From Anātman to Bardo Body: The Afterlife Journey in Buddhism

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Abstract

Since time immemorial, the institution of religion has monopolized knowledge about death, including speculations on how to address it and the fate of the deceased. Scholars have opined that death is a primary source of the origin of religion (Bowker, 1993). While death and dying are universal human experiences, societal responses to them vary. These diverse responses are largely influenced by diverse ways in which religious traditions portray death. Each religion has a 'mortality thesis' in which descriptions of death are so methodically inculcated that those are believed to be right by its adherents. Drawing upon the commentaries of sacred Buddhist texts, this article explores the death-related beliefs and practices prescribed in *Theravāda, Mahāyāna,* and *Vajrāyāna* Buddhism. Through an analysis of these texts, it becomes evident that Buddhism began keeping the human being's (Gautama Buddha's) lived experience as the central theme. Faith which started as a non-theistic way with minimal rituals and lacking a fixed God/ deity, gradually transitioned into a complex philosophy, comprising varied beliefs and practices, especially about death and the afterlife.

Keywords: Death, Beliefs, Rituals, Afterlife, Buddhism, *Bardo-thodol*

Death has been a vital aspect of Buddhism from its very inception, as it was the encounter with death that provoked Prince Siddhartha Gautama (later named Buddha) to leave his princely life and seek enlightenment. Buddhism has been a very diverse religious tradition since its origins in India in the sixth or fifth centuries BCE. The religion was founded by Buddha Shakyamuni, the royal prince of the Shakya family in Nepal. According to the traditional stories of Buddhism, the prince decided to seek enlightenment after witnessing four sights: a sick person, an old person, a corpse, and someone who has renounced the world. Those sights troubled him to the extent that he realized that the entire humankind was subject to *dukkhā* (suffering). Such thoughts made him renounce his luxurious life, and he left to seek solutions for that suffering. He lived the life of an ascetic and practised austerities and meditation for years. Lastly, while meditating, on the verge of starvation, he achieved enlightenment. Afterwards, he started preaching sermons. Further, as Buddhism evolved and spread across different parts of the world, various schools of thought emerged within it. Scholars have captured its diversity in diverse ways. Historians have classified it into philosophical epochs (era-wise); and theologians have offered regional typologies to it like Tibetan, Sri-Lankan, Chinese, and Japanese Buddhism; other Buddhist scholars have elaborated a schema based on diverseness in the doctrines within Buddhism (Reynolds & Hallisey, 2005). According to this typology, Buddhism is divided into three vehicles, namely, *Theravāda* (the way of elders), *Mahāyāna* (the Great Vehicle), and *Vajrāyāna* (the Diamond Vehicle). *Theravāda,* being the oldest school of thought, emphasizes *anātman*, the doctrine of no-self and does not prescribe any afterlife journey. However, *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrāyāna* introduce the concept of the journey beyond death. These schools got so engrossed in death and afterlife rituals that in countries like China and Japan, Buddhism was known as '*the religion of the dead*'.

Theravāda Buddhism

Theravāda school being the oldest one, reveres Buddha as the single, supremely gifted, yet mortal teacher and claims to abide by the original teachings of the Buddha. *Theravādins* trace their descent from the monastic

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community, called as the original *sanghā* community of Buddhist monks ordained by Buddha himself (Becker, 1993). It is believed that Buddha, *loka-vidū*, on experiencing a long course of austerities and meditations, concluded that all existence, ranging from the minutest microbe to an intellectual human being is based on three facts: (a) *aniccā* (impermanence); (b) *dukkha* (sufferings); (c) *anātman* (no-self). It is held that impermanence and no-self apply to both animate and inanimate beings, and suffering applies only to animate beings, but inanimate objects can be the cause of suffering for animate creatures like a stone that falls on a human being can be a reason for his/her suffering. The basic nature of all existence is that it is always dynamic and ever-changing. Eventually, everyone passes through the natural process of birth, youth, old age and death. Buddha preached that impermanence is a fact of life and man must remember this reality.

