

May 20, 2023 Saturday Afternoon, Death and Dying Workshop, Part 1

Barbara: When we were first asked about this, John and Aaron and I did not envision ourselves as presenters. There's a lot of wisdom out there, a lot of information. A lot of questions, too.

I think the ideal thing would be to have Aaron get started for just ten or fifteen minutes. He wants to talk about the experience of dying and death and how that is supported by the dharma.

I have a few personal things that I can share; amongst them, a near death experience and what that taught me. And John has some things he wants to share.

But mostly we want to let Aaron open this and then facilitate a discussion. Maybe people asking questions, and whoever feels they have something to say to that question. Just getting discussions going on certain topics. John and Aaron and I do not want to dominate this. We want to hear from you. We will facilitate to help keep us on topic. And we look forward to hearing from all of you.

John, before Aaron speaks, is there anything you want to say?

John: I just want to welcome everyone. It's wonderful to see so many old friends, some of whom I haven't seen for a while, your smiling faces. It does my heart good to see everybody this morning for this discussion.

And for those of you whom I do not know, I hope in some way, even in this short program that we're having today, that I can hear from you and I can get to know you a little bit.

So yes, as Barbara mentioned, I would like to share a little bit about dying and death from the Buddhist perspective, especially the Theravada Buddhist perspective. Maybe we'll have time to do a Death awareness meditation as part of our time together.

But as Barbara mentioned, we don't want to dominate this. This is not just instructional on our part; we want to hear from you, your thoughts and your experiences related to mindful aging, dying, death. I think that would be rich for us to be able to share together around these topics.

So, Barbara, why don't you go ahead and have Aaron come in, if you wish. Then you can speak with us and we'll just take it from there.

Aaron: My blessings and love to you. I am Aaron. Where can I start?

Death and dying. I have died to so many times I cannot recount each identity. It would take hours. Obviously, I made it through each time.

Some were easy deaths, just sliding into that space. Some were very painful, following perhaps a murder or a severe illness. The most important thing I have learned through all this experience with dying is the value of deep practice.

In our practice we're often discerning the distinction between a conscious, mind-body conscious and awareness.

You know that every conditioned thing arises when the conditions are present for it to arise and ceases when the condition ceases. So much of what you think about self is the conditioned self, the aggregates of form, feeling, thought, impulse, consciousness. The bodies that support those: the physical body, the mental body, and so forth.

You are not your body. You are not your mind. These came into being as the outflow of conditions and eventually they will cease when the conditions that support them cease. This is the way of every constructed thing.

What remains is what we're looking at in meditation. Who are you when you are not your body, not your mind? Not your thoughts, not your plans? Not even your joys and sorrows? Who are you?

In meditation many of you have had experiences of body dissolution, dissolution of consciousness, and entered a space of clarity and light, rested there for some time, come out of saying, "Where was I?"

Or perhaps had that experience and emerged from it with a deeper sense of where you were, that you were resting in the pure essence not of *your* being but of *being*.

That as one wave in the ocean, you had stopped and merged with the ocean and become the whole ocean, and yet with a distinct awareness that is cherished, precious. So *the* awareness and *your* awareness merged.

On the other side you do not cease to have preference and views. In the gathering of the Brothers and Sisters of Light there are often debates. Each wave in the ocean now merged with the ocean does not always agree with another wave. But there is no personality self, saying, "No, this is my view, and I know I'm right." There is a deep willingness to listen to each other, to learn, so that the waves become increasingly harmonious.

When you die, various of the bodies pass away first. Let's say various consciousnesses pass away first.

Seeing consciousness fades away early. To some degree body consciousness fades away, so if there was pain, the pain reduces and reduces, until you come to a point where you're still aware and there is both awareness and some level of consciousness but not so much personal consciousness. There is a gradual transition from "I am this

being, and I am dying” to the body consciousness resolving. Self is dissolving, and just awareness remains.

Hearing is still there. Barbara has asked me with some worry, since she can't hear, how will she be able to pick up anything, as she moves through this process of dying? And I said to her, “You can hear. You can hear me. Don't worry—I'll be there.”

