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# Psychology or Religion? Bridge-Building in the Translation History of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

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The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is one of the most popular Eastern scriptures in the West, in part because it has been framed outside of religion, as a kind of psychology. And yet its translators have also used it to stake claims in the debate about the relationship between psychology and religion, generally Buddhism, but also Theosophy, a religious and philosophical system founded in 1875, which tried to unify all religions. The first major English translation of the Book of the Dead was published in 1927, by W. Y. Evans-Wentz, who was a Theosophist, with the assistance of Kazi Dawa-Samdup. Evans-Wentz framed the text as supporting the existence of a universal religion grounded in science, altered terms to support Theosophical beliefs, and also opened the way to psychologized interpretations. Carl Jung's 1937 introduction to the Evans-Wentz-Samdup translation solidified a psychologized reading. In 1975, Francesca Fremantle and Chogyam Trungpa produced a more accurate translation, which continued the psychologizing trend. The 2005 translation by Gyurme Dorje, with Graham Coleman and Thupten Junpa, is the most traditional and technically accurate, yet also shades meaning towards universal appeal. My evaluation of the orientation of these three translations—Theosophical (Evans-Wentz, 1927), psychological (Fremantle-Trungpa, 1975) and traditional (Dorje, 2005)—highlights the difficulty of translating religious terms. The translation history also sheds light on the ongoing debate about the compatibility of the aims of psychology (self-development) and Buddhism (self-eradication) and provides a foundation for my argument that psychologized renderings are simply a part of theological drift, a process that is continual and ongoing in religious traditions.

**Keywords:** *Tibetan Book of the Dead, Theosophy, Carl Jung, religious experience, near-death experience, reincarnation, meditation, Theosophical Society, Tibetan Buddhism*

From its first English translation in 1927, the manuscript known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* has been used to support philosophical agendas that may or may not be present in the text. Its dramatic scenes connecting mental outlook with destiny invite easy comparisons from Western psychology and mind-cure belief systems. A comparison of the translation and interpretation of key terms and the claims made by the authors of three major translations demonstrates a range of possible perspectives on this text. I identify their approaches as Theosophical, psychological, and traditional. Comparison of these approaches and their commentaries also highlights the challenges of producing a translation that is both accurate and relevant to its audience.<sup>1</sup>

The first English translation, by W.Y. Evans-Wentz, in conjunction with Kazi Dawa-Samdup, took great liberties with the text. Evans-Wentz was a member of a syncretistic movement founded in the nineteenth century called the Theosophical Society, also known simply as Theosophy, which is best known through the writings of its most prominent founder, the Russian mystic Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891). Although Theosophy is nearly invisible today, its views percolated through our Western culture, and it deeply influenced the framing of Eastern religion in the West (Chajes, 2019; Lubelsky, 2012; Prothero, 2011). Evans-Wentz's version appealed to individuals as disparate as Carl Jung, Timothy Leary, and the European Buddhist convert Ernst Lothar Hoffman (Lama Govinda), and was thus widely

influential on the counterculture (see, for example, Davis, 2018).

Whereas Francesca Fremantle and Chogyam Trungpa's 1975 translation is more faithful than the first translation, it overtly psychologizes the language. For example, it uses terms such as "projections" and "neurosis" in its interpretations (p. xvi, 40). The 2005 translation by Gyurme Dorje, assisted by Graham Coleman and Thupten Junpa and with introductory commentary by the Dalai Lama, is more accurate, and can be termed a "traditional" approach. Yet it does universalize the text outside the context of Tibetan religion. Each of the three approaches to translation has its benefits, and it seems that some convergence of aims exists, as later translators both built upon and corrected Evans-Wentz. Even the 2005 version retains some psychologized framing. For example, Coleman, in his introduction to the 2005 edition, used both traditional religious language and metaphorical and psychological terms. He states, "The Great Liberation by Hearing can be read as a wonderful metaphorical narrative illustrating the processes of our cognitive state....From a psychoanalytical point of view...our text can...be seen as providing a guide for tracing our confused and deluded states (2005, xxxiv-xxxv). Therefore, it seems likely that even the most faithful translations will continue to promote the text outside of the boundaries of religion and in a psychological context.

In this article, I use the three translations of the manuscript most commonly known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as a doorway to a discussion of the relationship between psychology and Buddhism in Western discourse. The most popular portion of the text concerns the events said to occur in a "bardo." *Bardo* simply means "intermediate state," and in classical Tibetan culture it referred to the state which the soul experiences after death and before rebirth. However, for some schools of Buddhism, the "bardo" also refers to three states experienced during life: dreaming, meditating and "living" (Dorje, 2005, 479-480). Yet, the popular conception of bardo in Western culture generally focuses on *bardo* as referring to the afterlife.

The text divides the after-death *bardo* into three distinct periods in which typical events are expected. The first after-death *bardo* is known

simply as the *bardo* of the time of death, in which various stages of withdrawal of the breath and life from the body are experienced. The second is the bardo of "reality," a state in which individuals have the opportunity to discern their true nature. The third after-death *bardo* is known as the *bardo* of "consequent rebirth," in which the individual either 1) achieves liberation, 2) is born into one of the heaven and hell realms or 3) enters the womb of a mother on earth. Western culture has been fascinated by the text's description of the after-death bardos, particularly the bardos of reality and of consequent rebirth, in which much of the visionary material such as sounds, lights and rays, frightening and peaceful visions, and dream-like scenarios take place (Dorje, 2005, pp. 234-300).

But are these visions real or imaginary? The Hindu and Buddhist notion that the entire phenomenal world is in some sense an illusion (*māyā*), especially as promoted by the second-century CE Indian Buddhist sage Nagarjuna, whose teachings were adopted into the Mahayana Buddhism of Tibet, readily suggests that the mind and its contents play a vital role in spiritual well-being. *The Book of the Dead* sets forth in a systematic way the idea that cultivating appropriate mental habits through meditation, prayer and self-discipline will help to avoid pain, suffering, and rebirth, and lead to enlightenment. Such a system has become appealing to Westerners searching for meaning and a cure for their own mental and emotional anguish.

