



## Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche Teachings

### Introduction to the Bardos – the different states of life and death

Today I will speak on the bardo states as described in Buddhism.

The Buddha talked generally about the bardos in the sutra teachings and in more detail in the tantras. Sometimes four kinds of bardos are mentioned, sometimes six.

If we count four bardos, then the first one is the *bardo of the birthplace*. This denotes the mother's womb, where the father's sperm and the mother's egg come together. This is where consciousness takes on a new life form after death. The beginning of the bardo of the birthplace is conception and it spans until the elements begin to dissolve.

The second is the *bardo of the distressing moment of death*. It starts when the elements of the body start to gradually dissolve due to fatal illness. At that time our physical energy and the strength of our basic condition decrease. It spans until we take our final, inner breath.

The third is the *bardo of the absolute dimension of reality* (dharmadhatu). After the gradual dissolution of the outer and inner elements, we first lose consciousness and then perceive the appearances of the absolute dimension of reality. This state lasts as long as these appearances last.

Fourth is the *bardo of becoming*. After we die, we become unconscious and that is like when the programs on our computer get all mixed up. Then slowly everything falls back into place like when a computer expert rearranges our programs. In the same way our conceptual thoughts are first shattered and then they rearrange themselves according to our conceptual tendencies from our former life. We start to discriminate again between good and bad, virtuous and non-virtuous. From the moment on that we have these thoughts we are in the bardo of becoming which lasts until we take on our next life.

In these four bardos all parts of the former and the following life are included. If we count six bardos, then during the bardo of the birthplace we can distinguish two more. One is the *bardo of dreams*, where we experience the appearances we have in dreams. The other is the *bardo of meditation*, where we experience meditative absorption.

Today we don't have time to go into all of the bardos, therefore I will only mention them briefly, elaborating only on the bardo of the distressing moment of death and the bardo of becoming.

During the bardo of the birthplace, which stretches from conception until the onslaught of the fatal sickness, the Buddha said that we should practice like birds when they build a nest. There is a bird called *tigsha* in Tibetan. Before it builds a nest, it looks around for any enemies or any potential harm and so on. Only after the careful examination it builds the nest. Afterwards it can move freely from and to its nest and raise its young without fear. In the same way we have to find out during our lifetime how to change our mind in a positive way and how we as well as others can experience happiness. We have to examine well and not just trust blindly. Only then we can practice these methods without recurring doubts and achieve happiness for ourselves and others. The main practices mentioned are the meditation of calm abiding and of clear insight. Special people with outstanding capabilities can achieve liberation during the bardo of the birthplace, if they completely eradicate negative emotions. Afterwards they don't need to move step by step through the bardos again.

If we practiced during this life, but weren't able to accomplish the result completely, we have another opportunity during the bardo of the distressing moment of death. I will elaborate a little more on this bardo now. We distinguish between two processes of dissolution: the outer and the inner, initiated by the fatal sickness. During the course of the outer process of dissolution the elements that compose the body like the moving energy, earth, water and fire dissolve one after the other. This affects our sense perceptions of the eyes, the nose, the tongue etc.

During the inner process of dissolution the five energies break down one by one. The five are: the life energy, the balancing fire energy, the all-pervasive energy, the upwards- and downwards-flowing energy. These energies are constantly active in our bodies. Through the fatal illness these energies get out of balance and we experience problems moving, for example.

The *life energy* runs through the heart centre. If this energy changes, the mind becomes nervous and unstable. I don't know if you have been close to somebody dying before. I quite often am. Close to death, the person often forgets immediately what he's said and his speech doesn't make sense anymore. That is a sign that his life energy is declining.

The *balancing fire energy* helps in digesting food by utilizing heat. If it decreases we are not able to digest well anymore.

The *upwards-flowing energy* flows upwards from the stomach area and enables us to breath as well as to swallow. If it decreases we cannot eat and breathe well any more. When food is put in our mouth, it immediately falls out again. Then we need machines to feed us.

The *downwards-flowing energy* helps us to excrete the food which was digested by the balancing fire energy. It also controls the muscles, which are used to excrete. If through the sickness this energy decreases, we are unable to control these muscles and expel properly anymore.

The *all-pervading energy* flows through the whole body and the limbs. For example the fact that I can move my arm up and down is not only due to my strength. There is a connection between my thoughts and the nervous system. All movement in the body is based on energy.

Now I will speak about the dissolution process of the elements.

The so-called *earth element* is responsible for the firmness of our body, like the flesh. When its strength dissolves in the water element our physical strength decreases and we have difficulties lifting our head or our arms. This shows that the solidity of our body decreases. The inner,

mental signs are a foggy mind, like after waking up in the morning. We feel like being in darkness or falling. Dying people sometimes request to be held and pulled up, because they have the sensation of sinking, even though they are lying in a relaxed fashion.

