

Andrew Holecek
Week 1, *Transforming our Greatest Obstacle into our Greatest Opportunity*
January 6th, 2013
“*A Proper View of Death*”

I'd like to start the first of these four lectures on the Tibetan approach to death and dying by talking about the critical importance of view. The importance of view cannot be overstated. We suffer so much at the end of life and dread death because we don't have the right view. Therefore, we relate to it improperly. For most of us, death is just the ultimate black out; there is no view beyond what happens behind this dark curtain. You could say that fear and ignorance are virtually synonymous. Even in a colloquial sense, we are always nervous or afraid of what we don't know. If you have a job interview you're anxious about it because you don't know how it's going to go. If you have a blind date you are nervous about that because you don't know how it's going to go. Then, in the deepest sense, we're afraid of what happens after death simply because we don't know.

In so many ways, the Bodhisattva of these bardo teachings on death and dying is Manjushri. Manjushri is depicted as a deity holding a sword designed to cut inwardly and outwardly. He is the deity of knowledge and wisdom. What's so provocative is that the wrathful manifestation of Manjushri is *Yamantaka*. Yamantaka literally means, “the destroyer of death.” *Yama* is “death.” Yamantaka is that or who destroys death. This is what we aspire to become in these teachings—this kind of a wrathful, uncompromising, knowledge that allows us to transform the darkness of death into the brightest of life, which is our charter over these next four courses.

If we can do that then perhaps we can enter one of these three auspicious levels of proper relationship to death. The tradition puts forth that the highest level of practitioner looks forward to death, not in a suicidal fashion. They look forward to death because their view is so profound that they realize they do have something to look forward to. In the second level, the practitioner has no fear simply because they've transcended fear of death by coming to understand it. In the third level, the practitioner has no regrets. If we can develop the proper view, if we can truly see through this darkness of ignorance, then we will realize that we have a tremendous amount to look forward to. The greatest

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opportunity for spiritual awakening lies in front of you! If that doesn't excite a spiritual practitioner, I don't know what does.

The right view, of course, is the first of the noble eightfold path. It is foundational to everything in spirituality, and even anything in life. For instance, if you have the right view in life to become a medical doctor or an attorney, perhaps it's the view or the image of what it would be like to wear a stethoscope or to have the financial rewards of these stations in life. That view will carry you through any level of hardship. You will cut through financial and emotional obstacles. It doesn't matter. If the view is powerful enough it acts like a laser beam. If you're having problems even in a general sense, if you're having problems getting to the meditation cushion, if you're having problems studying on the spiritual path, it's because your view isn't strong enough.

In the Tibetan tradition, the importance of view is astatically put forth in the story of a legendary poet and practitioner, Milarepa. You may recall that Milarepa, early in his years, killed 37 people. When he finally realized the karmic implications of his act, he developed a view that was so formidable—it was also brought into him by his teacher Marpa—that when he was finally given the precious teachings for liberation, he took these teachings with a ferocity, tenacity, and a perseverance that is now legendary in the Tibetan world. During twelve incredibly difficult years in retreat, he penetrated through all these obstacles and attained complete enlightenment in one life. His example now serves to inspire so many others. What Milarepa represents is someone whose view was so formidable that it simply didn't matter what was put in front of him. He was able to cut completely through it.

The view is that, in relation to the bardos, the relative aspects of your self do indeed die. Of course if we're identified with these aspects, we're going to suffer in direct proportion to that level of identification. The good news is the absolute nature, the absolute level of your being, your absolute true identity, does not die. Again, if we can come to identify

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with this before we’re forced into this level of identification you could say at the moment of death, “we’ve won the game.” We’ve already transcended death.

There are a number of ways to talk about view specifically when it comes to the Bardos. First and foremost is this journey as you’ll see, this is a journey. The journey of the bardo is the journey after death. It is nothing more than a journey of the mind. It’s a journey into and through the mind. It’s nowhere else. This view alone brings about a tremendous sense of understanding in terms of the power of the contemplative path, and the power of meditation. As we engage in these different meditations, which I’ll talk about with some specificity in the second class, what we’re doing is simply becoming more familiar with these subtle aspects of our own mind, the aspects of the mind that fundamentally do not die.

