



**February 8, 2022 Tuesday Evening, The Eden Project class**  
**Deep Spring Center [www.deepspring.org](http://www.deepspring.org) with Barbara Brodsky**  
*Sacred Darkness; Four Empowerments*

**Barbara:** Let's meditate a bit together.

Bring attention to your breath. Is it coming into an open space in your chest and abdomen, or is it coming into a tight space? Just observing, not fixing anything. Just aware.

Is the body dancing with the breath? Is it responsive to the breath, or is it trying to control the breath? If trying to control the breath, again, we're not fixing anything, we're just observing.

Are there any areas of strong sensation in your body? Areas of pain, of pleasure? Warmth or cold? High energy or flat? How does it feel to just watch the body being like this? Nothing to fix. Just knowing, in this moment, this is how the body is.

*(sitting)*

If there's any strong sensation in the body, and if it is unpleasant, is it allowed to just be there as unpleasant sensation? Or is there resistance to it? Is there aversion to it?

So, we have contact, which might be a sensation in the body, and consciousness of that contact. Feelings of unpleasant, pleasant, and neutral. Just present with these.

And then, because we're here in human bodies, if it's unpleasant, there may be aversion. If it's pleasant, there may be grasping.

When we take this aversion or grasping as a new object, not say, "Oh, I'm supposed to be with my breath. I won't have this aversion now. I won't have this grasping." "Oh, here is this. Interesting." Just watching it unfold. Here it is, some discomfort in the body. Noting it, unpleasant feeling. And then aversion.

Then the next question: Can one take aversion itself as the predominant object? Aversion is probably unpleasant. Wanting to get rid of it. There's a tension in wanting. Wanting this to go away. Wanting.

But all that we're really experiencing is the unpleasant sensation and then the direct experience of "I don't want this." Ah, am I allowing myself to include "I don't want this" in my experience instead of trying to control it or push it away? "I don't like this. I don't want this." Just unpleasant sensation. Then just aversion.

Let's sit for a few minutes. And for any of you who are feeling a sense of aversion to anything, in what way are you able to open your heart to the direct experience of aversion? What happens if you just note this with compassion? In this human experience right now there's something very unpleasant. And then, on top of that, the next object is aversion to this unpleasantness. Ahh, I give myself permission to feel something unpleasant. I give myself permission to experience aversion.

I'm going to be quiet for a few minutes.

*(sitting)*

Thank you...

So, let's talk about this for just a few minutes. For you, what is the direct experience of feeling aversion? How did you feel that in your body, in your mind? What is the direct experience of resistance to that aversion, not wanting that aversion? Anybody who would like to share? We'll talk just for a few minutes.

**Q:** What I noticed was that when I was able to sit with aversion and resistance, the sense of "I" or a "me" wasn't present. But when I was in aversion or resistance I felt a strong sense of self.

**Q:** I was just going to say that I felt a clenching in my body and in my mind. I didn't feel any openness or spaciousness, just more of a contraction.

**Barbara:** And was awareness able to look at this contraction?

**Q:** Yes. After a little bit I started moving into what Q had said. I started to move more into that spaciousness. But I still felt some of the pain and rawness there. But I felt more space around it.

**Barbara:** So the pain doesn't go away, but there's more space for the pain, and therefore less fear of the pain, less trying to control the pain.

**Q:** I had a good example. I must have done something in yoga on Zoom this morning, because my shoulder really hurt. When you did this, it really became intense because I focused on it. My first reaction, when I felt that pain down my shoulder, was to fix it. That kind of made it worse, that thought of, "I need to fix this. I have something I can put on it." As you talked, I loosened up and found more equanimity with it, less pain, more spaciousness, as others have said. It hasn't gone away, but the whole notion of, "I have to fix this right now," I'm much more open and relaxed about it. I don't have any stories behind it, other than I have this gizmo to put on it. But I'm okay with it. It's just pain. And this too will pass; it's just pain. Thank you.

**Barbara:** Thank you, Q. As you said, the notion that you have to fix it goes. You can rest in spaciousness, but it doesn't make the pain go away.

What happens for us, then, when the pain doesn't go away, even when we're more spacious about it (physical or emotional pain)? It just is there, constantly looming over us.

Holding spaciousness is very valuable. At a certain level we have to understand, yes, these bodies are going to undergo physical and emotional pain. This is part of the human condition.

And then compassion can become very strong. And we can also open more to the spaciousness, light, energy—bringing something into that place that hurts.

