

# The Psychedelic Book of the Dead

## Timothy Leary in the Bardo

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**ABSTRACT:** In 1964, Timothy Leary and a few colleagues published *The Psychedelic Experience*, a manual for “tripping” explicitly based on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. At the core of the Tibetan materials lies the concept of the *bardo*, the “in between” realm of the afterlife. While acknowledging the problematic nature of Leary’s radical appropriation, this essay argues that his application of these materials to the orchestration and regulation of psychedelic experience reflected a productive reframing of the phantasmagoria common to strong psychedelic experience. Using tools of comparative religion and secular psychology, Leary constructed a model of psychological transformation that rejected religious or transcendental meaning while creatively expanding the bardo concept already evident in Tibetan Buddhism.

**KEYWORDS:** Psychedelics, Tibetan Buddhism, bardo, Timothy Leary, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, W.Y. Evans-Wentz

One of the more curious loanwords introduced in the 1986 edition of Webster’s Third New International Dictionary was the Tibetan term *bardo*. Often translated as “intermediate state” or simply “the between,” bardo was defined by Webster’s as “the intermediate or astral state of the soul after death and before rebirth.”<sup>1</sup> The appearance of this exotic word in an English dictionary, and the occult overtones of the definition (“astral”), can certainly be chalked up

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to the growing presence of Tibetan Buddhism in Western culture. But the West's encounter with the bardo concept itself can be traced to one, almost legendary text: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

A metaphysical best-seller first published by Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz (1878–1965) in 1927, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* was a translation, recension, and annotation of materials drawn from a popular Tibetan cycle of tantric texts used to ritually guide the dying and the dead through various bardos associated with mortal transition. The cycle was traditionally considered a *terma* (*gter ma*) or hidden treasure text, written and secreted by the legendary Indian yogi Padmasambhava, who is credited with first bringing Vajrayana Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century. In the fourteenth century, the text was rediscovered by Karma Lingpa, a notorious *tertön* (*gter ston*) or treasure-finder. In the twentieth century, Evans-Wentz, an Oxford-educated scholar and Theosophical seeker fascinated with faery lore, aggressively reframed the rather recondite material as a universal source of esoteric wisdom and psychophysiological data on mortality—at once an “art of dying” and a “science of death.” No doubt influenced by the popularity of E. A. Wallis Budge's 1895 translation of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, Evans-Wentz also retitled the cycle, originally known as the *Great Liberation Upon Hearing in the Intermediate State* (*bar do thos grol chen mo*). In this article, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* will refer to Evans-Wentz' version of the text, while *Great Liberation* will refer to the Tibetan cycle.

The title change alone suggests *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*'s destiny as a popular and influential work of esoteric perennialism that suggested a link between the mysteries of ancient Tibet and the spiritual plight of moderns. To date, the book has sold over a half-million copies in English, making it by far the best-known text plucked from Tibet's kaleidoscopic cornucopia of Buddhist writings. Since 1927, the Evans-Wentz text has gone through numerous editions, increasingly larded with prefaces and introductory material, including texts from psychotherapist Carl Jung (1875–1961) and European Buddhist convert Lama Govinda (Ernst Lothar Hoffman, 1898–1985), whose 1966 *Way of the White Clouds* influenced many later countercultural seekers.

The *Great Liberation* texts also have been retranslated and reframed numerous times, but never more audaciously than as *The Psychedelic Experience*, a 1964 text by Timothy Leary (1920–1996), Richard Alpert (b. 1931), and Ralph Metzner (b. 1936). Subtitled *A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the book was freely adapted from Evans-Wentz' translation into a phenomenological model for the stages of psychedelic experience, which the Leary group accessed principally through LSD and synthetic psilocybin (a psychoactive alkaloid found in some mushroom species). The book literally began in the margins of Leary's heavily annotated copy of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, extensive portions of which are cited (without quotation marks) in *The Psychedelic Experience*

alongside the cut-and-paste revision of significant words or phrases.<sup>2</sup> As an example, the three central bardos described in *Great Liberation* texts—the “bardo of the moment of death” (*chi kha gnad gcod kyi bar do*); the “bardo of the experiencing of reality” (*chos nyid od gsal gyi bar do*); and the “bardo of rebirth” (*srid pa las kyi bar do*)—become the Period of Ego-loss (or Non-game Ecstasy), the Period of Hallucinations, and the Period of Re-Entry. This cavalier remixing runs throughout *The Psychedelic Experience*, but despite the bizarre playfulness of some locutions (e.g. the “Retinal Circus” and the “Executive Furies of the Robot Lord of Death”), the material is presented with a tone that Robert Greenfield rightly identifies as “stern, authoritative, and very Germanic.”<sup>3</sup>

*The Psychedelic Experience* is a peculiar text, a rather mirthless pop-academic hybrid of experiential protocols, tantric cosmology, and free-wheeling psychedelic psychology. Contemporary readers are forgiven for finding the book at once dated and obscure, ponderous and silly. But perhaps the most striking aspect of the book, at least for contemporary readers concerned with questions of cultural appropriation, is how brazenly and indelicately the book borrows and then reframes a core text of Tibetan Buddhism for contemporary purposes. Even within the esoteric world of countercultural discourse, which has a high tolerance for weird cross-cultural sampling, Leary’s audacious cut-and-paste revisions have helped prevent the book from achieving the “classic” status of Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception* (1954) or Alan Watts’ roughly contemporaneous *The Joyous Cosmology* (1962). Over time, all three of *The Psychedelic Experience*’s authors even felt compelled to distance themselves from its incautious pages.

But there are reasons to pay closer attention to *The Psychedelic Experience*. For one thing, the book was both popular and influential.<sup>4</sup> As a self-declared “manual” that included “technical comments,” instructions, and verbal scripts, the book was not just widely read but widely used, its descriptions redeployed as prescriptive formulas for innumerable experimental forays. The text thereby played a crucial role in shaping psychedelic discourse, practice, and experience during the years when masses of people began to “turn on” to LSD, before the compound was scheduled as a controlled substance, first in California (1966) and then nationally (1968). For this reason, *The Psychedelic Experience*, specifically Leary’s reframing of the bardo concept, forms a significant chapter in countercultural history and the early development of “entheogenic esotericism,” which historian Wouter Hanegraaff defines as “the religious use of psychoactive substances as means of access to spiritual insights about the true nature of reality.”<sup>5</sup>

But there are deeper reasons to reread *The Psychedelic Experience*. In addition to its historical value, the text offers historians of religion an unusually stark example of cross-cultural appropriation—East to West, medieval to modern, esoteric to pharmacological. Moreover, the work

justifies itself through a curiously materialistic interpretation of the “perennial philosophy”—the notion that religious traditions widely separated in space and time contain an identical experiential core that can be accessed through spiritual techniques. According to Aldous Huxley (1894–1963), whose *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945) helped popularize the concept and its corresponding instrumentality, perennialism can be understood through the Sanskrit formula *tat tvam asi* (“Thou are that”): “the Atman, or immanent eternal Self, is one with Brahman, the Absolute Principle of all existence; and the ultimate end of every human being, is to discover the fact for himself, to find out who he really is.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, the devoted seeker who follows the proper protocols can discover the sources of religious meaning within.

Perennialist concepts have been foundational for a great deal of entheogenic esotericism, but such conceptual comparisons trigger a host of criticisms that scholars of religion have more recently lodged against perennialism as well as broader comparisons animating the scholarship on religion in the era of *The Psychedelic Experience*, some of which I will discuss below. Here, however, I am more interested in how the perennialist current of comparative religious discourse itself became a resource in the formation of an influential psychological and esoteric postwar model of psychedelic practice. In this sense, I am concerned with reading Leary’s bardo innovation in light of Harold Bloom’s notion of “creative misprision”—a willful distortion of a previous source that can be critically evaluated in terms of its own productive and inventive power.<sup>7</sup> Despite the audacious, forced, and arguably colonialist qualities of *The Psychedelic Experience*, I argue for the conceptual, phenomenological, and heuristic strength of Leary’s central elaboration of the psychedelic bardo.

