AFTER DEATH

Hypnotic Regression and Tibetan Bardo

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Dr Joel Whitton is a Canadian psychiatrist who in 1974, at the age of twenty-eight, performing hypnotic regression on a volunteer called Paula Considine, “stumbled upon the bardo” (*Life Between Life*, p. 39). He had already conducted many past life regression sessions, but “it had never occurred to him that active life goes on between incarnations” (pp. 39-40). The Tibetan term *bardo* generally indicates the intermediate state between a death and a possible rebirth, what Whitton calls ‘interlife’. Paula in a deep trance was recounting a past existence in which she was named Martha, when Dr Whitton interrupted her saying: “Go to the life before you were Martha…” (p. 43). Then she started describing herself as being “in the sky”. “I’am… waiting… to… be… born” (p. 44), she said to the astonished psychiatrist. “Could it be that Paula's unconscious mind was somehow tapping into the fabled *bardo* of the ancient Tibetans?” (p. 45).

The following year, inspired by the groundbreaking publication of *Life After Life* by Dr Raymon Moody, Dr Whitton decided to explore the “mysteries of the *bardo*” and discovered that, while near-death experiences are limited, because they allow one only to “‘peek around the corner’ into the interlife”, the subjects undergoing hypnotic regression “encounter no such restricting influence on their journeys into the next world because the transition has been completed” (p. 53).

The narration of the research on the interlife carried out by Joel Whitton is due to the collaboration of Joe Fisher (1947-2001), investigative writer specialized in metaphysical subjects. Previously Fisher had published in *The Case for Reincarnation* his preliminary account of a case studied by Dr Whitton, later produced integrally in chapter 11 of the book here reviewed.

The first six chapters of *Life Between Life* are devoted to illustrate the results of Dr Whitton’s research. Chapters 7-12 report six cases, where the data related to past lives are interpreted in light of the interlife. The second-last chapter offers some instructions on visualisations that facilitate the “self-exploration of the interlife”. The last chapter is a final reflection on the therapeutic and spiritual relevance of interlife knowledge. “The *bardo* is where we belong,” Whitton and Fisher assert elated, “planet Earth being no more than a very necessary testing ground conducive to spiritual evolution” (p. 253).

Given that premise, the reader unfamiliar with the Buddhist doctrine of the *bardo* (in Sanskrit *antarābhava*) could expect the book by Whitton and Fisher to confirm or even clarify the teaching of the so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (TBD); on the contrary, in spite of the reiterated references to the *bardo*, the aforesaid Indo-Tibetan tradition not only is misinterpreted, but its very essence is explicitly challenged.

“The *bardo* is where we belong”. So, what is the *bardo*? The TBD delineates three principal types of *bards* related to the process of death and rebirth: the *bardo* of the moment of dying, the *bardo* of dharmatā, and the *bardo* of becoming. The first intermediate state goes from the cessation of breathing to the moment the consciousness leaves the body. During the second intermediate state the consciousness is definitively out of the body and perceives the manifestations of its own ‘true reality’ (dharmatā). “Blinding light, overwhelming illumination, is the predominant feature of entry into the life between life” (p. 57), Whitton and Fisher declare; but according to the TBD this kind of experience is peculiar to the second *bardo*. The third intermediate state is characterized mainly by the assessment of one’s past life and ends with one making one’s way towards rebirth. The ultimate aim of the TBD teaching is not reaching the *bardo* as the place “where we belong”, but achieving
liberation from *samsāra* – the cycle of rebirths – in one of the three intermediate states: if it does not happen in the first *bardo*, one will try to realize it in the second or in the third *bardo*.

Whitton and Fisher consider access to the *bardo* equivalent to entering into ‘metaconsciousness’, which means “to be one with the timeless oversoul which is the invisible cornerstone of the powers of the individual” (p. 62). The oversoul is described as that “which contains a multiplicity of personalities that have materialized in previous existences” (p. 63). Such a notion could partially tally with the Buddhist concept of ‘ground consciousness’ (Skr. *ālāya-vijñāna*), which is the psychic base of *samsāra*, having the function of preserving the karmic energies of past lives; in fact, it is just in the third intermediate state that these energies surface powerfully.

What happens, according to Dr Whitton’s research, when one reaches the *bardo* “where we belong”? There are two fundamental events: the meeting with the ‘judgement board’ and the writing of the ‘karmic script’ for the next life (p. 51). “The testimony of Dr Whitton’s subjects thoroughly endorses the existence of a board of judgement” (p. 64). It is charmingly depicted as “a group of wise, elderly beings – usually three in number, occasionally four, and in rare instances as many as seven – perceived in a variety of guises. They can be of indeterminate identity or they may take on the appearance of mythological gods or religious masters” (ibid.). “The members of this etheric tribunal are highly advanced spiritually and may even have completed their cycle of earthly incarnations. Knowing intuitively everything there is to be known about the person who stands before them, their role is to assist that individual in evaluating the life that has just passed and, eventually, to make recommendations concerning the next incarnation” (p. 65). “The judges radiate a restorative, healing energy that abolishes any handicaps and assuages all guilt” (p. 66).

