

Natural Liberation

Padmasambhava's Teachings on the Six Bardos



Commentary by Gyatrul Rinpoche
Translated by B. Alan Wallace

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Translator's Preface

THIS BOOK CONTAINS A TRANSLATION and commentary on the great Indian Buddhist tantric master Padmasambhava's text, entitled *The Profound Dharma of the Natural Liberation through Contemplating the Peaceful and Wrathful: Stage of Completion Instructions on the Six Bardos*.¹ Presumably composed some time in the late eighth century, the text was dictated by Padmasambhava to his Tibetan consort, Yeshe Tsogyal. Tibetan tradition views Padmasambhava as an emanation of Amitābha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, and refers to him as Guru Rinpoche, or Precious Spiritual Mentor. His name, Padmasambhava, means "born from a lotus," indicating his miraculous birth from a lotus in the midst of a lake in the region of Oḍḍiyāna. Adopted by the king of Oḍḍiyāna, Padmasambhava dedicated his life to the study and practice of esoteric, or Vajrayāna, Buddhism.

In the eighth century, the Tibetan king Trisong Detsen invited Padmasambhava to Tibet to assist the Indian abbot Śāntarakṣita in building the first enduring monastery in that land. In Tibet, Padmasambhava devoted himself to subduing the many malevolent forces that were obstructing the study and practice of Buddhism there, and he gave numerous teachings to his disciples, among whom twenty-five became renowned, accomplished adepts in their own right. When his work in Tibet was completed, tradition says, Padmasambhava departed to the west in a body of pure light to the buddha-field known as the Glorious Copper-colored Mountain, where he resides even to this day.²

Padmasambhava concealed many of his teachings in the manner of "spiritual time-capsules" known as "treasures" (*gter ma*; pronounced *terma*) to be gradually revealed over the centuries when

human civilization was ready to receive them. The delayed revelation of these teachings parallels the manner in which the Mahāyāna doctrine came to be eventually revealed to the general public several centuries after the passing of the historical Buddha, and the way in which many Buddhist tantras came to be revealed for the first time in India in the centuries following that. Some of Padmasambhava's hidden teachings—known as earth treasures (*sa gter*)—were written down and concealed underground, in caves, or even inside large boulders. Other teachings—known as mind treasures (*dgongs gter*)—were mystically secreted in the mind-streams of his own disciples, awaiting their conscious discovery in the disciples' subsequent lifetimes. During the centuries following his departure to the Glorious Copper-colored Mountain, numerous "treasure revealers" (*gter ston*; pronounced *tertön*), who have generally been regarded as emanations either of Padmasambhava or of his chief disciples, have discovered great numbers of these treasures and have subsequently propagated these teachings.³

The concluding words "Samaya. Sealed, sealed, sealed" at the end of sections of this text are unique to hidden treasure texts, or *terma*. The word *samaya* in this context indicates that those who handle this text should remember their samayas, or tantric pledges. The words "sealed, sealed, sealed" are a warning that if someone other than the treasure revealer should accidentally come across these texts while they are still concealed, they should leave the texts alone. These words also warn the treasure revealer who was intended to discover the texts that he or she should make them known only at the appropriate time. Finally, those who read these texts are warned with these words not to show the texts to those who have no faith or to those whose samayas have degenerated.

One of the most renowned treasure revealers in Tibet was Karma Lingpa, who lived in the fourteenth century and is regarded as an emanation of Padmasambhava himself. It was he who discovered the present treatise—a classic example of an earth treasure—in a cave on Gampo Dar Mountain in central Tibet. Dealing with the six transitional processes, or *bardos*, this text quickly became an important treatise of the Nyingma order of

Tibetan Buddhism; as such, it has been widely taught and practiced by Tibetans ever since, but only by those fully initiated into this cycle of Vajrayāna Buddhist teachings. This treatise may also be considered as a companion volume to the well-known *Tibetan Book of the Dead*,⁴ for both are included within the same cycle of treasures discovered by Karma Lingpa. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* chiefly concerns the dying process and the subsequent intermediate state, or bardo,⁵ prior to one's next rebirth, and in Tibet it was commonly recited during and after an individual's death to aid that person in making the transition to the next life. The present work is much more extensive in its scope, providing practical meditation instructions pertaining to all six transitional processes, or bardos, namely those of living, dreaming, meditating, dying, the intermediate state following death, and rebirth.

This treasure text was made available to a broader public in the West when, during the early months of 1995, the Venerable Gyatrul Rinpoche, a senior lama of the Payul lineage of the Nyingma order, taught it openly to a group comprising both Buddhists and non-Buddhists at the Orgyen Dorje Den Buddhist center in San Francisco, California. Born in the Gyalrong region of eastern Tibet in 1925, Gyatrul Rinpoche was recognized at a young age by Jamyang Khyentse Lodrö Thaye as the incarnation of Sampa Künkyap, a Payul lineage meditator who spent his life in retreat and who later gave empowerments and transmissions from his retreat cave to multitudes of disciples. After being brought to Payul Domang Monastery, home of his previous incarnation, the young Gyatrul was educated by his tutor, Sangye Göñ. During his extensive spiritual training, he received personal instruction on many Buddhist treatises, including the present one, by numerous renowned masters of the Nyingma order, including Tulku Natsok Rangdröl, Payul Chogtrul Rinpoche, Apkong Khenpo, and His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche. In Tibet he received the oral transmission and instructions on the present treatise from the eminent Lama Norbu Tenzin.

After fleeing from Tibet into exile in India in 1959, Gyatrul Rinpoche continued his spiritual training and served the Tibetan