

# Tukdam: A Journey Beyond Death

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## Introduction

Human consciousness being, one of the greatest mysteries of this universe, manifests the very epicenter of the mind in certain ways through awareness of internal and external existence. Consciousness comprises six categories: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile and mental consciousness in which the first five are sense consciousness. Each emerges depending on a physical sense faculty and the last is the mental consciousness (manovijñāna)<sup>1</sup> which arises depending on the mental sense faculty furthermore in Buddhist psychology, there is seventh consciousness and eighth consciousness namely the mind – consciousness (manas-vijñāna) and the storehouse consciousness (ālayavijñāna).

Hence, consciousness is something that occurs uninterruptedly throughout all of one's worldly lifetime. It descends into the mother's womb at the beginning of each life and departs at the end of one's death and so on the process continues through a cycle of birth and rebirth, and ends with nirvana. Whereas subduing the thought that consciousness departs as one dies can be rationally subdued by the incorporation of a high level of meditation which enables one to achieve spiritual liberation by experiencing the fundamental nature of the mind which is known as Tukdam.

Tukdam, or thugs dam, in Tibetan, is an honorific meaning 'one engaged in meditation' in which 'Thuk' means the Mind and 'Dam' stands for Samādhi or the meditative state. A state of being in an effective meditative practice is defined as Tukdam, whereas in the context of Tibetan Buddhism, it is defined as the state of meditative practice even after death and thereby also slowing down the physical decomposition of body parts due to the evolved stage of their transformed mind. Spiritual masters in the state of Tukdam have elevated the sociological acceptance of biomedical science by defying the usual signs of clinical death and disintegration. The Tibetan Buddhist tradition of Tukdam emancipates the level of meditation at the deepest level of consciousness.

Such that it is a phenomenon where advanced meditators (who are mostly male) die in a consciously controlled manner and enter what is called a 'subtle consciousness', the meditator's body shows no signs of rot for days or weeks even after being declared clinically dead. It gives out no smell, sits upright in the life-like simulation of a living body in meditation, and is preserved and venerated for extended durations in situ. It entails that cessation of brain activity, breathing, and pumping of the heart is not life's clear-cut end but instead a pliable threshold.

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<sup>1</sup> Lama, D. (2020). Science and Philosophy in the Indian Buddhist Philosophy: The Mind Volume-2. USA: Wisdom Publications.

## Death And Dying

Death is an innate part of our life. It doesn't matter if one likes it or not but at a given point in time each one of us has to face it. The Buddha said that supreme mindfulness is remembering that life is impermanent and death inevitable.

“Of all footprints that of the elephant is supreme;  
Of all mindfulness meditations  
That on death is supreme.”<sup>2</sup>

As seen through the perspective of Tibetan Buddhist tradition one has to be fully aware of the subtlest state of mind that occurs at death known as the ‘clear light’ mind, hence to propel this motion the practitioner induces a ‘stimulated clear light’ through meditative practice. The Tibetan word Bardo means literally ‘intermediate state’ or ‘transitional state’. The same concept is called ‘Antarabhava’. The term Bardo can also be used metaphorically to distinguish times as in our usual way of life such that during a period of sickness or a meditation retreat etc. As described in many books there are six traditional Bardo states known as the six Bardos; the Bardo of this life (Kyenay bardo), the Bardo of Dream (Milam bardo), the Bardo of meditation (Samten bardo), the Bardo of Dying (Chikhai bardo), the Bardo of Dharmata (Chönyi bardo) and the Bardo of existence (Sidpa bardo)<sup>3</sup>. Hence the Kyenay Bardo or ‘the Bardo of this life’ is the first Bardo from being born an infant until the last breath when the mind streams withdraws from the body and endures as long as we live. Milam Bardo or ‘the Bardo of dreams’ is the second Bardo of dream state which enunciates the formulation of a person's dream yoga.

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<sup>2</sup> Khyentse, D. J. (2020). *Living Is Dying: How to Prepare for Death, Dying and Beyond*. USA: Shambhala Publications.

