

The Seekers Forum Transcript

# A Bird on Your Shoulder: Freedom from the Fear of Dying

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Today we're going to be looking at the essential connection between mortal awareness and flourishing and why is it, without being conscious of our impermanence, existence loses both its richness and its meaning.

As Socrates said, "We should always be involved in the practice of dying." The great saint, Anandamayi Ma put it differently. She recommended that we live our lives like a bird rests on a narrow branch, knowing that the branch can snap at any moment. Now, should the bird forget that it can fly, if birds actually thought about these things, it might live in a constant state of fear, clutching the branch, believing its survival depends on holding on for dear life and hoping that the weather holds.

This is how most of us spend our lives, imagining the branch is all that sustains us and that without this fragile connection, we're doomed to fall into oblivion. Like the forgetful bird, we lose track of the fact that we can fly as well, spiritually speaking, that an essential precious part of us can never be killed and isn't defined by shifts in material circumstance, as the limbs of our physical connection are shaken and weakened and eventually torn asunder with the passage of time.

To some of you this may sound like a sugarcoated version of our human condition, imagining that we are more spirit than body, because at one time it certainly would have sounded that way to me. Confronting the deaths of those around me and later my own fatal diagnosis, I would absolutely have rejected the notion of spiritual aviation, so to speak, out of hand, this idea that although the body dies, an aspect of us is aloft and awake and capable of flying when the breath stops and the flesh of the body snaps off from the tree. But, I've seen far too much in my life since then in the last thirty years or so to deny that this is actually true. I've sat with many dying people and I've seen this with my own eyes.

Let me tell you a story. It's about a woman who had no faith and had come to the end of her life. In her mind, the world was a godless place. It was a cruel, dog-eat-dog jungle of selfishness and injustice and pain. This woman had had a very hard life, filled with struggle and poverty and tragedy. A grandchild's death, a daughter's suicide, emotional and sexual abuse in her own childhood, and the list went on.

From this difficult combination of circumstances, she'd managed to eke out an existence, but it was an existence where spirit played no part and life itself was like an accident bereft of any meaning or resonance. This belief system made her tough and sometimes cruel, but also extremely honest in a way that close-minded atheists can sometimes be extremely honest, believing in only what they see.

Once when this woman overheard her sister and son talking about their own spiritual lives, after she herself was already ill, she interrupted them by saying it must be nice to believe in something. I'll never forget that moment because this was my mother and I had never heard her express so much longing for knowledge of a spiritual nature. And, yet, belief was way beyond her. And so she was facing the end of her life with no sense of spirituality whatsoever.

Two weeks before she died, she asked me to come home to take care of her along with my younger sister. And even though it was terrible and shocking to see her with one-third of her body weight gone, as the days went by sitting at her bedside, we also had moments of extreme sweetness. The sicker she grew, the softer my cantankerous mother became. With her weakness came openness and vulnerability that she had never allowed before.

I remember sitting by the bed with her head in my hands, scratching her scalp which was itchy from the morphine and realizing that this was the closest, most intimate moment of our entire life together. I had never felt such love for her or fewer defenses around her heart. As death approached, a whole layer of darkness was lifted from my mother's spirit and it revealed a lightness that none of us had ever seen before. My little toddler nephews got into bed with her and held onto her and teased her and my mother, who was normally not to be touched, let them do whatever they wanted. She just surrendered to the moment as it was with a very peaceful look on her face.

Shortly before she died, she asked me and my sister if she was dying and my younger sister said told her, "To be honest, it doesn't look good, Mom." That's when she looked at us and said, "It's not that bad." Two days later she was gone.

Now for someone who didn't know my mother, it might sound like this was the morphine talking, but it wasn't. The drug made her body more comfortable. But what lightened her spirit and what freed her at the end was love. My isolated mother had come out of hiding. She had finally truly let us in with this acceptance and openness. A keen awareness of a different way of being, when there's nothing to defend and no time to waste; when all you want to do is connect, when the old grudges and habits fall away and you're finally genuinely there with nothing – no expectations, no looking backward – standing between you and the moment that you're in.

This is as good a definition of spiritual awakesness as I know. And even though my mother never talked about god, she was visited by grace at the end of her life and the knowledge that death really isn't that bad.