It’s important to understand that we’re not going anywhere when we die other than into and through our own minds. If we can make this journey now, while we’re still alive, we can indeed die before we die. Therefore, negotiate the bardos with a tremendous sense of control and confidence because we’ve been here before. We’ve done the meditations. We’ve done the retreats. We know exactly what to expect as we enter these end of life situations.

There are two principle doctrines that I think are helpful to understand. These are like the frameworks for the entire bardo journey. The first is the teachings on the trikaya. We want to spend a little bit of time talking about this because what we’re doing with this teaching—and the teaching on the three bardos all together—is we’re installing a kind of psychic GPS. We’re installing a type of global positioning system within our own mind stream that will then serve to orient us as we enter these end-of-life situations. We will be able to know where we are, exactly what’s going on, and exactly what it is we need to do. By studying the Trikaya and the three bardos all together, we’re studying a map of such elegance and sophistication, that when we enter the territory, we’ll be able to orient ourselves. Where are we? What do we need to do? How can we negotiate this terrain?

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We become so familiar with this territory. This is interesting to me because the Tibetan word for meditation all together is *Gom*. Gom means to become familiar with, and that's what meditation is. It's a level of familiarization with all the different levels of our own heart mind. By studying these templates—the trikaya and the three bardo teachings—we're becoming familiar even at the level of a map with something so powerful that we can take this. It'll be implanted in our mind stream and then arise when we need it the most in this journey after death.

The trikaya is a fundamental teaching. It was originally brought about in the Mahanena schools as a way to describe the three bodies of a buddha. Then it was extended to encompass a description of the three levels of reality and truly the three levels of complete identification. In other words, they describe who we fundamentally are at three different levels. What the trikaya helps us understand—as we alluded to in the first introductory talk—is to help us understand that we have a false sense of identity if we associate with what's referred to as the *nirmanakaya*, which I'll unpack in a second. If we can come to dis-identify with that and progressively identify with these more subtle aspects of our heart mind—which we'll talk about shortly as the *sambhogakaya* and the *nirmanakaya*—then with this complete level of identification, we have a deep, deep understanding of not only who we are but exactly what's going to happen to us after we die because these levels of mind will be revealed to us as we go through this journey, as we will see.

One way to look at the trikaya all together that's been very helpful for me is to see them as a vertical mandala. The Tibetan Buddhists speak a lot about mandala principal—mandala meaning an organizational template. I like to view this idea or this teaching on the Trikaya as a vertical mandala. It acts as a kind of skeleton upon which we can hang a great deal of helpful information. The trikaya literally means three bodies; *tri* meaning three and *kaya* meaning body. The thumbnail description of these is the *dharmakaya* simply represents utter, complete formlessness. The *nirmanakaya* represents complete utter form, fully embodied manifestation. The *sambhogakaya* is the bandwidth in

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between we could say. It is the widest bandwidth that represents all kinds of partially manifested or embodied manifestations of reality.

So as we engage in the spiritual path, we're increasing our level of familiarity and identification with all three of these bodies. One way to define enlightenment is as the complete realization of ourselves as the trikaya. This is another reason why it's so helpful to understand these teachings. If we elaborate on them a little bit, the *dharmakaya* is literally referred to as the body of truth. It's our own formless nature. This is that aspect or dimension of our own heart mind that does not enter the world of space and time. It's unmanifest. It is simultaneously the womb and the tomb of all manifest reality. It is that from which everything arises and it is that too which everything returns. It's both the cradle and the grave. It's also referred to in the Miyana teachings as the great mother, Prajnaparamita. Prajnaparamita, the primordial cervix or womb that gives birth to all of reality. Interesting, there are so many names for that which fundamentally cannot be named. We're referring of course to this unmanifest dimension of our own heart mind as the *dharmakaya*. But other synonyms in Sanskrit would be (Dharmata, patategarba, shigatagarbaba, rigpa) 0:12:37.1 – 0:12:45.2, basic goodness, Buddha nature all together. This is the principle domain of experience that we will enter into at the end of the Bardo of Dying which we will see shortly.

