

Concerning the Concept of Consciousness
in the Bardo Teachings of Tibetan Buddhism
แนวคิดของสติในคำสอนเรื่องบาร์โดของพุทธศาสนาแบบทิเบต

Norbert Nemeth^๑

บทคัดย่อ

บทความมุ่งหมายเกริ่นแสดงบริบทชีวิตหลังความตายประเด็นสติรับรู้และหลักความเชื่อในทัศนะพุทธศาสนาแบบทิเบต รวมทั้งการเปลี่ยนแปลงแก้ไขสภาวะสติรับรู้ในการเผชิญหน้ากับความตาย อีกทั้งเข้าใจความเป็นไปได้ที่จะจากไปสู่จิตแรกเริ่มและดั้งเดิมตามธรรมชาติ ในทัศนะพื้นฐานและคำสอนพุทธศาสนาเรื่องความไม่เที่ยง ในแง่การยึดถืออาจเกิดขึ้นได้ทุกวินาที และการสิ้นสุดของแต่ละช่วงเวลาอย่างเสมอภาคซึ่งหมายถึง “ความตาย” ทั้งที่มีความรู้เรื่องความตายในวาระสุดท้ายของชีวิต แต่ด้วยไม่มีเส้นแบ่งอย่างชัดเจน ระหว่าง “ชีวิต” และความตาย ซึ่งครอบคลุมถึง โอกาสการเตรียมตัวตาย อรรถาธิบายของนิกาณตญาณพุทธศาสนาแบบทิเบต วิชาเชิงวิทยาศาสตร์ ถ่ายทอดประสบการณ์อย่างละเอียดเกี่ยวกับกระบวนการตาย และชีวิตหลังความตาย ในขณะที่จะตาย ส่งจิตไปโดยไม่ตั้งใจ พลังจินตนาก่อให้เกิดจิตกล้าแข็ง ในตอนแรกความรู้สึกรับรู้กายและโลกภายนอก ค่อยๆ กลายเป็นมโนภาพหรืออีกในหนึ่งคือความฝันทางโลก ณ ขอบแดนของชีวิตและความตาย กายหยาบและจิตสำนึกจะสิ้นสลาย ความละเอียดและประณีตของจิตจะปรากฏมากขึ้น

บทความนี้ให้ความสนใจกระบวนการ ท้ายสุดแก่นจิตสำนึกจะสลายเป็นไปได้อย่างไรจะกลับสู่ธรรมชาติเดิมแท้จริง ทั้งยังเรียกว่า การรับรู้ปรากฏการณ์ที่เกิดขึ้นทั้งหมด อนาคตและอดีตที่ผ่านมา หรือ นอกเหนือความเข้าใจ ดังนั้นนอกเหนือจากการผันผวนของปรากฏการณ์หรือความรู้ความเข้าใจสองชั่วที่ตรงข้ามกัน สภาวะจิตสำนึกที่คงอยู่ สู่ธรรมชาติแท้จริงคือ “สภาวะใสสว่าง และว่างเปล่า” ตามคำสอนพุทธศาสนาแบบทิเบต สภาวะดั้งเดิมคือกุญแจสำคัญในแง่ที่ไม่เพียงเตรียมตัวตายและการปฏิบัติหลังตาย แต่ยังรวมถึงการบรรลุธรรมด้วยตนเอง ความคิดเป็นรูปธรรมและมโนทัศน์ ถือเป็นประสบการณ์ที่ชัดเจนสดใส ของ “ที่นี่ ณ ตอนนี้” ความเป็นจริงที่เกิดขึ้นจริงระหว่างมีชีวิตและชีวิตหลังความตาย

คำสำคัญ: แนวคิดของสติ, คำสอนเรื่องบาร์โด, พุทธศาสนาแบบทิเบต

^๑ สาขาวิชาพระพุทธศาสนา บัณฑิตวิทยาลัย มหาวิทยาลัยมหาจุฬาลงกรณราชวิทยาลัย
Buddhist Studies, Graduate School, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University,
Thailand