So, for some of you, hearing will take true hearing with ears. But gradually it will become, really for all of you, hearing your guidance, feeling the angels around you, feeling the light and love around you.

A vital part of this process, for it to go smoothly and easily, is your present practice with fear. We know fear as object. It arises into experience. It's unpleasant. You watch yourself contracting and trying to get away from that which is feared or you may try to change your feeling about fear.

But gradually, as you practice you are all learning to hold fear as the object. To feel the contraction in the body, probably in the solar plexus. To note, “This is fear. Right here with fear where is that which is not afraid?”

Almost all of you have done that practice; where is that which is not angry right here with anger? Where is that which is not sad right here with sadness? Where is that which is not dying right here with death, with dying? Where is that which is not afraid?

As you open into that which is truly not afraid, the whole passage of the different stages of death becomes just a guide through.

Some of you have read *American Book of the Dead*, which is based on *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and have expressed discomfort with various things that might appear. They may sound terrifying.

Have you, as an adult, ever gone through one of those Halloween ‘fun houses’, where things jump out at you? When they first jump, you are startled, of course, because you're here in a human body. But then you look at this ogre and think, “Oh, well, that's really a well-built mask. They did a good job with this.” You're no longer afraid of it.

As a child you were afraid because you didn't know it wasn't real. But as you move through that as an adult, you know, “This is not real. It is a conditioned object that somebody has created to scare me. I don't need to relate to it with fear. I can appreciate it, or I can turn my head and choose not to get involved with it at all.”

So, this is the process, as you move through the different stages after death. Some things will be scary and bring up fear, and you know how to work with fear. Some things will be lovely. “Ahhh...Oh, I want that!” And you know also how to come back from any grasping. It's just some apparition drawing me to it, but I don't have to be caught in it.

Come back to this awareness which was watching the gruesome and the lovely just passing through.

There's a song that Barbara was taught many years ago. I will sing it in a flat voice. I've never heard it. Barbara has never heard it, but I like the words.

*Passing through,
Passing through,
Sometimes happy,
Sometimes blue.
Glad that I ran into you.
Tell the people that
You saw me passing through.*

That's it! As you go through that whole process, you're passing through. "Tell the people that you saw me passing through." Whoops—there I go, on to the next step.

In this first piece of it, your guidance will be with you. But you will not constantly feel your guidance because this is *your* work.

Our job is not to protect you but to help you understand your own power and insight to grow through and evolve. Whatever fears, whatever delights, not to have strong aversion or attachment; to move through.

As you continue through these bardo states, increasingly you'll feel your guidance, until you come out on the other side, really still carrying some of that personality self.

So, if you have not fully awakened but have a very open heart and feel love surrounding you, if you have practiced well, you can awaken in these bardo states and it can be the final phase of full awakening.

For many people, that's not so. There is increased awakening but not yet full awakening.

But the possibility of full awakening is also an incentive, I hope, to practice deeply with fear and other objects—objects of delight, objects of dislike.

So, you come out. There you are. For me, almost every time when I emerged, I emerged into a place of light. I felt loving energy around me, but I was not yet capable of seeing. I was feeling the energy, hearing music or hearing natural sounds of wind in the trees or waves on the shore, birds singing.

And then, not through ears or hearing but with thought, picking up the energy and thoughts of my guides. "Are you back? How are you feeling? What do you need?" Feeling surrounded by love.

Time is not measured, but soon enough I was able to begin to see. Each person will find themselves resting in the kind of place that is most restful. This is still bardo. We're still opening into the deeper true world.

Barbara has her memory of her last passing awakening. She felt she was lying on a very comfortable bed. She could smell flowers. She could hear waves. There was brilliant light, but there was just a bit of shade, so she was not in stark light. Hearing music. Turning her head and seeing flowers, and, beyond flowers, the ocean. A lovely ocean—not completely calm, but not huge or ferocious waves. She remembers just lying there. The light was ethereal, just such a beautiful light.

And then she remembers gradually awakening to my presence. Knowing me, feeling loved by me. And then her parents of that lifetime were there, and a few other loved ones. Feeling the circle of love around her that came just for a few minutes to welcome her and then departed.