Then the power of the *water element* dissolves in the fire element. At this time the natural glow of our body, which comes from moisture, decreases. The whole body dries up. A sign for an impending death is that the nose, eyes and mouth, which are normally clearly defined, sink into the face. People on the verge of dying often get deeply angry without any reason. They have no patience any more at all. That is also a sign.

When the *fire element* dissolves into the air element the body loses its heat.

Then the *air element* dissolves into consciousness. This is the decrease of the five energies I just talked about. At that point we are unable to move and so on.

Afterwards *consciousness* dissolves into space as it is called in the texts. Consciousness doesn't actually dissolve into space though. It means that when the elements dissolve due to sickness, we lose consciousness and at that moment we also lose all our perceptions. That is what we mean by 'consciousness dissolves into space'. It's the moment of death.

There is no fixed sequence in which the five elements and the five energies dissolve before death. It depends on the nature of the final sickness. This is just the way it is being described.

When the elements and the energies decrease, the power of the sensory organs like the eyes, ears and tongue also decrease. Even if they retain their strength, our perceptions become limited and unclear. We do not recognize hot as being hot anymore or cold as being cold.

As I am talking about the bardos here today, I looked at the appropriate texts beforehand. As I was reading something on my computer, something went wrong with the mouse and all sorts of files opened on my screen. One after the other popped up. A virus had brought everything into disarray. In the same way the viruses that cause sickness mix up the body.

At the moment when consciousness dissolves into space, the white, red and black path arise. At the time when the power of the elements, the sensory organs and the energies subside, the white element we received from our father also declines. This causes a white light to appear to us, which we also perceive after waking up from losing consciousness. This is called the *white path*.

After that the power of the red essence of the blood diminishes, which we received from our mother. That is like looking into the sun with closed eyes and seeing bright, red light. This is called the *red path*.

Because the sickness disturbs our physical condition, we perceive these red and white lights. Has the consciousness dissolved in space, everything turns black. That is the *black path*. At that moment we are unconscious.

Our body has all the dispositions to let anything appear to us. When a sickness causes imbalance, we perceive all sorts of things. If we aren't practitioners and cannot discern our thoughts, this can be very frightening.

I want to tell a story here. In my village a man caught ravens, tore out their eyes and let them fly again. Everyone told him to stop that, but he never listened. When the ravens flew and collided with things due to their blindness, the man stood there and laughed. I was there when he passed away. During the dying process he exclaimed: "A black bird is trying to get my eyes. Please shoo it away. It is pecking at my eyes." There was no bird anywhere close by, but he had this perception.

To keep our mind calm and not to get frightened by these appearances is the main practice during the bardo of the distressing moment of death. Then we can die peacefully.

When our perceptions are in disarray we receive pith instructions from our teacher to prevent getting frightened. One pith instruction for example is called '*Like seeing beauty in the mirror*'. When we look into a mirror we know what we need to change in our face or body. We recognize ourselves as the appearance in the mirror. In the same way when the elements of our body get out of balance, different appearances come up. Then we know that they are caused by our elements. Some people, who get angry easily, perceive enemies in the room, even though no enemy is there. We need to recognize that the perceptions originate from our own mind, like we recognize ourselves in a mirror. That is what is taught in the pith instructions. It is a method to understand, that the perceptions are self-created.

When these signs manifest, it is important to make the dying person as comfortable as possible. Maybe there are some doctors present here. In hospitals I saw the electrical machines that are used to revive people. Maybe they help sometimes. But when we think according to the gradual stages of dissolution, it is better to make the person as comfortable as possible as soon as the dying process begins. There is a connection between the mind and the body, so it is not good when the body is treated heavily with electricity or is handled too much. A practitioner will contemplate at this moment that all perceptions are self-created. Too much commotion will cause obstacles to his practice. That is my private opinion.

Some people might need support by a lama or someone who is close to them. This person then tells from the beginning of the dissolution process what is happening. "You have to be careful. Now these appearances will come up. Those are all self-created." This oral transmission is very beneficial, it is said. Some immediately remember what they learned during their lifetime, when they hear the instructions once again. Others need a more detailed explanation going through the different stages and signs. They get spoken into the ear: "Now you probably perceive and think this or that." Traditionally a small pipe is used. The most important point is not give into the appearances, but to remain relaxed.

When supporting someone in that way, we don't need to follow the texts exactly. We can confer the meaning in the dying person's ear in any language, English, German or any other. That will help.

As for our own practice, before going to sleep we should think, that we are dying now. When we gradually fall asleep we should try to recognize the appearances in our dreams as being a dream. We need to recognize these perceptions as being self-created. If we get accustomed to this, it will be very beneficial to us during the dying process.

After our inner elements collapse, the black path appears and we lose consciousness. Then we perceive something that doesn't take on any form, neither as human nor anything else. This is the bardo of the dimension of absolute reality. We have the habit to regard everything that we perceive as being good or bad. But now this habit doesn't come up. These thoughts 'this is my friend, this is my enemy, this is right, this is left, this is good, this is bad', don't surface.

