



An Eschatological Study of the Tibetan Book of the Dead and the Garuda Purana

Smaranika Tripathy
University of Delhi

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Abstract

This research paper aims at a comparative analysis of two ancient religious texts, the Tibetan Book of the Dead and the Garuda Purana, exploring their respective beliefs, rituals, and views on death, Afterlife, and reincarnation. Through multidisciplinary approach, this study aims to highlight the similarities and differences between these two texts, shedding light on their cultural significance and theological implications.

Keywords: Tibetan Book of the Dead, Garuda Purana, comparative study, death rituals, afterlife beliefs, reincarnation

I. Introduction

The Tibetan Book of the Dead and the Garuda Purana are two seminal texts from the Tibetan Buddhist and Hindu traditions, respectively, offering profound insights into the journey of the soul after death. Despite belonging to different religious traditions, these texts share common themes concerning the nature of existence, death, and rebirth. This research paper endeavors to analyze and compare the core teachings of these texts, elucidating their cultural and philosophical significance. Numerous scholars have explored the Tibetan Book of the Dead and the Garuda Purana from various perspectives, emphasizing their cultural, religious, and philosophical dimensions. Works by scholars such as Evans-Wentz (1927)[1], Thurman (1994)[2], and Garuda Purana: Sacred Texts (1882) provide valuable insights into the content and interpretations of these texts. However, a comprehensive comparative analysis that juxtaposes the teachings of both texts is relatively scarce in existing literature.

1.1 The Tibetan Book of the Dead is a Guide to the Afterlife:

The Tibetan Book of the Dead, known as the Bardo Thodol[3] in Tibetan, is a profound and ancient Buddhist text that serves as a guide for the deceased during the transition

between death and rebirth. Written in the 8th century by the Indian Buddhist master Padmasambhava, this text offers invaluable insights into the nature of consciousness, the process of dying, and the journey of the soul through the intermediate state known as the Bardo. The Tibetan Book of the Dead holds immense cultural and religious significance within Tibetan Buddhism. It is considered a treasure of wisdom, offering practical instructions for practitioners to navigate the complex terrain of death and rebirth. The text draws upon the teachings of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, emphasizing the impermanent and illusory nature of existence, as well as the potential for liberation through understanding and transcendence.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead is structured as a guidebook divided into various sections, each addressing different stages of the dying process and the subsequent journey of the soul. The text begins with instructions for the dying person and their attendants guiding how to recognize the signs of death and create conducive conditions for a peaceful transition. It then describes the experiences that the consciousness undergoes during the Bardo, including encounters with peaceful and wrathful deities, as well as visions of the afterlife realms. Central to the Tibetan Book of the Dead is the concept of the Bardo, which refers to the intermediate state between death and rebirth. According to Buddhist philosophy, consciousness continues to exist after death, undergoing a series of experiences determined by the individual's karma and mental disposition. The text emphasizes the importance of maintaining awareness and clarity during the bardo, as it presents an opportunity for spiritual awakening and liberation.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead stands as a testament to the rich spiritual heritage of Tibetan Buddhism, offering profound insights into the mysteries of death and the journey of the soul. Its teachings continue to inspire seekers of wisdom and truth, reminding us of the



impermanent nature of existence and the opportunity for liberation that lies beyond the cycle of birth and death. While the Tibetan Book of the Dead is traditionally used as a funerary text, it also holds relevance for the living. Practitioners often engage in meditation and contemplation on death and impermanence as a means of cultivating wisdom and preparing for their eventual transition. By familiarizing themselves with the teachings of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, individuals can develop a deeper understanding of the nature of reality and the potential for spiritual transformation

1.2 Garuda Purana: Insights into Hindu Eschatology

The Garuda Purana, a revered text in Hinduism, stands as a testament to the profound spiritual and philosophical underpinnings of the faith. It is one of the eighteen Mahapuranas, or great Puranas, which are ancient texts that encompass various aspects of Hindu mythology, cosmology, and philosophy. Among these, the Garuda Purana holds a special significance as it delves into the realms of death, the afterlife, and the journey of the soul. This article aims to provide an overview of the Garuda Purana, its contents, and its relevance in Hindu eschatology. The Garuda Purana is attributed to the sage Veda Vyasa, who is also credited with compiling the Mahabharata and other major Hindu texts. It is believed to have been composed between the 8th and 10th centuries CE, although its oral tradition likely predates its written form. The text is named after Garuda, the mythical bird and mount of Lord Vishnu, who is said to have narrated the Purana to the sage Kashyapa.

