

April 12, 2022 Tuesday Evening with Aaron

(This talk not yet reviewed by Barbara and Aaron)

What Stops Us From Believing We're One of the 'Thirty-Six'?

Aaron: My blessings and love to you. I am Aaron. It's a joy to be here with you. As Barbara just noted, thirty-four years ago our first Aaron nights, sitting in the living room of this house, and here we are this many years later. It is a special joy to me to see Deep Spring flowing, that the vision we had for what we wanted to bring into the world back then is flourishing and doing good. I'm very happy that all of you are able to be here with us.

I call you angels in earthsuits. You are so beautiful, made even more so by the fact that you don't hold the fact of your angel-ness with pride. In fact, some of you still don't realize you are angels.

You are divine essence, divine expression, flowing out into the world, that high loving energy, but you forget who you are. Sometimes you ask me, "Does it matter?" Well, yes, it matters. It's time to wake up and remember.

A friend sent me this quote this week. It's something I've heard before many times through the years, but I think it's time to read it again.

According to an ancient Jewish mystical legend the world will continue to exist as long as there are a minimum of thirty-six people who recognize the divine presence... (R tried to help Barbara learn how to pronounce the word. R, would you simply say it? *Shekinah*, thank you.) ...as long as there are a minimum of thirty-six people who recognize the divine presence in all things and respond unconditionally with compassion to the suffering of others.

They are called *Lamed Vav*, because the numerology for the Hebrew letters *lamed* and *vav* equals thirty-six.

These Lamed Vavs are well springs of loving kindness, pouring goodness and compassion upon the world. It is said that at any time there are fewer than thirty-six such people, the world would implode under the weight of human greed, ignorance, selfishness, and anger.

The intriguing twist is that nobody knows who they are. They themselves don't even know. They are called *hidden saints*, hidden to themselves and to others. Some say they need not be the same thirty-six people at all times. You, me, or any one of us at any moment might be one of these thirty-six upon whom the world depends. And so, it calls us to act as though we are.

What if you are? We have thirty-eight people here. And I'm not human; that leaves us thirty-seven. There's only one of you who is not one of these thirty-six—that means that thirty-six of you are. And through the evening that may shift around, so that as one drops out, another fills in. All of you hidden saints, hidden even to yourselves. The challenge is not only that you do not know yourselves as angels, but you think of yourselves only as broken.

We're coming up in two weeks to the Emerald Isle retreat. One of my favorite things through the almost two decades that we had the retreat live was to go on the beach with Barbara the day before the opening and pick up beautiful but broken shells. A spiral, the beautiful shell that spins around, and maybe instead of coming to a fine point, the end is chopped off. Or a beautiful, colorful cup of a shell with a few holes in it.

You look at these shells walking down the beach and you say, "Not that one; it's broken. Not this one; it's broken."

What I ask people to do through the week, I give each person a shell, and I ask them to find the wholeness of the shell, the perfection of it. The holes do not limit the perfection. If anything, we might say the holes add to the perfection. Perfect shell, holes and all, broken tip and all.

You are all these perfect shells, perfect just as you are. Does this mean I'm saying that when you are feeling greed or anger, or judging mind becomes strong, that you're still perfect? Yes, perfect in a different way than you believe in perfection.

You see perfection should be free of flaw, there should be no hint of a flaw. I see that perfection includes the flaws so that it can become clear how much radiance shines out, even when there are subtle distortions.

Distortion. I look at you—one has a lot of hair; one has little hair. One has higher cheek bones, one has a rounder face. Thin lips, fuller lips; bigger nose, tiny nose; big chin, small chin.

Barbara, because of the skin cancer surgery, really has no eyebrows. These are mostly penciled on. She looked at herself some years ago, when the eyebrows were gone, burned away, and said, "I won't have any eyebrows." And I said, "So what? What difference does it make? Eyebrows are easier to pencil on than cheek bones, or hair. But it's all the same thing. You are beautiful just as you are." And the beauty is not just physical beauty.

So, we look at the place where you feel anger or that judging mind, fear and other forms of negativity, and you recognize, "I am beautiful just as I am." Or, you begin to believe,

"I am wrong. There's something missing in me, something distorted and un-beautiful in me."

So, when anger comes up, "Anger! I am un-beautiful because anger has arisen." Rather than the clear recognition: This anger has arisen out of conditions. It's impermanent and not self, literally. The anger is not self, and the kindness is also not self. These are personality traits. What are you beyond the form and the personality traits?

Let me clarify something I just said, because I feel a question from some of you. I said that the anger is not self and the kindness is not self. The *essence* of kindness is your essence. The *expressions* of kindness are simply expressions, mundane expressions. And yet, they are beautiful expressions; they're helpful expressions.

