

# Tales of Lights and Shadows

THE MYTHOLOGY OF  
THE AFTERLIFE

ROBERT ELLWOOD



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## Mythology of the Afterlife

Robert Ellwood



**Continuum International Publishing Group**

The Tower Building                      80 Maiden Lane  
11 York Road                              Suite 704  
London SE1 7NX                          New York NY 10038

[www.continuumbooks.com](http://www.continuumbooks.com)

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**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4411-7003-3

PB: 978-1-4411-4397-6

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Ellwood, Robert S., 1933–

Tales of lights and shadows : mythology of the afterlife / Robert Ellwood.  
p. cm.

ISBN 978–1–4411–4397–6—ISBN 978–1–4411–7003–3 1. Future life.

2. Mythology. I. Title. II. Series.

BL535.E66 2010

202'.3—dc22

2010002076

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

Printed and bound in India by Replika Press Pvt Ltd

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# Chapter 1

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## *In That Good Night, What Dreams May Come? Myth, Meaning, and Afterlife*

Do not go gentle into that good night  
Dylan Thomas

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil  
William Shakespeare

## **The Clear Light and the Smokey Path**

You are a traditional Buddhist in Tibet. The hour of death has come upon you. Your body lies limp. You know that whatever in that frame was *you* is even now slipping away from its weight of flesh. The physical relics that remain will be taken to the charnel field where beasts and birds of prey will maul and devour them, for they no longer are of any human use. And yet, to feed even such carnivorous creatures as they is compassion, the religion's highest virtue.

As for yourself, as earthlight fades you hear, faintly but sufficiently, words whispered, almost chanted, into your ear, words in the voice of the lama attending you as you make this transition on the great pilgrimage. They are your instructions, your tour guidebook, so that nothing which confronts you will totally surprise you as a grand new adventure under a new sun unfolds. You will, in principle, be told in time how to respond to the many strange phenomena that are about to dazzle your eyes.

The darkness deepens, then suddenly light outbursts, light of a golden purity and power never seen on earth, the light of a thousand suns. And with it sounds the roaring of a thousand waterfalls at once. This is, the whisper tells you, the Clear Light of the Void, the very essence of the vast universe, the sound and sight of the dance of the galaxies and atoms distilled into a concentrate of unimaginable force.

Yet, you are told, that massive power is your own true nature, for you are and have always been as much a part of the dance as the remotest galaxy in the depths of space and time. Join it, let go to become part of it, and you are free, your pilgrimage having reached its ultimate goal, oneness with the One.

Yet you are not ready for this. You have not, in your time on earth, made enough deep meditations, moving consciousness beyond all name and form so that the one undifferentiated light seems familiar as family to you. If you had, you could now enter that supreme Reality as though returning to your own hearth and home. But as it is, the light is too bright for your eyes, feeling more like daggers than rays. The sound is too loud for your ears, drowning out even your own thoughts. You instinctively shrink back, and the magic moment when you might have gone where you most truly belong is gone. You see the ultimate light a little longer, as a dimmer and more distant radiant ring of eternity, but still you are too dazed by this strange new world to swim toward it. The secondary light too finally fades, leaving empty sky.

Not for long. Suddenly, as though a projector were switching slides, a vast and intricate figure looms above you amid the blue-black of infinite space. He is robed and crowned in white, he sits on a lion-throne and holds an eight-spoked wheel in his hand; he also holds in ecstatic sexual embrace his female consort. Radiant brilliance issues from his heart and that of the consort, so forcefully it is hard for your eyes to focus. We are now in the intermediate or Bardo state, the level of God or gods in heaven as it were, between God or Buddha-nature as infinite Clear Light, and the hard earth of our mortal lives.

The patter of words drones on, now telling you this is Vairocana, the cosmic Buddha whose meditations sustain the universe, who represents the Clear Light of the Void insofar as it can be represented in human form; his consort is Mother of Infinite Space, the profound wisdom with which he, as unlimited strength and skill, unites to manifest a universe. You realize that if you can truly recognize him as your own true nature, you will not fear but join him, entering his aura. You could do so if you had visualized him through meditation in the Tibetan style till you knew him as well as hands and feet. But again you are not prepared, and you pull back; the light again is too bright for your eyes. You are drawn to a softer white light off to one side of the vast phenomenon, and you are tempted to pursue it.