Abstract

The article aims to take a glimpse into the Tibetan Buddhist knowledge of afterlife from the point of view of consciousness, and it presents some underlying Buddhist tenets, as well as the amendments of the state of consciousness in the face of death, including the possibility for unravelling its original and primordial nature. As a basic idea, and in conformity with the general Buddhist teachings on impermanency, cessation could be experienced in every instant, and in this respect, the termination of each moment equally means its 'death' as well. Consequently, in spite of the common knowledge about death at the end of life, there is no sharp boundary line between 'life' and 'death', which also involves the favourable opportunity of preparation. It has an elaborated literature in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, and with almost scientific details, the experiences relating to dying process and afterlife are also described. At the time of dying, it is stated that the attention turn inward involuntarily, the power of imagination becomes extremely strong, and the senses that perceived the physical or outer world earlier begin to strengthen an inner vision similar to a dream world in one way or another. On the border of life and death, the coarser layers and functions of consciousness are terminated, and the more profound, or even the subtlest, strata of consciousness, could manifest.

The article draw the attention to the point that in this process, finally, the core of consciousness unravels, and there is a possibility of facing its true nature, also called primordial awareness from which all phenomena occur and to which the experiences relating to the future and the past withdraw or transcend. Thus, beyond the flux of fluctuating phenomena, or any dualistic pattern of cognition, the indestructible state of consciousness could be faced, the real nature of which is the "union of clear luminosity and emptiness". According to the Tibetan Buddhist teachings, this primordial state is of key importance in respect not only of the preparation for dying process and afterlife, but also of enlightenment itself. It is devoid of any abstract idea or conceptual notion: it is a vivid experience of 'here and now', the reality of which could be realized during life as well as in afterlife.

Keywords: Concept of Consciousness, the Bardo Teachings, Tibetan Buddhism

I. Introduction

From the place of its origin, Buddhism spread in Tibet in two waves at around the eighth as well as the eleventh century and it became a determinant state religion. Although, from India, the structures of the Buddhist teachings as well as practices relating to that period precisely transferred to the Tibetan plateau, and its patterns, too, have been preserved until now, the indigenous religious heritage was also integrated into local Buddhism.

In this process, a peculiar type of Buddhism sprang into existence, and this twofold inheritance established a plenteous Tibetan Buddhist culture of afterlife, to which was even contributed by severe environmental conditions, for example, the isolation of this region due to long winter periods or high altitudes. This article aims to take a glimpse into this specific Buddhist knowledge from the point of view of consciousness, and it presents some underlying Buddhist tenets, as well as the amendments of the state of consciousness in the face of death, including the opportunity for unravelling its original and primordial nature.

II. The role of preparation

According to the general Tibetan Buddhist principles concerning afterlife, in conformity with the fundamental Buddhist approach, our life is an illusion, the seeming continuity and permanency of which is only the sequence of moments. Through a profound investigation, it might be understood that the so-called 'life' is in reality a sequence of changing momentary impressions, sensations, thoughts or emotions etc. occurring in of the six fields of experiences. This continuous fluctuation is impermanency par excellence, and in every instant, cessation could also be experienced: in this respect, the termination of each moment equally means its 'death'^b.

Because of momentary changes, in spite of the common knowledge about death at the end of life, there is no sharp boundary line between 'life' and 'death', since in the form of cessation death happens in every instant. At the

^b Dzogchen Ponlop, *Mind Beyond Death*, (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2006), p. 4.



same time, this approach involves the possibility of preparation which, in Tibetan Buddhist culture, became a spiritual requirement that is advised to be performed every day, or even in every hour or second. This idea is expressed in a saying of the old Tibetan Buddhist school of Kadampa, founded by Atiśa (980-1054), the leading master of the second spread of Buddhism in Tibet:

If one does not meditate on death in the morning, the whole morning is wasted; if one does not meditate on death at noon, the afternoon is wasted; and if one does not meditate on death at night, the evening is wasted^๓.

The role or importance of preparation for death engages even the attention of Western materialist scientists, and for them, the famous ‘Wager’ of Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) might be instructive^๔. He says if one becomes nothing after death, one will not be there to regret having prepared for something; but if one is something after death, and the preparation was previously neglected, then one will long feel bitter, painful regret. And what is more, precisely the law of the conservation of energy should remind us of the fact that, at the moment of the physical death, the flow of an individual embracing strong emotions, deep thinking patterns etc. cannot be discontinued once and for all.