So from this unmanifest domain of reality of heart mind, manifests or radiates or expresses or shines what's known of course as the *sambhogakaya*, the body of bliss. This is the first level of manifestation. This is the primordial bandwidth of sound and light, which is the most subtle level of form. The *sambhogakaya*—Trungpa Rinpoche referred to it as the most populated of all the kayas—of all the domains. This is that bandwidth of experience where—depending on the tradition—where deities arise and abide. Where dralas in any level of disembodied angels; whatever spirit level you want to refer to, this is the bandwidth where these levels of reality manifest and where subtle

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levels of our own heart mind manifest. The very first manifestation of mind into form takes place as a *sambhogakaya*.

From the *sambhogakaya*, the third level of expression or manifestation is the *nirmanakaya*, or the body of emanation. This is what we would know as fully manifest form. This is exclusively identified with fully embodied physical form. It's interesting for those of us who are familiar with Tibetan terms. The Tibetan for *nirmanakaya* is *tülku*. When we talk about the different *tülkus* that are manifest throughout the world, all the different Rinpoche, these are simply voluntary *nirmanakayas*. These are minds that have such power and control over manifestation that they can take rebirth moment to moment, and therefore life to life, voluntarily.

This is the entire play of mind as it manifests and expresses itself throughout reality all together. Each one of these kayas is associated with a second template that I want to talk about. This is the description of the three Bardos all together. The first bardo is the painful Bardo of Dying. This is the bardo, or gap, that occurs at the end of life. It classically heads its onset when we become afflicted with a condition that will fundamentally end with our death. This can take place in a matter of seconds if you're involved in a car accident, or years or decades if you are involved in a kind of chronic, debilitating, progressive disease. The painful Bardo of Dying is associated with our release of the *nirmanakaya*. It's called painful because it's painful for us to let go. It's painful for us to release our grip on all things made of form. Of course most are typically, this body. We'll see more about this bardo in class three when we talk about the eight stages that constitute the aspects of this bardo all-together. As we'll see, there are five stages associated with what's referred to as the outer dissolution and three stages that are referred to as the inter-dissolution. We'll reserve a little bit of time for this in the third class when we discuss how it is that we can related to these stages with real skill as we're going through the dying process.

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At the end of the painful Bardo of Dying, when all form is dissolved, the mind then descends or ascends—depending on which metaphor you want to use—into the luminous Bardo of Dharmata. This is the second bardo. Dharmata is virtually synonymous with the Dharmakaya. This is the awakened nature, the true formless and therefore deathless nature that is at the very heart of who we all are. This is what we drop into as we drop into death. Because it's formless and doesn't enter the world of space and time, it is therefore not subject for the macerations of impermanence. This is you could say the underlying substrate kind of condition of mind that does not give birth; I should say does not enter the world of birth and does not enter the world of death.

If we can develop a level of familiarization with this nature, this dharmata nature, we will attain liberation at the end of life. For you see, every one of us, even though we will each experience the dharmata when we die, our levels of recognition of this state will be different. If we do have some level of familiarity with this deathless nature which we practiced during life, this is referred to in the beautiful phrase on the Tibetan tradition as “the union of the mother and child luminosity.” The child luminosity refers to your own level of recognition of your deathless nature. The mother luminosity is this primordial mother which gives birth to all manifest reality. If you can identify with this deathless nature while you're still alive, if you can die before you die, then when this deathless nature is revealed, mother and child reunite. The result of that reunion is fundamental awakening. This is the greatest opportunity that we have. Ego dreads it the most because the dharmakaya, from ego's perspective, is death. We enter this kind of double bind situation on this spiritual path. More than anything we long for liberation of the Dharmakaya or the Dharmata. But on the other hand more than anything, we dread it because from the ego's perspective it's death and the dissolution of all form.