However, dialogues between Western psychology and Buddhism have revealed deep divides as well as a search for mutual understanding (Aronson, 2004; Safran, 2003). The goal of psychology, which is generally seen as developing the self or ego and improving one's life on earth, may be at odds with the goal of Buddhism, realizing emptiness or enlightenment by extinguishing the individual self (Coleman, 2005, p. xli). Another area of tension centers around questions such as whether visionary experiences are "real" or "imaginary," and whether psychology has any contribution to make to the religious interpretation of texts. The way in which translators render key Tibetan terms in the *Book of the Dead* opens a window into possible approaches to the psychology-Buddhism divide.

My evaluation begins with an introduction to the text, followed by a discussion of key terms in the three translations, a brief review of Tibetan Buddhist doctrines, and an in-depth look at the role of Theosophy, especially as it has influenced the work's interpretation in the West, which so far has not received much academic attention. In conclusion, I discuss the impact of the three translations on the discourse between psychology and Buddhism and view the psychologizing trend in translation as part of an effort to build bridges between the two systems.

### The Manuscript and the Bardos

The book known in the West as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* was originally entitled *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*.<sup>2</sup> This book is but a portion of a fourteenth-century collection known as *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: Natural Liberation of Enlightened Intention*. The collection is said to have been discovered by Karma Lingpa in the fourteenth century and was believed to have been concealed as a "treasure text" by Padmasambhava, who formally established Buddhism in Tibet during the eighth century, in order to preserve the purity of his teaching for future generations. However, its status as a treasure text does not mean that every word is believed to have been written by Padmasambhava. According to Dorje, "The term 'treasure-teachings' is generally extended to include not only concealed 'earth-treasures' (*sa-gter*), but also revelations discovered in a telepathic manner directly from the enlightened intention of Buddha-mind (*dgons-gter*), and pure visionary experiences (*dag-s nang*)" (2005, p. xli). Further insight into the origins of the manuscript in Tibetan tradition may be found in Cuevas (2003).

One can guess why only the later chapters were translated in the early versions. Chapters one through ten of *The Great Liberation* are more formally religious and provide less scope for psychological interpretation. They consist of rituals for paying homage to deities and instruction for how to act during life in order to secure a better afterlife and/or liberation upon death. Chapter eleven concerns specifically the time of death and immediately after death, up to either liberation or reincarnation. The

Dorje translation is the first to include the entire manuscript of *The Great Liberation by Hearing*. The Evans-Wentz and Fremantle-Trungpa translations begin with chapter eleven, the time of death.

This paper focuses on concepts in chapter eleven, which relate to the after-death *bardos* of the time of death, of reality, and of rebirth. The text instructs the reader to repeat portions aloud to the dead or dying person and includes direction for prayer and meditation techniques the dying person can use in order to unite with ultimate reality and escape rebirth. The after-death *bardo* experience is said to proceed as follows: The *bardo* of the time of death begins "after respiration has ceased and before the ceasing of the inner breath" (Dorje, 2005, 229). The *bardo* of the time of death is said to be short in the average person, but longer in experienced meditators. The person is exhorted not to be distracted but to "cultivate an altruistic intention" while the elements that make up the body dissolve in order—earth, water, fire, and wind, with accompanying symptoms of loss of function—until only consciousness is left (Dorje, 2005, pp. 229–230). When consciousness emerges from the body, those who are able to view an inner radiance and recognize it will "attain the Buddha-body of Reality," and "achieve liberation" (Dorje, 2005, p. 232). If liberation does not happen, the person enters the second *bardo* of death, that of "reality" (Dorje, 2005, p. 234).

After death, the individual is believed to experience the *bardo* of reality, which gives the person the chance to view the "chosen meditational deity" (Dorje, 2005, pp. 234, 268). In this state, the person can be "liberated by the recognition of the inner radiance [of the path]" (Dorje, 2005, p. 232). However, those who do not immediately have this recognition are confronted by a variety of visions—of lights and rays accompanied by frightening sounds, and "peaceful" and "wrathful" deities (Dorje, 2005, p. 235). At each vision, the person has the opportunity to understand these visions as either 1) "natural" or 2) products of the mind. In what way they are natural, and to what extent they are a part of the individual's own mind, will be discussed below; the question of the reality of the expected afterlife visions has led to some of the variation in

translation of key terms. Individuals who proceed through the bardo of reality are asked to choose between enticing dim lights and startling pure lights. If attracted to the pure light, they will “dissolve into rainbow light” and “attain Buddhahood” (Dorje, 2005, p. 239). Those who are attracted to dim lights or fear the pure lights will continue to wander.

If unable to attain Buddhahood from the *bardo* of reality, the person enters the *bardo* of rebirth, where there are yet additional opportunities to attain liberation—primarily through controlling the emotions, thereby obstructing the womb entrances of potential mothers. If finally still attracted to life through “attachment” and “aversion,” the person can still hope to influence the type of rebirth—preferably as a human, god or resident of a buddhic garden of delight, where further opportunities for liberation await (Dorje, 2005, p. 300). Those who fail to do so may be reborn as an “antigod,” animal, “anguished spirit,” or “hell being,” unfavorable incarnations which make liberation extremely difficult (Dorje, 2005, p. 295). The author of the text stresses the importance of using its prayers, meditation techniques and rituals during life so as not to be confused after death. “It is essential to cultivate this experience [of reality] during one’s lifetime” (2005, p. 271).

The vivid descriptions of the after-death state, often read outside of cultural context, have given rise to multiple Western interpretations, of which the allegorical and symbolic may be taken in either a religious or psychologized direction. The remainder of this article compares approaches to translation of the terms used to describe the visions of the *bardo* of reality, and contrasts the approaches of the translators and other commentators on the *Book of the Dead*.

