

May 20, 2023 Saturday Afternoon, Death and Dying Workshop, Part 4 - QA Part 2

(This session not yet reviewed by John)

Q: When I look at the various fear challenges in the bardo or chambers, is it safe to say that one should always choose the most difficult option presented, even though you don't want to?

Barbara: Aaron says no. Please be kind to yourself. Kindness is a very important thing to learn and practice.

Q: I have this reaction to some of these books like *American Book of the Dead*. It seems like—and I haven't read the book, but from what I hear people talking about it, it seems like there's this opinion that you could trick your way into enlightenment. You know that if there's this blinding light which you're afraid of and it feels like it's going to be painful, that really you can basically skip the process and just dive into that, rather than choose something comfortable. And I think that that's just a misunderstanding; that this whole path is for our learning and the whole path is not to just escape from this cycle of reincarnations. The path is to acquire wisdom so that we no longer need to be reincarnated.

So, if there's a light in meditation, if you go into the bardo and there's this light that's very frightening for you because it's so hot, it's not that you have to choose. You have to choose what's natural for you, what's natural for you as a result of what you've done in your life and the progress you've made in your spiritual practices in your life. You can't just trick the process and say, "Well, I could just leapfrog this and choose what's difficult." You have to go through the whole process, really.

When I first met my guru in the 1970s, one afternoon I touched his feet, and there was a tremendous amount of spiritual energy that went through his feet. It was almost like I had a severe electric shock. And I involuntarily cried out because that light, that energy, was just so high and powerful and I wasn't ready to absorb that.

If you're not ready to absorb that really high divine light, then you're just not ready. We're ready when we're ready. There's nothing wrong with not being ready, because we're all progressing towards that light.

So, I don't know. I kind of feel like for me, when I think about going through the processes of the bardo, whatever that process really is, that I should just go in there with love and remember what I've learned in this lifetime and surrender to divinity.

Q: (*Another person pops in with this comment*) The major theme of *American Book of the Dead* is that you cannot cheat the process. So, what we can learn from this book is to look at our various fears and work on them *now*, so that when they're presented to us, in whichever chamber we're in, we respond with no fear. It's a great book.

John: (not yet reviewed) I have not read *American Book of the Dead*. I have read *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and also Sogyal Rinpoche's *Tibetan Book of Living and*

Dying, which, as you know, is an interpretation of *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. And I don't have recollection myself of going through the bardo.

However, as you know, Aaron has described it to us today, and I've heard him speak about this before. It would seem that what we experienced as we go through the bardo is just what is created in our minds or what comes up in our minds. So, these apparitions are not necessarily imposed upon us from something outside, but rather it's the condition of our minds and any fears or desires, any attachments, aversions that we might normally experience from the course of our lives. That essentially as we move through the bardo, what we experience is our mind stuff. It's our conditioned mind.

And in our Vipassana practice or other forms of meditation, in terms of what we experience—the arising of say a strong desire, say a sexual desire, that when that sexual desire arises in our meditation, or even outside of a form of meditation, as it arises and we become aware of it we have the opportunity to relate to it in a way that is skillful by, for example, not clinging to the pleasant feeling associated with that sexual image.

And by not clinging to the pleasant feeling of the sexual image, there's less attachment to that particular image, less getting caught up in the energy of it, not getting drawn into it and therefore seeing its dissolution.

Or, as Aaron was talking about, the kind of passing through—passing through that particular chamber or bardo and not getting stuck or caught in that, an image or memory, fantasy, whatever it might be, whether it's something pleasant or unpleasant in our experience.

And so, the work that we do—for example, in Vipassana and insight meditation, and working with whatever it is that arises, and especially the *Vedanā* (the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral feeling related to those thoughts or images or memories)—as we skillfully work with all of that, really it is the same process of what happens when we move through the bardo.

