

May 20, 2023 Saturday Afternoon, Death and Dying Workshop, Part 5, Q&A #3

Q: (not reviewed by John) I just thought I'd say a few words about the Phowa practice in my experience. I've been around several different lamas that gave some programs related to that. If someone was interested in pursuing that, personally I would recommend the Drigung Kagyü lineage, which has more of a specialty in Phowa practice, rather than the name Karma Kagyu.

I had some beginner's luck, being with a program in 1994 in Tucson where various initiations would go on for a week or so. I was lucky I didn't have to travel outside of the United States. (*Unclear, Iyounb?*) Rimpoché, mostly. He was supposed to come to the United States this year, (*unclear*), which is now mostly located (and historically) in Rochester, New York, but (*unclear*).

The thing about the Phowa, I would say, is that I've been around groups where the lama gave the thing, and it was supposed to be a big deal and everybody has grass sticking out of the top of their head. So that was always described as a big deal. But it may or may not be my experience.

One time in Tucson, Arizona, with ? Rimpoché, at the close I had a very powerful experience of energy through the top of the head. It wasn't discrete, it was more like a laser beam. Anyway, very blissful.

Whether one might have an experience like that evidently depends on your karmic connections, and in a variety of ways. So, I've probably said enough about that; you could follow up on it if you have some interest.

But in general, I would say if you can really be successful at your more general meditation, overcoming ego and all that, that for most of us that's really where we'd like to go. But if you really have a Phowa connection, there might be something that you need to do there. But if anybody has any connections, I can say more; otherwise I'll quit at this point.

Barbara: Aaron wants to say thank you for bringing that up and the other things that are being discussed. He says everybody wants a direct path.

Aaron: Everybody wants a direct path. Everyone wants a shortcut. There is no shortcut to spiritual growth. You've got these new practices, Phowa and others. Certainly, that's helpful, just as Barbara learned that practice two thousand years ago and it was helpful. And it helped her in that lifetime and in other lifetimes.

But there is no shortcut to spiritual growth. It's a step-by-step practice of seeing where you are caught. Holding the intention for service to all beings, with harm to none. "I hold the intention to release that which is not wholesome," and doing it over and over. Choosing to see that which is not wholesome without condemning or hating the self –

which is just another karmic trap. Rather, recognizing the essential radiance and goodness and divinity of the self, and choosing over and over to follow that path.

There are always going to be forks in the road (*unclear*); your intention is to follow the path toward the light, toward the love. And sometimes you're not sure, so you follow quite a way, and you see that it's not the right path—not the right path for you at that time, at least. And then you have the courage to step back and move on to a different path, always holding the intention, “Wherever I go, whatever I do, may it be with harm to no being, in service to all beings, and done with love.” And if you do that, the path will take you through it.

Thank you. I am Aaron.

Q: I had a question about the Phowa practices. Is this something that naturally happens, not as a practice but in the dying of the body? Does the body naturally go through this kind of release of consciousness?

And to share an experience I had 35 or 40 years ago, when I was asked to do some energy work with a friend's mom who was actively in the process of dying. When I was doing the energy work, I felt like I suddenly tapped into a space where there was just light and the most profound peace that I've ever experienced in my life. And that memory of that peace is still with me, and so reassuring.

I wondered if that was part of a Phowa experience that she was having, or if that was just something very different. That's my question. Thank you.

Barbara: Aaron says he cannot tell you what that was, what you or she were experiencing. But for you, that experience of light, you were in some way tapping into her experience, or you were tapping into your own experience and *knowing* your true essence is light.

The most important thing here is that you said it's very reassuring. It's something you still carry with you, and so there's a lot less fear of death, I would assume.

In 2004 I had a very powerful near-death experience and it had the same effect on me. There was just immense peace and light. And I knew that I had the option to move forward into that light, or to move back into what could be a very damaged body. And spirit was telling me—an angelic presence was telling me—it's fine to make either choice. It wasn't Aaron; it was a different presence. It's fine to make either choice. You're totally supported in whichever path you choose.