As opposed to simplistic scientific models, Buddhism elaborated sophisticated approaches toward afterlife, which could be categorized in conformity with the three main branches, or *yānas*, of Buddhism, namely Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna^๕. The general attitude of Theravāda is “to develop a sense of moderation and non-attachment”^๖ which could cease the functioning of negative karmic force in afterlife.

^๓ John Power, Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2007), p. 326.

^๔ About the detailed standpoint of modern science toward afterlife see in The Tibetan Book of the Dead, tr. by Robert A. F. Thurman, (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), pp. 23-33.

^๕ Glenn H. Mullin, Living in the Face of Death, The Tibetan Tradition, (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1998), p. 36.

^๖ Op.cit.

As far as Mahāyāna training is concerned, in accordance with its bodhisattva disposition, the great compassion is cultivated, and feeling patience toward others could help the bodhisattva keep his or her consciousness open at the moment of death. In the Vajrayāna method, mostly peculiar to Tibetan culture, various kinds of meditation were elaborated in order that practitioners could experience the stages of the process of dying and situations of afterlife in advance.

III. Bardo teachings and the consciousness at the moment of death

The word ‘bardo’ (tib. bar do) is a widespread expression for the realm of afterlife, even though in Tibetan the term ‘bar’ has a simple meaning of “between”, or “from... up to”. Due to this content, in its primary sense, bardo means “intermediate state”^๗ or “period of time between two events”^๘, and it could be referred to not only the states of afterlife, but also any experience of existence including the period of life.

Traditionally, in the system of bardos, the six types of intermediate states are thought to be, three of them pertaining to life, namely ‘the natural bardo of this life’, ‘bardo of dream’ and ‘bardo of meditation’. And the rest of the ‘intermediate states’ includes the fundamental changes in the process of dying and afterlife: the ‘painful bardo of dying’, “luminous bardo of dharmata” and ‘karmic bardo of becoming’^๙. In reality, the six bardos cover the whole spectrum of experiences which might have a conscious being during the different

^๗ Tsepa Rigzin, *Tibetan-English Dictionary of Buddhist Terminology*, (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1993), p. 180.

^๘ Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, *The Bardo Guidebook*, tr. by Erik Pema Kunsang, (Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 1991), p.21.

^๙ Dzogchen Ponlop, pp. 21-22. A detailed explanation of bardos is beyond the scope of this article, see further in several excellent books, also written in English and quoted earlier, such as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, translated by Robert A. F. Thurman, or *The Bardo Guidebook*, written by Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, etc.



periods of life and death, and this system is an expression of impermanent *Samsāra* by definition^{๑๐}.

According to the Tantric description of human being, consciousness is carried by subtle energies or ‘winds’, that is, *prāṇa* (skrt.) or *lung* (tib.), and “death is the result of the progressive collapse of the ability of the winds to act as supports for consciousness”^{๑๑}. The circulation of *prāṇa* in subtle channels, that is, *nādi* (skrt.) or *tsa* (tib.) has gradually terminated, and finally, *prāṇa* enters the centre of heart, which makes the consciousness more subtle and sharp. The more the general vision of outer world dissolves, the more intensive the inner word the dying person experiences and the wandering in the six *bardos* continues in conformity with karmic tendencies.

At the time of dying, as the attention turn involuntarily inward, the power of imagination becomes extremely strong, and the senses that perceived the physical or outer world earlier begin to strengthen an inner vision similar to dream world in one way or another. This situation might involve a grave danger for the dying person, since, without outer impressions, he or she could become stuck in a stage of the frightening process of dying or one of the bad habitual patterns fixed in the past life. As an illustration, this condition could resemble an obsession that captures the mind of an insane person, when his or her mind magnifies one thought or emotion to an extreme extent^{๑๒}.

Due to the danger mentioned above, for instance, it is strenuously advised to release any type of regret or remorse because this feeling could particularly dominate the mind of the dying person. From the Tibetan Buddhist view, these moments function as a synopsis or summary, therefore it is said “there are two things that count: whatever we have done in our lives, and what state of mind

^{๑๐} Even the beings of the god realm suffer from transience, about their ‘near-death’ experience see *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, translated by Robert A. F. Thurman, pp. 31-32.

^{๑๑} John Power, p. 336.

