The Comic Bardo Thodol

The Tibetan Afterlife
...in easy-to-digest comic form
Preamble: What The Hell?

**The Bardo Thodol, AKA** "The Tibetan Book of the Dead" **is the ultimate bedtime story: a guide text for the dying. It is essentially a map of existence after death...**

... or before birth.

**See, the Tibetans believe in reincarnation.**

**Who?**

It describes the afterlife (or between-life) journey through a kind of bizarre, psychedelic spiritual obstacle course... spiraling down toward rebirth.

**Whee!**

**Wuh?**

The text describes all the ways to break the spiral and attain liberation — exit from the wheel of birth and death, the highest spiritual achievement in their brand of Buddhism.

**But Beware:** Bigger is not better: the longer your bardo journey, the slimmer your chances of liberation.

**Wuh Comics?!**

Because the Bardo Thodol is really dense and complex, and there aren't good Western analogues; we've got heaven, hell, purgatory — the Tibetans have six such places... and numerous interstitial states, a variety of angels, demons, deities, and parallel worlds. It's weird and disorienting, and reading it can give you a major headache. So, in the interest of fun and simplicity, here's...
DEATH APPROACHES

THE MOMENT OF DEATH.

LAST BREATH...

--- WHICH IS THE
PORTAL INTO
THE FIRST BARDO

UNREALITY, CONFUSION.

FEELING AS IF YOU'RE GOING INSANE.

THE FIRST THING YOU SEE: THE "CLEAR LIGHT".

DO YOU RECOGNIZE IT AS PURE AND ULTIMATE REALITY?*

"CAUSE YOU'D BE LIBERATED, THEN.

MOI? PLEASE. I'M SEEING IT IN A SELFISH AND EGOistical WAY.

WELL, OKAY THEN...
SECOND CHANCE: ANOTHER CLEAR LIGHT, DIFFERENT FROM THE FIRST!

DID YOU DO IT THIS TIME? TRANSCEND EGO AND DUALITIES IN COMPASSION FOR ALL SENTIENT BEINGS?*

NOPE. NOT THIS TIME, EITHER.

*BECAUSE DITTO.

WELL, STRAP IN FOR A WILD RIDE!

BECAUSE YOU'VE WON A TICKET TO A COMPLICATED SEQUENCE OF SPIRITUAL ADVENTURES WITH AN ENTIRE PANTHEON OF BLISSFUL AND WRATHFUL DEITIES!

OH, YEAH.

WE'RE TALKING SERIOUS CHAOS.
Part II: the Chonyid Bardo

... So for the next week, you'll be experiencing benevolent hallucinations -- a new one each day. Welcome to Day 1:

YAIROCANA
Supreme Eternal
Mother/Father

SEE THE LIGHT FROM VAIROCANA'S "LOKA", OR HOME WORLD?

your tragic and gilde person, and none loves you.

AND OF COURSE, HIS "ATTENDANTS"...

Best Case:

I HAVE LIVED IN PURITY AND GRACE... AND AM THEREBY LIBERATED.

Worst Case:

BECAUSE OF MY BAD KARMA*, VAIROCANA STRIKES FEAR AND TERROR INTO MY HEART.

DEVA-LOKA

TO SPEND YOUR NEXT LIFE IN VAIROCANA'S "DEVA-LOKA": IT'S A LOT LIKE CHRISTIAN HEAVEN.

*FROM HAVING LIVED AN IMPIOUS LIFE

OFF YOU GO!

OTHERWISE...
WELL OKAY THEN!
ON TO DAY 2:

TIME FOR A LITTLE VISIT WITH...

AKSHOBHYA
AMMOTABLE BUDDHA

WITH A SMOKY LIGHT FROM HIS HELL LOKA.

THAT'S MY BOSS!

HOW DOES HE MAKE YOU FEEL?

BEST CASE:

JOY. PURE HEART. I AM LIBERATED.

WORST CASE:

OH, HE JUST MAKES ME ANGRY.

WELL OKAY THEN!
OFF YOU GO!

BHUVAR-LOKA

OH, POOP.

SPEND YOUR NEXT LIFE IN THE EQUIVALENT OF CHRISTIAN HELL....
HER LOKA MAKES A PLEASANT YELLOW LIGHT.

BES T CASE:
JOY, PURE HEART, BLAH BLAH. YOU KNOW THE DRILL.

GET YOUR OWN SUGAR! I'VE NEVER BEEN SO INSULTED IN MY WHOLE LIFE.

WORST CASE:

WHAT COULD SCREW IT UP THIS TIME?

OKAY, SO, EGO TISM, THEN. OFF YOU GO TO...

YEP! THE HUMAN WORLD! GET READY TO DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN.

