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A Book Of The Dead For The Life Of The World
The Mythic Ascent of Tibetan Buddhism

If there was any doubt that mythic forces still exist in the world today, one needs to carefully consider the story of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Aside from the content of the book, which is amazing in its own way, the story of how it became prominent on the world stage is no less incredible and seems to validate the assumption that the content of the Mythic Enterprise is still working in this supposedly scientific age.

The focus of this paper is to use the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* as a bridge to cross over into the world of Tibetan Buddhism and the world of mythology. While some time will be spent exploring the bridge itself, in the end we will look at the mythological implications for both sides of that crossing, Tibet and the rest of the world.

Initiating our mythic inquiry begins with consideration of the bridge document, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Perhaps Joseph Campbell states it best when he writes in *The Mythic Image*,

In the now ravished land of high Tibet there were maintained, up to the time of the Chinese Communist entry and desecration of the lamaseries, a number of Tantric Buddhist practices of the greatest psychological interest. The curious *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *Bardo Thödol*—"Book of Liberation Through Hearing (*thödol*) On The After-Death Plane (*bardo*)"—is perhaps the most important single document to have been brought to us from that last surviving sanctuary and treasury of the mystic lore of antiquity. It is an account, in detail of the ordeals to be experienced by a reincarnating soul during the seven weeks, or forty-nine days, between death and reentry into life. In the opinion of Jung, the book "belongs to that class of writings which not only are of interest to specialists in Mahayana Buddhism, but also, because of their deep humanity and still deeper insight into the secrets of the human psyche, make an especial appeal to the layman seeking to broaden his knowledge of life." "For

years,” he adds, “ever since it was first published, the *Bardo Thödol* has been my constant companion, and to it I owe not only many stimulating ideas and discoveries, but also many fundamental insights. (392).

That is quite a testimonial for a very ancient book intended for dead people. However, Campbell goes on to point out that according to the Lama Anagarika Govinda, the book was for the living as well, stating that it was also intended “for initiates, and for those who are seeking the spiritual path of liberation.”(Campbell 392).

According to legend, the Bardo was composed by Padmasambhava and written down by his wife, Yeshe Tsogyal (according to Changchub and Nyingpo, the first Tibetan ever to attain complete enlightenment) sometime in the eighth century C.E. However, the text was buried and not discovered again until the fourteenth century. The *Bardo* contains instructions on six types of liberation: liberation through hearing, wearing, seeing, tasting, touching and remembering. The liberation associated with the *Bardo* means that whoever comes into contact with the teaching receives enlightenment through the power of transmission contained in the text.

In his commentary on the text, Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche comments on the structure by saying,

The bardo experience can be seen in terms of the six realms of existence that we go through, the six realms of our psychological states. Then it can be seen in terms of the different deities who approach us, as they are described in the book. In the first week the peaceful deities, and in the last week the wrathful deities; there are five tarhagatas and the herukas, and the gauris who are messengers of the five tarhagatas, presenting themselves in all sorts of terrifying and revolting fashions. The details presented here are very much what happens in our daily living situation, they are not just psychedelic experiences or visions that appear after death. These experiences can be seen purely in terms of the living situation; that is what we are trying to work on.

In other words, the whole thing is based on another way of looking at the psychological picture of ourselves in terms of a practical meditative

situation. Nobody is going to save us, everything is left purely to the individual, the commitment to who we are. Gurus or spiritual friends might instigate that possibility, but fundamentally they have no function. (Fremantle 2).

It is perhaps advisable to throw in a cautionary note at this point. Making somewhat dogmatic statements like the above in a Buddhist context may be a bit ill advised. While the text can be read psychologically and archetypally, there are some indications that it can be read mythologically as well. There may be a flaw in the exclusive use of the psychological system.

In the text of the *Bardo*, shortly after death, the book explains,

If he was working on the visualization practice, one should read aloud the sadhana and description of his yidam, and remind him with these words: “O son of noble family, meditate on your yidam and do not be distracted. Concentrate intensely on your yidam. Visualize him as an appearance without substance of its own, like the moon in water; do not visualize him as having a solid form.” If he is an ordinary person, one should show him by saying: “Meditate on the Lord of Great Compassion.” (Fremantle 38).

The footnote on this passage says,

The yidam is a particular deity which represents the disciple’s innate enlightened nature, chosen by his guru to correspond to his own characteristics and the practice he is following. It is said that Avalokitesvara, the Lord of Great Compassion, is suitable for everyone, so “an ordinary person,” one who has not been given a specific yidam, should meditate on him. (Fremantle 38).

What may seem like a digression at this point, actually takes us deep into the heart of the mythological realm and perhaps out of the psychological. There are two paths to follow on this exploration. The first is the idea of miracle stories for Avalokitesvara and the second is the *Heart Sutra*. Before following either path, we need to discuss bodhisattvas.

According to Leighton, “Bodhisattvas are beings who are dedicated to the universal awakening, or enlightenment of everyone. They exist as guides and providers of succor to suffering beings, and offer everyone an approach to meaningful spiritual life.”

