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Who Wrote The Tibetan Of The Dead

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Unveiling the Origins of a Timeless Spiritual Classic

Few texts have captured the Western imagination as powerfully as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Known in its original language as the **Bardo Thodol**—which translates to *"Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate State"*—this ancient work offers profound insights into death, consciousness, and the afterlife. Yet for all its fame, a simple question often puzzles readers: **Who wrote The Tibetan Of The Dead?** The answer is far from straightforward, weaving together mythology, history, authorship, and translation. This article explores the layers of creation behind this revered text, separating legend from scholarly consensus while honoring the rich tradition from which it emerged.

The Traditional Attribution: Padmasambhava and the Terma Tradition

According to Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the core teachings of the *Bardo Thodol were composed by the great 8th-century Indian master Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche. He is considered a second Buddha in Tibetan Buddhism, credited with bringing Vajrayana Buddhism to Tibet. Legend holds that Padmasambhava wrote the text as a terma*—a "hidden treasure" meant to be discovered at a future time when the teachings would be most needed.

In Tibetan Buddhist culture, terma literature is a unique genre. Teachers conceal sacred texts, ritual objects, or instructions for the benefit of future generations. These treasures are then discovered by *tertöns*, or treasure revealers, who are reincarnations of the original teacher's disciples. So when someone asks **who wrote The Tibetan Of The Dead**, the answer has two parts: the original author, Padmasambhava, and the revealer, **Karma Lingpa**.

The Revealer: Karma Lingpa (14th Century)

Tradition states that Karma Lingpa, a 14th-century Tibetan master and tertön, discovered the Bardo Thodol as a hidden treasure near Mount Gampodar. He is said to have been a reincarnation of a disciple of Padmasambhava named Chokro Lotsawa. Karma Lingpa's discovery included a cycle of teachings known as the *"Profound Dharma of Self-Liberation through the Intention of the Peaceful and Wrathful Ones"*. The most famous part of this cycle is the *Bardo Thodol*, which deals with the intermediate state between death and rebirth.

Thus, from a traditional perspective, the authorship question—**who wrote The Tibetan Of The Dead** —is answered as Padmasambhava (as the original composer) and Karma Lingpa (as the scribe or revealer). However, modern historical scholarship offers a more nuanced view.

Modern Scholarship: A Composite Text

Academic researchers have examined the Bardo Thodol using historical, linguistic, and textual analysis. They generally conclude that the text is not the work of a single author but rather a compilation of teachings that evolved over several centuries. While Padmasambhava may have inspired the core concepts, the explicit

literary form we have today likely took shape between the 12th and 14th centuries.

Scholars such as **Bryan J. Cuevas** and **Donald S. Lopez Jr.** note that the Bardo Thodol belongs to a genre of "death literature" that became prominent in Tibet during the later dissemination of Buddhism. The terma tradition itself may have been a way to legitimize new teachings by attributing them to ancient masters. Therefore, when we ask **who wrote The Tibetan Of The Dead** from a critical standpoint, the answer is less about a single person and more about a collective process of composition, editing, and redaction by anonymous lamas over generations.

The Role of Walter Evans-Wentz: The Western "Author"

No discussion of **who wrote The Tibetan Of The Dead** would be complete without acknowledging the pivotal role of **Walter Evans-Wentz**. An American anthropologist and writer, Evans-Wentz published the first English translation in 1927 under the title *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. However, Evans-Wentz did not translate the text himself. He worked with Tibetan lamas, including **Kazi Dawa-Samdup**, who provided the actual translation. Evans-Wentz organized, edited, and wrote extensive commentary.

Calling Evans-Wentz the "author" would be inaccurate, yet his contributions dramatically shaped how the West understands the text. He added introductions, footnotes, and comparative references to Christian and Theosophical ideas. As a result, many modern readers assume that the Tibetan Book of the Dead is a single, fixed volume—when in reality, Evans-Wentz's compilation is an abridged and heavily interpreted version. If you ask a casual reader **who wrote The Tibetan Of The Dead**, they might well name Evans-Wentz, highlighting how translation can blur authorship.