> *"Just as in the autumn a farmer, plowing with a large plow, cuts through all the*
> *spreading rootlets as he plows;*
> *in the same way, bhikkhus, the perceiving of*
> *impermanence developed and frequently practiced, removes all sensual*
> *passion removes and abolishes all conceit of I am"*[1]

When the Buddha passed away, his senior disciple recited:

> *"Impermanent are all component things,*
> *They arise and cease, that is their nature:*
> *They come into being and pass away,*
> *Release from them is bliss supreme"*[2]

So, recognizing impermanence is a vital aspect of Buddha's teaching and central to the *Theravāda* doctrine. Even in contemporary times, at *Theravāda* Buddhist funerals, the monks recite the above-mentioned verse in Pali. *Theravāda* school explains that a human being is made of five *khandās* (ever-changing aggregates): *rupā* (matter or form), *vednā* (feelings, both physical and psychological), *sanā* (perceptions), *samkharā* (mental states, activities, and volitions), and *vinnanā* (conscious awareness). The material form is called *rupā,* and the remaining four are the mental faculties, called *namā.* Buddha calls these aggregates impermanent and without self; the causes and conditions that lead to the formation of these aggregates are also impermanent, and thus the implications of these aggregates will not be permanent. In *Milindapanah*, a book of questions by King Menander to the Buddhist Monk Nagasena, an analogy of a chariot is offered to explain this phenomenon. The chariot cannot be equated to its parts: yoke, axle, body, or equivalent to any of the individual parts, but the word chariot refers to nothing other than the aggregate of material elements, and there are no innate chariots in it (Pesala, 2016). Likewise, a living being is nothing but certain aggregates put together. The five essential *khandās* collectively describe the human being, and the idea of any underlying, unchanging soul or self is eliminated. A chariot cannot be explained with any one of its components, similarly, a human being cannot be explained in terms of any single aggregate. Thus, on death, when all these aggregates come to an end, no self is left.

What continues after death?

Despite having no permanent underlying self, *Theravāda* Buddhism advocates continuity after death. In light of the principle of *anātman,* the question is: when there is no underlying self in the material body, then what is it that reborn? In early Buddhist teachings, this impermanence is linked to transience and continuity: *"All component things arise as the effect of causes, which in turn give rise to effects"* (Thera, 1994). At the time of death, five *khandās* of the form are broken down and nothing is left, but this event of breaking down is a cause that has an effect on the outer cosmos and leads to continuity of some kind. When the five *khandās* are dissolved at death, the four non-material *khandās* continue like a causal current or stream of *bhavasotā* (energy), and this energy influences a foetus in a receptive womb, creating another form. A group of scholars called *Pudgalavādins* introduced the term *Pudgala,* meaning self. It was neither identical nor different from the five *khandās* but is something reborn. They claim that Buddha's teaching of *anātman* was not based on totally refuting the existence of any kind of self, but he denied the existence of an '*eternal permanent/unchanging self*'. *Pudgala* refers to the energy that flows from the corpse to the womb. In *Milindapanha*, Nagasena Monk illustrates the case of the man who steals mangoes and later pleads that the mangoes he stole were different from the ones the owner planted. Mangoes are not identical to the ones planted, but there has been a continuity of some kind—neither the same nor different. This is an outcome of a causal sequence. Likewise, today's curd from yesterday's milk is neither identical to the milk nor different from the original milk (Pesala, 2016). So, there is a causal sequence of events that enables one to identify with another or to say that one has given rise to another. Rebirth is explained as another case of this same kind of process.

Theravāda doctrine advocates that there are both material and immaterial realms of existence in the universe: *arupādhatu* (a godly, immaterial, and formless realm), *rupādhatu* (a ghostly realm with form but only subtle matter), and *kamādhatu* (the real world, which is the physical/sensual realm of form and gross matter).