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<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a089b42bce176b2541e85b8/t/5ad4f8e2aa4a995e49d05ecf/1523906809631/The+SIX+BARDOS---Death+and+Dying.pdf>

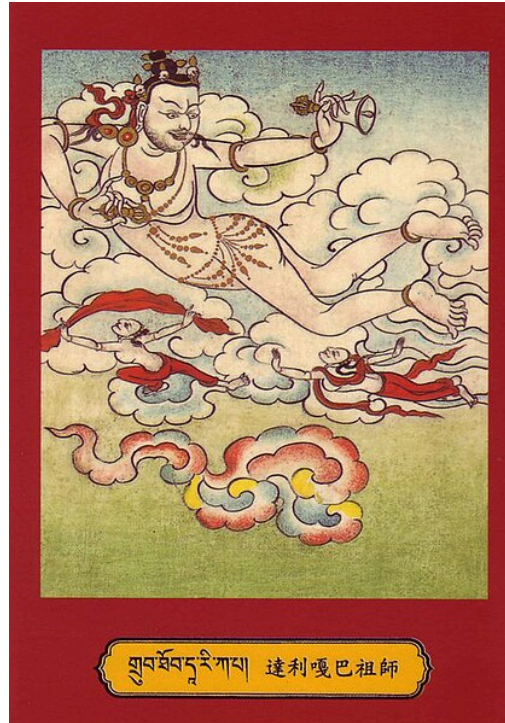


Figure 1 Mhāsiddha Dārikapa (Image source: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Darikapa.jpg> )

The figure above illustrates Dārikapa, 9th Century Buddhist Mahāsiddha in a state of dream yoga. Dream yoga substantiates practices to integrate dream state into Buddhist sādhanā or samādhi. After achieving the ability to lucid dream, a common first stage is attempting to fly in the dream.

The Samten Bardo or ‘the Bardo of meditation’ is the third Bardo which is mainly experienced by meditators though individuals may have voluntary experience of it. The classical languages of Buddhism are bhāvanā (mental development) and jhāna or dhyāna (mental training resulting in a calm and luminous mind).

The Chikhai bardo or ‘Bardo of the moment of death’ is described as the after-death state in the Bardo Thodol wherein the consciousness of the dead person primarily sees clear light at the moment of death. The timeline of this Bardo is between the last breath and the spontaneous presence of clear light. Hence the person further enters into Chönyi Bardo or ‘Bardo of the experiencing of reality’ is the intermediate state of reality featuring the fifth Bardo of luminosity in which the deceased see numerous visions and auditory phenomena. Sentient beings who have not practised during their lived experience and/or who do not recognize the clear light at the moment of death are usually deluded throughout the fifth Bardo of luminosity. The vision of wrathful and peaceful deities also appears in this Bardo.



Figure 2: Peaceful and Wrathful Deities (Image Source: [https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=File:Peaceful\\_guhyagarbha.JPG](https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=File:Peaceful_guhyagarbha.JPG) )

Sidpa Bardo or ‘the Bardo of becoming or transmigration’ is endured until subtle inner breath commences in the new transmigrating form resolved by ‘karmic seeds’ within the eighth consciousness as in the tradition of Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna Buddhism. As one dies of the factor that dissolves such as the earth element which shows external signs of the body being thin, limbs lose, sense-like body sinking under the earth and aggregate-like forms in which the body becomes weak, limbs become smaller, one cannot open or close eyes and, the lustre of body diminishes<sup>4</sup>.

The earth element further dissolves into a water element in which one renders emptiness of sensation and ceases to perform physical actions; one’s strength is consumed and internal signs like appearances of mirages occur. As for the third element, the fire element, the external factors that dissolve like one cannot digest food or drink, one is not mindful of the relations one possesses, inhalation weak and exhalation lengthy and internal signs like appearances of fireflies or sparks within the smoke.

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<sup>4</sup> Trungpa, F. F. (2000). *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo*. USA: Shambhala Publications.

The fourth element exhibits the wind element in which the external factors like inhalation and exhalation (lékyi lung) cease, and the tongue becomes thick and short. The root of the tongue becomes blue, one does not experience smoothness or roughness, and one is no longer mindful of external worldly activities, purposes and so forth. The internal signs include such as the appearance of a sputtering butter lamp about to go out.

