

*A Brief Overview of  
the Bardo*

*by*

**Thrangu Rinpoche**  
*Geshe Lharampa*

Copyright © 1999 by Namo Buddha Publications.

Namo Buddha Publications  
1390 Kalmia Avenue  
Boulder, CO 80304-1813  
Phone: (303) 449-6608  
Email: [cjohnson@ix.netcom.com](mailto:cjohnson@ix.netcom.com)  
Rinpoche's web site: [www.rinpoche.com](http://www.rinpoche.com)

### *Note*

The technical terms have been italicized the first time to alert the reader that they may be found in the glossary.

# Chapter One

## *An Introduction to the Bardo Teachings*

It is said that human beings have a body, speech and mind. The body consists of flesh and blood while the mind is a collection of the *eight consciousnesses* and speech, a conjunction of the body and mind, is the creation of sound to communicate with others. Body and the mechanisms for speech are created in the mother's womb, greatly develop at birth, and cease at death.

The mind, however, is not created in the mother's womb; it does not disappear like the body after death. Throughout beginningless time the mind has been habituated to its karmic tendencies. Through the force of grasping to a self, the mind enters the physical form in the mother womb at conception and this process is called "name and form" in the twelve steps of *interdependent origination*. "Name" refers to sensations, identification, mental events and the consciousnesses, the four mental aggregates. "Form" refers to the first *aggregate* of form. So there is the combination of name and form.

The mind by clinging to a self adopts the "name and form" link of interdependent origination in the mother's womb. The consciousness of the fetus itself comes from the second link called *samskara* which is the accumulation of actions performed in the previous existence. Due to this accumulation, the consciousness takes on a new form in a specific new life. The consciousness of this specific life that begins in the womb comes from a previous lifetime based on the actions performed then.

From the moment of life until death the mind and body are united and they are separated again at death. Then the body becomes a corpse, and the mind begins to experience new sensations or appearances. The time between a previous life to

## *A Brief Description of the Bardo*

the time of conception in a womb is called the bardo, or the “intermediate state” in English.

What is the consciousness in the bardo like? It is said that if we were blind or deaf during life, we will be able to see and hear during the bardo, i.e., all sensory faculties will be complete. There is no blindness, no lameness, no sensory deficiencies in bardo. In the *Abhidharma* a being in the bardo has miraculous power of activity in that he or she can go anywhere, which causes a great problem for individuals. During life the mind can be very distracted because it can think of various things, going here and there while being in a solid body. We can think of anything we like while the body stays where it is. During bardo, on the other hand, the mind thinks of a certain place and we are automatically there. When we arrive, we think of another place and are immediately there. In bardo there is no stability whatsoever; it is impossible to find a place where one can definitely remain; we are in a state described as being like a feather blown about by the wind. This state causes great confusion and suffering for us.

What will benefit the individual at the time of death? If a practitioner while alive has been able to gain some understanding of the nature of the mind by developing mindfulness and awareness and has been able to see how the mind works and is able to establish mental stability, it will be very beneficial during the bardo. In the bardo mindfulness and awareness of the mind’s activities is important and what brings about stability of mind is very beneficial for bardo. When the mind is separated from the body during the bardo, it experiences a quality of naked awareness. Without meditation practice, we will not be able to recognize what is happening to us nor understand the arising appearances. With the development of stable meditation of shamatha and insight of vipashyana meditation, we will be able to recognize what is occurring through clarity of the mind. We can then enter into a state of meditation at death. When great practitioners die, they are able to enter the state called *thug-dam* and consequently have control over death. In this state of meditation the body remains warm and the cells of the body don’t start to dissolve. These are signs that a great practitioner has entered a state of meditation at death and is able to voluntarily remain in that state.

If we recognize the nature of the mind at death, we will not be frightened when unknown appearances confront us, but will know that death has set in and will be able to recognize all manifestations of death. Without recognition of death and its arising appearances, we will be frightened and have no control of the mind, which then runs wild and cannot be pacified. We therefore practice meditation in this life to be able to control the mind then.

Having cultivated meditation practice during life, one can enter into the state of deep meditation or *samadhi* at the time of death. Without practice one falls into an unconscious state and awakes to the experience of various delusions, which are manifestations of the one hundred peaceful and wrathful deities within oneself. Forty-two peaceful deities are in the *heart center*, fifty wrathful deities in the crown center and eight semi-wrathful deities, called vidyadharas, in the throat center. They are latent in the *subtle channels* and *cakras* during life but aren't seen while we are alive. At death, when the mind has separated from the body, all deities manifest. First the peaceful deities of the heart center appear very brightly and clearly, remaining for a long time. Without meditation practice we will not be able to recognize the peaceful deities for what they are and will be annoyed by their bright light. But with meditation practice we will recognize the deities and can enter their respective bright lights without fear. After the peaceful deities have appeared, the wrathful deities manifest for a brief period of time.

