

Andrew Holecek
Dec. 30th, 2013
"Discovering Your True Nature"

Welcome everybody to this *Tricycle* online course in transforming or how to transform the greatest obstacle into the greatest opportunity. In other words, how it is that with a proper relationship we can transform end of life and in particular death, into the greatest opportunities for spiritual progress, spiritual awakening, or enlightenment. I find it so fascinating that in the western world, we live in denial of death so it's really a commendation. I applaud you for attending a program like this because most people aren't interested. Most people live in denial of the one thing of which we are absolutely certain. As the great historical Arnold Toynbee once said, "Death is un-American." I believe we view it as un-American because we still view it as a defeat. Yet, if we change our relationship to it, if we bring a spiritual relationship to end of life situations, we see it as a triumph. We see it as the greatest opportunity.

The Tibetan tradition—which is the one that I will be relying on principally—is arguably the most replete, the richest in the world traditions when it comes to teachings on death and dying. There are a number of reasons why I believe this. One is that in many ways the teachings on death and dying are a condensation of the entire spiritual path. If we look at the nature of the spiritual path all together, it's just death in slow motion. It's a successive level of teachings and practices that are all designed to show us how to let go. Letting go is just a euphemism for death. So in so many ways as we will see, if you travel your spiritual path with integrity, you are preparing for the ultimate letting go that is forced upon you at the end of life.

Secondly, I believe these teachings are so extensively taught in the Buddhist tradition because they bring forth the central teaching of impermanence. If we take a close look at our lives we discover that we are living in a sea of constant change, constant death and rebirth at every level—psychological and physical. If we look at the nature of our own bodies, you are literally not the same body you were when I started this talk just a few minutes ago. Every four days your entire stomach lining is replaced. Every six months your entire skeleton is replaced. Every six weeks your liver is replaced. Within a period of about two years, every single atom in your body has been replaced. We are

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embodying an ocean of reincarnation taking place at a physical level. We are reincarnating, whether we know it or not, throughout every moment, throughout every day.

The Tibetan teachings are very extensive in terms of helping us understand and establish a healthy relationship to this level of change. But I believe the most exciting aspect of these Tibetan teachings on death—which are referred to the teachings on Thanatology, Thanatose being the Greek God of death—the greatest gift of this tradition is the opportunity for us to relate to extremely unwanted circumstances in a way that provides profound opportunities for rapid psychological and spiritual development. The teachings are very assertive in this regard but there are actually more opportunities for awakening at the end of life than there are in life. This is because karma is temporarily suspended. You enter what the Tibetans refer to as *bardo*, which literally means gap, in-between, or transition. In this gap, the karma that brought you into this life is exhausted and in fact that’s what constitutes the end of this life. Before it crystallizes into your next embodiment, it’s as if the TV set has been turned off and there’s this gap; this temporary fluid transitional period where a great deal of spiritual progress can be made if we know what to do and when to do it.

Therefore, with the right view—which is what we’ll be discussing throughout this course—we do have something profound to look forward to. It’s like the poet, Robert Browning once said, “Grow old with me. The best is yet to be. The last of life for which the first was made.” I believe that we suffer at the end of life principally because of our obsession with form. You could say our almost pathological identification with form. You could say that that’s what ego is. Ego is an exclusive identification with form. As that form, as it’s represented in our body, dissolves and essentially disintegrates at the end of life, we experience a great deal of dis-ease because of that. We dread aging and the dissolution of this body simply because we don’t understand that this is not who we fundamentally are.

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This obsession that we have in the western world—this obsession with beauty, youth and appearance—doesn’t serve us very well because it’s not in harmony with reality. At the end of life, when we’re forced to let go of this form with which we exclusively identify, of course we’re going to suffer in direct proportion to that level of identification. You could say that we suffer at the end of life because we have a wild case of mistaken identity. We think that forms are us. We principally associate our level of identity first and foremost with this body.

