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Luminous Mind is a remarkable compilation of the oral and written teachings of the late Kalu Rinpoche, who was called "a beacon of inspiration" by the Dalai Lama. A master of meditation and leader of the Shangpu Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, Kalu Rinpoche taught with an inviting, playful, and lucid style that was just one natural manifestation of his own profound realization. As the Dalai Lama notes in his foreword, Luminous Mind covers "the full range of Buddhist practice from the basic analysis of the nature of the mind up to its ultimate refinement in the teachings of Mahamudra." This anthology of Kalu Rinpoche's writings and oral teachings resonates with his wisdom and compassion. Comparing Kyabje Kalu Rinpoche with Milarepa, the greatest meditation master Tibet has ever known, His Holiness the Dalai Lama extols the author of Luminous Mind as a "beacon of inspiration" for spiritual practitioners of all traditions, and urges us to delve into this remarkable anthology of the late Kalu Rinpoche's essential instructions so that we may encounter "the full range of Buddhist practice from the basic analysis of the nature of the mind up to its ultimate refinement."

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**From Life to Life: Transitions and the Bardo**

May I recognize all the manifestations that appear to me in the bardo as being my own projections; emanations of my own mind.

—Padmasambhava, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

There would be no rebirth if, at the moment of death, we were to disappear like a candle flame going out or water evaporating. But mind is emptiness, and the void does not know death. At death, body and mind, attached as they are to illusory appearances, separate; each goes its own way. Then once again, by the power of karma, basic tendencies and afflictions caused by various agents lead us to be reborn in one of the six realms.

**Bardo**

According to Dharma as well as other traditions, death is not an end. Beyond death, there is a continuous series of experiences in different states known collectively as the *bardo*. This Tibetan term literally means “between two,” “interval,” or “passage.” These passages are all the states that the consciousness passes through. The series of bardos makes up cyclic existence, or samsara.

The series of bardos corresponds to the transmigration of the consciousness from life to life, but also to the transformations that occur moment by moment in our states of consciousness. The teachings relating to the different bardos are presented in particular in the well-known traditional text, the *Bardo Thödrol*, literally, “the understanding that frees from the bardos,” better known in the West as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. It gives practical instructions on how to proceed through the bardos and offers a path for realizing the nature of those bardos and liberating ourselves from them.

Even though “the interval between death and rebirth” is its best-known meaning, the word “bardo” refers not only to that period between death and rebirth, but to all the existential states the consciousness goes through. Therefore, the word is also used to refer to life, which is the bardo between birth and death and is, in most cases, the longest of the bardos. There is also the bardo between two thoughts, or between two states of consciousness, which is the shortest of the bardos. The period from the moment of falling asleep to waking up is called the dream bardo, while the experience of death...
itself is the bardo of the moment of death. After respiration stops completely, there is a period when the mind remains in a state of total unconsciousness, called the bardo of emptiness. Finally, the bardo of becoming is the period that follows the bardo of emptiness, during which the consciousness has the experience of a postmortem world, which lasts up until the moment of rebirth.

The Four Great Bardos

Briefly, the four great bardos from the process of dying to being reborn are as follows:

1. The bardo of birth to death, or the state we are in right now.
2. The bardo of the moment of death, corresponding to the passage from life to death.
3. The bardo of emptiness, the period following death.
4. The bardo of becoming, the stage between the bardo of emptiness and another lifetime in which we begin a new bardo of birth to death.

The six bardos frequently referred to include two others in the bardo of birth to death: the dream bardo and the meditation bardo. These each correspond to states of consciousness lived out during this lifetime.

In the following chapters we will describe each of the four great bardos, which together make up cyclic or samsaric existence.

The Bardo of the Moment of Death

When the bardo of the moment of death appears may I abandon attachments and mental fixations, and engage without distraction in the path which the instructions make clear.

Mind projected into the sphere of uncreated space, separated from body, from flesh and blood, I will know that which is impermanence and illusion.

—Padmasambhava, The Tibetan Book of the Dead

The different vital factors that sustain life deteriorate and disappear at the end of a lifetime. The extinguishing of life is described as the dissolution or outer reabsorption of the principal elements—earth, water, fire, and air—and the inner reabsorption of the different types of thoughts and cognitions. During this bardo, the various winds that animate the body are destroyed.