Now, there's pain, of course, and periods of grief. There are emotional wounds that never quite heal, of course, because they aren't meant to. We're meant to continue loving those who are gone, and you can't do that without some pain. The same goes for the one who's dying. It's a bittersweet pain that has soul in it, too, gratitude, nostalgia and longing, but also lightness and freedom; although the body is gone, the departed can't be taken away as long as we continue to love them.

"Set me as a seal upon your heart for love is strong as death," it says in the Book of Solomon. Set me as a seal upon your heart for love is strong as death.

When we accept death as our daily companion, it only increases love. It increases lightness. It increases courage. We know ourselves as we truly are and can finally see ourselves in the proper perspective, very humbly, as guests in this mortal roadhouse. And when we see ourselves that way, it gives us wings, it gives us buoyancy.

The poet Emily Dickinson wrote about the thing with feathers that lifts us from darkness when we're most lost. Dickinson called it hope. But what did she mean by hope? I think she meant spirit. I think she meant the unexplainable lightness that exists at the core of who we are. With death, whether the thought of death, the contemplation of death invites us to liberate in order to experience freedom in this world before we're facing death.

"Hope is the thing with feathers," Dickinson wrote, "that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all." Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all.

Anyone who comes to enough hardship in his or her life knows that without this hope or spirit it's nearly impossible to survive. The body may live, but the soul will wither. Without some sense of transcendence, we lose a critical aspect of our own humanity, the sacred imagination which dreams us into existence and sustains us in times of trouble.

You could even say that imagination is the thing with feathers. But whatever you call it, the ability to open our minds and hearts in the face of mystery, rather than recoiling in fear and defeat is what comes to our rescue at the time of death, or any time we take a moment to remember who we are and where we're going.

How can we do this in our daily life? How can we reap the rewards of mortal awareness while we still have the time to enjoy them? I'd just like to give you a few suggestions, some of which I've combined with the teaching of Stephen Levine, who was my first mentor on this path of death and the deathless.

Stephen was a fantastic teacher and if you don't know his work, I highly recommend his books, including *A Year to Live* and *Who Dies, Meetings at the Edge of Life and Death*. He has five or six classic books that if you're facing loss of any kind, I highly recommend that you immerse yourself as his books are so rich and so wise.

The first tip or the first thing we can do is catch up with your own life, catch up with your own life. Many people who are given a terminal diagnosis, say they finally caught up with their lives in the nick of time. Catching up with our lives means taking stock of who we are and what's true for us, where we're blocked, where we're dishonest, what wants to be created or what wants to be let go of – in other words, actually being present. Catching up with our lives means telling the truth, which we do so rarely, without fear or self-censorship.

After the shock and grief wear off, many people who've been told they may die soon, including myself thirty years ago, decide they're going to use the time that's left to them to live more fully than they have before.

There's a wonderful story about the novelist Dostoyevsky, who was condemned to be executed along with several other people but reprieved at the last moment. He literally had the smock of execution on and was swept away from gallows when they suddenly gave him the reprieve. He was a free man all of a sudden and one of the fellows in the line with him actually went crazy from the shock.

But Dostoyevsky's own craziness took a different form. He decided to survive brightened, being vivified by his touch with death. He became obsessed with the image of one man executed and the other reprieved and he made a lifelong commitment not to waste what we had learned and to conduct his life in terms of, as he put it, what the condemned know.

He wrote in a letter to his brother, "When I turned back to look at the past, I think how much time has been wasted. Life is a gift. Each minute could be an eternity of bliss. My old head has been cut from my shoulders, but my heart has left me. And the same flesh and blood which likewise can suffer and desire and remember, *on voit le soleil*. I see the sun."

Isn't that beautiful? The same flesh and blood which likewise can suffer and desire and remember, *on voit le soleil*. The sun is the awareness of life's brevity and the brightness that comes with spiritual freedom and insight.

The next tip is to practice dying – practice dying. As Stephen says, "When a journey is in our future, it's never too early to check out the travel guides, customs, and language spoken in the land where you'll be traveling." As Kabir, the poet, put it, "What we call salvation belongs to the time before death. If you don't break your ropes while you're alive, do you think the ghosts will do it for you afterwards?"

Stephen tells the story of a person who was given a one-year diagnosis and felt something first tightening and then releasing in their gut. But then somehow after this tightening, after the fear, an unexpected sense of spaciousness arose. One person said, "As what the doctor told me really sank in, I could feel something very heavy begin to lift. I felt as though I was free to live my life at last, bizarrely like life never felt so safe. Maybe I'm crazy, but I felt more freedom and love than I had in some time. In fact, I felt as though my life wasn't being taken away but as though it had been given back to me. I was going to die and my life was completely my own."