### Comparison of Key Terms in Three Translations

The perspectives of the three translations—Evans-Wentz as Theosophical, Fremantle and Trungpa’s as psychologized, and Dorje’s as traditional but universalizing—become apparent when we compare key terms. The perspectives are most clear in the last row of Table 1 below, which compares the terms used to describe the beings known as the “Peaceful

and Wrathful Deities,” which appear in the bardo of reality (Dorje, 2005, p. 235). The 1927 translation, by Evans-Wentz, describes the deities observed in the bardo using a Theosophical term, “thought-forms,” which has its own lineage in esoteric thought (Besant & Leadbeater, 1905). In his notes and introduction, Evans-Wentz promoted the book as a scientific description of a universal after-death experience that can be confirmed by other ancient traditions. Evans-Wentz overlaid the text with a cross-cultural East-West symbolic interpretation.

The second translation, in 1975, by Fremantle and Trungpa, describes the deities that appear after death as “my own projections” (p. 40), an overtly psychological term. The 2005 translation, by Dorje, describes those same deities as “natural luminosities of your own actual reality,” a term which is open to a variety of interpretations. Jung (1960) compared these deities to universal archetypes.

The Dorje translation also reveals its more traditional and literal agenda in the choice to address the hearer not as being of “noble” birth, as do the other two translations, but as “Child of Buddha Nature.” Elsewhere it defines Buddha Nature as “[t]he seed of enlightenment inherent within the mental continuum of all sentient beings” (2005, p. 452). The commentary by the Dalai Lama which precedes the Dorje translation states that the Buddha Nature is comprised of a “subtle body” and “subtle mind” (2005, xvi). The choice of “Buddha Nature” as a substitute for the literal term “noble” suggests that the goal is to create a translation that will be understood more universally, particularly in the West.

While Table 1 does illustrate the difference in emphasis in the translations over time, it also reveals the difficulty in translating complex religious concepts from the Tibetan. As Anne Klein, a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, explains, “These are descriptions, not translations. *Chos nyid* literally means ‘phenomena-ness’ and is often translated as true nature, real nature” (Anne Klein, personal communication, February 28, 2023). Another example is the term *man ngag*, which was translated by Evans-Wentz with the phrase “know thou thyself,” evoking ancient Greece with its archaic pronoun (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. 91). Klein points out that this

term is actually a “pith instruction,” a short aphorism used by Tibetan teachers, which can take time to unpack, and gives rise to a range of interpretations. In order to better understand what is at stake in the translation of these terms, it is important to review the Tibetan Buddhist view on what or who actually is doing the viewing in the *bardo*. Who is “thysself”?

**Tibetan Buddhist View  
of the Nature of Consciousness and Self**

Tibetan Buddhists adhere to the *anātman* view of most Buddhist schools, which teach that there is no permanent self. What we see as a “self” is said to be composed of five skandhas, a Sanskrit term that means “aggregate,” and which is used in Buddhism to describe the elements of the impermanent self to which individuals habitually cling. The skandhas include “(1) form, (2) feelings, (3) discriminations, (4) compositional factors [i.e.,

karma], and (5) consciousness” (Powers, 2007, p. 72). In other words, what we think of as a self is actually a conglomeration of qualities. Given the changing nature of the *skandhas*, Buddhists teach that it is only ignorance that makes us believe that we possess a unique and unchanging self. The goal of meditative practice is to destroy ignorance by realizing “emptiness,” a complicated concept beyond the scope of this discussion, which relates to the ephemeral nature of the material world. Once emptiness is achieved, the self and all of the skandhas will have been dissolved. As discussed in the final section of this article, the doctrine of no permanent self or soul can be seen as a key difficulty in attempts to find common ground between psychology and Buddhism. Yet it can be interpreted in a variety of ways (Siderits et al., 2011), even within Tibetan Buddhism (Jinpa, 2002). Buddhists also acknowledge that the consequences of actions

<b>Purpose of Term</b>	<b>Tibetan Term Being Described</b>	<b>Evans-Wentz (1927)</b>	<b>Fremantle and Trungpa (1975)</b>	<b>Dorje (2005)</b>
<b>To address the dead or dying person</b>	Child of <i>rigs</i> , Skt. <i>gotra</i>	Nobly born	Son of noble family	Child of Buddha Nature
<b>To name the light with which the individual is confronted in the bardo of the time of death</b>	<i>'od gsal</i>	Clear Light	Basic luminosity	[the luminosity] known as the "inner radiance"
<b>To describe the light in the bardo of the time of death</b>	<i>^chos nyid</i> (lit. “phenomena-ness” or “true nature”)	Naked, spotless intellect...like unto a transparent vacuum without circumference or centre	Dharmatā, open and empty like space, luminous void, pure naked mind without centre or circumference	Naked aware-ness...not extraneous [to your-self], but radiant, empty and without horizon or centre
<b>Direction for how to interpret the light</b>	<i>man ngag</i>	Know thou thysself	Recognize then	Personally recognize this intrinsic nature
<b>Body used to navigate the bardo of reality</b>	<i>yid lus</i>	Thought body of propensities	Mental body of unconscious tendencies	Mental body...the product of [subtle] propensities
<b>Visions of the bardo of reality</b>	<i>rang snang</i> and/or <i>rig pa</i>	Reflections of mine [my] own consciousness	My projection	Awareness, manifesting naturally of itself
<b>Peaceful and wrathful deities</b>	<i>zhi khro</i>	Thine own thought-forms	My own projections	Natural luminosities of your own actual reality

**Table 1.** Comparison of terms across three translations of The Tibetan Book of the Dead<sup>3</sup>

may follow an individual, from one lifetime to the next (Sarao, 2004).