However, for the time being you stay with the passing panorama in the sky, as you see Vairocana fade out and another no less magnificent appear, and then another and another. These are the five cosmic

Buddhas of the great mandala or circle of power, who represent the immense forces and subtle layers of cosmic consciousness driving the universe itself. They appear in forms suitable for interface with human consciousness, as Buddhas in meditation so deep they uphold aspects of reality itself. Each holds his own symbol and embraces his own wisdom-queen. Yet they are all within each of us, for we are part of that reality, born from its mind and body, and able to return to it. If we recognize ourselves in any of the cosmic Buddhas, we can attain liberation through that gateway to infinity. You see them individually over five days, then on the sixth all five together, and on the seventh all five with attendant bodhisattvas.

The Buddha of the western wing of the mandala, Amitabha (Amida in Japanese), is particularly popular in East Asia, for it is said he has promised that all who call upon his name will be brought into his vast aura, which to our sight focuses as a Pure Land or Western Paradise, a virtually endless wonderland of gardens, trees strewn with nets of fabulous jewels, the music of paradise in the air.

Yet near each of the bright figures a dim light, in various colors, leads the overburdened eye away from the brilliant figure. These side-rays are six in number, tunneling toward six lokas or places of reincarnation. Those unable to receive the sublime images will find themselves especially drawn to one or another of those seductive pathways as a way of escape, because they correspond to the fate one's karma, or actions in thought, word, or deed, has prepared.

The white light leads to the heaven of the gods, the best karmic fate for those unprepared by spiritual meditation to receive Clear Light or the cosmic Buddhas; these happy fields are given those with a preponderance of good deeds in life. Then a soft red light will guide the wanderer between worlds to the realm of the asuras or fighting, jealous titans, the natural home of those who live by anger and violence. A soft blue light leads to human rebirth, with all its ambiguities. A soft green light takes us to the world of animals, said in Buddhist lore to be governed by sufferings and appetites which the creatures have no intelligence to understand; it draws those who, despite intelligence, have allowed their own lives to be guided mostly by appetite and suffering.

A soft yellow light leads to the realm of the hungry ghosts, creatures consumed by immense greed. Finally, a soft smoky light-trail takes one down deep to the dismal depths of hell. As in many religions, traditional commentators describe the imaginative tortures inflicted on the unfortunates consigned to hell with a certain relish. The main point, though, is that hell-beings really send themselves to this dark kingdom,

by means of the state they have allowed their consciousnesses to reach: seeing themselves as entirely separate from all others, they inflict pain without compunction; here it is merely reflected back on themselves.

You may be drawn to follow down one of these light-paths, and will remain in it; not forever, but only as long as the karma you have generated keeps you there. When that energy is exhausted, you may revert back to the human realm, the only level at which you have mind and ability to make real choices, which in turn will determine your next destiny. But if you enter into the Clear Light or merge into one of the Buddhas, that is eternal . . . unless you willingly return as a bodhisattva out of compassion for sentient beings.

Staying in the realm of Buddhist manifestations, continuing the heavenly panorama, you next see the five Buddhas in their terrifying aspects, as though your rejection of them has now turned them wrathful, or rather you perceive them as wrathful because of their threat to the separate individuality to which you still cling. But in your case, even the shock-therapy administered by their bloodthirsty horror is not enough to shake you free of self-clinging.

This is of great psychological interest, but we must proceed to the last stage of this scenario: since you did not find liberation in the intermediate state, you must now proceed to rebirth. You find yourself in a place of storm and tumbling rocks as the winds of karma blow stronger and stronger; you are told to pray to your patron deity, you have a flash vision of your future parents in sexual intercourse, you then faint and forget consciously all that has transpired, and find yourself in the womb of whatever creature, in whatever realm, your karma has scripted for you. In due course you are born, whether as human or dog, god or hungry ghost.

This is, as many will recognize, the after-death experience as portrayed in the text known to the west as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of the present study, it can be considered a myth, since it presents important information about the human situation, its meaning and destiny, in story form: the story of 'you' as you pass through physical death, transit the 'in between' (Bardo) state, and enter rebirth.

## Knowledge as Story, Story as Knowledge

Why story form? The issues of life, death, and afterlife have of course been dealt with more abstractly, in texts ranging from religious

catechisms to recondite philosophy. But we are likely to find ourselves most engaged by *stories*, whether we believe them literally or not. That is, first of all, because our *lives* are stories, not abstractions. We are not just one thing, whether soul, mind, spirit, or flesh, nor just one kind of person, good or bad, but a long narrative in which now one, now another of our facets holds center stage, though the others are there, in the shadows or waiting in the wings:

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts . . .  
– Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II, vii.