## ***The Six Realms of Samsara***

**The six realms of samsara** (Tib. *rikdruk*) These are the possible types of rebirths for beings in samsara.

**God** (Skt. *deva*, Tib. *lha*) Sanskrit for god. These are more highly evolved beings who is still part of samsara and therefore in need of Dharma teachings to reach enlightenment.

**Jealous gods** (Skt. *asura*, Tib. *lha ma yin*) These beings are very jealous of the gods and are often depicted as cutting down the wish-fulfilling trees of the gods.

**Human** This is the world of human beings and is considered the best realm to be born in because it is the realm which has the best possibility of reaching enlightenment. Even in the god realm, the gods are so involved in their pleasures that they don't seek enlightenment.

**Hungry ghosts** (Skt. *preta*, Tib. *yadik*) A type of being who is always starving and thirsty. This is the result of excessive greed in previous lifetimes and are depicted as having an enormous stomachs and a thin throat. See the six realms of samsara.

**Animal** This is the realm of animals who have the main obstacle of stupidity. Even though they may want to reach happiness, as all sentient being do, they do not have the intellectual capacity to understand how to do so.

**Hell** In this realm there is much suffering with one being either extremely hot or extremely cold with there being no end of the feeling. The beings of these realms are consumed with anger or aggression.

*In the Chenresig practice when we say the mantra OM MANI PEDME HUM, the OM is to liberate beings in the god realm, MA to liberate those in the jealous god realm, PE for the animal realm, ME for the hungry ghosts, and HUNG for those in the hell realms.*

## Chapter 2

### *The Twelve Days of the Bardo of Dharmata*

The study of the bardo is very important. As it is, we make many plans which can be fulfilled or not due to change. We will all definitely experience the bardo, the only route lying ahead without any detours to the left or right. We can never dodge it by taking a road leading around it. If this were the case, we could plan differently, but there is only one road and it leads straight into the bardo, the reason these teachings are very important. The appearances of the bardo will definitely occur so it is very important to meet preparations now.

#### AT THE MOMENT OF DEATH

At the time of death it is possible to gain liberation by hearing *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* or *The Bardo Thodrol*, by having the deities introduced through the reading of such texts, which were written from the clairvoyance of this process by the great masters. If we are prepared we can practice *bagchag rangdrol*, which means “spontaneous liberation from karmic latencies.” In this *vajrayana* practice we imagine that we are Vajrasattva. We imagine ourselves as Vajrasattva and not someone else because in the *preliminary practices* he is peaceful and purifies us of all bad karma and obscurations. Therefore we do the Vajrasattva practice, but we do not imagine him above our head, but rather imagine ourselves as Vajrasattva, the embodiment of the one-hundred peaceful and wrathful deities of the bardo. We imagine that in our heart we as Vajrasattva have the syllable HUNG encircled by the *one-hundred syllable mantra*. We do this because each syllable of this mantra represents one of the hundred deities.

## *A Brief Description of the Bardo*

In more detail: The heart appears as a clear crystal. In the upper region of the heart we imagine the primordial, dark blue Buddha Samantabhadra (Tib. *kuntuzangpo*) in union with his white consort Samantabhadri (Tib. *kunduzangmo*) seated on a lotus and sun disk. The reason we imagine them in the upper heart region is because at the time of death, the true nature of the mind appears clearly being a manifestation or the play of Buddha Samantabhadra in union with his consort. This manifestation is Samantabhadra as the *dharmata*, the true nature of phenomena and one recognizes him.

Then one imagines that below are the five subtle channels, the location of the *five Buddha families*, which branch out like petals from the heart region. On the central channel is the white Buddha Vairocana in union with his consort. He is the embodiment of the purification of ignorance and is *dharmadhatu wisdom*. This is the bardo meditation one practices during life.

### THE PEACEFUL DEITIES APPEARING ON THE FIRST DAY OF BARDO

On the first day after death, Vairocana Buddha appears together with an intimidating, bright blue light shining together with the dim white light of the realm of the devas or gods of samsara, which doesn't seem frightening. Without previous practice one cannot identify the bright blue light and escapes to the soothing white light through attachment, thus running into samsara. If one has cultivated this practice, one is then able to recognize what is occurring.

### THE SECOND DAY OF BARDO

On the second day the pure form of the element of water as white light and the blue Buddha Vajrasattva as the embodiment of mirror-like wisdom, the pure form of anger, in union with his consort Buddha Locana manifest. Vajrasattva is one of the five Buddhas and will be accompanied by two bodhisattvas, Chittigarba and Maitreya, and two female bodhisattvas, Pupema and Lasema. Pupema is the goddess of flowers and Lasema is the goddess of beauty. Therefore six deities will appear. Together with the bright white light a small and dim smoky light

## *The Bardo of Dharmata*

of the hell realms will appear, which one shouldn't be attached to. Instead one should go towards the white light, meditating that one merges into Vajrasattva's heart.