We live in a time—these past two years, especially—but a time of trauma. I saw something on the news a day or two ago about people in the Ukraine and how they're preparing for this threat that's surrounding them. I've heard this from people living in Israel, where they're surrounded by militant neighbors. I've heard this from people who live in ghetto neighborhoods, where they constantly feel they're under threat.

We are under threat. We're not going to live past this lifetime—not in this present form. That doesn't mean there's always going to pain or fear. But we can become so sensitized to it that we carry it around with us.

Talking to people at the workshop, I heard from many people who are experiencing this, a sense of constant guardedness, which is really part of being a mammal. As mammals, we're vulnerable. We do have a reality of a fight and flight reflex. And yet, people throughout history have lived under very traumatic conditions with an open heart, with spaciousness, with joy. There's a story of some people in a concentration camp who formed an orchestra, and the way that music and creating music helped them. We can create music or dissonance; that's our choice.

Some of this is, let me just call it long-term habit energy. I don't want to use the word karma, but long-term repetition of patterns. When this happens, when something pushes me, I push back.

Just one finger, pushing against me. Take one finger, hold it up to your chest. Try it. What happens to your body when you push moderately hard, right in the center of your chest? Probably most of you feel contraction.

Now, holding that finger there, "Breathing in, I am aware of the contraction. Breathing out, I hold space around the contraction."

See if it happens that you relax into a point— and I'm using fairly firm pressure, right in the middle of the chest and the sternum. It's uncomfortable. That which is aware of pressure is not feeling pressure. That which is aware of discomfort is not feeling discomfort. And yet, from the relative perspective there is pressure and discomfort.

Part of the mammalian reflex is to bat it away, to get rid of it, to hide from it. Fight against it or hide from it. To control it. And that really doesn't get us anywhere.

I think, as I talked to people, many of us are living with some degree of PTSD. Maybe only a small amount of it, but still.

Before Hal's stroke, five or six years ago, one of my sons, who is a photojournalist and photographer, was living in the Ukraine in Donetsk, where even back then there were a lot of military skirmishes. Shelling through the night and day.

He was going out in a protected vehicle, which of course would not protect him if it went right over a bomb, but it would protect him against shelling. He had people with him who were theoretically guarding him, protecting him. He was a neutral photojournalist, careful not to take sides, going to both sides to do his photography.

Because of the time difference, at midnight he was texting me and saying, "Hey mom, want to talk?"

"Sure, what's going on?"

"Well, I can't sleep."

"Why can't you sleep?"

"The shelling is so loud. I'm thinking of people a mile away who are getting killed. I can't sleep."

We're all being shelled. At least folks a mile away are being shelled. People are dying of Covid. People are losing jobs. People are traumatized at work. How do we hold space for this, especially if our habitual pattern has been one of let's control and fix it? And right now, here we are in our homes, (*dons mask*) behind our masks—what can we do? How do we control it? We can't.

How do we learn to live with things as they are without giving up on the intention to help release distortions that are hurtful to ourselves and others?

How do we release those distortions without contracting and trying to fix?

So, I've been pondering this a lot, especially during the workshop and looking at it in my own personal situation.

With the Group Healing Circle last Thursday, I realized the ways that I am experiencing my own form of PTSD. My life for the last four years has just been moving from one crisis to another and trying to survive that crisis and gain a little bit of stability until the next crisis comes.

My meditation practice is shot. I try. I sit in here, right here where I'm sitting, the altar there with candles lit in the morning. Eyes open, looking at the candles, breathing. And about all I can do is stay present and breathe. That's all I can do.

Then most mornings that's interrupted with the flashing strobe light that says Hal has woken up and needs me—6am, 7am, whatever time. So it's hard to relax and meditating knowing the strobe light is going to start flashing.

Aversion. Longing. The part of me that's been feeling I just want to go off to some beach where nobody can reach me. No phone, no computer. Just a little tent will be fine, and some gentle water, Caribbean Sea. I just want to spend a couple of weeks floating on my back on gentle waves, letting everything else wash away. Sound good? Want to go with me?

We can't do that. We're asked to be here in this present life doing what we need to do compassionately for those around us and for ourselves. And we have that capacity.

So I've been reflecting: What blocks me from opening more fully to that capacity? What's keeping me stuck?

I see part of my "can't meditate" is "don't want to meditate" because to meditate is to ask myself to be present with things as they are, and I don't like things as they are. There's a part of me that just says, "It's too hard. I want out."

Grief, anger, sadness, fear, lack of control—all of this obviously comes up for all of us. I'm not unique in this in any way. I see the ways I'm holding this tension in my body.