This is a very helpful thing to understand as we feel the resistance to spiritual practice all together. Ego has a deep intuition that fundamentally as ego heads into egolessness, which is another way to talk about this material, there is a deep underlying intuition from ego's perspective that it's entering into its own death. So understanding this can give us

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courage and inspire us to go through challenging situations on this path as we start to understand that this is really fundamentally where we are going.

So I want to say briefly that there are two phases to this bardo. The first phase, phase one is referred to as the emptiness phase or the *dharmakaya* phase. This is another way to talk about it. We're returning into the empty nature of our own heart mind. This is phase one. For most of us by the way, this luminous Bardo Dharmata, lasts a finger snap simply because most of us don't have recognition and familiarity with these subtle states of heart and mind. But again as that familiarity is cultivated in life, the level of recognition increases and therefore our chances of attaining full awakening at the end of life are also increased.

So the second phase of this bardo is referred to as the luminosity phase. The reason I want to talk about this ever so briefly is because this of course is the *sambhogakaya* phase. This is the first level of expression as the heart mind starts to shine in this particular bardo. This of course is where famous legendary hundred peaceful and wrathful deities of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* arise. Now it's well beyond our scope to discuss these, but these hundred deities are simply primordial or archetypal expressions of the awakened mind as it first starts to shine and radiate as the luminosity of emptiness.

This is worth understanding. Most of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* or I would say at least half of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* that talks about these deities, is talking about this phase in the bardo. For most of us if we have any level of recognition, it will usually—the tradition says—be fleeting images of light. If you're from a Christian tradition of course, you will not see Tibetan deities. You will see if anything, glimmers of light or archetypal expressions of that light in a form that has some relationship to you.

So if you are a spiritual practitioner and you have some level of familiarity with these two phases of this really powerful Bardo of Dharmata, you can fundamentally do anything you want. You can manifest as a voluntary *nirmanakaya* as a *tülku* that we talked about.

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The tradition gets quite sophisticated in the descriptions. You can hang out in this empty space for as long as you wish. To me it's very elegant: “you can do anything” because there is no longer a you.

So how are we going to relate to this pretty esoteric bardo? This is the one that people usually have the hardest time relating to, just because it's the most subtle. If we're not familiar with these very subtle levels of mind. Again for most of us, the luminous Bardo of Dharmata literally transpires in a finger snap. But if you're a practitioner, if you're a yogi or yogini, fundamentally “you” can do whatever you want. You can rest in the nature of your heart mind indefinitely. In fact this particular resting in the mind is referred to in the Tibetan tradition as Tut Kan, which is kind of a post-death meditative absorption. This is fairly common place in the Tibetan Buddhism.

Interestingly enough, this particular phenomenon is now being studied at the request of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. There are a team of scientists that are involved in rigorously studying and therefore substantiating this phenomenon of Tut Kan where an advanced practitioner after death for a period of days or sometimes even weeks, there will be a heat still exuding from the heart center. The skin will retain a kind of pliability that's consistent not with the post-death state of most people but with someone who's alive. They fundamentally don't even look like they are dead. They look like they are sleeping. This is very exciting if this particular research project can be brought to fruition. The implications for the western scientific world because of our relationship with science, it's pretty compelling.

So a person with spiritual realization who rests, this kind of union of mother and child luminosity which by the way still takes place in your body at this point. A person can rest here indefinitely. They can arise as a voluntary emanation or a voluntary *nirmanakaya*. We talked about this earlier as a tulku. They fundamentally can do whatever they want. I like this kind of safeguard because there is no “you”. There is no longer an ego controlling or dictating the situation. Mostly for realized beings, this level of wisdom is

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completely conjoined with the expression of compassion. Our realized being will not rest indefinitely in this state but will take on whatever form is necessary to bring about the greatest level of benefit for the greatest number of human beings or greatest number of beings all together, I should say.