Hence the earth element dissolves into water which further dissolves into fire and fire into air and air onto space. The forty impressions (mandala article) of attachment, thirty-three impressions of aggression, and seven impressions of stupidity are said to dissipate without a trace<sup>5</sup>. The dying person loses all sense of individuality and is momentarily in the state of Ground Luminosity (zhi ösel) and has a split-second opportunity to realise the true nature of existence and fully align himself or herself with the way things are, unobstructed by concepts, thoughts, prejudices and emotions.

## Path To Tukdam

Tukdam meaning the meditative stage of consciousness utterly rendered to be in after death naturally validates the three states as the path of three bodies. As of taking death as a part of 'dharma body', taking the intermediate state as the 'celestial body' and taking rebirth as the 'emanation body' in all of which the state of being in pure consciousness after death emanates the powerful visualization of a journey considered to be dead but lively.

An accomplished meditator with deep insight into śūnyata will be able to accomplish it by being in that state and merging oneself with dharmakāya or the innate nature of reality. Tukdam is not only practised by highly religious lamas but lay practitioners can also practice Tukdam to naturally imbibe in themselves the practice of dharmakāya. The gradient light which is seen after death is a sanctum towards the deceased being free of physical propensities, and emotional obscuration and utterly reaches the state of Bardo.

In order to help one navigate through the experience the lamas are often present to remind the dying person of the opportunity to guide them towards the merging ground luminosity. Their existential identity ceases to exist and they go on to the path to attain enlightenment.

The purpose of reading out the 'Bardo Thodol' to a deceased person who has merely passed 40 days is to aid the person through this stage of the Bardo experience. It entails that a person who has died will have a mere experience of facing the peaceful and wrathful states as product of the mind and karmic winds. Tukdam is not just a post-death meditative state but one can also achieve the same state of mind in one's lifetime. The parity of consciousness in the subtle state of mind through continuous life forms such as the eighth consciousness which is said to store the impressions (vāsanāh) of previous experiences, which form seeds (bīja) of future karma in this life and the next life<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://texts.mandala.library.virginia.edu/book\\_pubreader/39341](https://texts.mandala.library.virginia.edu/book_pubreader/39341)

<sup>6</sup> <https://buddhiststudies.stanford.edu/events/johndunne-between-life-and-death-understanding-tukdam>

Tibetan practitioners practising Tukdam or highly anticipated meditation after death brings in the subtle clearance of one's life towards the virtue of deep consciousness which entails dying in a state of conscious manner. Hence from a Tibetan Buddhist perspective dying is considered a significant process as it gives the person a window of opportunity to become fully enlightened. While the lama directs the deceased in the right direction he is instructed to see the blue light of Bardo which is the embodiment of Buddha Vairochana who is considered as the embodiment of the all encompassing reality of dharma. The white light is the immutable energy of enlightenment of Buddha Akshobhya whose nature is as vast and immutable as space. The yellow light of Buddha Ratnasambhava whose nature is gift bestowing and inspiring generosity. Buddha Amitabha's nature is infinite light of red colour which entails us to see the beauty of dharma and discern its profound truth and Buddha Amoghasiddhi radiates green light and his nature is to accomplish the words of dharma by the power of compassion. These energies of Buddha should not be seen as human or god figures but they should be seen as an open flow of luminous spiritual energy of enlightenment.

Moreover, if the deceased person experiences the Bardo with a tendency to accept the enlightened energies and bridge oneself with them, then the person realises sambhogkāya, the state of enlightenment and such a person would also be considered to remain in Tukdam. The muscles may remain compact, skin remains gleaming, and the body retains some warmth and the heart as if it is still subliminally functional.

Therefore, practitioners who succeed in passing Chikhai or Chönyi Bardo stages remain in Tukdam and experience spiritual alteration of the nāma (mind) and rūpa (body), and as a result, they do not undergo the usual sign of disintegration or decomposition.

