

# The Martian Book of the Dead<sup>1</sup>

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You are dying. You are hearing my voice because you are about to leave your body and enter interval-being, the time suspended between one existence and the next which in Tibetan we call *bardo*. But if you listen to what I say you can escape the cycle of rebirth.

You are fortunate to have lived at a time in which the Dharma, the teaching of the Buddha, has advanced so greatly. It might not have been so; the great ages of the cosmos are turning, one to the other. In the holy language of Tibet, Mars is called *mig-dmar*, the red eye. And those like us that live on that red eye and gaze back to where the last Buddha was born, we call Earth *mig-sno*, the blue eye. And when we look back at Blue-Eye we see it changing: the systems of the Earth are being strained into a new composition by the weight of humanity living there. And here on Red-Eye we see that **it** is changing too, being coaxed back to life by human and machine, as Mars is settled, its air thickened, its oceans returned, the plains and hills covered with living soil from which prairies and forests grow. And the whole great mandala of the sun and all its planets is altering, as beings start to move freely amongst them, connecting them all by a web of movements and coherings. All of these – Red-Eye and Blue-Eye and the great solar mandala that contains them both – are moving from one great age of the cosmos to another, from *kalpa* to *kalpa*.

And in a time of interval-being like this, the ‘latter days’ suspended between one great age and the next, the Buddha’s teaching can become dark and unclear. We know this darkening was happening because rebirth was becoming difficult and interrupted. Beings were trapped in human form, unable to progress through the realms of rebirth that we call *lokas*. And liberation from rebirth was also being denied to people.

But then we were given the gift of Mangalayana, or ‘Mars-vehicle’ Buddhism, by Migdmargyi Norbu Rinpoche. As his name reminds us he was indeed the “jewel of Mars”. He gave us a new form of the Dharma, one that escaped the bounds of one planet so that we could enter planets more fully. He taught us about the new forms of rebirth – for in the machine *kalpa* that we are entering, the way that a

consciousness passes from one body to the next was changing. And he taught us about how **liberation** from rebirth had also altered. In the Buddhism of Tibet, liberation from the cycle of becoming, from abiding in this world, is known as *mi né pa*, or ‘non-abiding’. Migdmargyi Norbu showed us that the liberation that we call non-abiding is in reality the **fullest form** of abiding. This is what I want to remind you, to ensure that you abide in Mars, enter into the infinite Buddha fields that are generated by the dance of its layers and forces, and escape the realm of suffering.

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For life on Red-Eye is full of suffering. The air is still thin, and the soil contains poisons that need to be continually washed off the body and filtered from the water. The work of mining, on which our economy depends, is backbreaking and hazardous. And now your body is coming to the end of its capacity to maintain itself; or maybe it is about to be disintegrated, as your consciousness is transferred to a new organic or machine body. So just as the planet on which we live is entering a state of interval-being, **you will pass** into your own interval-being, suspended between one life and another. And with the help of my guiding voice you will recognise the identity of these two interval-beings, the cosmic and the personal – that they are one and the same.

You will already have learned that at the moment of bodily death you will pass into *chikhai bardo*, where you will experience the “first” and then the “second” luminosity of pure space. Then you will enter *chonyid bardo*, where you will encounter the peaceful and wrathful deities of planetary being. Finally, in *sidpa bardo* you will have visions of being drawn towards the caves, wombs and birthing tanks of rebirth.

With the coloured sands of Mars we make mandalas to depict that experience; they chart the visions that you will encounter after the moment of death. The mandalas are flat, but we are taught that they are really solid figures, that the lines and colours and shading symbolise height and depth. But also that even this height and depth are symbolic; the mandalas show the **areophany**, the vision of Mars not as a material landscape but as an ineffable body; not as a finite object contained within the infinity of space and time, but as containing and generating the infinite within itself; not as a dark, inert orb but as a world coursing with energy, motion and self-organisation, on timescales that stretch from a fraction of a *ksana* to a million *kalpas*; and not as a mere interruption punched in the glorious shining of space but as a holy presence. It is this vision that is the surest route to liberation from rebirth.

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You are dying, but as you die you will experience visions of those who will appear to you to help you achieve liberation: gods and demons, bodhisattvas and dakinis. Migdmargyi Norbu was blessed with the experience of meeting the Emissaries of the Common Culture of our Galaxy, a moment of turning in human history. Earth had already started to open up in new ways: it was opening **inwards**, starting to reveal its *terma*, its buried secrets, its deep history; but it was also opening **outwards**, as its inhabitants started to move from the Earth to the asteroids and other planets. But we were unable to discern the deeper truth of this double opening; our new knowledge was only half-born, until we met the Emissaries. The Emissaries are the true dakinis. In our Buddhist tradition, dakinis are 'sky-travellers', that bring the news of the ineffable. They appear to the seeker after enlightenment at the moment when they are needed; in their otherness they provide what the seeker lacks. And the Emissaries **had** what human culture needed: the knowledge, and the very being, to shock it into completing the double opening of the Earth.