In this essay, I also engage the fundamental question of how scholars of religion interpret other people’s religious interpretations, especially when those interpretations carelessly, exuberantly, and even willfully distort or remix their sources. In this case, however, the sources themselves point towards a more complex spin on the now tried-and-true model of Western colonialist appropriation. As we will see, the bardo materials that attracted Leary and his colleagues were themselves the result of the collision and commingling of Indian Buddhism and indigenous Tibetan religion within a soteriological context of visionary death rehearsal that blurred the distinction between descriptive and proscriptive formulas. I also want to suggest that the strength of Leary’s bardo construction derives from his audacity and skill at culture crafting, and from the power and plasticity of the bardo concept itself. To appreciate that power, we first need to understand the degree to which modern psychedelia has involved a turbulent and sometimes hair-raising dimension of visionary thanatology.

## EGO DEATH

The discourse of modern psychedelia—from the professional language of psychedelic psychotherapy to the store of terms and narrative schemas used to construct and verbalize first-person experiences—is haunted by the death trip, the hallucinatory and sometimes quite real conviction that one is dying. Robert Masters and Jean Houston describe the experience as “not a particularly rare one.” In *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience* (1966), a groundbreaking early assessment of psychedelic psychology, they analyzed one patient’s experience within a pattern of symbolic death, rebirth, and eternal return that they compared to initiatory psychodynamics of ancient mystery cults. The authors’ articulation of this pattern reflects the influence of Carl Jung, Huxley and other perennialist thinkers of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

Stanislov Grof (b. 1931), the Czech psychiatrist who amassed thousands of hours of clinical LSD trials with patients prior to the prohibition of such trials, places the mortal phantasmagoria of death rehearsal at the heart of his perinatal model of psychedelic phenomenology. He links the stages of high-dose psychedelic experience to a four-stage model of human birth, the repression of which drives a great deal of unconscious and archetypal material. In his classic *LSD Psychotherapy* (1980), Grof associates “eschatological ideation” (visions of wars, devils, rotting corpses, etc.) with the intense pressure, claustrophobia, and terror of imminent transition marking the infant’s passage through the birth canal. These symbolic experiences often resolve themselves, especially over repeated therapy sessions, into a liberating, ecstatic, and transpersonal experience of rebirth. Grof also insists that these experiences can appear to go beyond the symbolic to the simulated: “it is not uncommon for patients in this situation to lose critical insight and develop a delusional conviction that actual physical demise is imminent.”<sup>9</sup>

The discourse of psychedelia that embraces the model of the death-rebirth trip, with its normative Jungian, esoteric, and transpersonal overtones, raises the problem of expectancy. People hear or read about the death-rebirth experience from friends, therapists, or psychedelic gurus, and then run the scripts for themselves when intoxicated. A possible example can be found in the autobiography of Dallas star Larry Hagman, who experimented with LSD in the 1960s and found that it “took the fear of death from me, the fear of manmade heaven and hell.” But Hagman had been reading Alan Watts’ *The Joyous Cosmology* as well as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* at the time, making it impossible to disentangle experience, report, script, and expectation.<sup>10</sup> To its credit, however, psychedelic discourse long ago adopted a conceptual apparatus for understanding and anticipating the force of expectation and contextual conditioning. The concept of “set and setting” was first introduced by Leary and his co-authors in *The Psychedelic Experience*. The “set”

references one's mind-set (including expectations and other "programs"), while "setting" describes the dynamics of environmental aesthetics or situational suggestion. With the concept of "set and setting," an irremovable element of reflexivity enters into psychedelic discourse—including that of the bardo.

That said, only the most general sense of expectancy could have played a role in the mortal phantasmagoria that Albert Hoffman (1906–2008) passed through during the world's first LSD trip, on 19 April 1943, after he ingested 250 micrograms of a lysergic acid compound he had first synthesized five years earlier. During his famous bicycle ride home, and increasingly when he went inside, Hoffman grew anxious and disoriented.

Dizziness; visual distortions; the faces of those present appeared like grotesque colored masks; strong agitation alternating with paresis; the head, body and extremities sometimes cold and numb; a metallic taste on the tongue; throat dry and shrilled; a feeling of suffocation; confusion alternating with a clear appreciation of the situation. . . . I lost all control of time; space and time became more and more disorganized and I was overcome with fear that I was going crazy. . . . Occasionally I felt as being outside my body. I thought I had died. My "ego" was suspended somewhere in space and I saw my body lying dead on the sofa. . . .<sup>11</sup>

A decade after Hoffman's trip, Huxley offered a far more influential account of psychedelic experience that directly linked such grueling mortal trials with *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Relatively early into an experience with mescaline (a psychedelic amphetamine found in some species of cactus), which he described in *The Doors of Perception*, Huxley confronted a chair that looked like "the Last Judgment—or, to be more accurate, by a Last Judgment which, after a long time and with considerable difficulty, I recognized as a chair." Huxley felt himself on the edge of madness, a panic he compared to the confrontation with the Clear Light that stands as the central existential drama of *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Translated by some as Inner Radiance, the Clear Light is the subtle essence of mind that necessarily arises at the close of the bardo of dying, and the recognition of its absolute luminescence can return the advanced practitioner to the nondual ground of pure awareness. Though offering final exit from the wheel of rebirth, however, the Clear Light terrifies most bardo travelers, who seek shelter in the "comforting darkness of selfhood as a reborn human being."<sup>12</sup> Whether the judgment chair vision triggered the bardo scenario spontaneously in Huxley is a little unclear, but on the tape recording of his experience, his wife Maria attempted to calm his terrors by asking him if he might "fix [his] attention" on the Clear Light. "Only if there were somebody there to tell me about the Clear Light," he responded. "One couldn't do it by oneself. That's the point, I suppose, of the Tibetan ritual—somebody sitting there all the time and telling you what's what."<sup>13</sup>

This conviction is the origin for *The Psychedelic Experience*, which cites this very passage on its dedication page to Huxley, who died a year before the book's publication. A few years earlier, Huxley had talked with Leary about the need for a psychedelic guidebook. At the time, Leary was a Harvard professor of social psychology and obsessed with the transformative possibilities of psilocybin and LSD. He had first ingested psilocybin mushrooms in Mexico in 1960; he subsequently tried acid, which produced "the most shattering experience of my life." Tripping at home in Cambridge, Leary turned on the television, which told him that he was already dead. Flipping open a book, he saw every word devolve backwards in time to its original linguistic form; the key term, encountered over and over again, was *death*. "Everything was illusion," Leary later said of the experience. "Even love."<sup>14</sup> But despite the self-shattering potential of psychedelics (and to a great extent because of them), Leary continued his work with the Harvard Psilocybin Project, a project that provided psychedelics to professors and students but that eventually foundered amid concerns about the Leary team's free-wheeling ways.

Given Leary's subsequent career as a kurta-wearing acid guru draped in marigold garlands, it is important to emphasize that the Leary who adapted Evans-Wentz' *Tibetan Book of the Dead* into "psychedelic English" was a deeply secular professional psychologist who came of age in an era defined by the tension between behaviorism and Freud. His first book, *The Interpersonal Diagnosis of Personality* (1957), offered a dense personality typology cast in terms of programmed social roles and interpersonal scripts. Dissatisfied with behaviorist models, Leary was already becoming interested in transactional analysis and models of social agency when he discovered psychedelics in 1960. He was moving deeper into psychedelia when he spoke to the International Congress of Applied Psychology in August 1961, where his central metaphor for social interaction was the *game*, a rule-based set of learned scenarios with pre-established roles, speech protocols, and positional values.