We discover that exploring the fear of death, actually the fear of life, that needs to be investigated first. And you can do this by starting with five-pound weights. Notice where your fears arise. Notice where impermanence shows up and freaks you out. Just notice – the falling of leaves, changes in relationships, passing of experiences that are precious to you. Being aware of the bittersweet awareness of impermanence actually deepens the heart and enriches the soul. It makes life more vibrant and more to be treasured.

The next tip is to get to know the witness. The witness, as most of you probably know, is that aspect of consciousness that can observe itself, what psychologists call meta-cognition. And that aspect of consciousness that can observe itself, that awareness, is the part of us that doesn't die. To become familiar with that part of us that does not die, that isn't bound by the body or the typical circumstances of our lives, we need to develop some kind of contemplative practice, whether it's self-inquiry or writing, or prayer, meditation. It's imperative that we acquaint ourselves with our own timeless nature in order to lessen the fear of death.

I highly recommend non-dual teachings for cultivating the awareness of the witness. You can have a look at Eckhart Tolle, Rupert Spira, or Gangaji, or Jean Kline, or Ramana Maharshi.

These are all excellent teachers who are all communicating the perennial philosophy and how we stabilize ourselves in the I, in the consciousness that doesn't die. If you go to the Resource Library on The Seekers Forum dot com, you'll find many specific titles and recommendations for non-dual teachers, as well as books on death and dying.

The next point is to do a life review. Many folks at the end of their lives describe seeing their lives flash before their eyes. We don't need to wait until the end to review our lives and draw lessons from what we've learned. That's why *Writing for Legacy* like we're going to be doing in this upcoming Shift class can be so useful, to get a sense of the journey that we have been on, to be able to look at the journey that we've been on in black and white. What mattered, what didn't matter, what did you learn, what needs learning. Try keeping a life journal. This may be the same as any journal, but it is focused on the life review that I'm talking about where you recall key moments from your life and what they have meant to you.

And finally there is a wonderful practice called soft belly meditation that Stephen Levine recommends and that has helped me through many, many dark nights of the body and soul. Stephen has a copy of this meditation in his book *A Year to Live*, which I highly recommend. I'd like to do this meditation together now.

Please just gently whenever you're ready, close your eyes. Take a couple of deep breaths in and out through the nostrils. As you breathe in, feel the body, feel the body expanding and contracting with each breath. Focus on the rising and the falling of the abdomen. Let awareness receive the beginning, middle, and end of each in breath, of each out breath, expanding and contracting the belly.

Note the constantly changing flow of sensation in each exhalation and in each inhalation and begin to soften all around these sensations. Let the breath breathe itself in a softening belly. Soften the belly to receive the breath, to receive sensation, to experience life in the body. Soften the muscles that have held the fear for so long. Soften the tissue, the blood vessels, the flesh. Let go of the holding of a lifetime, letting go into soft belly, merciful belly. Soften the grief, the distrust, the anger held so hard in the belly. Levels and levels of softening, levels and levels of letting go.

Moment to moment allow each breath its full expression in soft belly. Let go of the hardness. Let it float in something softer and kinder. Let thoughts come and let them go, floating like bubbles in the spaciousness of soft belly, holding to nothing, softening, softening. Let the healing in. Let the pain go. Have mercy on yourself. Soften the belly. Open the passageway to the heart. In soft belly there is room to be born at last and room to die when the moment comes.

In soft belly is the vast spaciousness in which to heal, in which to discover our unbounded nature. Letting go into the softness, fear floats in the gentle vastness we call the heart. Soft belly is the practice that accompanies us throughout the day and finds us at day's end still alive and well.

Whenever you're ready, open your eyes and come into the room in soft focus. That's a wonderful practice to do when you're under duress, whether it's physical duress or any other

kind of duress to realize how we clench the belly, how we hold our fear there, how we attempt to control life with this rock-hard belly of ours and how when we begin to release control, the body softens, allows air into the lungs, into the tissues, into the cells and actually refreshes us and gives us more life.

I highly recommend doing this soft belly meditation which is in Stephen's book. I'm sure you can even get it online if you'd like to. It's extremely helpful and quite simple, as well as useful.

That's what I wanted to say to you today about keeping the bird on your shoulder and beginning to attain freedom from the fear of dying.