

These prints are centered around the research of one ancient text, the *Bardo Thodol* or *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Written in the 8th century, this book outlines in great detail the events that follow death and the mechanics of reincarnation. Contrary to Western belief, the soul is eternal and unchanging, and the body is a temporary home. I read selections of this book and found that it felt strangely relevant to a death I experienced somewhat recently. The connection between the *Bardo Thodol* and my personal experience of losing my grandmother not only helped me process a painful event, it changed my entire view of dying and my place in my own body.

Because these ideas feel far too big to inspire one piece of art, I chose to explore a few aspects by researching the life cycle of metamorphic rocks. These rocks melt down to create new rocks while retaining their mineral content. This is the perfect metaphor for the soul inhabiting new forms while retaining its basic qualities. I created three etching plates of rocks and printed each four times. After generating twelve total prints, I painted over nine of them using acrylic paint and colored pencil. Etching is an old process that has been passed down; something about the clean borders of the prints seem firm. Here, I juxtapose the hard lines with fluid and abstract patterns. The fragile abstract shapes move across the prints to represent the unbound pages of the *Bardo Thodol*. As they wash over the rocks, they blur the lines underneath, making the individual rocks become one form. I kept some of the tone and form of the rocks visible to suggest that the minerals might move into a new form, but their previous state leaves a mark, creating layers of history. This series represents the cycle of minerals in sequential progression from right to left.

I struggle to think of life as fluid, to allow changes to occur that I may or may not have control over. The *Bardo Thodol* helped me recognize that transition, whether during or after life, is natural and manageable. The purpose of this work is to help others grapple with thoughts about their own mortality and mutability.

Evie F.
New York

Read This to the Newly Deceased

Eve F.



How do we manage the great unknown of dying? When a family member passes, we assume that they are gone forever, that their traits and thoughts are lost and cannot be found again. But according to the Bardo Thödol, an ancient Tibetan-Buddhist text that outlines in great detail the events that follow death, the consciousness is eternal and is passed onto a new existence. The body is a temporary home for the consciousness. No effort is made, in Tibetan tradition, to preserve the body after death; in fact, great effort is often put into hastening its decomposition. Yet in Western culture, we obsess over preserving and disinfecting the body. We try our best to stop natural decay. Why? These efforts are no match for natural processes.

This paper addresses the purpose of the Bardo Thödol, as well as its connection to my own experience with death and the process of dying.

“We shared the same values, Alison and I, and towards the end we both came to a sort of common ground, about family and how a family should be. We agreed that family was most important. So I want to give to the four corners of our family a small symbol of that value. These rocks are rare because they have a white band that not only goes all the way around them, but the band connects in a continuous loop. These were hard to find. Just hang onto them.” My dad rubbed the stones as he said this. They are a faded black color, like the hot stones that are in ads for hotel massages. But they have, like my dad said and takes great pride in, white stripes. He gave them to my mom, my aunt, my sort-of-aunt Mia, and kept one for himself, polishing it in his clumsy hands. They were found among piles of smooth, flattish stones that line the beaches of Block Island, stacked in piles by the thousands below big grassy cliffs. Most of those stones are grayish, rarely the faded jet black that these are. I can picture my dad spotting each stone, running them under the tide to see if they had those rare white bands.

My grandmother always said that if you give one of these stones, she called them Eternity Rocks, to another person, you would be connected to them in some way for the rest of your life.

According to Tibetan Buddhist belief, the soul of a deceased person lingers in the human realm for forty-nine days after the body dies. On top of that, the soul has the ability to hear. From my understanding, it remains in the body, listening to the sounds of mourning, prayer and, most importantly, to the words of a book called the *Bardo Thödol*. This book is a set of prayers and instructions for the consciousness¹ to help it through the “bardos” after death. Written by Phadmasambhava in the 8th century, it consists of unbound pages printed from hand-carved wood blocks, and is made to be read out loud to this lingering soul during the forty-nine day period. The body is kept, unpreserved, in the home, usually lying in a bed. Nothing is done to stop natural decay. After he finished the book, he buried it in Tibet and it was not discovered until the 14th century. It describes the body, whether human or otherwise, as a temporary home for the immortal consciousness. The Bardo Thödol encourages the consciousness to recognize “Immediately upon separation from this compounded body of flesh and blood ... [this body] to be like a transient illusion.”² This home isn’t warm and safe but rather referred to as “the heavy body of flesh and blood and bones.”³ It is more of an inconvenience than a safe haven. In contrast, the soul is a kind of abstract form, it does not have a clear definition in Buddhism. It is only vaguely tied to Karma, though to me that only makes things more confusing. By that definition, we are only the amalgamation of our good and bad deeds, which seems too binding to me. I think that our soul informs how we act in the world, not the other way around. My best definition of it is a kind of core sense of self, constantly absorbing and processing its environment. To me, the soul is the part of us that connects to other people and craves truth.

