

BOOK REVIEW

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Death, Intermediate State, and Rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism, by Lati Rinbochay and Jeffrey Hopkins. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Press, 1985, 86 pp., \$6.95 (pb)

The 1970s were a period of serious interest in Tibetan *tantra* and the *Book of the Dead*, and Jeffrey Hopkins is one of the leading translators and expositors of these interests to America. The renewed interest in Tibetan problems in 1988, along with the fact that this book has been republished (the original having been printed in 1979), warrant taking another look at this slim but compressed volume. In *Death, Intermediate State, and Rebirth*, Hopkins has made available to the lay reader a rare text of potential importance for the understanding of the Tibetan traditions about death and afterlife.

The origins of the book first need to be placed in context. Like so much of Sino-Tibetan Buddhism, which claims ancient heritage and ancestry, this book traces its roots back to Indian patriarchs of Mahayana Buddhism: Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu. Also common to the Buddhist tradition is the fact that it is a commentary upon a commentary upon a commentary. Specifically, it is a commentary by 20th-century scholars Lati Rinbochay and Jeffrey Hopkins (although it is never made clear which one is writing what) upon an 18th-century text on the *Three Basic Bodies*, by the Yellow-hat (dGe-lugs-pa) monk Yang-jen-ga-way-lo-dro. Yang-jen-ga-way-lo-dro, in turn, wrote the text as a commentary and exposition to illuminate texts by Tsong-ka-pa, the

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15th-century founder of the dGe-lugs-pa order. Tsong-ka-pa's texts, in turn, were based on the 11th-century Indian monk Atisa's renderings of Vasubandhu's (4th-century) and Nagarjuna's (2nd-century) commentaries on the Abhidharma.

This long lineage is intended neither as praise nor criticism, but simply to set in context the background of the text. Nor is it necessarily a criticism that the Hopkin-Rinbochay commentary bears but distant resemblance to original Abhidharma doctrine, for it is a widely accepted principle in Buddhist tradition that the commentators enrich and advance the teachings over time, and that later texts often explicate what the Buddha and his followers had not discussed publicly. The author and his method of commentary presuppose substantial familiarity with works on Tibetan Buddhism for a full understanding of the text. Through dual prefaces, and by his own frequent interpolations and footnotes, Hopkins attempts to make clear some of the background and underlying assumptions the text presupposes.

In a format that is also typical of Tibetan and Sanskrit texts, the text itself is a highly structured, almost epigrammatic outline of rigorous parallelism and dense description. This density of description may frustrate a reader who is seeking a quick overview of Tibetan teachings, for the thin spine of the book belies the very broad scope of its material.

Where *Death, Intermediate State, and Rebirth* makes its greatest contribution is not to an understanding of the *Bardo*, or state between incarnations, which has already been much discussed in other books like those by Lauf (1976, 1977) and Evans-Wentz (1927, 1935). Rather, it is in the fact that this text covers in substantial detail the process of dying itself, and the physiological-psychological symptoms or experiences indicative of each stage of that transition. *Death, Intermediate State, and Rebirth* recognizes from the outset that death is not an instantaneous occurrence, such as when the breath stops or the brain no longer registers. Rather, death is seen as a long process taking hours or even days, during which a variety of sensations and experiences accompany each successive stage of the "dissolution" of the human personality from its bodily habitation (pp. 18ff). In particular, the eight stages of death are accompanied by the following experiences respectively:

1. Shrinking of the limbs, the impression of sinking, and seeing a cloud or mirage.
2. Cessation of hearing, drying of the mouth, and an appearance of blue billowing smoke.

3. Cessation of smell, cooling of the body, and an appearance "like fireflies."
4. Cessation of taste, end of breath and movement, and vision as of a sputtering butter-lamp.
5. Cessation of all conceptions, and vision of vacuous empty whiteness like moonlight.
6. Energy moving from the sexual organ to the heart, and a red-orange appearance arising.
7. Heart energy lost, cessation of dualism, and vision of radiant black vacuity like autumn night.
8. Blood or phlegm leaving the nose or sexual organ and an appearance of clear light.

Now it is not completely explicit whether this is a descriptive or prescriptive account; in other words, whether this is taken to be a true description of what everyone necessarily experiences during the death process, or whether we are to understand that *most people should* pass through some such stages. There seems room for broad interpretation and exception in the commentary, and of course the account presupposes people who are dying "natural" deaths, not in accidents, seizures, or sudden explosions. The interesting point of this account, however, is that it yields a "chronology" of death at least potentially capable of empirical verification or falsification. Insofar as certain of the descriptors are visible by third-party observers, we may certainly ask, for example, whether it is in fact the case that drying of the mouth precedes cooling of the body, which in turn precedes stopping of breath. Secondly, we might use the techniques already begun by so many NDE research groups—interviewing those who have "returned" from death or its brink—to ask whether in fact there were a sequence of lights, or colors, and sensations that in any way parallel the list of subjective sensations that *Death, Intermediate State, and Rebirth* would predict. This challenge alone seems to be one valuable derivative from this book. The description also leaves ample room for possible reconciliation with the sorts of OBE and NDE accounts common from near-death experiencers today.