It is believed that continuity after death may take place in any of these realms. Just as there are many classes of humans and animals in the real world, likewise, there are many categories of gods, spirits, demons, etc. in immaterial realms and even they are subject to death and continuity. Interestingly, according to *Theravādins*, a possible explanation for the increasing population on earth is that some elements of consciousness of different species in other realms are also born as humans on earth, and at a given time, the *bhavasotā* released after death can even influence more than one foetus. Moreover, the rise of animal tendencies among humans could be because animal consciousness can also get into human fetuses.

Cuticittā (last thought) and *Karma* (action)

Thoughts at the moment of death play a significant role in determining continuity after death. At the time of dying, the right thoughts adopted and firmly held by a person lead *bhavsotā* to influence towards a good life, and conversely, negative thoughts, if held firmly, may result in leading towards a difficult afterlife. *Theravāda* Buddhism prescribes that through causal current, every action creates a new action. The *karma* created with one's body, speech, and mind leaves a subtle imprint on the mind, resulting in the creation of thoughts that have the potential to ripen as future happiness or future suffering. Thus, if an individual has done good deeds in life, then these deeds, at the moment of death bring pleasant and positive thoughts leading to a good rebirth, and vice-versa.

Nibbāna (Nirvana): Liberation from the Cycle of Birth and Death

In *Theravāda* doctrine, the permanent solution to the cycle of birth and death is the release from it. It is preached that this release can only be attained through the right practice and meditation which is possible only through human birth. Although life on *kamadhātu* (material realm) as a human being is subject to more suffering than in heavenly realms, it offers an opportunity to escape from the birth-death cycle. This escape is called *Nibbāna.* Buddha preached that as all creation is subject to suffering the only solution is non-existence. Buddhist texts maintain that Buddha through tough meditative practices, attained the state of *nirvana* and he explained them to his followers. Buddha preached how to handle life to attain permanent freedom from suffering, yet there is no evidence to explain *nirvana* and he never emphasized the afterlife. Since there is a lack of Buddha's explanation of *nirvana*, so it has been interpreted in the following different ways:

***Nirvana* as annihilation:** Offering the analogy of extinguishing fire and lamp, Eugène Burnouf in his translation of Lotus Sutra, explained that the perfect Buddha, after having performed the totality of obligations, was like a fire of which the fuel is consumed, annihilated in the element of *nirvana*, in which nothing remains of that what constitutes existence (Becker, 1993). This perspective is also called *Negativism* or *Oblivion*, whereby, a person reaches a stage when he/she has outdated the birth and death cycle and nothing is left behind nor any of the material/non-material aggregates, ceasing all further continuity.

***Nirvana* as eternal life:** Another explanation of *nirvana* is that it is not an extinction of the being but the extinction of the cravings causing suffering. *Nirvana* has been interpreted in terms of vanquishing all wishes and desires and leading a life unbiassed to joy and pain, good and evil. From this perspective, *nirvana* is a transcendental state of blessedness and not a state of non-being. It is said that it is an absolute eternal state of being that Buddha experienced but never quoted in literary terms.

An ethical state in this world: Keeping in view the Buddha's teachings of leading a selfless moral life, another interpretation of *nirvana* is a living condition in present life itself, neither annihilistic nor transcendental, not even any kind of blissfulness. Living a selfless life is nirvana. It is neither any kind of separate existence in this life nor non-existence after death, rather it is an ethical state of living here and now. Proponents of this view call virtues of apathy, and selfless service as *nirvanic* qualities. In the later years, *Mahāyāna* proponents and Japanese monks added virtues of selfless action, generosity, love, sympathy and wisdom to the list of *nirvanic* qualities. Believers of this approach preach that the persons possessing these qualities need not worry about death and the afterlife.

