Tibetan and SGI Buddhisms: Reflecting on Death, Dying, Life, and What’s In Between

By Seth Clark

Abstract

This paper discusses the similarities and differences between approaches to death and dying in SGI and Tibetan Buddhism. It also draws on research compiled on Near Death Experiences. By comparing these traditions and the NDE experiences, a few conclusions are drawn: namely, that death is a process and not a static event. Secondarily, the process of death should be prepared for by all parties involved. The last conclusion is that the larger Dharma tradition can teach western society that it is a healthy and necessary practice to view and sit with the deceased body instead of storing the body immediately after “death” occurs.

The 1990 film, Flatliners, starts with the line, “It’s a good day to die.” An exploration of life and death by a group of medical school students ensues by dealing with the implications of their actions in life while in a state “between” reversible and irreversible death. When each character comes back to life after experiencing a medically-induced clinical death, they have to satisfy the wrongs that they were forced to confront by the specter of death. After a viewing of this film and a brief reading of the Bardo Thodol (popularly known as the Tibetan Book of the Dead), I began to see the connection between real accounts of Near Death Experiences and the Tibetan concept of liminality known as the “bardo,” the series of in-between states that characterize the cyclical nature of existence.

Another form of Mahayana or Universal Buddhism teaches similar concepts about the nature of existence. SGI or Soka Gakkai International Buddhism is the lay form of Nichiren Buddhism and has millions of members worldwide. The central practice to SGI is the chanting of Nam Myoho Renge Kyo – the title of the Lotus Sutra and the basic teaching that the universe is a constant unfolding of cause and effect. Thus, this paper discusses the similarities and differences between approaches to death and dying in SGI and Tibetan Buddhism while drawing on research compiled on Near Death Experiences. By comparing these traditions and the NDE experiences, I hope to draw implications on thanatology from these two strands of the great Dharma tradition.

The implications that will be emphasized are two-fold: namely, that it is necessary for the dying individual and all those involved to prepare for death by utilizing the available traditions, regardless of whether they are part of the Dharma tradition. The second implication is that western medicine does not typically allow for family members to interact with a newly deceased body. The larger Dharma tradition can teach western society that it is a healthy and necessary practice to view and sit with the deceased body so that the nature of death can be fully absorbed.
**Tibetan Buddhism**

Tibetan Buddhism is well-known in the United States of America, especially the spiritual leader of Tibet, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama gives dharma talks on a semi-regular basis in this country, delivering one a few months ago here in Southern California. Tibetan Buddhism is well-known for its work on death and dying, especially as compiled in the Bardol Thodol, which is literally translated as “Liberation Through Understanding in the Between.”

Essentially, this text serves as a guide to be read to the dying as the individual transitions from one liminal space or bardo to the other to facilitate a desirable rebirth in their next life. Tibetan Buddhism is composed of 4 different schools and the primary material relevant to thanatology is drawn from the Nyingma and Kagyu schools. The Kagyu school divides the cyclical existence of beings into 6 bardos: 1) the normal waking experience, which is the “bardo between birth and death,” 2) the “dream bardo,” which is the time between when one goes to sleep and the time of awakening, 3) the time of unconsciousness when the mind is overwhelmed by death, which is entitled the “reality bardo,” because the mind is in its true state and most untrained individuals are so bewildered that they are rendered unconscious in lieu of confronting it directly, 4) the fourth bardo is the “state of becoming” in which one confronts lively and terrific projections of the mind. This state continues until one is reborn into one of the six realms of continual existence, 5) the fifth intermediate state is the “bardo of meditative absorption” and is accessible by meditative practitioners who have learned to control their focus and fully examine the human mind, and the sixth and final state is the “bardo of birth,” which begins directly after the “bardo of becoming” ends. The consciousness of an individual in this state enters into a zygote of a consummating couple and this bardo lasts from the “point of fertilization until the moment of physical birth.”