In my experience traversing this spiritual path for some thirty-five years, the spiritual path is levels of progressive dis-identification with who we think we are and then progressive levels of identification with who we truly are. I have come to view the spiritual path as a kind of circle or two arcs. In the first half of the path we could say is a process of dying to our false sense of self. We do this by sitting in meditation and paying attention to how we relate to our bodies. We might find ourselves saying, “I’m not my body.” In fact just the phrase itself, “If it’s my body I can’t be me. I must be something subtler. I must be something more refined.” So then perhaps we dis-identify successfully from that, but we come to identify with our thoughts and say, “Well I’m my thoughts and emotions.” But then we realize if I’m using this word “my” if it’s my thoughts and my emotions, it can’t be me. So in a certain real sense what we’re doing is dis-identifying and backing away from who we think we are and fundamentally linking back. This is so interesting because the roots of the word religion, *religio*, in fact mean to link back. We’re gradually linking back to who we truly are.

This process of progressive dis-identification is known in the western approach as the apathetic or negative theology. In the east it’s referred to as the *Via Negativa*, which the Hindus refer to as *neti*—not this, not that. “I’m not this. I’m not that.” So we’re progressively dying to these false levels of identification, which of course brings about a level of discomfort and discord throughout the life of the practitioner, but at least as a spiritual practitioner, we’re doing so on our terms. We’re doing so volitionally.

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As spiritual practitioners we have the opportunity to let go or to die to these false levels of identity on our terms. As we enter end of life situations, this level of dis-identification happens on reality’s terms. It happens involuntarily as we grow old, get sick, and then eventually die. This is what old age and sickness fundamentally teaches us. For instance, I look at my own being as I age. As I age, I’m losing my hair. My eyesight is not quite as good as it was before. I’m losing my hearing. As we continue to age, we might lose our teeth. We lose flexibility. We lose muscle tone. On mental levels, we lose cognitive capabilities. We lose our sense of memory. On so many levels, this is what the Tibetans refer to as a *nundro* or a preliminary practice to the fundamental level of release that is then forced upon us at the end of life.

If we can establish a healthy relationship to what nature is actually teaching us as we enter old age and end of life situations, we can relax and enter these phases of life with grace, instead of resisting this natural course of release. We can surrender to it in a healthy way, and realize that this is simply what nature is teaching us. So what is lost at the level of form is gained at the level of spirit. If we can make this fundamental transition—in terms of relating to end of life situations—we can transform what most people live in tremendous denial of and accept it with grace and dignity. Truly, this is what old age, sickness, and death are fundamentally teaching us. Let go now on your terms or be forced to let go on nature’s terms, which for those who are unprepared is often a very challenging situation.

After releasing these false levels of identity—this kind of first half of this spiritual path—there comes a point referred to as “the path of seeing” where for the first time in your life you come to identify with who you truly are. You come to see that you’re fundamentally not constituted of form. You are of the nature of heart, mind, and spirit. This then constitutes the second half of the path, which is a progressive level of familiarization in increased identification with who we truly are. This is sometimes referred to as the catechetic way or the *via positiva*. As they say in Sanskrit, *Tat Tvam Asi*—“thou art that” This is who you truly are. The magical discovery when this

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experience comes upon you on the spiritual path is that this fundamental level of absolute identity does not die. It does not enter the world of space and time.

This means that this fundamental level identify, if it can be gained while you're still alive, means that you can transcend death. You've identified and become familiar with your true immortal, undeathless, nature. This also helps us when we're dealing with disease. Whatever term you want to apply to this absolute level of identity—and we will share many different terms—we could see here that this absolute level of identity, doesn't get cancer. This doesn't get aids. This doesn't get Alzheimer's. It doesn't enter the world of space and time. If you can stabilize this level of identification and take refuge in it, then when all these superficial forms dissolve at the end of life, it's no big deal.

It's like His Holiness, The Karmapa, considered a fully enlightened being at the end of his life. He said something incredibly provocative just weeks before he died. He simply said, “Nothing happens. Nothing happens.” Well for someone like the Karmapa—for someone who has released this obsession and identification with form to such a level nothing does happen, because in the certain sense he has already died.

So the summary instruction is put forth by Christian mystic, Abraham a Sancta Clara, is truly this: “If you die before you die, then when you die you will not die.” If you can let go of these false levels of identification before you are forced to do so, then when end of life situations come about, nothing fundamentally happens because you've already released. You've already died to these levels of form that create so much unnecessary suffering in life.

During the course of this online program, we will use the sophisticated and tremendous skillful means of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition to show you what to do before, during, and after death—both for yourself and for others—so that you have a complete roadmap for negotiating these challenging periods in life. Thereby, transforming the greatest obstacle into the greatest opportunity. I look forward to sharing this adventure with you, and I delight in this participation. Thank you.