At the workshop, I mentioned in December the physical therapist had found that my heartbeat was erratic when she took my pulse, and she asked me to go to the doctor and have tests. I had several different tests—EKG and a heart echo test—and they all showed that my heart was wonderful. I'm told my heart is actually the heart of somebody a lot younger than me. Very healthy heart.

But I have pain across here. Ah, if you do this for long enough, contracting, you're going to have pain across your chest. It's not just that—I have a bad shoulder. I've had a bad shoulder for years. But until these last four years I haven't had pain and tension. How am I holding tension into my body? Why am I not allowing myself to be present with that tension?

Because I'm afraid that that pain and tension is going to reveal my helplessness, my anger, the depth of my grief. I've lived with this guy who I love for 57 years, and now suddenly I don't have him anymore. Well, that's not quite true; I have him, but not the man that I had five years ago.

And the movement was so fast from stroke, ER, ICU, trying to keep him alive, there was never any time to get my balance. Just, keep going, keep going, keep going, because his life depends on my keeping going.

I had just started to regain some balance, to recenter myself. He was now in a skilled nursing home. He was doing okay. He wasn't good, but he was okay. And then Covid came. A week after they locked down, I brought him home. Put a hospital bed in the living room because I knew if I left him there locked down, he would die. I couldn't let myself do that, to him or to me.

It wasn't just the Covid, but because he has aphasia and can't speak, and because he's paralyzed and can't get up and walk, he was just lying in a bed. They were so understaffed they couldn't do anything for him. We brought him home in ten days and he already had bad bedsores and was traumatized. So, I brought him home. I see the ways that I've been putting this weight on myself of carrying him.

The Buddhist sutra on loving kindness starts, "This is what should be done by those who are skilled in goodness and would know the path of peace. Let them be able and upright..." —I'm not reciting the whole thing—"unburdened with duties." There's that line in it.

What does "unburdened with duties" mean? It doesn't mean there won't be duties. It means not to be burdened with duties. Not to take the duty as a burden, to take it as a joy, an honor. It may be hard, but it's very different than when it's not experienced as a burden because you're not trying to carry it like that. Carrying a baby is not a burden. Carrying a ten-thousand-pound weight is a burden.

So, this workshop was wonderful for me because it asked me, if I'm going to lead the workshop, I must do the work. To see the place where I've been trapping myself in a place of darkness, which I was not allowing to become sacred darkness. It was just darkness—"Get me out of here."

What is darkness? What's the difference between darkness and sacred darkness?

With sacred darkness, I have a sense of the light that is part of the darkness, and the darkness reminds me to open up to the light—non-dual. With just plain darkness, I'm just stuck in the darkness.

I'll show you a cover of a book, if I can... One of you just sent me this book... It's a book called *Entering the Stone*. She's down in a cave. I haven't started reading it yet, but this picture really speaks to me. Going down into the darkness, entering the cave. It's by Barbara Herd, "on caves and feeling through the dark".

I assume the person who sent it to me has read it and loved it. Has anybody else read this? I'll tell you about it. Q, can you tell us anything about it?

**Q:** What I enjoyed about it is that it appears the author is very familiar with Buddhism. She talks about her emotional experiences of facing fear. She's afraid of going into caves. She has a panic attack. She works her way through it. At the same time, her best friend is dying, so there's emotional pain outside her caving. And the part I probably liked least but it might appeal to others is there's a lot of scientific knowledge about caves also presented. And her relationships with other people who enter caves. It's very rich. It's a series of essays. They kind of link together, but they stand alone, too.

**Barbara:** Thank you. Q asked me to read the final paragraph of the book. Let me open to that...

"First, emptiness, then form. Probably emptiness again. It's the sequence I want to keep in mind, the undulating of something arising out of nothing, dissolving again. The practice of paying attention to the lull. The viscera of absence calls us to grope where we can't see. The normal constraints of identities and definitions by which we live might lift, disperse momentarily, leave us in enormous space. Here, the imagination twists and searches, fumbles, gets ready to say what we can't quite see. We stand in the absence, in the clearing, the hollowed out place, and discover not wisdom or enlightenment but spaciousness (inaudible)."

"...opening to that which we can't see." I think those words got to me. Wanting to see, wanting to control. In the dark in the cave, we can't see. We have to trust the power of our loving heart. And we don't have much experience doing that.

Anyhow, during the workshop I did a lot of meditation with all of you, as I was able. And that 24 hour quiet day, looking at this pain, this tension. Bringing light in through the crown chakra and into the heart center. Asking myself, what is it I do not wish to see?