These 6 bardos are usually experienced by all beings in cyclical existence but there are heightened opportunities for human beings during the three death “bardos.” John Powers, an expert in Indo-Tibetan thought and meditation theory, dictates that there are moments that can be particularly liberating to those who have the proper meditative training during the death bardos, especially since the “coarse levels of the mind” have dropped away and one actualizes very subtle states of the mind that are rarely accessible before death. He continues on to state that a person who takes advantage of this opportunity “can more easily become aware of the fundamentally pure and luminous nature of mind than a living person in the normal waking state.” Hence, one ethical conclusion on the nature of death and the process of dying is that it is a learning process and when one is properly prepared, the difficulties that face the inevitable end known as death can be negotiated in such a way as to face a desirable and dignified end of existence of an individual in its current state.

In the same vein, ancient and modern research on thanatology dictates that the ability to prepare oneself to experience death is necessary for an enlightened and desirable end. Tibetan teachings dictate that the proper meditative training enables one to embrace the true nature of...
reality and the mind that is experienced usually only during the death bardos. This experience makes it possible to influence one’s rebirth to a desirable state of human or otherwise favorable position to help free others and oneself from cyclical existence. Modern research, such as that done by medical doctors Elisabeth Kubler Ross and Sidney Wanzer, emphasizes the necessity of properly negotiating the five stages of dying and being prepared to help loved ones make decisions to bring comfort to and possible hastening of the death process to avoid unnecessary suffering. In other words, as much as death is the end, it is also an opportunity to become fully human and help others to do so as well.

Another aspect of Tibetan Buddhism and the dying process is the area where the consciousness fully exits the body. As a larger part of Indo and Dharma tradition, the human body is divided into points where energy enters, focuses, and possibly exits, known as the “chakras.” In the Tibetan tradition, the consciousness exits through the chakra located on the crown of the head, known as the “brahma aperture” and is facilitated by the recitation of “hik” over and over again by the dying individual. The Dalai Lama suggests that one practice this procedure by reciting “hik” to make the consciousness leave the body and then reciting “ka” to make it return. For beginners, the idea is to transfer the consciousness to a “pure-land” where one can obtain enlightenment and bodhisattva status without distraction but according to research on this Tibetan technique, other possibilities are open to experienced practitioners.

One of the interesting aspects about this technique is that it was supposedly taught to Thomas Merton, the great Trappist monk and lifelong student of comparative religion. In a larger report on how Tibetan Buddhism came to the West, Jeffery Paine writes that Chogling Rinpoche taught him this technique, known as phowa, but he had his doubts about it. Shortly thereafter, Merton met an untimely accidental death. Paine notes that Chogling Rinpoche had a premonition that Merton would experience his death soon and as such, should be familiar with this technique.

In a sense, it seems that this Rinpoche was attempting to prepare Merton for his death by teaching him the proper technique that the Buddhist knew of in his tradition. Thus, the preparation for death in the Tibetan is stressed in multiple aspects. Another aspect that comes into play here is that death is to be learned from and by multiple parties. Both those close to a dying individual and the individual themselves have to make proper medical decisions and other preparations beforehand. The opportunities provided during the death Bardos and propelling consciousness through the “brahma aperture” have to be trained for to be fully utilized to have a favorable reincarnation as another human or another favorable state.

As a matter of interest, the process for a dying person is very specific in the Tibetan Buddhist system. Due to the nature of karma at the time of death, Powers dictates that “…desirous thoughts can have negative consequences and a dying person should strive to avoid them.” To aid in the process of keeping the mind off of desirous thoughts and keeping it focused on religious sentiments, one should envision one’s lama or teacher and chant a mantra, such as Om Mani Padme Hum (which is associated with the Bodhisattva of Compassion) or another mantra that is associated with a specific Buddha in order to establish and maintain a
connection with that Buddha or Bodhisattva. Furthermore, any prayers or good deeds done on behalf of the dying or dead person also contribute to a desirable rebirth. A similar practice is used in SGI Buddhism.