When I think of the soul, in my head I see something smooth and soft but also tough and unchanging. It is a steady force that sits within us, but sometimes it can become clouded as we grow older. It gives us “gut feelings.”

¹Padmasambhava. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: the Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*. Translated by Gyurme Dorje, Penguin, 2010..

² Padmasambhava. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: the Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*. Translated by Gyurme Dorje, Penguin, 2010..

³ Padmasambhava. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: the Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*. Translated by Gyurme Dorje, Penguin, 2010..

I didn't realize that she was losing her bodily functions. I thought that if we drove fast enough, pedal to the metal, I would get there in time and I could talk to her and enjoy her one last time. But she wasn't really there, as my dad said. She couldn't speak and we weren't sure if she could hear. This wasn't what I had expected.

We got to her apartment on the Upper West Side ten minutes after an ambulance had taken away her body.

Her body stopped serving her. She had one foot out the door for a while. Losing her ability to speak was when she seemed to leave what was left of a physical life. But my mom said her body kept functioning after that, or as much as it could. I don't really want to picture that.

It was strange going into her apartment building. It still felt like how it always did, exciting and safe. It felt like I was going to see my Granna who I adored and who adored me. It felt like I was going to eat dinner with her and sit with her under a big white comforter and tell her all about the things I had done while we were apart. We would sit out on her terrace, looking down at the cars on 82nd. She would make us a big steak, medium-rare, and we would split it with horseradish sauce. I would put on pajamas that always stayed at her house. My bed there was two mattresses thick and softer than my bed at home.

But she was gone when I walked in, gone off to who knows where.

Upon death, the soul begins to undergo the process of leaving its physical body. This first moment after death is the First Bardo⁴. During the First Bardo, the soul sees is an intense bright light, called the “Clear Light of Ultimate Reality.” In Buddhism, this is the ideal state to be in, and the soul’s objective is to recognize and remain in the “Clear Light” for as long as possible, and eventually stay there forever⁵. This can only happen if the soul can realize that “his own mind and self is identical with the “clear light.” This light has also been characterized as “True Nature,” which to my interpretation means a vivid understanding and escape from the cyclical nature of existence. But why does the soul want to stay there forever? The Bardo Thödol describes this moment as the soul experiencing “wholeness and safeness.”⁶ This is vague, but at the same time it is a statement that I think everyone can relate to. The feeling of “wholeness” that comes from gaining a deep understanding of the universe and life would probably be enough to make a person content for eternity. Especially after the “suffering” of “mundane” human life, understanding the purpose of living truly does sound like the end goal.

I can't help but wonder if being in this intense light would be lonely. Can a soul connect with other souls in the “Clear Light”? Are there even separate souls in the “Clear Light” if the “self is identical” with it? If, in fact, there is no separation between souls in the “Clear Light” then maybe wholeness isn't just gaining knowledge but connecting and joining with all other living things. There is definitely a kind of “wholeness” in that.

There are a lot of confusing, compelling names for the “Clear Light”. One that interested me in particular was “the Ground of All”. “Ground” could refer to the base of all life, that everything in the universe and even beyond hinges on. It is a more simple place to exist, free of

⁴ Williams, Kevin. “The Tibetan Book of the Dead and NDEs .” Near-Death Experiences and Hinduism, 2017, www.near-death.com/religion/buddhism/tibetan-book-of-the-dead.html.

⁵ Williams, Kevin. “The Tibetan Book of the Dead and NDEs .” Near-Death Experiences and Hinduism, 2017, www.near-death.com/religion/buddhism/tibetan-book-of-the-dead.html.

