the Great Seal (*Mahāmudrā*) practices of the Kagyu tradition and the Indivisible Union of Bliss and Emptiness practices of the Gelug tradition.

Now, when we speak of inner radiance, it is important to bear in mind that there are different levels at which this can be experienced and, in addition, there is one important difference between the Dzogchen view of inner radiance and that of the New Translation schools. As with that of emptiness, the experience of inner radiance can be of different types. The experience of inner radiance described in the New Translation schools is effected only subsequent to the dissolution of all the gross levels of conceptual elaboration. However, in the Dzogchen view, all states of awareness or consciousness are thought to be pervaded by inner radiance, just as a sesame seed is permeated by oil. Therefore, in Dzogchen, there exist refined instructions which allow the recognition of inner radiance even while all the gross levels of sensory activity are still active. This is where we come to the important distinction made in the Dzogchen teachings between the Tibetan terms '*sems*' and '*rig-pa*'. Our 'ordinary mind' (*sems*) refers to the gross dualising consciousness (*rnam-shes*), whereas 'pure awareness' (*rig-pa*) is free from the dualistic perceptions of subject and object. Following the practices of the Dzogchen teachings of the Nyingma school the student is directly introduced by an authentic spiritual teacher to the very nature of his or her mind as pure awareness. This is the focus of the 'Cutting through Resistance' (*khregs-chod*) aspect of the Dzogchen path and this is complemented by the All-surpassing Realisation (*thod-rgal*) practices which focus on eliciting and recognising the radiances of pristine cognition.f Irrespective of these differences of view and practice, however, a genuine experience of inner radiance is the realisation of the fundamental nature of our awareness, which is the inextricable union of emptiness and luminosity.

Now, when the subtle mind is completely pure, the body or energy aspect of the combination of subtle mind and subtle body arises as the five different coloured luminosities (white, blue, red, yellow and green) and in the form of buddha-bodies. All the different mandalas, of the hundred deities, or the thousand deities, or whatever number, are all expressions of the five enlightened families, which are related to the purity of the five psycho-physical aggregates, the five elements and the five pristine cognitions. These relationships form the core of the practices presented in Highest Yoga Tantra, as does the experiential cultivation of the nature of these deities through the daily practice.

So, in summary, by following in our practice the process of the natural dissolution of our gross forms of consciousness, and the natural arising from this state of the luminosities and bodies of the deities, first the actualisation of inner radiance is refined and this serves as the substantive cause for the arising of the Buddha-body of Perfect Resource and the Buddha-body of Emanation respectively. Thus the three bodies of a buddha are perfected, which is the fruition of the path of tantra.

Now, as for the forms of the meditational deity, which are generated in the practice of tantra, there are two principal types: peaceful deities and wrathful deities. In general terms, these are concerned with the transformation of the cognitive and emotional states associated with attachment and aversion respectively. The peaceful deities are quiescent and are expressions of the natural purity of attraction, that is the mind resting in its natural pristine state. The wrathful deities are the dynamic aspect of the peaceful deities and are expressions of the natural transformation of aversion. That is they represent the mind's active transformation of delusion into pristine cognition.g

As we now see, the path of Highest Yoga Tantra involves taking dissonant cognitive states, such as attachment and aversion, on to the path. In the path followed by pious attendants (*śrāvaka*) dissonant cognitive states are categorically perceived as something to be renounced. In the Mahāyāna path, however, there are two approaches which contrast with that of the pious attendants. According to the Mahāyāna śāstras, if a certain situation suggests a positive outcome in terms of benefiting others the voluntary use of desire or attachment is allowable. However, in the tantras it is not merely that desire or attachment is permissible when beneficial, here one deliberately utilises their energies as the path to purifying or consuming the dissonant states themselves.

Given that the practices of the tantras include the disciplined engagement of subtle physiological processes and the transformation of the energies associated with attraction and aversion, before a practitioner can embark on the practices of tantra, he or she must find a spiritual teacher who meets the qualifications as set out in the authoritative literature and must receive empowerments and graduated instruction from that master. In addition, the practitioner should complete the preliminary practices and achieve a thorough grounding in the foundational paths of the śāstras, which includes the development of the altruistic intention to attain enlightenment (*bodhicitta*), the development of calm abiding - the stabilisation of attention on an internal object of meditation - and the development of penetrative insight - an analytical meditative state that dissects the nature of its object, its relationships, characteristics and function. The development of calm abiding and penetrative insight are the means by which the practitioner can cultivate his or her understanding of emptiness, which is an appreciation of the total absence of inherent existence and self-identity with respect to all phenomena. It is an essential prerequisite for beginning on the path of tantra that the practitioner achieve a profound appreciation of both non-substantiality and its interdependent relationship with phenomenal reality. The tantras presuppose this understanding, so it is in the śāstras therefore that we find the extensive elucidation of the methods for developing a complete understanding of emptiness.

Now, as to the nature of the understanding of emptiness presupposed by the tantras, the majority of masters of the Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Gelug schools agree that this is the view of the Middle Way (*madhyamapratipad*) propounded in the śāstras and elucidated by Nāgārjuna in his works. In the Dzogchen view, however, there is also a unique method of explaining emptiness, which emphasises the inseparability of emptiness and inner radiance, but nonetheless, principally, this designation does refer to emptiness as presented in Nāgārjuna's Middle Way.

As far as the concept of emptiness or the ultimate nature of reality is concerned this is one area where there is an emerging convergence between the Buddhist understanding of the ultimate nature of existence and the evolving contemporary scientific view. This convergence relates to the unfindability of entities when these are analytically sought. In modern science the methods of analysis are principally applied to investigating the

nature of material entities. Thus, the ultimate nature of matter is sought through a reductive process and the macroscopic world is reduced to the microscopic world of particles. Yet, when the nature of these particles is further examined, we find that ultimately their very existence as objects is called into question. This interface between non-substantiality and phenomena is a fundamental focus of Buddhist philosophical analysis and of experiential analysis through meditation on the nature of mind. As is now becoming more commonly known in the contemporary scientific field, a subtle understanding of the nature of the arising and dissolution of both individual thoughts and the cycles of existence lies at the heart of Buddhist literature and practice.