Robert A.F. Thurman, in his introduction, commentary, and translation of the Bardo Thodol dictates that there are 8 stages of actively dying and transitioning from one bardo to another. Each stage involves the dissolution of the aggregates or elements that are assembled to constitute the human body and is accompanied by a specific experience by the dying individual which can be physically observed until the 5th dissolution. The 1st four dissolutions are basically the human body shutting down, and after the fourth one is complete, one is considered clinically dead because respiration and brain activity have ceased, as well as no movement in the circulatory system. It is interesting that in Tibetan thought, the dying process continues well after one can be declared clinically dead, and this is another piece of information that can be passed onto our modern understanding of when death occurs: death is a process and is not complete when one is declared clinically dead by a medical doctor. A period of letting the “corpse” rest before burial practices is standard in Tibetan burial practices and other cultures as well. Thus, the wisdom of the Bardo Thodol and the larger Tibetan Buddhist thanatological tradition can be summed up in three points: death is an unfolding event that needs to be prepared for, the nature of death and dying indicates that like life, death is a process, and finally, death is only complete sometime after one may be declared clinically dead.

SGI Buddhism

SGI Buddhism, due to the nature of this new movement, has much more to say about matters relevant to death and dying in modernity. It is strictly a lay form of Nichiren Buddhism, which was established by the 13th century Buddhist teacher Nichiren. The current leader of SGI is Daisaku Ikeda. As such, he is responsible for most of the literature for the organization.

Similar to Tibetan teachings on the nature of life and death, SGI Buddhism affirms the cyclical nature of existence. Ikeda expounds upon this when he states that there is an “intrinsic Buddha nature” in all phenomenal reality and that this nature displays itself in latent and emergent states. When a being comes to life, the “intrinsic Buddha nature” is in an emergent phenomenal state, and when a being dies, the same nature is a latent phenomenal state. Ikeda offers hope to others when he writes that just as “sleep prepares us for the next day’s activity, death can be seen as a state in which we rest and replenish ourselves for a new life. In this light, death should be acknowledged, along with life, as a blessing to be appreciated.”

This form of Buddhism also stresses preparing for the process of dying because of the metaphysical consequences that are either beneficial or detrimental at the time of death. Ikeda that at the “end of life, positive and negative energies are released from our unconscious,” which is the “storehouse of karmic effects” according to this Buddhist philosophy, and proper preparation is needed to reinforce the good energy. He stresses the teachings of Nichiren and Nagarjuna at this point, stating that there are “three paths” that can either give rise to “three
“poisons” in delusion or “three virtues” in truth, the latter of which is desirable so that the positive energy is strengthened. In lieu of eliminating the three paths of “earthly desires, karma, and suffering,” the truth about each one has to be realized so that they are manifested as the “Dharma Body, which is the truth the Buddha realized, Wisdom, which is the ability to realize the truth, and Emancipation – from sufferings of birth and death.” This is accomplished, as expected, through the chanting of Nam Myoho Renge Kyo and faith in the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. This practice and faith is also essential at the time of death as well.

SGI emphasizes four phases of existence, which are similar to the Tibetan Bardo: existence during birth, existence during life, existence during death, and existence during death or the intermediate existence. Ikeda emphasizes the idea that that existence during death is quite different from existence during life and as such, is a process that requires preparation during life. In laymen terms, he emphasizes the dissolution of the physical aggregates and the emotions that one may experience while actively dying, noting that one’s karma, which is the basis of the ego in Buddhist thought, affects existence during death as well as the rebirth of the individual. He is also quick to note while the sufferings of an individual from the effects of karma cannot be mitigated instantly by the individual during the intermediate state, the prayers of the living can help cease the suffering of the individual and result in favorable rebirth.

Overall, SGI Buddhism has a detailed approach to death and dying that is similar in many aspects to Tibetan thought: emphasizing preparation for death and the idea that is a process and not a static event. Like modern medicine is learning, SGI teaches about the need for death to be a dignified process, one that is not impeded by curative medicine or technology when an individual is actively dying and as such, contributes to the bioethics of death.