A selfless state experienced in two stages: This view combines the earlier ones and offers two stages of *nirvana*:

***Nirvana* with remains**: It is a stage in life itself that can be attained by living with virtues of selfless actions, sympathy, compassion, etc.

***Nirvana* without remains**: This stage connotes existence in a state beyond death, which cannot be described sufficiently in words but Buddha and *arhats* experience it. In *Milindapanah* this stage is explained, giving the analogy of a flame that is no longer identifiable and no longer limited to a single wick. The flame is not necessarily destroyed but may be expanding by losing its prior individuality. Another analogy offered is of raindrops. Falling into the ocean, raindrops do not lose

their existence completely but lose the prior limitations and characteristics of their separateness (Pesala, 2016). Similarly, in this stage, the practitioner experiences a suffering-free transcendental existence that is beyond any material existence.

Thus, interpreted in diverse ways, *nirvana* is ultimately the goal described in *Theravāda* Buddhism. It is believed that Buddha reached this stage through hard discipline, meditative practices and austerities. Though he never explained in literary terms, what he exactly experienced and what it meant. Certainly, he saw it as a much different state than the current existence, and something different to the process of permanency after death (Becker, 1993). As part of his core teachings to attain *nirvana,* Buddha prescribed *Vinaya Pitaka* (the absolute code) for living a disciplined life for *bhikkhus* (monks) and later *bhikkunis* (female monks). For laypeople, he prescribed the realisation of four Noble Truths: *dukkhā* (suffering); the cause of *dukkhā* is *tanhā* (craving) for material and non-material things; the cessation of *dukkhā* is the relinquishment of that craving; the path that leads to cessation of *dukkhā* and helps in abstaining from craving is the Eightfold Path of right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration (Bodhi, 1998). However, he did not prescribe a path for attaining *nirvana* for the congregation.

Maranassati Sutta: Mindfulness of Death

Contemplating one's death while being alive is an important practice among all schools of thought in Buddhism. Since death is inherent in life, *Maranassati Sutta*, a *Theravāda* text explains that instead of avoiding the subject of death, it is better to confront it as directly as possible. Other benefits of contemplating death beyond preparing oneself for death are prioritising one's goals and feeling content about life's accomplishments. It is believed that without mindfulness of death whatever *dharma* (religion) one practices, it will be superficial. Confronting death directly overcomes one's fear, dislike and confusion around death and ensures a deep sense of peace and well-being. Practitioners preach to maintain death as a constant companion. One way to do this is to wear *mala* (prayer beads) made of bones, each bead sculpted in the shape of a skull. In the *sutta* (discourse) on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the monks are guided to meditate on a corpse and its different stages of decay to learn and contemplate death. The idea is to remind oneself that like this corpse, one's body will also decay one day.

As the *Theravāda* school preaches there are two possibilities after death, either the deceased will continue in some form in any of the existing realms or will attain *nirvana*. Attaining *nirvana* is the ultimate goal which is attainable by living in a prescribed manner and nothing can be done after death. Hence, in *Theravāda* Buddhism, death is dealt with subtly and there are no rituals for the afterlife journey. Later, *Theravāda* school of thought was criticised by later Buddhists on mainly two aspects, viz. firstly, the explanation of rebirth (continuity after death) was condemned on spatiotemporal grounds. Critics stated that the continuity between death and renaissance cannot be explained like a sequence of life events because, at the moment of death, all aggregates cease. So, the analogies of flame continuing to light other flames or milk being converted into curd were considered unfit to explain death and life continuity. This changing continuity is comprehendible only if it happens in one's lifespan when there is already an existence of memory and physical body, not in the case of death.

