

THE BRIGHT LIGHTS OF THE BARDO

Spring is here, the snow is gone, and when I look outside at my yard, I find the 90-feet of flowers I planted last year just waking up, not to mention several other specialized gardens. My first thought was, due to health problems and the craziness of all the construction and change going on around here, I may just let the flowers fend for themselves this year.

But then the blue of the sky, some of the first warm air, and finally all that sun on my face and before I knew it I found myself out in that sun, sitting on the ground, gardening gloves on, weeding the flower garden.

What better thing to do than that? Which brings me to why I am writing this. I seem to have trouble knowing what to do with myself since my stroke. So, if you can stand it, bear with me and I will run this past you. You may have some suggestions for me.

Thanks to my recent stroke, I find myself observing the mental state I'm in more than I usually do. My teacher, Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, has taught us for decades to be aware (and on the lookout) for any shock in life, a sudden event (large or small), because that can be a time when we can be jarred out of our normal fixations or routine (rat race) and possibly catch a glimpse of the nature of our own mind behind the veneer and habits of our normal Self. Speaking of shocks, my stroke has for sure been a huge shock to the system.

Unfortunately, because I am basically lazy, I'm usually unable to wake up (and remain aware) short of something sudden or very shocking happening to me. Left to my own devices, I just kind of glide through this dream we call life from day to day. Like most of us, I'm busy, but at what? LOL.

In other words, unless I reach some kind of stop sign, something that shocks me awake, the best I can come up with is some sort of intellectual and conceptual grasp of things. I seem to prefer floating above where the rubber actually meets the road (the realm of hard experience) and seldom venture any actual skin in the game. Perhaps I don't prefer to connect fully to reality.

And, of course, without experience (skin in the game), there can be no realization. And without realization, the dharma can never ripen in us. We just don't spontaneously wake up; at least I don't. But enough about my day-dreaming through life. I want to say a little more about my recent loss of Self and what that has left me with because it is interesting, at least to me. It's happened a few other times in my life, but not this strong.

Something that has been on my mind since the stroke is how awkward I feel without my usual sense of self. After the stroke, I woke up from the comfort of my normal self (which was gone) to find myself all alone in this present moment. It's not like it has ever been any different; I just didn't know it. It's some stark experience.

Suddenly, here I am wide-awake, but feeling totally exposed and just not knowing what to do with my time. And I didn't much like this experience at first. It makes me nervous, yet I haven't known just what to do about it but persist.

For some (perhaps strange) reason, I associate my own uncomfortableness in the moment these days with what is described in the bardo teachings from the Tibetan Book of the Dead, i.e. our reaction to the various bright lights that appear in our bardo journey after death and possible attempts to hide from or turn away from these lights.

As the teachings point out, these bright lights are somehow just too bright, so that we turn aside or away

from them. We don't want to go toward the light and we don't recognize the light as the true nature of our own mind which it is. The thought of that miss-take is troubling to me.

I wonder if we already do this (or something similar) in everyday life, which the teachings also say is one of the bardos (the Kyenay Bardo), which lasts from birth to death? In other words, we are already in the bardo now.

Yet, it's that fifth after-death bardo, the Chönyi Bardo, where these various visions are said to occur and where, so the teachings say, that various lights appear that are so brilliant that we can mistake or not recognize them as our own inner nature and thus turn away from them into darkness. Who can read about that and not be moved to thought? I was shocked back in the early 1960s and maybe the late 1950s by the Tibetan Book of the Dead. It was one of only a few books on Tibetan Buddhism back then. Today there are thousands.

It is this fifth bardo that makes me wonder whether there is something similar in this normal life we live now where we can also feel very uncomfortable, enough to also turn away from or hide. First, I would like to know more about what the Tibetans mean by "bright light." Whatever it is, it can make us uncomfortable enough so that we turn away from and try to avoid it. To me, that begins to sound familiar in the state I'm currently in, this uncomfortableness at being on the spot called the present.

