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Thirty-Seven Bardo Tsakalis (Initiation Cards)

Block printed on paper, burnished surface

Bkra Shis Lhunpo Monastery

Museum #: 91.001.004

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These *tsakalis* (initiation cards) were used in the initiations performed by a Lama or monk in the process of reciting the Bardo Thodol (*Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Between*, known in the West as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*) on behalf of a deceased person.

Tsakalis are carried by a monk or Lama to the home of a dying or deceased person to whom the Bardo will be recited. At the start of this recitation, the Lama summons the consciousness of the deceased with a name-card or picture-card, often a block-printed drawing of a worshipper upon which the deceased's name is written. The name-card symbolically represents the deceased so that the Lama may give him instructions and describe the Bardo stages, thus preparing the deceased for the Bardo visitations. The *tsakalis* are then used by the Lama to guide that consciousness through the realms of the Bardo, the "Between state" or intermediate plane of existence that each person experiences following the end of this life and the next rebirth.

The *tsakalis* are held up during certain points in the reading of the text when specific initiations for the dead person are performed. The central part of the ritual begins as the Lama describes the sixth day of the Bardo visions. This occurs within the fourteen-day period that forms the second of the three stages of the Bardo, called the Chonyid Bardo, in which visionary deities appear before the deceased. On the sixth day of the Chonyid Bardo the Six Buddhas of the six realms of existence, emanations of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, appear before the deceased. At this stage the Lama describes the Buddha that presides over each realm and the particular sufferings to be found in each. The deceased's name-card is moved through and symbolically liberated from each of these six realms which are then ritually closed off after the deceased passes through it, protecting him from rebirth there.

In total, fourteen initiations are performed in the recitation of the Bardo Thodol, through which knowledge about all of the visionary deities of the Bardo and the symbolic significance of their groupings are explained. Amongst these initiations are those to the five Buddhas, with consecrated water used for *abhiseka* rites, and the offering of bowls of rice. By reciting the Bardo and performing the initiations in this way the Lama spiritually enables the deceased to face the Bardo deities and understand their true nature; this understanding is the key to liberation for the deceased.

Tsakalis are utilized in other death and dying rituals not related to recitation of the Bardo, at the end of which the name-card of the deceased may be burned to indicate the consumption of the last tie to this incarnation. Similar cards are also used for a variety of other initiations which a practitioner is given

as he progresses in his studies.

This set of *tsakalis* includes images of the Buddhas of the Six Realms of Existence, and of the mandalas of these Six Realms. Other cards depict ritual implements such as the *dorje*, or show groups of some of the Wrathful deities that appear during the Bardo visions.

References:

Lauf, p. 77-83

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