A lot of answers, one after another—helplessness, anger. A really loud, “It’s not fair!” We’re supposed to have this time of our lives, Hal and I, to enjoy winding down together. And instead, he can’t talk, he can’t walk. And yet, the light that’s Hal shines through, and I want more of that. Craving, grasping. Grief that I never really had time to fully work my way through, because I’ve been, as I’ve said, just running from one crisis to another, handling crises.

When this man slips out of his chair and falls on the floor, that’s a crisis. There’s no way even the caregiver and I can get him up. What do you do with a 200 lb man who has a paralyzed right side and is lying on the floor? Fortunately, I have a few loving neighbors and usually I’m able to catch somebody who will come, strong men who will lift him up. But what happens in me is tension, fear, anger. And not taking the time to process any of this.

Not paying attention enough to the joy, to the wonder of sitting in the chair next to him, holding hands while we watch a movie. Wow! He was supposed to die four years ago. Who would have believed that we could sit together side by side like this and laugh at a movie together?

But I’m not paying enough attention to that because I’m trying to control the crises. I’m trying to control my anger, my grief, my fear. And I’m holding all that tension in my body, so obviously my body is going to be painful.

It’s not all bad; I don’t want to exaggerate here. I’m at peace, I’m happy for the most part. Life is reasonably good—better than it is for many people. Part of it is grasping, “Oh, it was going so well four years ago.” We were celebrating our 50th anniversary. We were going to Hawaii, planned for two months after his stroke. We had lots of travel plans. We’ve never really traveled much. Not fancy travel plans, but we were going to do some things we wanted to do, just float on that sea. Find a pretty beach and put up a tent.

Anger, fear. The one who cannot control. We’ve done this last semester. Dropping down from the bridge. Seeing the two sides of the cavern. Finding that seat, remember? Sitting in it and lowering yourself down as far as you can go, and maybe just a little further, and asking, what is this darkness? Is there anything here that does not touch the light? Is there anything here that is ultimately contracted?

So, we’re going to start this semester moving further into the cave, each into our personal caves. Looking at the old habitual patterns we have. This is one of the reasons for the handout I sent you. I found myself last week remembering the Seven Branch Prayer and the Four Empowerments that’s the core of it and beginning to work with it again. I haven’t worked with it for a long time.



Seeing the habitual tendency to close myself off. Just to pull a wall around myself, armor, which means that I'm safer from rocks being thrown at me, but I also can't receive any light. I'm cut off from love. Feeling all of that.

So, I started to work with this practice. I don't know how much Aaron is going to do with this tonight. He may do some. He's going to lead us in a different guided meditation, but I wanted you to have this practice and to start working with it. How many of you are familiar with this practice from past classes? I think a lot of you. Bring it in where it's appropriate, and if not tonight then the next class we'll probably bring it in.

What are the habitual tendencies that keep me suffering? Why am I holding onto them? I have this belief that they help me to be safe. And of course, that's an illusion, because we're only safe when we allow ourselves truly to know our interconnection with all that is, not when we hold ourselves locked in behind armor.

If you're going to work with this, I suggest you read through the whole Seven Branch Prayer practice, just read through it once, and then go into the Four Empowerments. Aaron says he will work with the Four Empowerments tonight but probably not the whole practice.

What are the habitual tendencies? Like for me, armoring myself and carrying this thousand-pound weight. What are the habitual tendencies that keep us locked into our isolation and pain?

I talked about my photojournalist son. Finally, Hal and I just said to him, "It's time to come home. You need to leave." A couple of knowledgeable professionals, who he agreed I could speak to, agreed, "You're developing PTSD. It's time to leave." It took him some time at home and some support to release that. And this was just somebody there as a semi-safe photojournalist, not the guy who's getting shot at.

We're all getting shot at. How can we allow ourselves not to be shot at; to duck appropriately; to say no? But also, to hold, not armoring but light, as a ground of safety.

Obviously, that doesn't protect us in our mundane lives. An apple can still fall off a tree on my head and knock me out, no matter how much light is in my crown chakra.

But how do we remember to hold the love in our hearts? Just to keep that open.

He came home. He was okay. I'm going to be okay. We're all going to be okay.

We're all here learning how to find compassion for these challenges in our lives. I know we opted in to this human experience to learn how to stay open and keep the light

moving with challenges. If there were not challenges, there would be no challenge. We'd all just be open and radiating light.

So, thank you, challenge. Maybe a little less challenge; could we have a quiet day?

