

BEING MORTAL RETREAT — Essays, Week IV

Pir Elias Amidon © Sufi Way

Clear Light and the Beauty of the World

At the moment of our death, when the messages of our senses cease and the contents of our mind become transparent, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* offers this instruction:

Remember the Clear Light, the pure Clear Light from which everything in the universe comes, to which everything in the universe returns; the original nature of your own mind.... Let go into the Clear Light, trust it, merge with it. It is your own true nature, it is home.

When I first read that passage as a young man I was deeply moved and reassured — it assured me that the confusion and loneliness I felt as a twenty-two year-old would vanish one day in that great, final homecoming. I didn't understand what this "Clear Light" was, but it didn't matter — the certainty of the voice in the Book of the Dead comforted me. The Clear Light would come.

And meanwhile, I would just have to make the best of it. So in the years that followed — my twenties and thirties — I kept attempting to find or build some kind of substitute, metaphorical home in which I could belong during my exile here on earth.

I realize now that I had succumbed to the old polarity of my species: the sacred *hereafter* and the profane *here*, heaven and earth, light and dark. As far as I can understand it, this polarity has its genesis in our need to identify ourselves as individual beings separate from the other beings and objects of the world: me *in here* and all the rest *out there*. The dominance of the "me in here" sets up the added polarity of my suffering and incompleteness *now* versus the promise of redemption and homecoming in the *future*.

Of course, these kinds of polarities are understandable — we are two-legged organisms walking about, seemingly disconnected from the earth and sky, and anxious about avoiding any dangers that might be lurking on our path. It appears we *are* separate beings.

It took me a few decades of spiritual practice and inquiry — not to mention the normal sufferings life provides — to realize that the nature of reality only *appears* to be split into these dualities. As one of my teachers, Murshida Sitara Brutnell, once cryptically said, "*There is no other.*" This

whole show is one magnificent Happening, one awesome Brilliance reflected in the infinite prisms of possibility. Which means that we — you and I right now, every humming atom of us, every thought and feeling, every movement — are inextricably part of this blossoming of spontaneous light.

Sufis call this *wahdat-al-wujud*, the Oneness of Existence. Nothing stands outside of its Oneness and Suchness — there is no other. The multiplicity of the phenomenal world is sometimes imaged by Sufis as a veil over the Absolute, though the veil and the Absolute are not seen as two different things, rather “the veil is the external epiphany of the Absolute.” Or, as the 14th century Persian Sufi Mahmud Shabastari wrote, “*The whole world of Being is the beams of the Absolute Light. The Absolute remains hidden because it is so clearly manifest.*”

Which brings us back to the Tibetan notion of the Clear Light, surely the same as Shabastari’s “Absolute Light.” The Clear Light is not, as I had first thought, something waiting out there to welcome me when I die. It is present now, right here, both as perceptible as all the apparent things and thoughts and feelings of this world, and as imperceptible, invisible, and transparent as the awareness in which these words appear to us right now. The “light” of awareness, the Clear Light, “the original nature of your own mind,” all indicate this same “light” that can’t be seen or located, though it is unmistakably, spontaneously present. “God’s Light is in the heavens and the earth,” says the Bible and the Quran. And the Quran adds, “whichever way you turn, there is its presence.”

When I die I imagine that one of my last feelings will be, “How beautiful!” I won’t be referring to the beauty of where I’m going (I have no idea about that), but how beautiful is where I’ve been, this astonishing earth, sky, and cosmos, this astonishing body and its capacity to know and love. As the mystic-philosopher Francois Cheng remarked, “The universe is not obliged to be beautiful, and yet it *is* beautiful.” How extraordinary!

The mystery of the Clear Light and the mystery of the beauty of the universe have become the central contemplations of my life. “*Beauty*” (I’m fond of repeating these words of Ibn ‘Arabi) “*is the welcoming openness of the truth toward us.*” Somehow the “truth” of the unchanging Clear Light is revealed by ever-changing beauty. “God is beautiful and loves beauty,” a hadith tells us. Spontaneous, ephemeral beauty — the beauty of a song, a kiss, a passing cloud, a glint of sunlight — each one a momentary revelation of the unborn Clear Light, our home.

Free Fall

Plummeting from so great a height with no parachute, slowly cartwheeling, his body now facing upwards at the retreating sky, now downwards so he could see the puffs of cloud-tops scattered across the patterned earth, it seemed to him he was not really falling but stretched out weightless, suspended in a space in which he had time to remember and rest. The furious beating of his heart moments before was calm. He felt enveloped in an intimacy so close that no sense of peril could enter.

An image of his mother came to him. It was a look of endearment she had given him as a child, looking down from her place by the stove, her kind eyes and smile. But instantly the image flashed away, leaving behind a swelling of light in which other pictures came: of him as an infant crying as the door closed, of the new tricycle with the red ribbon on its handlebar, of his father's hat, of a scoop of white ice cream in the dirt, of the college girl next door lifting him up half-conscious from his bike accident, the weird thrill of her body next to his.

Now it seemed the images he saw and the feelings he felt were the same, not two kinds of senses but something else, a history of his privacy no one else knew. Warmth, skin, hoping, the faces of women so close, then dropping away, the old loneliness kept tenderly inside him, the longing, the disappointments, great flashes of happiness like curtains swept back to let the morning in, his children in his arms . . . it was like a history of meaning read in a language of feeling that he no longer needed to protect himself from. It didn't matter, the losses didn't matter, and he felt in the space of his suspended falling, for the first time, the relief of being free from care.

