

March 20, 2023 Saturday Afternoon, Death and Dying Workshop - Part 3, Q&A

Q: Aaron mentioned about the apparitions, and I'm wondering what their purpose is, what they're about, how they come to being. I also had a second question about the connection to those that are still living—to family, to loved ones, to friends—what the mechanism is there. Are we still connected and able to be with those people and see what's going on, or does that stop for some period?

Barbara: Aaron says he guesses he is the best one to answer that. He will come in.

Aaron: I am Aaron. Regarding these apparitions in the bardo state, what appears to one will not appear to another, it's based on your karma. No matter how loving you have been, there will be certain areas that bring up more contraction. Perhaps for one person, a pride in their physical body and appearance and wanting to look beautiful to others, and an apparition that might come up is the self in a haggard-looking appearance. That is just one kind of possibility.

Something that you intensely fear like fire or flood or helplessness, the apparition that could come would be of everything burning. If there is a person with whom there was strong hatred, that person could be there just right in front of you, right in your face, and then you may utilize your ability from your practice to know this is has arisen out of conditions, is impermanent, is not self. To perhaps be able to say to that apparition, “May you find the healing that you seek. May you be blessed. May you find love. I release you. I wish you well.” This response releases your locked-in connection with that person, held to the self with that kind of fear.

There will not just be one kind of apparition through the bardo states; there will be numerous ones. It's really no different than your daily practice. Objects come and they will be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. If they're neutral, you just move past them, but if they're pleasant, “Oh, I want that!”, your whole energy can be locked into it. Or if it is strongly unpleasant, “No, get away from me!”, there is aversion.

So, the sincerity of your practice with finding equanimity with that which was pleasant and bringing in grasping, with that which is unpleasant and bringing in aversion, this will help you so much in the bardo state to simply know it as arisen from conditions, impermanent, and to make the commitment, “I am not being drawn into this, or this,” and going ahead.

Sexual fantasies. All humans have sexual fantasies of one sort or another. If there is any kind of fantasy upon which you really fixated, as you move through the bardo state you could see beings involved in sexual energy with the enactment of that fantasy. “Ooooh!”, getting sucked into it, or strong aversion to it.

What we're looking for is being able to know, “This has arisen in my experience. It is strongly pleasant or unpleasant. I have the control to let it go.”

As John recited, “All beings are heir to their karma and inherit its results. Their futures will be born of such action. Its results will be their home.”

When one is caught in any web of karma—caught literally in a web, stuck—it is one’s choice to say, “No, this is illusion based on old experience, and I do not choose to enhance it in any way.”

Then you bring your attention back, perhaps to doing a metta meditation, or to chanting, not to avoid that which has arisen but as part of the power that you have to say, “No, I choose not to be caught here.” Just offering loving kindness to yourself and to this illusion. And then you break through it, and, breaking through it, you’re far less likely to be caught in it again.

So, it’s healing the karma. The power of the bardo is to literally heal the karma as you go through, if you are ready to do the work, and this is why this is such a valuable part of your practice.

There was a second piece of that question: are we still connected and able to be with those people and see what’s going on, or does that stop for some period?

As you move through the bardo, and there are living people in the room as you’re dying, gradually that will pass out and you’ll be more connected with your guidance and the inner planes.

As you finish moving through this process, there’s an ability to see those who were alive. But your guidance will often advise you not to get too caught up in them, because you can build new karma for yourself and those who remain living by grasping after them, really an unwholesome kind of movement.

When they also pass on—that, of course, will happen—then you’re able to be with them on that inner plane, perhaps even plan a new lifetime in which you will try to be together.

I don’t want to speak too long. I think that is a sufficient answer. I pass this on. I am Aaron.

Q: My question is for John on your introductory remarks. Is there a book that you can recommend that explains those five Buddhist meditations on death and dying?

John: Yes. A book that I would recommend is *Living in the Light of Death* by Larry Rosenberg. In this book, he uses the Buddhist teaching of the Four Heavenly Messengers.