In summary, therefore, even though the stages of preparation for engaging in the practices of Highest Yoga Tantra are extensive, it is said that, since the mode of procedure in Highest Yoga Tantra follows a very close correspondence to the nature of existence, human beings of this world are regarded as having the perfect gross and subtle physiological basis for undertaking these practices successfully.

Normally in our lives, if we know that we are going to be confronted by a difficult or unfamiliar situation, we prepare and train ourselves for such a circumstance in advance, so that when this event actually happens we are fully prepared. As I have outlined, the rehearsal of the processes of death, and those of the intermediate state, and the emergence into a future existence, lies at the very heart of the path in Highest Yoga Tantra. These practices are part of my daily practice also and because of this I somehow feel a sense of excitement when I think about the experience of death. At the same time, though, sometimes I do wonder whether or not I will really be able to fully utilise my own preparatory practices when the actual moment of death comes!

A sense of uncertainty, and often fear, is a natural human feeling when thinking about the nature of death and the relationship between living and dying. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that the *Bar-do Thos-grol Chen-mo*, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a treasure-text which focuses on this important subject, has become one of the best-known works of Tibetan literature in the West. Carrying out the first complete translation of this cycle of teachings has been an extraordinary accomplishment undertaken with great care over many years.

I hope that the profound insights contained in this work will be a source of inspiration and support to many interested people around the world, as they have been in my own culture.

### **Editor's Introduction**

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* includes one of the most detailed and compelling descriptions of the after-death state in world literature. It is not surprising therefore that when Chapter 11 of our text, 'The Great Liberation by Hearing', first appeared in English, in 1927, it caused a considerable stir and has remained one of the most well known of Tibet's literary works ever since. In our work, for the first time, we are presenting a complete translation of all twelve chapters of the compilation of texts known as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which includes nine chapters not translated in W. Y. Evans-Wentz's original publication.

Our intention in carrying out this work was twofold. One was to present the entire original work, and the second was to compose the translation with the close support and participation of the contemporary masters and lineage holders of this tradition.

The complete *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a comprehensive guide to both living and dying as originally taught by the great master from Od'd'iya, Padmasambhava. Padmasambhava, along with S'ntaraks'ita and King Trisong Detsen, formally established Buddhism in Tibet, during the eighth century, and most Tibetans revere him as a 'second Buddha'. The story of how this teaching was first given by Padmasambhava to King Trisong Detsen is presented in Gyurme Dorje's 'Brief Literary History', which follows.

The compendium of texts known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* contains exquisitely written guidance and practices related to transforming our experience in daily life, on how to address the processes of dying and the after-death state, and on how to help those who are dying. These teachings include: methods for investigating and cultivating our experience of the ultimate nature of mind in our daily practice (Chapters 2-7), guidance on the recognition of the signs of impending death and a detailed description of the mental and physical processes of dying (Chapter 8), rituals for the avoidance of premature death (Chapter 9), the now famous guide ‘The Great Liberation by Hearing’ that is read to the dying and the dead (Chapter 11), aspirational prayers that are read at the time of death (Chapter 12), an allegorical masked play that light-heartedly dramatises the journey through the intermediate state (Chapter 13), and a translation of the sacred mantras that are attached to the body after death and are said to bring ‘Liberation by Wearing’ (Chapter 14).

In addition, and at the advice of the late HH Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, we have also included two additional texts that are not usually included, namely Chapter 1, which poetically sets out the preliminary meditations and practices related to this cycle of teachings, and indeed to tantric practice in general, and Chapter 10, the instructions on methods for transferring consciousness at the point of death into an enlightened state, which are referred to in Chapter 11 and are an essential aspect of the practices related to dying.

Our second intention was to present the entire work in a way that, as honestly as we could, reflects the insights and intentions of the masters of the lineage and gives a sense of the elegance and moving, poetic beauty of the original work. In order to do this, as is described in the Acknowledgements, the translation has been based on the oral commentarial explanation of contemporary lineage holders and was carried out with the continuous advice of contemporary masters.

Given the above, there is very little to say with respect to offering further introduction to the meaning of the texts. It is our hope that with the help of HH the Dalai Lama’s Introductory Commentary, the short introductions to each chapter, the notes and the glossary, the meaning will shine through as directly as was intended.

As I have been asked to do so, I will just say a few words about the psychological context of this material. It may seem somewhat woolly to many if it is said 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 processes of dying and beyond. But, as described by the Dalai Lama in the Introductory Commentary, the process of imagining and then actualising the stages of dissolution of consciousness that will occur naturally at the time of death lies at the heart of higher Tibetan Buddhist meditative practices, as do practices related to maintaining awareness during deep sleep and while dreaming.

As Gyurme Dorje describes in ‘A Brief Literary History’, this cycle of teachings is based on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. This text is described as having been received in a revelation from the primordial buddha Samantabhadra, transmitted through the agency of the meditational deities Vajrasattva and Guhyapati Vajrapani. In other words, the source is Samantabhadra, who is the resonance of pure awareness, the natural purity of mental consciousness, transmitted through an embodiment of the insight, compassion and communicative skills (skilful means) of all the buddhas, that is to say of all those who abide in an unmoving realisation of the ultimate nature of mind.

As in all the major Buddhist tantric systems, the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* describes a mandala, which is a visual representation of the components of the enlightened mind. Our chart of the mandala of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities (Appendix Two) sets out the core aspects of the symbolism of the mandala associated with our text. As is always the case, this symbolism is based on the classical understanding of the nature of a person’s psycho-physical components, as described in the Abhidharma literature, which is



common to all forms of Buddhism. This analysis of the components of our being can be undertaken with our normal conceptual mind.

The actual experience of the luminosities which are said to underlie the *manḍala* is however only possible as a result of the accomplishment of very subtle meditative states, which are fruitional aspects of the path of Highest Yoga Tantra. As the Dalai Lama relates in his commentary, these luminosities only become apparent to the meditator once realisation of the ultimate nature of mind is achieved. This occurs during the processes of meditations, which are simulacra of the processes of dying and the re-emergence of consciousness from a non-conceptual inner radiance, the mind's ultimate nature. The processes of the dissolution of the coarse forms of consciousness into inner radiance and the emergence of consciousness from inner radiance also occur naturally at the time of death. In other words, according to Buddhist tradition, experiential access to the processes, which mirror those of dying and the re-emergence of consciousness after death, is achievable in the waking state.