Second, not only are our lives stories, but – perhaps for that reason – we remember stories best. The roots of myth go back to preliterate times, when important information had to be conveyed from one generation to the next by word-of-mouth, through the lips of bards and elders who knew well what people needed to know. The data included knowledge of where the world, humanity, and one's own particular tribe had come from, on the grounds that to know thoroughly the nature of anything, one must know its origins. The wisdom included also the society's highest values, as exemplified by its heroes, its governance, its structure, its attitudes toward gods, animals, and tribal neighbors. And it also included knowledge about death, the spirits of the departed, and the likely experience of those who make that last long journey.

The loremasters who kept custody of this wisdom quickly realized it was imparted best through song and story, ideally the two combined in great epics. The first Australians learned the geography of their vast land through singing lengthy songs that recounted how tribal totem-ancestors created the features of that terrain back in the Dreamtime. Today, tribesmen walking those ancient 'songlines' and singing their songs of long ago can find their way, at the same time establishing a profoundly meaningful and sacred connection with the land.

Often a mythic story involves tension and action, for as every novelist knows, basic to any gripping narrative is a protagonist, the 'point of view' character, and an adversary or obstacle she or he must overcome. As the thrill of the drama holds us we also learn whatever information the story imparts along the way, often in the tale's very words. The storyteller too, in the days before writing, relied on the intense engagement lent by excitement, together with such devices

as meter, rhyme, and stock phrases (all very evident in such epics as Homer's), to aid memorization.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, a journey beyond death such as that narrated in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* contains these features. It is a *vademecum*, a guidebook that can 'go with me,' literally as it is whispered into the ear of the dying person. It presents obstacles to be overcome, namely the fear that the tremendous figures, peaceful or wrathful, so easily induce in those not accustomed to their transcendent brilliance. It displays tempting sidetracks, the soft lights to the six lokas. And it limns the ultimate ends of the great pilgrimage: absorption into the bliss and power of the transcendent, life in heaven, or rebirth in this world.

Myths not only transmit information; they also inculcate attitudes toward it. How do we respond to a universe created in such-and-such a way, or to a destiny beyond the grave like this? We will see that afterlife myths suggest all sorts of responses: fear, wariness, gloom, wonder, ecstatic joy. Even more basically, they all are ways of articulating a fundamental human feeling: that our lives are somehow lived in a larger context than just birth to death in this particular world. We cannot normally remember our own conception or birth, nor can we truly imagine death, though we try. It seems something more must shape our lives, more than what we can know just in terms of the perspective of this world. The larger framework gives us hints, at least, about where we came from, where we are going, and what it's all about.

The distinguished poet William Butler Yeats once wrote, 'I have often had the fancy that there is some one myth for every man, which, if we but knew it, would make us understand all he did and thought.'<sup>3</sup> Many of us, if we were honest, would acknowledge a certain story, or at least image, we keep telling or describing to ourselves in some private chamber of consciousness. Though we share it with no one else, if broadcast it could tell the world much that is important about us.

At the same time, we cannot help but feel very important issues are left unresolved by one lifetime in one world: the vindication of right and wrong, empty places in hearts left by the loss of loved ones, all the unanswered questions.

Myths of the afterlife endeavor to fill in those blanks. It must be acknowledged that myths cannot deal fully with all doubts. Every myth opens with certain structures of the universe already set: one can always ask for a backstory telling how it happened to be that kind of cosmos in the first place. Those queries can go back and back, like the question children often ask: 'If God created the world, then who created God?'

No myth can explain everything. Perhaps that explains why so many different myths of the afterlife can be found, giving such different and often inconsistent information, calling up so many diverse ‘feeling-tone’ responses. Profound tensions between possible visions at odds with each other obtain in the world of afterlife mythology, and these tensions will be basic to the approach of this book.

We will now list a number of tensions or polarities in myths and concepts of the afterlife. Our approach in this study will be to present and discuss examples from various side of these dichotomies in each chapter. It will become clear that every major religion or religious culture is represented, if not in every corner, at least in a remarkable diversity of places. However, it will not be possible to present an example of every side for each faith. In each, one outlook will probably be dominant, the others present as minority opinions or recessive traits that may nonetheless supplant the dominant view given the right circumstances. Here are our areas of tension:

## Tensions in Afterlife Myths and Doctrines

(1) *Taking afterlife seriously vs. virtual disbelief or unconcern about it.* Many rich mythologies depict a spectacular afterlife and an arduous pilgrimage-journey to fulfil it: Celtic, Egyptian, Native American, the Australian Dreamtime. On the other hand, the ancient Israelites, at least as represented in the Hebrew scriptures (Christian Old Testament), generally gave afterlife little mention, regarding God’s rewards and punishments to be in this world.