The Garuda Purana is divided into two parts: the Purva Khanda (former section) and the Uttara Khanda (later section). The Purva Khanda primarily deals with rituals, ceremonies, and codes of conduct, while the Uttara Khanda focuses on matters related to death, the afterlife, and salvation. One of the most renowned sections of the Garuda Purana is the dialogue between Garuda and Lord Vishnu, where Garuda poses questions about life, death, and the nature of existence. Vishnu's responses provide profound insights into the cycle of birth and rebirth (samsara), the law of karma, and the paths to liberation (moksha). The text elaborates on the journey of the soul after death, describing the various stages it undergoes before reaching its final destination. It delineates the concept of hell

(Naraka) and heaven (Svarga), detailing the punishments and rewards awaiting souls based on their deeds in life.

The Garuda Purana holds immense significance in Hindu culture and spirituality, serving as a guide for individuals navigating the existential questions of life and death. It offers moral guidance, ethical principles, and spiritual practices aimed at attaining liberation from the cycle of reincarnation. Furthermore, the Garuda Purana influences various Hindu rituals and customs associated with death and funeral rites[4]. It prescribes specific rituals to be performed by the relatives of the deceased to ensure the smooth passage of the soul into the afterlife. The Garuda Purana stands as a timeless repository of wisdom, offering profound insights into the nature of existence and the journey of the soul. Its teachings continue to resonate with believers, guiding them on the path toward spiritual enlightenment and liberation. As a foundational text in Hindu eschatology, the Garuda Purana serves as a beacon of hope and understanding in the face of life's ultimate mystery - death. This study adopts a comparative approach, analyzing the Tibetan Book of the Dead and the Garuda Purana based on their textual content, religious contexts, and cultural implications. Utilizing a combination of textual analysis and thematic synthesis, the research identifies key similarities and differences between the two texts regarding their views on death, the afterlife, and the process of reincarnation.

II. Comparative Analysis:

The Tibetan Book of the Dead, also known as the Bardo Thodol, is a guidebook for the deceased to navigate through the intermediate state between death and rebirth. It provides detailed instructions on how to recognize and transcend various stages of consciousness, ultimately attaining liberation. Conversely, the Garuda Purana is a Hindu scripture that elucidates the journey of the soul after death, describing the process of judgment, punishment, and rebirth according to one's karma. While both texts acknowledge the existence of an intermediate state after death, they differ in their conceptualization of the afterlife and the mechanisms of reincarnation. The Tibetan Book of the Dead emphasizes the importance of recognizing the illusory nature of reality and achieving enlightenment during the intermediate state to escape the cycle of samsara. In contrast,



the Garuda Purana outlines a hierarchical cosmology of different realms and prescribes rituals and offerings to ensure a favorable rebirth in higher realms. The Tibetan Book of the Dead presents the intermediate state, known as the Bardo, as a crucial opportunity for the deceased to attain liberation. It emphasizes the illusory nature of reality and the importance of recognizing this illusion to break free from the cycle of samsara. The text guides the deceased through various stages of consciousness, offering instructions on how to navigate the bardo and attain enlightenment. In contrast, the Garuda Purana elucidates a hierarchical cosmology of different realms where souls reside after death based on their karma[5]. It describes the process of judgment, punishment, and rebirth, highlighting the consequences of one's actions in determining their afterlife experience. The Purana emphasizes rituals and offerings to ensure a favorable rebirth in higher realms such as heaven (svarga).