But for me, seeing that passageway into death. And I don't think I went through the normal bardo states. I suppose if I had chosen to go on, then I would have experienced more of the bardo states. But at that point my consciousness was released from my body. There was just Barbara awareness seeing the whole fabric of my life and knowing I can choose either way. And this whole thing was just a few seconds, maybe 20

seconds. I didn't drown, so it was 20 or 30 seconds. But the power of it has never left me, being in that place of light. It's just, "This is the truth. I trust it."

Q: Thank you.

John: (John has not reviewed this part) I just want to talk a little bit about judgment, then maybe a very short break for five minutes, and then do a meditation, a little bit of chanting to endart0.

I have a friend, a boyhood friend, who I grew up with. He was my best friend growing up. He and his wife have recently been here staying with us. He's my age, but his health is not very good right now. He's begun thinking about his own death, and he's somewhat fearful of being judged. Many, if not most of us, grew up in the Judeo-Christian tradition where there was a very strong message that upon death we will be judged and we're being judged during this lifetime. And when we die, ultimately we're going to be judged.

I remember the minister of the church that my family went to, when my grandfather was dying, the minister saying to my grandfather, "Well, Henry, are you ready to meet your Maker?" And kind of implied within that was, "Are you ready to come to that Day of Judgment about yourself, about your life, and how you've lived your life?" I just remember that sense of fear and contracted energy that I experienced when the minister said that to my grandfather, who was an important member of the church that we belonged to.

I think that many people either consciously or unconsciously have some subtle fear of judgment or being judged at the end of their lifetime. Fear of being judged during their lifetime or the ultimate judgment on Judgment Day, whenever that day comes, when we are judged by God.

I said to my friend, "Nobody's going to judge you but yourself." Any judgment that's going to be happening is going to be happening within your own mind. We have the opportunity to look at that judgment of ourselves, judgments of others, in our practice.

And if we work with this, if we work with judgment in the judging mind now, in this lifetime, we see that a lot of that judgment comes from our fear, comes from our negativity, especially negativity and hatred towards the self. Judgment comes from the memories of unskillful things that we have done, or the feelings of unworthiness or inadequacy, these different habit pattern energies we experience in being human.

If we work with the judging mind, if we work with the heart-centered practices of compassion and forgiveness, that fear of being judged will begin to fall away because we're not getting caught in this cycle of negativity and judgment to self and to others.

This is why I see the heart-centered practices—especially of kindness, of compassion, of forgiveness, of equanimity—as being very important parts, practices in relationship to

what we can work with in this lifetime in resolution of judgment and fear of judgment. And also that will enable us to carry forth, as we make the passage through dying and death.

I just wanted to share that with you because it's been on my mind especially since my friend has recently been here with us. Thank you.

Barbara: Thank you, John. Before we have a very short break and the meditation, is there anything that anyone else would like to share with us today?

Q: Just a very brief question. There are different expressions being made about our true essence as light, deeper awareness of our oneness with the Divine. So, I guess there are different ways of expressing our true essence. And I'm wondering about the expression "*that our eternal soul that was created by the Divine from the very beginning and is on ongoing, it's eternal, it is an ongoing evolution.*" Is the expression "eternal soul" another way of expressing our true essence that is eternal, and it's an ongoing evolution?

Barbara: Aaron says he's very uncomfortable with that phrasing and with the idea, "soul that was created by the Divine." We are not created—we are expressions of the Divine. The Divine is eternal and we are eternal, but there's a difference. We are not a created thing, we are That. Otherwise there is duality. If we are not the Divine (however we name that) but the Divine is out there and created us, there is duality. Aaron says his experience is that there is no duality and we are all expressions. He uses the sun and the sunbeams as example. The sunbeams are not created; the sunbeams are the sun.

I don't know if that speaks to your question, but Aaron felt that he wanted to say that as you spoke.

Q: Thank you very much, Aaron and Barbara. Yes, it does help.

John: Is there anyone else that would like to share anything?