(2) *Gloomy view of the afterlife vs. a bright, happy picture.* The ancient Mesopotamians, Japanese, and Greeks of the Homeric era affirmed the afterlife, but portrayed it as bare existence in a dismal underworld; for others it is, like the Buddhist western paradise, a place of sunny, splendid beauty and joy.

(3) *Where is the place of a deceased spirit?* Is it at the hearth or grave, or in an another world, such as heaven? In fact, we will find that some societies have postulated multiple souls so that aspects of the person can dwell in two or even three or more places.

(4) *Earthly immortality, such as that of the Taoist immortals, vs. immortality in another realm.* In some societies, it is said to be possible to attain a preternaturally long life, even virtual immortality, in this world, in this body, through the practice of esoteric forms of yoga, alchemy, or meditation, and that earthly longevity in effect takes the place of an eternal spiritual life in heaven.

(5) *Reincarnation on this earth vs. eternal life in a heavenly world.* Views of the afterlife in world religions break down fundamentally over whether reincarnation is affirmed, or the next life is always elsewhere then in this world. On the other hand, both options may be experienced, as in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. What about the resurrection of the body and a new heaven and earth? This belief is part of the picture too.

(6) *Is the afterlife theocentric or anthropocentric?* That is, does it emphasize only worship of God or mystical union, or does the ideal fulfilment of human concerns also have a place – even a central place – in heaven? These would be the likes of reunion on the other side with lovers and relatives, the enjoyment of innocent delights comparable to those of earth, such as dancing amid paradisaal landscapes, or walking down the streets of golden cities. Does heaven include sublime sensuous and ‘natural’ loveliness, the beauty of birds, gardens, and music, or is it only ‘spiritual’?

(7) *Is the afterlife static or progressive?* Is there spiritual education and progress in heaven, or are souls, once glory is attained, considered perfect, and hence incapable of further change?

(8) *Fear of ancestral or other spirits vs. respect and honor.* The fear of ‘ghosts’ is virtually a universal human dread; yet so also is the desire to reverence, even worship, the departed.

(9) *Community and religious solidarity vs. individual reward and punishment.* In some early societies, afterlife fate was often not highly differentiated among individuals, but was collective. Deceased children would be reborn in the same family; most persons from the same tribe would take essentially the same journey to the other world, save perhaps for exceptional rulers, shamans, or heroes. On the other hand, then and much later, rites and initiations, basically reflecting the common beliefs of a community and the power of its collective priests and prayers, could greatly assist in the transition of an individual, so that she or he was not solely dependent on personal virtue.

By way of contrast, some societies and religions have also emphasized strict individual moral judgment, sometimes, as in ancient Egypt, at the same time priestly and magical aids (e.g., mummification) were also deployed, leaving no reassurance unsecured. In Christianity too, judgment based on one’s individual faith and moral life is emphasized, yet prayers and masses are also often said on behalf of the deceased, thus likewise employing the spiritual energy of the religious community to assist the individual’s transition.

(10) *The difficult vs. the easy path.* In some traditions, adequate preparation for the afterlife requires not only strict morality, but also arduous regimens of yoga, initiations, and pilgrimage which change an individual into another, more adamant being, capable of deathlessness. In others, the secret is in its very simplicity, which emphasizes the overwhelming grace of God: simple faith in Christ or Amida, unfeigned devotion as in Hindu bhakti.

(11) *A personal and/or eschatological, linear view of history vs. cyclical time.* The western monotheistic religions, together with popular eastern views of reincarnation, indicate that both history and personal time are moving toward future goals, distant as they may be. But cyclical models, like that of primal societies that see life rotating between this world and the Dreamtime, or the Platonic and Hindu four declining ages, suggest one's place in the scheme is also conditioned by one's place in the cycle, and the afterlife itself may involve cycling between worlds. The paradox also leads to the issue of individual reward and punishment immediately after death vs. Last Day judgment. This tension, which particularly exists in the western monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is a result of the Axial Age (to be discussed below), and its desire to find meaning in history. Summing-up and judgment at the end of days jostles with continuing belief in one's far more imminent individual journey and after-death judgment.<sup>4</sup>

(12) *Ordinary vs. extraordinary destinies after death.* Often, ordinary persons may have one kind of afterlife, warriors or heroes another. Most ancient Greeks went to the shadowy realm of Hades, but in time heroes could find rest in the Hesperides or the Isles of the Blest; ordinary Germanic people found themselves in the gloom of Hel, while warriors enjoyed warfare and feasting in the splendor of Valhalla. In medieval Christianity, saints went directly to heaven, while ordinary souls might need to undergo lengthy purification in Purgatory.