When HH Dilgo Khyenste Rinpoche gave his commentary to the text he explained that the 'Introduction to the Intermediate State of Reality', the central section of 'The Great Liberation by Hearing', is an expression of the esoteric Thodgal practices of Dzogchen, the 'Great Perfection' teachings. Thodgal is the pinnacle of meditative practice according to the Nyingma school and it results in the direct experience during meditation of the luminosities and the *manḍala* of meditational deities that are described in Chapter 11. This arising of the five-coloured luminosities as a result of actualising the ultimate nature of mind is a phenomenon that has been described by all the great meditators of the four major Buddhist schools of Tibet and the pre-Buddhist Bon tradition. The point I am leading up to here is that the experiences described in our text relate to the modalities of our awareness from moment to moment, in our waking state, in deep sleep, in our dreams and also during the transition from life to death and beyond.

In this sense 'The Great Liberation by Hearing' can be read as a wonderful metaphorical narrative illustrating the processes of our cognitive state, whether in our waking state or in death.

Carl Jung in his commentary to Evans-Wentz's 1927 edition of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* spoke about how compelling he found it to look at 'The Great Liberation by Hearing' backwards. From a psychoanalytical point of view this is indeed interesting, as our text can then be seen as providing a guide for tracing our confused and deluded states, back through our conditioned attraction and aversion to selected aspects of our experience, back through the weave of our habitual tendencies and mental constructs and a relentless series of voluntary or involuntary mental choices, back through the illusory comfort generated by our sense of ego, right back to a pure original cognitive event. This is something that we can explore during our own waking experience by analysing how our thoughts originate in the mind, interact with our mental constructs and guide our emotions and subsequent actions.

Chapter 4 of our text, 'The Introduction to Awareness', addresses this process of exploration directly. Here we find guidance for the meditator on how to recognise the mind's ultimate nature, the underlying, mirror-like pure awareness, free from dualistic elaboration, from which all our thoughts and perceptions arise and into which they always again dissolve. Chapter 11 then gives a symbolic description of how the pure radiances of our awareness, the ultimate nature of our pure psycho-physical components and elemental properties, arise as luminosities and meditational deities. At this critical point, either we recognise these luminosities and meditational deities as the embodiments of our own actual nature, and thereby remain in a state of pure perception, or, having failed to recognise their appearance as being a natural expression of the ultimate nature of all phenomena, we are then inexorably drawn into the clouded, dull impulses of dualistic experience. Once this occurs, the matrix of our habitual tendencies and mental constructs is activated and this generates our sense of independent, individual identity. By now our ego, which cannot accept the openness and clarity of the pristine perceptual state, is established and the mind functions purely on the basis

of wanting to satisfy its conditioned expectations and impulses, from moment to moment.

In this ego-bound state our thoughts, speech and actions are then modulated by a process of inner judgement. As the text describes, death holds up an all-seeing mirror, 'the mirror of past actions', to our eyes, in which the consequences of all our negative and positive actions are clearly seen and there is a weighing of our past actions in the light of their consequences, the balance of which will determine the kind of existence or mental state we are being driven to enter. The 'life-review' aspect of this process, metaphorically described in our text as the weighing of white pebbles, representing our positive actions, against the weight of black pebbles, representing our negative actions, is wonderfully illustrated by the poet Heathcote Williams' phrase 'death develops life's photographs', which succinctly evokes the notion of our day-to-day obliviousness to the consequences of our actions being developed or processed in death so that we can experience them face to face.

Following the expansive process of the 'life-review', the mind is then driven into a new equilibrium, avoiding the chaos of dissociation. This twofold process of inner judgement, the 'life-review' followed by the coalescence of the mind into a new modality, is symbolically represented in our text by the actions of Yama, who is the embodiment of the infallible laws of cause and effect. In our waking state, this weighing and modulation of the momentum of our past thoughts, speech and actions is of course largely hidden, but we do experience this in our sense of 'conscience' at the time of thinking, speaking or acting. In death, as in life, the process of inner judgement is not of course a judgement by an external being but it is the result of our own mind's innate dynamic of manifesting the natural fruition of our own mental constructs and coalescing this ripening into a new equilibrium. At this stage, in particular, just as we are about to enter a changed emotive state, it is absolutely critical that we recognise the fundamental reality that we are experiencing the results of the mental states which we ourselves have generated and that we use this understanding to recognise the actual nature of our experience. In our day-to-day life we know that if we begin to feel angry, for example, this immediately creates an internal disturbance and this disturbance creates a shift in the way we perceive both others and our environment, which in turn affects the way in which others react to us, which then reinforces our initial anger and we feel confirmed in that new state. This is the cycle of experiencing the results of the mental states that we ourselves have generated, which can occur from moment to moment or according to our text from lifetime to lifetime.

Finally, if there is no recognition and as a culmination of this entire process, our text describes how, driven on by a relentless search for security and the urge to resolve our impulses and expectations, in a mental realm where our expectations and actual reality do not match, and based on the ever-present swinging back and forth of our attraction and aversion, we enter into an emotive state whose focus can be anywhere across the spectrum of elation, jealousy, pride, confusion, blankness, desire, craving, anger, hatred or fear. These states are depicted in our text as the realms of existence into which we may pass at birth.

Given the above, even if we do not accept the Buddhist understanding that the modalities of our consciousness in deep sleep, dreams and our waking state mirror those of death, we can still apply the advice given in 'The Great Liberation by Hearing' to our everyday experience. Giving up our compulsive attraction and aversion to aspects of our perceptual realm, glimpsing the causal dynamic of our actual condition and coming to the realisation that what we see is the product of our own mental constructs, and that we therefore do have the potential to view our experience more insightfully, is a powerful method of releasing us from the dissonant and perhaps even fearful qualities of our own self-made, perceptual landscape.