But we do not judge ourselves or others if the expression that has arisen seems less than beautiful. We simply know this is the outflow of conditions. And I don't have to be afraid of this outflow, but I will be very careful not to enact this outflow in ways that do harm.

My question for you tonight, then—along with not knowing if you may be one of these thirty-six—what stops you from trusting the possibility that you could be one of these thirty-six? That from time to time you *are* one of the thirty-six?

"Who? Me? How could I possibly be somebody who's that loving?" Well, why not you? "How could I possibly be somebody who's that compassionate, that wise, with that big of a heart?" Why not you?

This leads us to an interesting statement. Some years ago; something heard from a friend.

He was speaking of a friend who was in a wheelchair. He had a hand switch that he could control this electric wheelchair with so he could move himself about. The friend was in another city—I believe in Paris—away from his home, staying in a hotel. It was late at night, and he was hungry. It was raining outside. He decided, "There's a little café just a block down the street, and I believe they're open late. I will go down there and get myself some soup or something to eat."

He came out of the hotel and onto the sidewalk. He had to get down the curb to go on the street, because there were not the kind of accessible sidewalks that you have here. But he was adept at getting his electric wheelchair front legs down the curb and then back legs down the curb. He had done it a hundred times; he didn't see any problem. He went over the curb and there was something uneven there that tilted his wheelchair, and it fell over into the curb.

It was late at night. There was no one on the street—no cars, no pedestrians. It was pouring rain. So, this friend lay there, in the gutter, with water rushing by him and rain coming down. And for an hour or two, he said, "Why me? Why is this happening to me?" He started to think, "I must have done something wrong, to hurt someone, and I'm being punished. Maybe I'm just a bad person, and this is happening to me. No, I'm not really that bad a person. Why me? Why am I the one lying here in this gutter, suffering?" Anger came and flowed through and went. He began to have a bit of compassion for himself. "I'm cold. Not in terrible pain, but wet and cold and uncomfortable, and I don't know when help will come." He had no cell phone, no way to call. "Ahhh, I offer love to myself."

And then the story came back, "Why me? If I'm lying here, I must be bad in some way, and I don't deserve this compassion." And he had the thought within his heart, "If this were someone else lying here, would you feel compassion? Of course. Compassion for all beings who may lie in the rain in the gutter, or in some other way be highly uncomfortable."

And finally, the thought came to him, "Why not me? Across this earth right now there must be thousands of people who are wet and cold and uncomfortable. I'm not better than them, and I am not worse. That I experience such discomfort does not make me a bad person, only that the conditions have arisen out of which I am now wet and overturned and uncomfortable. Why *not* me?"

Each of us will have our turns at suffering, and each of us will have our turns at freedom.

Each of us will have our turns at being blind to the truth of who we are, and each of us will have our turn at being awake, *knowing* who we are.

Suffering exists. Why not you? Because if you can accept that, "Yes, sometimes it will be my turn to be suffering, because I have not yet resolved the causes for that suffering. Sometimes that will happen," if you can understand that, then you don't make yourself into an idea of a bad person because you are suffering. The suffering is just suffering. It's still huge but it's just suffering, and there is no story with it, "I'm suffering because I'm bad."

Or "I'm not suffering because I'm good." What if that were true? Then any time you have an angry thought, does that mean you are going to suffer terribly, on and on and on? Or can it be noted that, "This is just an angry thought."?

We start to see these objects arise and pass away, arise and pass away. This afternoon, Barbara's son, M, and his two children were helping clean out the little pond from the middle of her garden to set up the waterfall. The older one had high knee

boots on. M was staying out of the water. The younger girl bravely jumped into the pond up to her knees, raking out the dirt and helping to pick out the rocks that had fallen from last year's waterfall and lift them up so that they could be reset.

And then she got out, after twenty minutes, maybe, and her legs were covered with tiny baby leeches. That's pretty scary for a ten-year-old. It wasn't one or two leeches, it was a hundred leeches. Now, none of them was more than an eighth of an inch long. They were way too small to bite. But just the fact that they were leeches is pretty scary.

She came out of the pond, and her father began quickly to wipe it all off with a towel. She was feeling ready to cry. "Why did this happen to me?" She came over to Grandma, here, and Grandma said, "Well, leeches live in dead vegetation, and there was a lot of vegetation in the bottom of the pond. So, it drew these small leeches, and you were wading in the pond. You didn't do anything wrong. You were just there and the leeches were there." And she smiled and said, "So, it's not my fault?" Of course it's not her fault. They were just leeches in the pond. Quickly resolved—they dried her off and put her in the hot tub for a while. She felt much better, warmed up and clean.