Secondly, the idea that liberation from the cycle of birth and death is only possible for *arhats* and the notion that laypersons by following the path given by Buddha can seek to achieve a life free from suffering was also criticised by later Buddhists. Therefore, the *Theravāda* school was alleged to be too orthodox and self-obsessed that it had no prescription for *nirvana* for ordinary people. So, later Buddhists came up with a new doctrine and preached virtues like love and compassion, which can help the followers of Buddhism (the laity) on the path of enlightenment and liberate them from the birth/death cycle. They called their philosophy *Mahāyāna* (the great vehicle) and named the earlier one as *Hināyāna* (the lesser vehicle). *Mahāyāna* Buddhism gained popularity in China, Korea, Japan and some parts of India.

Mahāyāna Buddhism

To provide a remedy for *nirvana* to lay people, *Mahāyāna* Buddhism brought the idea of near nirvanic fields called Boddhi fields or Buddha lands. These realms are abodes of enlightened beings called *Bodhisattvas*, who help ordinary people attain enlightenment. By meditating on these *Bodhisattvas*, practitioners can transcend the birth/death cycle. A popular sect under the *Mahāyāna* canopy is *Sukhāvatī* or pure land Buddhism. It focuses on *Bodhisattva Amitābha* (*Amida Buddha*), meaning infinite life. Offering prayers and meditating on his name can enable rebirth in his realm near *Nirvana*. Three sacred texts, Larger *Sukhāvatī-Vyuha Sutras*, Smaller *Sukhāvatī-Vyuha Sutra*, and *Amitayur-Dhyana Sutra*, explain the realm of pure land and the way to be born in it, after death. Pure land is an intermediate realm that lies between *samsara* (material world) and *nirvana*. It is a state of absolute bliss from which the attainment of nirvana is ultimately guaranteed.

The adherents of this sect believe that pure land which was established by *Bodhisattva Amitābha* is characterized by radiance and light. Just like heavenly realms explained in other religious faiths, pure land is described as a celestial place where trees, ponds, and fields glow like precious metals and gemstones. The ground is covered with flowers; the gentle breezes and the birds create soft harmonious music. In the centre a huge golden figure of *Amida Buddha* is placed surrounded by his disciples, listening to *dharma* (Becker, 1993).

The *Amitayur-Dhyana Sutra* prescribes a meditation method for gaining the vision of *Amida Buddha* and rebirth in his realm. It involves mindfulness and challenging meditation practices, starting with physical objects and gradually moving to envisioning elements of pure land. The advanced stage involves focusing on *Amida Buddha* and his surroundings, and finally, on every aspect of this Buddha field. To achieve this, seekers must ritually purify themselves through limiting diet, chanting mantras, sleeplessness, and confessions. Pioneers of this school and monks, particularly from China and Japan, practice meditation and austerities, such as maintaining a single posture for three months, and not eating or sleeping for months.

Thus, *Mahāyāna* Buddhism introduced the concept of *Bodhisattvas*, God-like beings, and initiated practices of offering prayers to Buddha and *Bodhisattvas*. Unlike the *Hināyāna* school, *Mahāyāna* developed ritualistic patterns for better prospects in life and after death. A series of practices are prescribed to ensure the rebirth of the deceased in *Amida Buddha's* abode, including do's and don'ts for the dying, after-death rituals, disposing of the dead body, holding memorials, and remembering ancestors. In anticipation of death, it is encouraged that the deceased visualises *Amida Buddha* and chants his name, while the family and community act as witnesses to the deceased's journey to the pure land. The *Mahāyāna* school also initiated practices like keeping the corpse for a few days and calculating an auspicious time for disposal.