Chapters 1-7 provide us with a framework for achieving this release in our daily lives. Chapter 1 poetically evokes the perspectives that may lead us to realise that understanding our actual nature and understanding our current condition as human beings are worthwhile, Chapters 2-6 offer us methods for training our minds to instinctively recognise the actual nature of our being and existence, and Chapter 7 provides a framework

for modulating and refining our motivation, perspectives and actions.

It is undeniably the case that in our society we do not easily accept that death is a natural part of life, which results in a perpetual sense of insecurity and fear, and many are confused at the time of the death of a loved one, not knowing what they can do to help the one that has passed away or how to address their own grief. Exploring ways of overcoming our fear of death and adopting a creative approach at the time of bereavement, that is, focusing one's energy on supporting the one that has passed away, are both extraordinary benefits of the insights and practices that are so beautifully expressed in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

When I think of these things I often remember the Dalai Lama saying: 'When we look at life and death from a broader perspective, then dying is just like changing our clothes! When this body becomes old and useless, we die and take on a new body, which is fresh, healthy and full of energy! This need not be so bad!'

Graham Coleman  
Thimpu, Bhutan

### **A Brief Literary History of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead***

by Gyurme Dorje

Since the publication in 1927 of Lama Kazi Dawa Samdup and W. Y. Evans-Wentz's pioneering English translation of three chapters from the cycle of texts known in the original Tibetan as *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States* (*Bar-do thos-grol chen-mo*), the chapters they translated, dealing with the nature of the after-death state, including the accompanying aspirational prayers, have attracted a compelling interest outside Tibet under the title the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Learned Tibetans today often express their surprise that this particular collection of meditative practices concerning methods for understanding the nature of mind and transforming our experiences throughout the round of life and death has become one of the most well known of all the works of Tibetan literature in translation. This renown is especially unexpected when one considers the esoteric origins of the text and its highly restricted transmission within Tibet until the mid-fifteenth century. It is on account of this widespread popular recognition however that the title coined by the editor of the first translation, Evans-Wentz, has been retained in all subsequent translations and related studies. Following in this tradition, we too have retained the title the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* to refer to the first complete English translation of *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*, which includes translations of all twelve chapters of the original compilation.

### **EARLY ORIGINS**

*The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States* is an outstanding example of Nyingma literature. The Nyingmapa are the followers of the oldest of all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism, tracing their lineage back to the first wave of transmission of the Buddhist teachings to Tibet, to the royal dynastic period of Tibetan history in the eighth century, when great Indian masters such as Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra and Buddhaguhya initially introduced the three inner classes of tantra: Mahayoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga. These

tantra texts are differentiated on the basis of their distinctive meditative techniques, known respectively as the generation stage, the perfection stage and the Great Perfection (Dzogchen).

All traditions of Tibetan Buddhism today share the inheritance of the canonical compilations of the Indian Buddhist scriptures and treatises contained in the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur*. The former contains those teachings of the Buddhas (vinaya, sūtras and tantras) that were translated from Sanskrit and other languages into Tibetan, mostly from the late tenth century onwards and compiled initially by Buton Rinchenchub (1290 — 1364). The latter includes the classical Indian commentaries that were also translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan. In a recently published and collated master edition of both the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur* these texts comprise 180 volumes.

At the same time, each school has its own distinctive writings. The particular literature of the Nyingma school comprises translations from Sanskrit and other languages, which are preserved in the twenty-six volume *Collected Tantras of the Nyingmapa* (*rNying-ma'i rgyud-'bum*), and a companion anthology of commentarial treatises, written by successive generations of Indian and Tibetan lineage holders. The latter, which has been faithfully handed down through a 'long lineage of oral precepts' (*ring-brgyud bka'-ma*), that is to say through an unbroken lineage of transmission from one generation of accomplished masters to the next, is continually growing and currently comprises 120 volumes in a recently published edition.

The *Collected Tantras of the Nyingmapa* has three main sections, corresponding to the compilations of Atiyoga, Anuyoga and Mahāyoga. Among them, the most influential single text is the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*, a revelation of the primordial buddha Samantabhadra, transmitted through Vajrasattva and Guhyapati Vajrapāṇi. The compendium of texts that we now know as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* bases its symbolism and iconography on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. Founded on the classical Abhidharma view of the elements, psycho-physical aggregates, etc., this tantra text is the earliest known literary work to portray the natural purity and natural transformation of our mundane psychological states, respectively, as the maṇḍala of the forty-two peaceful deities and as the maṇḍala of the fifty-eight wrathful deities. Though generally and rightly classified as a Mahāyoga text, the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* has also been obliquely interpreted from the perspective of Dzogchen, most famously by Longchen Rabjampa (1308 — 63). The meditative techniques of both Mahāyoga and Dzogchen are clearly expressed among the chapters of our present work: the generation stage of meditation is emphasised in Chapters 5-7, and the Great Perfection in Chapters 4 and 11, these latter two chapters being based on the teachings of the two key aspects of the Great Perfection, namely Cutting through Resistance (*khregs-chod*) and All-surpassing Realisation (*thod-rgal*) respectively. Thus from the point of view of its theoretical foundation and practice, as well as in its iconography and symbolism, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* echoes its roots in the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* but, in addition, vividly incorporates the classical teachings of Dzogchen.

The *Guhyagarbha Tantra* was initially compiled by King Indrabhūti and Kukkurāja of Sahor in north-west India (circa sixth century). The monarch, also known as King Dza, received the whole corpus of the Mahāyoga tantras in a vision from Vajrasattva, and Kukkurāja, a great accomplished master, divided this literature into eighteen books (*tantras*) — the most all-embracing of which is the *Guhyagarbha*. During the eighth century, the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* was translated into Tibetan from Sanskrit three times: initially by Buddhaguhya and Vairocana, secondly by Padmasambhava and Nyak Jñānakumāra, and definitively by Vimalamitra with Nyak Jñānakumāra and Ma Rinchen Chok. A much later indigenous Tibetan translation was also prepared in the fifteenth century by Tharlo Nyima Gyeltsen and Go Lotsawa. The anthology of treatises related to the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* includes a large number of commentaries on this text, of both Indian and Tibetan origin, composed by illustrious masters such as Līlavajra, Buddhaguhya, Rongzom Panḍita, Longchen Rabjampa and Lochen Dharmaṛaṇa.