This is my understanding of it. I would be interested to know what Aaron has to say about that, but it seems to me, in terms of my own practice, that these bardos, these gaps, these conditioned states are arising continually for me now, and how I relate to them and the practice that I do is going to prepare me for that experience of moving through the bardos because it's mind created.

I remember one of my teachers, Ajahn Buddhadasa, in Thailand, saying that in Buddhism they have different realms that one can exist in, lower realms—the **Nuriah hell**, (John, please confirm this term or correct it) where one burns in hell, or the realm of the hungry ghosts where there is very strong craving. The image of this kind of being that's got a big belly and a very small (*mouth*) hole, and no matter how much food or whatever is taken into the body it can never be fulfilling because it's the realm of the hungry ghosts.

There's the realm of the Titans, the warriors that are always fighting, that represents certain states of mind in which we always feel like we're in battle or contesting things and people and situations in our lives.

And then there are the upper realms, the realms of the devas, the realms of the gods, goddesses where everything is pleasant and wonderful and there isn't any suffering. There's the human realm that's kind of in between, in which we experience both things that are unpleasant and painful and also things that are wonderful and pleasant and delightful.

But the different realms that they speak about in the Buddhist tradition, they're not actually places that we go to, they are states of our mind.

In a lifetime we practice with these different states of mind and emotions that come up for us in a skillful way so that we're not getting caught and drawn into them through our strong attachment and aversion in relationship to whatever it is that we're experiencing. That we're not caught in these different realms, no matter how unpleasant and painful something can be. We're not drawn in our mind into these kinds of lower realms.

Again, not some place we go to but mind states that we experience. No matter how pleasant or delightful or blissful our meditation practices may be, or our experiences in life, that there's not an attachment to those—especially the very intense, pleasant quality of them—so that we're not caught in that particular mental realm.

So, this was always helpful for me, to look at these various Buddhist teachings from this perspective of *these are experiences of mind and body*. They're not necessarily places that I get to. Therefore, I find that a lot of the fear factor falls away, because the meditation practices, the Dharma and certain spiritual teachings, give me the tools that I need to work with these different mental and emotional states in a skillful way, so that I'm not getting either caught in very strong attachment or aversion.

That's what I wanted to share about this. Perhaps Aaron can speak about this in relationship to 'the passage through', as to whether this is something that's coming at us externally, or are these just expressions of our own mind.

Barbara: Aaron says they are all expressions of our mind. No substantial reality

Q: I'm so happy to see you this morning. This is extraordinary. So, I'm here. I know it's been a really long time. But I'm here because of events and in my life and getting older, and I'm also working with dying people. Now I'm in palliative care so thoughts about death are often with me. I particularly was interested if you would speak about suicide.

I have two friends who have committed suicide recently, and I'm looking at the distinction between suicide and physician aid in dying, which is where you help a patient end their life at the end of a difficult illness where there's a lot of suffering. I have really mixed feelings about it and I was looking for some guidance on that subject. Thank you so much.

Barbara: Aaron will speak.

Aaron: I am Aaron. My love to you. Intention is everything. For the person who has suicidal thoughts, there will almost always be an intention to escape some physicality that's too unpleasant, some emotions, something in their lives, perhaps feeling helpless.

There's nothing *sinful* about suicide. The problem with suicide is that there is unresolved karma, and that person is just going to have to come back and work with that again. They haven't resolved it. It's okay—if one needs to escape, one may escape.

A physician working with somebody who is deeply suffering, more usually physical pain, if that person says, "I need to leave," it's not usually so much an emotional, "I can't stand the feelings of unworthiness or hatred; I can't stand the world." It's more just, "The suffering is so intense from this pain, and I know what's going on. I know I'm going to die. I would like it to happen soon because there's so much pain. I choose to leave my body sooner rather than later." But there's not the same energy based in fear or negativity.

I've lived in many cultures where it was considered a great kindness to help that person die. Nothing was felt to be wrong in doing that; in fact, it was felt to be wrong to keep that person suffering who had no possibility of recovering.