⁶ Williams, Kevin. “The Tibetan Book of the Dead and NDEs .” Near-Death Experiences and Hinduism, 2017, www.near-death.com/religion/buddhism/tibetan-book-of-the-dead.html.

confusion. But it also could mean the end, like in existence we are falling in some way until we reach this ground.

In Buddhist Tibetan tradition, the body is disposed of in a sky burial. After the forty-nine day period, filled with readings of the Bardo Thödol and prayer, the body is given a ceremonial “Sky Burial.” During a sky burial, the body is placed on a mountaintop to decompose and be eaten by vultures and other animals. At this point, the body is no longer of use to the consciousness and given to other living creatures. When only the bones are left, the family and friends return to smash the bones with a mallet and mix them into barley flour, tea, and milk⁷. This is then fed to crows and hawks that waited for the vultures to leave the body.

The ashes were in a thick plastic bag, surrounded by bubble wrap. We each took big, fistfuls of ash, spilling some on the ground, which felt wrong. In a circle, our cupped palms holding dunes of black sand, we each said a few words. I don't remember what I said, and I'm not sure I spoke much at all. Mom said something that, at the time, seemed strange. Again, my memory is patchy, but she said that she could “feel” Granna “changing.” That throughout her life, my grandmother went through many transitions and changes, not always happy ones. Now, she could sense that she was still growing and continuing on.

We tossed our dunes off of the bluffs, down to the rocky beach. I watched the gray powder leave my hands and seemingly disappear into the wind. We grabbed fistfuls until the bag was empty, and then my dad shook the plastic bag out. It felt weird to do something so big in such a clumsy way.

The walk up to that cliff in particular is one that I have done many times throughout my life. It follows a wide, muddy trail along the edge of the bluffs, past houses that are so close to that edge they are nearly falling into the ocean. We went out to Block Island almost every summer when I was little. We rented houses with big, purple and blue hydrangea bushes and skinny little paths to the beach.

My favorite part of every summer there was the lobster boil. This usually happened at the very end of our visits. We would buy enough lobsters to feed our family, plus a few extra, and drop them into huge pots of boiling water. I always found it upsetting because the lobsters were still alive when this happened. But then a family friend taught us how to hypnotize the lobsters so that they wouldn't feel any pain. First we stood the lobster on its head, balanced on big claws. Then each of us ran a metal spoon gently up and down its back, stroking the red plastic surface. Slowly the lobster's feet relaxed and go limp, its tail curled into itself, and its antennae stopped moving. They looked numb and sleepy. This made me feel better about dipping its stringy white insides in hot butter.

If the soul is unable to recognize its place in the “Clear Light,” it is “pulled down” into the Second Bardo. This stage lasts two weeks, divided into two parts. During the first part, the soul encounters the “Peaceful Deities.” First comes the “Father-Mother,” the supreme deity of the universe. Its name comes from its ability to “transcend all dualities” including that of gender⁸. If the soul remains in a state of “purity” while witnessing the Father-Mother, it will reach Ultimate Liberation and return to the Clear Light. If the soul reacts in fear, it will be drawn

⁷ “Sky Burial.” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 23 Nov. 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sky_burial#Procedure.

⁸ Williams, Kevin. “The Tibetan Book of the Dead and NDEs .” Near-Death Experiences and Hinduism, 2017, www.near-death.com/religion/buddhism/tibetan-book-of-the-dead.html.