The iconography and symbolism of the hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities presented in the

*Guhyagarbha Tantra* subsequently gave rise to a whole genre of literature in Tibet known as the Cycles of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities (*zhi-khro*), among which our compilation of texts *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States* is the most influential.

## THE CLOSE LINEAGE OF TREASURES

According to traditional accounts, when Padmasambhava introduced these teachings to Tibet in the eighth century he foresaw that the oral transmission of the ‘long lineage’ would be subjected over time to corruption and misapplication, and that the efficacy of the teachings would be diminished. To counteract this, through the agency of his consort Yeshe Tsogyal and other foremost disciples, he concealed a large number of ‘treasure-teachings’ (*gter-chos*), in the form of books and sacred artefacts, at power-places (*gnas*) throughout the Tibetan plateau, predicting that they would be rediscovered in future generations by their respective ‘treasure-finders’ (*gter-ston*) and promulgated for the sake of future generations. Prophecies were written, describing those who would have the power to unearth such revelations in the future — figures of the calibre of Nyangrel Nyima Ozer, Guru Chowang, and the discoverer of our text, Karma Lingpa. The term ‘treasure-teachings’ is generally extended to include not only concealed ‘earth-treasures’ (*sa-gter*), but also revelations discovered in a telepathic manner directly from the enlightened intention of buddha-mind (*dgongs-gter*), and pure visionary experiences (*dag-snang*).

This notion of the concealment of texts in the form of treasure had precedents in both Indian and Chinese Buddhism. Nāgārjuna, for example, is said to have received the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* in the form of treasure from the ocean-depths, and, according to Nyingma doxographers, a recension of *Mahāyoga Tantras* was revealed to the eight teachers of Padmasambhava, at the Sītavana charnel ground near Vajrasana. Similarly, the Chinese Buddhist tradition of elemental divination, which includes aspects of *Feng Shui* and *Yi Jing*, also recounts how the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī concealed certain divinatory texts on Wang Hai Feng, the Eastern Peak of the sacred Mount Wutai Shan. Tibetan sources then describe how Mañjuśrī subsequently revealed the *Precious Clarifying Lamp* (*Rin-chen gsal-ba'i sgron-me*) to the Chinese master Dahura Nagpo.

Since the initial discoveries of the first Tibetan ‘treasure-finder’ Sangye Lama, in the eleventh century, a vast literature has been produced in Tibet by way of revelation through the ‘close lineage of treasures’ (*nye-brgyud gter-ma*), and redacted within the public domain. The *Collected Treasures* of the various treasure-finders are too voluminous to mention here, but many of their works are represented in the extensive nineteenth-century anthology known as the *Store of Precious Treasures* (*Rin-chen gter-mdzod*), which was recently republished in 76 volumes. Just as the anthology of the ‘long lineage’ contains many commentaries on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*, a significant number of ‘treasure-teachings’ are also inspired by its portrayal of the hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities. Among them the most elaborate is the cycle discovered in the fourteenth century by Karma Lingpa — the *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: A Profound Sacred Teaching, [entitled] Natural Liberation through [Recognition of] Enlightened Intention* (*Zab-chos zhi-khro dgongs-pa rang-grol*). The compendium of texts now known outside Tibet as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is an abridgement of this treasury of texts discovered by Karma Lingpa.

## THE CONCEALMENT BY PADMASAMBHAVA

The extant cycle of texts that comprise Karma Lingpa’s revelations includes a few short biographies and historical accounts of the work’s original concealment and subsequent revelation, which were composed by later lineage holders. The following passage from the *Middle-length Empowerment* (pp. 61-4) describes the roots of this tradition:

At the time when [Padmasambhava] was turning incalculable wheels of the teachings concerning the

supremely secret vehicle [of Vajray?na], he revealed, in accord with the individual capacities of the fortunate king [Trisong Detsen] and his subjects, many practices related to the generation and perfection stages of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities; and these were [later] concealed, for the most part, as profound treasures, for the benefit of beings in the future.

When Padmasambhava was nearing the completion of his direct spiritual work and teaching in Tibet, the sovereign and his son [Prince Mutri Tsenpo], along with the translator Chokrolui Gyelsten and others, offered him a man?d?ala of gold and turquoise, and fervently made the following supplication: ‘Although your compassion is always present and in the past you have held high the incalculable beacons of the teaching, according to the outer and inner vehicles, yet for the benefit of ourselves, the king, ministers, friends and subjects, and for future beings of the degenerate age, we request you to give a teaching which is the quintessence of all the teachings of the outer and inner vehicles; one through which buddhahood may be attained in a single lifetime; one which will bestow liberation by merely hearing it, a profound and concise teaching containing the essential meaning.’

Thus, [in response to their supplication] the Great Master replied, ‘O! Sovereign King, Prince, Ministers, in accord with your wish, I do have a teaching which is the essential point of all the six million four hundred thousand tantras of the Great Perfection, which were brought forth from the enlightened intention of glorious Samantabhadra. By merely hearing this teaching, the doors leading to birth in inferior existences will be blocked. By merely understanding it you will arrive at the level of supreme bliss. Those who take its meaning to heart will reach the irreversible level of the spontaneously accomplished awareness-holders. It can bring great benefit for all those who are connected with it.

‘Although I do possess such a teaching, since those who are of weak mind, or who are naturally inclined towards the Lesser Vehicle, or who lack good fortune, and harbour wrong views and doubts, may disparage this teaching and thereby fall into inferior existences, you should not proclaim [this teaching] to others, even [by whispering its name] into the wind. It should be concealed as a [buried] treasure for the sake of future beings of the degenerate age.’

So it was that he named this teaching, which essentialises all teachings, the *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: A Profound Sacred Teaching*, [entitled] *Natural Liberation through [Recognition of] Enlightened Intention*, and he bestowed it on the translator, [Chokrolui] Gyelsten, as his legacy [of good fortune]. Then, directing his enlightened intention towards living beings of the future degenerate age, who would be of meagre merit, he concealed it in the form of a treasure at Mount Gampodar in Dakpo, at a site which resembles a dancing god.