Pattanuppadanan (Merit Transference)

Like *Theravāda* Buddhism, the idea of merit transference is prevalent in *Mahāyāna* tradition. It means that the merit accumulated by performing certain acts can be transferred to others for their good. *Mahāyānists*, mainly adherents of pure land Buddhism, took it further and preached that these '*others'* include the dead as well. According to the *Mahāyāna Sutra of The Great Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva*, one can transfer one-seventh of the merit of an act they have performed to a deceased[3]. It is believed that the highest gift to the departed is the transferring of merit. The doctrine is said to be influenced by Hinduism's belief in benefiting the *pretas* (departed souls) through rituals and material things (Becker, 1993). The idea became very popular in China and many funeral rituals were devised to transfer the merits to the departed for their better rebirth. These include practices like giving alms to monks in the name of the deceased and releasing animals/birds with the thought of benefitting the departed. Gradually, these practices became an important part of death rituals in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. Therefore, while *Theravāda* Buddhism denies the existence of any permanent self, and prescribes a minimal ritualistic pattern to deal with death, *Mahāyāna* school not only introduced the idea of an underlying self but elaborated complex practices at different phases from the anticipation of death to the funeral and post-funeral practices to ensure that the self is born in *Amida Buddha's* abode.

Vajrāyāna Buddhism

In around 747–749 A.D., Indian master Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rimpoche, travelled to Tibet and Bhutan via Afghanistan to preach Buddhism. In those times, Tibetans were practising a Chinese religious philosophy called Bon. Hallucinations and paranormal experiences were integral to Bon's philosophy. They held that humans consist of twin spirits that depart on death, and after death, the departed part, if not handled properly, might come back and haunt. So, to wade off the evils created by the spirits that might have existed because of being mishandled at the time of death, the practice of human and animal sacrifice was also prevalent. These pre-existing beliefs impacted Buddhism and led to the emergence of another school, *Vajrāyāna* Buddhism. It is also called Tibetan Buddhism, *Tantric* Buddhism, or Esoteric Buddhism. The literal meaning of the term *Tantra* is *'thread'*, which refers to a chain of teachers who pass on their teachings to the disciples. This doctrine is predominant in Himalayan states like Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, and Mongolia, as well as in the Himalayan region of India. The very popular Dalai Lama cult also belongs to this school.

As discussed, *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna Buddhism* preach that death ceases the physical body but leads to the continuity of some aspect of consciousness in varied physical forms in this huge universe. For the soul to be free from this trap of rebirths, they preach the way out, called *nirvana,* or liberation. Both these schools prescribed a different pursuit for attaining *nirvana.* In *Theravāda* Buddhism, it is possible only for the *arhats* to attain freedom from the birth and death cycle; the lay people can lead a life in a certain manner and eventually overcome their sufferings. *Mahāyānists,* however, preach that lay persons too, with assistance and compassion

from enlightened beings, can attain liberation (reach pure lands). The Tibetan school goes further and teaches its practitioners how to experience death with a wholesome mind to attain *dharamākaya* (nirvanic realm called Buddha Mind). It also guides the disembodied self in the pursuit of rebirth after death. The learned *lamas* (monks) connect with the departed consciousness to guide it in the afterlife journey.

Tibetan Buddhism too, propounds that death ceases the physical body and its functions, but there is an underlying self that carries on its journey after death. This self is either reborn or reaches *dharamākaya* (Buddha Mind), a real and formless state from which there will be no rebirth. If Buddha's Mind is not attained, there is a rebirth at another two levels (realms) of existence: a) *sambhogākaya* (the spiritual realm), which belongs to the spiritual and enlightened beings just a little short of *dharmākaya*; b) *nirmanākaya* (the material realm), in which all material forms (animate and inanimate, both humans and animals) exist. This material realm in totality consists of six planes of existence where invisible creatures like demons, ghosts, titans, etc. also live (Wentz, 2005). All living creatures (visible and invisible) in this material realm are subject to death and rebirth. Hence, the ultimate goal of humans is to attain the *dharmākaya* stage.

