

Q&A on Death and Dying

It has been almost seven weeks since we've had satsang. We've been meditating a lot, so I thought we'd start the session with Q&A and see where that leads us. What's going on out there? What's going on in there?

Q: This is a question about death and specifically about so-called mercy killing. We found a baby gopher, and it wasn't doing well. We gave it water, and it drank and threw up. Then we discovered that the neighborhood cats had been at it. Its head had been chewed on and it wasn't going to make it. I had an appointment, so either I had to leave him or do something violent, like step on him, to end his life. But if I left him where he was, the cats might come back and torture him more. Is it possible that this creature had something it needed to learn while it was dying, and I would be depriving it of an important experience if I killed it?

Mark: The answer to your question is "yes." Death is an extremely personal event and is the absolute reflection of your life, whether this life or previous lives. You will die as you lived. That happens with everybody and everything. It is also true that all living things inevitably tremble before death because the identity as they know it is being taken away.

There are situations where your death is upon you and the process is going extremely well. This means that you have had the opportunity to prepare for the moment of death and will make the requisite struggle with as many odds on your side as possible. Then there's the diminishment of those odds, all the way down to the sudden and violent death resulting from the September 11th terrorist attack. When you are in the middle of your daily routine and death strikes without warning, you have no opportunity to prepare, and death is particularly violent.

In addition, the process of death is extremely confusing because you are going through a series of collapses of the architecture of identity. Unless you are extremely wise, you have "X" amount of identity attached to your physical form. As the body goes through its process of dissolution, there are a myriad of spiritual, psychological and metaphysical dynamics to undergo.

Clearly, there's nothing more personal than death. The process of interceding or becoming involved in another being's death is a profoundly karmic and personal gesture between you and that being. You have to judge yourself worthy, make a series of assessments about the situation, and then act accordingly. You have to listen very carefully. Does the

being want you to intercede or not? Is it suffering? No matter what, there's a certain amount of suffering at the moment of death.

In the situation you've described, perhaps you were the little gopher's good karma, coming in to buffer his suffering while he went through the death process. Perhaps you wouldn't want to step on him but move him to a safe place where he could spend his last hours peacefully. This would probably be what I would have done. If you left him where he was, the cats might come back. Just when he'd be getting through the process, they'd be on him again, and that's excessive cruelty. But he's clearly dying and you know it's going to be over in an hour or so. Just move him to a place where he won't be disturbed and let him make his exit. Death in nature tends to be violent. It's the way of things.

As a general rule, rapidly accelerating a person's death process is not a good idea. You want to let the person go through what they want to go through. Now let's look at the case of a human being with a lingering disease. A person has to go through their karma, and the process of a difficult death is an aspect of that karma. They just have to go through it. Most people would rather put up the struggle and, in those last moments, just go off.

In some situations, such as with Parkinson's or Alzheimer's diseases, there is an incredible loss of identity. At a certain point, you know you'll be unaware of your surroundings, and you want to die before that total progression occurs. I think that's valid. We're finally getting to a point in society's acceptance of death that you can leave a will forbidding extraordinary means to prolong your life. In fact, all of you should place this in your will in the event you're being kept alive by extraordinary means. You don't want to be kept alive when you can't speak for yourself. Hopefully you will have enough personal power to avoid that kind of exit, but you never know. Life is tricky, and you should always make appropriate arrangements.

On the other hand, the death process is never as bad as people think it is. People dread death because of its unknown quality. It is a kind of violence, but it's a natural part of things. There's nothing to fear. I want you to get away from the fear model. It is high adventure and really intense, but it's nothing to fear.

Q: Along the same lines, do you have an opinion on whether people should be organ donors?

Mark: Yes. As a rule, I don't feel they should. I think that you should just take your body and exit.

Q: But what happens if you do donate organs?

Mark: Not donating is just my opinion. If you have a feeling for doing it, I have nothing against it. After you extinguish, you are no longer in your body; you're dealing with the bardo completely. For approximately five days, you're connected to that body. You don't want people messing with your body while you're in exit mode. But if you have a worldview where organ donation is useful, and you want your parts scattered to the four winds, there's nothing wrong with it.

After death, you want the process to be whatever you expect it to be. Every culture has its idea of what surrounds death. For example, in Israel, they bury you within one day. They stick you in the ground—it's over. That's what you expect, so, when it happens, there's no shock. You are in the bardo, and you see your body being handled according to your beliefs. You don't get all strung out about it; you just keep on going.

As a rule, arrange to have your body undisturbed for at least one to three days if you can. That's somewhat tricky in this culture, but a wake is always a possibility. Hopefully you can die at home or where your power is strongest and can leave your body in the hands of people who will carry out your final wishes. Whatever you want to happen, they'll see that it's done.