In general, our body is controlled by five main winds, called the life-bearing wind, the upward-moving wind, the pervasive wind, the fire-dwelling wind, and the downward-voiding wind. These winds animate the physical body, and their proper functioning assures good health. At the moment of death, another wind manifests, called the wind of karma and becoming. It is usually diffused throughout the whole body. When it manifests, it upsets and interferes with the other winds; different pathological symptoms appear as the body approaches death.

Outer Dissolution

The wind that regulates the absorption of nourishment, or the fire-dwelling wind, is the first wind to be disturbed. It leaves its location in the navel cakra and ceases to function, which means that we can no longer be nourished by food, nor can food that is absorbed be digested; nutrients are quickly rejected.

Next, the life-bearing wind is disturbed and leaves its location at the heart, which results in emotional distress and a lack of mental clarity. This disturbance next affects the downward-voiding wind of the lower abdominal functions so that retention of feces and urine is disrupted, causing incontinence or intestinal obstruction.

Then the upward-moving wind is impaired, causing short, labored breathing and difficulty with swallowing. Finally, the pervasive wind is affected, which
brings on unpleasant physical sensations as well as difficulty moving the limbs.

The disturbances of these winds cause them to leave their usual locations in the body. This migration brings about the destruction of the subtle channels through which the winds normally circulate, as well as their two main centers or wheels, cakras in Sanskrit.

The destruction of these channels and their centers occurs concomitantly with a deterioration of the body’s principal elements and the physical aspects connected with them: physical body, respiration, body temperature, blood, and flesh, corresponding respectively to the elements of space, air, fire, water, and earth. The secondary winds, located in the five great centers already mentioned, migrate and disappear at the same time as the main winds. The destruction of these secondary winds causes the gradual disappearance of the sense perceptions.

The destruction of the five winds happens at the same time as the dissolution or reabsorption of the elements, which occurs from the grossest to the most subtle. So, the earth element absorbs into the water element, water into fire, then fire into air, and air into consciousness.

The dissolution begins with the reabsorption of the earth element into the water element. The physical, or outer, symptoms include the disappearance of physical strength, so that the head has a tendency to fall and the trunk of the body caves in; flexing and extending the limbs becomes difficult and remaining seated is no longer possible. Phlegm and saliva flow out.

Various inner signs correspond to sensations experienced by the dying person during this phase. The mind lacks clarity, as though it were plunged in great darkness. The dying person has the urge to move, to change position or rearrange the covers, but is physically unable to. In fact, the immobile body becomes very sluggish; the dying person feels heavy, as though knocked down and buried under a mountain. The eyes, which can no longer see straight, tend to roll up in the head.

The most subtle or secret symptoms are visual experiences or visions, which also begin to develop during the time of the outer and inner symptoms. During this first reabsorption, the dying person’s vision is unstable, as if looking at a mirage, or there is a visual distortion, like the appearance of water in a scorching desert or under a blazing sun.

The outer symptom of the second phase, which corresponds to the reabsorption of the water element into the fire element, is the drying out of the nose, mouth, and nostrils, along with the eventual loss of sphincter control, which results in incontinence. Inner symptoms are extreme mental agitation; unpleasant thoughts disturb the mind. The dying person feels as though he or she is being carried away by a torrent and has the sense of falling and being swallowed up, and hears the sound of a violent waterfall. At the secret level, the dying person’s vision is foggy and perceives everything as blending into clouds of smoke.

The third phase is the dissolution of the fire element into the air element. Outer symptoms are the chilling of the mouth and nostrils, shortened breathing, and a loss of feeling associated with decreased vital heat, which leaves the arms and legs starting from the extremities and reabsorbs from the exterior to the core of the body. Inner symptoms include the momentary loss of mental clarity and lucidity. Things are no longer seen clearly. Secret symptoms include visions of blazing light, as if the universe were on fire. This is combined with visions of sparkling lights resembling fireflies.