Even if the permanent self does not exist, its non-material parts find a vehicle after death from which to operate. Buddhists have developed a variety of ways of looking at the status of an individual independent of a physical body and of the *skandhas*. This vehicle, described as something like a mind body, is what is believed to be viewing of the visions in the *bardo*, even though the individual is dead and the self is unreal. Dorje (2005) describes this vehicle as a “mental body,” *yid-lus*, “[t]he non-corporeal body assumed during the intermediate state of rebirth, which is said to have an initial similitude to the physical body of the previous life” (p. 490). In a later commentary on the *Book of the Dead*, Fremantle (2003) said that this body is “determined by the karmic imprints or tendencies in the source consciousness” (2003, p. 346). However, the consciousness is disoriented because it no longer has the physical frame of reference.

#### **Dorje Translation: Traditional and Universalizing**

Before reviewing the psychologized and Theosophical interpretations of the visions in the *bardo* of reality, we will focus on the more traditional translation by Dorje. In calling these visions “natural luminosities of your own actual reality,” which “manifest naturally,” Dorje (2005) raised the question of what is “natural” (2005, p. 235). The Tibetan word for “manifest naturally” is *rang-snang* which, Dorje said, “refers to the non-dual mode in which the natural radiance...of pristine cognition...arises as intrinsic awareness” (2005, p. 493).

Lama Tenzin Samphel, in a 2013 lecture translated and commented on by Klein, clarified the use of the term:

What is in our own mind appears to our own mind. It is an ontological explanation. The mind in the *bardo* is sensitive. What you think appears. In the *bardo*, when occupying a subtle body, the mind and appearances come more powerfully. (Samphel, & Klein, 2013)

Therefore, rather than being dismissed as “unreal,” the visions are to be recognized as “natural.”

According to Klein:

The most literal translation of this term is “self-appearance” or “self-perception.” *Snang* can be either agent or object. Dorje has chosen to translate it as “naturally manifest,” probably to indicate that the appearance arises “naturally” in the sense of there are no external causes. (Samphel & Klein, 2013)

The Dorje (2005) translation provides further context:

[I]t is essential to recognize, with certainty, that whatever terrifying experiences may arise, they are natural manifestations [of actual reality]. O, Child of Buddha Nature, when your mind and body separate, the pure [luminous] apparitions of reality itself, will arise: subtle and clear, radiant and dazzling, naturally bright and awesome, shimmering like a mirage on a plain in summer. Do not fear them! Do not be terrified! Do not be awed! They are the natural luminosities of your own actual reality. Therefore recognize them [as they are]!” Brackets in original (Dorje, 2005, pp. 235–236)

It may be difficult for Westerners at first to grasp that these visions, some of which are of the terrifying, blood-drinking, “wrathful deities,” are meant to be realized as “natural.” A further clarification of the concept is given by Dzogchen Ponlop (2006):

The deities that appear now are the basic truth, or intrinsic nature, of our mind. They are the reflection in space of the enlightened qualities that are inseparable from the primordial wisdom that is the actual nature of our mind. This fundamental state of awareness, the ground nature of mind itself, is the origin of all appearances and is thus the source of the expression of the peaceful and wrathful deities. (2006, p. 175)

In spite of these attempts at clarification, the average non-Buddhist yet may have difficulty understanding how and why these visions and deities are considered as a type of reality and prerequisite for enlightenment. Let us take a step backwards in time to 1927 to more clearly understand the Theosophical approach to translation, which also poses difficulties.

### Evans-Wentz and the Theosophical Influence on the 1927 Translation

Theosophy, which reached its peak in the early twentieth century, was an attempt to harmonize science with a revival of esoteric Eastern and Western religion (Hammer, 2004). Its leaders played an important role in protecting Eastern religion from destruction by colonial powers (Lubelsky, 2012; Prothero, 2011). Nevertheless, they also appropriated and revised Eastern doctrines as they saw fit (Chajes, 2019; Prophet, 2018). During the early twentieth century, Westerners who discovered Buddhist principles, often in Theosophical translations, tried to harmonize them with the nascent field of psychology, a trend which became only more common as the century progressed, and figures such as Jung discovered both Eastern and Western esoteric texts in translations by prominent Theosophists (see, for example, Goodrick-Clarke, 2013, 296–297).

Evans-Wentz was an American Theosophist who studied anthropology at Oxford before travelling to India. He believed that in overseeing the translation of Tibetan texts he was helping recover ancient wisdom that was fundamentally the same in cultures around the world, and that as a Theosophist, he was meant to restore the original sense of Hindu and Buddhist religion (Lopez, 2000). Theosophists generally support belief in karma and reincarnation, but they depart from traditional Hindu and Buddhist views in supporting a progressive trajectory that rejects the possibility of the incarnation of humans as animals (Chajes, 2019; Prophet, 2018). They claimed that Tibetan Buddhism had been corrupted, and that the true interpretation of Buddhism and all major religions could be found in secret schools run by enlightened teachers who communicated with Blavatsky and others whose wisdom represented a more pure and ancient faith that had been everywhere the same (Hammer, 2004; Prophet, 2018). This idea dates to the Renaissance and is known as *Prisca theologia*.<sup>4</sup>

The notion that a hidden group of teachers in India and Tibet possessed wisdom that was not offered to the general public and was superior to

official religious positions was a common trope of romantic Orientalism in the sense of misreading the East in an essentializing and ahistorical manner (Said, 2003). Blavatsky in her voluminous writings described individuals she met in India and called “Mahatmas” (See Rudbøg & Sand, 2019). Her claims were controversial, and much popular and scholarly debate has raged around the identity of these individuals (See, for example, Harrison, 1997; Johnson, 1994). However, Blavatsky did have access to genuine Hindu and Buddhist texts, and her goal was to harmonize them with Western religion.