Not your fault. Sometimes we *do* help create or co-create the conditions for negative circumstances. That still does not make you bad. It only means that there was some ignorance, some lack of seeing the full situation.

But as soon as you buy into the story "I co-created this, and thus I am bad, and thus I deserve further misfortune," then you're going to create that misfortune.

When you understand this moment, this is the outflow of conditions, and I have control, to a great degree, over what will come next. Not to what happened just now, but to what will come next. I have a choice about what will come next. How am I going to relate to what just happened?

Then, if you begin to consider, "Maybe I'm one of those thirty-six, and what just happened is my opportunity to experience negativity and respond with compassion. Maybe in this moment I can give that service to the world, to experience something frightening or hurtful and respond with compassion." Because each time that one responds with such compassion it does change everything. It changes your karmic tendencies, your habitual patterns. It changes the whole world's response to habitual patterns.

What do I mean by that? Compassion is energy. The heart contains this energy and offers it out.

If your immediate, instinctive response to having your legs from the knees down covered in tiny leeches, is, "Oh! I'm terrible!," you're going to keep playing that role. If

instead, it becomes, "Oh, that's interesting. There must have been tiny leeches in the pond. That shows how many leaves fell in, thick with leaves over the winter. Alright! I'll ask my dad to wipe the leeches off and then we'll clean the leaves out of the pond." And, it's sparkling now; they cleaned it out completely.

A few of you are asking, "Well, what of the leeches? They're sentient beings, too." I don't know about the leeches that were on her legs and moved onto a towel, but any other leeches in the pond are with the leaves and other vegetation that was poured out onto the grass, and they have free will to go where they wish. There are certainly enough puddles out there that they can find a new home. But one has free will to say, "No, I do not wish to have leeches in my pond, in which I occasionally put a hand or a foot. No. I set that boundary."

I want to digress a little here and tell you a story. It will tie in at the end.

Long ago and far away, I was one of a group of people who lived in great peace in the country near a large forest. The forest extended quite a distance, many miles in every direction, and slowly rose up, the trees growing smaller as the mountains rose up. On the other side of the mountain, literally there was another country.

In the country in which I lived, we lived in peace. People were very compassionate, very generous. They shared their food. They helped each other. And everybody had a deep intention to serve everyone in the community and not just themselves. It was a beautiful community.

When I say forest, don't think of a great north wood forest with towering trees but a thick woods. The mountain behind us, there was one big rock of a mountain, and beyond that, other mountains.

We as a group, shall I say we loved each other, and considered each other to be largely more awake than many people. Not fully awake but at least partially awake, living with an awakened consciousness as much as was possible. And, because of that, we were not popular. We were hated. People feared us. We were different because we were happy, because we did not seem to be suffering so much.

And so a mob of people came in to attack us, to attack our village. We knew they were coming and made the decision to go off into the woods through the countryside. We went off quite a ways into, I cannot say into another country; it was not divided in that way then, but a different group of people, a place where we would not be known. Not to stay there forever, but to find safety.

It was night and it was raining. We did not have the leisure to wait until the next day, to stay until the weather was nice, to escape. So, in groups of a few here and a few there,

we began to branch out onto trails and to climb rocks. We got past the immediate mountain that was close to us and off beyond, into unknown territory. We knew there were steep ravines and rushing creeks, wild animals, and we were afraid.

A very wise person amongst us said, "Remember, there are some here who know the way."

We looked around—who knows the way? This loving, wise person, whose wisdom we all respected, said, "I'm not going to tell you who, but there are some here that know the way. Even if you've forgotten you know the way, try to take a deep breath and ask yourself, 'Do I know the way?' Let it not be pride or some sense of trying to outdo others. But I know none of you have that kind of pride, or need to outdo others. So, go deep into yourself and ask, 'Do I know the way?'"

Everyone became quiet. And then, a few stepped up and said, "From right here, and for a little way, at least, I know the way." I can't say there were thirty-six of them; we weren't that big a group. But those who knew the way began to lead us.

We came to some steep cliffs, and, as I said, it was dark and raining. But we were safe, skirting those cliffs, and we walked for several hours. We came down to a rushing river, and, as we stopped, the ones who were leading said, "I no longer know the way." Our wise friend who had said, "I do not know the way here, but I know some of you do," stepped up again. "I know there are some of you that know the crossings for this river. All it takes is one person who knows that way."

After a few minutes of quiet, one stepped up and said, "Yes, I know the way," who began to lead us upstream quite a ways to where there was a natural log bridge, and we were able to cross this raging river.