Next comes the reabsorption of the air element into consciousness. The outer symptoms are gasping for breath with long exhalations and short, labored inhalations. The eyes roll back; breathing slows and approaches its eventual cessation. Inner symptoms are the appearance of apparitions that correspond to the dying person’s karma. At the moment of death, the body is extremely frail; however, the mind is very strong. This physical weakness combined with the strength of the mind produces very intense illusory appearances. If the dying person has performed many negative actions in his or her lifetime, these visions will reflect them and cause extreme fear. For example, a murderer who has killed many animals might see those animals chasing and devouring him. At that moment, his body and speech might show terror by emitting cries or moans. By contrast, a Dharma practitioner whose karma is positive could experience this phase very happily, meeting various luminous divine beings. Inner signs or symptoms at this phase are hearing the sound of an extremely violent wind, a throbbing hum, or a very loud rumble. Secret symptoms are the sense that one is vanishing or fading and the experience of an appearance similar to the glow of a candle.

INNER DISSOLUTION

The consciousness then dissolves into emptiness. At this point, the body takes on a bit of color, breathing stops completely, and heat gathers just above the heart. This is the final moment of death. Dissolution of the consciousness into emptiness is characterized by luminous experiences called white luminosity, red luminosity, and black luminosity. These correspond to the reabsorption of the masculine and feminine principles contained in the body.

Our subtle body is actually made up of two principles, masculine and feminine, located respectively at the crown of the head and at the level of the navel. At the moment of death, they reabsorb into each other at the level of the heart.
Initially, the white masculine principle descends from the crown of the head toward the heart. At this moment, the experience of white luminosity occurs, which is similar to the light of the moon.

The reabsorption of consciousness occurs with its thoughts. These can be reduced to eighty types of conceptions, of which thirty-three arise from aversion, forty from desire, and seven from mental dullness or stupidity. The thirty-three kinds of thoughts connected with aversion, hatred, and anger dissolve during this first phase. Even if our fiercest enemy or our parents' assassin were in front of us, we would have no more aversion toward him.

Next, the red feminine principle reabsorbs, ascending from the navel toward the heart; this is the experience of red luminosity much like the light of the sun. The forty types of thought connected with desire and attachment cease during this phase. Even if a gorgeous, charming god or goddess were to appear, we would no longer experience any desire.

When the two principles reabsorb in the heart, the consciousness loses its faculty of knowing. This is the experience of black luminosity, similar to a midnight blue or a dark night. In an ordinary being, the mind sinks into total darkness. At this moment the seven kinds of thought connected with mental dullness or stupidity cease. Any spectacle that might arise in the mind will no longer be considered good or bad.

This whole process of dissolution, from the beginning up to the experience of black luminosity, is called the bardo of the moment of death. At the end of the dissolution, the clear light, or mind's basic nature, is revealed. All beings have an experience of the clear light, but the ordinary being does not recognize it. For him or her, that recognition is replaced by a period of unconsciousness, or unconsciousness. It is the lack of realization, or ignorance, which obscures the ordinary being during this phase of complete unconsciousness that replaces the experience of the clear light. But even if it is extremely fleeting and goes unrecognized, this experience of the clear light occurs to every being.

On the other hand, if a person has recognized the true nature of mind within his or her lifetime—that is, has realized mahāmudrā—the mind can recognize the fundamental clear light at this final moment of the bardo of death and, to whatever degree this recognition is stable, can remain absorbed in it.

For such a yogi, the daughter clear light, which was experienced during his or her lifetime, and the fundamental mother clear light unite. This is the state of buddhahood.

This bardo is called the bardo of emptiness because, as we have just discussed, it is the moment at which the clear light, or the essential nature of mind, appears to an enlightened being. The period of unconsciousness that an ordinary being experiences instead generally lasts three and a half days, during which time the mind remains in a dark, impenetrable, and unconscious state.

The Bardo of Emptiness

When the moment is upon me
May I not be frightened
By the collection of peaceful and wrathful aspects:
Emanations of my own mind.
—Padmasambhava, The Tibetan Book of the Dead

Lights and Deities

After this period of unconsciousness, the consciousness and its illusions revive, and for a few moments the consciousness experiences five essential luminosities that are described as extremely subtle. These appear simultaneously with the peaceful and wrathful aspects of the bardo, manifesting as rainbows, points of light, clouds, and other luminous phenomena. The appearances at the end of the bardo of emptiness are very fleeting.

Although these manifestations vary, this state is similar to that between waking and sleeping. The phenomena we have just discussed, which characterize the boundary between these two bardos, are described in The Tibetan Book of the Dead as apparitions of various peaceful and wrathful deities. If we can recognize the divine nature of these appearances, we can unite with them and immediately and spontaneously gain liberation, as all experience or appearance becomes the deity itself.

