

What happens when I die?

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“For anything that men can tell, death may be the greatest good that can happen to them” – Socrates

Published by David Tuffley

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A. [What happens when I die?](#)

There is a natural tendency in people to shy away from the reality of death. Yet this refusal to acknowledge the impermanence of our earthly existence creates a deep anxiety that inhibits a person's spiritual progress. Put another way, if we are to progress on the spiritual path, it is necessary to fully accept the impermanence of life and the certainty of death.

The ego is terrified by the thought of death, since it knows that it will cease to exist when that time comes. As a self-aware living entity, the ego wants more life; it seeks to survive this threat. But the ego knows, deep down, that there is no avoiding death, so the it deals with the inevitability of death by avoiding the issue.

By facing the reality of death, we are addressing the root fear of all fears. By ridding ourselves of that fear, we are able to live fearlessly without the normal requirement for security and permanence that holds most people firmly in its thrall.

The Buddha left detailed teachings on what happens to a person when they die. This is tremendously helpful for a person seeking liberation from the fear of death.

A.1. [The Tibetan Book of the Dead](#)

More correctly known as the *Bardo Thodol* (or Liberation through Hearing), the Tibetan Book of the Dead in the Buddhist tradition is a detailed description of what one's consciousness experiences in the period between death and rebirth.

The *Bardo Thodol* is an excellent guide to what happens to your consciousness after your physical body dies. Remarkable for its clarity, the *Bardo Thodol* has been used to good effect in Buddhism for many centuries since its inception in the 8th Century BCE. You can use it to help overcome your fear of death, and to prepare yourself for that inevitability.

The book is divided into three Bardos, or distinct stages:

Chikai Bardo (concerning the moment of death) in which a person is suddenly conscious of the *luminous splendour of the colourless light of emptiness*. This light is who you are at the core of your microcosmic self, and it is the same light that permeates the entire macrocosm. If you are not too attached to worldly things, your essence will naturally seek to merge back with the greater whole. In popular culture it is "The Light" that that is spoken of by people returning from near death experiences.

Chonyid Bardo (concerning the experience of reality) in which a person encounters various manifestations of the Holy Ones (Buddha, or Christ or other divine icon). The form these take is determined by your cultural background.

Sidpa Bardo (concerning the experience of rebirth) in which the sensual attachments that a person is most given to in life impels them to seek more of the same (sex, food, drink etc) in a new physical body. Liberation from rebirth requires that you rid yourself of these attachments before you die, since you will not be ready and able if you wait until after.

A.1.1. The Moment of Death

At the moment of death, with great suddenness, you find yourself immersed in a stunningly bright light (the *luminous splendour of the colourless light of emptiness*). The intensity and suddenness of this experience, if you do not expect it or know what is happening, will make you want to escape in fear.

This radiance is your first opportunity for Liberation from re-birth. Stay calm and recognize the light as the ultimate Reality of what you are and what the Universe is. If you remain fully conscious and let go of all thoughts of yourself as a separate egoic identity with attachment to all manner of worldly things, then you can achieve immediate Liberation (from reincarnation). All of this happens within moments of death.

If you have not come to understand the process of dying, then this first opportunity is likely to pass very quickly. Most people will be so shocked and disoriented that they lose consciousness in the way that a terrified person might faint.

If you reacted fearfully at the moment of death to the clear light of pure consciousness, you soon find yourself awake in a dream-like world. What you experience here depends on your state of mind at time of death. You naturally gravitate to experiences in this Bardo that are qualitatively similar to those you had in life. If you die peacefully, your experiences in the second Bardo will reflect this. If you die confused, angry, lustful, envious etc, then this will also be the reality of what you experience in this second Bardo.

You become aware of having a subtle body that has the same or enhanced sensory capabilities that you had in life, as well as the same attachments to various worldly things and people. Your body seems real, but it is no more than a resonating echo of who you had been before; only an illusion.

During this stage, if you can free yourself from the desire to dwell in the sensory experiences of your former life, another chance for Liberation presents itself. The key ingredient for this is to have no attachment to anything. Be willing to let it all go. Of course, this will be difficult for the unprepared, as difficult as it would have been in life to simply give everything away, or see it taken away from you in a disaster. When a tornado takes someone's house, and a News reporter is asking the home-owner how they feel as they stand beside the bare slab, you never hear the person say, *oh well, it was just a house, at least I am still alive*. You must be similarly prepared to let your old life go if you are to achieve Liberation from re-birth.

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