A caring being, not necessarily a past-life being or a present-life being, but a loving nurse of sorts, a caregiver, came asking, “Do you need anything? Are you warm enough? Are you too hot? Do you need sustenance, something to drink?” Because at that stage there still may be experiences of need and comfort or discomfort, there was an almost human experience of being taken care of.

In the beginning she believed she needed food and drink. And then, as time went by, she realized that everything she needed was there to just be drawn her; she did not need to actually drink or eat.

So, it was a gradual growth over a period of weeks, (though no human time measured) coming into the true self.

And then, when she was ready, I and others came for her and said, “Would you like to join your group?” We had all visited her singly at one time or another when she was ready. Now several came together.

She did not clothe herself, no fabric, but she chose her appearance. Put on a gown of sorts, just color over what was really not this body, the appearance she wished to send out, what she felt was her true appearance. But it was not built with a personality; it was built with a knowing who she was and what visual expression would best express what she was to those who she would see.

She came into the place of gathering of this group. There are many different kinds of groups, with different kinds of folks. But Barbara would call this mostly a group of—In the old days, two thousand years ago, we did not use the word ‘bodhisattva’ but ‘Magdalenes’, male and female Magdalenes. They were those beings who were committed to service for the highest good of all beings, committed as the bodhisattva to return if needed and when needed. Beings with different strengths and different weaknesses, so that when they moved on into a new lifetime, they would look at those

weaknesses and choose the possibility of the experiences that they needed to fully wake up.

I don't want to go into that in too much depth right now. Rather, she came into this group. She was greeted by many beloved old friends. Not greeted as 'Barbara', for this was not Barbara but the being she was before the given name of that past life. Not greeted by any mortal name but by, let's call it her true name.

What is your true name? Like the poem about the cat. I don't remember the poem. [T.S. Eliot: "But I tell you, a cat needs a name that's particular. A name that's peculiar, and more dignified. Else how can he keep up his tail perpendicular, or spread out his whiskers, or cherish his pride?"] Knowing your true name.

And then the question, what work did she wish to be doing on these inner planes?

Similarly, that first—I will not call it days. We do not have days and weeks. We don't have linear time. But after meeting with her group, there was also a meeting with her highest guides to look at what she had learned in the past lifetime. What still needed to be learned. What she could do toward that learning now on the inner planes, for herself and in service to others.

And then, again, no linear time, but when she was ready, the choice to move into a new incarnation. Being pulled by karma to learn the things that needed to be learned, to serve in the ways that service was asked. But always with free will.

This was Barbara's experience, because she was not fully awakened, but more on the side of awakening than total non-awakened, and with a loving heart.

Let's look at the experience of somebody who was really angry, did a lot of harm in his life. They will be greeted by their guides. They will probably wake up with some fear because they're so caught in the negative consciousness with which they died. They will be surrounded by love. Often, they cannot accept that love because they are so caught in their own idea of that negativity, but they will be treated with love, surrounded by love.

Light may be painful for them. They will be given a shelter in a, not totally dark but somewhat dark place, what feels comfortable for them, with beings creating something for their comfort.

And they will have endless hours of time to talk with their guidance, with their friends; to practice forgiveness for themselves and for others. If they have done great harm to one or several other people, with loving beings holding the space they will have a chance to talk with that person, and between them, to try to find forgiveness and peace in this situation.

The movement for a person who was very negative goes much slower, and they don't immediately move into a service kind of group, into a learning group; it's more individuated, but supported too.

I would highly recommend *Testimony of Light*, a book by Helen Greaves, about a woman who had been a nun. When she dies, she tells her friend she's going to come back and tell her friend what transpired. I very deeply recommend this book to help you understand the whole process of dying and what you will experience. It is a beautifully written book with honest portrayal.

I'm happy to answer questions later, but I've been talking for a long time, and this is to be a discussion so that's enough from me. My love to you, and I will be around and talk as is useful.

I am Aaron. I return the body to Barbara.

Barbara: This is Barbara. John, do you want to talk now, or do you want us to open the floor to others? I know I want to wait to talk because I've just been channeling, and I can't get my thoughts together.