(26). Avalokitesvara, the most popular of bodhisattvas, is bodhisattva of compassion.

Avalokitesvara is so filled with compassion that she is often depicted with multiple heads, representing expanded consciousness of suffering. Like other bodhisattvas, Avalokitesvara has taken a vow to not personally settle into the salvation of final buddahood until she or he can assist all beings throughout the vast reaches of time and space to fully realize such liberated experience.

Interestingly, there are miracle stories regarding some of the bodhisattvas, particularly Avalokitesvara. While many of these stories of aid may only be legendary, they indicate an element of impact in the phenomenal world, which suggests that they are more than just mental representations or archetypes. As Leighton states, “Such ‘mysterious assistance’ (*myoshi* in Japanese) is one traditional doctrinal basis for understanding the stories of miraculous activities of bodhisattvas.” (197). Furthermore, he writes, “In this context of openness and trust, the cosmic, archetypal bodhisattvas (whether understood as internal or external, energies or entities) may be able to intervene and help alleviate suffering.” (197). From my perspective, once we enter into the realm of the mysterious by engaging phenomenologically ambiguous events (miracles), we have gone from the strictly psychological to the realm of mythology.

The second area indicating something more than just psychology at work here is the concept of the *Heart Sutra*. This sutra is a short poetic text that basically says, “Form is emptiness.” In his book *Old Path White Clouds*, Thich Nhat Hahn devotes chapter

sixty-five to the Buddhas teachings of emptiness from which the sutra is derived. (436-445). Ray sums up this teaching by stating,

The Heart Sutra is saying, in essence, “What form really is, is actually empty of whatever it is we may think of when we say ‘form.’” There is no such substantial and definitive thing as “form.” We may think that form exists in some substantial and objectifiable way, but this is a false projection upon reality; this is no different from the way in which we may imagine the existence of the “self,” which also is fallacious and finally empty projection.

The text continues, “Emptiness also is form.” This is to say that emptiness, the absence of objectifiability, is encountered within, in the very midst of our experience of what we think of as for. Further, emptiness is said to be the nature of ultimate reality. (93).

I would submit that through the vehicle of the bodhisattva, we have entered into the heart of the entire Buddhist mythic system. This entails dealing with the whole range of human experience through the experience of dying. If this is the case, then the *Bardo* functions as a Meta-Linguistic Interface that does more than merely suggest some psychological connections, it stimulates a whole Mytho-Catalytic experience, which is why perhaps, enlightenment is possible by just coming in contact with the text. Therefore, if it is a mythological text, we can see clearly how it serves the life of the world. According to many commentators, countless numbers of people are hungering for myth in their lives.

After the above digression, we need to actually return to the text of the *Bardo*. So far, we have examined only the first few moments of the journey into death. Each of the next stages is part of a journey toward re-birth. In a generalized sense, the journey of death could be characterized according to the mythic pattern of the hero’s journey: separation, adventure, and return, with the return being re-birth. We could explore each of these stages in greater detail, but that would extend beyond the scope of this paper.

The most interesting question from a psychological, mythological perspective is, how do we know that these things actually occur to people who are dying. As Rinpoche writes,

How do we know that these things actually happen to people who are dying? Has anyone come back from the grave and told us the experiences they went through? Those impressions are so strong that someone recently born should have memories of the period between death and birth; but then as we grow up we are indoctrinated by our parents and society, and we put ourselves into a different framework, so that the original deep impressions become faded except for occasional sudden glimpses. Even then we are so suspicious of such experiences and so afraid of losing any tangible ground in terms of living in this world, that any intangible kind of experience is treated half-heartedly or dismissed altogether. To look at this process from the point of view of what happens when we die seems like the study of a myth; we need some practical experience of this continual process of bardo.

There is the conflict between body and consciousness, and there is the continual experience of death and birth. There is also the experience of the bardo of dharmata, the luminosity, and of the bardo of becoming, of possible human parents or grounding situations. We also have the vision of the wrathful and peaceful divinities, which are happening constantly, at this very moment. If we are open and realistic enough to look at it in this way, then the actual experience of death and the bardo state will not be either purely a myth or an extraordinary shock, because we have already worked with it and become familiar with the whole thing.

In other words, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a valuable sourcebook of wisdom for the living and the dying. As such, it functions as a bridge between the worlds of life and death, but also functions as a bridge between the sacred world of Tibet and larger world of everyday human experience, even in the west. That such a document could continue to impact the entire world is quite and extraordinary wonder.

One wonders how the mythology of such a tiny country could have such impact on the world. Yet, small as it is, Tibet has captured the imagination of many people, as evidenced by the series of articles from the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69. Interestingly enough, the Dalai Lama is probably the second most widely recognized

religious figure on the planet, outside of the Pope. I wonder if the Dalai Lama would have that kind of exposure and ethical impact if he had remained on his throne in Tibet? One of the things I have learned about the “Way of Wonder” is that it is not always so wonderful.