^{๑๒} Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, p. 99.

we are in at that moment”^{๑๓}. And at the border of life and death it becomes obvious that only spiritual realizations have the value, and any materialistic belongings or the attachment to them is pointless^{๑๔}.

As the inner world of the consciousness becomes more intense and turns inward, for this extreme situation a balanced attitude could be fruitful. It is expressed in a Buddhist maxim: “Be free of attachment and aversion. Keep your mind pure. And unite your mind with the Buddha”^{๑๕}. The achievement of this attitude is promoted in various ways, for instance, a tantric follower could practice the so-called ‘bardo yogas’, when the events and the stages of dissolutions are drilled in advance^{๑๖}.

IV. The spiritual possibility for the manifestation of the true nature of consciousness

According to not only Tibetan, but also general Buddhist literature concerned with the death experience and afterlife, consciousness is not a single entity, but it is a ‘collection’ of the kaleidoscopic ‘consciousnesses’ ranging from the coarser ones to subtler ones. Owing to different aspects of these collections, the various forms of illusory individuality, or the habitual experiences of outer world, etc. are generated.

^{๑๓} Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Death*, (London: Perfectbound, 2003) p. 227.

^{๑๔} This kind of topics is the motifs of preparatory meditations; see more about it in John Power, pp. 329-330.

^{๑๕} Sogyal Rinpoche, p. 227.

^{๑๖} John Power, pp. 336-339. The stages of the process of dying and the experiences of afterlife are described by an extremely clear terminology in Tibetan Buddhism which has various sources, such as the literature concerning the accounts of the people who return to life from death, called in Tibetan ‘delog’ which literally means “one who is come back from death”. More about it in Delog Dawa Drolma, *Delog: journey to realms beyond death*, tr. by Richard Barron, (Junction City: Padma Publishing, 1995).



At the border of life and death, the coarser layers and functions of consciousness are terminated, and the more profound, or even its subtlest, strata of consciousness, could manifest. In this gradual process, finally, the core of consciousness unravels and there is a possibility of confronting to its true nature, also called primordial awareness from which all phenomena occur and to which the experiences relating to the future and the past withdraw or transcend^{๑๗}.

In the Buddhist teachings under discussion, the whole range of experiences occurring as ‘life’ or ‘death’ is impermanent and fleeting, however, beyond the flux of fluctuating phenomena, or any dualistic pattern of cognition, the indestructible state of consciousness could be faced^{๑๘}. As far as its own nature is concerned, it is the “union of clear luminosity and emptiness”^{๑๙} which spontaneously unravels at the time of death.

The reason for roaming in the six realms is not apprehending this union, or primordial state of consciousness, therefore the whole set of experiences in *Samsāra*, even including seemingly the most solid ones, such as physical buildings or rocks, are only the projections of consciousness. Consequently, one of the most significant texts containing bardo teachings, namely *Natural Liberation Through Naked Vision, Identifying the Intelligence*^{๒๐}, lays special emphasis on recognizing this union. In its radical and astonishing formulation, the commentary of text states: “This simple teaching — the three words, ‘This is It!’ — is the final point of all the other teachings of all the Buddha”^{๒๑}.

The Tibetan Buddhist bardo teachings draw our attention to the knowledge that beyond the flux of phenomena of life and death there is the spacious and luminous state of consciousness which occurs not only at the moment of death, but also could be experienced during life in meditation. This

^{๑๗} Dzogchen Ponlop, pp. 4-5.

^{๑๘} Ibid., p. 11.

^{๑๙} John Power, p. 343.

^{๒๐} See its English translation in *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, translated by Robert A. F. Thurman, pp. 227-242.

^{๒๑} Ibid., p. 229.

primordial state is devoid of any abstract idea or conceptual notion: it is a vivid experience of ‘here and now’ that is completed as a state of total awakening^{๒๒}.

V. Conclusion

In the spiritual culture of afterlife, it is considered that at the time of death the core of consciousness, that is, the clear light unravels, or the intensity of clairvoyance in the karmic bardo of becoming of afterlife is seven times stronger than in life^{๒๓}. This article strived to highlight these kinds of possibilities that were originally the reason for the elaborated teachings and practices of afterlife, which might be valuable even for the practitioners of the present generation.



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^{๒๒} Sogyal Rinpoche, p. 155.

^{๒๓} Ibid., p. 307.