### **Science And Its Say On Tukdam**

Eventually, many researchers and neuroscientists have been fascinated by the process of the brain's activity after the dying process. Hence one such research has been done by the Centre for healthy minds, the University of Wisconsin-Madison with adherence to Men-Tsee-Khang (Sowa-Rigpa, Dharamshala India) rendering on the thoughts of post-mortem meditation state. From the perspective of neuroscience on consciousness, recent studies on electroencephalographic activity (EEG) have shown evidence of a surge in EEG and the bi-spectral index (BIS) at or in the period following clinical death. Researchers using the mismatch negativity (MMN) paradigm entail that the auditory pathways may be responsive to stimuli just moments prior to clinical death. Henceforth, these studies suggest strongly that death is not an event that occurs at a single point in time<sup>7</sup>.

Neuroscience at the present level stands in a mere strong position to empirically evaluate the extending process of dying and more precisely to investigate the possibility of brain activity following the cessation of cardiac and respiratory functions. However, the possibility of a mere level of consciousness and activity of brain cells following clinical death raises certain questions in the world of science like how we should assess or demonstrate the presence of subjective

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.599190/full>



consciousness and what is the supplementary persistence of brain activity concerning subjective awareness. Therefore, the Central of healthy minds at the University of Wisconsin explored these questions in India through research on a post-mortem meditative state cultivated by Tibetan Buddhist practitioners.

The Tukdam project started in conversation between DR. Richard J. Davidson and His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, the XIV Dalai Lama, is a long-term empirical research to study the religious understanding of death processes through the minds of several practitioners. The project combined ethnographic as well as psychophysiological research to understand the social and meditative practices of Tukdam to discover neural and biological mechanisms which may be involved in post-mortem cases of Tukdam.

They hypothesised that some residual brain activity persisted in Tukdam practitioners following clinical death and that this might be the reason for delay in decomposition of body. Hence to detect such activity EEG (electroencephalographic) was used to monitor cranial response to auditory stimuli which elicit well-defined electrical signals independent of conscious attention and in a state of minimal consciousness.

The aforementioned research tools such as MMN (mismatch negativity) and ABR (auditory brainstem response) have been used to discern in patients the vegetative state and to suggest the presence of residual cognitive activity and ABR to determine the viability of the brain stem in cases such as coma and brain death.

Therefore, the study demonstrates the feasibility that a sparse electrode EEG configuration can capture ERP waveforms from living subjects used as HB (healthy baseline). As for practitioners in the post-mortem state of Tukdam were discerned with no recognizable waveforms but it is important to understand that even if Tukdam is mediated by residual electrical activity in the brainstem, this activity may generate signals that are too weak to be detectable on the cranial surface. In that vein, the researchers documented multiple Tukdam incidences and rigorously investigated the possible mechanisms involved. The methods could not reveal the neurophysiological correlation on the Tukdam state but identified and addressed numerous complex scientific and cultural considerations, demonstrating the feasibility of further research.

## **Conclusion**

Tibetan Buddhism exerted a strong influence from the 11th century CE, upholding doctrines associated with Mahāyāna Buddhism as well as the tantric Vajrayāna Buddhism. According to the Tibetan Buddhist perspective dying is considered a significant process as it gives one the ability to break the cycle of samsara and become fully enlightened. Death awaits us all, and what happens to our consciousness at the time of death continues to captivate people's imagination. While studying Tukdam and its process the author has come to know about the advanced meditative state of "mind over matter" and such control of consciousness during dying can reportedly provide a route to full awakening, or, at least, to a positive reincarnation.

Hence, Tukdam must not be considered a magical or miraculous event, as the practice of Tukdam requires discipline, training, effort, and the right motivation. Much scientific research has been conducted to know the epistemology of people remaining in Tukdam, but mostly all researchers have been insubstantial in understanding the philosophy of mind. Therefore, Tukdam generally can be referred to as intermediate state meditation or dying meditation, or ground luminosity. It is a meditation between death and birth in which the mind rests for a moment in its very inherent natural state of reality.

In the process, those realised minds that have control over death and birth can be enlightened as the mind being in the state of Tukdam has extremely extraordinary power since the mind realises its own nature of emptiness. However, Tukdam after death is not the sole indication of enlightenment and thus claims of it should not be exaggerated. Hence, preparing and training one's mind to its full potential with real discipline, insightful meditation and profound motivation can help one manifest the qualities to bridge oneself to the path of Tukdam.

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