We walked. We were wet and cold. Our beloved friend again stepped up and said, "There is one or several who know the way." Everyone was shaking their heads, saying, "Not me; I've never been here. I don't know the way." He said, "Maybe you've never been here, but in your heart, I believe you know the way. Where is shelter?" None of us *had* ever been there before. Where is shelter?

A few of us said, "Well, there are steep hills not far from us. I can see them. I can see the shadow of them. There must be some caves or other shelter there. I know the way. Come with me."

It takes courage to do that, especially if you haven't been there before, in this present incarnation. But perhaps in a past incarnation one had been there. Being willing to trust one's deep wisdom and say, "Yes, I know the way. I will come through. Let me walk ahead."

Then we found ourselves in a series of deep caves and began a fire. There was actually some dry firewood inside and we were able to warm up. We found food to eat. We lived in those caves for a bit of time, and we found peace there.

And then the thought: What shall we do about those neighbors who attacked us and caused us to make the choice to flee? —Caused us to make the *choice* to flee; they could not *cause* us to flee, but cause us to look at our choices and say perhaps it might be wise to flee.

Weeks had passed. "Let us go back to our village." Somebody thought, "What if they've destroyed the village?"

"It's not a big deal. We can rebuild the village. Spring is almost here. Let us go back. Who knows the way? Anybody here who knows the way, who can lead us home? Just be quiet in yourselves for a bit and say, 'I could at least get us started going home.' Is there anybody like that here? Yes? Okay. Let's follow him, and if he becomes a bit unsure, he will tell us, 'I've lost my sense of where we're going so we need a new leader to come forth. So, let's walk.'"

A day, another day, and a third day pass, and then the terrain changes. You might say, "I'm not sure now." So you don't have to be right and feel the need to prove anything. You can be honest and say, "Well, I thought I knew, but now I'm not sure. Okay, now who wants to take over? Who else here maybe knows the way, even just for a day? No one? We need someone....Thank you. Okay, let's walk on."

Now we're going through some small woods and open fields, up and down some hills. And far in the distance, you see that big mountain that was near our old home. There's a sense of a certainty for many of you, "Ah, there is our mountain. We still have to cross it, but there's our mountain."

So, our present leader might say, "I'm getting a bit tired of the responsibility of leading, although I think I know where we're going. Can somebody else take over now? Thank you." And on we go.

"I know what to do. I know what to do." Deep inside you know what to do.

A friend told us, many years ago, a wonderful story. She was in India, planning to attend a ten-day retreat with Goenka. She had arrived a day early and was in the town where the retreat would be held.

She was just getting her bearings there, when suddenly, she heard a squealing noise. A car had gone past, and a squealing puppy had been hit by the car. It wasn't deeply

injured. It was a bit bloody, and it was crying and limping. It was just maybe a two month old puppy.

She stopped. She picked it up. It was crying. It was bleeding, as she was holding it. She said, "I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do." What do you do in a small village where there are few veterinarians? What do you do with an injured puppy? "I don't know what to do."

As she was saying this out loud, she felt a hand on her shoulder, and a very clear, strong voice say to her, "You *do* know what to do."

She tried to turn around, but he was holding her in a fixed way so she couldn't really see him but just get a glimpse of him. "You *do* know what to do." And then he quickly turned and walked away, and she saw his back retreating. She thought to herself, "Yes, I *do* know what to do."

The scared self doesn't know what to do, but the awakened self knows what to do. A puppy this young must have a mother nearby. So, she walked up and down the street, behind hedges and in alleys a little way, and she found the mother. She lay the puppy down in front of the mother, and the mother immediately began to wash the puppy, wash its wounds, and offer it milk.

She has no idea what happened to that puppy, but presumably it was okay, because it had the mother's care and it was not that seriously injured. She *did* know what to do. The next morning, she got up and went to the big hall where the retreat would take place and sat up near the front, just sat and began to meditate. In a few minutes, she heard a voice say, "Good morning." And, it was the "You *do* know what to do" voice, Goenka, standing there in front of the group. So, he had been with her the day before, probably just passing by on his way to get his tea, or whatever. He had brought to her the remembrance, "You *do* know what to do."

You always know what to do. And when fear and all of the small self stories don't get in the way, you know what to do.

Are you one of the thirty-six? As the story noted, they are not permanent; they come and go. Sometimes you're one, and sometimes you're not one. Is there some story that you're carrying that says, "Not me; I couldn't possibly be one of those thirty-six—I'm not wise enough, good enough, loving enough."? Why would you limit yourself in that way? Where do these negative self-stories come from?