to the Buddhist form of Heaven by the Deva Loka (Deva means god or angel, Loka means realm), a companion of the Father-Mother. In Buddhism, Heaven is a second-choice because it isn't permanent or as fulfilling as the Ultimate Liberation. On the second day, the Father-Mother returns, but this time if the soul reacts in anger, it will "recoil from the light in fear and be drawn into hell." Again, the next day, the Father-Mother appears but this time if ego causes the soul to be afraid, the soul will be drawn back into the human world and be reborn. On the fourth day, the God of Eternal Life visits the consciousness. If the soul has a negative reaction to this deity, it is caused by lingering attachment that the soul has with its former body and the human realm. The soul will be reborn into the Preta Loka, a realm of ghosts with huge stomachs and tiny mouths, so they are never satisfied. I cannot pretend to understand why such a cruel punishment would be given to the soul just because it is still attached to its previous life. On the fifth day, the Almighty Conqueror appears, and this time if the soul reacts with jealousy it will be reborn into the Asura Loka, or world of demons. This realm isn't nearly as dismal as the Preta Loka. Demons in Buddhism are power-seeking deities. They are in constant competition with the Deva Loka. On day six, all of the previous deities return, along with the six lokas or realms: Hell, Ghost (Preta), Animal (Brute), Human, Deity (Deva), and God. On day seven the "knowledge-holding" deities appear, which are much more demonic-looking than the other Peaceful Deities. If the soul reacts negatively because of stupidity, it will be reborn into the Brute-Loka as an animal.

Part one of the Second Bardo encourages the consciousness to let go of not only its previous body but also its previous concerns and negative emotions. Leaving the body is hard, but leaving behind the circumstances of daily life is even more challenging. After years of being completely absorbed in human interactions, letting go of all of that anxiety and jealousy is a strange process. From what I have read, the soul doesn't lose the memories of its past life, yet it is expected to move on from the hardships and joy it experienced. Not only is it expected to move on, it has less than forty-nine days to do so. The soul must adjust to the idea that its previous life and loved ones are just a tiny piece of a much larger, even infinite cycle.

The last time I saw her was when I cut my hair short. I got it chopped into a messy pixie cut right after I finished seventh grade. Looking back it kind of looked like her haircut. She had thick dark brown hair up until the very end, barely any strands of gray and she never dyed it once. I have always been told that I got her hair.

I went up to her apartment with my mom to show it off. As usual I styled it meticulously and only wore clothes that my Granna had given me. I always wanted to look my best for her, even if we just ended up watching Say Yes to the Dress and eating peanut M&M's in her bed. She was a very elegant lady.

She was in remission and I was delighted.

I heard from my mom over the phone about her decline. I was at an arts camp so she couldn't tell me in person. She told me that Granna wanted me to stay at camp and not come home to see her, because she didn't want to interrupt my creative time. She knew that camp was a special time for me to do what I loved. I did what she said.

I never even called her. She didn't want to formally say goodbye.

At this point, if the soul still has not reached the Ultimate Liberation, it will encounter the "Wrathful Deities", a legion of hideous demons that threaten and scream violent words. The soul will be tempted to flee in "bloodcurdled terror," but instead it must recognize that the demons taunting it are in fact the Peaceful Deities in disguise. It must visualize the demons not as they

appear, but as they actually are. Though this stage seems unbelievably terrifying, it ends with the realisation that there is no need for “fear” outside of the human world only “[radiant] light”. The soul wants to reach eternal liberation from fear. The Bardo Thödol tells the consciousness: “As we roam [alone] in cyclic existence [driven] by deep-seated habitual tendencies, May the assembly of wrathful blood-drinking [deities] draw us forward, Leading us on the path of [radiant] light, Which is free of fear and terrifying perceptions!”. The Wrathful Deities aren’t trying to harm the soul but rather shake the consciousness to its core, shake it out of the “deep-seated habitual tendencies” it has become accustomed to. The soul wasn’t successful in doing this when the Peaceful Deities appeared, it couldn’t let go of the negative emotions caused by human life, so now it requires a more forceful approach.

“Your grandmother was angry at her body at the end, she couldn’t control her body because of the tumor, you know? She would try to stand and her legs would give out. When we had dinner with her she insisted on feeding herself, usually just muffins, but her hands would crush them before she could reach her mouth. Sometimes one of her hands would move without her wanting it to and she would try to hold it down with the other hand, she would slap it away. I could see how frustrated she was.”

I stopped my mom here. I don’t like picturing this. My grandmother was so graceful in my eyes, I don’t think I ever even saw her spill a glass of water. She was slow, but never uncoordinated.

My mom told me other details of her physical decline, to try to help me better understand what exactly happened while I was away. Usually the stories and memories she shared quickly became too much for me to process. I am worried that my mental pictures of these details are distorted and far from the truth, that I will be disturbed by the pictures I create. That is why I try not to visualize what my mom tells me.