### THE THIRD DAY BARDO

On the third day the purification of pride into the wisdom of equality appears. One imagines that in the center is the yellow Buddha Ratnasambhava in union with his consort Mamaki, appearing with two bodhisattvas, Akashagarba, "the essence of space," and Samantabhadra, as well as two female bodhisattvas, Malema and Dugpoma. Very intense yellow light, the essence of the wisdom of equality, brightly shines together with the dim blue light of the human realm, the one to which one is attracted because it is milder. One should not be attracted to the mild blue light and not be afraid of the intense yellow light, rather one should think that one merges into the heart of Buddha Ratnasambhava.

### THE FOURTH DAY IN BARDO

On the fourth day the red light of Buddha Amitabha appears who is in union with his consort Pandara (Tib. Gos dKarmo) which means "white clothes," together with two bodhisattvas, Chenresig and Manjushri, and two female bodhisattvas Girtima and Aloke, the goddesses of song and lights. The intense red light shining from Amitabha is the essence of the wisdom of discrimination. At the same time there is the dim yellow light of the realm of the pretas or *hungry ghosts*. It is said one should not be attracted to the mild yellow light which leads to the realm of the pretas and one should not be afraid of the bright red light of the wisdom of discrimination, rather one should think that one merges into the heart of Buddha Amitabha.

When we are doing this practice we should imagine that Buddha Ratnasambhava is on the southern channel of the heart and that Buddha Amitabha is on the rear petal of the heart.

### THE FIFTH DAY IN BARDO

On the fifth day Buddha Amogasiddha shines with bright green light in union with his consort Sarnaya Tara together with two bodhisattvas, Vajrapani and Nirvarana Viskandin (Tib. *pa namsal*), “the elimination of all obscurations,” and two female bodhisattvas, Gandema and Nartima, the goddesses of incense and dance. There is the majestic green light as the essence of the wisdom of accomplishment of activity as well as the dim red light of the realm of the jealous gods (Skt. *asuras*). It is said one should not be attracted to nor dislike the mild red light of the asuras and one shouldn't be afraid of the green light of Amogasiddha's wisdom. It is said one should imagine that one merges into the heart of Buddha Amogasiddha.

In terms of the practice, one should imagine that Amogasiddha is on the northern petal of the channel of the heart, which is on the left.

### THE SIXTH DAY IN BARDO

All five Buddhas have manifested successively each day of the previous five days. On the sixth day all five appear simultaneously and together in union and with their retinue of male and female bodhisattvas. Around them are eight wrathful deities, four male and four female, together with the six Munis, the six Buddhas of the six realms of beings.

At this time one can experience fear and terror and wish to flee from these appearances. One shouldn't try to escape nor be afraid. Instead one should have faith and devotion and sincerely wish to be with these appearances.

### DAILY PRACTICE

In terms of daily practice, we imagine a mandala and a male and female wrathful deity in each of the four directions of the doors of the heart. We visualize that in the eastern door of the heart is one male and one female wrathful deity; in the southern door is one male and one female wrathful deity; in the western door is one male and one female wrathful deity; and in the northern door is one male and one female wrathful deity.

## *The Bardo of Dharmata*

Next we visualize the Buddhas of the six realms. At our crown we visualize the Buddha of the god realm, at the nape of the neck we visualize the Buddha of the jealous gods, in the heart channel we visualize the Buddha of the human realm, at the navel we visualize the Buddha of the animals, at the *secret region* we visualize the Buddha of the hungry ghosts, and at the sole of the foot we visualize the Buddha of the hell realms.

Then we visualize the peaceful deities of the bardo of dharmata. We visualize Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri in the center of the heart, below them Vairocana and his consort in the center of the heart and the four Buddhas with their consorts in the petals of the heart center. There are the groups of six deities in the east, six deities in the west, six in the south, and six in the north.

### THE SEMI-WRATHFUL DEITIES APPEARING ON THE SEVENTH DAY IN BARDO

On each day of the six days of the bardo of dharmata one of the five Buddhas of the Buddha families had appeared and on the sixth day all Buddhas with their entourage appear.

On the seventh day the vidyadharas appear five female vidyadharas in union with their consorts. In the center is the vidyadhara of complete maturation, who radiates all five colors: his consort is red. In the east is the white vidyadhara with his white consort; in the south is the yellow vidyadhara with his yellow consort; to the west is the red vidyadhara with his red consort; and in the north is the green vidyadhara with his green consort. So here are five pairs of vidyadharas and their consorts who appear on the seventh day.

Concerning the daily practice of bardo: One visualizes the vidyadharas in the throat, one in the center, one in the east, one to the south, one to the west and one vidyadhara to the north. We make a prayer to them that while one wanders in samsara and has entered the bardo one may experience no fear or terror but is able to gain a good rebirth.

At this time, from the heart of the dakas and dakinis light rays of all colors intertwined to one length shine brightly and one is frightened. At the same time the green light of the animal realm shines, which is not frightening. One should not be

## *A Brief Description of the Bardo*

attached to the green light of the animal realms and not be frightened by the lights of the five colors. Instead one should think that one merges into the hearts of the dakas and dakinis. This describes the seventh day, which concludes the appearance of the peaceful deities.

