

The Practice of Emergence

Thank you all for gathering here tonight. I am deeply grateful to Rabbi Seth for this opportunity to speak with you.

Who am I ? How did I get here? Two years ago, my seminary required I visit a neighborhood place of worship that was different from my own faith system. The request came at a disruptive moment in my life, I had just moved to Davis. As I searched this unfamiliar town, through its neighborhoods, I felt lost, until I saw the sign for Bet Havarim. I'd never been in a synagogue before. Luckily their office was open. I met Rabbi Wolfe, the congregation's leader, who graciously welcomed me to attend everything from Friday services to Torah Study. I felt welcomed into the tent of possibilities, not understanding that this place, indeed this faith, had more in common with my own than I ever thought possible. As if to hammer in the point, the office assistant handed me a flyer for Rabbi Seth's Meditation course.

In the two years of attending this class, I discovered that the Leader of my Buddhist lineage, His Holiness The 17th Karmapa, had met with a Rabbi. (share screen). His Holiness the Karmapa poignantly shared with the Rabbi how difficult it is to be a spiritual leader to a diasporic people. It was the Rabbi's warm smile and response of "Well, that is why we do this." that reminded me that suffering together brings us together, and all are interconnected. In these desperate times, many of us come together to nurture and sustain each other. Like this class, and this community.

So here we are floating in this strange hybrid of connectivity, seeing and hearing, but not feeling or sensing each other. Harbored yet imprisoned in our living spaces. The yearning to be free from something we can't quite identify permeates us. And we wait, and we wait and we wait for something the shift. We know something is changing, but we can't define what it is or even why we feel it. All we see in our communities and in the news cycle are scenes of chaos and fracture. When will this end?

In about twelve days, we will be released back into the wild. Right now, some of us are feeling ready to go back to "normal", but we are uncertain what that might be. Some of us are a bit hesitant to embrace freedom. And so many have been affected, and even more have died. I believe the count is close to 93,000 as of today?

We don't know what to expect. We are in the space of uncertainty. This feels raw, like a new wound, sore and vulnerable.

In my lineage of Buddhist training, there is a word for this state. The word is Bardo. Many in the West have heard this word in relationship to the Buddhist approach to death and dying. It's a word used to describe the realms visited while dying and after bodily death. But the actual word, by itself just means 'transitional state'.

Bardo is confusion, unbalanced, uneasy and yet revealing at the same time. Pema Khandro Rinpoche, one of the few female Tibetan high ranking spiritual leaders, states that "Confusion is the raw material for wisdom." And so Bardo is a place that stores raw wisdom. Bardo reveals the impermanent, temporarily cohesive but not binding, easily fractured, and completely chaotic states we experience going through life. Those of you with young children experience elements of the Bardo every day! It's that realm of surprise, a sudden unexpected unplanned shift, the state we feel when we break down by the side of the road, or get fired, or lose our homes in disaster. It's an earthquake.

It is an ocean of suffering without a safe harbor in sight.

But we humans absolutely need a safe harbor in times of stress, shift, or change. It's human nature to want shelter from chaos. So we try really hard to get back on the saddle. Maintain status quo. Drink, play, spend, or ignore, or minimize-perhaps wishing the event will "just go away."

The harder you turn away from Bardo's currents of shift and chaos, the longer, the more difficult it can be unless we recognize that this confusing place is actually quite eye opening. Bardo opens up the view, changes the perspective, offering a vista of clarity in a time and place when our very natures demand stability. That is what makes it hard to experience. It is in this "against the grain" way that Bardo reveals the truth that suffering exists in relationship to toxic individualism.

What is that? Greed, self-interest at the expense of others, hoarding toilet paper, indulging cravings and needs without thought to its repercussions on others around us. Bardo, like Covid19, exposes the cracks in the system by showing us the reality of our own interconnectivity. Bardo reveals that we do have an impact on all life, all energy in the universe.

Covid19 and Climate change are Bardo. Covid19 caused our communities to shut down, ending commutes for many, industry for nations. We saw a drop in carbon emissions from this event. Yes, humanity and its craving for industry has an impact. Large cities started to hear wildlife after the noise of public utilities and transit, business and traffic shut down. Climate was changed, again. Our consumer lifestyle ended small businesses that depended on us to survive. Across the globe, we began to see a shift, a wake up call, about our own frailty and the striking strong reality that it began with a single lifeform transmitted to a single individual.