If the consciousness cannot accomplish this, it moves on to the Third Bardo. Here it encounters the Lord of Death, another demonic deity, and is subjected to judgement. The Lord of Death holds the soul up to the “Mirror of Karma”, where good and bad deeds are all reflected. The demons from the second part of the Second Bardo return, and begin to torture the soul for all of its bad deeds. The Bardo Thödol instructs the soul to recognize this torture and terrifying scene as a projection from its own mind, and to accept its good and bad actions without fear. It tells the consciousness, “How pitiful that we have committed non-virtuous actions! The deity and demon representing our good and bad conscience Will compare the white and black pebbles of past actions, And Dharmarāja will reveal all in the [all-seeing] mirror.” The deities, though torturing the poor soul, are encouraging it to let go of guilt. Yet it says that if the soul doesn’t achieve this, it will be sent “remorselessly” toward rebirth. It seems like it encourages remorse for past actions, instead of allowing the soul to leave its past life behind. But isn’t moving on from the previous body and circumstances the Ultimate Liberation?

As the demons continue to torment the soul, the six Lokas appear again, and the soul is drawn to the one that shines the brightest. It will be reincarnated into one of the Lokas or realms and the cycle continues.

These six Lokas make up the Samsāra, or the beginningless cycle of repeated birth, “mundane” existence, death, and so on. It is referred to as “Dukkha” or “suffering”, and the Bardo Thödol repeats throughout a section called “Prayer to the Lineage Teachers”: “Please guide all beings from this swamp of cyclic existence!”. By preaching that the current state you

are in isn't the highest form of existence, the Bardo Thödol gives people who are suffering in the human world something to reach for. This is a theme in many religions: If you are good, you will be in a better place later. But what could that better place be? The "Clear Light" is the goal of Buddhism, but there are other realms that are idealized. The Deva-Loka realm is a world of angels or gods that live somewhat harmoniously and spend their lives learning from the Buddha. Where is this realm in relation to our earth and universe? Is it completely separate, outside of outer space, or somehow connected to life on earth? According to some interpretations of this Deva-Loka, most devas can construct "illusory forms in the lower worlds"⁹, they can choose to visit the other realms. Do they appear as angels, or do they take the form of a creature in that realm? Could they take the form of their past self?

My mom has had two visitation dreams so far. One was a very vivid, almost jarring, picture of her. She looked real. But my mom said that it felt like it was difficult physically for Granna to appear to her. Like she was trying hard to visit my mom.

My mom said that it was like "she stepped through the scenery of a play", that everything else in her dream was artificial, like a set, but that my grandmother was far more real. She hugged my grandmother and spoke to her, just like she used to, and that was it. "Every pore on her face, every hair on her head was real, far more real than anything else in my dream", my mom described this dream passionately, she wasn't confused or disturbed. She said that she felt like it was impossible that her brain could make such a perfect, lifelike image of her mom. My mom thought that she would need photos to conjure up such a thing, but somehow it happened in her mind. I have trouble picturing my grandmother's face with any kind of detail, let alone imagine a three-dimensional version of her. To me, this dream is a phenomenon.

After just scratching the surface of the Bardo Thödol as a belief system, I have realized that, in some ways, this book is for the living as much as it is for the dead. When I think about her slow decline towards death, I think of this forty-nine day period in which the soul leaves the body and finds its way into a new existence, whether towards the Ultimate Liberation or reincarnation. As her physical health deteriorated, her mind seemed to fade. The Bardo Thödol says "if a person dies after a prolonged period of illness that has led to a prolonged degeneration of both physical and mental capacities, there will be a greater chance of many of the personal characteristics, including memories etc., being lost." but that "someone who dies a sudden death, when the mind-body relationship at the gross level is still very firm, it is thought that there is a greater chance of carrying forward the acquired characteristics and memories, etc." Though my grandmother did die after a "prolonged period of illness," she remained herself up until a few days before her death. It was her loss of speech that was the last straw; she really seemed gone after that, according to my mom. Her consciousness left her because it recognized that the body it was in was no longer a home, so in that regard her "mind-body relationship" got weaker. But we have no way of knowing if she was really "there" at the very end. It is possible that she was conscious and simply unable to use her body. I just hope that she didn't lose her memories of us or any of her personality. Maybe she needed to.