Her attitude toward Eastern religion mingled Eastern and Western thought. She wrote in her first major work, the 1877 *Isis Unveiled*:

It is by the spirit of the teachings of both Buddha and Pythagoras, that we can so easily recognize the identity of their doctrines.... Every man may become a Buddha, says the doctrine. And so throughout the interminable series of ages we find now and then men who more or less succeed in *uniting* themselves "with God," as the expression goes, with their *own spirit*, as we ought to translate. (Blavatsky, 1960, p. 1:291)

Blavatsky (and Evans-Wentz after her) approached Eastern scripture with the conviction that she could uncover its hidden meaning, and her interpretations were often colored by Western traditions. Theosophy developed its own set of definitions for mystical experiences, based in part on Western esotericism, such as Kabbalah and Hermetic writings, as well as on some translations of Hindu and Buddhist texts. In Blavatsky's second major work, *The Secret Doctrine*, she declared that she was in possession of commentaries on Tibetan manuscripts, such as those becoming available in the West through translation at the time. Blavatsky described these texts as being “full of myths, blunders and errors,” while hers preserved even more ancient tradition (Cited in Lopez, 1998, p. 51). Nevertheless, even while repurposing Asian philosophy, she generally adopted a reverential tone.

Theosophical viewpoints today may offend both historians of religion and Tibetan Buddhists. Nevertheless, Theosophical translations of Buddhist writings should be viewed in historical context.



When they were created, most Westerners viewed Eastern religion as superstitious or dangerous nonsense. As noted by scholar of Buddhism Donald Lopez, “if Evans-Wentz had not been so audacious, we would not have had the books and their wide influence” (2000, p. H). Theosophists did the world a service in preserving and disseminating these texts. Aside from important departures, the Dorje and Evans-Wentz translations bear many similarities. A needed corrective has been applied by Lopez, Cuevas and other scholars seeking to identify the errors introduced by Theosophical theology.<sup>5</sup> Although historians disagree that it is possible to proclaim the same truth in all religions, nevertheless, comparisons between Eastern and Western practices of meditation, contemplation and enlightenment will continue to be drawn (See Kapstein, 2004).

### **Untangling the Role of Dawa-Samdup in the First Translation**

Evans-Wentz could not have produced the 1927 translation without the Tibetan Kazi Dawa-Samdup. The only information available about his co-translator comes from Evans-Wentz (1960), who said that when they met, Dawa-Samdup was the headmaster of the Maharaja’s Bhutia Boarding School in Sikkim, an Indian state bordering Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan. Dawa-Samdup was born in 1868, and served as translator for the British Government from 1886 to 1893, in Sikkim. He was said to have been initiated by a Bhutanese guru, Norbu. Although he contemplated a monastic lifestyle, he married and sought a career in order to support his family. After working on the translation with Evans-Wentz, he was appointed in 1920 as a Lecturer in Tibetan at the University of Calcutta; however, he was unaccustomed to the hot climate, and died in 1922, before the translation was published. He was also the author of a Tibetan-English dictionary published by the University of Calcutta (1960, pp. 79–81).

Although there is no record that Dawa-Samdup was ever a lama, Evans-Wentz (1960) called him one, and wrote that he was qualified as translator by his

profound lamaic training, his fervent faith in the higher yogic teachings of The Great Perfectionist

School of Guru Padma Sambhava...his practical knowledge of the Occult Sciences as taught to him by his late Guru in Bhutan, and his marvelous command both of English and of Tibetan. (1960, pp. 78–79)

Evans-Wentz uses Dawa-Samdup’s credentials to convince the reader of the work’s authenticity. However, with the translator’s death coming five years before the volume was published, it is unclear how much he was aware of the volume’s commentary and notes. Evans-Wentz informed readers that Dawa-Samdup had dictated the notes to him (1960). But he also admitted the difficulties of translation, and that revisions might be necessary in the future, and that his own knowledge of Tibetan was “almost as nothing” (1960, p. 78). His goal in working with Dawa-Samdup, as he described it, was to “keep as closely to the sense of the text as the idiomatic structures of the Tibetan and English tongues permit” (p. 78). However, he also admitted to an occasional departure from “a strictly literal translation” in order to convey the meaning that a “real” lama would take from the text (p. 78). And he acknowledged receiving translation advice from Dr. Johan Van Manen, “Secretary of the Asiatic Society, Calcutta” (1960, p. xxi).

### **Thought-Forms, “Natural” Manifestations, and the Seeds of Psychologized Interpretations**

Evans-Wentz unabashedly used a Theosophical framework in presenting the *Book*, declaring that he had received a “true” interpretation of the text through “various philosophers, both Hindu and Buddhist” (1960, p. 42). He claimed that Dawa-Samdup had agreed that Blavatsky had access to “higher” Tibetan teachings, and that it was permissible to “correct” the allegedly corrupt text (1960, p. 7n1). The most obvious of his “corrections” was to dispute the *Book’s* reference to the possibility that humans could be reborn as animals. “Evans-Wentz...claims vehemently that humans can only be reincarnated as humans, animals as animals, and so forth” (Cuevas, 2003, p. 7). This dispute gave rise to a symbolic approach. Evans-Wentz informed readers that when the *Book* describes the possibility of rebirth in an animal realm, it is using esoteric language, which

is really referring to birth “amongst human beings ‘resembling the brute order’” (1960, p. 185). In his introduction, he had already carefully expounded the Theosophical doctrine of soul as an “evolving principle” whose seed “cannot incarnate in...a body foreign to its evolved characteristics” (1960, pp. 42–43). Such a progressive approach to reincarnation appealed to optimistic Westerners (see Chajes, 2019).

Another of the revolutionary shifts in attitude that may have been catalyzed or assisted by the Evans-Wentz translation is the notion that Westerners needed to pay more attention to end-of-life care. Evans-Wentz argued in favor of a “science of Death,” and a “trustworthy Art of Dying” to be practiced in the West, and the dangers of overmedicalized death (1960, p. xv). His avant-garde proposal was certainly taken up in succeeding decades.

Evans-Wentz (1960) was also the first to realize that the text might be framed as both “scientific” and “psychological,” and he used psychological language to clarify the text, even while asserting the superiority of a religious approach. He declared that the *Book* offered “a psychical science far in advance of that, still in its infancy, which forms the work of the Society for Psychical Research” (1960, p. 77). The society’s members, particularly Frederic W. H. Myers, had made important contributions to nineteenth-century psychology and influenced Freud and Jung (See Ellenberger, 1970).