Leary insisted that "all behavior involves learned games," and that the institutional forces he referred to as "power" disguised the contingent and constructed nature of these games.<sup>15</sup> He pushed the concept far beyond typical social interactions: the "subject-object game" structured ordinary perception and science alike, while the "most treacherous and tragic game of all" was the ego game. Defining the "mystic" or visionary as one who "sees clearly the game structure of behavior," Leary outlined a program of "applied mysticism," suggesting that "great trauma" could shatter "the gamesmanship out of you" and thereby free you to play better games.<sup>16</sup> At this point in his career, Leary was not providing a map of what "better games" might look like; instead, he was interested in rupturing identity and consensus reality through psychedelic trauma. "The visionary experience is the nongame, metagame experience."<sup>17</sup>

Leary's social dynamic perspective led to his famous formulation of the thanatological simulacrum: the concept that psychedelics ideally occasion an experience of "ego death." This influential concept helped reframe and transcend the mortal terror encountered by many trippers, while also directing them towards psychodynamic stages that Grof and others would later dub "transpersonal." (Writing in 1980, Grof insisted that there is a difference between the death-rebirth experience and the much rarer experience of ego death.<sup>18</sup>) First broadcast to the emerging community of informal psychedelic users in the pages of *The Psychedelic Experience*, "ego death" became a highly normative *desideratum* in the 1960s and remains in common parlance among some trippers and psychedelic psychotherapists.<sup>19</sup>

But what about Leary's quasi-religious turn to the rhetoric of "applied mysticism"? Confronting the spiritual and mythological material often encountered in experience reports and professional psychedelic discourse, Leary found himself increasingly drawn towards perennialist ideas. One of his influences was his friendship with Huston Smith (1919–2016), an MIT professor of religion whose work, including *The World's Religions* (1958), became one of the more influential vectors of perennialist comparativism in the history of American religious scholarship. Huxley had laid down some core elements of this current in his 1945 *The Perennial Philosophy*, in which "empirical theology" framed spiritual and moral praxis as *instrumenta* of investigation and metaphysical discovery. As a young man, Smith made a pilgrimage to visit Huxley, by which time Smith had adopted a meditation practice, joined the Boston Vedanta Society, and talked about yoga on television, all while remaining a Methodist. But only when he experimented with LSD with Leary in 1961 did Smith finally experience the full-blown mystical blast he had been searching for, a fact he would acknowledge throughout his successful academic career, even while later finding fault with Leary and the drug culture.

From his exposure to Smith and the Boston Vedanta Society, Leary was already primed to reframe esoteric literature and Eastern mysticism as proto-psychedelic psychology when Huxley suggested he develop a trip manual based on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. After exiting Harvard in the spring of 1963, Leary began working on the text with Alpert and Metzner—his former Harvard colleague and graduate student respectively—first at their psychedelic research commune in Zihuatanejo, Mexico, and later at a donated mansion in Millbrook, New York. According to Metzner, Leary said "Let's take the text of the Tibetans and strip the particular cultural and religious language and rewrite it as a manual" for tripping.<sup>20</sup> This plan is clear evidence, were any needed, that Leary was aggressively reframing the Evans-Wentz text according to a perennialist, quasi-scientific concept of culturally unmarked and therefore universal visionary states. This was more than

an intellectualist or “colonialist” act of appropriation; it was a constructive and creative act of framing the new in terms of the affordances of the given, a visionary remix with very pragmatic ends in mind.

Leary’s psychedelic bardo theory emerged from an intentional and relatively systematic attempt to map, manage, and guide the roiling maelstrom of high-dose psychedelic experience, with its terrors and exhilarations and teasing hints at the ground of being. Despite the resonant phenomenology, Leary’s superimposition of psychedelic ego death onto *The Tibetan Book of the Dead’s* afterlife scenarios required a bit of analogical work. Luckily for Leary, this work had been already performed to some degree by Evans-Wentz himself, who in his introductory materials had linked the Tibetan text to initiatory “pre-mortem deaths” in ancient mystery religions. This crucial theme—which also informed the psychedelic psychodynamic models of both Grof, and Masters and Houston—had appeared in the foreword to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* written by Lama Govinda, a German national and informal convert to Buddhism. (Along with Jung’s “Psychological Commentary,” Govinda’s foreword appeared in the third, 1957 edition of Evans-Wentz’ text.) For all these authors, the esoteric kernel of the Tibetan materials was, paradoxically, the modern, seemingly exoteric notion of a universal and progressive “science of consciousness” based on psychodynamic events rather than literal death. Leary simply updated this current when he insisted that the *Great Liberation’s* deathbed scenario was “an exoteric façade” that disguised the text’s true subject: the “pre-mortem-death-rebirth experience,” a visionary initiation that taught the aspiring mystic “how to lose the ego; how to break out of personality into new realms of consciousness; and how to avoid the involuntary limiting processes of the ego.”<sup>21</sup>

Creative or not, Leary’s misprision clearly rests on the distortions that already constituted Evans-Wentz’ *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. According to Buddhist scholar Donald S. Lopez, Jr., who has provided the most sustained critique of Evans-Wentz to date, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is “not so much Tibetan as it is American, a product of American Spiritualism.”<sup>22</sup> Lopez really means something closer to “esotericism” (Hanegraaff) or the “American metaphysical religion” (Albanese) here, but the point is made.<sup>23</sup> Heavily influenced by Theosophy, Evans-Wentz brought modern esoteric ideas of spiritual evolution and hidden masters to bear on his repackaging of the *Great Liberation* materials.<sup>24</sup>

By putting some of this Theosophical doctrine into the mouth of his Tibetan translator and “lama,” Kazi Dawa Sandup (who does not appear to have been a traditional lama), Evans-Wentz committed what Lopez calls a “crime”—not only a scholarly lie but a colonialist act of appropriation.<sup>25</sup> This accusation accords with Lopez’s rather withering thesis in *Prisoners of Shangri-La* that the West’s “encounter” with Tibetan Buddhism is an illusion in which outsiders muffle Tibetan voices and play with their own projections. Lopez also attacks commentaries by

Lama Govinda and Carl Jung, claiming they ripped the text from its Tibetan context by psychologizing it, though Lopez forgets to mention that Jung explicitly acknowledged that his interpretation “in no way accords with the original intention of the Bardo Thodol.”<sup>26</sup> Unsurprisingly, Lopez also attacked Leary for seeking to “decontextualize [the text] from its traditional use as a mortuary text.”<sup>27</sup>

Lopez’ accusations anticipated a now-familiar strain of post-colonialist critique, but there are significant problems with his position. Buddhist scholar David Germano sympathizes with Lopez’ anger at the West’s “hermeneutics of exploitation” but also worries that such outrage “interpretively confin[es] the possibility of cross-culturally inspired creativity.”<sup>28</sup> Such creative misprision applies not only to the ongoing Western encounter with Tibetan Buddhism but also to Tibet’s own religious history, especially its obsession with Buddhist India in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries. According to Germano, that period featured “the same crazies with their visions, misrepresentations, and outrageous distortions of Indian Buddhism,” which in turn inspired “the same outraged voices of moral superiority, cultural critics, and conservative academics.”<sup>29</sup> In the end, Germano argues that Lopez hamstringing his own account of Tibet’s native religious dynamics. By framing “contested (mis)interpretive activity and cultural (mis)appropriation as largely a western activity,” Lopez winds up privileging “accuracy and earlier meanings” over creative reinterpretation *within* Tibet.<sup>30</sup>

Ironically, the *Great Liberation* texts themselves emerge from a current of Tibetan Buddhist practice that almost seems designed to accommodate creative religious revisionism. This is Tibet’s widespread *tertön* tradition, in which “treasure” finders discover and translate encoded texts, or *termas*, hidden by earlier masters. From a sociological perspective, the *tertön* tradition could be said to allow creative innovation within the context of traditional authority. But even within the tradition (and therefore outside the critical frame of historical scholarship), the production of *termas* affirms the creative or visionary imagination, since the *tertöns* download their transmissions directly from visionary domains. To his credit, Lopez acknowledges the irony. Karma Lingpa, the *tertön* who discovered Padmasambhava’s *Great Liberation* texts, was “a kind of embodied ghost writer, translating [the treasure] in such a way as to make it meaningful for its time, creating a text whose originality is derived from the fact that it is a copy.”<sup>31</sup> From this perspective, Lopez has to admit, Evans-Wentz—and, by extension, Leary—was being “traditional.”