However, there are three respects in which the accounts of this book are somewhat hard to understand: mythical, linguistic, and categorical. Of course, these are not the faults of the translators, but they may pose obstacles to the unprepared reader. The first problem is that these Buddhist tests, like the Judaeo-Christian Bible, contain mythological accounts of events that seem in principle incapable of proving true. Take the following cosmology:

During the first aeon [after formation of this world system], the humans of this world had seven features—spontaneous birth, an immeasurable life-span, all sense faculties, a body pervaded by its own light, adornment with similitudes of the major and minor marks [of a Buddha], sustenance by the food of joy without eating coarse food, and magically flying in the sky. However, due to activation of predispositions established by attachment to food, they ate coarse sustenance. Then, when the unrefined part of the food turned into faeces and urine, the male and female organs protruded as openings for excretion. Two who possessed predispositions established by copulation in former [lives] became attached to each other and, in dependence on their lying together, a sentient being formed in the womb. Through these steps, birth from a womb came to be. (p. 29)

Some people may find the above account more interesting than the one in Genesis, and others find it less imaginative. Just as the fundamentalists' insistence on the literal truth of Genesis detracts from the credibility of their entire view of the Bible, so a too-doctrinaire interpretation of this old Buddhist folk-cosmology tends to cheapen the germs of truth in the rest of the accounts of death and the intermediate state. Such mythological/cosmological interludes are not philosophically important to the truth of the discussion of death and dying, and if anything, tend to detract from it. As scholars do not let criticisms of Genesis infect their appreciation of Acts, so we should not let our natural incredulity at such Tibetan mythologies obscure the importance of the testable hypotheses found in other sections of the text.

A second difficulty in understanding the text lies in the linguistic problems of metaphors in translation. The descriptions of consciousness in post-mortem states are replete in metaphor, but they are not all the sorts of metaphors that are intuitively acceptable to a modern Western mind. The mind is continually analogized to a rider, and the "winds" that permeate the body are said to be akin to its "mount." Yet in what sense there even exist "winds" within the body, and what possible meaning could be attached to a "mind" "mounting" them escapes common English intuition. While the light or sparks from a butter-lamp may be imaginable, however distant from the everyday life of a modern English-speaking reader, the four empties ("empty, very empty, great empty, and all empty") again transcend common daily experience and English usage, and therefore seem unclear if not meaningless. There are a number of cases where the analogies or metaphors of consciousness and life in the body simply run counter-intuitive to a modern English world-view. I would not go so far as to thereupon pronounce them all false or meaningless, nor would I fault Hopkins in his literal translation, but one might wish that more intuitively understandable English explanations had been included.

A third difficulty with ancient Sanskrit and Tibetan texts again raises its head in this one: the problems of disanalogous categories and unnecessary categories.

The problem of disanalogous categories can be seen in the example of the 80 conceptions, which are divided in turn into 33 of white appearance, 40 of red increase, and 7 of radiant black near-attainment. If we look at some of the 40 conceptions, we see that they include: Great Joy, Middling Joy, and Small Joy; Embracing, Kissing, Sucking; Stability, Effort, Pride; Virtue and Untruth, etc. Now in English usage, these do not refer to the same sorts of things at all. Some are abstract and some are concrete; some apply to personal action, others to propositions, and others to character; some that seem gradable are ungraded, and some that seem not very intuitively gradable, are graded here. It is not clear whether this is primarily a problem of translation—that these things are really all on the same level of abstraction in Tibetan, and we simply lack suitable English to make their analogous nature clear—or primarily a problem of category confusion even in the original. In either case, their parallel inclusion does not make things any easier for the English reader.

The problem of unnecessary categories is clearly one of the original text(s) and not of the translators. Even more than the ancient Pythagoreans, Sanskrit and Tibetan authors love to make long and parallel lists of categories. These sometimes served as mnemonic devices; perhaps they also gave a sense of fullness or completeness to a system of thought, as when a mathematician establishes a particularly elegant proof. From an Anglo-American point of view, however, such categorization leads to the filling in of tables of parallel attributes with words and ideas that are based less on empirical observation than upon some classical scholar's notion of what would constitute a complete and elegant system. The charts on pages 16–18 and 33–34 make this particularly clear—and particularly suspect. It is rare in nature that the same categories can be filled out analogously to describe any two different organisms or stages of experience. When the Tibetan categories of post-mortem experience fall into neat graph-like precision, therefore, rather than increasing our confidence in the absolute symmetry of universal experience, they rather raise our suspicions that perhaps the experiential accounts have been forced into too neat a mold—just as some modern near-death researchers would like to find the same pattern in everyone's NDE, even though there is in fact a tremendous range of disanalogous experiences reported.

Nonetheless, this is a text very much worth having available in English. At the very least, it sheds further psychological and anthropologic light on the Tibetan cosmology and world-view. It may in fact

provide important insights about the nature of the dying and post-mortem process—or at least stimulate future researchers to dedicate much-needed attention to this area of investigation. In any case, we may applaud Hopkins' continuing dedication to familiarizing the English-speaking public with the vast and inadequately understood traditions of Tibetan Buddhist death and afterlife.

References

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