The tale I was telling before---yes, we found our way back to the village. Our trials had helped us to deepen in compassion, seeing how those who lived in neighboring villages feared us. We felt we had to make ourselves less fearsome to them. Instead of going

out all the time and asking, "How can we help you? What do you need?" and becoming, in their eyes, too perfect, we began to greet them at times, if we passed on the road, and just say, "How are you?" And instead of bringing them our abundance of food, we began to ask, just, "May I borrow a cup of sugar?" Letting them see us as not always perfect. We saw how we were creating that myth of our perfection.

This one of the thirty-six is not caught up in ideas of their own perfection. They're much more interested in seeing others' perfection, seeing the radiance of others, the magnificent shell with a few holes in it.

You *do* know what to do. You are one of the thirty-six. Everyone on Earth is one of the thirty-six or will be, in some other future lifetime, or has been in the past, because you all have the same root. You are all these angels in earthsuits, born of the innate perfection that you bring with you into this human experience, and needing only to remove the dust from your eyes, as it's said, to begin to see yourself and each other in the radiance that is true for you.

For us, as that village so long ago, to be able to see our neighbors not just as struggling people that needed help; as people who had gone astray, who were confused, or hurt, or angry. We were failing to see their radiance and perfection. And they hated us for that.

When the story says the one of the thirty-six may not know that it's them in that moment, you have to come to a point where you know that *everyone* in the world—yes, everyone, even Mr. Putin—everyone in the world at some time, in some life, is capable of being one of the thirty-six. The heart of compassion dwells in every human being. You cannot lose it, and it cannot be limited in any way. But it can be shoved aside and forgotten for long periods of time.

Are you ready to stop doing that? Maybe find six friends, the seven of you making an agreement, "On Monday, I'll be one of the thirty-six; Tuesday, you can be; Wednesday, you can be; Thursday, your turn. And between us, we have a week covered."

Imagine if everyone around the world did that, forming groups that would cover a week. We need fifty-two groups like that a year, times thirty-six. One person, thirty-six people, each coming from a different group, and on it goes.

Are you willing to drop the negative stories of yourselves one day a year? What do you think? Could you do that?

To do this, you must become deeply aware of the conditioned quality of these negative stories; how they are arising from conditions, impermanent, not self.

You must give sufficient time to your meditation practice. With vipassana, watching objects, including negative thoughts and feelings, arise and pass away, arise and pass away, until you know with assurance, "This is all just arising from conditions and is not me. I am not any of the aggregates. I am something beyond. "

Well, if you are not the aggregates—the form, the feelings, the thoughts, impulse consciousness—if you are not these, what remains? What *are* you?

This is the other half of your meditation work. Who am I? What am I? This is where the Pure Awareness practice becomes such a help.

Let me try to spell this out a bit. In meditation, watching objects arise and pass away, arise and pass away. You come to access concentration. Mind is steady, holding an object long enough to see that it is simply arising from conditions, impermanent, not self, and letting it go. "I am not that." And, there's another one. "I am not that. I am not that."

When everything is clearly seen as impermanent and not self, where do you turn? You are seeking to awaken. And what you've been seeking through the vipassana practice with the conditioned realm does not provide the answers. Where do you turn?

There are two options here. Both of them are fruitful. One, continuing on, deepening the vipassana practice, noting, "What I am seeking is not in the conditioned realm. Where is it?" It's at this point that the citta—the consciousness that's capable of perceiving the Unconditioned—open.

Before that, even if the Unconditioned was right in front of you, you couldn't see it, because the consciousness to see it was not there. But now it's there! You are able, at this point, to perceive the Unconditioned and at least a glimpse, an awareness, "Ah, there is truly something beyond the conditioned realm. Ahhh..." Resting in it for just a moment. That very first opening, touching the Unconditioned, it gives you faith that it's there.

The second way of approaching this—and they are not separate from each other; they work together—is to come into Pure Awareness practice, at this point, as John has been teaching it. Stepping back just a little bit. Seeing the conditioned realm arising and passing away. And stepping back, watching this with awareness, resting in the spaciousness of awareness. This is another doorway into the Unconditioned.

There are different aspects, different ways of seeing the Unconditioned. You're not in the *heart* of the Unconditioned; you're perceiving there *is* an Unconditioned and I can touch it.

Gradually, with practice, it grows deeper. I'm very grateful to John for the clear ways he has been leading you in the vipassana class, and meditation class, to bring these practices together.

So, the small self begins to see the old stories. "I'm not good enough." "There is shame. I'm unworthy." "I should be better than that; after all, I've been practicing for all these years." Well, why should you be better?