Subsequent Translations and Scholarly Editions

Since Evans-Wentz, many scholars have produced fresh translations. **Francesca Fremantle** and **Chögyam Trungpa** published a translation in 1975 that aimed to be more faithful and accessible. **Robert A. F. Thurman** offered another version in 1994. **Gyurme Dorje** translated the entire cycle of Karma Lingpa's terma in 2005, giving readers a comprehensive view of the original Tibetan. These newer works often include critical discussions about **who wrote The Tibetan Of The Dead** and the text's historical development.

Each translation places the text in a different light, revealing that "authorship" in the Buddhist context is fluid. The original terma is considered timeless wisdom, not the product of a mortal mind. For practitioners, the question of **who wrote The Tibetan Of The Dead** is secondary to its efficacy as a spiritual guide.

The Text's Structure and Content

To appreciate the authorship, it helps to understand what the Bardo Thodol actually contains. The text is a guide for the dying or recently deceased, describing three intermediate states: the *chikhai bardo* (moment of death), the *chönyi bardo* (experience of reality), and the *sidpa bardo*(rebirth). It provides instructions on recognizing visions of peaceful and wrathful deities, avoiding rebirth in lower realms, and achieving liberation.

The style is poetic, repetitive, and ritualistic—intended to be read aloud to the dying person. This liturgical nature suggests that the text was composed by someone steeped in Vajrayana practice, likely a lineage holder. Whether that was Padmasambhava, Karma Lingpa, or a later editor remains open to interpretation. Yet the coherent spiritual vision underlying the text indicates a sophisticated authorial voice, even if collective.

Why the Question Matters Today

Understanding **who wrote The Tibetan Of The Dead** is not merely an academic curiosity. It affects how we read and use the book. If we see it as the direct word of Padmasambhava, we may approach it with religious reverence. If we view it as a medieval composition, we might analyze it as a cultural artifact. If we treat it as a Western construction by Evans-Wentz, we examine it through a colonial lens.

Many contemporary Buddhists and scholars take a middle path: honoring traditional attribution while acknowledging historical complexity. They recognize that the Bardo Thodol's power lies not in its human author but in its ability to guide beings through the ultimate transition. Nevertheless, the question persists **who wrote The Tibetan Of The Dead** ? The most accurate answer is a layered one—Padmasambhava, Karma Lingpa, and a host of translators and editors all played essential roles.

Semantic Keywords and Related Concepts

When researching this topic, readers often stumble upon related terms such as **Bardo Thodol original author**, **Padmasambhava terma**, **Tibetan Book of the Dead translator**, and **who discovered the Tibetan Book of the Dead**. All these queries touch on **who wrote The Tibetan Of The Dead** . By weaving these semantic variations naturally into the article, we ensure SEO best practices while maintaining readability.

- Padmasambhava is the traditional author.
- Karma Lingpa is the treasure revealer.
- Walter Evans-Wentz edited the first English version.
- Kazi Dawa-Samdup was the actual translator.
- Modern scholars like Gyurme Dorje and Francesca Fremantle have provided fresh translations.

Thus, the question **who wrote The Tibetan Of The Dead** has multiple answers depending on context.

Conclusion

The Tibetan Book of the Dead stands as one of the most profound spiritual works ever transmitted to the West. Yet asking **who wrote The Tibetan Of The Dead** reveals a rich tapestry of tradition, revelation, scholarship, and interpretation. From the legendary Padmasambhava to the historical Karma Lingpa, from the pioneering Evans-Wentz to modern academics, each figure contributed to the text we know today. Rather than searching for a single author, we might best understand the Bardo Thodol as a living teaching—one that has been written and rewritten across centuries by those who sought to liberate beings from the cycle of birth and death. Its true author, perhaps, is the compassionate wisdom that transcends any single name.

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