Lopez here underscores the simulacral, even transhistorical logic of the *terma*: treasure texts like the *Great Liberation* are originally copies, or copies whose origins lie in their own emergence as visionary transcriptions. Intriguingly, simulacral logic also undermines one of Lopez’ critiques. Recall that, in contrast to the problematic operation of psychological “decontextualization” undertaken by various authors associated with *The*

*Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Lopez insists on the *Great Liberation*'s literal status as a funerary liturgy—a text whose descriptions are designed to be read in the presence of the dying and dead. As Lopez elsewhere explains, however, two of the Karma Lingpa cycle's texts—the *Reminder of the Bardo of Reality* and the *Direct Introduction of the Bardo of Becoming*—are prescriptive rather than descriptive, and they generally have been regarded as “meditation manuals to be employed by advanced tantric practitioners, rather than as mortuary instructions to be read to the ordinary dead.” When introducing these manuals, Lopez underscores the “irony, in the event that another was needed:” Evans-Wentz “selected two texts for the living and called them *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.”<sup>32</sup> But Lopez can only enjoy this irony at the cost of his own critique. Far from being literal liturgies, some central *Great Liberation* texts are recipes for tantric *sādhana*s, the ritual production of symbolic experiences decoupled from the deathbed scene.<sup>33</sup> As Germano puts it, Tibetans were “decontextualizing” their mortuary play-book through tantric analogy “long before Timothy Leary ever fixed it in his drug-enhanced, or drug-blurred, gaze.”<sup>34</sup>

The simulacral logic of Tantra's death rehearsals—which confuse literal and symbolic, event and icon—underlies my argument for the “fitness” of *The Psychedelic Experience*'s appropriation of the *Great Liberation* texts, so it is important to emphasize it here. Within the initial generation stage of tantric *sādhana*, practitioners visualize deities, three-dimensional mandala palaces, and their own radically spiritualized bodies. Stephen Beyer describes this stage as “a reenactment and simulacrum not only for the macrocosmic creation of public nonreality [the imaginal construction of the mandala], but also for the microcosmic experience of death, the intermediate state of the bardo, and birth in the world.”<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the editors of the most exact and orthodox English translation of the *Great Liberation* cycle note that for Mahayoga practitioners of the Nyingma school, who emphasize generation stage practices, the “signs which accompany the successful actualization of this meditative process are identical to those which occur at the time of death.”<sup>36</sup> On the one hand, then, some tantric practices can be understood as *rehearsals* in the sense that by provisionally “running through” and adjusting to the proscribed and expected stages and experiences, practitioners can avoid confusion when actual death comes. On the other hand, these practices generate what Beyer calls a “magical simulacrum of death.” Since the semiotic and affective displays associated with dissolution—including the Clear Light—are in some fundamental sense “identical” between *sādhana* and literal death, the rehearsal can become the soteriological stage for actual liberation.

While the drug-induced ego-death of *The Psychedelic Experience* has little to do with the exacting ritual and visionary protocols of the advanced tantric practitioner, I would argue that the intentional construction of and submission to a “magical simulacrum of death” nonetheless forms

a productive or “resonant” basis of cross-cultural comparison and transmission. Just as the tantric practitioner exploited *sādhana* in soteriological anticipation of the real deal, Leary reframed the “magical simulacrum of death” catalyzed by psychedelics as a this-worldly psychological practice aimed at permanently shifting the dynamics of ordinary identity. The *accuracy* of Leary’s comparativist mapping, in Buddhist or psychological terms, is not my interest here. Instead, I want to underscore its pragmatic, productive, and historical character while insisting that Leary’s radical appropriation depends directly on latent potentials or affordances within the source materials themselves. In other words, Leary wasn’t just shouting his psychedelic English over Tibetan voices; he was also *listening*, and what he heard were the reverberations of an operational concept—the *between*—that has the curious capacity to absorb, and relativize, any easily demarcated phenomenological phase of human consciousness. To see this, we need to take a closer look at the Tibetan development of the bardo concept itself, whose liminal, multivalent, and deconstructive character brings different registers of human existence into destabilizing resonance.

### MAPPING THE BETWEEN

In his *Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which represents the finest work in English on the *Great Liberation* texts, Bryan Cuevas explains that Tibet’s bardo lore has its roots in early Indian debates about a possible “intermediate state” between death and rebirth. The great fourth-century sage Vasubandhu attempted to codify the concept in his *Abhidharmakośa*, an account that may have influenced a number of Mahayana sutras. The *Saddharmasmṛtyupastāna sūtra*, for example, features a description of the intermediate state that anticipates a number of elements that characterize classic Tibetan accounts of various bardos.

When the time of his death is approaching he sees these signs: he sees a great rocky mountain lowering above him like a shadow. He thinks to himself, “The mountain might fall down on top of me,” and he makes a gesture with his hand as though to ward off the mountain. . . . Presently the mountain seems to be made of white cloth and he clammers up this cloth. Then it seems to be made of red cloth. Finally, as the time of his death approaches he sees a bright light, and being unaccustomed to it as the time of his death he is perplexed and confused. He sees all sorts of things such as are seen in dreams, because his mind is confused. He sees his (future) father and mother making love, and seeing them a thought crosses his mind, a perversity (*viparyasa*) arises in him.<sup>37</sup>

In the far more elaborate and systematic accounts found in the *Great Liberation*, the down-crushing mountain reappears as the collapse of the

earth element during the initial bardo of dying, while the red and white cloths become the red and white essences or drops that appear shortly before the actual moment of death. Similarly, the “bright light” blooms into the moment of Clear Light, after which a dreamlike period of confusion unfolds before the bardo being is attracted back into rebirth by a human couple making love.

By the time the intermediate state arrived in Tibet, the concept was already intertwined with the intense visionary or magical practices associated with Tantra.<sup>38</sup> Cuevas identifies two important currents of these tantric bardo teachings as they pass into Tibet: one derives from the instructional precepts of Padmasambhava, and the other from the instructional precepts of the Tilopa (988–1069) and Naropa (1016–1100) lineage.<sup>39</sup> To take the latter current first, Tilopa, in his *Instruction Advice on the Six Doctrines*, offers practical tantric instructions for navigating the intermediate zone. For example, the yogin is encouraged to gather “the winds of the sun and moon at the heart” at the time of death, at which point his consciousness of external objects will become dream-like.<sup>40</sup> However, it is Tilopa’s student, the great mahasiddha Naropa, who radically redoubles the intermediate state into a tantric schema encompassing all stages of life. In his *Vajra Verses on the Oral Tradition*, Naropa establishes three great intermediate states: between birth and death; the interval of dreams; and the becoming that unfolds before taking rebirth. Aligning these three bardos with the three kaya theory (*Trikaya*, “Three Bodies of the Buddha”), Naropa established a “bardo yoga” (*bar do mal ’byor*) of simulacral practice that exploited the formal resemblance between these bounded states in order to “effect their union at specific points during the meditation session or at the actual moment of death.”<sup>41</sup>

Naropa’s bardo yoga demonstrates how the bare schema of a bounded intermediate state allows the concept to reverberate beyond its initial characterization as the passage between death and rebirth. (Leary, in this sense, was not just imposing his concepts but amplifying or redirecting this reverberation.) Naropa’s inclusion of the dream also gives us a clue as to the primary psycho-physiological metaphor that fuels the multiplication of the bardo concept, and arguably underlies it in the first place. From the more-or-less universal perspective of the waking subject, sleep presents itself as a blank passageway book-ended by drowsiness: we lie down and close our eyes just like other sleeping people we have seen, and then we awaken to discover that, but for the apparent passage of time, reality remains consistent. Tucked recursively within that frame, however, lies the enigmatic passage of the dream, which reveals itself (or is produced) as a bounded passage precisely at the moment when the dream state collapses and we find ourselves outside its temporal and ontological boundaries, at once the same and different as the dream subject. Lurching across this threshold, we not only discover the concrete phenomenological basis for the boundedness and

alterity of the bardo, but also for the ruptures that insinuate themselves, like the Clear Light, *between these between*s.