## THE PROPHECY CONCERNING KARMA LINGPA

Padmasambhava’s prophesies concerning the treasure-finder Karma Lingpa and his immediate successors are also recounted elsewhere within the cycle. The following verses are taken from Gendun Gyeltsen’s fifteenth-century account, entitled *Padmasambhava’s Prophecy of the Treasure-finder and the Series of Authentic Lineage Teachers* (pp. 22ff.). In particular, they offer a rationale for the original concealment of the texts and predictions regarding their subsequent discovery and secret transmission. It is clear that even in this early formative period the cycle of texts had acquired two distinct titles, *The Great Liberation by Hearing during the Intermediate States*, and *The Natural Liberation through Recognition of Enlightened Intention*, reflecting its shorter and longer versions.

It says in a prophetic declaration of Orgyan Rinpoche:

‘In the future, during the final era, the degenerate age,  
When monks [act] like pigs and make women pregnant,  
When virtuous actions generate and sustain resentment,  
When the most noble of monks takes a bride,  
When factionalism and wars are widespread,  
At that time there is no doubt that all those bereft of such instructions  
Will fall into the inferior existences.

So to benefit the sentient beings of this degenerate age,  
I have committed [this cycle of teachings] to writing,  
And concealed them at Mount Gampodar.

In that age, a supremely fortunate son will be born.  
His father will have the name Accomplished Master Nyinda,  
And he will be the courageous “Karma Lingpa”.

On his right thigh there will be a mole,  
Resembling the eye of pristine cognition,  
And he will be born in the dragon or snake year,  
Into a heroic family line, the fruit of past good actions.

May that fortunate person encounter this [teaching]!

‘But he [Karma Lingpa] should not publicly teach the cycles of

*The Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: Natural Liberation through [Recognition of] Enlightened Intention*

To anyone at all, even by whispering into the wind,

And so it should remain until the time of the third lineage holder.

Obstacles will arise if these [teachings] are publicly taught!

However, he should impart the cycle of the

*Great Compassionate One: Lotus Peaceful and Wrathful Deities*

To all of his fortunate students!

‘If the oral instructions of the lineage issuing from the third generation lineage holder  
Are kept secret for seven years, there will be no obstacles.  
When seven years have passed,  
That [third generation successor] may properly impart to others  
The empowerments and practical application of the [abridged] cycle,  
The *[Great] Liberation [by Hearing] during the Intermediate States*.  
Then, when nine years have passed, the [complete] cycle of the  
*Natural Liberation through [Recognition of] Enlightened Intention*  
Should be imparted gradually, not all at once!

‘These treasures will be extracted in the region of Dakpo, in Southern Kongpo,  
And they will be concentrated for the sake of living beings,  
In the region of Draglong, in Upper Kongpo.  
Karma Lingpa’s activity on behalf of living beings will ripen in the north!’

## THE LIFE OF KARMA LINGPA

Although the exact dates of Karma Lingpa are unknown, his birth and death have been accurately placed within the fourteenth century. The following passages describing his life and those of his immediate successors are taken from Gyarawa Namka Chokyi Gyeltsen’s fifteenth-century *Jewel Garland: An Abridged History of the Lineage* (pp. 40ff.). Of particular interest is the discovery of two distinct cycles of treasure-teachings, the well-known *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: Natural Liberation of Enlightened Intention*, and the *Great Compassionate One: Lotus Peaceful and Wrathful Deities*. The latter is no longer extant in this form, although it appears to have been the source for the masked drama contained in Chapter 13 of the present work.

### Karma Lingpa

[Revered as an emanation of the great translator Chokrolui Gyeltsen], Karma Lingpa was born at Khyerdrup, above Dakpo in Southern Tibet. He was the eldest son of the accomplished master Nyinda Sangye, an upholder of the mantra tradition and a treasure-finder in his own right.

In his fifteenth year, the prophetic declaration and the auspicious coincidence came together. From Mount Gampodar, which resembles a dancing god, he extracted the *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: Natural Liberation of Enlightened Intention*, along with the *Great Compassionate One: Lotus Peaceful and Wrathful Deities* and other treasures.

Unfortunately others spoke ill of him because he did not form an auspicious relationship with the intended



consort who had been prophesised for him in connection with his discovery of these treasure-teachings. He did have one son, but because he showed a yellow scroll [containing his treasures] to his student before the time when he was destined to impart the *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: Natural Liberation of Enlightened Intention*, it is said he encountered life-threatening obstacles.

Karma Lingpa was endowed with innumerable attributes, and dwelt as the very embodiment of unimpeded enlightened activity. So, knowing of his own untimely death, he said with prescience: ‘In the near future, many marks in the form of lotus flowers will appear on my body!’, and he also made numerous other clairvoyant statements. Then, the next year, when he was on the point of death, he granted the empowerments and transmissions of the *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: Natural Liberation of Enlightened Intention*, to his son alone, and not to any others, saying ‘You should entrust this teaching to a saintly person who maintains the commitments and has the name Nyinda. His actions for the welfare of living beings will be most extensive!’ Making many such prophecies, Karma Lingpa passed away.

Thus the first lineage holder was Karma Lingpa’s own son, Nyinda Choje, the author of Chapter 1 of the present work. The second-generation lineage holder, Lama Nyinda Ozer of Tsikar Monastery in Longpo, was born in 1409 (earth female ox year), and he is said to have written down the text contained in Chapter 1 of the present work. It is the third-generation lineage holder Gyarawa Namka Chokyi Gyatso who has the distinction of being the first person to publicly teach the treasures of Karma Lingpa. The transmissions of the *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities* and *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States* that eventually came to permeate the entire Tibetan plateau can all trace their roots back to his teaching activity, particularly at Menmo and Thangdrok monasteries in Kongpo.

The extensive dispersion of the lineage throughout Tibet and the Himalayan region that issued from Gyarawa has been recently documented, along with visual charts, by Bryan J. Cuevas in his work *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*. We will not therefore describe this again here. However, one important figure, from the perspective of the literary history, is Rigdzin Nyima Drakpa (1647-1710), who in his later years, at Takmogang and Chakru, began transcribing and collating the various texts associated with Karma Lingpa’s cycle. It is clear from the various extant lineage prayers that he was directly responsible for standardising the shorter anthology entitled *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States* in its present form.

