

## The Three Death Bardos →

### Dying → Death → Intermediate State → Rebirth

The central orienting view in the Tibetan world, and a doctrine that provides a template for the book *Preparing to Die*, is that of the three death 'bardos'. A 'bardo' is a transitional state.

The painful bardo of dying is the transition between life and death; the luminous bardo of *dharmata* is death itself, the transition between this life and the intermediate state; the karmic bardo of becoming is the transition between the intermediate state and the next life.

Often, the word 'bardo' is used simply to denote the intermediate state between death and rebirth; however, bardo also has the wider meaning of a transitional state.

The *painful bardo of dying* begins with the onset of a terminal disease or condition that ends in death. It is called 'painful' because it hurts to let go. In the case of a sudden death, this bardo ends in a flash.

The *luminous bardo of dharmata* begins at the end of the bardo of dying. For most of us it passes by unrecognized. 'Dharmata' means 'suchness' and refers to the nature of reality, the enlightened state. It is fantastically brilliant, hence 'luminous'. It is so bright that it blinds us and we faint. We then wake up dazed in the karmic bardo of becoming.

In the *karmic bardo of becoming* the glimpse of the enlightened state is gone, and confusion re-arises as karma returns to blow us into our next life. The entire process takes up to forty-nine days.

Not everyone goes through the bardos the same way. Most teachers say that cultural differences and personal idiosyncrasies generate a variety of experiences. Why would a Christian or Muslim, with very different beliefs, experience death the same way as a Buddhist?

One of the best preparations for the bardos is learning about them. Study the map and you will recognize the territory. Studying the bardos is like installing a psychic GPS. After death, you will know where you are what you need to do.

Fear is always associated with the unknown and the unfamiliar. Fear and ignorance are virtually synonymous. Through our study and practice we remove the darkness of ignorance that surrounds death and transform fear into fearlessness.

Edited extracts from *Preparing to Die: Practical Advice and Spiritual Wisdom from the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition* by Andrew Holecek Snow Lion: London & Boston, 2013, pages 6, 26ff