A term like the “subconscious” came to mind in Evans-Wentz’s (1960) attempt to explain the “Ether Element” that appeared in the *bardo*. *Ether*, he stated, could be rendered as “the subconsciousness,...a transcendental consciousness higher than the normal consciousness in mankind, and as yet normally undeveloped” ( p. 7). He also used the term “psyche” in his commentary, recognizing the utility of a concept like soul and the need for cross-disciplinary dialogue. In the third of his three forewords, written in 1955, he expressed hope that Western scientists and psychologists would one day be able to prove the reality of the *bardo*. However, he predicted that it was not psychoanalysis but “meditation and an integrating self-analysis, such as the master *yogins* employ and the Buddha prescribes” that would lead to a “higher understanding of the human psyche” (1960, p. x).

Buddhism, therefore, in his eyes, would ultimately trump psychology.

A third important Theosophical innovation with the text was the use of the term “thought-forms” to translate *rang-snang*, a term that explains the nature of the peaceful and wrathful deities (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. 103). As noted, Fremantle and Trungpa used the psychological term “projections,” while Dorje applied the vaguer “natural manifestations.” In Theosophical parlance, a “thought-form” is a mental creation that can take on a life of its own and go on to interact with physical objects and people (Besant & Leadbeater, 1905). The definition incorporates elements of metaphysical religion of the nineteenth century (Deveney, 2015). No doubt the Tibetan term seemed appropriate to Evans-Wentz. However, it had multiple layers of meaning in Theosophy. As explained by Theosophists Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater:

If the man’s thought or feeling is directly connected with someone else, the resultant thought-form moves towards that person and discharges itself upon his astral and mental bodies. If the man’s thought is about himself, or is based upon a personal feeling, as the vast majority of thoughts are, it hovers round its creator and is always ready to react upon him whenever he is for a moment in a passive condition. For example, a man who yields himself to thoughts of impurity...is very likely to feel the vibration of impurity stealing insidiously upon him. If the consciousness of the man be to any extent awakened, he may perceive this and cry out that he is being tempted by the devil; yet the truth is that the temptation is from without only in appearance, since it is nothing but the natural reaction upon him of his own thought-forms. Each man travels through space enclosed within a cage of his own building, surrounded by a mass of the forms created by his habitual thoughts...Thus until the man learns complete control of thought and feeling, he sees nothing as it really is, since all his observations must be made through this medium, which distorts and colours everything like badly-made glass. (1905, p. 26)

Theosophy may seem like so much corrupted Buddhism, and indeed, there had already been cross-pollination of Eastern thought in Western metaphysics before Blavatsky's odyssey to the East (Lubelsky, 2012; Partridge, 2013). But it must have seemed obvious to Evans-Wentz that the idea expressed in *The Book of the Dead* that one could be confused and frightened by the products of one's own mind could be explained by the Theosophical "thought-form." However, it is also clear that *thought-form* is not entirely analogous to *rang-snang*. Evans-Wentz repeats *thought-forms* several times in his translation, stating that the "sounds, lights, or rays" of the *bardo* are "thine own thought-forms" (1960, p. 104). He has clearly missed some of the nuance attached to the definition of mental body seen in Ponlop (2006) and the descriptions of Klein and Samphel (2013).

To make things even less clear, Evans-Wentz distanced himself further from a literal interpretation of the *Book*. He added, in a footnote, that "the student in attempting to rationalize" the visions of the *bardo* "should ever keep in mind that this treatise is essentially esoteric, being in most parts, especially from here onwards, allegorical and symbolical of psychic experiences in the after-death state" (1960, p. 105n2). The question remains, then, what are the implications of the text for efforts to understand human psychology, whose insights presumably must be applied during life?

### Psychological Interpretations

By the 1930s, the tendency to engage the psychological possibilities of the text, which had been begun by Evans-Wentz, was taken up in earnest by Jung, who chose to argue for an identity of aims, rather than superiority of either a religious or psychological interpretation. The 1957 third English edition of the Evans-Wentz translation includes a commentary by Jung, which had first appeared in a 1938 German edition. Jung (1960, p. xlix) stated that his purpose was to make the text more comprehensible to Westerners but also admitted that Tibetan Buddhists would not agree with his interpretations. His translator, R.F.C. Hull, noted the difficulty in Jung's German term *Seele*, which was not entirely equivalent with the English "soul," and

certainly seems at odds with the Buddhist belief in the impermanence of the soul. In a footnote, Hull quoted a prominent Jungian analyst, James Kirsch, who asked "Oriental readers" to set aside their understanding of the term "in order to be able to follow [Dr. Jung] with an open mind into the depths where he seeks to build a bridge from the Shore of the Orient to the Shore of the Occident" (Jung, 1960, p. xxxvn1). Such a caveat might also be applied today to Westerners who are more familiar with Buddhist theology than they would have been in 1957.

Among Jung's innovations that might clash with Buddhist theology are his comparison of the *bardo* of reality with "psychic dissociation," his interpretation of the journey through the *bardo* as a parallel to the process of psychoanalysis, and suggestion that Westerners might profitably read the book *backwards*, starting with the *bardo* preceding rebirth, which would be most likely to have left an imprint on the mind of the newborn as he enters a family and the relationships most closely analyzed by Sigmund Freud (1960, pp. xlvii–xlix). Indeed, some passages even as faithfully translated seem to uncannily support Freudian analysis:

If you are to be born as a male, you will feel attachment towards the mother and aversion towards the father. If you are to be born as a female, you will feel attachment to the father and aversion towards the mother. (Dorje, 2005, p. 291)

This passage evokes Freud's Oedipus complex, which Jung was quick to note (Jung, 1960, p. xli).

Jung continued throughout his life to attempt to reconcile psychology and Buddhism. In 1958, in a dialogue with the Zen master Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, Jung, as quoted by William Parsons (2009) declared that Buddhism and psychology had essentially the same goal. However, as Parsons points out, much was lost in translation, and Hisamatsu never agreed to the comparison. In his commentary on the *Book of the Dead*, Jung was hindered by both inadequate translation and his own preconceived ideas. Yet he nevertheless hit upon themes that would occur to better-equipped scholars.