I was so sound asleep 1:30 when my alarm light started flicking. That doesn't usually happen. It was Hal. The oxygen thing that goes into his nostrils had pulled out. It's good that he woke me. He's not always aware enough to ask me to come and help. But then I was up another three hours.

Now, there's no reason for me to have been up for three hours because of having to get up for one minute and put the oxygen back in. What was keeping me up for three hours was waiting for the other shoe to drop, looking at, "What's going to happen next?" All that old tension.

The need to be present with that. To go deep into that cave, feel the tension, find the light and rest in the light. We can learn to do that.

I've talked longer than I expected to talk. I need a five minute break and then Aaron is going to come in.

Let me share one more thing with you. Starting next week—not Monday and Tuesday, because there's a class Tuesday night and I have things I have to do on Monday—but then starting next Wednesday for three weeks I am going to be on a personal retreat. I will be here to lead classes. I will be here to lead Remembering Wholeness somewhere in that three-week period. Otherwise, I have not had a retreat since the summer of 2017 because there have always been too many balls to juggle keeping Hal going. So, I'll share with you as classes go by, and probably am going to invite you to talk to each other some in class so I'm quieter. I'll tell you what's going on in my retreat. But I'm really looking forward to having a three-week retreat.

John is going to join me. So, Zoom retreat, John and I with Aaron. I think this is going to be helpful for me and I hope helpful for you, as I pass this on to you.

*(break)*

**Aaron:** My blessings and love to you. I am Aaron. As Barbara said, you are here in the human body—the human body, spiritual, physical, emotional and mental, these bodies being learning materials. You are here to learn compassion. You are here to learn the power of love. You are here to learn the capacity of the heart. You are here to learn the unlimitedness of the awakened heart mind, the awakened state.

Are you all familiar with *Flight of the Garuda*? Remember that this is a restricted Tibetan text. You may not share it with others. But if you are working with me and Barbara, you may have it.

I'm reading from Song 1:

I, the untroubled and carefree renunciant,  
Will now sing this song about the view,  
Entitled The Flight of the Garuda.  
It enables one to swiftly traverse all the levels and paths.  
Listen carefully, fortunate children of my heart!

In both samsara and nirvana the renown of the enlightened state  
Is widely heard like thunder throughout the sky.  
As this always remains within the minds of beings of the six realms  
How amazing that one is never separate from it even for an instant!

Not knowing that this state is within oneself,  
How amazing that one searches for it elsewhere.  
Although it is clearly manifest like the radiant disc of the sun,  
How amazing that so few see it.

Having no father and mother, one's mind is the true Buddha,  
How amazing that it knows neither birth nor death!  
No matter how much happiness and sorrow is experienced,  
How amazing that it is never impaired or improved even in the slightest!

How amazing that without being fabricated,  
This mind, which is unborn and primordially pure,  
Is spontaneously present from the very beginning!

This self awareness is naturally free from the very first,  
How amazing that it is liberated by just resting --  
At ease in whatever happens!

\*\*\*

But most of you have not developed the capacity to rest at ease in whatever happens, and so you armor yourself. You strive, you grasp, you push away. And with lack of mindfulness, you don't see yourself doing this until you're caught more and more, stuck.

I suppose it's no longer a politically correct story, but here is Uncle Remus and the Tar Baby, Br'er Rabbit. He sees the tar baby sitting in the road, blocking his way.

He says, “You, I’m trying to get past—you get out of there!”

The tar baby doesn’t move. He says, “I’m going to punch you if you don’t move!” So Br’er Rabbit punches the tar baby, and his hand is stuck.

Then he says, “Let me go or I’m going to punch you again!” He punches again; both hands are stuck.

“I’m going to kick you!” Now one foot is stuck.

He kicks again. The other foot is stuck. “You let me go!”

Tar baby just sits there. He says, “I’m going to punch you with my head!” (*sound effect*)  
Two feet, two hands, head—this is one stuck bunny!

I think many of you are somewhat stuck bunnies like this, busy punching tar babies, when what you need for awakening is there and has always been there.

In the Eden Project, a big piece of this is awakening more deeply to who you are. And one of the paths to that awakening is to watch yourself punching the tar baby, as Barbara was just describing her process of punching it through these four years. Finally waking up to the fact, “Hey, I’m really stuck, here! What next?”

The interesting thing to me is that as soon as you ask that question you’re no longer stuck, because a part of you has started to recognize that you are free and have always been free, and to recognize the old habitual patterns that have kept you stuck for such a long time.