### THE WRATHFULL DEITIES APPEARING FROM THE EIGHTH DAY

After the seventh day the wrathful deities begin to appear. The wrathful deities appear from one's own *karmic latencies* and are very powerful manifestations. Therefore it is very important that one has the meditation in order to recognize them, otherwise they will be very terrifying. Normally one does daily practice, thinking, "I am the yidam deity." In doing this practice one doesn't experience any fear. This kind of practice is very important so that one doesn't feel frightened when the wrathful forms manifest at the time of bardo.

Among the wrathful manifestations there is the central manifestation, which is the wrathful form of Buddha Vairocana, called Buddha Heruka. He is dark maroon in color, has three faces, six arms and four legs. His jewelry and costume are very frightening. He is accompanied by his consort, called Krode-shvara, who both make terrifying roaring sounds. Buddha Heruka has wings, his consort doesn't have wings.

With peaceful deities light shines from both the heart of the deity as well as from the realms of samsara. No lights shine from the wrathful deities, instead their appearance is so terrifying that we dislike and fear them and wish to escape and run away from them which would be to enter the wrong path. So we should think of the wrathful deities as being our yidam and identify with them and merge into their heart.

In terms of daily practice: We imagine ourself as Vajrasattva with all the peaceful deities in our heart, with all the vidyadharas in our throat and all the wrathful deities in our head. In daily practice we imagine that above the wrathful deities is the wrathful form of Samantabhadra with his consort, called Chemchog Heruka, dark maroon in color. They do not manifest in bardo because he is the dharmakaya Buddha, who doesn't manifest in a visible form. He doesn't apparently appear in the

## *The Bardo of Dharmata*

bardo on the eighth day. Below Chemchog Heruka is Buddha Heruka, described above. To the east, west, south and north of Buddha Heruka are the other four Herukas of the Buddha families. One imagines they are present in ones head, that they are ones yidams and one supplicates and prays to them. By becoming habituated to this practice during life one will not be frightened by them when they appear during bardo and one will not run away. Instead one thinks, “They have love for me and are my refuge, my yidams.” One turns to them with devotion, merges into them and doesn’t want to run away.

It is said that the peaceful deities manifest for a longer period of time, whereas the wrathful deities appear very quickly and shortly from the eighth day onwards.

### THE NINTH DAY OF BARDO

On the ninth day Vajra Heruka manifests in the east. He is dark blue in color, has three faces, six arms and four legs, the same as Buddha Heruka. The essence of Buddha Heruka is the dharmadhatu wisdom of the dharmakaya. Buddha Heruka’s sambhogakaya is Vairocana. The essence of Vajra Heruka is the mirror-like wisdom of the dharmakaya. Buddha Heruka’s sambhogakaya is Akshobya. Buddha Heruka is the pure manifestation of the impure klesha of ignorance. Vajra Heruka is the pure manifestation of the impure klesha of anger.

### THE TENTH DAY OF BARDO

On the tenth day and to the south appears the Heruka of the ratna or jewel family, called Ratna Heruka. The essence of Ratna Heruka is the wisdom of equality of the dharmakaya. He is the pure manifestation of the klesha of pride which causes one to think that others are inferior and one is superior to others. When pride is eliminated, the wisdom of equality shines forth, which is the realization that all beings are equal So with the elimination of the klesha of pride and with the realization of the wisdom of equality of the dharmakaya, one has attained the state of the sambhogakaya Buddha Ratnasambhava. Therefore, the essence of Ratna Heruka is Buddha Ratnsambhava of the jewel family associated with increasing enrichment, development and





## *A Brief Description of the Bardo*

progress. Without pride and with the realization of equality there is development and increase. With pride it is said that “qualities cannot enter the solid lump of pride.” so there can be no progress. With the attainment of the wisdom of equality and of the ratna family there will be development. Ratna Heruka is yellow, also has three faces, six arms and four legs like the other Herukas.

### THE ELEVENTH DAY OF BARDO

On the eleventh day Padma Heruka of the lotus family in the west manifests. His impure aspect is desire and his pure aspect is discriminating wisdom. With the attainment of Buddhahood two wisdoms arise: the wisdom that knows the true nature of things and the wisdom that sees the relative multiplicity of things. Dharmadhatu wisdom, mirror-like wisdom and the wisdom of equality are classified as the wisdom that knows the nature of things as they are. The wisdom of discrimination and the wisdom of the accomplishment of actions, also sometimes mirror-like wisdom, belong to the wisdom that sees the relative multiplicity of things. Primarily, the wisdom of discrimination and of accomplishing actions are the wisdom of multiplicity.

If someone has attained Buddhahood, there is nothing they don't understand or know because they have wisdom of discrimination, which sees everything distinctly from everything else, i.e., everything is seen for what it is. This means that the bad is not seen as good, the good is not seen as bad, the bad is seen as bad and the good is seen as good with the wisdom of discrimination. The impure aspect of desire is accompanied by mixed ignorance, i.e., mixed with the other kleshas. When desire is strong, one doesn't recognize things for what they are, i.e., one then thinks what is bad is good, what is good is bad. When the klesha of desire is eliminated, one has the wisdom of discrimination, which can distinguish all things from each other, the good, bad and so on.

