



# A Teaching on the Bardo

H.H. the 42<sup>nd</sup> Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche



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By the merit of this work, may Their Holinesses the Sakya Trichen and Sakya Trizin enjoy perfect health and very long lives, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.

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# CONTENT

A Teaching on the Bardo	1
Questions and Answers	16

## A Teaching on the Bardo

**W**e experience different states: birth, death, and bardo. *Bardo* means “intermediates state” and refers to the state between death and birth.

Generally speaking, all composite factors are impermanent. In other words, all things that depend on their own causes and conditions to develop are called composite factors or compounded things, and are impermanent. For instance, our body is impermanent because it is made of a ‘pile’ of many particles; the parts and particles are bound together to form this human body. There are many human body parts, such as head, hand, and feet. We can divide a hand into a palm, five fingers, and so on. A finger can be further broken down to a fingernail, flesh, skin, and so on. Likewise, every small part of the body can be further broken down into more parts and particles. Hence, the human body, just like all other compounded things, are impermanent.

Everyone born in this world will end in death. There is no one born in this world who will never die. We have no doubts about this. It is certain that whoever will be born in this world will die because we do not have the power to live forever. We do not have a choice to stay forever. Many people have lots of plans and projects, yet before completing them may die unexpectedly, leaving projects incomplete. People die whether they have finished their projects or not. Moreover, it is certain that we will die because our human body is very fragile. If even steel skyscrapers can be destroyed, then there is no need to mention our body that is not as hard as iron and is more fragile.

Further, as we can all see there are many ways or many causes and conditions that can take away this very dear life of ours. External causes and conditions such as an accident can cause a person to die. Likewise, internal obstacles and conditions such as sicknesses may cause one to die. Overall, it is certain that we all will die. We are aware that the human life span has no certainty. We cannot say all humans will live up to one hundred years, and that they will not die before that. We can see people dying before living up to one hundred years old; in fact, there are some who die while in their mother's womb. There are those who die right at birth, while some die in their teenage years, twenties, thirties, forties, and so forth.



Human beings die at different ages. There is no certain age that everyone will live to because life is impermanent. Therefore, we cannot say that people will live until they become old; we cannot say we will not die soon; we cannot say people will not die because they are young. We have seen many young people die before their parents. We also cannot claim that people who are healthy will not die. This is not true because some who are very sick and are bound in bed live for years before they die, while those who are very fit and healthy die suddenly, either due to a hidden sickness or to external conditions.

Thus, as we observe and experience, being young and healthy are not the right reasons to believe that people will not die soon. In the teachings it is said that whether tomorrow or the next life will come first is uncertain.<sup>[1]</sup> Therefore, we should make efforts for a better next life rather than just putting efforts into only this present life.

No matter how much wealth we have, no matter how powerful we are, no matter how famous we are, no matter how many supporters we have, these will not help us at the time of death. We cannot evade death by using our fame, power, wealth, or by showing our supporters. At the time of death, these mundane things are not going to help us.

When a dying person is surrounded by close family members, relatives, and friends, these people cannot help the dying person by prolonging his or her life or reducing the pain and suffering of death. Instead, the close ones may even cause more suffering and mental pain to the dying person because they feel strong emotions and express them with crying or wailing in sadness. These negative emotions will cause the dying person to feel sadder and experience more pain and suffering in their mind.

Since mundane things will not help us at the time of death, it is important not to have attachment to this life—not to have attachment to your close ones, belongings, supporters, and so on. When one has strong attachments at the time of death, it will obstruct one's departure. Whether one has attachments or not, one needs to depart, and the mind needs to separate from the body. There is no other choice. Therefore, when one's mind is separated from the body, it is far better to have no attachment so that the process of departing will be smoother and better, and thus one will have better results in one's next life. For example, if a bird's leg is tied to a stone, it will obstruct the bird from flying freely in the sky. Similarly, having attachment to our close ones, properties, or any mundane things will obstruct our ability to go freely to the next life. Further, attachments will also cause more suffering because having an attachment at the time of death is

a negative thought, and negative thoughts always cause more suffering; therefore it is important to be free of attachments.

In addition, at the time of death, it is important for the person to have a peaceful and calm mind. During this time, as a Buddhist, we should supplicate to our guru and the Triple Gem. It is said that the thoughts we have at the time of death are very important. Even though one may be a decent practitioner, at the time of death, if one dies in anger, this may spoil your whole life's practice. Even though one may not be a decent practitioner, at the time of death, if one abstains from all negative thoughts and only possesses positive thoughts such as supplicating to the guru, deities, buddhas, and bodhisattvas, and performing certain practices at the time of death, while doing this, if one dies, then it is a good sign. Because of this, the person will have better results in their next life.