Seeing these links is the gift of Bardo. As this disruptive, shifting state offers this opportunity for us to reflect on our impact, as both individuals, and as a species, perhaps change can happen at both ends of the spectrum, the small and the large. By isolating a single individual, we can protect thousands.

Adrienne Maree Brown, author of the book Emergent Strategy says: "How we are at the small scale is how we are at the large scale." This wisdom comes from observing fractals- a mathematical structure common in nature-like coastlines, trees, veins. They grow and decrease using the same patterns in either direction- So what does that mean about changing ourselves? Does this mean we can effect change, just by sitting here in class? By meditating? How can I, alone, affect change?

Learning how to Make these connections is a successful navigation of the Bardo state. One of the most popular teachings on how to do this is found in the Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, but as we've seen, you don't have to be dying to experience this. Anyone with young children understands the transient nature of the moment, the full impact of staying fully present, without the moorings of anger, fear, and its cousins, impatience, and frustration.

And though there may be "secret Bardo" practices, there truly is just one simple practice anyone can engage in. It's simply referred to as Clear Light.

Is Clear light practice the same as mindfulness? Mindfulness is a tool in the practice of Clear Light.

It's used to create what Adrienne Maree Brown calls "a small scale shift" because, she goes on to say, "What we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system." Being mindful in the time of Covid19 is knowing your choices are helping change the landscape of our community. Being mindful

in this time is greeting others, especially essential workers, with genuine appreciation and warmth. When you engage in small actions of mindful kindness watch the result.

These small aspects of Clear light Practice is at the heart of transforming our Bardo experience. When we uplift or share our uplifted and gentle kindness with others or the space around us, there is a sensation of relaxation. That relaxation creates room, not only for others to participate but for you to learn and listen.

If you remain in this state of loving kindness, a spaciousness, Tibetans use the word *shunyata*, is felt. Some have described a lessening of burdens, a lightness, even a sense of expansiveness as if we and the world are one. And we are connected. Buddhist Philosopher Joanna Macy calls this listening to “the voice inside us which connects us to all beings and to the whole web of life.”

It is here transformation can happen. Clear Light Practice helps you rest in this place and to see through your personal Bardo to engage in the path forward.

Clear Light practice is truly for everyone and like all practices, it has a story attached to it. To know the story is to know the practice as they say in my lineage.

First of all, how is my Buddhist lineage or Kagyudpa, how is it any different from what you’ve been hearing?

Venerable Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche describes Kagyudpa as a lineage that “places great emphasis on meditation.” As great a focus on meditation as the Dalai Lama’s Gelugpa lineage emphasizes intellectual discipline. Kagyudpas got that way by teaching Buddha’s system of enlightened wisdom by engaging in mentorship between teacher and student throughout their life. Like many faith systems, how the student takes what they’ve learned as a practitioner is reflected in how they interact with their community. Kagyudpas believe wholeheartedly that Practice is literally life and life is Practice. Learn by doing, think by listening, engage in the teachings by finding a practice that speaks to you, doing that particular practice throughout your life.

One of the most beloved of all Kagyus in the lineage’s greatest teacher, Milarepa. Tibetans love him because he was an ordinary guy that went down a dark path, understood the depth of his mistake, and worked hard to transform his life.

They even made a movie about him. You can watch Mila’s life story on Amazon Prime if you like. (see the chat box for the link)

Milarepa’s story speaks to many in the West too. We’ve all have parts of ourselves, parts of our past, that we cannot change and in this society, a single mistake for some, especially people of color, can have serious repercussions. Milarepa’s life story and journey to enlightenment is about just that.

Milarepa lived in a time of economic disparity. His father was murdered by his uncle and Milarepa’s mother, sister, and himself were pushed into slavery and poverty. One day At the behest of his grieving bitter mother, he met a to sue contemporary language, Darth Vadar and learned about the dark side. He used the dark skills to destroy his uncle for revenge for his mother, and in the process the destroyed his entire village.

Seeing the death toll horrified him and he thought this wasn't the right way to end his mother and sister's and his own suffering.. It was like that phrase "the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

There had to be a better way. So Milarepa wandered through villages and the mountains to find it. He tried to get into universities, the monestaries of the time, but his grades weren't good enough. He also was indigenous, which made it even harder to belong to the elite ruling class. But he kept searching, wandering, kind of in a limbo or dare I say Bardo state? Luckily he did find a teacher, a great one, named Marpa, another Tibetan hero. Marpa understood that teachings could be translated into many different learning modalities. It was through Marpa that Milarepa found he could learn how to let go of his past and grow. And so he stayed with Marpa, as basically his intern.