The essence of Padma Heruka is discriminating wisdom of the dharmakaya. The sambhogakaya is Buddha Amitabha. He appears as the other Herukas, except that he is red in color.

THE TWELFTH DAY IN BARDO

On the Twelfth Day there appears Karma Heruka, who is green in color and has the same features as the other Herukas. He is the pure manifestation of the klesha of envy. His essence is the wisdom of accomplishing actions.

Buddhas do not make any errors or mistakes in their actions, i.e., whatever they do is done correctly because they have the wisdom of the accomplishment of actions. When the impure aspect of this wisdom, which is envy, prevails there is conflict between oneself and others. Due to this conflict one isn't able to accomplish what one intends and cannot accomplish actions. When envy is eliminated then there is the wisdom of the accomplishment of actions because without envy one can accomplish one's actions. Therefore, Buddhas are free of envy and can accomplish their actions. They are therefore said to have the wisdom of the accomplishment of actions.

The wisdom of accomplishing actions is the dharmakaya of Karma Heruka. The sambhogakaya aspect is Buddha Amogha-siddha, the peaceful manifestation of the wrathful Karma Heruka.



## **Chapter 3**

### ***The Bardo of Becoming***

There are two kinds of bardo: the bardo of dharmata (“the true nature”) and the bardo of becoming. The peaceful and wrathful deities appear in the bardo of dharmata. They are always latent within our body and mind and have the power to appear after death in the bardo of dharmata. When we are changing bodies, they manifest. If we don’t recognize them, we are terrified by them. If we do recognize them, we can turn to them for refuge and they can benefit us in our journey. As already described there are the peaceful deities, the vidyadharas, dakas, dakinis and these are the wrathful deities, which manifest during the bardo of dharmata. There are a great number of wrathful deities because the five Herukas have an entourage of wrathful deities. If I go through them all, name them, describe what they look like and what they wear, it will not be particularly useful and you may feel a bit overwhelmed. Therefore I will move on to the next bardo of becoming.

In the bardo of becoming we exchange our old existence for a new existence. Many illusory appearances occur in the gap between our old existence and new existence. If we cannot recognize them, much fear, problems and mistakes can ensue. But if we are habituated to the various appearances that manifest during the bardo of becoming, then we will be able to recognize the illusory appearances and then they diminish and we will not be frightened and consequently we will make fewer make mistakes.

It is said that in the bardo a being has all sensory faculties and that one can go anywhere without being impeded. One is in a house and needn’t leave through a door but can just think of another location and be there, such as on top of a mountain. So all such appearances and experiences can occur. Sometimes we can know that we have died, at other times we don’t know that we have died. It is like a dream, where appearances and experiences change dramatically with us sometimes clearly

## *A Brief Description of the Bardo*

recognizing that we are dreaming and at other times we think we are awake and really experiencing what is taking place in a dream. This can change so that we can lose the recognition that we are asleep and dreaming or vice versa. The experiences during the bardo of becoming are like these experiences of dreaming.

We may be near our family and relatives and see that they are crying and upset. This can bring the realization that we have died and can cause much suffering to us in the bardo. Due to the power of karma we can find oneself in a completely different location. We can also recognize that we have died and think positively. "I have died and this happens to everyone. There is no point in being attached to my family and those who were close to me. If this were beneficial, then attachment would be alright, but there is no benefit in this, so I mustn't be attached." We can also see our wealth and belongings going to others which can cause anger. We should rather think that this is what happens to our possessions after we have died and there is no benefit in feeling attachment for past belongings, rather accept that others have them.

We may have attachment to our body, our family and possessions in the bardo of becoming. If we are attached, we see the harm caused to our body, our family or possessions and feel anger which gives rise to the disturbing emotions or kleshas. This causes great suffering, the reason we should have no attachment to our body, family and possessions. instead, if we can meditate, then we should meditate at this time. If we can visualize ourselves as a yidam deity, then we should do so and think that all worldly appearances are impermanent and without any true reality.

*Various visual forms, sounds, lights and so on can occur in the bardo. We shouldn't feel fear, but pray to the three jewels, supplicating them without losing awareness of the dharma or falling under the power of the kleshas. If the kleshas are present, then many terrifying experiences will ensue. We must become free from the kleshas and pray to Amitabha Buddha or Avalokiteshvara to help us be free from the kleshas, attain liberation, and not wander in the six realms of samsara. We can pray to Amitabha Buddha or Avalokiteshvara to take us to the*

pure realms, so it is important at this time not to fall under the influence of the kleshas.