The Journey from Death to Birth

Bardo-thodol (The Tibetan Book of the Dead), the sacred text of *Vajrāyāna* Buddhism that has existed since the eleventh century and was miraculously found amongst many other writings of Padmasambhava explains that death is not an instant event but a process lasting for several hours or sometimes even several days. It is through the process that the consciousness departs from the physical body and experiences out-of-body travel. In *Vajrāyāna* Buddhism, importance is given to the location from which the subtle form of consciousness leaves the deceased. It is perceived that if it leaves from the point at the top of the head where the skull is joined, then there are better prospects in the afterlife; otherwise, it may fall into sub-human wombs. With this rationale in view, certain rituals are performed by the *lamas* (monks) at the moment of death. The departure of consciousness on death is co-related to an out-of-body travel experience, possible for accomplished *lamas* through meditation. Thus, meditative yoga and death experience are considered alike, with the only difference being that in a *yogic* act, this consciousness will come back to the same body, but in the case of death, it cannot happen.

Bardo-thodol notes that life consists of a series of successive states of consciousness. The first state is birth consciousness and the last is death consciousness. The intermediary phase from death to birth is called *Bardo. 'Bar'* means '*in-between*' and '*Do'* means '*an island or mark*'. *Bardo-thodol* explains the experiences of the *bardo* body (departed consciousness) after the death of the physical body and serves as its guidebook in its out-of-body travel after death. Highly learned *lamas* connect with the departed consciousness by chanting the verses from the *Bardo-thodol.* According to the *Bardo-thodol,* the consciousness passes through the following three *bardos:*

***Chikai Bardo* (the glimpse of the clear light)**: At the moment of death, there is a glimpse of the clear light that provides the consciousness with the opportunity to enter the *dharamākaya.* If the consciousness merges in this clear light of void, it experiences the Buddha Mind. At the moment of death, this glimpse of light appears to everyone, but the deceased may miss it because they are trapped in other illusions. So, the person must die in a wholesome mental state, being fully aware of one's death and ready to spot the spontaneous appearance of clear light and merge with it. The enlightened saints easily identify it and get absorbed. Lesser *yogis* (saints) and blessed people may be able to retain this vision of light, but they are eventually distracted by other desires or thoughts. For all others, the experience of light is no more than a flash. On missing this chance, the consciousness gets pulled by the illusions. These illusions are the outcome of the thoughts of a dying person, which keep floating due to the *karmic* imprints accumulated by the deceased.

***Chonyid Bardo* (crossing holy and evil illusions):** In this phase, the consciousness feels like it has an imaginary physical appearance like its previous life and wanders in its disembodied state. For the first seven days, seven *Bodhisattvas* (Buddha-like images) appear to the consciousness. If the consciousness merges with these images, it enters the spiritual realm of *sambhogākaya*. However, due to one's *karmic* imprints, at the *chonyid bardo* level, the *bardo* body is also repelled by fearful and terrifying illusions. If the *bardo* body misses the *Bodhisattvas* and gets attracted to these illusions, it will be reborn in the realm of ghosts and demons. In the event of missing out on both, for the next seven days, it has to face some *herukas* (terrifying deities). It is explained that these are the projections of one's subconscious mind. Once this temporary body crosses this phase, it enters another level.

***Sidpa Bardo* (phase of material existence):** After missing out on the opportunity to merge with *Bodhisattvas*, this wandering consciousness trickles down further to the material world. The consciousness has the power to move across distances, visualise previous homes, mourning relatives, etc. It wanders here and there, homeless and

disturbed. As the consciousness is in its pure state, it doesn't know how to overcome these realisations. It finds itself in surroundings where bodies are engaged in sexual intercourse, and the *bardo* body gets to choose its womb. Some interpreters also believe that consciousness might also enter an animal's womb (Wentz, 2005). The *lamas* narrating the *Bardo-thodol*, being assured that the consciousness is listening, advise it to choose the womb not merely because of physical attraction but to look for parents of pious character with adequate wealth, and spiritual inclination.