I'm thinking here of, for example, somebody who was grievously wounded. Gored in the abdomen, infection from it, no way for that person to survive. The healers would give that person some kind of herb that would gently help them fall asleep and move on from the body. That was considered a great gift, not to force that person to endure that totally unendurable pain or give them heavy narcotics of some sort to mask the pain. Because it's never completely masked.

It really can help the person karmically to know "I can end it," and that such choice is not morally wrong, especially if there is terrible pain that can lead to deeper aversion, and the body truly cannot survive the condition. If that choice is coming from a mental place, a lot of suffering in their life, there will be unresolved karma.

But if the person is not going to die from that very painful condition, then supporting suicide really helps the person avoid what they need to learn. And as I said, they'll need to do it again. It is still not "wrong" to do that, but it can be unsupportive to them. Does that clarify for you?

Q: I see the distinction. Thank you. Very much.

John: I would like to add one thing to this. It's good to see you. It has been many, many years but I remember you from all those retreats. So wonderful. We had a dear friend, her name was CL, and she lived in a retirement community in Chapel Hill called Carol Woods. It's a very expensive retirement community. She was an artist from New York City, a delightful, delightful being. She was part of a meditation group that we had there for a number of years.

She had this question about suicide. She was in her late 90s, had lived a long life, fruitful life, wonderful life. She had been married. She didn't have any children, but she had some nieces and nephews. And here she was. She felt like she was rotting away in this expensive retirement community, and she really didn't see any point in it. You know?

But she wasn't quite sure whether it would be okay to take her life or not. So, Barbara came to Central North Carolina and we had a retreat of some sort there. And I took her to Carol Woods and Aaron spoke with her and essentially said, "You have done the work that you need to do in this lifetime. If you wish to end your life, it's okay to do that, because you're not doing it out of aversion or out of fear or wanting to escape, not out of pain, emotional pain, in this particular lifetime."

She really wasn't experiencing any of that. She felt like, rather than just kind of rotting away in this retirement community, she would rather the money that she still had, which was substantial, go to her nieces and nephews, because they could use it to support their livelihoods, their lifetimes.

And so, she decided to do it. There's an organization that supports people in suicides and they told her how to do it, essentially. We knew when she was going to do it. We knew the night that she was going to do it did. The aide that stayed with her during the day, she had to wait until that aide left because she didn't want to implicate that person.

But the sad thing for those of us who knew and really loved her, the people in the meditation group and other people in the retirement community, was that we couldn't be there with her when she was going to pass. She had to do this alone. And that was really the sad thing for many of us, that we couldn't be there supporting her in this decision and in her transition. That is something that she had to do alone in the night.

This is further explanation of what Aaron was talking about, that suicide isn't something necessarily that is unwholesome or carries a great deal of karma along with it. Really, it is based upon intention and what feels most appropriate for a person giving their life situation.

Barbara: I remember her, and I remember that discussion with her. She was so openhearted, obviously such a clear person who had done deep spiritual work all her life, was not fleeing from anything, just moving forward with love.

And Aaron says that while no physical being could have been with her, which would have been very nice, he says he was with her, and other beings, her guides were with her. She was not alone. She was aware of their presence.

Q: That's my sense of it also. I have a patient now who is asking for assisted suicide. California law is apparently different than whatever it is in South Carolina because people can be with her. She has to take her medicine herself, but as many people as she wants can be with her. So, that's a really good thing, I agree.

And I have had the recent experience of somebody else who also decided to take her own life, and that particular person was just such a light in the world. She was facing Alzheimer's and knew that she would be dissolving her personality and her being here, not wanting to burden her family and so on. So complicated, but her clarity about it. And she actually went to Switzerland in order to accomplish assisted suicide. It was hard.

It was remarkable because it was hard, and yet I knew that she was doing the right thing. And I still felt like it was really hard for the people left here. We got a letter after she died saying, "If you're receiving this letter, it's because I've passed." Suicide is so hard for the people who are left behind, I guess.