The dream is also one of the primary metaphors deployed throughout the course of Buddhism to underscore the transience and ultimately insubstantial character of the world.<sup>42</sup> As such, it is hardly surprising to discover that the dream recurs throughout the accounts of the intermediate state. In the *Saddharmasmṛtyuṣastāna sūtra*, the confusions of the afterlife are metaphorically linked to the dream, as they are in Tilopa's later tantric account. Naropa explicitly categorized the dream as itself a bardo, a development that may have been inspired by a quote from the *Vajradhāra tantra*: "just as a dream is illusory, so is the bardo existence."<sup>43</sup> Naropa's classification is also pragmatic, opening up a new basis for visionary practices that include not only dream yoga but the imaginal generation of the magical or "illusory" bodies of the higher yoga tantras.<sup>44</sup> Though the dream is generally not treated as a particularly privileged bardo (in the Six Yogas of Naropa, for example, dream yoga is generally absent or subsumed into the practices of the illusory body), the elaboration of the in-between conceptually rests on what Cuevas calls the bardo's "formal resemblance to the dream state."<sup>45</sup>

As Naropa's lineage extended itself into Tibet, his three-fold schema was elaborated at the hands of the Tibetan yogis Marpa (1012–1097) and Milarepa (1052–1135). By the first half of the twelfth century, Cuevas concludes, "there had already been such a remarkable proliferation of ideas inspired by the generic notion of a period of transition between two states of consciousness that for Milarepa's generation seemingly every significant experience or phase of existence . . . could be divided into a graded series of intermediate states."<sup>46</sup> This multiplication was both extensive and intensive—bardos could be recognized both *within* other bardos (as the dream bardo exists within the bardo of birth-to-death) and *between* other bardos. The most important example of the latter, which derives from Padmasambhava's teachings and therefore forms the backbone of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, is the bardo of "reality itself" (*chos nyid od gsal gyi bar do*), an "entirely unique intermediate state concept"<sup>47</sup> said to arise between the bardo of dying and the *srid pa bardo* of confused imaginal becoming that culminates in rebirth. The bardo of reality, characterized most famously by the vibrant appearance of peaceful and ferocious deities, begins with two eruptions of the Clear Light, whose arising is sometimes characterized as a bardo of its own.

What is crucial to emphasize in this highly abbreviated presentation is the *productive instability* of the bardo concept, especially once it is abstracted from the intermediate state between death and rebirth. It is as if the affordances of the schematic concept, defined more by the frames marking its boundaries than its internal ontology, encourage the concept to insinuate and iterate itself in endless in-betweens of existence, analogically reverberating across an increasingly elaborate and

recursive series. We are always either in or between bardos, an “in-between” that is itself, at least theoretically, another bardo. These phases are themselves able to enter “into phase,” so that, at least for advanced practitioners, the underlying condition of “in-between” echoes through a variety of cosmic and mundane registers. So, even as the bardo concept *expands* to encompass life’s various in-betweens, this very multiplication collapses into a shared resonance that brings meditation, dream, orgasm, and even sneezing “into phase” with the dissolution of dying and the necessary encounter with the Clear Light.<sup>48</sup> Tibetan Buddhism scholar Robert Thurman nicely captures the soteriological implications of this resonance in his characterization of Tantra as “a method of compressing eons of lives into one life, eons of deaths into one death, and eons of betweens into one between.”<sup>49</sup>

So far, I have discussed the evolution of the intermediate state concept within Buddhist thought. Perhaps equally important to the *Great Liberation*, however, is the mutation the concept underwent when it encountered the ferocious funerary imagination of indigenous Tibet. Though scholars are divided on the usefulness of the second-order term “shamanistic” to describe pre-Buddhist Tibet, the term has proved valuable for some scholars of the region. In *Civilized Shamanism*, for example, Buddhism scholar Geoffrey Samuel identifies two streams of Tibetan Buddhist culture: a “clerical” stream, of Indian origin, associated with monastic institutions, graded moral development, and an other-worldly orientation; and a “shamanistic” stream that is indigenous, this-worldly, and more overtly magical.

For Samuel, Tibet’s “shamanic Buddhism” should not be confused with folk practices found among village healers, exorcists and astrologers, but rather identified with some of Tibet’s highest teachings on liberation. These include the so-called fruition-based tantric paths, which, rather than following a series of linear and progressive stages, start from the “always already” achieved suchness of *Bodhi*. In contrast to the Mahayana sutra orientation of the clerical strain, this stream is based on *termas* and tantric practices that “provide a functional equivalent to shamanic practice and operate through a vocabulary that may be considered as a more sophisticated and rationalized version of typical shamanic vocabulary.”<sup>50</sup> From this perspective, it is clear that the bardo texts of the *Great Liberation* represent the more shamanistic end of Tibetan Buddhism, which intensively engages visionary consciousness in the context of a “here and now” soteriology that draws from indigenous materials but affirms Buddhist models of transcendence. Some scholars even suspect that certain Tibetan traditions, especially the Bön and Nyingma, “contain deep within their layers a constellation of Tibetan ideas on death and the hereafter that have more or less survived from ancient times.”<sup>51</sup>

Two particularly indigenous elements of the *Great Liberation* are important to emphasize in light of *The Psychedelic Experience*. One is the

visual gruesomeness, ferocity, and intense affect associated with the demons who appear as part of the mandala of one hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities within the bardo of reality. These include a variety of immense, blood-drinking avatars of cosmic horror outfitted with skull-scraping implements of torture. Seeing these, Evans-Wentz' *Tibetan Book of the Dead* reminds us, "awe and terror are naturally produced in one."<sup>52</sup> Though this mandala derives from Mahayoga tantras, it may be incorrect to assume that the visualizations themselves emanate solely from Indian material. Though Nyingma accounts claim that Mahayoga tantras were translated from India in the eighth and ninth centuries, Cuevas insists that "little evidence exists to support such statements."<sup>53</sup> In his discussion of the *Great Liberation*, Germano also notes that he is "unaware of any sources that speak of a systematic revelation of in-dwelling deities that occurs for all life immediately following death."<sup>54</sup> It is reasonable to assume, then, that the mandala of the bardo of reality derives from an indigenous, shamanic layer of material that frames death as a *necessary* confrontation with gods and monsters. While it is impossible to delineate sharply the indigenous strand of this bardo lore, Cuevas argues that such a strand certainly includes the notion of a vulnerable soul (*bla*) capable of wandering away from the body, getting seduced by demons, and needing ritual specialists to ransom and guide it through the realms of the dead. These, of course, are all classic shamanic activities, as exhaustively cataloged by Mircea Eliade in *Shamanism* as well as by later, more careful scholars.<sup>55</sup> "In this light," Cuevas concludes, "we can be confident that a real continuity exists between the ritual beliefs of ancient Tibet and those preserved by later ritual traditions."<sup>56</sup>

The other uniquely Tibetan feature of the *Great Liberation* is found in the formal presence of the guide, the omniscient narrator using the imperative voice to address and instruct the reader. Tibetan Buddhism scholar Matthew Kapstein reports on research by Tibetologist Yoshiro Imaeda on the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, a collection of royal funerary texts and rituals found at Dunhuang (northwestern China) and dating to the late eighth or early ninth centuries. According to Imaeda, this material "seems to incorporate elements that cannot be traced in properly Buddhist mortuary rituals but that may be of archaic Tibetan origin, namely, its direct calls addressed to the deceased."<sup>57</sup> Here is an example from the Dunhuang texts, which will be familiar to any reader of *Great Liberation*: "Now listen, you who are deceased! Fickle impermanence, the real nature of the whole world, has at this time befallen you. . . ." <sup>58</sup> Kapstein argues that this present-tense imperative voice derives from "the apparently indigenous Tibetan tradition of calling the dead."<sup>59</sup>

This voice is perhaps the most singular rhetorical device of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and must account for some of the text's immense popularity in the West. Its drama and immediacy, with its commanding

descriptions and authoritative control, intensifies the imaginative appeal of the text itself, luring readers to enter into vivid afterlife scenarios by identifying with the scripted, second-person addressee. The words are received as if issued from the far side of the veil, which Western readers fantastically but ineluctably imagined themselves to have already crossed, staging a literary analog of Beyer's "magical simulacrum of death." But for some Western readers, already exposed to the sometimes harrowing thanatological simulacra of psychedelia, it was the stance of the shamanistic guide itself that became a site of constitutive resonance and creative distortion.