In his book *Power vs. Force*, Hawkins speculates on the levels of power that can be balanced by persons of various levels of consciousness. Seemingly, the Dalai Lama may be balancing the consciousness of an enormous number of people on the planet, something which would be much more difficult if he were sequestered amid the mountains of Tibet. In a sense, I’m suggesting that mythic forces may be at work which have cast the Dalai Lama into exile, forced him onto the world stage and thereby exposed a great many people to the wisdom and mystery of Tibetan Buddhism. In a mythic sense, Tibet may be acting as a bodhisattva for the world. According to Feurstein,

In the *Bodhi-Carya Avatara* of Shantideva (early eighth century C.E.), the bodhisattva’s benign attitude is described as follows:

I am medicine for the sick. May I be their physician and their nurse until their sickness is gone.

Having dedicated myself to the happiness of all embodied beings, may they strike me! May they revile me! May they constantly cover me with dirt!

May they play with my body and laugh at or toy with me! Having given my body to them, why should I be concerned?

May those who denounce, injure, and mock me, as well as all others, share in enlightenment!

May I be a protector for those without protection, a guide for travelers, a boat, a bridge, a passage for those desiring the farther shore.

For all embodied beings, may I be a lamp for those in need of a lamp.
May I be a bed for those in need of a bed.
May I be a servant for those in need of a servant.

For all embodied beings, may I be a wish granting gem, a miraculous urn, a magical science, a panacea, a wish fulfilling tree, and a cow of plenty.

This is the embodiment of the *Heart Sutra* which is worth reflecting upon as we consider the desolation and isolation of the tiny land of Tibet. Perhaps some of the reflections on emptiness might be useful in a mythological sense, as Ray states,

In this way, the teachings on emptiness call into question every painful and depressing experience, as well as every pleasurable and inflating experience. These teachings are saying, 'Things are not what you think; if you think things are a certain way, take a closer look. You cannot make anything out of your experience.' The reason is that to make something out of your experience, you have to have some idea of what your experience is. Only then can it be of service to your ego. However, your experience is, really and truly, beyond words and concepts, it is empty. Therefore, you are left with nothing to make anything out of. Only when you remain in this open and indefinable space can the tantric journey continue. (97).

To the people of Tibet their country is a sacred cosmos. It is a land guarded by mighty gods and filled with centers of ritual and mystical power. Within this landscape, virtually every natural feature, the buildings, the people and the day to day activities are charged with religious significance. The mountains are the thrones of awe inspiring deities and the caves places of meditation. The wandering paths through the mountains suggest the path of enlightenment. By marking their landscape with banners, rock paintings, and votive offerings, Tibetans continually re-invent their world, reaffirming the lives of the ancient ones, sages and mystics whose heroic acts infused the universe with potent spiritual meaning.

Reflecting that sacred universe is the function of the mandala, a circular pattern within a rectangular framework. A mandala is a map of the Buddhist cosmos—the outer visible world, the forces that operate within it, and the deities, both great and small that preside over it. Every element, force and divinity in the universe corresponds to an aspect

of the human personality and physiology, and an awareness of those links between the inner and outer world can bring special insight and mystical ability. However, the final goal is not simply knowledge and power, but an unshakeable awareness of the absolute unity of all existence. Those who have realized this truth enjoy enlightenment—a state of equanimity, wisdom, and infinite compassion. Mandalas are aids in the pursuit of this state of enlightenment.

With the ascent of Tibetan Buddhism, we in the west have become aware of the power and beauty of the mandalas and the mythic universe they represent. Coupled with such documents as the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and the ongoing inspiration of the Dalai Lama, many people who have lost touch with the sacred in their own culture have in a sense re-connected with the mythic world and in a sense with their deeper selves. As Epstein writes,

The Dalai Lama begins every talk by describing how human beings yearn for happiness and how the only point of spiritual practice is to make that happiness a reality. The strategy of focusing the attention on the appearing “I” at the moments of narcissistic injury is but an advanced example of an approach that the Buddhist path makes extensive use of: that of consistently working toward more mature satisfactions. The antidote to the heedless desire of the Animal Realm, for example, is portrayed in the Wheel of Life by a book, and the antidote to the bottomless thirst of the Realm of the Hungry Ghosts is described as spiritual nourishment, both of which are potent symbols of sublimation. The ability to hold an emotion in transitional space of bare attention is always portrayed in Buddhist teachings as more satisfying and more complete than the strategies of disavowal or indulgence. (221).

These are profound messages for a time and world that seems to hunger for things spiritual, but do not seem to be nourished by the spiritual banquet of the past. Perhaps, through the mysterious forces that shape and create our lives, the mythologies of a tiny country, largely hidden until recently from the flow of history may provide a new

banquet of meaning and consciousness for our world. Perhaps, from this mythological perspective one can discern meaning within the suffering and experience of the people of Tibet. While ongoing efforts to liberate the people of that land from the tyranny to which they have been subjected should continue, one may yet feel a sense of gratitude that things have worked out the way they have. After all, suffering has a significant place in the world of Buddhism, according to the Four Noble Truths. While many deny such wisdom, the world continues to unfold according to truth long understood by the heroic people of Tibet. Like bodhisattvas, they suffer for the life of the world.

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