It is essential to have positive thoughts at the time of death. It will not help if one has strong attachments to family members, close ones, materials, or properties because one does not have power to bring it with them to the next life. One will have to leave all our loved ones and everything we owned behind, including this very dear body, which has been associated with one's mind since birth until death. The physical body will be disposed of by burying it, by throwing it in the water, by cremating it, and so on.

However, one cannot dispose of one's mind like one disposes of the physical body.

So, this physical body but not the mind can be disposed of. The mind will continue although the mind itself is impermanent, and it changes moment by moment—the continuity of the mind will be maintained from this life to the next. For example, when we are young, we have the mind and when we become old, we still have this mind, but this mind is not the same as the mind we had earlier. Rather, it is linked over time through continuity. In fact, the mind changes moment by moment, but due to this continuity of mind, we can remember some of what we have done when we were young. It does not mean this is the same mind we had when we were young; it means that although the actual mind changes momentarily, we have the same continuity of mind and can remember our past, such as what we have done a year ago.

Death means the separation of the body and mind. When the mind is separated from the body, it means that one has died. After that, this mind will continue and will go to an unknown destination, depending on one's karma and action. Our action is the main cause of where we are going to take rebirth in our next life.

As a Buddhist, we can say that the sole protection and refuge is our Dharma practice or positive thoughts at the time of death.

When one dies, one will enter the bardo state, the state between death and birth. Most people will enter the state of bardo after death, except for two types of persons: first, those who are very advanced in practice, who immediately as the consciousness departs the body enter a buddha field or pure realm. Second, those who have very heavy negative karma will go directly to the lower realms—animal realm, hungry ghost realm, and hell realm—right after dying.

In the bardo or intermediate state, bardo beings have a physical body equipped with all the faculties of a body, but unlike our human body, this physical body is not tangible—it is in the nature of light or a rainbow. Generally speaking, the shape of a bardo being resembles the body the being is going to obtain in the next life. Bardo beings are without clothes; their bodies are in the nature of light. They cannot eat tangible or solid food. They can consume only the smell of food. Hence, “bardo beings” are also called “scent eaters.” Therefore, many Buddhists will offer smell, through the practice of the *sur* offering, to bardo beings. Since a bardo being’s body is in the nature of light, ordinary beings like us cannot see bardo beings. Bardo beings can see each other. Highly realized beings or highly realized masters, however, can see bardo beings. I once heard a story: When one of the great masters’ attendants passed away, this great master could actually

see that the attendant was in the bardo state. Sometimes this master would say: “Oh, don’t do this, don’t do that.” He was advising his attendant who was in the bardo state. Unlike us, highly realized masters can see bardo beings and give them advice.

Bardo beings can see us. They can come to our place although we cannot see them. It is important for the close family members who are dealing with the deceased’s property or belongings to understand this. If one uses these belongings in a proper way, this bardo being will be happy. However, if one uses these belongings in a wrong way, then the bardo beings will know how the close ones are using his or her belongings. Since bardo beings are in the presence of nature of light, they have contaminated clairvoyance; they know what their relatives are doing and how the masters and Saṅgha members are doing prayers for them. When one does good things or performs proper rituals for them, the bardo being will be benefited. Conversely, if proper rituals are not performed, or close family members use the deceased’s belongings in an improper way, the bardo being will know and get sad and angry, and thus will only cause more suffering for the bardo being.

Since the bodies of bardo beings are in the nature of light, they have the power to go anywhere, any time. Just by having a wish

or thought to go somewhere, the bardo being will reach the destination instantly, even if it is thousands of miles away. Solid things such as walls or mountains cannot obstruct bardo beings. They can go through walls and mountains. They will not fall down from the cliffs or fall into wells.

Bardo beings can see their family members and relatives. For this reason, they will go to their loved ones and speak to them. However, since we ordinary beings are not able to see or hear them, even though they are talking to us, we are not able to reply to them. Bardo beings will not experience sunrise, moonrise, and so on. Since a bardo being's body is in the nature of light, they will not have a shadow and they will not leave footprints on the ground they walk on.

Bardo beings experience a state of uncertainty. They suffer from the uncertainties of place, attitude, food, friends, refuge, and mental state. For example, bardo beings can go anywhere, any place, and this is the uncertainty of place. It is said that a bardo being's mind is seven times clearer than the mind of ordinary human beings. Therefore, if we can practice during our time in the bardo, then that practice will be clearer and better.