You know the story of the Buddha as he was still a prince, before he renounced and went into his wandering as an ascetic. He reflected upon four experiences he had when the charioteer took him out of the kingdom, out into the city that he was living in. He saw an old person—someone who was hunched over, very old, who was aging, someone who had aged. He saw somebody who was very sick, like a leper. He saw a corpse,

that was perhaps being carried to a charnel ground. And then the fourth heavenly messenger he saw was a monk, who impressed him in terms of him being calm and serene and walking slowly. These four we call Heavenly Messengers.

In this particular book, Larry Rosenberg works off of the Four Heavenly Messengers and talks about these five contemplations that I spoke about earlier, in terms of aging is unavoidable, illness is unavoidable, death is unavoidable—I'm going to die. The fact that I'm going to be separate from everything that I love and cherish in this world that I had been living in, and also a reflection upon karma. He goes into great depth about each of these contemplations, and also includes some meditations as part of it, including insight meditation, in-depth awareness meditation.

So, if you're looking for a good book to read on the subject related to especially the Theravada tradition, the Insight Meditation tradition, *Living in the Light of Death* would be what I what I would recommend.

Q: As most of you know, this is not just theoretical for me, I have recently lost my beloved. The question I have is sort of a follow up to a previous question about communication when a person passes.

I talk out loud to my late husband quite a lot. I even asked him for a sign if he is hearing me and feel like I got a 'yes'. But now I'm wondering if I am impeding his progress in these other realms or adding karma. I know it could be seen as a form of grasping. So that is one question. I have another question too, after that.

Barbara: I'm glad you can feel and hear him, at least feel his presence, and I'm certain he can feel your presence. If you're asking, "am I impeding his progress," you need to ask him that. Sit in meditation, and I think you'll find an answer.

It could be that there's a period of time where he becomes somewhat unavailable and then later, he is more available again. Because of your closeness with each other, it's like if he was living and you were talking to him, and you said, "I'm talking to you about a lot of things that are going on, and I know you're busy." And he might say to you, "Yes, I really have to get out to do this work, but I'll be back."

You would feel that. Trust that. And also, for yourself, watch any grasping, knowing that you have the strength to do what you need to for yourself, and any ways that you're depending on him to help you, whether he's still living or not. Can I do this for myself?

I remember many years ago a talk with a dear friend whose husband of 50 or 60 years had just died within the past year. She was struggling at first, and then she seemed to be become much more serene. And so, I asked her what was happening.

She said, "He always did everything for me. And in the beginning, when he passed, he still was there and doing everything for me. Finally, he said, 'It's time for you to do it yourself,' and he just stopped being present."

She said she went through a hard few months, and then she saw, yes, I can do this for myself.

About two years later she came to me and said, "He's back now that he knows that I know I can do it for myself. He's back and we can talk again."

Q: Okay, thank you. I mean, it's hard not to cling. For me, it's not doing things so much as just emotionally supporting me.

Barbara: This was her, and she was used to depending on him for the doing. For you, it is whatever it is for you. You and your husband had a certain relationship, and you have a chance now to heal any unwholesome karma within that relationship and to be present with the wholesome karma.

Q: The other question I have is more theoretical, and that is because I just went through reading the *American Book of the Dead* to him.

One of the things that is disturbing to me is not just the ugly images and the seductive images, but the fact that in many instances it seems that the path one is supposed to choose—the path toward the light—is actually an aversive stimulus. He talks about the searing, burning radiations as the light you're supposed to follow, and there are these softer lights that are more comforting that you are supposed to avoid while you take yourself into something that actually, per his imagery, burns you.

And that troubles me, because it's sort of like a real backwards kind of situation. I get the learning to deal with fear, learning to deal with grasping, but seems something apart.

Barbara: I understand what you're saying. In this year's class we've been going more into path of sacred darkness—being willing to look into the places that will scare us, the places which there is the strongest aversion. Aversion towards certain people. Aversion to certain kinds of experiences. Maybe aversion to being helpless, or aversion toward power. Aversion toward literal darkness. Aversion toward certain emotions like anger, or aversion toward love, fear of love—whatever scares us.