Now he was swept by the extraordinary, by a feeling that went beyond the particulars of his life, that felt in the particulars passing such a dearness that he spread his arms out as if to embrace them all at once, and in that moment he began to fly.

It was not a flight he guided, as he had guided his plane before it broke apart. He flew now surrendered to a vacuum ahead of him, pulling him into itself, drawing him forward. Once again an awful fear lunged at him, tearing through his body.

Then it was quiet. The sound of the wind rushing in his ears stopped. A clarity as clear as space, perfect in itself, appeared in his being as if it had always been there but had somehow gone unnoticed until now. The clarity was everywhere, but since it saturated him as well as everything else, he couldn't tell any difference between everywhere and here. The clouds, the azure sky, the massive earth and his body as it plummeted were made of the same radiant clearness without reference, vast but without distance.

The sense of his approaching death turned inside out. There was no approach and no death. The story of his having once been born dissolved in the same way. Nothing had happened, nothing

could happen, he had never gone anywhere. He knew then it was all a Great Happiness, a Joyous Perfect Home without doors, a Placelessness so Beautiful and so Familiar he wondered how he could have forgotten its Presence. It was old — no — it was Always, never having begun so never ending, a Happiness at the Heart of Being that revealed his life to be gossamer, a play of light in an empty room, an emanation of Kindness Itself, and all that he had ever worried about or wanted or grieved over resolved itself in that Kindness, and with a silent shout of joy he met the Brilliant Ground.

In One Form or Another

I once caught a very large fish. As it appeared from the depths of the sea off the west coast of Canada I saw it was longer than my arm, and I knew I couldn't pull it into the kayak I was in — there wasn't room in there for both of us. The sky was gray and close; the wind had picked up, blowing spray in my face; the rise and fall of the sea made my little boat unstable. I tied the line onto the kayak so the fish would stay close to the boat, its green body swimming next to me while I paddled to the shore of a small, uninhabited island. When I landed I pulled the fish up onto the pebbled beach. It thrashed and quivered, lay still, then thrashed again and again. I took my hunting knife from its sheath on my belt and plunged the blade just behind the fish's head, severing its spine. At that moment I felt a surge of energy like an electric shock explode up my arm and into my body. Later that night my friends and I ate the fish, but in that moment, as the surge of energy entered my body, I felt I had absorbed its life force. It turned into me.

Yesterday I was making a soup. As I sliced the carrots I remembered that fish and its gift, and realized the carrots were doing the same thing. The carrots, like the fish in its sea, had led private lives in the dark earth somewhere, had been pulled out and now submitted themselves to my knife. There was no surge of electricity that I could feel as I chopped the carrots, but the gift was the same.

This world is constantly feeding us like that. Even this breath we are drawing in right now — the life-gift of plants — offers up its power to us, keeping the continuity of life happening. All of us are brimming with this accumulated life force given from countless sources — carrots and fish and air — plus vast gifts more intangible but no less vital, like the perseverance and ingenuity of our ancestors: hunter-gatherers, nomads, farmers, singers, builders, scientists, or the gifts of our mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers, and theirs, all the way back, the parents whose caring for their little ones ensured our coming into being. The life force we breathe and move with pours into us from all this like the current of a great luminous river.

We can feel this directly, and we can also feel how this luminous current doesn't stop inside us — it keeps flowing. What we have taken in, gives. This is happening right now, it doesn't stop. Whether we are aware of it or not, the light of aliveness pours forth *from* us just as it pours *into* us. The aliveness of our seeing, hearing, and touching, the aliveness of our warm hearts, all of it continues to illuminate the world around us just as we are illuminated by it.

Of course there are rocks and obstructions in this great current of aliveness. Meanness, abuse, selfishness, fear — none of us escape being wounded by these things, or wounding others. Our job is to learn to get out of the way, to let the luminous current flow through us and not obstruct it. This is not so easy, but we can do it.

One thing that helps is *remembering to bow* — to bow in acknowledgement and awe of this current of aliveness that creates and sustains our own aliveness. What a vast gift it is! The simple humbleness of our bow — not necessarily outwardly but inwardly — in recognition of the unimaginable offering of a universe that makes our existence in this moment possible... this is what helps us get out of the way. To be here, alive with this aliveness, and not to be in its way, is the best luck we could have.

Even in sickness or the decline that precedes our death, the current of life still flows in its full vitality, if we get out of its way. Then it is not so much a physical vitality as a luminous one. For within this current of livingness that we are made of is an unquenchable light. It is the invisible light of becoming — so close we can't see it — that ignites the whole drama of fish and farmers, fathers and mothers. But now the metaphor of a “current” or a “river” comes to its limit, because this gift of aliveness is not limited by river banks — it is more like a shoreless ocean of light, or what Inayat Khan describes as “the all-pervading life in space.”

Light, life — these two words spiral around and into each other until we cannot distinguish the difference. Ultimately, and intimately, our livingness is light — we are made of light. And yet even that word — light — meets its limit, for this invisible light is not the opposite of darkness, nor is it located in one place and not in another. In the same way, “the all-pervading life in space” is not the opposite of death. Ultimately, and intimately, there is no death. The fish, the sea, the soup, the air, the ancestors, us — we are all radiances of this invisible and timeless light. Or as Jack Kerouac tells it: “We’ve been here forever, in one form or another.” Bowing down, we know what he means.