### SET AND SETTING

When Leary appropriated *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* for his own psychedelic purposes, he was acting as an applied religious comparativist. From Huxley and Smith, as well as from Jung and Lama Govinda (who receive, along with Evans-Wentz, "tributes" in the opening pages of *The Psychedelic Experience*), Leary imbibed the perennialist notion of a "universal" initiatory structure that demanded, in Govinda's words, that the aspirant "symbolically . . . die to his past, and to his old ego, before he can take his place in the new spiritual life into which he has been initiated."<sup>60</sup> Leary simply ratcheted up the degree of psychologization in this portrait by framing the pre-mortem death-rebirth experience as a function of the human nervous system that could be reliably catalyzed with certain psychoactives. In a sense, this molecular praxis simply extended the range of traditional spiritual "techniques" that Huxley had already drawn attention to in his portrayal of "empirical theology" in *The Perennial Philosophy*. Whatever we think of perennialism, we need to recognize that Leary was first and foremost developing what philosopher Peter Sloterdijk calls "anthropotechnics"—disciplined practices through which humans effect themselves and participate in their own subjectification. For Sloterdijk, much of what we refer to as religion is really "misunderstood spiritual regimens," psycho-physiological protocols developed in light of an existential "vertical tension" manifesting both as transcendence and, in modernity especially, a variety of aesthetic, athletic, acrobatic, and psycho-spiritual practices.<sup>61</sup>

We could say that Naropa also developed new anthropotechnics when he broadened the concept of a post-mortem intermediate state to include both waking life and dream. He not only demonstrated the philosophical plasticity of the concept, he also unleashed the possibility of new soteriological practices that continued to multiply as the bardo concept became further elaborated within the Tibetan context. Thinking in terms of such anthropotechnics, we might say that Leary was simply adding another domain to the series, constructing a "pharmacological

Tantra” that, paradoxically, may not have been so very distant from certain strains of South Asian ethnobotanical praxis.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, by making the *Great Liberation*’s implicit analog between the dying process and symbolic rehearsal explicit, the Leary group arguably brought forward some of the *Great Liberation*’s own “shamanistic” undertow.

As suggested earlier, the Tibetan elaboration of the Indian Buddhist intermediate state can be seen in part as a transformation of pre-Buddhist indigenous beliefs and practices, whose this-worldly exploration of non-ordinary states of consciousness involved, at least in some cases, the visionary pre-mortal death and dismemberment of the shaman. Gregory Samuel gives us an illuminating schema for understanding the socially embedded dimension of such self-rending transcendence:

The training of the shaman involves the acquisition of control over a series of different potentialities or modes of operation within human experience. . . . If shamans are to operate with these modes, or deal with the spirits, they have to acquire some kind of further mode or state from which they can view them and balance them within themselves and their social context. In the process, they have to transcend or go beyond the normal experience of the world taken for granted within their social and cultural context. [This] is the meaning of the symbolic death that forms a common part of shamanic training and initiation.<sup>63</sup>

Here we have a peculiarly resonant characterization of Leary’s own psycho-social theory of ego-death and the “non-game ecstasy” afforded by psychedelic experience.

While dependent to a degree on psychological discourse, Leary’s insight needs to be seen within a modern phenomenology of psychedelic experience, particularly the widely reported claim of perceiving, sometimes with despair, the thoroughly constructed contingency of everyday forms of perception, behavior, and identity.<sup>64</sup> In *The Psychedelic Experience*, this insight, arguably “postmodern” and certainly constructionist, is re-framed as the inner truth of perennialism’s more typically “modernist” initiatory death-rebirth structure. Leary’s appropriation affords a positive basis for the comparison of shamanic and social scientific models *without* invoking the essentialist notion, attacked by Lopez in good historicist fashion, of “a deep structure in human consciousness that has remained the same across space and time.”<sup>65</sup> Instead, Leary’s broad comparativist gesture hangs its hat on the deconstructive force of “ego death” and the dissolution of cultural scripts, identity positions, and subject-object relations into a field of radical contingency that must either be affirmed in its indeterminacy or reconstructed. The nexus of comparison is no longer an essentialist “object” like a deep structure, but an “event” that catalyzes the dissolution of structure.

The construction of “ego death” is one of the more intriguing revisionisms of *The Psychedelic Experience*. During the often rocky onset of the

trip, analogized by the Leary group with the bardo of dying, the sorts of physical symptoms described earlier by LSD pioneer Albert Hoffman—nausea, chills, claustrophobia—become, as in the *Great Liberation*, “signs heralding transcendence.” But what is this transcendence? If fears and grasping are released, “The Period of Ego-loss or Non-Game Ecstasy” then dawns. This is the psychedelic Clear Light according to the Leary group, who define liberation as “the nervous system devoid of mental-conceptual activity.”<sup>66</sup> The weird hallucinations conventionally associated with psychedelic experience were by no means the desideratum of the Leary group, who wanted instead to prioritize the radical dissolution of conventional dualistic modes of thought and perception into a mode of immediacy.

This serene release from game-playing and identity is, according to the text, difficult to maintain. It therefore remains in “vertical tension” with the remainder of the experience, as the personal, psychodynamic, and genetically inherited propensities of most subjects drive them into the Second and Third Bardos, dubbed by the authors the Period of Hallucinations and the Period of Re-Entry. During the latter—the return to “routine game reality and the self” (conventionally described as “coming down”)—the subject experiences the strong return of sexuality and interpersonal conflict, indicating a return to normal ego bounds. Acknowledging that most people will flicker back and forth between these bardos throughout their experience, the authors insist that the goal of their guidebook is to keep subjects in the Period of Ego-loss for as long as possible. Here, what was once soteriology becomes a kind of acrobatics of the void. Upon re-entry, subjects are encouraged not to pick up their old habits but to commit to a new and happier “game.”

Along with reconstructing “liberation,” the Leary group boldly re-framed the central Buddhist doctrine of emptiness—the absence of inherent existence that, as the *Great Liberation* constantly reminds readers, is the actual nature of bardo visions. Indeed, according to some tantric interpretations, one advantage of the bardo is that the restless phantasmagoria of visions makes it easier to recognize the deluded nature of dualistic perception and to release into the underlying natural radiance of mind.

As formulated by Leary and colleagues, psychedelic experience presents a curious structural or conceptual analog here, although they latch it to a very different ontology. As secular psychologists, they accept the contingent, dream-like, or mind-generated character of psychedelia’s visionary phenomena. At the same time, however, they recognize that the ferocious clarity, revelatory content, and profound meaningfulness of the visions encourage a misrecognition of being. Like *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, but in a materialistic mode, the Leary group reminds trippers to remember the lack of inherent existence in the visions. *The Psychedelic Experience* was designed to be read to subjects during the more difficult

passages of an LSD experience, and one of the redacted Tibetan prayers that close the text reads:

Voidness cannot injure voidness.  
None of the peaceful or wrathful visions,  
Blood-drinking demons, machines, monsters, or devils,  
Exist in reality  
Only within your skull.<sup>67</sup>

Here the Buddhist philosophical concept of pure or empty appearance moves from a metaphysical to a reductive bio-physical register: the brain within your skull. But this secular and psychological reframing does not reflect *eliminative* reductionism, since it remains attached to the meaningful and arguably transcendent possibility of insight into the constructed character of our dualistic dispositions. Far from embracing visionary phenomena as some sort of premodern or exotic re-enchantment of experience, the Leary group's attitude towards hallucinatory material is ultimately iconoclastic and in some fundamental sense naturalistic.

As a work of visionary anthropotechnics, perhaps the Leary group's most influential and intriguing intervention is the notion of the guide itself, a figure that in *The Psychedelic Experience* encompasses both a literary device (the guidebook) and a social position (the human guide). Curiously, this double meaning arguably already structures the *Great Liberation* cycle, whose manuals of instruction include literal scripts to be intoned *in situ* by human guides. *The Psychedelic Experience* provides various protocols and self-referential "Technical Comments" outlining its possible uses as a guidebook—such as reading certain prayers to help subjects avoid "paranoia traps"—with scripts that can be pre-recorded and played back to obviate the need for a human guide. The authors also note that, with the law of set and setting in mind, their bardo lore can also be used to construct a "program" for the experience. "One can envision a high art [of] programming psychedelic sessions, in which symbolic manipulation and presentations would lead the voyager through ecstatic visionary Bead Games,"<sup>68</sup> a notion drawn from Herman Hesse's *Magister Ludi*, which describes a visionary and intellectual game of comparison and synthesis.