Oh! Don't feel much of anything...
DAY 4:

**Best Case:**
JOY, PURE HEART, BLAH BLAH. YOU KNOW THE DRILL.

**Worst Case:**
GEE... INFINITE LIGHT LOOKS REALLY EXPENSIVE. I'LL WAIT TILL IT GOES ON SALE.

**What could Screw it up this time?**
MISERLINESS, ANYONE?

**OFF YOU GO!**

**Preta-Loka**

THE LAND OF "HUNGRY GHOSTS" -- WITH HUGE STOMACHS AND TINY THROATS. RAVENOUS, UNSATISFIED DESIRE. HAVE A NICE LIFE.

DOESN'T SOUND LIKE MUCH FUN, DOES IT?

OOPS
OH! DON'T FEEL MUCH OF ANYTHING...
DREAM IT. BELIEVE IT. ACHIEVE IT.

Worst Case:
I TOTALLY ENVY THIS GUY'S SUCCESS. AND I WISH I LIVED IN HIS VENICE CONDO.

OOPS. JEALOUSY. THAT'LL BE GOOD FOR A LIFETIME IN...

Best Case:
THE USUAL...

ASURA-LOKA

A WORLD OF FIERCE WARRIOR DEITY DEMONS. SNAP!

OH!
I'M DON'T FEEL MUCH OF ANYTHING...
WELL THEN! DAY 6:

A CURTAIN CALL!
THE "RETINAL CIRCUS"!

ALL THE BUDDHAS! ALL THE LOKAS!
one night only!

VIP Night
For Lesser Attendant Deities
FINALLY, DAY 7:

The End of the Benevolent Deities

Bye-Bye

And a One-Time-Only Performance by

The Five Knowledge-Holding Deities

Ooh. Wow. That's great, but I still have a lot of illusions about myself. And those chicks are beasts compared to me.

Well, you're ready for...

Worst Case:

Tyria Loka

Realm of animals. Now you're a beast for a lifetime.

Still haven't been reincarnated yet? Well, don't get comfortable. It's time for...
Another week of Encounters with Deities
only this time they're Scary and Malevolent

WOOF.

HEY PRETTY MAMA...

THEY'LL ALL SCARE THE CRAP OUT OF YOU. GET READY TO SCREAM FOR A WEEK STRAIGHT.

FOR YOU.

GRR.

HELP!
Look what they have in store:

TORTURE!

OUCH!

DECAPITATION!

DISMEMBERMENT!

YOW!

ENDLESS KAIVAY MEETINGS!

WELL, THAT'S JUST NIFTY.

KILL ME.

SHEER HELL!!!

...and it goes on for seven days!
But here's the catch:

The Malevolent Deities are merely
The Benevolent Deities...

...IN DISGUISE...

...it's their dark side manifesting as a result of your own evil karma...

RECOGNIZE THIS, AND YOU MERGE WITH THE DEITY AS A KIND OF LESSER LIBERATION -- ABOUT THE ONLY ONE YOU CAN HOPE FOR AT THIS POINT...

BONUS:

...with the one remaining possibility to realize that these fearsome creatures are not real, but emanations from your own mind; realize this, and they will vanish -- and you will be liberated.

THESE GUYS AREN'T SO SCARY. THEY'RE NOT EVEN REAL...

...AND OFF YOU GO...

OTHERWISE, YOU PASS OUT WITH FEAR, WAKING UP IN...
Part III: the Sidpa Bardo

In the Sidpa Bardo, you awaken in a bardo-body, much like the cartoon ideal of a ghost: you can walk through walls, blip across great distances in an instant, stuff like that. Don’t get too attached to your powers. You’ll just get distracted from the business of liberation.

Depending on your karma, you’ll wander this bardo experiencing:

Terror

Beauty

We’ve got it all!

Terminal Blandness

Oh! Beauty, please?

Maybe, maybe not. How’s your karma, baby?
WAIT! DON'T ANSWER THAT. YOU'RE ABOUT TO MEET YAMA RAJA

LORD OF DEATH

AND HE'S GOT A LITTLE SOMETHING FOR YA... SOMETHING YOU MAY OR MAY NOT FIND AMUSING...

Wherein EVERY GOOD OR EVIL DEED IS REFLECTED

STILL SEE SOME HEAVY KARMA HANGING OVER YOUR SOUL? WELL,

MORE DEMONS, THEN!

THE MIRROR OF KARMA

APPROACHING AND TORMENTING FROM EVERY SIDE. BUMMER.
Yeah, we know this must be getting old by now, but you could still — at this late date — attain liberation by recognizing the voidness of this judgement and the lord of death himself. But you probably won’t... but this is your last chance.

Now the lights of the six lokas dawn again into one of these loka worlds your soul must be reborn.

Man, I’m still traumatized by all these apparitions. I just need to rest for a little while.

In fact, that cave looks nice.

Not a cave. A womb.

You’re about to be reborn.

There are apparitions of your new parents making love.

Gross.
At this point, pretty much all you can do is focus on the chain of good karma, the clear light, and the voidness of all things.

It might help you to choose an incarnation that will have more success closing the door on rebirth this time around.
and now...

Your descent is complete

You are reborn...

Welcome back to the world.

Thanks.

Have a nice life.

I think...