The Fremantle and Trungpa translation (1975) is up front about its use of psychological language,

which is apparent in terms such as *projections* and *unconscious*. In her introduction, Fremantle wrote:

Concepts such as conditioning, neurotic patterns of thought, and unconscious influences, seem more appropriate in this book than conventional religious terms. In the Commentary, words such as neurosis and paranoia are used to describe not pathological conditions but the natural results of this fundamental state of mind." (1975, p. xvi)

Fremantle further explained that

"projections" indicates the way in which we see things, coloured by our own attitudes. In the text, it translates a Tibetan word (*snang*) which basically means "light" or "appearance," whether internal or external.... "Projection" overcomes this distinction between the subjective and objective. (Fremantle & Trungpa, 1975, pp. xvi–xvii)

In Freudian psychoanalytic theory, a projection is "the unwitting attribution to others of trends within a person's own personality; considered a defense mechanism when the person first represses and denies such trends" (Wulff, 1991, p. G-23). There is a great deal of difference between a *projection* and something that is "naturally manifest" or "intrinsically manifest," the term used to translate *snang* by Dorje (2005, p. 493). In fact, if the wrathful deities are to be seen as projections, they will therefore not be actual manifestations which the viewer is required to either ignore or eliminate. Describing them as *projections* can easily lead to confusion.

In a later work, Fremantle explained that she now believed *projections* was not the best word, and that she preferred *self-display* because "*projection* can sometimes give the wrong impression, especially in connection with the deities. It seems to imply something false and might suggest that the deities themselves are nothing but the projections of our dualistic consciousness" (2003, p. 257). She continued:

On the other hand, *self-display* permits the interpretation that these deities are reality. The deities are the manifestation of our

original, awakened nature, which transcends individuality. They are universal realities. When the coarse elements and skandhas dissolve, the innate deities are revealed. They are naturally present, without any effort on our part....The deities are not just psychological, nor are they created by meditation. They are our true nature, but through countless lives of wandering in samsara we have lost sight of that nature. They are not symbols of abstract ideas, but reality itself. They are the living presence of enlightenment, not ideals of enlightenment. They are what we really are, but they are far more real than we are in our present state....[I]n the bardo, we still grasp at the existence of ego or we would not be there at all, so the deities seem to appear before us as external visions. As soon as we perceive them as separate from ourselves, we react with passion or aggression or fear, and when we turn them into the objects of our emotions, they become our own projections. (2003, p. 257)

Although Fremantle's explanation is clear, it is far from obvious that a true rapprochement can be established between psychology and the aims of a Buddhist text far removed from its cultural moorings.

### **Is Psychological Language Unavoidable When Presenting the Book of the Dead to Westerners?**

In spite of the misconceptions that can creep in when translators over-apply psychological language to Tibetan texts, such terms have continued to crop up in books by both Tibetans and Westerners attempting to explain Tibetan Buddhism to lay Westerners. In his "Commentary," Chogyam Trungpa (1975) attempted to make the book more relevant by using psychological language to turn the Book into a manual for self-improvement.

The details presented here [in the Book—six realms, peaceful and wrathful deities] are very much what happens in our daily living situation, they are not just psychedelic experiences or visions that appear after death. These experiences can be seen purely in terms of the living situation; that is what we are trying to work on. In other words, the whole

thing is based on another way of looking at the psychological picture of ourselves in terms of a practical meditative situation. (p. 3)

He went on to argue that we need “some practical experience of this continual process of bardo” (Fremantle & Trungpa, 1975, p. 4). Such practical experience is advocated in the less-read early chapters of the text, which give guidance for life on earth.

Thirty years later, Coleman (2005), in his introduction to the Dorje translation, took a similar approach. He referenced Jung’s earlier introduction, and suggested that the text could yet prove “interesting” from a “psychoanalytical point of view” as providing a guide for “tracing our confused and deluded states... back through the weave of our habitual tendencies... to a pure original cognitive event” (p. 34). Coleman went on to promote a psychological interpretation as beneficial for non-Buddhist readers:

Even if we do not accept the Buddhist understanding...we can still apply the advice given in ‘The Great Liberation by Hearing’ to our everyday experience...[C]oming to the realization that what we see is the product of our own mental constructs, and that we therefore do have the potential to view our experience more insightfully, is a powerful method of releasing us from the dissonant and perhaps even fearful qualities of our own self-made, perceptual landscape (2005, p. xxxvii).

Psychological language also occurred to Jes Bertelsen, a teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, who in his 2013 book *Essence of Mind* described the consciousness that remains after death and the dissolution of the skandhas as “archetypal” and “collective,” at a “collectively unconscious and impersonal level” (2013, p. 100). Although he did not go so far as to encourage non-Buddhists to take a psychoanalytic view of the bardo, he did argue in favor of the use of psychotherapy in Buddhist practice. He advised that psychotherapy is a “prerequisite” for “the process of enlightenment” (2013, p. 49). His acknowledgement of the utility of psychotherapy is not quite the same as putting it on an equal footing with Buddhism. In fact,

like Evans-Wentz, he elevated Buddhism above psychology.

The question of priority of aims among those studying Buddhism or analytical psychology or both from a Western perspective often devolves to the observation that Buddhists are devoted to the eradication of the self, while the goal of analysis is to strengthen and develop the ego, or self. As mentioned above, the doctrine of “no-self,” or *anañman*, can be interpreted in many ways even within Tibetan Buddhism and clearly Buddhists do believe that actions taken in one life can influence an individual in the next life.

Those who have attempted to bridge the divide between Buddhism and psychology do so by either describing their differences and declaring both projects to be valid (with one perhaps taking priority), or by focusing on their similarities and minimizing the differences. Bertelsen attempts the former when he states that “self-development is the process of expanding, integrating and balancing your personality...Spiritual development is the renunciation of one’s ego and personality” (2013, p. 20). In Bertelsen’s view, then, psychological development is a prerequisite for spiritual development.