For most of us, as I mentioned earlier, without level of recognition and premeditation practices, we just basically black out. This is the black out which most people associate with death. You can gain some kind of a hint of this experience and we'll talk about this in the next class, by looking at what happens when you fall into deep dreamless sleep. It's a very similar state of mind. For most of us without preparation or practice such as sleep or dream yoga, most of us do not recognize deep dreamless sleep. But a sleep yoga practitioner or someone who's familiar with the luminosity, the emptiness of their own heart mind, they maintain a kind of constant consciousness. A twenty-four/seven level of awareness so that when they drop into sleep, their body might be going into a sleep mode but their mind continues to stay awake in a formless level. We'll say more about this in the next class.

So for the rest of us as this bardo is just usually conically skipped, we will wake up somewhat bewildered and confused, which is referred to as the third death bardo, which is the karmic bardo of becoming. Here what this refers to is that the display of wisdom at this point is over. You could almost say that you've missed step one and step two, or opportunities one and two for awakening. The karma of this life and residues of that, conjoined with karma from previous lives arises with a kind of vengeance, actually. The winds recur and according to the Tibetan description at this point, the very subtle body which I'll talk about later, leaves this physical body and begins this interesting and potentially terrifying journey in the after-death state, which constitutes for most of us, the post-death experience, which according to the Tibetans, on average lasts around forty nine days. So this state is very similar to an unrecognized dream—a non-lucid dream. Again we can gain some sense of suggestion about how much recognition we will have in these after-death states, but how we relate and recognize what happens every night when

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we fall asleep. How many of us can recognize deep dreamless sleep, which is a concordant expression of the luminous Bardo Dharmata? How many of us can recognize dreams – lucid dreams? How many of us can be awake in our dreams, which is a concordant expression of the karmic bardo of becoming?

This again is why these practices of the night, which I’ll refer to later, are so helpful. In fact they came about principally as ways to prepare for death. So what happens here that’s so interesting to me—you could say that in the luminous bardo of Dharmata, all heaven breaks loose. The entire wisdom display of our own heart mind is unleashed or revealed. In the karmic bardo of becoming, all hell breaks loose. As we will see, it is the intensity of these experiences that forces us to contract out of fear.

What makes this particular bardo so unsettling for us is there’s no—just like in a dream—there’s not hitching post, so to speak. You can’t even say that distraction exists because distraction becomes your reality. There’s nothing to be distracted from, just like in a dream. So then what happens, according to these teachings, is this bardo progresses as we’re being exposed to the confused aspects of our own mind. But it develops this very provocative fear of our own heart mind. As we go deeper and deeper through this bardo, there comes a point where we fundamentally can’t stand what’s taking place. We can’t relate to what’s being released in our own confused expression. Fundamentally this gives birth to the impetus to take on form—any level of form that would get us away from ourselves. This throws us therefore involuntarily into our next life.

So what is so compelling to me and I want to end on this, is that what constitutes rebirth into this life according to these teaching is a progressive level of contractions. So in the luminous Bardo Dharmata, we contract out of fear; the fear of the truth of our own non-existence, forms a kind of contraction. We contract away from that and contract away from the display of the wisdom power of our own mind, which would be the second phase of the luminous Bardo Dharmata. We contract yet away from that out of fear of our own power. In the karmic bardo of becoming we actually contract out of fear there,

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because of fear of our own confused mind. It's so compelling to me that this process of contraction is then recapitulated in a physical form as our mother literally contracts us through labor into this world. Then of course what we do is spend the entirety of our lives recapitulating this process of contraction yet again through grasping. Every time we grasp after something, which of course causes so much suffering, we're echoing this primordial contraction that gave birth to us out of the bardos and into life altogether. This is a very interesting assertion because what it therefore implies is that, if contraction is the principle mode of bringing us into life moment to moment or life to life, then the antidote to that contraction—and I would put forth the fundamental irreducible instruction of the spiritual path all together—is realization. Relaxation. Relax into the nature of who you are. Relax and let go all these false levels of identification. You will indeed be participating in the fundamental expression of the spiritual path, at least as I've come to understand it.

So, on the next class, we're going to talk about what it is that we can do specifically.

What are the specific practices that we can do before we die? Now we have the view, we have the infrastructure, and we can start to ground this in very earthy practices that will benefit ourselves and others.