During this period, we hear violent and terrifying sounds louder than a thousand thunderclaps exploding together. This deafening sound is the sound of emptiness.

Throughout space in all directions, many different points of light and brilliant flashes of light like rainbows appear, and we perceive the conditions of existence and a vision of the various pure buddha realms and their celestial spheres: all of samsara's and nirvana's different states become perceptible. The experience of all these things is much like the lively districts of Paris during rush hour. It is as though we were in the middle of a huge throng, with people
bustling here and there endlessly, and streams of cars driving in every direction.
For our example to be complete, we would have to add heavy train traffic
along with many airplanes criss-crossing the sky above, and the whole chaotic
spectacle throbbing.

People initiated into the practices of the bardo who have an authentic expe-
rience of them can recognize these various appearances and gain liberation
during this phase. Otherwise, it gets a bit difficult. Not knowing the nature
of the wrathful deities, a person is terrified and, paralyzed with fear, loses
consciousness. And since the nature of the peaceful aspects goes unrecognized,
it is impossible to tolerate their radiance, so people recoil as if blinded by
the light of the sun or the moon.

At this moment, extremely brilliant white, yellow, red, green, and blue
lights appear; they are the lights of the six pure buddha realms. At the same
time, six lights corresponding to the six realms of samsara appear. These six
are the same colors as the six buddha realms' but are much duller. The vivid
clarity of the buddha lights is dazzling and difficult to tolerate, which makes
us withdraw from them. By contrast, the pale lights of the six realms of
samsara are attractive and seductive and propel us to take birth there.

The end of the bardo of emptiness is the period of the restructuring of
consciousness. The winds that animate consciousness remanifest. The wind
“that makes ignorance arise” returns at the same time as the air wind, which
corresponds to visions of green lights. Then, the fire, the water, and the earth
winds, corresponding respectively to red, white, and yellow lights, reappear.
These five lights are the emanation of the five winds and the quintessence of
the five elements. This remanifestation of the five elements is produced as the
mental body of the bardo being and its outer experiences are created.

Upon the reappearance of the winds, the different types of conceptions
return in the inverse order of their disappearance: first, the seven kinds of
ignorance or stupidity, followed by the forty types of desire or attachment,
and finally, the thirty-three kinds of hatred or aversion. This is how the
manifestation and experiences of the bardo of becoming appear, which will
stop when rebirth occurs in one of the six realms of samsara.
impressions in the mind; the mental body cannot be killed by other projections, which are themselves mental. Even though it is indestructible, the mental body experiences all kinds of fears, terrors, and cravings because of the influence of habits and imprints from the past. In all of this, the experiences of the mental body and the appearances of the bardo of becoming are comparable to those of dreams, but much more intense.

The bardo being has five faculties corresponding to our ordinary five senses, as well as certain powers, such as clairvoyance, which allow it to perceive the world of the living. It also has the power to move around without being hindered by physical objects. In fact, nothing can impede the mental body. It only has to think, for example, about India, and it will immediately find itself there; if it thinks about the United States, it will instantly be there; if it thinks of its home prior to dying, it will be there right away. Just by thinking of a place, it will be there. Likewise, it has only to think about or wish for something for the experience to instantly arise.

Actually, our mind thinks a lot. When we are in the bardo of becoming, these different thoughts crystallize and appear as realities, producing a world in great flux. The huge multitude of thoughts, turning and shifting like a whirlwind, makes this situation extremely unstable and difficult.

Having arrived at this stage of the bardo, someone who has, for example, led a family life, will remember his home. He will see those who were dear to him, his wife, children, and so on. He yearns to talk to them, to communicate with them, but they cannot see him and are no longer interested in him; he addresses them, but there is no response, and this causes him tremendous suffering. Because he is unable to make contact, he realizes he is no longer in the world of the living. This inability to communicate provokes grief, suffering, and aggression.

At this point, he realizes that he has, in fact, left his body and can actually see the buried or incinerated corpse. These terrifying and distressing experiences lead him to believe that he is dead. He perceives those who were near and dear to him crying and grieving. Their emotions can revive his own attachment. Moreover, if his loved ones are not sad, or, worse, if they are happy about his death, he feels anger, and this causes him further suffering. It might be that his heirs are fighting among themselves over the division of the things he has left behind, which is still another source of frustration and anger.