2.1 Mechanisms of Reincarnation:

The Tibetan Book of the Dead places a strong emphasis on the role of consciousness and awareness in the process of reincarnation. It asserts that the state of mind at the moment of death influences the nature of one's rebirth, and encourages the deceased to recognize their true nature and attain liberation during the Bardo. "The Tibetan Book of the Dead," also known as the "Bardo Thodol," is a classic text of Tibetan Buddhism that provides guidance on the process of dying and rebirth. It describes various stages of consciousness that a person goes through after death and before rebirth. While it doesn't delve deeply into the mechanisms of reincarnation, it offers insights into the transition from one life to the next. In Tibetan Buddhism, reincarnation is a fundamental belief based on the concept of karma, which is the law of cause and effect. According to this belief system, the actions, thoughts, and intentions of an individual create imprints on their consciousness, which determine their experiences in this life and in future lives. When a person dies, their consciousness continues on a journey through various intermediate states, or bardos, before being reborn into a new body. The mechanisms of reincarnation described in "The Tibetan Book of the Dead" involve the following stages[6]:

- **The Moment of Death:** At the point of death, the consciousness of the deceased enters into an intermediate state known as the "bardo of dharmata." In this state, the individual

experiences the dissolution of the physical body and begins to perceive various visions and experiences related to their past actions and karma.

- **The Intermediate State (Bardo):** The consciousness then moves through a series of bardos, which are transitional states between death and rebirth. These bardos are characterized by different types of experiences, including peaceful and wrathful deities, as well as the potential for encountering one's own karma and past actions.

- **Rebirth:** Eventually, the consciousness of the deceased is drawn towards a new birth. The specific circumstances of the rebirth are determined by the individual's karma, which influences the type of body, environment, and experiences they will have in their next life.

The mechanisms of reincarnation described in "The Tibetan Book of the Dead" emphasize the continuity of consciousness and the importance of karma in shaping the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The text provides practical instructions for navigating the process of death and rebirth in order to achieve a favorable outcome in future lives. Conversely, the Garuda Purana outlines a more deterministic view of reincarnation, where the soul is subjected to the law of karma and undergoes judgment based on its deeds in previous lives. The text prescribes rituals, prayers, and offerings to mitigate the effects of negative karma and ensure a favorable rebirth. The Garuda Purana provides insights into the mechanisms of reincarnation from a Hindu perspective, detailing the journey of the soul after death and its subsequent rebirth. Here are some of the mechanisms of reincarnation as described in the Garuda Purana:

- **Cycle of Birth and Death:** The Garuda Purana elucidates the cyclical nature of existence, wherein the soul undergoes a continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. According to Hindu belief, the soul (atman) is eternal and immortal, but it transmigrates from one body to another based on its karma, accumulated through actions, thoughts, and intentions in previous lives.

- **Judgment of Deeds:** After death, the soul is said to undergo a judgment process in which its deeds from the previous life are evaluated. This judgment determines the soul's next destination in the cycle of reincarnation. Good deeds lead to positive outcomes, while negative actions result in suffering or lower forms of existence.

- **Yama and Chitragupta:** In Hindu mythology, Yama is the god of death who presides over the souls of the deceased.



According to the Garuda Purana, Yama and his attendants, including Chitragupta, maintain records of the soul's deeds and administer justice accordingly. Chitragupta is believed to keep meticulous accounts of every individual's actions, ensuring that karma is justly rewarded or punished.

- **Punishments and Rewards:** The Garuda Purana describes various hells (naraka) and heavens (swarga) where souls may temporarily reside based on their karma. Souls undergo periods of punishment or reward in these realms before being reborn into new bodies on Earth or other realms.

- **Transmigration of Souls:** The Garuda Purana outlines the process by which the soul leaves the deceased body and seeks a new birth. Depending on its karma and spiritual progress, the soul may be reborn as a human, animal, deity, or in other forms of existence.

Overall, the Garuda Purana provides a detailed framework for understanding the mechanisms of reincarnation within Hindu cosmology. It emphasizes the importance of righteous living, ethical conduct, and spiritual evolution to attain liberation (moksha) from the cycle of samsara and achieve union with the divine.

2.2 Concept of Liberation

The Tibetan Book of the Dead approaches liberation as the ultimate goal of existence, advocating for the transcendence of the cycle of samsara through awareness and enlightenment. It presents the intermediate state as an opportunity for the deceased to break free from the bonds of illusion and attain liberation. On the other hand, the Garuda Purana focuses on the attainment of a favorable rebirth in higher realms as a means to progress towards ultimate liberation (moksha). It emphasizes the performance of righteous deeds, adherence to dharma, and the fulfillment of prescribed rituals to secure a better future existence. In "The Tibetan Book of the Dead" (Bardo Thodol), the concept of liberation is central to its teachings. Liberation, known as "moksha" in Hinduism and "nirvana" in Buddhism, refers to the ultimate goal of spiritual practice – the liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (samsara) and the attainment of enlightenment or union with the ultimate reality.