If you were an important spiritual being, sometimes they'll keep your body in state for the entire process of the bardo, a full forty-four days. Certain kinds of yogis prefer to be interred in a pit while in a mahasamadhi state with prescribed Vedic mantras and herbs and minerals. One of the extreme examples of this is Sri Jnaneshwar who died in the twelfth century and is still in his body. Muktananda was buried sitting up in meditation in a deep pit surrounded by salts so insects and other creatures couldn't get at his body. You have the same thing with Nityananda except he was interred lying down.

When you go around the body of an awakened soul, you can tell that it's being used as a gateway of grace. The flow of heightened consciousness is still moving through that collection of bones. Visiting the sacred bones of members of the lineage was the underlying purpose of our yatra in India. All the bones that we visited were holding the lineage at a different time and place. The lineage made it possible to give shaktipat here in America at the end of the second and the beginning of the third millennium.

I suggest meeting your death sitting up because of the electromagnetic flow of the earth. If you lay your spine on the earth, it will blend with the earth leaving you muddled and confused. But if you sit up, the process of

life extinguishing inside your body will be much clearer. The gateways that we are the most concerned with at death are in the upper brain. This means that you want to assemble all of your consciousness in the sushumna and draw it up into the brain and out the sahasrara. That way the body becomes a gate to the ecstatic equilibrium. If you do that, you enter the Self and attain liberation in an instant.

But sometimes at the moment of death, a phase of karma hits you that may take time to work through. If someone does take the body away, it won't mess you up. You'll still be in the bardo. You're done with the body, but you'll be trying to balance yourself on a totally slick, wily surface. However, if the karmic and physical situations remain stable as long as possible, three to seven days, it will be easier for you.

If you've lived a good life, you'll have sufficient spiritual power to hear death coming. As we've discussed before, there is no real event that is without prophecy if you're listening. If you were listening, really listening, you would have known not to be in the World Trade Center on September 11th. You would have heard it; you would have sensed it. You would have started seeing it in dreams. You would get your car washed or picked up the laundry before work and decided not to go into the building. But if you're not listening and it's an agreement you've made, you're there. You have the experience of a surprising and extremely violent death. The body is eliminated and burned to a cinder.

Q: I am curious about the dynamics of sky burial and why that means was chosen in certain cultures.¹

Mark: One reason is that the earth where this ritual is practiced is hard as stone, so you can't dig a hole. Sky burial appeals to the really dark streak in human nature. It's also particularly beautiful. As the body is chopped up, there's always an expert there when the head is cut off. As the brain is split open, the expert's job is to look at it and see if the consciousness principle has escaped the brain or not. It often hasn't because most people's consciousness gets trapped in the brain-well while the body is being dismembered.

The brain-well contains the stored karma of the senses and occupies a lot of the brain. The sushumna goes up through the brain-well, branching out into a million fibers through the brain-well. There are only three fibers that go through the entire nest and up through the crown, so you have to be a very adept yogi to make it through that nest. It's like a thicket of thorns or briars, and most people get entangled in the well. The expert's job is to

¹ Sky Burial: Ancient ceremonial practice of disposing of corpses by making the bodies available as food for birds, especially vultures. Sometimes called "celestial burial," this ritual is practiced in places where the earth is mostly stone and there is very little fuel for fire.

transport the consciousness principle out of the brain and into the bardo stream. These experts live both in this world and the bardo simultaneously and can tell when a soul has been ensnared. When you see those guys, they're like madmen. When you look into their eyes, they're spinning like crazy

Sky burial also has the underlying suggestion of sun worship, where a source of infinite light shines on all, warms them and consumes each in its own time. All religions include the idea of the relationship between food and that which consumes food. This equalizes everybody and all living things. Even Christianity, which is a relatively modern religion, contains this idea. You see it in the offering of the Christ through the wine and the bread.

The use of birds and vultures in sky burial is the same idea: food that consumes food. Everything has a place in the food chain. The message of humility that you hear in the West is, "In the end we're all food for worms." Well, in sky burial they say, "In the end we're all food for the vultures." It's a deep and profound psychological truth and is contained in the words of the oldest texts. Something has to give its life to sustain our life. We have to eat three times a day, and it has to come from somewhere. We don't consume food, per se; we consume life. Because we're modern people we abstract that idea, but that doesn't mean it's not true.

Q: How does a relationship with a guru interact with your death?

Mark: If you call on the guru at the moment of death, the guru will show up. If you're confused, he'll inform you that you've died. He'll produce an illusion where you are transported into a condition of liberation and delivered from the wheel of samsara. Through the power of the grace of the guru and the grace of the lineage, your consciousness principle will be wrapped up and delivered from the power of the wheel. It's just like Virgil guiding Dante through the Netherworld, but it's very fast. As a rule, because death is recognized as a tricky moment, the guru will go for the best path, as fast as possible, not taking any chances.