This is where I find the Four Empowerments and Seven Branch Prayer to be very helpful. This prayer, it comes from *The Way of the Bodhisattva* by Shantideva. But there is a similar practice in almost every spiritual tradition; worded a bit differently, but similar.

The essence of the practice is to hold your intention to be of service, the intention of love. To see the places where you’re habitually stuck, the same situation repeating itself: Punch! Punch! Stuck, stuck. And to not unstick yourself so much as find that which was never stuck. To find the awakened heart mind and begin to live from there.

The challenge for many of you is the fear from living from there. If I tell you, “You are already awake,” “But I’m not!” Why are you afraid of that truth? Perhaps it feels like too much responsibility.



You are already awake. The habitual patterns that have kept you running on a treadmill are simply habitual patterns.

Mindfulness helps. The bodhisattva intention to service to all beings, “I do not do this for myself but for all beings. And for the good of all beings, I am willing to go into that dark cave. I am willing to see what the darkness is about, and to find the light in the darkness, to find freedom from the old habitual patterns of fear, of hatred, of greed that create suffering.”

Let’s skip away from the theoretical. I would like you to work with the Four Empowerments. I think the way it’s worded is, find something in which you can take refuge. It can be the experience of love. It can be your cat or dog; not the cat or dog embodiment but that of which it is embodiment. Your cat or dog is an expression of love. Your neighbor as expression of love. Your mother, your sister, your father, your brother. Or it can be a great teacher.

If it’s an individual, let it lead you more deeply into the heart of love. In other words, your father or sister may not speak love in the ultimate sense to you, but you can see the expression of love through them, or through your kitten, or whatever it may be. Holding that expression of love and knowing, “This is what I come in service to, that there may be more love and light in the world. And that I have the power to help make this happen for the highest good of all beings. I choose this.”

So, this is finding support.

It’s not just the personal self doing this but going very deep. Not just the personal self but something much greater than the self.

Barbara has been singing a song that she learned in Brazil, to herself repeatedly the past week. I cannot sing the melody.

*Start the day with love.  
Spend the day with love.  
Fill the day with love.  
Close the day with love.  
This is the way to God.  
This is the way to God.  
Start the day with love.*

How many of you start the day with love? Do you ever think about that? Or do you start the day with, “What time is it? I’m late!” Or, “I need my coffee!” “Start the day with love.”

“Spend the day with love” means be mindful through the day. In this moment, where is love? It’s so easy to lose track.

“Fill the day with love.” When love seems absent, look around for it. Just find the glitter of—right now I’m seeing the icicle hanging down from the gutter. I suppose it’s not a good thing in terms of gutters and roof, but they’re very beautiful, lit up by the outdoor light. Just filled with light. Fill the day with love. Whenever love seems to be absent, stop and ask, where is love?

“Close the day with love.” Barbara’s been singing that. Usually she sits with Hal for at least a half hour or so as he’s watching TV in the evening before his bedtime. She was holding his hand last night and thinking to herself, instead of focusing on the negative, that he can’t talk to me and so forth, think about the positive. How beautiful it is that after all these decades we still have each other.

“Close the day with love.” And so she turned around and looked at him and she said, “I love being able to sit here with you.” And that was honest, it was true. There was pain in it, but it was also true. She loved sitting there holding his hand. She said, “I love you.” And she could lipread his saying, “I love you.” And they just looked at each other for a few minutes and then went back to watch to the skiers jumping.

“Close the day with love.” It’s such a simple practice. Can you try it?

So that kind of practice is your support.

Compassionate regret. Whatever has arisen in you, a habitual pattern of fear or need to control, of sadness, of grief, of anger, closing down. For Barbara, the closing of the heart, the armoring of herself. “Ah, here I am, armored.” Armoring.

And then—this is important—compassionate regret. That does not mean judging the self or anger at the self. Holding oneself in compassion that yet again this has arisen. And it’s hard that it has arisen. But I have the spaciousness and the love to be with it. Compassionate regret. So, no guilt, no wrongness; just, here is this habit energy again.

Step Three, to resolve not to repeat whatever has happened—the words, the actions. Not to be ensnared with anger in the same way. Not to be caught in misunderstanding.

If there was clarity that because you experience the self as separate, that because fear arose and the conditions were present, certain emotions followed, there can be a deep resolve to work more in depth penetrating the delusion of separation.

So, this resolve—different ways for each of you to observe this pattern coming up again and again and just say, “Ah, sit here and have tea.” Not, “Get out of here!” Not, “Okay, take over.” Just, “Sit and have tea.” Here is this again.