Although the description of the karmic judges has reassuring tones, the judgement is not always perceived by the examinees as a pleasant event. “If there is a private hell in the life between life it is the moment when the soul presents itself for review. This is when remorse, guilt and self-recrimination for failings in the last incarnation are vented with a visceral intensity that produces anguish and bitter tears on a scale that can be quite unsettling to witness” (p. 65).

What is the reason for the life review in the presence of the karmic judges? “For the purpose of self-assessment, the soul is confronted with an instantaneous panoramic flashback which contains every single detail of the last incarnation” (p. 67). “The knowledge of self gleaned from the review process equips the soul to make the vital decisions that will determine the form of its next incarnation. But the soul does not act alone. The decision making is heavily influenced by the members of the judgement board who, mindful of the soul’s karmic debts and its need for specific lessons, give wide-ranging counsel” (p. 69). “The judge’s recommendations are made according to what the soul needs, not what it wants” (ibid.). “Planning for the next life is frequently undertaken in consultation with other souls with whom bonds have been established over many lifetimes” (p. 70). “The ‘karmic script’ often calls for renewed involvement with people who have figured, pleasantly or unpleasantly, in previous incarnations” (ibid.).

The meeting with the ‘judgement board’ and the writing of the ‘karmic script’ for the next life are events recounted also in the section of TBD that describes the *bardo* of becoming, but the interpretation given to those events is quite different. In Buddhism, as well as in Hinduism, the judgement board is presided over by Yama, the ‘King of Death’, assisted by a variety of attendants. Generally Yama personifies death, as a prelude to a karmic rebirth; however, in the context of the *bardo* Yama is portrayed as an individual, although his role could be held by many entities. Because of their function and the fear that it arouses, Yama and his acolytes are described as terrifying; nevertheless, their appearance is deceptive and has to be recognised as an illusion in order to achieve liberation from *samsāra*: “Outside and distinct from your own bewildering perceptions, Yama, gods, malevolent forces, the bull-headed Rakṣa and so on, do not substantially exist. Recognise this!” If the recognition happens, the liberation will be possible also in the third intermediate state, because the *bardo* of becoming is not at all the place “where we belong”. But, in case liberation is not achieved, karmic rebirth in a lower or higher state will be inevitable.

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In Buddhist texts the transition from body to body is compared to the flame that passes from candle to candle (Life, cit., p. 88). This assertion refers to Milindapañña, a non-canonical Buddhist text that narrates the supposed dialogue, dating back to the 2nd century B.C.E., between the Indo-Greek king Milinda (Menander I Soter) and the monk Nāgasena.

Unlike the misleading interpretation by Whitton and Fisher, the true meaning of the cited metaphor denotes that there is no real transition, transference or transmigration of a soul from body to body, analogously to the flame that does not pass from candle to candle; rather, just as a candle flame can affect an unlit candle, kindling it, but without passing its flame to it, similarly with its karmic energy a consciousness in the intermediate state can condition the formation of a new psychophysical organism, but without becoming its conscious subject. The passage from Milindapañña goes as follows:

“Can there be any rebirth where there is no transmigration?”
“Yes there can, just as a man can light one oil-lamp from another but nothing moves from one lamp to the other; or as a pupil can learn a verse by heart from a teacher but the verse does not transmigrate from teacher to pupil.”

According to the Buddha’s teachings, that even Buddhists have a hard time understanding deeply, rebirth as human or animal is not the transmigration (saṅkamati) of the same consciousness, mind or soul from body to body, but the connection (paṭisandhi) that is established initially between the gandhabba in the intermediate state – i.e. the stream of consciousness that comprises the karmic energies of the past lives – and the zygote in the mother’s womb. The psyche or mental consciousness of the new life is not the same entity of the former life, nevertheless it is not even completely different from that, having inherited its karma. The mechanism of the psychic heredity of karma is comparable to biological heredity, which is exemplified by Nāgasena resorting to the simile of mango seeding. Accordingly, a quite evocative translation of the Sanskrit word saṃsāra could be ‘psychic recycling’, because the individual mind unaware of its real nature is recycled, as a tributary of a main stream of consciousness, in a new form of life. The rebirth or reincarnation considered as transmigration is solely an easy but erroneous definition of saṃsāra from the ego’s point of view. The person identifying herself or himself with sensations, emotions and memories, of both the present life and other lives inherited psychically, may well believe that such contents constitutes her or his individual identity, but the self so conceived is merely an impermanent illusory image. If the illusoriness of this self-perception is recognized and overcome thanks to the awareness of one’s true nature, that is unborn and unceasing, then liberation from saṃsāra is possible at any point. As Padmasambhava states in the TBD, “If you have this understanding, virtue and vice dissolve naturally; if it is lacking, then whatever action you perform, whether it is virtuous or not, you will not transcend being recycled in the upper or lower states of existence.”