Barbara: This is where being able to be with the person when they've made that decision can be very helpful for the people left behind.

Q: Yeah, I agree. I agree. I want to be able to be present for others for myself and for others. This is this is my work at this time. Thank you so much for your guidance.

Barbara: Aaron says his blessings and love to you. It is a delight to see you.

Q: It is lovely to be in his presence again.

Q: This has been a very interesting discussion. And as an aside before I talk about what I wanted to, I have friends who are living in Switzerland and a loved one chose what they call the "Exit Program." They have to drink something, but all the family was allowed to be there including the grandchildren, and they blew bubbles. It was a very moving event. So, it can happen in different ways in different parts of the world.

What I wanted to say was, for many years I have been involved in grief retreats, and I've just come back from one where each person in the retreat had lost a loved one to suicide—a child.

We do something called opening sacred space, where we use the four directions to open the space and towards the end, we do a candle light ritual using water. I would put myself in the category of being an intuitive and the overall feeling of the whole retreat very much is sacred and holy. Each person steps forward in their journey of grief to do the work. I'm so humbled by their efforts to do this work.

I'm just completely amazed at seeing the shifts, even with suicide, in which attached to that—especially if you lose a child—is a lot of guilt. And to see these shifts in perspective, because each person supports one another, and they are surrounded in love.

I just wanted to share how the ground is holy—and we don't use any form of spirituality because everybody comes from their own perspective, and they might they not come from a perspective of any particular religion or spirituality. But the feeling I get is that all

of this is holy. And I'm still feeling the essence of that as we've all been talking and listening to people's grief and death experiences. That's it, thank you.

Q: For the past six months or so I have been caring for my aunt, who shares my same name. She's just a lovely beautiful soul. And she has an illness of the brain that gives her mini-strokes and bleeding in the brain. Essentially, she has dementia. I've been having conversations with her and she asked me to be her health proxy, which means that when she can no longer make decisions for herself, I will make them for her.

We've had conversations about—and I have been encouraging her to think about—assisted living, because there may come a time where she won't be able to care for herself. And so, we've had some very honest conversations about what advanced dementia can be like. When we talk about what's called moderate dementia (which to me sounds severe) meaning inability to clean yourself, to feed yourself, to do your basic functions for the day, she says to me, "Can't you just give me a pill? Can't you just let me go?"

I have learned from friends that I do have an option for her. If she's being fed and can no longer feed herself, an option that I have to serve her wishes is to request that they stop feeding her. But you can see there's tremendous gray area here. And so the question I have really is how to support somebody in leaving when they have dementia and you don't know what their intent is—back to what Aaron was saying.

And yet, as Aaron and Barbara were saying, it can be an act of great compassion. We haven't gotten there yet, but we are preparing for it simply so that I can, as best as possible, serve her needs. So, I guess those are my questions. How do you support someone who has dementia and you don't know their intention?

Barbara: Thank you for the question. Now while her mind is still somewhat clear, it is important to have her write things down. Will you write it out for her and have her read it and sign it—what her intention is when she is at the point where the dementia is advanced, to that point that she doesn't recognize people, can no longer take care of her needs, etc. Write out that she wishes them to stop feeding her and get that documented and notarized so that it's clear she decided this while her mind was clear, that nobody wrote or forced her signature on this.

Aaron: This is Aaron. As you all know, I've lived in many different traditions, human traditions, spiritual traditions, places in the world, religious groups, and so many have their own very different processes.

One tradition in which I lived seemed very harsh, or does, looking back. When somebody became totally incapable of caring for themselves, the tradition was simply to put them out of doors. It was a cold climate. They would carry them out on a blanket a mile or more from a human dwelling, where they would either simply freeze to death or be devoured by animals. It's not what I would wish for my loved ones, but that's the way it was handled.