Behind all these creative protocols is the conviction that psychedelic experience is more productive or rewarding with the presence of some guide or intentional structure: in the midst of liberation and surrender, there is also construction and prescription.

## BROADCAST

By translating *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* into "psychedelic English," the Leary group did not just creatively "misread" Evans-Wentz' already

malformed translation of the *Great Liberation's* reconstruction of ancient Indian intermediate state theory and indigenous thanatology. The group *continued to read it*, which means they furthered the textual transmission of a “human artifact”<sup>69</sup> whose originality is derived from its possibility of being copied and disseminated. The *Great Liberation* text translated in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as “Introduction to the Bardo of Reality” already makes the following self-referential call to its readers:

Therefore read [the text] in the midst of vast congregations. Disseminate it. Through having heard it once, even though one do [sic] not comprehend it, it will be remembered in the Intermediate State. . . . Hence it should be proclaimed in the ears of all living persons; it should be read over the pillows of all persons who are ill; it should be read at the side of all corpses; it should be spread broadcast.<sup>70</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the Leary group included this passage, suitably remixed, into their own manual.

Following its publication, *The Psychedelic Experience* became the most important manual for psychedelic experiences during the crucial “in between” period when LSD moved out of the elite realm of research centers and psychotherapist offices and entered (and fueled) the exploding counterculture before legal prohibition sent the molecule underground. For better or worse, the desideratum of “ego death,” tinged with Buddhist self-deconstruction and an ambivalence around “visions,” became a primary script in the emergence of entheogenic esotericism. As Robert Greenfield notes in his biography of Leary, “*The Psychedelic Experience* was taken so seriously by LSD users that when people failed to have the experience described within its covers, they blamed themselves . . . the book was a top-down attempt to program LSD users to experience what those at Millbrook deemed a proper trip. Ego-death was a non-negotiable part of it.”<sup>71</sup>

Evidence for this claim can be found in *Orange Sunshine*, Nicholas Schou’s popular history of the Southern California-based Brotherhood of Eternal Love, one of the largest (and most idealistic) hashish and LSD drug networks of the 1960s-1970s. In the early 1960s, the Brotherhood’s future leader, John Griggs, was a petty criminal described by Schou as a “mean-spirited badass prone to picking fights.”<sup>72</sup> Griggs tried LSD—which he had stolen—and experienced “ego-death.” Almost overnight, he became a spiritual evangelist for LSD, yoga, and meditation, consistently employing and recommending *The Psychedelic Experience* as a trip guide. According to Schou, a fellow traveler named Steve Hodgson reported that Griggs and his buddies recited the book chapter and verse whenever they took LSD, and that, during his own initial exposure to the molecule, Hodgson had what he referred to as a religious experience.<sup>73</sup>

*The Psychedelic Experience's* cultural authority, however, would not last long. In one of the most storied (and over-thematized) confrontations of the 1960s psychedelic underground, the West Coast Merry Pranksters, led by novelist Ken Kesey, made a cross-country trip in their Magic Bus and descended on Millbrook to visit Leary and company. In contrast to Leary's scholarly comparativist orientation, Kesey and the Pranksters had embraced a far more anarchic, demotic, and "bottom-up" approach to psychedelic experience that was much less amenable to explicit religious frameworks or guidance grounded in clinical psychotherapy. In Tom Wolfe's colorful retelling of this encounter in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, the Pranksters visited the basement rooms where the Leary group performed many of their explorations, and Prankster Ken Babbs launched into a parody of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, mocking what he called the Leary group's "crypt trip."<sup>74</sup> By the 1970s, even among the therapeutic mavericks who continued to guide psychedelic users on the sly, the heavy-handed and sometimes corny protocols of the *Psychedelic Experience* were largely abandoned for more conceptually minimalist (if sometimes sensually maximalist) approaches to leading and "programming" sessions.<sup>75</sup>

That said, Lopez is wrong to claim that *The Psychedelic Experience* was "largely forgotten." The truth is that this fascinating, bizarre, and problematic text was not so much forgotten as absorbed. In addition to launching the foundational notions of "set and setting" and "ego death" into psychedelic culture, the book's revision of the bardo concept arguably helped fuel the transfer of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist concepts, images, texts and practices into the West, seeding the spiritual counterculture that overlapped and in some ways followed the 1960s counterculture. The exact role psychedelics played in the emergence and ongoing mutation of postwar Western Buddhism and Hinduism remains a complex and controversial topic.<sup>76</sup> Here we could do worse than gesture to the paradigmatic life course of *Psychedelic Experience* co-author Richard Alpert, who followed up his Harvard dismissal with a life- and name-changing trip to India in 1967, returning to America as the spiritual leader Ram Dass.

In the long run, however, perhaps the most significant reverberation of *The Psychedelic Experience* is the connection of psychedelic practice with the art and necessity of dying. In the late 1950s, Aldous Huxley wrote about the benefits that psychedelic sessions might hold for those nearing death. In the fall of 1963, as a terminally ill Huxley sank into darkness, his wife Laura injected him with 100 micrograms of LSD, and when that seemed to go well she gave him another, comparable dose. Subsequently, a number of clinical investigations explored the use of psychedelics to ameliorate the fear, anxiety and despair faced by terminal patients.<sup>77</sup> In 1975, with Stephen Levine, Ram Dass founded the Living/Dying Project, whose counselors would read the *Tibetan Book of*

*the Dead* to the dying. And as part of today's so-called "renaissance" in legitimate psychedelic research in the United States and Europe, a number of studies at Johns Hopkins, New York University, and University of California, Los Angeles have explicitly focused on the therapeutic benefits of various psychedelics for advanced cancer patients and the terminally ill.<sup>78</sup>

As a methodology of applied mysticism, or entheogenic esotericism, psychedelics remain marginal and controversial. But it may be harder to marginalize the transformative role these substances can and do play in that practice that in some sense we all must take on: the practice of dying.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> F.C. Mish, ed., *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, unabridged* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Though *The Psychedelic Experience* is credited to all three authors, Leary was primarily responsible for the text's tone and conceptual bravura; as such, I will refer to the text's author as "Leary."

<sup>3</sup> Robert Greenfield, *Timothy Leary: A Biography* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2006), 219.

<sup>4</sup> Less than two years after publication, *The Psychedelic Experience* entered its fourth hardcover printing; in 1966, a Folkways recording featured all three authors reading selections from the text.

<sup>5</sup> See Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Entheogenic Esotericism," in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kenneth Granholm (Sheffield, United Kingdom: Equinox, 2013), 392. "Entheogen" (Gr., generating [or recognizing] the god within) is a term used by some scholars and practitioners to replace the stigmatized terms *psychedelic* and *hallucinogen*. However, for reasons of etymology and historical continuity, I prefer to retain the term *psychedelic*.

<sup>6</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Bloom's most thorough presentation of creative misprision can be found in his *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> R.E.L. Masters and Jean Houston, *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience* (New York: Dell, 1966), 142. For their account of "Psyche and Symbol," see 161–86.

<sup>9</sup> Stanislav Grof, *LSD Psychotherapy* (Pomona, CA: Hunter House, 1980), 72.

<sup>10</sup> Larry Hagman, with Todd Gold, *Hello Darlin'!: Tall (and Absolutely True) Tales About My Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 138–42.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Don Lattin, *The Harvard Psychedelic Club* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 63.

<sup>12</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* (Harper Perennial, 2004), 56.

<sup>13</sup> Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 57.

<sup>14</sup> Greenfield, *Timothy Leary*, 166.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Leary, “How to Change Behavior,” in James Penner, ed., *Timothy Leary: The Harvard Years: Early Writings on LSD and Psilocybin with Richard Alpert, Huston Smith, Ralph Metzner, and others* (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2014), 23.

<sup>16</sup> Leary, “How to Change,” 28.