Rigdzin Nyima Drakpa’s lineage was particularly influential in the nomadic areas of Sok Dzong, where the mantrins of the Kabgye Lhakhang even now maintain the lineage of his teachings, and in Dzachuka, where his teacher Dzogchen Pema Rikdzin founded Dzogchen Monastery in 1685. He also formed a spiritual rapport with Terdak Lingpa, on account of which the transmissions of Tsele, Lhalung and Mindroling all converged in his own son Orgyan Tendzin. Subsequently, the teachings of the Karma Lingpa tradition were passed on from Mindroling to Dzogchen in the following line of transmission: Pema Gyurme Gyatso, Gyelse Ratna Vija, Dzogchen II Gyurme Thekchok Tendzin, Pema Kundrol Namgyel and Dzogchen III Ngedon Tendzin Zangpo. The last named was responsible for preparing the first xylographic edition of *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*, at Dzogchen Monastery in the mid-eighteenth century.

## **EDITIONS AND CONTENT OF *THE GREAT LIBERATION BY HEARING IN THE INTERMEDIATE STATES***

The diverse strands of the lineage stemming from Karma Lingpa and Gyarawa, summarised above, ensured that their legacy would flourish throughout Tibet and in the neighbouring sub-Himalayan regions of Northern Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. The earliest texts which these spiritual successions imparted through the generations were handwritten manuscripts, including a great many local and anonymous supplements.

Yet, as Bryan Cuevas has rightly observed, ‘most of the available recensions of [Karma Lingpa’s] *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities* come to us in the form of xylographic prints and facsimile reproductions from blocks carved only in the last two centuries’. Unfortunately, the scribal errors that have crept into many of these ‘standard’ editions subsequently acquired great currency.

At present, the most extensive extant version of the *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: Natural Liberation of Enlightened Intention* is not a block-print, but the manuscript version from the library of the late Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche, who in the 1960s had his scribe prepare an elegant three-volume edition on the basis of the two volumes in his possession, which were apparently of Katok provenance. This manuscript contains sixty-four distinct texts, which are arranged sequentially under the categories of history, empowerment, generation stage, perfection stage, introductions (according to the Great Perfection), path of skilful means, and protector liturgies. Although it is the most extensive version available, this manuscript is by no means exhaustive — for there are other, smaller published compilations, associated with Pelyul, Dzogchen and Nedo, containing texts that are excluded from the larger anthology. However, in our experience, and on the authority of Gene Smith, who generously made the Dudjom manuscript available on CD-ROM, the Dudjom manuscript is far more accurate than the many Indian and Bhutanese reprints that are more widely available and have provided the source for the recent partial translations of *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*. Even the illuminated manuscript on which Kazi Dawa Samdup’s 1927 translation is based appears to perpetuate the same inaccuracies. After wrestling with the scribal errors, lacunae and inconsistencies that fill the various Indian reprints of *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*, it was with considerable joy and relief that we were finally able to clarify obscure readings and eliminate many cumbersome and unnecessary annotations by basing our translation on the three-volume Dudjom edition of the *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: Natural Liberation of Enlightened Intention*. Seldom have we opted for readings based on the two Indian reprints of *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States* at our disposal, the Delhi and Varanasi photo-offset publications, and when we have done so, we have indicated the reason for our choice in the notes. We have not, however, made reference to the new Amdo edition, compiled by Khenpo Dorje and just published in Hong Kong.

Readers wishing to understand the precise relationship between the chapters of the derivative *Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*, and the larger cycle of the *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities*, are referred to Appendix One, where the correspondences are presented.

As stated above, this is the first complete English translation of *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*, otherwise known to the outside world as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and it is based on a version of the original text which has proven to be far more accurate than those used in previous translations. All the chapters of the anthology standardised by Nyima Drakpa and later published in woodblock form at Dzogchen Monastery are contained in this book. With the exception of Chapter 13, Part One, which may well derive from the non-extant *Lotus Peaceful and Wrathful Deities*, and Chapter 13, Part Two, which was composed by Gyarawa Namka Chokyi Gyatso, all the other chapters from Nyima Drakpa’s compilation appear to have been taken from the original treasure-cycle of Karma Lingpa’s *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities*.

In presenting our translation, we have sought to order the chapters according to the meaningful sequence of the intermediate states that arise in the course of life and death, and therefore the order of the chapters in this translation differs from the arrangement of Nyima Drakpa. In addition, we have included two further chapters from the *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities* that are not part of *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*. Chapter 1, outlining the preliminary practices of meditation, is attributed to Nyinda Choje and Nyinda Ozer, while Chapter 10, on consciousness transference, derives from Karma Lingpa’s *Six Guidebooks of the Perfection Stage* of meditation. The first of these has been included because it provides an essential context to the later chapters, and the instructions on consciousness transference have been included

because they are specifically mentioned in Chapter 11, as a necessary practice related to the intermediate state of the time of death.

## 1

### **Natural Liberation of the Nature of Mind: The Four-session Yoga of the Preliminary Practice**

#### **CONTEXT**

In its original Tibetan this preliminary practice is beautifully written in verse. In the monasteries and lay households of the practitioners of this cycle of teachings, it is usually sung melodically in the early morning, before any other practice or activity is begun. Often the young monks sing the opening verses of this poem as they go about their morning duties.

When engaging in a preliminary retreat, it is recommended that this meditation is done every day in four sessions: early morning till dawn, after sunrise until just before noon, from afternoon until just before sunset, and from sunset until late evening.

The practice essentialises the ‘four common or outer preliminaries’ and the ‘five uncommon or inner preliminaries’, which are described in the glossary. It is recommended that the inner preliminary practices are repeated 100,000 times as a prerequisite to receiving instruction on the ‘generation stage’ practices of the Vehicle of Indestructible Reality (*Vajrayāna*).