And then, applying the antidote. This can be a little tricky. You are not trying to fix yourself; you are inviting balance. So, what Barbara was practicing last week: feeling the armoring of the body; the way she was bringing in pain through the tension in her body, and the habitual patterns she has developed through these four years of closing in her body, armoring the heart.

There are many antidotes for any situation, but for Barbara for this she’s just been practicing gratitude. Gratitude opens the heart. She’s been spending a lot of time looking outside, even walking, where possible—short times out on the deck. Freezing weather, so, short, but just the wonder of all that snow on the branches. How beautiful it is. And the birds flying and the squirrels scampering. Gratitude. Seeing how it opens the heart. Joy.

Start the day with love. Live the day with love. Fill the day with love. Close the day with love.

Gratitude for this precious opportunity to be human, as hard as it is. And remembering that you came in with your eyes open before the veil descended. You knew what being human was going to entail. Not the details, but you knew it was going to be challenging.

Okay. You are up to the challenge; I know you are.

So put aside the whole of the Seven Branch Prayer for now and for this week, please just practice with the Four Empowerments.

Now I’m going to move on to a different guided meditation that I’d like you to do with me, a related one.

For those who want to listen to it, you’ll receive the audio file and it starts at 20 minutes.

Imagine yourself in a large, flower-strewn meadow. There are thousands of wonderful flowers growing, with beautiful scent. On one side of you there’s a bubbling stream about 70 feet wide moving over rocks. Across the way, on the other side is a dark woods. Here, a nice expanse – 70 yards or so – of meadow sloping down to the water, and beyond the meadow, a steep hill rising up, pockmarked with caves.

You live in these caves. You are comfortable there. Now you are sitting in the meadow, the scent of the flowers filling your nostrils. The sun is warming your body. Very near you a rabbit is nibbling on some grass. A short distance away some deer are grazing.



These animals have no cause to be afraid of you. They come right up to you. There are chipmunks. There are birds flying and singing. It's an idyllic scene.

Some of your friends are cultivating vegetables in their garden; one is milking a cow or a goat, others are churning – making cheese or butter. Somebody is baking bread. A peaceful, loving scene.

All of a sudden, you hear shouting, screams.... You look toward the small river from where the sounds come and you see at the edge of the woods across the way VERY angry people, yelling. Some of them have weapons. Some throw rocks. Maybe even some arrows and bow, but most important are the rocks flying at you.

You get up and run inside your cave. Your cave has a magic door. All you must do is put your hands on either side and it closes, like a camera lens. It closes to a very small hole. Closed. And as soon as the door of the cave closes, special internal lights come on.

This is a very advanced simple culture. Your cave has everything you need. There is a rock ledge covered with a very soft mat for your rest. There is fresh water coming in. Most important, there is a place where you can put your hand and say, "I need, I wish for," and a little window in which it appears. "I need a sandwich. I need an apple. I want a cup of coffee.

"I want music," and beautiful music will fill the cave.

"I want books to read."

Everything you need except the companionship of other beings is available within your cave. Everything. The most exotic foods you could ask for – it's all there.

"I invite... I want."

The door is closed. You can hear the rocks pounding against the outside wall of the cave, but you know that you are safe. Hours pass, the rocks hitting the cave wall. Slowly the sound dies away. You have no watch, no way to tell time, but you would guess the day is just about passed and night is falling.

You want to go out, but you feel, "Maybe they came across the river. Maybe they are out there with weapons."

You stay inside. You stay within that cave.

It is soundproofed except for the rocks that would be hitting, which would hit with a thud. You can't hear voices.

There is fresh air; there is food, there is water; there are music and books. No TV, no news. But plenty to hold your interest, plenty to enjoy; you are comfortable....

How long will you stay there?

Nothing can come in and harm you, but your beloved friends and family and all those dear animals and the flowers and the food crops... what has happened to them?

Only one person to a cave.

You cannot bring anyone else into your cave. You can always go out. Remember that this door opens like an aperture – you can open it just a small amount and peek out, hoping that nobody is outside and going to poke you in the eye. You can look out, or you can open it a bit more and put your head out.

So, you don't have to step out. You can emerge gradually.

Silently find yourself in this situation.

*(Instructions to take about minimum ten minutes to do this.)*

“What keeps me in my own cave, seemingly safe and yet isolated, losing the connection and the love that are my birthright as a human?”

“What invites me out?”

“How does it feel to come out?”

Please don't think too much about it, just quietly allow yourself to be in the cave, to experience the safety and the isolation, both. To experience not just the curiosity but the yearning for connection, for what which you love....

“What allows you to open your heart and to come out?”

