

What Happens After Death: Navigating the Bardos

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By Roger Woolger Ph.D.

With the heavenly eye, purified
and beyond range of human vision,
I saw how beings vanish
and come to be again.
I saw high and low,
brilliant and insignificant,
and how each attained,
according to his karma,
a favorable or painful rebirth
Gautama Buddha

Every action takes a form in the invisible world
Which may be different from how you thought
It would appear. A crime is committed
and a gallows begins to be built.
Jalaludin Rumi

What is it like to be conscious of a “higher” or “after-” world? What happens when we find ourselves there in a regression? Is it like the state of deep meditation or prayer? How does it compare to a near death experience? These are the kinds of questions I shall attempt to answer in this and the following chapter.

Past Life Memories of Dying and Near Death Experiences

From the many cases therapists have seen over the last thirty years there seems little doubt that much unfinished business from one lifetime is carried over into another by means of the subtle body or energy body. Instead of our psychic patterns being extinguished at death they continue to be run in the consciousness of the transitioning personality, remaining still very much alive in the after-death state that Tibetan Buddhists call a *bardo* (which means “in-between”) and consequently still very much alive in the unconscious mind of that person today. We might well say, following recent developments in transpersonal psychology, that this *bardo* reality in between lives is very much a realm of the human unconscious, one that deserves nevertheless to be called a “higher” realm.

The experience of being in a higher reality is also familiar to those who meditate regularly; for many it is experienced as a kind of luminous out-of-body experience. They find themselves in the room sitting, but somehow they are also in a totally “other” place. Similar out of body visions often occur when individuals have a spontaneous past life memory; they may see their body as a warrior slain on a battlefield and know that they have died, for instance. In this kind of state the disembodied consciousness from the past life may find itself ruminating on its lost life, longing for its loved ones, blaming itself for failure and more. But most apparent of all in these experiences, to die very clearly entails leaving the body and going to some “other” or “higher” realm.

This kind of conscious post-mortem experience has very precise parallels too among the thousands of reports we now have on record of what are called “near death experiences” (NDEs). NDE’s most commonly involve people who have died clinically in an operating room, or in a car accident or catastrophe, and yet have been brought back, almost miraculously, to life. They too have reported very similar phenomena to those we are describing here: a sense of being outside their body, looking down on it, realizing they may be dead and then floating up to some higher realm where they spontaneously meet with spirit guides or beings of light or dead relatives. They too find themselves looking back over their lifetime and making some kind of review about it.

NDEs are obviously unplanned and therefore unguided, but they too reproduce exactly the same kinds of descriptions of what it is like to die as individuals have “remembered” during regressions to a previous life. In fact, many of the people who have reported these different states of “afterlife” awareness in regression know little or nothing of the literature of near death experience. So they do not on first glance seem to be copying or unconsciously reproducing an experience they’ve heard about. Afterlife experiences of ancestors, guides, life reviews

etc seem in fact to be just as spontaneous during a past life regression as they are for those who experience them during a near death experience.

The Intermediate or Bardo Realm

During regression sessions, there are of course many spontaneous images and experiences that arise, but the therapist or guide very often has a strong idea from having taken others through these afterlife stages or realms many, many times of where the subject is traveling in their journey. A past life therapist learns to become a kind of shamanic guide between different realities as he or she works. And like any travel guide he or she knows where to take short cuts and how to get quickly out of dead ends or stuck places. In fact there are so many similarities between guided and unguided journeys through these realms beyond death and out of the body that it is totally appropriate to talk of a common psycho-spiritual territory.

I'm therefore going to call the state after death simply *the bardo realm*. Scholars of Tibetan Buddhism know that there are many bardos or in-between states and that more correctly the one we're referring to here is called the bardo of becoming. This is actually a the kind of waiting place or time between lifetimes, when one life is finished and your consciousness may be preparing for another. Later on I will offer ways to refine this preliminary picture of the bardo reality to include several levels of conscious awareness, but for moment we want to emphasize the fundamental difference between the two worlds, that of the here and now and that of the world beyond death.