The point of a lifetime relationship with a guru is to learn to trust him. Then when you're at the moment of death and the guru starts doing things, you are relaxed. You trust what's going to happen; you accept it as the guru's grace. You go along with it rather than resist to the last second. That's a conversation that takes place between the guru and the disciple.

Q: You've said that entering the death bardo is just like being here in this room. What does that mean?

Mark: The mind keeps assembling appearances, which is another reason they say you die as you lived. The dream that you had with you in life, you take with you in death.

Q: And yet wouldn't you look at your own body and think, "Oh, I must be dead because I am seeing my body lying there"?

Mark: It will flicker by your mind, but then your mind will produce a dream. Your body will make sense in the dream. Maybe in the bardo, after you die, you'll go to sleep, and you'll dream you saw your body. You'll think, "Oh, that's kind of strange." You'll feel odd, but then the next thing will happen and you'll go on just like you do in life now. For example, what do you do when you get up in the morning? You think, "Oh, I'm going to have my tea." You have your tea and ask, "What do I have to do today?" You're off on your errands. Then it's lunch and then you'll just come up with the next thing after lunch. Even after death, in the bardo you're doing the exact same thing. But it happens faster and faster. Just when your mind is about to stop, what do you do? You come up with something to do.

Q: But gradually those things stop working?

Mark: That's what occurs. What happens if you miss your shot at entering into the infinite ocean of light and becoming liberated? The fabric of all your karma of this life and past lives becomes the content of the movie you then start spinning.

The first three days of the bardo are like a vacation, and, again, it varies with each person. This period is basically just like life in a way; you dream the dreams of being alive. It's one of the jokes on human nature that most people don't know they've died for two or three days. But right away the truth is being revealed. You'll see loved ones, first in ideal settings and then mourning your loss. Then you'll start to see their mental projections as well as your mental projections. The clues start pouring in. You notice that the edge of your reality is decaying and then realize, "Oh...I died." After that the winds of the bardo begin to blow and start to drive the soul.

It's like the movie *Jacob's Ladder*. The main character starts receiving hints from both benign and demonic beings. It took him the whole movie to finally figure out he was dead and only needed to let go. The whole process took place over the course of a week in a seeming life, but it was all a bardo dream.

If a person has a very strong desire that went unfulfilled in life, they may have enough power to resist the winds of the bardo. They refuse to enter the bardo and become a hungry ghost instead. They have enough power

to stay in the world and walk around. They can see the objects of their desire, but they can't fulfill them because they don't have a body. They'll haunt an area or follow people around, feeding on other people's energy. They try to use this mental energy to reproduce a reality, but it never works. They feel excessively embittered, and that's why they don't just stay ghosts. They're called "hungry ghosts" because they possess a wild, hysterical bitterness since they haven't been able to fulfill a single desire for a long period of time. You don't want that to happen to you.

Q: Where is the part where the lights show up?

Mark: That's all in the first three days. It happens pretty fast.

Q: You know what really scares the hell out of me? What if I were to miss the moment of liberation and wind up in the three days. Then beings show up for the final call with the winds blowing and I'm saying, "Oh no, I'm not going." And I end up missing the last bus off Devil's Island.

Mark: Well, there are a series of five lights that are the elemental bases and they're the wrong doorways. They lead to rebirth.

There's one light that leads to liberation. The light of the Self appears as the light of ten million suns. It leads to liberation and happens instantaneously. Anyone can access it, but almost everybody misses it. It's so bright and fast that people tend to shy away from it, sensing it as a form of obstruction. The multiple lights come after the light of liberation. These are the basic lights of the elements and the senses, all leading to rebirth. But then there's a moment at the end of that sequence where the light of the Self appears again.

The best thing in approaching death is to have meditated enough so that you've heard the footsteps of death coming. When death strikes, you will know what it is. Even as you're dying, you'll know you're dying, and you'll sit up and go into the best meditation you can. You'll start noticing that it's very easy to draw all of your consciousness into the sushumna because that's where it wants to go. So instead of becoming frightened, you'll say, "Oh, I'm just meditating and I've done this a thousand times in a thousand meditations. I'm just going along with it."

As death happens, a powerful drama takes place. You feel a subtle regret because you know that everything is happening for the last time. You're not going to be allowed to come back to this house ever again. You're not going to see your loved ones ever again, at least not in this form or this setting. Get used to the idea of transience so you don't linger over that last regret too long. Death is a very tricky moment, and you need the best attention you can muster.

Q: It's kind of like a reverse dark night of the soul.

Mark: Yes, it is. When death happens, it clicks along really fast. Now, if you are aware, what seems like winds to other people won't to you. It's just like a doorway. You just walk up to it and you say, "Ah, no, I don't want to step through that doorway." You go up to another one and go, "Ah, no I don't want to step through that one." At the same time you should think, "You know, I'm dying. OK. I should call my guru." You call on the guru internally, and he'll show up.