In a similar situation, a very different tradition. When somebody reached that point, whether it was with dementia or simple body collapse, unable to move their body, mind totally unclear, and the person had voiced the intention not to be kept alive in that situation before it got to the point where they were not able to comprehend what was happening, but could even with a blink of an eye answer yes, the loved ones and sometimes the whole community would gather around. It was a very beautiful practice where many people would speak. The person might be dying, but they could still hear. People would talk of what this person had given them in their lives, thanking them. Expressing the gift of that being's life and how meaningful that gift was. The group would sing.

When everybody had expressed their feelings – not keeping it going if that person was suffering a lot of pain—but when people had a chance to express their feelings to cherish that person, the person was given an herb which would gently just put them to sleep and stop the heart, and just go out surrounded by that love.

You can see that the death in the first situation would be frightening and unpleasant, freezing to death or being eaten by a wild animal, and without being cherished by the community. And I think in that situation, the community felt helpless in the face of death and just wanted to put it aside, where in the second tradition people really saw death as a natural part of life. And just as they cherished a new baby coming into birth, they cherished the person leaving. As they supported the life of the new baby, they supported the leaving of the person. It was not thought of as a suicide; it was thought of as just a merciful support for the person to move on.

That's all. My love to you.

Q: Thank you Barbara and Aaron. I want to mention two resources. One the dementia directive. I did go through that with my aunt, and it specifies at different stages of dementia what level of medical care she wants. I will get that notarized. I got her to sign it but I will get it notarized. But it is very helpful to have that conversation with somebody ahead of time.

Another wonderful resource is called Five Wishes. It's put out by a nonprofit. It's a series of questions that you can go through with your beloved prior to death that talk about how they want to be accompanied as they're dying. What kind of music do they want; do they want massage; do they want prayers; their wishes for burial and ceremony and all that kind of stuff.

It is nicely done, and there's also a handbook for how to have that conversation with a loved one. It covers a lot of ground that a typical health proxy doesn't, and I think people have found it very helpful. **So I'll upload the link to that, and I'll upload the dementia directive for everybody.**

<https://www.fivewishes.org/>

<https://dementia-directive.org/>

Q: I would like to hear your thoughts on the Phowa practice. It is not easy to find someone to practice with in that regard. But my understanding is that it can be of great benefit to assisting those that are dying, in transition, as well as a good meditation to learn before the time comes for myself. John, do you have any experience with that? Or could either of the three of you speak briefly to that practice?

John: I studied the Phowa practices a little bit. It's been a while and so I really can't speak to them. They exist within the Tibetan tradition. I can't speak to them in a way that would be helpful for you, I'm sorry. Perhaps Barbara or Aaron knows more about it.

Barbara: The Phowa practice is basically a transfer of consciousness, releasing consciousness from the body. I have never studied it in the Tibetan tradition at all. Aaron has talked to me a little bit about it.

For me, the most important thing he said about it is that as we do our Vipassana practice and come into access concentration, in a place where we are *present*, we're resting in spaciousness. Things are still arising and passing away, and they may even be pleasant or unpleasant, but there's no attachment or aversion to those. So, at this point, access concentration is a doorway.

Often, but not always, there's an experience of great light. Many of you have learned to rest stably in access concentration but it can seem like a dead end. It is not a dead end, but it seems like it because one is settled and, "Ah, here's access concentration, and I'll just sit here for the rest of the sitting." It's very pleasant, but we need to use access concentration as a doorway.

As we move from access concentration, it is a place where there's no attachment or aversion, where we can choose to move through and move further on.

One of the possibilities, only one, is to become aware of the energy and bring the consciousness itself to the foreground. Remember, consciousness is still an aggregate. We are not our consciousness. Awareness invites consciousness up out of the body to go back through the crown chakra. Then awareness is not blocked by consciousness anymore and can move through the crown chakra to a deep sense of who and what we truly are.