<sup>17</sup> Leary, “How to Change,” 27.

<sup>18</sup> See Grof, *LSD Psychotherapy*, 218–27.

<sup>19</sup> A search for the term “ego death” brought more than 500 hits among the more than 20,000 psychoactive experience reports collected on <https://erowid.org>; accessed 3 November 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Schou, *Orange Sunshine: the Brotherhood of Eternal Love and its Quest to Spread Peace, Love, and Acid to the World* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2010), 28.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, and Ralph Metzner, *The Psychedelic Experience: a Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New York: University Press, 1964), 22.

<sup>22</sup> Donald S. Lopez, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 119.

<sup>23</sup> For a condensed introduction to Walter J. Hanegraaff’s notion of esotericism, see his *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); for metaphysical religion, see Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Lopez is not the first to analyze Evans-Wentz in terms of his Theosophical prejudices. See John Myrdhin Reynolds, “The Views on Dzogchen of W.Y. Evans-Wentz and C.G. Jung,” in Karma-gliñ-pa and John Myrdhin Reynolds, *Self-liberation through Seeing with Naked Awareness* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2000), esp. 71–96.

<sup>25</sup> Lopez, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography*, 150.

<sup>26</sup> See C.G. Jung, “Psychological Commentary,” in W.Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xlix.

<sup>27</sup> Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 72.

<sup>28</sup> David Germano, “Encountering Tibet: The Ethics, Soteriology, and Creativity of Cross-Cultural Interpretation,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69, no. 1 (2001), 171.

<sup>29</sup> Germano, “Encountering Tibet,” 176.

<sup>30</sup> Germano, “Encountering Tibet,” 171.

<sup>31</sup> Lopez, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography*, 119.

<sup>32</sup> Lopez, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography*, 117.

<sup>33</sup> Tibetan scholar Bryan Cuevas notes that, in the seventeenth century, the fifth Dalai Lama included two *Great Liberation* texts in a collection of Karma Lingpa *sādhanas*, and concludes that these documents “were viewed by the fifth Dalai Lama as nothing more or less than texts that provided a ‘means for achieving’ (*sgrub-thabs*) visualization of a prescribed mandala during the interval between this and the next life.” See Bryan J. Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 106).

- <sup>34</sup> Germano, "Encountering Tibet," 175.
- <sup>35</sup> Stephan Beyer, *The Cult of Tara: Magic and Ritual in Tibet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 110.
- <sup>36</sup> Graham Coleman et al., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: First Complete Translation* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 423, n.3.
- <sup>37</sup> Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 43.
- <sup>38</sup> For more on the historical development of the bardo concept in Tibet, see Matthew T. Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. 8–10; also see David Germano, "The Funerary Transformation of the Great Perfection (Rdzogs chen)," *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 1 (2005): 1–54.
- <sup>39</sup> Padmasambhava is considered the founder of the Nyingma, the oldest of Tibetan Buddhism's four major schools; the legacy of the Tibetan mahasiddhas Tilopa and Naropa, Tilopa's chief disciple, belong to the Kagyu school.
- <sup>40</sup> Within Tibetan Tantra, both "winds" and "heart" refer to internal elements of esoteric physiology. Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 47.
- <sup>41</sup> Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 48.
- <sup>42</sup> For a good overview of Buddhism and dreams, see Serinity Young, *Dreaming in the Lotus: Buddhist Dream Narrative, Imagery, and Practice* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1999); and Angela Sumegi, *Dreamworlds of Shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York, 2008).
- <sup>43</sup> Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 229, n. 59.
- <sup>44</sup> Within the Vajrayana traditions of Tibet, the "illusory body" or "vajra body" is a non-corporeal emanation of light developed through the generation stage practices of visualization and tantric *sādhana*.
- <sup>45</sup> Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 51. The Six Yogas of Naropa are an influential body of advanced esoteric tantric practices first compiled in the twelfth century around the time of the Kagyu sage Naropa.
- <sup>46</sup> Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 53.
- <sup>47</sup> Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 58.
- <sup>48</sup> Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 63.
- <sup>49</sup> Robert A.F. Thurman, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Liberation through Understanding in the Between* (New York: Random House, 1994), 63.
- <sup>50</sup> Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 239.
- <sup>51</sup> Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 28.
- <sup>52</sup> Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 141.
- <sup>53</sup> Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 64.
- <sup>54</sup> David Germano, "Dying, Death, and Other Opportunities," in *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 459.
- <sup>55</sup> For more critical views of the adoption of "shamanism" by scholars and modern spiritual practitioners alike, see Ronald Hutton, *Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination* (London: Hambledon Continuum,

2007); also see Merete Demant Jakobsen, *Shamanism: Traditional and Contemporary Approaches to the Mastery of Spirits and Healing* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999). While the controversies over this second-order term might make its inclusion here questionable, I believe it is important to stress the comparative function that altered states of consciousness play in religious creativity, both indigenous and modern, and the centrality of “shamanism” to that comparison.

<sup>56</sup> Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 32.

<sup>57</sup> Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism*, 7.

<sup>59</sup> Eliade also notes that the Tibetan lama or priest, “although strictly speaking . . . not a psychopompic guide,” can be compared with “the function of the Altaic or Goldi shaman who symbolically escorts the deceased into the beyond.”<sup>59</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 438.

<sup>60</sup> Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 29.

<sup>61</sup> See Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 1–15.

<sup>62</sup> Powerful psychoactive plants played a role in tantric and folk religious practices throughout the Indian subcontinent. Within Hindu Tantra, the ritual and sacramental use of cannabis and datura among Shaivite sadhu orders and siddha culture are widely attested to in contemporary practice. David Gordon White points out that cannabis is called *vijaya* (victory) in a number of tantric texts. See David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 412, n. 220. The record for Buddhist Tantra is thinner; for a thorough discussion see R.C. Parker and Lux, “Psychoactive Plants in Tantric Buddhism,” *Erowid Extracts* 14 (2008), 6–11; pdf available at [https://erowid.org/general/newsletter/erowid\\_newsletter14.pdf](https://erowid.org/general/newsletter/erowid_newsletter14.pdf); accessed 3 November 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Samuel, *Civilized Shamanism*, 238.

<sup>64</sup> Stanislov Grof describes a phase of psychedelic perception in which the world seems to possess “an empty cardboard-like quality or the bizarre and grotesque character of a circus sideshow.” See *LSD Psychotherapy*, 86.

<sup>65</sup> Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-la*, 76.

<sup>66</sup> Leary, Metzner, Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience*, 38, 36.

<sup>67</sup> Leary, Metzner, Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience*, 139.

<sup>68</sup> Leary, Metzner, Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience*, 139.

<sup>69</sup> Leary, Metzner, Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience*, 105.

<sup>70</sup> Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 152.

<sup>71</sup> Greenfield, *Timothy Leary*, 219.

<sup>72</sup> Schou, *Orange Sunshine*, 11.

<sup>73</sup> Schou, *Orange Sunshine*, 6.

<sup>74</sup> See Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 104–08.

<sup>75</sup> For an illuminating account of this underground work, see Myron J. Stolaroff, *The Secret Chief Revealed* (Sarasota, FL: Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, 2004).

<sup>76</sup> For a thorough overview of the psychedelic dharma, see Douglas Osto, *Altered States: Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>77</sup> See Stanislav Grof and Joan Halifax, *The Human Encounter with Death* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977), 13–39; see also Bruce Sewick’s M.A. thesis, “Psychedelic-Assisted Psychotherapy for the Terminally Ill;” at <http://www.maps.org/research-archive/sewick.html>; accessed 3 November 2017.

<sup>78</sup> For a round-up of current research projects, see “LSD & Psilocybin-Assisted Therapy for Anxiety,” Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies; at <http://www.maps.org/news/media/260-ld-psylocybin-for-anxiety>; accessed 3 November 2017; for a journalistic account of this research, see Lauren Slater, “How Psychedelic Drugs Can Help Patients Face Death,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 20 April 2012; at [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/magazine/how-psychedelic-drugs-can-help-patients-face-death.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/magazine/how-psychedelic-drugs-can-help-patients-face-death.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0); accessed 3 November 2017.