For me, in meditation (not specifically death meditation), I come to a place where there's a very soft, soothing light and spaciousness, and it's blissful. I could stay there for a long time. I could get lost. But it's a place of stagnation. And usually, as I recognize that I'm caught in a place where I'm just settling into something that's soft and comfortable, I can see both a deep darkness and this...kind of like you're talking about, and the recognition that I need to go towards the light. And that light will burn away whatever is still heavy and needs to burn away.

It's symbolic, but for me, in deep meditation there is sometimes this fiery light and walking into the fire.

Some of you know that I've been sick the past two months with a bad leg infection. I've been taking an antibiotic for these two months, and I've not been feeling terribly sick, but

nauseous from the medicine and there's a bad wound on my foot with the bone showing. The infection is in the bone, and unless it heals—and it is healing—but unless it heals, I'm going to need to have some part of my toe or foot amputated. It's very scary.

I can put a lot of beautiful images of healing there and I do, holding the intention to heal. But I find I also must go into the knowing of losing a leg, how that would feel, just so that I do not have to do it in actual life.

I'm looking at, probably experiences in past lives. I'm distinctly experiencing a past life. But what would it mean to lose a leg? What would it mean to live that life? Just one leg... Needing to cherish this foot and to look at the fear of losing a part of my body.

This is sacred darkness, but as I do this work, there's also a sense of going into a searing light that's burning everything away. It's burning all the old fears. I don't know how best to explain it in dharma terms, but it's a willingness to be present with that which is most terrifying, which I guess for me right now is helplessness.

So, feeling the potential toward helplessness and moving into that place where the fear of helplessness almost burns away into the stronger—not more abrupt, but the essence of my being that is never helpless emerges and I know myself to be strong, and that whatever happens, it will be okay.

I come out of these reflections with a strong confidence that whatever happens, pleasant or unpleasant, it will be okay.

It's only then that I am able to truly manifest healing of my foot, because I'm healing it out of a place of choosing rather than aversion.

I think that's all I can say on the subject. I hope that makes sense to you.

Q: Yes, it does. And if I may throw in one other question—Aaron mentioned that during your near-death experience you saw your parents from this lifetime. I know shortly before his death, my husband had a vision of his parents, who are both deceased. What confuses me is that I would think his parents were not people that I would think would have ascended to not having to repeat lifetimes. So, how are these people still there to be visions, when I would have thought they would have reincarnated?

Barbara: People reincarnate at different times. It could be within a month; it could be within a hundred years. There isn't a set time in which they're going to choose new incarnation.

Even a parent who seemed non-loving, once they've matured a bit by passing through the death experience, not all but many likely will come back to the true love they have for their child and, seeing their child passing, will want to be there in support—or at least to be there and help clarify the relationship—but often to support. And then, if they're not ready to do that work, they're gone. But it's not necessarily a parent. It could be a

sibling. It could be a grandparent. It could be a friend. There are different people who may appear in this bardo passage.

I think it's best to simply note to these beings that this is illusion. "If you want to talk to me later, I'll be there. For now, just passing through." Not, "Oh, my parents!" Just moving through.

Q: I have a question for Barbara. Thinking of *American Book of the Dead* and the forty-nine chambers there are in the bardo, did Aaron say that you go through these alone or you're accompanied by your guides? Because I hope I am at that point, because it can be scary.

Barbara: Aaron says you are accompanied by your guides, but you may or may not feel their presence, depending on where you are. You're never alone, he says.

He's using the example of a child who is trying to do something new. Let's say a toddler is trying to build with blocks. He puts the third block on, and it topples over, and he does it again, and then he starts to cry because he can't get the third block to balance. The parent will sit down and show him how to do it and hand the blocks to the child. The child tries it again, and it topples over, and the parent demonstrates again. But then the wise parent backs up and lets the child experiment.

You don't want your guidance holding your hand and doing it for you but there, knowing, "I'm supporting you, but this is your work, and I trust you to do it." I'm paraphrasing Aaron, he's not incorporated.