Like any ministerial intern, Milarepa was put through a lot of difficult tasks, pushed to do better without sometimes understanding how to do better. It seemed that Milarepa was constantly facing chaotic, disruptive, difficult tasks until Marpa his supervising professor, saw that Milarepa was starting to trust the learning practice process, trusting the pain of moment to be just a moment of pain that would diminish, and in that trust, that what we sometimes call 'a leap of faith' moment, is what is called a 'shunyata' or spacious moment, Milarepa found the Bardo state dissolve and his path become clear. With this Milarepa exclaimed E Mah Ho! The Tibetan equivalent of Wow! Cool! Or some of you might remember Far Out.

Milarepa is very popular as an inspiring teacher. I think because we admire as a culture people who work hard. We have the industrialized view that putting in time/effort yields product or result. The linear quality of a production line perspective put on Buddhist practice is actually the epitome of the individualized greed and a very strong source of misunderstanding of the deep teaching of Clear Light. One of the most common questions around this practice is this confusion surrounding having goals, endpoints, results when we do practices. There must be some secret, many ask. I gotta speed up this enlightenment gig so I can get to the next level. But the reality is, awareness already exists in your mind. You just need to get involved with it. It is not something to be attained, but to discover, uncover, its existence in us right now and that by engaging in it we are influencing the world around us because we become aware of shifts, changes, the potential for shift and change. We see wonderful things such as Tibetans and Jews sharing the cultural and colonial terror of diaspora. That Christians deeply meditate. That Indigenous societies knew how to be sustainable long before the word became cool and it makes sense.

Clear light practice shines a light on multiple paths to this wisdom, by mining the raw material in the Bardo state. Through adversity you can see which pathway generates the best shift and movement within not just you, but your community surrounding you. You are a member of the community and therefore can impact it moves from a trite sentiment to an actual experience.

Milarepa became a great teacher. He transmitted most of his teachings using an indigenous oral method: storytelling by song. Music, song, embrace more than one of the senses and therefore increase the understanding and engagement of the tools needed to move forward. He made space and welcomed connection no matter what the form.

Many indigenous practices emphasize the connection with the Earth, the web of life, as a practice to the path of clarity. It starts with deep respect and humility, and encourages sharing, not ownership. Sharing is an awareness of impact, of one's own needs and wants in direct association with one's community.

At the heart of all this is an Emergence story. How, where, and why they emerged governs the way they engage with their environment which is their community. It is these concepts of connectivity we are desperately feeling the need for right now. Indigenous communities are mindful of how they impact the world, by living every day with a set of practices that create, continue, and diversify connections to the clear light of life, the same qualities we want to achieve when we sit down on our cushion every day.

Milarepa's story reminds us of that organic quality of meditation, already within our being, the state of spaciousness, the faith in the power of change and persistence that one could survive and thrive in the challenge. By understanding that the raw power of this Bardo, our Bardo, can energize our own understanding of the world as a whole, we are understanding that **the truth of the moment isn't in its power to disrupt, but is in its power to expose and show things as they truly are.**

This is the clear light of awakening. That is why Buddha said the truth of suffering will set you free. Because you have within you the clear light to see this Bardo, this interim suffering, as just that, an interim state and that when you emerge you will understand the profound need to be open to change.

COVID19 is shattering systems of support. It's destroying lives. It's revealing cracks in what was supposed to be a foundation of our beliefs, our stabilities, our very being. Viruses know no racial or economic boundary. Equality as a species is being revealed as a fundamental truth. How we face this transformation of this awareness will be life altering.

But we have to be able to see it, and support the transformative path ahead. We have to refuse the deadening drugs of resentment, political beliefs, economic disparities, and have faith in each other and have the courage to greet suffering as a means in which to connect deeply with each other. understand the power of companioning each other through difficulty because as Joanna Macy says. This grief, this pain, is the reflection of love. Shared challenge generates compassion. Compassion is yet another tool to clear light practice.

So let us dabble in a sample of Clear Light Practice. It's very accessible. Traditionally It has a long form and short form. But this form You can take wherever you go.

a light version, so to speak.

All that you touch you change, all that you change, changes you, the only lasting truth is change. God is change- Olivia Butler,

Thank you.