This is not Phowa practice; it is a support to Phowa practice, Aaron is saying. He does not feel qualified to teach Phowa practice. He has never practiced it himself. But as he understands it, the consciousness is released out through the crown. Awareness remains. And there also can be, for the support person, a transfer of consciousness, helping the person who is dying for example, and maybe is stuck, to release unliberated consciousness, he is saying, so that awareness may come in. It's like there's too much

consciousness and the awareness can't get through, and as we open to awareness, distinguishing that from consciousness, it opens up.

I've practiced this a little bit, but I didn't think it was really successful, so I don't think I can say any more about it. I understand it more intellectually, but I can't say much more.

John: I believe it that's where I first came upon it, yes, and then through the Living and Dying organization that Ram Dass and Stephen Levine put together. Yes. Thank you.

Q: I can speak a bit about the Phowa practice because I studied it quite some time ago. I did a week-long meditation retreat just for Phowa, and at the end of the week we were all initiated into being able to do that.

So, it's definitely a deep, very intense study. Right now, here in the US, I don't think there is anyone, because it has to be a master who is accomplished this and many other things.

But I do know that the Tibetan meditation group, Traditional Life Care (TLC), a Vajrayana Buddhist non-profit group supporting end of life transition, just recently spoke about trying to bring a meditation master to the US to be able to give that teaching.

There is also similar—not similar but I considered connected—Zhitro (also spelled Zhi-khro) teachings, which again was another week-long meditation retreat. That's the meditation and chanting for the people who have passed. As they're going through the bardo for the 49 days, this is something that is done to help them. There are active groups doing that. But again, you have to have the experience, the meditation, and the initiation.

Barbara: I'd like to add something here. Thank you for sharing that information about Phowa. I am glad to hear there was that kind of retreat.

Aaron is reminding me that in a past life I've looked at very deeply and was very meaningful to me I was given certain different kinds of initiations. This was not in a Buddhist tradition, but the initiation that was given was that the initiate was literally placed in a tomb for three days, 72 hours. They might be lightly sedated, but sometimes—and it was their choice—not sedated at all. And obviously it was claustrophobic, just put in this space.

I had a lot of training. I was young, just a teenager, but I had had a lot of training on how to do this. And what I remember is being in the space.

First a lot of fear coming up, "I am going to die in here."

The person was kind of diapered, and there was no food or water. You couldn't really move; just move your head, move your feet, open and close your hands, but you couldn't move.

The fear “I’m going to die,” and looking at this fear; conscious of death and moving through what would be similar to Buddhist reflections on death, that this body will die but the essence of me will not die.

And working with—they didn’t call it Phowa, and I don’t really know if it’s a similar practice or not, but releasing my consciousness out through the crown of my head, so that if one was doing this successfully, they would know when to open the coffin, because there were tiny openings in it and light would begin to pour out—a little light or a lot of light. And being able to shift into this essential essence...

I’m closing my eyes to try to remember. It’s part of what I know about death in my own knowing, as opposed to reading about it. It’s very comforting to me to remember that part of me, the ego part of me, died in that lifetime. And of course, it came back; I wasn’t done with it. (*laughing*) It is still around.

But in that lifetime, in that training, I was able to come out of that really much more awake; still enacting the ego at times, but very much more aware when I was enacting the ego and more able to live from a deeper truth.

I think an issue for me and for others at that time was this was usually given to teenagers, young 20’s, and not mature people, this initiation, and we weren’t ready for it emotionally. I wasn’t ready to do what I needed to do with it or what I could do with it.

But I would guess from the little I know about Phowa that what I was doing was releasing consciousness so that the pure essence of being could be there, and the light. And then when the coffin was opened and I was helped out, of course the mundane consciousness came back. That’s all.

I don’t remember all past lives but this is one I’ve worked with a lot because it was a very significant lifetime and this was something important to me. It’s something I’ve actually been looking at these past two months, as I contemplated not just potentially losing a limb but end of life. I’m 80 now, and what it means to be 80 and all conditioned things are impermanent. And so I’ve been doing a lot of practice with this. That’s why I’ve been focused on this lifetime.