Herein is contained the *Natural Liberation of the Nature of Mind: The Four-session Yoga which is a Spiritual Practice of the Vehicle of Indestructible Reality, the Way of Secret Mantras*,<sup>1</sup> an extract from the *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: A Profound Sacred Teaching*, [entitled] *Natural Liberation through [Recognition of] Enlightened Intention*.<sup>2</sup>

It would be excellent if one were to train one’s mental continuum according to the [following] preliminary practices which are based on the *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: A Profound Sacred Teaching*, [entitled] *Natural Liberation through [Recognition of] Enlightened Intention*.

#### **COMMON PRELIMINARY PRACTICE**

O, Alas! Alas! Fortunate Child of Buddha Nature,

Do not be oppressed by the forces of ignorance and delusion!

But rise up now with resolve and courage!

Entranced by ignorance, from beginningless time until now,

You have had [more than] enough time to sleep.

So do not slumber any longer, but strive after virtue with body, speech and mind!

Are you oblivious to the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death?

There is no guarantee that you will survive, even past this very day!

The time has come [for you] to develop perseverance in [your] practice.

For, at this singular opportunity, you could attain the everlasting bliss [of nirvāṇa].

So now is [certainly] not the time to sit idly,

But, starting with [the reflection on] death, you should bring your practice to completion!<sup>3</sup>

The moments of our life are not expendable,

And the [possible] circumstances of death are beyond imagination.

If you do not achieve an undaunted confident security now,

What point is there in your being alive, O living creature?

All phenomena are [ultimately] selfless, empty, and free from conceptual elaboration.

In their dynamic they resemble an illusion, mirage, dream, or reflected image,

A celestial city, an echo, a reflection of the moon in water, a bubble, an optical illusion, or an intangible emanation.

You should know that all things of cyclic existence and nirvāṇa

Accord [in nature] with these ten similes of illusory phenomena.

All phenomena are naturally uncreated.

They neither abide nor cease, neither come nor go.

They are without objective referent, signless, ineffable, and free from thought.<sup>4</sup>

The time has come for this truth to be realised!

Homage to the spiritual teachers!

Homage to the meditational deities!

Homage to the dākinīs!

O, Alas! Alas! How needing of compassion are those living beings, tortured by their past actions,

[Who are drowning] in this deep chasm, the engulfing ocean of their past actions!

Such is the nature of fluctuating cyclic existence!

Grant your blessing, so that this ocean of sufferings may run dry!

How needing of compassion are those who are skill-less,<sup>5</sup>

Those who are tortured by ignorance and past actions,

Those who indulge in actions conducive to suffering —

Even though they desire happiness!

Grant your blessing, so that the obscuration of dissonant mental states and past actions may be purified!

How needing of compassion are the ignorant and the deluded,

[Bound] in this confining dungeon of egotistical attachment and the subject-object dichotomy,

Who, like wild game, are trapped in this snare, time after time!

Grant your blessing, so that cyclic existence may be stirred to its depths!

How needing of compassion are those beings who endlessly revolve [in the cycle of existence],

As if [circling] perpetually [on] the rim of a water-wheel,

In this six-dimensional city of imprisoning past actions!

Grant your blessing, so that the womb entrances to the six classes of existence may be barred!

We who are fearless and hard-hearted, despite having seen so many sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death,

Are wasting our human lives, endowed with freedom and opportunity,<sup>6</sup> on the paths of distraction.

Grant your blessing, so that we may [continuously] remember impermanence and death!

Since we do not recognise that impermanent [things] are unreliable,

Still, even now, we remain attached, clinging to this cycle of existence.

Wishing for happiness, we pass our human lives in suffering.

Grant your blessing, so that attachment to cyclic existence may be reversed!

Our impermanent environment will be destroyed by fire and water,<sup>7</sup>

The impermanent sentient beings within it will endure the severing of body and mind.

The seasons of the year: summer, winter, autumn and spring, themselves [exemplify] impermanence.

Grant your blessing, so that disillusionment [with conditioned existence] may arise from the depths [of our hearts]!

Last year, this year, the waxing and waning moons,

The days, nights, and indivisible time moments are all impermanent.

If we reflect carefully, we too are face to face with death.

Grant your blessing, so that we may become resolute in our practice!

Though this [body] endowed with freedom and opportunity is extremely hard to find,

When the Lord of Death<sup>8</sup> approaches in the semblance of disease,

How needing of compassion are those who, bereft of the [sacred] teachings,

Return empty-handed [from this life]!

Grant your blessing so that [a recognition of] urgency may grow in our minds!

Alas! Alas! O Precious Jewel, embodiment of compassion!

Since you, the Conqueror, are endowed with a loving heart,

Grant your blessing, so that we and the six classes of beings

May be liberated, right now, from the sufferings of cyclic existence!

### **UNCOMMON PRELIMINARY PRACTICE**

Refuge

(Then, the outer, inner, and secret refuges should be adopted in the following way:)

### *Outer Refuge*

I bow down to and take refuge in the spiritual teachers  
Whose enlightened intention, throughout the past, present and future,  
Is uninterruptedly directed towards living beings,  
The infinite sentient beings of the three world systems and six classes.

I bow down to and take refuge in the [perfect] buddhas,  
The Transcendent Ones Gone to Bliss of the ten directions and four times,  
Foremost of humankind, adorned by the major and minor marks,  
Whose enlightened activities are inexhaustible, and as vast as space.

I bow down to and take refuge in the sacred teachings,  
Including the doctrines of the ultimate truth, quiescent and desireless,  
The irreversible path<sup>9</sup> of the three vehicles,  
And the transmissions, esoteric instructions, and treatises  
Of the transmitted precepts and treasures.

I bow down to and take refuge in the communities [of monks and nuns],  
Who abide on the unerring path, forming a field of all supreme merits,<sup>10</sup>  
Together with the assembly of Sublime Ones, set apart from the stains of dissonant mental states,  
And the supreme upholders of the Teaching: bodhisattvas, pious attendants, and hermit buddhas.

### *Inner Refuge*

I bow down to and take refuge in the spiritual teachers,  
[Embodying] the essential nature of the buddhas of the three times,

The masters of all the secret and unsurpassed man?d?alas,  
Who guide all living beings with their blessings and compassion.

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