Here's another story. This one comes from Sharon Salzberg. It was told at a teachers meeting years ago. She was relating how they were meeting with the Dalai Lama. They were in India. It was just a small group, maybe fifteen or twenty senior Western teachers. Maybe not even that many. And she put the question to His Holiness: "What do we do with people who believe themselves to be so unworthy, really hate themselves, feel so much shame?"

The Dalai Lama looked perplexed, she said. He said, "Do you mean people with bad mental illness?" And many of the group broke into smiles. And Sharon said to him, "No, the people sitting in this room!" And everybody laughed. This was a group of senior teachers, still feeling unworthiness at times.

Well, coming back to where we started—why *not* you? Why should you be exempt from these feelings of shame, or unworthiness, or guilt, or judgment?

The question is not whether these will continue to arise. Take my word for it—as long as you are in a human form, some of these feelings will arise, no matter how awakened you become.

But, what happens is that you cease to be reactive to it. "Oh, here's that old story. I don't need to become caught in that old persona anymore. I choose to step back. I choose freedom. I choose to be one of the thirty-six for just this moment, awake and present, with a heart of compassion, the heart of wisdom."

One moment—can you do it? One moment.
(pause to create a new audio file)

Barbara: Aaron will come back and open the floor to questions. He's asking, before we have questions, he's inviting people to share, and asking, can you conceive that you sometimes—just for a brief time, if not a long time—you could be one of the thirty-six? How about your partner, or your mother or father, or a loved friend—do you know anybody who you can see as one of the thirty-six, he's asking. What prevents you from thinking of yourself or another person as one of these thirty-six? He's asking for some discussion of this.

He says, Put it a different way. Do you know anybody who'd be one of the thirty-six—not always, just now and then?

(The participants did not record.)

I need a little break from channeling, so I'm going to answer that, and if Aaron wants to add to what I say, he will come in.

First of all, I know you've practiced tonglen. How is that for you?

(Q not recorded)

Take their bad luck, hard circumstances into yourself. You give your virtue, wealth, whatever, to another. This is basically what we're doing with tonglen. We're taking the dark energy and, knowing it's not me that I'm taking it into, I serve as the opening into the Unconditioned and into the spaciousness of love. It comes through me, though this human free will choice, allowing myself to be touched by that pain. And yet, I don't carry it around. I don't say, "Oh, I'm going to walk around with all this pain." I just let it go through me and release it.

The release is so important. It's the same thing here. To perceive another's pain. To feel our own relief—"Wow, I'm glad that's not me." And then to be willing to share in that other person's pain. Knowing I don't have to carry it all the time; I'm not being a saint, here. I know I'm not a saint. But I can carry a little of their pain just by holding compassion in my heart.

So then, taking it a step further, now. The boat question. The boat will sink if one person doesn't get off. Aaron is saying, Respect yourself. Let it flow naturally.

So, we don't say, "I'm going to be the one that jumps off." That's a kind of ego, pride—"I'm going to be good." We don't say, "I won't be the one"; if it's for the highest good, I'm willing to let it happen.

How do we hold that balance of respect from a place of, not ego but from love, and just see what evolves? What's needed in this moment, and what's needed in the next moment.

If I say I'll do the huge thing, I may feel I can't. But if I take it one step at a time, "Okay, I'm up to this. I can do this." And one step further, "I can do this." And one step further, "Hmm, maybe I can even do this."

Rather than saying, "Not me; I can't." It's at that point we're living in service to all beings. Living in service to all beings doesn't mean despising the self. I don't know if that answers your question...

Others?

(Q not recorded)

So, Aaron is asking: John, have you found that when you need to step up and be one of the thirty-six, even just for a few minutes, that you've been able to do it?

(Q not recorded)

Don't put us on pedestals please! But yes, I understand why Aaron is asking that. Because I also find for myself, at times when I feel, "I can't do this. I can't"—that familiar story from Aaron's talk, "I don't know what to do"—if I come into my deepest heart of awareness, I *do* know what to do, and I'm able to do it. I may not be able to sustain it, but, at least temporarily, I am able to do it. And then I can hand it on to the next person who is ready to pick it up. In this moment where there's chaos, am I able to be clear? Am I able to experience compassion and share that compassion? And I think most of you, *all* of you probably, have had times when you've been able to do that.

(Q not recorded)

Barbara: Yes, thirty-six million, but at least thirty-six. This is not Aaron's story; this is an ancient story. There are a *minimum* of thirty-six people who recognize the divine presence. These thirty-six are wellsprings of loving kindness, pouring goodness and compassion upon the world, a minimum of thirty-six. If it goes below thirty-six, it implodes.