A strong objection to the notion of saṃsāra as psychic recycling could be the observation that there are important researches conducted on children with spontaneous past-life memories, for example by Ian Stevenson and Hemendra Banarjee, which seem to confirm the common conception of reincarnation; but Whitton and Fisher too admit that “it cannot be proven that a person with memories of a previous existence actually was that remembered individual” (Life, cit., p. 98). This notwithstanding, supposing that one really lives personally many lives, the fundamental question is: why one does not remember them? “This amnesia is invaluable”, Whitton and Fisher assure, “in that it prevents endless pining and homesickness for the grandeur that has been left behind and

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4 See T. W. Rhys Davids, op. cit., pp. 63, 65 (II.2.1).
5 Ibid., p. 120 (II.6.9).
allows the individual to embark on the new life unhindered by confusing echoes of past deeds and misdeeds…. Just as it is pointless for a student to be furnished with answers before sitting down to write an examination, so the test of life requires that certain information is temporally withheld from the conscious mind” (p. 80).

Even though the law of amnesia casts an obscuring veil on the mind eager for direct ascertain- ment, Whitton and Fisher confidently remark that the evidence gathered from the hypnotic regressions “suggests that the shuttle of rebirth is an evolutionary requirement which grants us the means to learn from experience and, through learning, to realize our vast potential. One life is simply not enough…. There is no substitute for personal experience and only by choosing different bodies, according to our needs, can we learn from a multitude of perspectives” (p. 101).

Although the book contains some confused references to the Tibetan bardo, Buddha’s teachings and Upaniṣad doctrines, evidently the notion of reincarnation revealed by Dr Whitton is not equivalent to the Indian conception of samsāra. Fisher notes this discrepancy clarifying complacently that, “Whereas Hindu and Buddhist texts portray mankind strapped to the wheel of rebirth by the thongs of karma, Dr Whitton’s subjects present a more instructional view of karma's workings. Picture the entire human race at work in a cosmic classroom where, over the course of many lifetimes, we set ourselves lesson after lesson” (pp. 104-105).

Life Between Life was the first publication to inquiry into the “mysteries of the bardo” through hypnotic regression. Independent research, carried out by the Californian hypnotherapist Dr Michael Newton has substantially confirmed the discoveries of the Canadian psychiatrist, yet accumulating much more data, that make Dr Whitton’s work appear basically pioneering. Nevertheless, while in 1986 Whitton and Fisher vaguely intuited and diplomatically indicated the difference between their understanding of reincarnation and the Buddhist and Hindu visions of samsāra, Dr Newton in his two main books published in 1994 and 2004 seems seraphically to pass over this not irrelevant question. On the contrary, in 2007 the English author Ian Lawton with the collaboration of the psychotherapist Andy Tomlinson published their work entitled The Wisdom of the Soul: Profound Insight from the Life Between the Lives, which explicitly addresses the issue. In this book, based mainly on information gathered from the hypnotic regressions conducted by Tomlinson, Lawton reaffirms more emphatically the conceptual distinction already underlined by Whitton and Fisher: “our sources are unanimous that the purpose of reincarnation is for individual souls to learn and grow by experience. This is clearly fundamentally opposed to the idea that any soul can break free from the cycle at any point, merely by recognizing the illusion of individuality. These two views cannot be reconciled, and are mutually exclusive.” Lawton and Tomlinson define the two views respectively ‘Experience Model’ and ‘Illusion Model’, but a well-informed Buddhist reading the six cases discussed in the book by Whitton and Fisher would have no difficulty in concluding that the ‘Experience Model’ is just an expression of the illusion of samsāra pointed out by the Buddha.

Look upon the world as empty,
Mogharāja, ever mindful;
uprooting the view of self,
you may thus be one who overcomes death.
So regarding the world,
one is not seen by the King of Death.9

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7 Dr Newton’s first account of his research was the book Journey of Souls: Case Studies of Life Between Lives, published in 1994. It was followed by Destiny of Souls: New Case Studies of Life Between Lives, published in 2004.