In my recent after-stroke experience, when I no longer had the comfort of my Self around me, but rather found myself just kind of stuck out here in the cold, so to speak, I was VERY uncomfortable, bereft of any of the comfort of my normal Self. Does this "uncomfortableness" relate to the bright-light of the Chönyi bardo? And why do I even think this?

My reasoning is that the Self with its fixations and attachments is said to be a major veil or obscuration to the clarity of the mind – a big distraction. We all should know that. And with the stroke came the sudden absence of the Self in my experience. It was immediately vacated or voided, leaving me on my own and vulnerable.

And with the absence of the Self, I felt very much exposed to whatever remained after the Self had abdicated, call it the natural mind or nature of the mind, the mind without Self – whatever. Is this what happens to us when we enter the bardo, in particular the Chönyi bardo, after death? I wonder.

It is clear from the written teachings that soon after death, our Self from this life fades and becomes increasingly unidentifiable. In other words, we lose touch with ourselves and finally are so without it entirely that we no longer identify with it. Who or what remains?

What remains without the Self? You tell me, but I imagine that what remains is that part of us that transmigrates between lives, between death and rebirth, whatever that is. And it seems it must be coherent enough to see and turn away from lights that are too bright for it. If we have lost our Self or persona, what or “who” is it that turns away?

In other words, a serious question is that if the Self has faded in the bardo soon after death, who or what is it that responds (or hides) from the bright lights of the bardo? If all that remains for us is the non-Self (whatever that is), then who is it that “freaks” out and seeks to turn away from the bright light of the clarity of the mind?

“Inquiring minds want to know.” LOL.

It is written that we don't recognize the nature of the mind when confronted with the bright lights and, if we

don't, it is then that we turn away from the light into something not-so-bright where we feel more comfortable. And that is also said to lead to a "lessor" or more difficult birth or at least not to freedom from rebirth and an existence in one of the pure realms, the Buddha Realms. That's a lot to take in and process.

Of course, I have no experience such that I am aware of any of this, but this is just what I read and have been taught. But who among us who studies this stuff does not wonder how it works and does not try to make sense of it? I can't help it.

All I know for a fact is that after the shock of my recent stroke, my Self immediately voided out, shattered, became detached, or however you want to describe it. And life without my Self was very different than before when I had a Self and its seeming security. I had experienced all this some years ago to a lesser extent in a previous stroke (TIA) and another shocking life event. The result, in all cases, was that I felt totally exposed to the elements or whatever there is, i.e. very, very vulnerable. I was naked and stuck out.

The most common way this was experienced was this sense of not knowing what exactly to do with myself, only I had no Self to not-know what to do without. LOL. "Suck any sense from that who can," as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins put it.

Anyway, I found that I was very anxious, being simply exposed like that, and sought relief in nervousness, naps, or just closing my eyes and resting. It seemed overwhelming. I had to lie down or something. It was hard to just be and remain present for any length of time in this new form I am.

So, naturally I wonder just what is it that I am reacting to when I feel uncomfortable? Or, am I just reacting because I miss the comfort of my historical Self and its attachments? And how do I miss what I no longer am?

And.... what is going to matter or count when I pass beyond this life into the actual bardo? Am I just going to have to wing it? Or is there something I can do here and now (in this life) to better prepare me for the bardo? I don't appreciate how helpless I feel when devoid of Self. Trust me, beyond the comfort of the Self and its illusion, awaits something more authentic and pure, but also more sober.

I have to say that it was unsettling, after my stroke, to feel like a stranger in a strange land. If that's the kind of exposure I will get in the bardo, that is not a comforting thought at all. I was unprepared and not able to cope all that well, to say the least. Perhaps I better do some preparatory "push-ups" (or something) before going there... into the bardo. LOL

What thoughts do my fellow dharma brothers and sisters have to say about this? I'm asking, because we are all in the same boat. My guess is that you too are like me. Talk to me!

[Photo by me yesterday.]

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<http://traffic.libsyn.com/spiritgrooves/Links to Michael Erlewine-V2.pdf>

“As Bodhicitta is so precious,
May those without it now create it,
May those who have it not destroy it,
And may it ever grow and flourish.”