(Q not recorded)

Barbara: Aaron will come in at this point.

Aaron: I am Aaron. Indeed, you have been one of those thirty-six—or thirty-six million, however many it is. You have been one of those for periods of time; everyone on this screen has. None of you could carry it for twenty-four hours; you're just not yet ready to do that.

But what if you're carrying it for twenty-three hours? Is that okay? What if within that twenty-four hour period comes a moment when you say, "I am exhausted. This isn't fair. I don't want this anymore," and then you take a deep breath and say, "Okay. Just hang in. This is how it is right now. I can hold this space."?

The more you evolve into fuller awakenedness, really knowing who and what you are, the shorter are the gaps between what you can sustain as high frequency, high compassion, and the fewer times the ego saying, "I can't do this anymore." And you just keep moving with it.

Many of you have commented lovingly to Barbara of how you are awed by her ability to take care of Hal with such love and compassion. But she has moments of saying, "I can't do this anymore." She's human.

The question is really, when you're in that situation where others are depending on you, where your own self and well-being is depending on your clarity and open heart, are you, of your own free will, willing to put aside the old stories of, "I am not worthy. I am not capable," and say, "Yes, I am capable. I am at least partly awake. I *do* understand compassion. I will carry through with this."? This is where your free will choice comes in. Not, "I can't do it," but, "It's hard to do. I don't *want* to do it, but it is necessary and I have found the spaciousness and love to do it." I pause.

(Q not recorded)

Aaron: Thank you. I think it comes through everyone, at times. The big question is whether you will allow it to come through. Many of you feel that movement and then say, "Oh, no. I can't do that." A bit of the old shame comes up; feeling fear, feeling unworthiness, feeling uncertainty. The one who actually presses 'Send'. The one who actually walks across the street to the neighbor whom he sees struggling, or calls the friend on the phone who's been crying. For that one, there's some compassion there that's coming through.

It must always be with watchfulness to ask, "Is this my ego speaking?" Some of you will think, "How do I differentiate?" You *do* know how to differentiate. When there is ego, there's much more contraction. There's ego in offering the service; there's ego in withholding the service, and there's contraction. When it's more free of ego, it flows. And there's not one of you who does not know the feeling of that flow.

I want to read this again, because some of you are misunderstanding it a bit.

According to the ancient Jewish mystical legend, the world will continue to exist as long as there are a minimum of thirty-six people who recognize the divine presence in all things and respond unconditionally with compassion to the suffering of others. (Aaron: I'm skipping a bit...) They are wellsprings of loving kindness, pouring goodness and compassion upon the world. It is said that if at any time there are fewer than thirty-six such people, the world would implode under the weight of human greed, ignorance, selfishness and anger. The intriguing twist is that nobody knows who these Lamed Vavs are. They themselves don't even know. They are called "hidden saints," hidden to themselves and to others. They need not be the same thirty-six people at all times. You, me, any one of us at any moment might be one of these thirty-six upon whom the world depends. And so it causes us to act as though we are.

Now if there were thirty-six million, then we're not much danger of getting below that lower limit of thirty-six, but we don't know. So, it's likely there are thirty-six million. But let's just consider the possibility that right now there are thirty-six million, and suddenly they all dropped away. Right now, there are only thirty-six. And if I leave, there'll only be thirty-five. In this moment, where is compassion to be found, compassion for myself as well as for the world?

The point that I'm trying to bring home tonight with this teaching is how often you get caught in stories of self-limitation that fail to consider the possibility of the depth of your awakenedness, the depth of your compassion. Not as an ego story, "Oh, I'm awake. I'm compassionate." But, in this moment, what does it mean to have compassion when I experience suffering in myself and others, or when I see the root causes of suffering in myself and in others? Do I respond with fear and shutting myself down into a small space, or do I allow the heart to open with more love, more kindness and compassion? I touch on a lot of this in my book, *Awakened Heart*. That book was published close to thirty years ago. We've gone full circle, but with a lot more depth, at this point.

In any moment where everything is trying, painful, could you possibly just take a deep breath and say, "What if, at this moment, I'm one of the thirty-six? Am I willing to step up and find my compassionate heart and to live from that heart, even just for five minutes? I am now open to more of your questions.

(Q not recorded)

Aaron: Very much the same. Different beings will experience compassion differently. For me the essence is that even if there is a driving story, "What about me? Why me?", there is spaciousness that can take in the vastness of suffering and say, "Why not me? I hold us all in the light. I share the light in which I sit. I open to the light because of the need to help support that light out to the world."