The Emissaries are also **terton**, the treasure-revealers of Buddhist tradition; as they progress around the galaxy they know where the profound truths are buried in the cultures that they encounter. And Migdmargyi Norbu was one of the jewels that they found, a treasure himself who was able to take the *terma*, the hidden treasures of Buddhist understanding, to bury them even deeper in the ground, and thereby to fashion the new vehicle of Buddhism that we call Mangalayana.

The areophany, the true vision of Mars, is central to Mangalayana practice and a great spiritual achievement. The heliophany had been obvious to the ancients, for the sun is easily seen as the abode of a deity. The geophany too seemed easy to achieve in a limited form, since humans found the Earth a place already filled with meanings, our bodies and senses accommodated to it and it to us. But when we came to Mars the **areophany** eluded us; the shape and meaning of our new home were almost impossible to discern. How could our new abode tell us how to live, how to be reborn, and how to escape from being reborn? Mars seemed devoid of the boundaries between earth and water, rock and life that made Earth a place of dwelling. Of course, as we tended the planet into life and filled the great northern plain with the water frozen beneath the regolith, as the atmosphere thickened and filled with clouds and a new, strengthened water cycle established itself, and as life spread, the planet became intelligible to the eye as it became commodious to the body. But what we needed was not simply to fill our vision with our own projects and attachments, but to see what **Mars itself** was and wanted to be.

Migdmargyi Norbu used the analogy of Olympus Mons to explain why it is so hard for human beings to really **see** Mars. Olympus is so large that its peak is above the top of our atmosphere. But it is **so** big that it cannot be seen: as fast as it rises from the ground, the ground curves away over the horizon; as fast as the eye sends out its light to see it, the mountain recedes from view. So too did Mars seem to recede away from the eye.

We had to learn how to **see** Mars, even as we learnt to inhabit it. For the areophany is important for our work. When our ancestors came here they found Mars not dead but **alive**; they found a landscape full of *né*, of dwelling-places of power. And as they learned to read the planet and thickened the air and coaxed the regolith into soil, they also slowly learned to read and glorify and harmonise the mandala of Mars. They moved through the landscape with their prayers, in the circling and the arriving of pilgrimage that we call *nékor* and *néjel*. They visited the great *néri*, the mountain abodes; and the fossae that score the face of the planet. They tamed the landscape with shrines; each crater and graben and dune was harmonised. And in your own life, as you played **your** part in the great story of the red planet's reawakening, you will also have learnt to see Red-Eye through the areophany, to be guided in your actions by the planet's own being and becoming.

But the areophany is not only key to our toil on Mars; it is also key to the possibility of Enlightenment and the cessation of toil, as it can enable us to see beyond the narrow time-frame of a human life. When Migdmargyi Norbu was among us he would also liken the becoming of a planet to a great sphere of water, on which insects skate to and fro; the skin of surface tension keeps those insects on that surface; they think that narrow surface and the vibrations they feel in it to be the whole world, and the sky above them and the depths below them just illusions and fantasies. We are like those insects; the thin surface that we inhabit is our time perception. Above us, the spirits flit so quickly that they seem immaterial; below us, the time of rocks so slow that they seem still. And, when we die, the forces that attach us to the things around us keep us on that surface, that thin slice of time; and these attachments pulls us back into rebirth as finite temporal beings.

But the Dharma is like soap – it does not just clean the mind; it breaks the mind's attachments and so breaks that surface tension, allows us to enter into the temporal depths of the planet. So that in the state of areophany, when we see the red soil of Mars, we see not just something to be tilled and nurtured, but as a sign of the particular path that Mars took when it cohered from the solar cloud, too small to pull its iron down into the core. When we see the low northern plain, now filled by the ocean that girdles our planet, we see a sign of another great trauma in our home's formation. When we see a single fern unfold, a single moment in life's evolution, we see the times that are embedded in other times, embedded in other times, and so on, from the time of the multiverse itself down to the time of the smallest particle of matter. And when we see **Tharsis**, the high plateau that covers nearly a quarter of Mars, we see an echo of **Tibet**, the great plateau of Earth, and in the symmetry between these two great plateaus we discern a deep spiritual truth, a cosmic drama which is still unfolding.