Someone who was particularly attached to his home or possessions will see them again. He sees people seizing the things he had accumulated, which arouses his greed and attachment. He tries to hold on to them, but no one sees him, and he remains utterly powerless. Anger overcomes him and can cause him to take rebirth in a hell realm.

The various different experiences of the bardo of becoming depend upon the karma of the being in that state: negative karma produces terrifying and painful appearances, while positive karma is a source of pleasant, happy experiences.

The duration of the bardo of becoming varies; rebirth can occur at any time, but generally at the end of seven cycles of seven days. Rebirth can also take place after one, two, or three weeks. The maximum usually is forty-nine days, but a very long bardo could last up to a year.

If the mind is steeped in extremely negative tendencies, this bardo will last only a short while, because the being will immediately go the lower realms. Likewise, if the mind is saturated with positive tendencies, rebirth will occur just as quickly in a higher realm. On the other hand, if the karmic imprints are mitigated or weak, the bardo of becoming will be less certain and last longer.

Whatever its duration, the experiences and appearances that the deceased perceives in the first part of the bardo of becoming relate to the immediately preceding lifetime. Then, karma gradually causes those appearances to fade, while those of the next life begin to manifest. Then come the experiences that suggest what that next lifetime will be. Usually, during the first three weeks, the rebirth consciousness abides in a world where its experiences are much like those of its previous life. Then, at the beginning of the fourth week, it begins to perceive the world into which it will take birth.

In this phase of the bardo, six signs, in the form of various experiences, manifest in very fleeting and unpredictable ways, which suggest the karma and the rebirth that will be taken. These six signs are different habitats, environments, behaviors, foods, company, and mental experiences or perceptions that shift from moment to moment.

There are also four experiences that occur among all the beings in this bardo: these are the terrifying sounds called the four fearsons: the collapse of a mountain, an engulfing ocean, a blazing inferno, and a gusting whirlwind. These experiences correspond to little deaths within that bardo, as certain winds are reversed. The reversal of the earth wind produces the impression of being buried under a gigantic mountain or under a house. At the reversal of the water wind, there is a feeling of losing one’s footing and sinking in the ocean. At the reversal of the fire wind, there is the feeling of being grilled in an immense fire, and upon the reversal of the air wind, there is the feeling of being swept away, as if carried off by a tornado.

There is also the experience of the three abysses in this bardo. The bardo being has the impression of falling into a grayish white, reddish, or dark well or tunnel; this is produced by the manifestation of the tendencies toward hatred, desire, and ignorance, respectively.
At this point, the moment of rebirth occurs. There are four possible kinds of rebirths: womb birth, apparitional birth, birth from heat and moisture, and birth from an egg; sometimes they are combined. Births in hell or divine realms are apparitional.

Rebirth is accompanied by different experiences:

The bardo being—the rebirth consciousness, or bardo in Tibetan—that experiences arctic cold is attracted by a burning flame. This is how it ends up being born in a hot hell.

The bardo may also be extremely terrified and, to feel secure, goes and hides in a hole. This is how it is reborn in an animal realm.

**If the bardo has positive karma, it can perceive a celestial place with a marvelous palace. Reaching that place, it is born in the divine realms of long life, in which it enjoys a radiant body for a very long time.**

If the bardo is to be born of a womb as a human, in addition to the necessary karma, three factors must come together: the bardo being, the father's sperm, and the mother's egg. The bardo being perceives the parents having sex. If the bardo will be born as a male, he feels attraction for the mother and revulsion toward the father. If the bardo being will be born as a female, the opposite—attraction for the father and revulsion toward the mother—will occur. At the moment of conception, the father's semen, the mother's ovum, and the bardo or rebirth consciousness unite. The gametes are the outer aspects of the male white substance and female red substance. They contain the potential for the different elements—space, air, fire, water, and earth in their outer aspects. The bardo, with its mental body, contains these elements in their inner aspects. At the moment of conception, there is a consolidation of the five outer elements and the five inner elements. This is how a new individual arises. With this fusion of the two gametes and the bardo, there comes a period of unconsciousness. Little by little, at the beginning of embryogenesis, the consciousness will be found. At that time, without exception, all recollection of the bardo is lost.

Whether we are Buddhist or not, whether we are connected to one tradition or another, the most important thing for us at death is to know our mind and our nature well and to practice now to gain this understanding.