In the context of the Bardo Thodol, the process of liberation is described as follows:

2.2.1 Recognition of the Nature of Reality:

The text emphasizes the importance of recognizing the true nature of reality, which is characterized by impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anatta). Through meditation and contemplation, individuals are encouraged to transcend the illusions of the ego and the material world, gaining insight into the ultimate nature of existence.

2.2.2 Awareness during the Intermediate States (Bardos): The Bardo Thodol describes various intermediate states (bardos) that the consciousness passes through after death and before rebirth. These bardos present opportunities for liberation if the individual maintains awareness and clarity of mind. By recognizing the illusory nature of the experiences encountered in the bardos and remaining focused on the true nature of reality, one can attain liberation from the cycle of samsara.

2.2.3 Union with the Dharmakaya: The ultimate aim of liberation in the Bardo Thodol is the attainment of the Dharmakaya, the ultimate reality or truth of existence. This state transcends individual identity and is described as the union with the primordial wisdom of enlightenment. Through the dissolution of ego and the realization of the interconnectedness of all beings, individuals can achieve liberation and merge with the Dharmakaya.

2.2.4 Post-Liberation States: The Bardo Thodol also describes various states that individuals may experience after achieving liberation, including the ability to guide other beings towards enlightenment (Sambhogakaya) and the potential for rebirth in order to benefit others (Nirmanakaya).

The concept of liberation in "The Tibetan Book of the Dead" encompasses the realization of the ultimate truth of existence, the transcendence of the cycle of samsara, and the attainment of enlightenment. Liberation is portrayed as the culmination of spiritual practice and the fulfillment of the inherent potential for awakening within all beings.

In the Garuda Purana, liberation is often referred to as "moksha" or "mukti," and it represents the ultimate goal of human life. Here's how the concept of liberation is presented in the Garuda Purana:

2.2.5 Freedom from Samsara: Like in the Bardo Thodol, the Garuda Purana emphasizes liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (samsara). It teaches that the soul is trapped in this cycle due to its karma and desires, and liberation is achieved when the soul



transcends these limitations.

2.2.6 Union with the Divine: Liberation in the Garuda Purana involves the soul merging with the divine or attaining union with the Supreme Being (Brahman). This is akin to the concept of attaining the Dharmakaya in Tibetan Buddhism, where the individual soul merges with the ultimate reality.

2.2.7 Release from Bondage: The Garuda Purana describes the various bonds that tie the soul to worldly existence, including attachment to desires, ignorance, and ego. Liberation entails breaking free from these bonds and realizing one's true nature as divine and eternal.

2.2.8 Attainment of Bliss: Liberation is depicted as the state of eternal bliss and peace, free from the suffering and limitations of worldly existence. The liberated soul experiences unending joy and contentment in union with the divine.

2.2.9 Paths to Liberation: The Garuda Purana outlines different paths to liberation, including devotion (bhakti), knowledge (jnana), and selfless action (karma yoga). Regardless of the path chosen, the ultimate goal remains the same – liberation from samsara and union with the divine.

While the specifics may vary, the concept of liberation in both the Tibetan Book of the Dead and the Garuda Purana revolves around transcending the cycle of birth and death, realizing one's true nature, and attaining union with the divine or ultimate reality. It represents the culmination of spiritual evolution and the fulfillment of the soul's inherent potential

III. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Tibetan Book of the Dead and the Garuda Purana offer distinct perspectives on the journey of the soul after death and the quest for liberation. While both texts acknowledge the existence of an intermediate state and the cycle of reincarnation, they differ in their conceptualizations of the afterlife, the mechanisms of reincarnation, and the approach to liberation. Despite these differences, both texts serve as profound guides for individuals seeking understanding and spiritual growth in the face of mortality. While both texts offer spiritual guidance for the deceased, they reflect the unique cultural and theological frameworks of Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism. By exploring these texts in conjunction, scholars and practitioners can gain a deeper understanding of the diversity of religious beliefs and practices concerning the

journey of the soul.

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