Be in your cave. Spend some time with this over the next week.

Maybe you will find that being in your cave is sufficient, that you find so much light and love and presence in your cave that you have no need for anything else. Maybe you find that you can both be in your cave and out there; maybe not... Just explore it.

I am Aaron. We'll have 10 minutes now to practice this...

*(sitting)*

**Barbara:** Let's open this to sharing, then.

**John:** This particular meditation reminded me of a time when I lived in a cave in Thailand. It was during the rains retreat and we had to stay in one place for at least three months.

So I found a cave that was really conducive for this and stayed there for between four and five months. I wanted to do solitary practice during this time so I kind of let it be known to the people who own this property that I want it to be in solitude.

I'd been going on long fasts for a couple of weeks at a time, exploring meditative states. When I was not eating, my body would become very quiet because it was not digesting food, and that made my mind very quiet.

I really had the feeling like I was pushing away the world because I just wanted to go more and more within, mostly during concentration practice.

I received a letter from my father during this time. And my father, who was not a very literate person, who had never written me in the whole eight years that I was away, (he said) on the bottom of the letter. "I love you, and I would like to see you again before I die."

When I read that note from my father, my heart really opened up and I realized how kind of closed in I had been in the cave, shutting the world out.

I came to the point where there was no more suffering. I really felt like I was liberated, because no suffering was arising. No suffering was arising because I was secluded the cave and I had shut the world out! I knew that that was not real liberation.

And so that message from my father, that's when I began to realize that I needed to come back. I needed to leave Thailand, needed to come back to the United States. I needed to reconnect with my family of origin. I needed to reconnect to my culture, the language of my people, my history, and everything that in part I had been kind of running from because it was so painful before.

Bul had to go back into that, essentially that darkness that I had left behind, but with the light that I had experienced as a result of the teachings and practices that I had been introduced to in Thailand.

So this exercise just really brought all of those feelings back to me, and I'm grateful for the meditation, Aaron. Thank you.

**Q:** Just to be very brief, right at the end of the meditation time I felt that the rocks were indeed a threat to the very core of being human. To retreat in that way denies the essence of this human experience. It is inherently about relationality. Coming out to be

with others and to collectively be in a place of love and light actually stood for protecting what was most whole and most sacred about the journey that we're on.

**Q:** I can't say when in the meditation, but in the course of the meditation I realized that I was in sufficient for myself. Shortly after that there was a sense, not so much I as a discrete being left the cave, but more like—it's hard to say in English, I guess—but more like my awareness kind of exited and enveloped the entire scene—the rock throwers and the flowers and all that was there. That's all. Thank you.

**Q:** The entering the cave, I was quite comfortable there, comfortable being alone, but I couldn't remain in the cave without knowing how the rest of my community was doing, whether they had made it to their caves, whether they were in trouble or were suffering. So I couldn't remain in the cave. I had to come out. I assumed we could not communicate.

Then, knowing that the community was safe and the invaders were still there, in my imagination, I thought I could direct compassion towards them. Then the meditation became emotional, because not only were we possibly suffering but those people were suffering. So, directing love and light towards them. If they were resistant they might leave, and then our community could come back out. Or maybe they would change and we could peacefully abide together or whatever, something like that.

But I was touched that the meditation was strong enough that it created an emotional response and tears for them. I pause.

**Q:** I just want to ask John whether the cave he stayed in was the one he told me about with the big snake in it, because Krishnamurti has a wonderful story about how we should be meditating in our room or cave as if we were meditating with a cobra. The cobra is the "I", and the "I" comes and goes. We get into concentration and we're free of it and then the cobra comes back. I love that story from John because it was such a good analogy of not going to sleep (*distortion*) in our consciousness to pay attention to.

John, was that the cave with the big snake?

**John:** This was a different cave. The cave that I was just speaking of did have snakes in it. But this cave that you're speaking about was very far north of Thailand. And it was a boa constrictor that I spent a night with in the cave. (*laughing*) Different cave, different story, but an interesting experience.

**Q:** In the monk life, which we did share, it was very common for some of our colleagues to go to caves—I went to one, too—and get really concentrated and feel that we had really relieved ourselves of some suffering. And we would get letters from each other, you know, "I'm all free now." And then a week later, we'd get another letter saying,



“Forget the previous letter— I'm really free now.” And then in another week, we'd get a third letter saying, “Forget the other letters— I'm finally free. ”And two weeks after returning from those caves, most of our friends had descended back to to being people. So it's a wonderful analogy. Thank you.

*(announcements)*