

THE MOMENT OF REBIRTH

At this point, the moment of rebirth occurs. There are four possible kinds of rebirths: womb birth, apparitional birth, birth from heat and moisture, and birth from an egg; sometimes they are combined. Births in hell or divine realms are apparitional.

Rebirth is accompanied by different experiences:

The bardo being—the rebirth consciousness, or *bardoa* in Tibetan—that experiences arctic cold is attracted by a burning flame. This is how it ends up being born in a hot hell.

The bardo may also be extremely terrified and, to feel secure, goes and hides in a hole. This is how it is reborn in an animal realm.

If the bardo has positive karma, it can perceive a celestial place with a marvelous palace. Reaching that place, it is born in the divine realms of long life, in which it enjoys a radiant body for a very long time.

If the bardo is to be born of a womb as a human, in addition to the necessary karma, three factors must come together: the bardo being, the father's sperm, and the mother's egg. The bardo being perceives the parents having sex. If the bardo will be born as a male, he feels attraction for the mother and revulsion toward the father. If the bardo being will be born as a female, the opposite—attraction for the father and revulsion toward the mother—will occur. At the moment of conception, the father's semen, the mother's ovum, and the bardo or rebirth consciousness unite. The gametes are the outer aspects of the male white substance and female red substance.²³ They contain the potential for the different elements—space, air, fire, water, and earth in their outer aspects. The bardo, with its mental body, contains these elements in their inner aspects. At the moment of conception, there is a consolidation of the five outer elements and the five inner elements. This is how a new individual arises. With this fusion of the two gametes and the bardo, there comes a period of unconsciousness. Little by little, at the beginning of embryogenesis, the consciousness will be found. At that time, without exception, all recollection of the bardo is lost.

Whether we are Buddhist or not, whether we are connected to one tradition or another, the most important thing for us at death is to know our mind and our nature well and to practice now to gain this understanding.

The Bardo of Birth to Death

When I am in the bardo of birth til death,
 May I waste no time;
 Abandoning laziness, may I engage without distraction
 In the study, assimilation of,
 And meditation on the teachings.
 May I practice, integrating on the path
 Appearance and mind.

—Padmasambhava, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

GESTATION

When the bardoa, or rebirth consciousness, unites with the mother's and father's substances, memories become confused and begin to disappear like the clouded dreams of deep sleep.

During the first week in the womb, the embryo looks like rice mush and suffers as though it were being cooked in a copper pot. In the second week, it is oblong, and looks like frozen butter; at this point, the pervasive wind differentiates the four elements (earth, water, fire, and air). In the third week, the embryo has a complete form, shaped like an ant, and, due to the activator wind, the manifestation of the four elements becomes evident.

The embryo continues to change until the seventh week, when the spiral wind forms the four limbs, creating the feeling of being forcefully stretched, as if across a stick. At the seventh week, the opening wind produces the nine bodily openings; to the embryo this feels as if an open wound were being poked with a finger.

From this point on, if the mother eats something cold, the embryo feels as though it is being thrown onto ice; if she eats a lot of food, the embryo feels pressed between rocks; if she eats too little, being whipped around in the air; if she runs violently or falls, it has the feeling of being hurled down the side of a cliff; if she has sex, for the embryo it is like being flogged with metal thorns.

After the thirty-seventh week, the fetus starts to perceive being in the mother's womb as being imprisoned in a dark, unpleasant place; it is unhappy and wants to get out. During the thirty-eighth week, the baby is directed toward the birth canal by the "joining to the flower" wind and suffers as though the body were being carried away by a moving wheel.

The fetus is thus animated by twenty-eight winds. It grows, nourished by the mother's blood and nutrients, until its body is completely formed.

Finally, turned over by the reversing wind, the baby emerges, arms folded, suffering as though being forced through a narrow tube. When the baby comes out of the womb, it has the sensation of being deposited onto thorns; when it is finally cleaned and dried, it feels like it is being burned alive. Considering all this suffering, who would want to return to the mother's womb? This is how we are born.

DURING LIFE

During this bardo of birth to death, which is ordinary life, the mind produces the primary delusion of existing as a body that it considers its own.

This delusion about our body also rests on the elements earth, water, fire, and air. These elements exist in us since conception, at the inner as well as the outer level. They mature in us like a flower that blooms. By their maturation, the body and mind develop, grow, and acquire their power.²⁴ This period of growth might last up to twenty-five years, after which, in the second part of a lifetime, the body and abilities weaken; a process of deterioration accompanies aging, followed finally by death. There are, therefore, two natural stages: evolution and involution. Nevertheless, this process can be interrupted by a sudden death, as if a flower had been cut.

In the bardo of birth to death, we also experience the dream bardo and maybe the bardo of meditation. Then once again, we pass on to the bardo of emptiness and the bardo of becoming, which lead us toward yet another birth.