(13) *The One vs. the many.* Ultimately, the goal of the afterlife may not be reincarnation or life in another world, but union with Absolute, Unconditioned Reality: God, Brahman, Nirvana, the Clear Light of the Void. Separate existence falls away. In monotheistic religions, the experience of mystical union can make for tension with the need to maintain the distinction between Creator and creature.

## Afterlife, Myth, and History

The distinguished analytic psychologist C. G. Jung once wrote:

When we look at human history, we see only what happens on the surface, and even this is distorted in the faded mirror of tradition. But what has really been happening eludes the inquiring eye of the historian, for the true historical event lies deeply buried, experienced by all and observed by none. It is the most private and subjective of psychic experiences. Wars, dynasties, social upheavals, conquests, and religions are but the superficial symptoms of a secret psychic attitude unknown even to the individual himself, and transmitted by no historian; perhaps the founders of religions give us the most information in this regard. The great events of world history are, at bottom, profoundly unimportant. In the last analysis, the essential thing is the life of the individual. This alone makes history, here alone do the the great transformations first take place, and the whole future, the whole history of the world, ultimately springs as a gigantic summation from these hidden sources in individuals. In our most private and most subjective lives we are not only the passive witnesses of our age, and its sufferers, but also its makers. We make our own epoch.<sup>5</sup>

Among the clues to psychological shifts which are the real, though deeply buried, makers of history, surely myth must rank as one of the most important. Jung held that dreams also gave clues to what was transpiring on the plane of group as well as individual unconscious, but then myths are the collective drams of the human race. By this of course one does not mean only schoolbook myths, or official myths, but those myths that are important to the ‘individuals,’ in their multitudes, of whom Jung writes.

One thinks not only of the important nineteenth-century recovery of national myths, such as the Finnish Kalevala or the Germanic Nibelungenlied, the Japanese Kojiki or the British cult of King Arthur and Camelot, at the roots of that century’s nationalism, which in some cases had such bloody consequences in the next century. We recall also ‘myths’ told confidently and confidentially about what ‘really’ happened, perhaps on more parochial levels; whispered yarns of heroes and enemies modeling how ‘we’ in our little group think or act, told out-of-class in schoolyards or at office parties or in barracks or around campfires. Or one thinks of the way in which more recent ‘myths’ or urban legends about UFOs, or Satanists in day-care centers, or what ‘they’ don’t want you to know, reflect the hopes and anxieties of numerous people, and they are heard so much that it seems they ‘must be true.’

## Myth and History: The Axial Age

A time there was in the past when the stories behind the current great religions were fresh and new, told with hope and dread from one ear to another. Of greatest significance of all are the changes in myth, views of human nature, views of the afterlife, and religious history that went with the 'Axial Age.'

The period around the fifth century B.C.E. was termed by the philosopher Karl Jaspers the Axial Turn, or Axial Age.<sup>6</sup> It was an important time of turning in many places on planet earth: the age of the great philosophers of India, China, and ancient Greece; and the time commencing the era of the founders of the great religions. Zoroaster, Confucius, Laozi (if historical), and the Buddha lived around then, as did the first makers of comparable changes in Hinduism (the earliest Upanishads) and Judaism (the Exile, Return, and codification of the Hebrew scriptures). The founders Jesus and Muhammad came half a millennium and a millennium later, but their work was in the same mold, and belongs to the Axial Age broadly understood.

Before, virtually all religion in the world had been in the archaic tribal or agricultural style, involving the polytheistic worship of local deities, even if adapted to the life of city-states like those of Greece, or agrarian empires like Egypt or Mesopotamia. But deep-level tensions were emerging: increasing travel and societal complexity made many people feel more individualized, less a part of a tribe or city. Above all, the 'discovery of history' meant the realization that we do not just live in seasonal cyclic time, always in the same place over against the mythic time of creation, but in linear, irreversible historical time in which things change and do not change back – and we get further and further from the mythic beginning.

This realization, undoubtedly a result of the invention of writing by which ongoing chronicles could be kept, profoundly affected religious consciousness. For being left stranded in linear time brought a sense of the 'terror of history,' as Mircea Eliade called it. In any case that gloomy perspective must have seemed natural to most ordinary ancient people, for to them history was all too often mostly a matter of plague, famine, and one conquering army after another marching across one's fields. History, they desperately hoped, must also have a larger meaning, or at least a way of escape from its toils. Now that the irreversible march of history had been seen for what it was, the explanation and way of egress could not be only a return – such as was symbolized in so