Since we do not have a physical body in the *bardo of becoming* we find ourselves in different places without control. We will find this very irritating and seek a body, a stable existence. Our mind should be very stable here and careful not to seek any kind of new physical existence. We should have a stable mind so we are able to find a good existence, instead of adopting a new existence driven by fear or attachment. When we are going to take rebirth, different appearances will occur. If rebirth is in the god realm, pleasant appearances will manifest. If rebirth is in a lower realm, frightening appearances will manifest. When frightening appearances manifest, we might want to escape and hide in a crack or whatever. When pleasant appearances manifest, we might feel attracted and attached to them, thus taking on a rebirth in the specific realm. If we see pleasant appearances, we should not feel attachment, which prevents rebirth taking place; if we see something terrifying, we should meditate the yidam deity with the retinue, remaining in meditation and realizing that the appearances are just an illusion. This prevents rebirth from occurring. We can also see the place we enter into a new existence, our future parents. At that time anger and attachment arise towards the mother and father, which will bring on our conception. In order to prevent immediately entering another life we need stability of mind and should not have anger or attachment, but remain in meditation and meditate on the deity and its retinue. This prevents an immediate new rebirth.

If we have meditated and can see the true nature of the mind, then it will be very beneficial during the bardo because the mind will be still, stable, and peaceful. No harm will ensue because the kleshas will not arise. Therefore meditation practice in this life is very important.

When we are about to be reborn and enter a new existence it is best to close the doorway to the womb and to meditate the yidam deity, to pray to Amitabha or Avalokiteshvara, so that we don't enter the new existence but be led to a pure realm. That is ideally the best thing to accomplish. If we can't do this, then it is said one should pray to be reborn before Padmasambhava, in the presence of Avalokiteshvara or in a good land where we will be

## *A Brief Description of the Bardo*

able to practice the dharma. We should pray like this and try to remain in a state of meditation. There are two things we can do when taking on a new existence: closing the door to the womb and choosing a womb. Karma drives us to a new rebirth and by supplicating the Buddhas and bodhisattvas we prevent an uncontrolled rebirth by closing the door to the womb. When we have to be reborn we choose our new existence by transforming impure appearances into pure appearances.

When anger and attachment arise we must prevent the arising of anger and attachment and instead develop *bodhichitta*, a good motivation, for instance wishing to receive an empowerment, thinking one is receiving dharma teachings and so on. Due to this wish one will gain a good rebirth. These are the kinds of practices necessary during the bardo of becoming.

### ***Questions & Answers***

**Question:** You talked about the peaceful and wrathful deities. Most Westerners don't know they exist. Is it possible to recognize fear, anger and wrathful things in bardo?

**Rinpoche:** This is the reason Trungpa Rinpoche had the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* translated, printed and distributed everywhere. It is very beneficial in introducing people to the bardo.

**Question:** If somebody knows nothing about Buddhism. is it not possible to recognize the bardo?

**Rinpoche:** There is bound to be some difficulty if one hasn't created the imprint within oneself of recognizing the deities. But if the bardo text is recited for the deceased, it would benefit them.

**Question:** If someone realizes this in meditation, does he have to know all the deities to recognize them?"

**Rinpoche:** A practitioner of meditation may not know the deities of the bardo but will have a stable mind, so in the bardo they will have peace and stability of mind, able to recognize appearances as being their own manifestations. They will have that understanding. If one can recognize the deities individually and is able to merge with them or pray to be reborn in a Buddha realm, then that would be very beneficial.

**Question:** How much is the deity an own existent and how much is it built up through trust in Buddhism, through the power of mantras and belief?

**Rinpoche:** The deities are those of the dharmata, or the true nature of phenomena, and therefore they are natural manifestations which are latent within our body and mind. So they manifest in the bardo from the true nature. Whether we are a dharma practitioner or not, the deities will manifest. Normally we cannot recognize them. Just as the five wisdoms are our own nature, there are the five kleshas. When purified, the five wisdoms shine forth as the five Buddhas of the families. They are naturally present, but normally we don't recognize them. When they manifest in the bardo, we may not recognize them. If one can recognize them, then that is very beneficial.

**Question:** In your teachings on *The Moonbeams of Mahamudra*, you said something about the Sixteenth Karmapa and his task of bringing Buddhism to the West. You also said something about an obstacle the Karmapa eliminated. I was wondering if the obstacle has something to do with Westerners; what the obstacle was and how did he conquered it?

**Rinpoche:** The obstacle concerned the life of the Karmapa and the fact that Tibetan Buddhism was nearly destroyed. It was only due to the activity of special lamas, such as the Karmapa, that Tibetan Buddhism has been preserved. Otherwise, if it hadn't been for these special lamas, Tibetan Buddhism would almost have gone into oblivion with people commenting, "Well, there used to be a thing called 'Tibetan Buddhism' which was practiced in Tibet, but it doesn't exist anymore." However, the Karmapa was able to take up residence in Rumtek and the Dalai Lama was able to take up residence in Dharamsala. Through the activity of special lamas, Tibetan Buddhism has been preserved. A few texts have been lost and many statues with special blessings have been destroyed. But apart from that, the dharma teachings are preserved and haven't deteriorated. Not only that, these teachings have spread to the West with a great number of people now are learning and practicing the dharma.