Near Death Experiences

Arguably, the best-known collection of accounts of Near Death Experiences or NDEs is Life After Life, written in 1975 by Dr. Raymond A. Moody, Jr. In this book, Dr. Moody relays many different experiences of NDES from various people and under various circumstances. I would like to note that the study is not scientific, because the accounts contained therein cannot be empirically verified and thus are best seen as anecdotes recounted by individuals, which Moody divides into three categories. These three categories are: 1) experiences of people who have been judged or even pronounced to be clinically dead but have been resuscitated who then told of their experiences; 2) those who have been injured in a manner that caused them to come very close to physical death but lived to report their NDEs; 3) the experiences of persons, who while they were actively dying, told their experiences to those around them and those individuals in turn, reported them to Moody. However, Moody only reports the accounts that fall into the first two categories for reasons of brevity and accountability; in other words, about one-third of the total accounts he gathered.
Along with being judicious about the type of accounts he used for his work, Dr. Moody notes that while there are parallels between these accounts, none of them are exactly identical. However, most of these accounts share common features such as being able to know what others are saying in the room when one is said to have “died,” feeling the consciousness exiting the body and floating in the room, seeing a luminous being that may review the events of one’s life, and the actual reentering of the consciousness back into the body as it is being resuscitated or revived by medical care, and not being believed by others when an individual relates the account. For the sake of brevity, I will now skip to the accounts that are relevant to features accounted for in the Tibetan tradition.

Moody states that while some individuals recall the consciousness entering back into their physical bodies; others actually recall the process in such detail to remember the feel of reentry and the point on the body in which it happened. He continues on to state that these individuals report that it “happened through the head” with details such as “I was being sucked back; it seemed that the suction started through the head, like I went into the head.” During the section in this paper on preparation for death in the Tibetan tradition, the technique of “phowa” was explained and how the consciousness could be purposefully expelled and recalled through the “brahma aperture” or the fontanel located on the top of the head. This is the proper exit for the consciousness in the Tibetan tradition, because it results in the most favorable rebirth. It is so important to the adherents of this tradition that the body is not moved until the consciousness has exited and is well on its way to rebirth. Then the body is buried by sky burial or cremation.

Moody has a section in the back of his book on parallels between the accounts of NDEs and religious/philosophical texts such as Plato’s Republic and the Bardo Thodol. Moody acknowledges that the authors of the Bardo Thodol saw dying as a skill – which could either be done well or in a fitful manner. He acknowledges the parallels between preparing for death that is emphasized in the Bardo Thodol and how the experiences of the dying line up with those expressed in the accounts in the book. The being of light or clear light also appears to the dying according to Tibetan tradition, much like similar luminous figures appear to most of those who recall NDEs. Stated differently, some of the common elements of NDEs line up with the process of dying as it is recorded in the Tibetan tradition and can be seen as anecdotal confirmation of what to expect while dying.

**Practical Conclusions**

Modern humanity is very often scared of dying because of the way it is portrayed as the end of existence or because of the consequences pushed by certain western traditions such as fundamentalist forms of Christianity. Also, the medical system as such is designed as a curative one, and being healthy is held forward as a way of extending life for one’s own purposes and desires before one dies. We often use words to hide from the reality of death such as “passing away,” “moved on,” and other pat phrases that do not express the reality of death but instead serve to mollify the staunch reality therein. As demonstrated, certain religious and philosophical
traditions teach humans to prepare themselves for death in various ways, and this includes ideas on when the time of death happens. Moody proposes that there are three definitions of when a person is dead: 1) death as the absence of “clinically detectable vital signs”; 2) death as the absence of all brain activity; 3) death “as an irreversible loss of all vital functions.”

The third definition is certainly when one has fully entered into the state of death. However, both Tibetan and SGI Buddhism confirm that one may be “clinically dead” at this state while there is still consciousness among other energies present in the body. That is why the body is allowed to rest for a period of time until the signs that the consciousness has exited the body are present, and burial is the next step. In a modern Western hospital, as soon one is pronounced dead, the body is tagged and is sent to the morgue to be refrigerated until an autopsy is performed by a coroner. There is wisdom to be learned from the Tibetan tradition of letting the body rest for a few days before preparing it to be buried. Conceptually, this allows the consciousness to exit the body fully as anecdotally confirmed by the NDE and Bardo Thodol. Practically, this allows family members to view the body and deal with the full reality of death. As a summary, death is a process and not a static event that needs to be prepared for in various ways, and finally, death cannot be said to be final simply after one’s vital signs are undetectable—especially in relation to the work that needs to be done by family and friends dealing with the death of their loved one.

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Notes

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