(Q not recorded; audio turned on for tail end of sharing, not transcribed)

Aaron: That's a beautiful example, Q, thank you. Compassion is contagious; it spreads. When you experience the energy of compassion and of unconditional love, it reminds you that you are also of that essence of compassion and love and can allow it to move through you as well. Then there are many microphones all speaking out, one echoing the other, the sound of compassion filling the earth.

A big question for me is simply, to hold the intention to mindfulness to note, when you are caught in the story that believes that you are limited in compassion, in good will, in all of these beautiful qualities of the heart, what triggers such a story? What if it arises and you simply note, "Ah, here is that story, again," rather than getting caught in it?

Q: This speaks to what you just said. I was wondering what blocks my thinking that I am one of the thirty-six. I think that it's as if I'm a character on a stage and I've come to believe the character that I am. I run around thinking about my needs and my plans, and what I need to do. There's a Q, and there's a whole construct, this whole character, and I'm used to thinking that that's who I am. I don't run around thinking that I'm one of the thirty-six. I don't remember that I'm one of the thirty-six. It feels like a lot of habit. And a lot of it is, for me, I think for sure it's, "Who, me? One of the thirty-six?" And like people have said, I've had my moments, I think, where I felt like I've been an instrument for love and compassion. But I was toying with this idea of what blocks it, and I think it's just habit. I'm just used to thinking of myself as this limited character on this stage. So, I wonder if you have any reaction to that.

Aaron: What blocks you from going the other way and saying, "Oh, yes—I'm one of the thirty-six. Of course I am."?

You *are* a character on a stage. That's one small bit of what you are. And you are an awakened being, sitting back stage, waiting for the line that brings you back on stage again. You play your part and you go back off stage.

When you're off stage, you watch the actors on the stage and you say, "Oh yeah, I'm just playing a part." But when you go on stage, you have to play that part convincingly. Sometimes that means slightly forgetting the truth of what goes on off stage, because you have to be authentic on stage.

How do you balance that? It's really that same sambhogakaya bridge. How do you balance it?

Mindfulness is the most potent tool that you have. Watching yourself get caught, contracting, trying to fix, losing touch with the innate compassionate heart. And then, noting, "This is happening." Whether you catch it seconds, or minutes, or hours in, "Ah, this is happening." Come back. Come back to the awakened self, again and again. Because, of course, what these thirty-six are, thirty-six million, they are the ones who are able to know themselves, at least occasionally, as awake beings; old souls who are here on earth in service to all beings and with love. And to note with compassion, "Yes, I am that, and sometimes, or often, I get trapped. And that's okay. I can have compassion for myself for being trapped, for being caught. And as soon as I see that I'm being caught, I'm not caught anymore. Just for that moment I am free." And it builds up. More and more you are in the free space, watching the human go out and authentically play the part, but not coming off the stage caught in the stories.

Q: I'm not sure how this fits into the thirty-six, exactly. But there are a couple of things that the Mother has said to me on Remembering Wholeness Sundays over the year that fit in here for me.

One is, she was speaking to me about my higher self kind of going it alone, in a way. She gave me an example of a car that's turned over, and I would go there and try to right the car by myself, whereas there's this infinite number of souls who are willing to support me in that. And what I found is that when I'm meditating in that kind of pure place, I'm no longer alone. There's no end.

And another thing she told me was about something Q said earlier about receiving—seeing the darkness that we receive, the contractions we receive, the uncertainty we receive, whatever form it takes. And when I've done that sacred darkness practice many times, I did that receiving by myself and moving into awareness.

But tonight I just had the sensation that I'm no longer alone in that darkness. It's just like when you're in the light. So, I don't see a sense of an individual being the thirty-six. I just see these multitudes, unending multitudes. Thank you.

Aaron: Thank you, Q. This is absolutely clear. When you're in that spaciousness, resting in awareness, you know that it's not just thirty-six, at least at this point here on the earth. It's closer to that thirty-six million. So many beings out there, holding and supporting the light. And yet, if each of those beings were to say, "Well, there are so many others; I don't need to do this anymore," it would drop down quickly. There are an infinite number of loving souls, and each one is vital to the bringing of the earth through this phase of darkness and into the light.

That's a good place to end. I thank you all for your presence with me tonight. Remember that what you do—your free will choice to get caught up in the old stories of fear, negativity, and judgment, or your free will choice to say, "I see what's happening, and I choose to step back and find the space and the light to respond with love and compassion, and with wisdom"—this is what makes the difference. Each of you doing this; each of you trusting that you have the capacity to do this. Which means not getting caught in the stories that are negative.

I hope I've left you with a little bit to think about and to practice.

Here's to the thirty-six million, and here's to the thirty-six.

I love you all. My wishes to you for a good night.