This intermediate phase lasts for forty-nine days. Ironically, in Tibetan Buddhism, it is believed that *lamas* and spiritually elevated people get merged with the clear light or with *Bodhisattvas* and are born in the spiritual realms. Unlike laity, they do not envision any illusion and do not wander as a *bardo* body for forty-nine days. Dalai Lama and other influential spiritual leaders are perceived to be the material incarnations of *Bodhisattvas*. Before their death, they indicate the region and the characteristics of the family where they will be reborn. So, after forty-nine days of their death, babies showing miraculous signs are identified and efforts (specific prayers and rituals) are made to find out any physical similarities with the previous Dalai Lama and on identification, these children are selected for intense religious education.

In *Vajrāyāna* Buddhism, dying awake with a wholesome mind without distracting thoughts can make consciousness see and catch the clear light, which is the ultimate solution to escape from the birth/death cycle. Hence, contemplation on death is given due importance in *Vajrāyāna* Buddhism as well. Being prepared for death at any time is an important teaching given to its practitioners. The meditative lessons from the masters to the students involve making their consciousness have a death-like experience of leaving the body for a certain duration and coming back. Since death can arrive unpredictably, it is important not to delay resolving difficulties and completing unfinished tasks. One of the exercises taught to improve the concentration capacity of the monks and to make their death conscious is the *mandala* (an art form) making and destroying it immediately, symbolic of the impermanent nature of everything that exists.

Thus, in Tibetan Buddhism, death is a process, and the afterlife journey is the adventurous journey of consciousness where it wanders in a disembodied state, going through pleasant and evil phases, which are the projections of its subconscious mind. After facing different adventures, the consciousness itself chooses its next birth. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* serves as a guide to this wandering consciousness, right from the moment of death until the next birth. The consciousness is advised not to be frightened and confused and should make the right choice for the next birth. This implies that if a person is poor, rich, religious, spiritual, or evil if one is born in a favourable or unfavourable situation, it is because of one's own choice, and these characteristics are not allotted by some outside agency as a reward or punishment for previous deeds. What is going to happen in the next life is a matter of one's own choice, and nothing is predestined or controlled by any supernatural power.

Conclusion

Buddhism emerged as a religious philosophy at a time when monotheism and polytheism were the popular faiths. Monotheistic religions prescribe that one universal mega-God governs the entire life of humans, and polytheistic religions preach that God is comprehensible and manifests itself in various forms to assist the laity in negotiating everyday mundane issues here and in the journey after death. Buddhism came up with a different idea: there is no supreme God to guide, but one can attain enlightenment through lived experience. The central theme of Buddha's teachings is the principle of *'suffering'*, which is an integral part of human life. Based on his own enlightenment experience, he prescribed a way to liberation from the cycle of suffering. *Theravāda* doctrine preaches a path of liberation based on Buddha's teachings, and the objective is freedom from suffering, so death is dealt with subtly. However, later schools emphasized better prospects in the afterlife journey and the next life, so they prescribed intricate end-of-life rituals. In *Mahāyāna* school, the departed consciousness is guided to reach the Buddha lands and experience the near-nirvanic stage. In *Vajrāyāna* Buddhism, the monks and accomplished practitioners can connect with this consciousness and comfort the deceased in the process of death and beyond. Through intricate rituals, separation, liminality, and incorporation of the deceased into the new life are ensured.

Hence, the philosophy that evolved as a humanist/naturalist religion by a human being, based on his lived experience of the natural principles of suffering, impermanence, and ever-changing aggregates, with minimal rituals, gradually transformed into a system of complex beliefs and practices. Interestingly, death in all three schools of thought is explained as a moment of transition leading to something new, and this newness is one's own choice. There is no supreme power or outside agency to decide a posthumous fate. Ironically, as Buddhism evolved in phases, beliefs and practices for the afterlife journey transited from simple to complex.

Notes

1. https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/ireland/wheel107.html
2. This is a famous verse that was repeated by Sakka, the Lord of Devas, on the occasion of the Buddha's passing away (*parinibbaana*). See *The Wheel* No. 67/69, *Last Days of the Buddha,* p. 77.
3. http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/ksitigarbha.pdf

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