Migdmargyi Norbu taught us that the infinite and the finite are one. Buddhism did not after all come to dominate the old religion, with its chthonic gods of the underworld, but to complete it. Before the hidden treasures of Mangalayana Buddhism were revealed, the Tibetan plateau was seen as a demoness, Srinmo, lying supine and pinned down by the Buddhist temples that had been deliberately placed on her body as the mandala of Tibet was laid out. But in Mangalayana Buddhism the civilising power on Earth and Mars comes from not from above but from the ground itself. And it is taught that each planet is *néchen*, a great abode of a deity, but also has a *néchok*, a principal abode. On Earth the *néchok* is Tibet; on Mars it is Tharsis, which is the form of the bodhisattva that we call Chenrezig, the compassionate one that looks down on the cries of the world. Alba Mons, the White Mountain, is Chenrezig's head, and the three volcanoes known as Tharsis Montes lie across his chest. His right hand is holding Olympus Mons, his left is Tempe Terrum, his legs the Thaumasia Highlands. His body is not pinned down by the mountains and shrines arranged across it but held up and animated by them. Srinmo, whose body is the body of Tibet, is his consort, and they yearn towards each other. They dance around the sun, swinging their faces towards each other and then away.

And Mars, the abode of Chenrezig, is itself *bodhisattva*; the whole planet sacrificed itself, surrendered its becoming and gave it to Earth. Many *kalpas* ago, the demons that circle the sun in the space between Mars and Jupiter, fell upon Mars in a great bombardment that stripped it of its air, and then of its oceans. But Mars responded to this disaster by showering the Earth with the gift of falling stars, that brought to it the miracle of life. It was through this gifting that Earth was able to establish the system of *lokas*, the realms of rebirth – mineral, plant, animal, human, god – and that the wheel of life, the cycle of rebirth, started to turn on the Earth.

And now Earth gives life back to Mars, in this holy work that we are involved in. But the ongoing story of Earth and Mars is not just about the *lokas*, about rebirth; it is also about **liberation** from rebirth. The highest sacrifice of the bodhisattvas is to be capable of enlightenment, but to hold back so they can aid others to achieve it. To be bodhisattva is to be able to a **peak**, standing alone and high above the clouds, but to choose to be a **plateau**, on which others can stand. The link between Tharsis and Tibet, between the bodhisattva Chenrezig on Mars and his consort Srinmo on Earth, is the story of the ebb and flow of love and life and liberation between two such plateaus. In Tharsis, a huge pooling of magma, we see a sign of Mars's immobility, its giving up of itself, of air, water, life and motion; in Tibet, an area thrust up into the air by the collision of continents, a sign of Earth's borrowed dynamism. But now the story shifts; the energy of Srinmo brings Chenrezig to new life, and Chenrezig through Migdmargyi Norbu brings us the promise of liberation through the areophany. And the areophany not only allows us to see Mars and achieve deep abiding; we also see Earth for the first time. For what we are learning in our mystic

aerology enables us to see that we had never before truly seen the Earth and the way we dwelled in it. And in this story we see a huge circle, in which the wheel of life is a mere epicycle, a cog which serves the poetry of the whole.

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But now your body is dying; soon you will enter *chikhai bardo*, and see the shining reality of space. And then, if this vision is not enough to grant you liberation from rebirth, you will enter *chonyid bardo*, and experience the vision of one hundred deities; these will both terrify and inspire you, in ways that will help you to achieve the areophany, to see past the immediate presentation of the sacred mandala of the planet into the Buddha fields of its deep becoming. And if you have still not gained liberation, you will pass into *sidpa bardo*, when visions of coupling and rebirth will try to pull you back into the shallow waters of finite becoming.

But I will be with you. We will set off along the plains, as the sun warms the ground, and the dust devils start to form in the near distance. Then the land will begin to rise as we pass into the highlands. And as we approach the pass between two mountain peaks, between the abodes of deities, we will sing out the traditional song of protection: '*lha gyal lo*' – 'victory to the gods!' For I am travelling with you, into the mountains, into the planet; my voice is here to guide you into the deep abiding, and the final victory will be ours.

**Ki ki so so – lha gyal lo!**

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<sup>1</sup> This text was originally devised for a multi-media 'Demonstration' at *A Matter Theatre*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 16-18 October 2014. It is based on my theory-fiction 'Liberation Through Hearing in the Planetary Transition: Funerary Practices in Twenty-Second-Century Mangalayana Buddhism', in *Grain Vapor Ray*, ed. Katrin Klingan, Ashkan Sepahvand, Christoph Rosol and Bernd M. Scherer, Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2014, pp. 149-64. Many thanks are due to Carlos Mondragon, Ashkan Sepahvand and Katrin Klingan for conversations which have greatly informed this piece; however I take full responsibility for the liberties I have subsequently taken.