Q: In the bardo, is the first step before the appearance of the wrathful deities, the playback of your life for you?

Mark: The Judgment, yes. That takes place within the bardo. The causes of your actions match up with the wrathful and peaceful deities within and produce a dynamic product, the Judgment.

Q: You lead straight to the doorstep of the question I was going to ask. I met this lady who mentioned that in her belief system, the people who were in the World Trade Center had all chosen to be there at birth.

Mark: Absolutely. That's why they were there.

Q: What you said earlier led me to believe the opposite. I understood it's a question of personal power, and if the individual had any power, they would get the hell out of there before the disaster.

Mark: Well, that's true, too.

Q: Wow. Those seem mutually exclusive.

Mark: Well, it's easy to understand. On one level you can say that the individuals who died in the attack had that karma to work out, and they chose to do it. On this level it was a positive act. Not only that, the lineage acted in their benefit to make sure they all reached the bardo after the attack on the building. The point where death finds you is an absolute agreement. You've always agreed to it. What I'm talking about is a trick of language that we're getting tripped up on. If you are committed to yourself, you will have felt the prophecy of your own agreements unfold in your life, and as death approaches, you will be prepared for it. Death is a constant advisor. It's always right there.

Q: My question is about tomorrow night, Halloween, when we're having a chöd meditation. Are these beings, the chöds, the ones that are caught in the ghost body?

Mark: Yes. There are all kinds of them and they're numberless. The chöd meditation (the word "chöd" means "to cut") is one of the oldest forms of sadhana that exists. It began in Tibet and all sadhanas flow from it; it carries an extremely sane message.

During the meditation you are offering aspects of awareness (such as attachments, which form obstacles to enlightenment) as food to beings of the lower planes. This offering is a conscious act of an enlightened nature. It's very interesting to watch the pacification of these hell-bound beings. They experience an act of kindness, and their very nature is changed.

Again, we recognize the reality of the relationship between food and that which consumes food. You offer the constituents of your consciousness as food for beings, which you're going to do eventually anyway. For example, you could get chopped up and fed to birds or turned into ashes and spread in the ocean. The amoebas and enzymes and proteins of the ocean will eat you. Or if you are buried in the ground, then the worms will eat you. Somewhere, someone's going to have lunch. Just think of all the lunches you've had this lifetime; it's all fair.

During the chöd, when you offer the components of your consciousness as food to beings that are trapped in the lower realms, you're committing an act of mercy. You're also declaring that you know that these qualities are not you or yours. They are only an illusory appearance. When you do it just right, you are left with pure consciousness. Usually this feeding process is just one component of the sadhana, but it very clearly happens and is a very interesting sensation. Nothing bad happens. In fact, it's a form of power. When it's done right, there is an explosion of consciousness inside your system that makes a powerful seat of enlightenment.

This meditation is also an opportunity to confront the underlying superstitious beliefs about what you consider to be your identity. It's actually very surprising how superstitious we all are. The fact that we fear the thought of considering ourselves food, even for an instant, is a form of neurosis, because that's what we are anyway.

Q: You said that all living beings tremble before death. You go into nirvikalpa samadhi so you're not really in the same class of living beings as humans. What happens with you?

Mark: I've actually gone through the death process a number of times. Advanced meditation is death, and as you go back and forth along that track, you iron out the neurotic fear of the event. That doesn't mean it's

not a tricky moment, but you're not afraid. Also, it doesn't mean that you're not going to regret the beautiful things that happened to you in a given life. Life is sweet indeed.

Q: So it's still tricky for the Dalai Lama or the guy that's done it a dozen times?

Mark: Well, you want a specific result, and that requires precise action.

Q: Mark, have you picked out where you're going next?

Mark: Yes.

Q: Is there any chance you'll let us know where that area is or teaching us a way to get there?

Mark: Yes, there is a chance. As soon as you are able to learn it, I will teach you. There are times where I've shown all of you maps in advanced speech. It will be information you will be able to access when you're ready to access it.

Q: It occurs to me that the description of the bardo just after death and the description of this bardo while being alive sound similar. The only difference is this one doesn't break down as quickly.

Mark: Yes, you've made a connection. They're not two things; they're one thing. The difference is due to the constituents of the physical body. Being in the body is called the embodied bardo. The dropping of the body is called the intermediate state, the state between bodies. It's not two bardos. It's one. This is the bardo where you have a dream of having a body. It lasts a certain amount of time according to the rules of nature at this given time and place.

Q: But the joke is on us because none of this is really happening.

Mark: Exactly. If you understand that to the point of recognizing its truth, you are liberated in that moment.