Psychotherapist Radmila Moacanin (2003) focuses on the similarities in her harmonizing book *The Essence of Jung’s Psychology and Tibetan Buddhism: Western and Eastern Paths to the Heart*. While acknowledging that there may be no meeting between metaphysical and psychological categories, she finds resonance between the Buddhist goal of the destruction of the self and the Jungian goal of individuation (p. 77). For Jung, as she understands him, the goal is to place the ego, with its “distortions and projections,” at the service of the “Self...the totality of the psyche” (p. 84). Jung, who also engaged with both Tibetan and Zen Buddhism, wrote, as cited by Moacanin, that non-Buddhists should realize that “a conscious ego and a cultivated understanding must first be produced through analysis before one can even think about abolishing egohood” (cited in Moacanin, 2003, p. 85).

Psychotherapists have noted that Western Buddhists may be subject to anxiety around the question of self and its aims. For example, Judith

Pickering (2019) identifies a patient suffering a “psychotic episode” at a Buddhist retreat, and describes a way forward through “loving kindness and compassion” (767). Among the insights from psychotherapists who are also Buddhist are those of Robert Gunn, a Zen Buddhist whose 2009 “Two Arrows Meeting in Mid-air” is a vivid metaphor for the collision between psychology and Buddhism:

How well I recall the evening in *dokusan* (a private interview with a teacher in Zen) when my first Zen teacher told me that psychology and Buddhism are ever at odds, because psychology is concerned with creating a self and Buddhism is concerned with getting rid of the self and attaining no-self.” (p. 19)

Gunn chose to take the discussion as his own personal koan. Also working in a harmonizing direction, he declared that he had discovered the “common source and common goal shared by Buddhism and psychotherapy” (2009, p. 19). The source is “the experience of suffering” and the goal is “to put an end to it” (p. 19). “Buddhism and psychotherapy both seek to overcome a sense of alienation and to recover an original vitality that has got lost or has been buried under social conditioning and nonfacilitating environments”. (p. 19). Psychoanalyst Mark Finn (2003) argues that historically, Tibetan Buddhists learned to “represent, in narrative, . . . basic psychoanalytic discoveries,” and calls for a revitalization of the conversation between Buddhism and “a psychoanalysis that admits the mystical” (pp. 101, 115).

Jung (1960) suggested a solution to the problem of whether or not the *bardo* realm (and thus perhaps the self?) is real. He proposed approaching the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, rather than with a stingy “European ‘either-or,’” with a “magnificently affirmative ‘both-and’” (p. xxxvii). He went on to offer his own koan:

This statement may appear objectionable to the Western philosopher, for the West loves clarity and unambiguity; consequently, one philosopher clings to the position “God is”, while another clings equally fervently to the negation, “God is not.” (p. xxxvii)

Jung’s argument might be usefully updated today. Debates regarding self/no-self, emptiness, God/no-God will no doubt continue as each generation develops new understandings of ancient beliefs. And it seems worthwhile to observe that if, as Tibetan Buddhists believe, the *Book of the Dead* is a *terma* (treasure) texts were discovered or telepathically received in Tibet in the fourteenth century (Dorje, 2005, p. xli), which elaborated on teachings from the eighth century, themselves revitalizing Indian Buddhist teachings of the second century and before, why cannot modern-day teachers continue to uncover new ways to make the scriptures relevant to new audiences? Whether or not one believes in life after death, it is also worth noting that the early chapters of the Great Liberation by Hearing that have received less attention are devoted to ideal practices in the three bardos of the here and now: the bardos of dreaming, meditating and living (Dorje, 2005, p. 479).

Each of the three approaches to translation has its benefits, and there has been some merging in approaches, as later translators have both built upon and corrected Evans-Wentz, and Fremantle refined her psychological approach. Coleman’s remarks on the utility of the book for Westerners deluded by their own minds (2005, xxxvii) demonstrate yet again the use of psychological language to ensure the continued appeal of the *Book of the Dead* in the West, to Buddhists and non-Buddhists. My analysis has demonstrated the importance of understanding the history of the text’s interpretation in the West, and implies that Westerners would do well to avoid dogmatic approaches from either direction. It also suggests that even the most faithful translations will continue to emphasize the psychological benefits of the Buddhist outlook, and use whatever terms are in vogue to make their point. Rather than taking offense at the psychologized renderings, it may be helpful to view them as simply a part of theological development, a process that is continual and ongoing in all religious traditions.

#### Notes

1. The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Anne C. Klein/Rigzin Drolma,

in whose graduate seminar on reincarnation at Rice University this article had its inception.

2. "Intermediate states" is the literal translation of the Tibetan bardo, but the Tibetan word is also often used in English translations, due to its familiarity to Western audiences.
3. Dorje, 2005, pp. 228, 234, 236; Evans-Wentz, 1960, pp. 91, 101, 104; Fremantle & Trungpa, 1975, pp. 35, 40, 41.
4. "Prisca theologia," which means "early or ancient theology," originated in Renaissance humanism and held that an ancient but lost or forgotten wisdom religion as taught by figures like Hermes and Moses predated Christianity and was in harmony with it (Hanegraaff, 2006). "Perennial philosophy," a term proposed in the sixteenth century by Agostino Steuco (Hanegraaff, 2006), holds that a single true philosophy exists in all cultures and is continually rediscovered. Aldous Huxley revived this term with his 1944 book, *The Perennial Philosophy*, which attempted to harmonize a variety of religious and philosophical ideas (Hanegraaff, 2006).
5. The influence of Theosophists on the historical study of religions, particularly the transmission of Asian religion to the West, has not been fully appreciated, and was the subject of a conference at Harvard Divinity School in 2019 (Josephson Storm, 2022; Stang, 2022; Stang & Josephson-Storm, forthcoming).

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