To practice in the bardo, we—every one of us—must train from now on. How can we train ourselves? At present, we should think

that we are in the bardo state, especially when there is a sudden sound, or when we are excited or shocked. At that moment we need to remember our guru, the Triple Gem, and our teachings and practices. This will really help us to remember our guru, the Triple Gem, and practices when we are in bardo. If we can perform practices in the bardo state, it will be more meritorious, helpful, and beneficial.

It is important to know there is a bardo and that bardo beings are clever because they have clairvoyance. From a Buddhist perspective, when people die, although it would be difficult for many, we do our best to not feel sad or show our emotions. Because when we show our emotions—such as crying, wailing, feeling sad, and so on—this can be seen by bardo beings. They will know we are experiencing sadness and suffering because of their departure. At the beginning, bardo beings will not know they have died. They will go to their own home, trying to take food from their kitchen. Although they can see the dining table, no one would give them food, no one would notice their presence. Only then will the bardo being realize: “Oh, I’m dead, I’m no longer with my family.”

So bardo beings can see us and understand what we are doing for them. If we feel sad due to the departure of a deceased being, this being will feel sadder seeing our negative emotions and suffering.



We should not be worried for the deceased because worries and sadness will not bring the deceased back alive. Rather, this will bring more suffering to them. Instead of feeling sad and emotional, we should practice more virtue and accumulate merit, and dedicate oneself along with sentient beings to attain buddhahood. By doing this, not only can we accumulate merit, more important, we can help the bardo being.

To do a proper dedication, we should not dedicate our merit to only one deceased being. Dedicating our merit to only one person is not a Mahāyāna practice, in which practices are not performed merely for a person. Instead, all Mahāyāna practices including dedication are performed for all sentient beings without any exception. Therefore, it is not right to dedicate our merit to just one person. We can dedicate our merit to the deceased as well as to all sentient beings to attain buddhahood. Then our dedication becomes a proper dedication.

If one is not a good practitioner, one will feel fearful when we are in the bardo. Because in the bardo, fearful sound such as the sound of the collapsing of a solid mountain, an earthquake, and a tsunami will be heard. Not only do the bardo beings feel that they are sinking in the water, but they also feel that they are being swept away by the strong waves. When the sound of the mountain collapsing is heard, bardo beings feel that they are sinking in the

ground and being suppressed by the earth. These are the absorptions of the first two elements: water and earth.

Bardo beings hear the sound of a blazing forest fire. They also feel their body being scorched by the fire. Then, the sound of strong wind—not a gentle breeze, but the sound of tornados and hurricanes—is heard. Bardo beings feel that they are being carried away by the strong wind. They also feel that they are falling down a cliff. These four sounds of elements are called the four fearful sounds that bardo beings hear in the bardo.

For nonpractitioners or those who are not good in their practice, when they hear fearful sounds or have the sensation of falling down a cliff, they will feel more scared and frightened. But for good practitioners, no matter how dramatic the sound they hear, they can still remember their guru and practice; their practice will not be disturbed by these four fearful sounds and other fearful factors.

Therefore, it is essential to have a calm mind. To have a calm mind when in the state of the bardo, it is important to first have a calm mind at the time of death. When one dies while practicing Dharma—while one is possessing loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta, and other positive thoughts—then naturally one’s mind will be more peaceful in the bardo. When your mind is peaceful, you will remember to practice the Dharma in the bardo.



It is vital to know the situation of the bardo state. Further, it is important for all of us to do a proper practice that refers to genuine practice with sincere thoughts, wish, and motivation. No matter who we are, we have to experience the bardo state. When we face the situation of the bardo state, having a strong mind that is sealed with our practice is extremely important. If our mind is prepared and sealed with our practice, then our tranquility and peaceful mind will not be disturbed in the bardo state. In such a condition, we are able to perform more practices and gain clear realization. This is very important, and we have to keep this in mind.

The bardo mind or consciousness will enter a fertilized egg of the future parents and then travel to the mother's womb. From then onward the being starts their next life. The time one is conceived in the mother's womb is the time when one begins one's next life. We can say this is a cyclic existence because it never ends. One takes birth after birth and death after birth. The cycle just goes round and round, hence cyclic existence.

Overall, in the bardo, it is important to have good practice, especially to have right motivation, sincere faith, and devotion in one's guru, deity, Triple Gem, and Dharma practices. This is very important to know. As I mentioned earlier, bardo beings do not

have a physical body, but they have a body in the nature of light. Their body is like a rainbow and not tangible. One cannot feel it with naked hands.