When I came from Kham in Tibet to the border of Bhutan, all I had with me was what was in my mind. I didn't have a single page of any text. All I could do was say mantras with my mala because I had nothing to read. Later when I arrived in

## *A Brief Description of the Bardo*

Sikkim a man called Atin gave me a text *called The Recitation of the Names of Manjushri*. I was overjoyed because I thought, “Now I have a text I can read.” So all I had was this small text that made me very happy. Gradually, things have developed and now there is the *shedra*, the monastic college, and a retreat center at Namu Buddha in Nepal. Teachings are being taught, people are studying texts, so things have developed.

**Question:** Does one need to be in close proximity of the body when we recite the bardo instructions for others?

**Rinpoche:** Yes, it would be good because the consciousness of the deceased returns to the body near the family and friends. So it is good to recite the bardo in the place where the consciousness returns to. If the deceased was a friend, the consciousness will come to the friend and think, “Oh, that is my friend. He is chanting this prayer for me.” So one can recite the text in one’s home because the consciousness will be attracted to the friend.

**Question:** I don’t exactly know what bardo yoga is?

**Rinpoche:** Among the *Six Yogas of Naropa* there is a yoga of the bardo and of phowa, the “transference of consciousness at death.” In the first practice one meditates on the appearances which arise during the bardo. In phowa practice one doesn’t meditate on the deities but only on general appearances that arise in bardo. This practice is done in order to recognize ultimate clarity and wisdom in oneself that sometimes manifest in bardo, so the practice is designed to recognize that when it appears.

**Question:** I have a question about karma. Does a town and country have karma?

**Rinpoche:** No, karma is accumulated by individuals and ripens for them. Even so, there are common appearances that arise for individuals due to similar karma. Some people accumulate similar karma and therefore experience the same kind of result together. For instance, some people may create a certain same karma and they all will be reborn in the West, where they experience happiness and a pleasant environment. Others will accumulate certain karma together and as a result they will experience countries like Africa, where there is nothing to eat and they are always hungry. It seems they are experiencing the same karma, but it is the similarity of individual karma. It looks

like group karma but it isn't. There is no such thing as the karma of a town or country.

**Question:** I wasn't quite clear about what happened on the first day in bardo, when I have the choice of following either a soft or strong light, depending upon what I do. Do I have a second chance on the second day to follow another light?

**Rinpoche:** If one recognizes the light on the first day, the benefit will come and one will not make a mistake on the second day. One will keep recognizing the principal lights. Whereas one can make a mistake on the first day and not on the second day.

**Question:** Rinpoche, many dharma teachings are very reasonable and one is told that one can work them out for oneself and base one's experience. It is not possible for us to check them out. I didn't understand that whoever dies, whether an African, a Tibetan or my wife's mother in Finland. They would have the same mind, the nature of the mind would be the same? But all the actual appearances you described in detail, don't seem to be universal phenomena?

**Rinpoche:** There are three ways to approach the teachings. One is what can be directly observed. If this teaching concerns something that can be directly observed, then it shouldn't contradict what you can directly observe. For instance, the books you are holding are red. If someone says they are yellow, then it contradicts what you can visibly observe. The second concerns things you can't directly perceive for yourself. This must be checked through deduction and logical reasoning. One examines a statement with logical reasoning and finds out whether it contradicts logical reasoning. If it is contradictory, then it is something one doesn't believe in. There are these two ways of checking teachings by directly observing and checking through logical reasoning. If anything contradicts these two, then one needn't believe in it.

The third kind is called "extremely concealed or hidden meaning" which are something you can't perceive nor deduce. An example for this is the teachings on the bardo and the deities. One can't find that they exist nor that they don't exist due to the statement alone. There is no ground for believing in their existence. But you also can't prove it isn't a lie since the meaning is extremely obscured and concealed from our knowledge. How can we verify these teachings? We can't look

at the content of the teachings itself, so we must look at who is giving the teachings and examine him instead. So if one looks at the Buddha and asks, “Is this a person who tells the truth, is he someone who actually knows what he is talking about?” one comes to the conclusion that the Buddha then “although there is no way of proving it the one way or other, but since he taught it, I believe it!” That’s the third approach.

**Question:** Who taught these teachings and where were they first revealed? From the historical Buddha or from the Tibetan tradition?

**Rinpoche:** These are Tibetan teachings, but the source of these teachings is found in the tantras. In the tantras you can find the 42 peaceful and 58 wrathful deities. You can’t find this complete teaching in the tantra though, but you can recognize deities in specific tantras and know about what is held in the hands and all contents of this teaching. That was taught by the Buddha.

**Question:** By developing superior insight in meditation, which we can do if we try hard enough, can we with clairvoyance observe these facts? Does the mind naturally experience it as a day or is it just for a designation purpose from our point of view?

**Rinpoche:** The days are measured in terms of our time of days. individuals in the bardo do not experience a day because there is no sun or moon. They don’t have a day that accords with the length of lime the sun rises and sets again. Day here refers to our time, which passes for the person who experiences it differently.