My parents, sister, and aunt helped to transition my grandmother into death, a place we know little to nothing about. They saw her through this process, sat with her while she lost her ability to speak, to stand, to control her limbs. They had faced the terrifying parts, the "Wrathful

⁹ "Deva (Buddhism)." Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 22 July 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deva_(Buddhism)#Powers.

Deities”. But they also got to spend time with her and experience her for a little bit longer--this part being the “Peaceful Deities”. This made them more prepared for her death. The Bardo Thödol even says, “Last year, this year, the waxing and waning moons, the days, nights, and indivisible time moments are all impermanent. If we reflect carefully, we too are face to face with death.” This basically says that while the soul is facing the death of its past life, the people reading this book are doing so too, in a different way. They are confronting death and the afterlife head on, moving on from a tragedy just as the departing consciousness is.

The Second Bardo is all about letting go of negative emotions, and I can’t help but think that this advice that is read to the consciousness is actually directed at the readers of the book, those mourning the death. They are telling the departed soul to release its anger, jealousy, fear, and perhaps most relevant, attachment. They are supposedly helping the soul abandon its past life, and essentially abandon them. A certain kind of strength is required to encourage a loved one to forget their life with you and move on to another one.

My grieving process was very different from the rest of my family. In my mind, I still had this picture of her in remission, running her fingers through my short hair. She hadn’t faded, she hadn’t left at all. I was away from home, and even though I thought about her and her illness a lot, I wasn’t actually processing.

The Bardo Thödol provides concrete information about the afterlife so that this unknown transition is less daunting. It invites and even insists that the family participate in releasing the soul, almost as a final act of love towards the deceased.

Modern burial and grieving practices are so much less centered around the family. After someone dies, we call for their body to be removed and we don’t see the body until it is in the ground. In contrast, the sky burials require the family and even a larger community to participate. They are physically grinding up every bit of the body, making sure that it gets consumed by birds and other organisms. Not only does this aid in releasing the soul, it is a cathartic experience for those involved. Instead, we pay thousands of dollars for our loved one’s former bodies to be preserved with chemicals and drained of all of the blood and fluid that made them whole. How can we move on if we stop natural decay from occurring?

My grandmother chose to be cremated, and I felt some release and sense of closure when we spread her ashes. It is weird to think that was the last time I saw her body, black ash in a plastic bag. I think everyone needs to see the body like that, decomposed in some way. The idea of seeing an alive-looking body in a casket sounds upsetting and counter-productive. It also helped to hold the ashes and physically throw them, similar to how it helps to grind up the bones of a body and feed them to surrounding wildlife.

There is a home for people who are terminally ill and nearing death which uses the this text to help transition patients into their final days/hours. One volunteer, Ram Dass, at this home called *The Living/Dying Project*, said that it was started because “The metaphors, the storyline that existed in our culture for dying in which death was seen as a failure and the enemy and an error of the universe.”¹⁰ In Western culture, death is the end and must be avoided at all costs. But what if it wasn’t the ‘end’? How would we live differently if death was just part of something much larger and much longer? Perhaps instead of trying to preserve our bodies for as long as possible, even after death, we could accept the cycle of organic material. We fear that our bodies almost sustain our consciousness, but according to the Bardo Thödol our consciousness does not require a physical home, and is even happiest in a state that doesn’t seem physical at all.

¹⁰ McLean, Barrie and Yukari Hayashi, directors. Tibetan Book of the Dead Documentary. The Tibetan Book of the Dead, 1994, www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdbGTjoHg38.

For my grandmother, this book might have eased some of her frustrations with her dying body. It tells the reader that the physical form at its best is still “the heavy body of flesh and blood and bones.” It isn’t meant to function or even appear perfect. For me, this book has had profound connections to my experience with her death, it has provided that feeling of being understood. It speaks deeply to my emotions and thoughts, which had always seemed abnormal and wrong. So many of the ideas that are detailed in the text, especially those about the consciousness being eternal and craving “wholeness,” put my mind at ease. I feel more in control knowing that maybe I am more than my body. Spreading my Granna’s ashes seemed messy and inappropriate at first, but now it feels right. She was more than her body, she is eternal.

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