Notes:

[1] “Since there is no certainty whether tomorrow or the next life will come first, it is certainly right to make efforts now for the sake of the next life, instead of for the sake of tomorrow.” translated by Iyer R. in *The Dhammapada with the Udānavarga* (London: Concord Grove Press, 1986).

## Questions and Answers

*Question:* Rinpoche, some bardo beings are able to harm, disrupt, or cause suffering to living beings. Since bardo beings do not have physical bodies that we can see, how do they have the power to harm us? How can we protect ourselves from such harm?

*Answer:* As I said earlier, if a being dies harboring anger, most probably they will have strong negative thoughts in the bardo state. Due to these strong negative thoughts, it influences the bardo being to harm others. Sometimes they harm others who are not close to them, such as their enemies that were made when they were alive, due to grudges. They are harboring thoughts of revenge against the so-called enemies that they can still remember even after death. The negative thoughts or defilements lead them to harm others through negative power.

To protect oneself and to avoid such obstacles, as a Buddhist, it is important to have sincere faith and devotion to the Triple Gem.

Although there are rituals for protection, especially of the Vajrayāna tradition, from the Mahāyāna point of view we do not necessarily need to practice these rituals if we have sincere faith and devotion in the Triple Gem. It is also true that when you have a genuinely enlightened mind—wishing and engaging enlightened mind—this will protect you from obstacles, all types of obstacles, including the ones created by the bardo beings. So, it is essential for us to take refuge and develop the enlightened mind; it can protect us from obstacles.

Some followers of the Buddha want to seek “higher” teachings such as the uncommon esoteric tantric teachings, and so forth. Often, they disregard the fundamental teachings, and this is not right. Because if we know how to practice refuge and enlightened mind properly, then these practices become profound protectors for us. However, if one tries to practice the so-called “higher” or uncommon teachings, yet if one does not know how to practice properly, then one’s practice will not be effective. Therefore, whether our practice is profound or not depends on how we practice the teachings.

*Question:* How long does the bardo state last?

*Answer:* Generally speaking, the bardo state lasts seven weeks. Forty-nine days after passing, the next life of the deceased starts. This timeframe is very general, however; there are many exceptions. It depends on the individual. Good practitioners may not need to remain for seven weeks to take rebirth. If the beings have lots of negative thoughts, actions, and propensities, they may remain in the bardo for years. So, it depends on the individual. But normally, we say it takes seven weeks. In our culture, when people die, we perform purification rituals for seven weeks. If we have time and if necessary, we may perform the ritual every day for seven weeks.



*Question:* What practice we could do to help friends and relatives who are dying?

*Answer:* Actually, all Dharma practices can help them. There are special rituals for the deceased, such as the Mahāvairocana ritual for the deceased, Avalokiteśvara ritual for the deceased, and other deity rituals for the deceased. We should do such rituals and dedicate to them. As I said before, we should use their belongings and properties in a positive way, so that they'll not suffer disappointment. When they are satisfied with the conduct of the family members, they will feel content, which will help them not to experience more suffering—this is one way to proceed, the mundane way to help the deceased. Another way is to do Dharma practice and rituals—the spiritual way to assist. So, there are two ways to help them: a mundane way and a spiritual way.

*Question:* For those beings who do not wish to share their belongings with other family members, is it possible to later share these in the family, or do we have to follow the instruction of the deceased?

*Answer:* I think it depends on the individual. Satisfying the deceased may not be positive. Sometimes the deceased has very strong negative thoughts; sometimes they may have plots of not sharing their belongings with others and also of harming others. If this is the case, I think it is legitimate for family members not to follow the deceased's demands. He or she did not give you good advice; instead, they gave you bad instructions. We do not have to follow bad instructions. If we do follow these demands, we will be engaging in negative actions. Generally speaking, we need to use the deceased being's belongings in a positive way, so that it can help the deceased, even though it may not necessarily accord with the deceased's wishes.





- His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, is the eldest son of His Holiness the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin). Renowned for his erudition and the clarity of his teachings, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin is regarded as one of the most highly qualified lineage holders in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He belongs to the noble Khön family, whose successive generations have provided an unbroken lineage of outstanding Buddhist masters.

Since his youth, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin has received an ocean of sutra and tantra teachings, empowerments, transmissions, and pith instructions from His Holiness the Sakya Trichen, as well as many other learned and accomplished masters. After years of rigorous philosophy studies at Sakya College in India, he was awarded the kachupa degree. And starting from the age of twelve, he has completed numerous meditation retreats, including the Hevajra retreat. With utmost humility, he travels extensively to bestow teachings and empowerments at the request of students across the globe.



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