**Question:** Does the diminishing of ego equate with a peaceful death?

**Rinpoche:** It is good to have a relaxed and peaceful state of mind in order to die easily. This is primarily due to karma, particular circumstances and features of illness, which can cause difficulties or the absence of difficulties at death. Many people have trouble dying and have much anger, desire and feel sad while others don’t. A good death is peaceful and without disturbing conditions.

## *The Glossary*

**Abhidharma** (Tib. *chö ngön pa*) The Buddhist teachings are often divided into the Tripitaka: the sutras (teachings of the Buddha), the Vinaya (teachings on conduct,) and the Abhidharma which are the analyses of phenomena that exist primarily as a commentarial tradition to the Buddhist teachings. There is not, in fact, an Abhidharma section within the Tibetan collection of the Buddhist teachings.

**aggregates, five** (Skt. *skandha*, Tib. *phung po nga*) Literally “heaps,” These are the five basic transformations that perceptions undergo when an object is perceived. First is form which includes all sounds, smells, etc. everything that is not thought. The second and third are sensations (pleasant and unpleasant, etc.) and identification. Fourth is mental events which actually include the second and third aggregates. The fifth is ordinary consciousness such as the sensory and mental consciousnesses.

**daka** (Tib. *khandro*) A male counterpart to a dakini.

**dakini** (Tib. *khandroma*) A yogini who has attained high realizations of the fully enlightened mind. She may be a human being who has achieved such attainments or a non-human manifestation of the enlightened mind of a meditational deity.

**dharmata** (Tib. *chö nyi*) Dharmata is often translated as “suchness” or “the true nature of things” or “things as they are.” It is phenomena as it really is or as seen by a completely enlightened being without any distortion or obscuration so one can say it is “reality.”

**dharmakaya** (Tib. *chö ku*) One of the three bodies of Buddha. It is enlightenment itself, that is wisdom beyond reference point. See kayas, three.

**disturbing emotion** ( Skt. *klesha*, Tib. *nyön mong*) The emotional obscurations (in contrast to intellectual obscurations) which are also translated as “afflictions” or “poisons.” The three main kleshas are (passion or attachment), (aggression or anger); and (ignorance or delusion). The five kleshas are the three above plus pride and (envy or jealousy).

**eight consciousnesses** (Skt. *vijnana*, Tib. *nam shé tsog gye*) These are the five sensory consciousnesses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and body sensation. Sixth is mental consciousness, seventh is afflicted consciousness, and eighth is ground consciousness.

**five buddha families** (Tib. *rig nga*) These are the buddha, vajra, ratna, padma, and karma families.

## *A Brief Description of the Bardo*

**five dhyana buddhas** (Tib. *gyel wa rig nga*) The sambhogakaya deities of Vairocana, Akshobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, and Amoghasiddhi. Each one represents one of the five wisdoms.

**heruka** (Tib. *trak thung*) A wrathful male deity.

**interdependence** (Skt. *pratityasamutpada*, Tib. *tren drel*) Also called dependent origination. The principal that nothing exists independently, but comes into existence only on dependency of various previous causes and conditions. There are twelve successive phases of this process that begin with ignorance and end with old age and death.

**karmic latencies or imprints** (Skt. *vasana*, Tib. *pakchak*) Every action and that a person does has an imprint which is stored in the eighth consciousness. These latencies express themselves later by leaving the eighth consciousness and entering the sixth consciousness upon being stimulated by external experience.

**One-hundred syllable mantra** This is the Vajrasattva mantra used mainly in purification.

**Preliminary practices** (Tib. *ngöndro* and pronounced “nundro”) Tibetan for preliminary practice. One usually begins the vajrayana path by doing the four preliminary practices which involve about 100,000 refuge prayers and prostrations, 100,000 vajrasattva mantras, 100,000 mandala offerings, and 100,000 guru yoga practices.

**samadhi** (Tib. *tin ne zin*) Also called meditative absorption or one-pointed meditation, this is the highest form of meditation.

**sambhogakaya** (Tib. *long chö dzok ku*) There are three bodies of the Buddha and the sambhogakaya, also called the “enjoyment body,” is a realm of the dharmakaya which only manifests to bodhisattvas. See the three kayas.

**six yogas of Naropa** (Tib. *naro chödruk*) These six special yogic practices were transmitted from Naropa to Marpa and consist of the subtle heat practice, the illusory body practice, the dream yoga practice, the luminosity practice, the ejection of consciousness practice, and the bardo practice.

**subtle channels** (Skt. *nadi*, Tib. *tsa*) These refer to the subtle channels which are not anatomical ones but ones in which psychic energies or “winds” (Skt. *prana*, Tib. *lung*) travel.

**three jewels** (Tib. *kön chok sum*) These are the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha.

**yidam** (Tib.) A tantric deity that embodies qualities of Buddhahood and is practiced in the vajrayana. Also called a tutelary deity.