Barbara: As some people do need to leave promptly at 1pm, perhaps we need to stop the discussion, with a promise that we can pick this up again, maybe this fall with Part Two, if there's interest.

Q: I just want to express thanks very much for this whole session today. It's been very meaningful, and I'm sure that everyone listening appreciates it very much. So, thank you, all.

John: A short break, and I'll ring the bell here. Then we'll have a short death awareness meditation and a chant that is used as part of ceremonies in Thailand during cremations and at other times as well. Okay, short break and then we'll come back together again. Thank you, everybody.

(break)

Not reviewed by John

I'll guide you through a death awareness meditation here, and then at the very end we'll do the initial vada Sankara chant, which I will screenshare with you so the words and the meaning of the words will be on the screen.

Why don't we all come to a place of sitting quietly, being aware of our bodies. Sitting in a chair or on the floor, buttocks, pelvis, resting on the seat that we're sitting on and the sensations of sitting. The feet and the legs touching the ground; or, if you're sitting crosslegged in a sitting posture, the sensations of your legs and your feet crossed. Awareness. Our hands are resting either on our thighs or one hand inside of the other in our laps.

So, the foundation for sitting—the pelvis, the legs, the feet, the hands, the torso, shoulders, neck and head. The whole body and sitting posture can be helpful to connect with our breathing, the inhale and the exhale. Just coming into that quiet, more still place within.

Then, as I mention to you, these different phrases or truths, perhaps, as you perceive them as being truths, or just points of reflection, and just noticing what kind of response you have to them or how they touch you.

The first set is the inevitability of death, the fact that we are all going to die.

The first one is:

I will die.

Everyone must die and I will die.

The remainder of our lifespan is decreasing continually.

The remainder of my lifespan is decreasing continually.

My lifespan is becoming shorter and shorter...

Death will come, regardless of whether or not we have made time to practice the dharma, or to practice within our spiritual tradition, whatever that might be.

Death will come regardless of whether or not I have made time to practice the dharma, to practice my spiritual path.

This second set of reflections is upon the uncertainty of the time of death:

Human life expectancy is uncertain.

I don't know when I am going to die.

I don't know when I am going to die.

There are many causes of death.

I don't know how I'm going to die.

I don't know what will be the cause of my death.

The human body is very fragile.

The body is fragile and subject to illness.

I can die at any time.

The third set of reflections focuses on only the practice of dharma and can help us at the time of death:

Only our spiritual practices, whatever they may be, can help us at the time of death.

Our wealth cannot help us.

No matter how much money and material resources we may have, that can only help us to a certain extent.

Ultimately this wealth will need to be left behind.

Our loved ones cannot help.

Our loved ones can surround us and comfort us and offer us their love, but we must die alone.

A meditation or exercise that can be helpful for us in this regard is to imagine ourselves on our deathbed with the person who we love most in the world beside us.

Imagine yourself saying goodbye to this most loved one, realizing that we will need to leave this body behind as we say goodbye to our loved ones.

And finally:

Our own body cannot help us at the time of death.

Only the dharma, only our meditation practice, only the spiritual practices that we have done during this lifetime and previous lifetimes can help us at the time of death.

And for this we give thanks.

(John chants)

Anicca vata sankhara

Upada vaya dhammino

Upakituva nirujanti

Tesang vupassamo sukho

All conditioned things are impermanent.

Their nature is to arise and pass away.

To live in harmony with this truth

Brings the highest happiness.

John: Thank you so much for being with us today and having this wonderful, very relevant discussion. I hope to see you all again, either embodied or disembodied. Much love to you all. Namaste. Thank you, Barbara. Thank you, Aaron.

Barbara: For all the sharing, thanks to everyone. Thank you, everybody. And I want to especially thank S, who initiated this first meeting. This was wonderful. We may be doing this again in the fall, if there is interest.

Subjects for Contemplation, as John posted in Chat:

There are these five facts that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained. Which five?

I am subject to aging, have not gone beyond aging.

This is the first fact that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained.

I am subject to illness, have not gone beyond illness.

I am subject to death, have not gone beyond death.

I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me.

I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.