The bardo of the absolute dimension of reality has different parts. First, space dissolves into clear light; this dissolves into the great unity; this again dissolves into primordial wisdom; which then dissolves into the spontaneous presence and, finally, dissolves into primordial purity. All perceptions eventually dissolve into primordial purity. This is how it is taught in the views of Dzogchen, Mahamudra and the Middle Way, but this is not the occasion to share this.

The practice at that time is called '*How a child goes on the lap of the mother*'. If the mother comes near her small child, the child will climb on her lap without any hesitation because he or she recognizes her beyond doubt. Here we unite the practice of the bardo of the birthplace, during which we learned to view all perceptions and experiences of suffering as self-created, and what is happening at present. Without any doubts we will recognize all perceptions as self-created, just like a child going on the mother's lap. Then gradually the light takes on the physical forms of a vast variety of wrathful and peaceful deities. There are texts which provide an introduction to the appearances created through the eye power or other powers. They don't need to be explained in Tibetan especially. Any language is okay for this method of introduction.

Now I will talk about the bardo of becoming.

As we cannot identify the bardo of the absolute dimension and remain in it and we fall prey to concepts we have developed due to earlier habits and present afflictive emotions, we enter the bardo of becoming. There we distinguish our perceptions again as good and bad or what we want and what we reject, based on former attachment, aversion and mental obscuration. We follow the rules of our previous habits. The bardo of becoming lasts until we enter the body of our mother.

After we wake up in the morning, we stretch and feel relaxed. At that time we don't think about our plans for the day yet. Only when we are fully awake, we start to think about where we have to be a lunchtime, who we need to talk to and who we need to call. Then we remember someone treating us badly the day before and that we want to get back at him. Likewise during the bardo of the absolute dimension of reality we are free of habitual thinking patterns, but in the bardo of becoming we succumb to them again.

Generally we say the bardo of becoming lasts 49 days or seven weeks. That is not fixed, though, and any time period is possible. No matter how long we remain, during the first period of the time, we perceive mainly what happened in our last life. Afterwards the appearances of the next life become more prominent.

At this time we have the signs of the six uncertainties. We have to get familiar with them already now, so when they appear, we know we have died and are able to aim for a better rebirth through the appropriate practices.

The first is the *uncertainty of place*. If we think, there is something nice to eat over there, we can't just be at that place, because our body prevents us. In the bardo of becoming we are free from our body and can be anywhere our thoughts lead us.

In connection with our habitual tendencies we have the *uncertainty of dwelling place*. Our habitual tendencies tell us this is my room, my sofa, my bedroom etc. We identify the place we reside at as our place. But during the bardo of becoming this changes every time we have a new thought.

Then we have the *uncertainty of conduct*. For example we have the impression that we read a book, but then we want to give something to someone and immediately we have the impression to do that. Even if we are completely relaxed we have all kinds of thoughts. We remember something that made us angry and we react. Or we suddenly act in a very happy manner. Our conduct changes very quickly.

Fourth is the *uncertainty of friends*. Because our dwelling place changes all the time, we encounter all sorts of appearances ranging from gods to demons. During our lifetime our friends are humans, but now any being can be our friend.

Then there is the *uncertainty of food*. Out of our habitual tendencies the food that we enjoyed in our former life appears to us. But it is only an appearance and due to having merely a mental body, we are not able to eat it.

The *uncertainty of appearances* means that we have many different thoughts, each creating a new perception which change very fast. Beforehand our body kept us from fully perceiving everything our thoughts create. That is why based on their physical condition some people are more perceptive than others. When we lose our body at death, we perceive everything our thoughts create. Friends, enemies, things we like etc. appear to us unfiltered. That changes from one second to the next.

When we realize these signs, we know we have died. Through this knowledge fear arises. We should hope and pray that we will follow the right path without fear at that time to achieve a good rebirth. We have different practices for that, which function like a water canal for diverting water. When water is routed through a pipe, it will flow exactly where it should. Such practices connect the former life with the next and ensure that we go in the right direction to take the next life as we intended.

At this time many appearances can arise through our negative states of mind. For example, through anger we could have the impression of going to war. That can be a sign of getting reborn in the hell realms. Or we think constantly about food and wish we could eat something. This can be a sign for a rebirth as a hungry ghost. If we know the signs for the different realms of rebirths, we can change these appearances caused by aversion, attachment and ignorance through an altruistic, compassionate and loving mindset. The ability to do that is a sign that we will gain a good rebirth.

We should develop the motivation and pray to have a rebirth which will benefit us and all other beings the best way possible. When we enter our mother's womb or see the union of our parents, we should visualize your parents as being pure and oneself as one's meditational deity, free from the three mind poisons. We should think: "I'll take this next life for my sake and for the sake of all sentient beings." With this firm resolve that we never forget, we enter our mother's womb.

Now I gave this overview as an introduction. The details of this practice can only be explained in the context of the Buddhist tradition. The most important point is to recognize the appearances as self-created. If we understand that, we don't need to change them but can leave them be, knowing that we are being deluded by our own concepts.

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