The Greek philosopher Plato, who was probably the last great spiritual bridge between East and West, called these two worlds *the world of being* (the physical) and *the world of becoming* (the "other" reality). In the ancient spiritual literature of India, one of the Hindu Upanishads gives us this simple but profound description of the relationship between the two worlds or realms. The ancient sage Yagnavalkya says

There are two states for man. The state in this world and the state in the next. There is also a third state. The state intermediate between these two, which can be likened to dream. While in the intermediate state, a man experiences both the other states that in this world and that in the next. And the manner thereof is as follows.

When he dies, he lives only in the subtle body on which are left the impressions of his past deeds, and of these impressions [*samskaras*] he is aware, illumined as they are by the light of the Self. The pure light of the Self affords him light. Thus it is that in the intermediate state he experiences the first state, that of life in the world.

Again, while in the intermediate state he foresees both the evils and blessings that will yet come to him as they are determined by his conduct good and bad upon the earth and by the character in which this conduct has resulted.

(Brihadaranyaka Upanishad)

The Buddha, in a state of greatly expanded higher consciousness, was similarly able to see with his "heavenly eye" (i.e. the light of the Self), both the lives and deaths of those who had been on the earth, and those who were in the intermediary realm about to return.

There is something very extraordinary about this intermediary state. Those who write about it and report it often talk about something like the light of the Self, the heavenly eye, higher consciousness, inner senses, higher mind, knowing, light. It's as though when we are in this state, which the Upanishad likens to a dream, we have a different set of senses, the strongest being that of vision. But we may also find there is spiritual or higher hearing and there is even the senses of touch, taste and smell. So the subtle body is not just an energy formation. It has its organs of perception. We might call them visionary organs. These organs, with their ability to perceive clearly belong to the higher dimension or perspective we wrote about in Chapter 3. They enable us to understand the greater meaning of what connects our life on earth with the our spiritual life in the intermediary realm or bardo state. This is an extraordinary accomplishment and one that is open to all of us when we undergo regression or when we practice some form of focused awareness or meditation.

Sogyal Rinpoche says very strikingly in his illuminating commentary on the *Tibetan Book(s) of the Dead*, that "the still revolutionary insight of Buddhism is that life and death are in the mind and nowhere else." What this means is that the fact of leaving the body and dying is not, in the end, a physical event at all. Physical events are only mental illusions; while we are in a body we feel as if we had a body. We feel through the physical senses.

But when we are no longer in a body, we still have consciousness and we are directly connected by memory to that state when we were still in a body. So it is demonstrably possible to have an overview in this higher state of both life in this world and life in the beyond.

It would be belittling this consciousness to call it simply conscience or self-awareness, because it is far more than that. It is a higher awareness, which according to Sogyal's statement, allows us to see that life and death, birth and death are a continuous event and that the continuity is precisely our consciousness. As we do more regression work, use the exercises in this book, practice meditation, even as we reflect on the stories told here, we start to develop the expanded awareness that belongs to this "other" reality and it enables us to become deeply aware of our own complexes as the root patterns or *samskaras* of our very souls. They start to become so transparent to us that we find we have an unparalleled opportunity to let go of them and by doing so to transform the energy locked up in them. This, to my mind, is the supreme value of past life regression.

Sogyal Rinpoche does not pretend that this awareness is especially easy or automatic after death. He is careful to point out that most of the time, when the consciousness of the departing personality reaches the bardo or the other realm, it is more often than not in a state of confusion. Past life regression work would totally agree with this. The number of souls who die having clearly let go of the confusion, the rage, all the feelings, all the unfinished business we talked about in earlier chapters, is relatively few. The way that Sogyal puts it is that *the mental body, without a physical body to ground it, is vibrating or chasing itself ten times faster than it did when it was on the earth*. The number ten, as Sogyal admits, is a vibrational analogy, a metaphor that is not to be taken literally. But as such it does give us an idea of how fast things move when we are in the spirit world. It also means that if we accept the speed at which a complex moves unconsciously, it is also possible to change this pattern with equal rapidity.

The following example of a guided therapeutic regression session from my casebooks demonstrates how easy it is to get stuck in the anguish and confusion that comes with an unwanted and sudden death in a past life. It also shows the debilitating effects of unfinished business, the karmic patterns or *samskaras* that unfortunately get replayed unconsciously in our present lives. It is only with the intervention of a detached helper that new consciousness arises and the healing energies of the higher or bardo planes come into play.

Marion's Story: the Massacre by the River.

Marion was an African-American who suffered from anxiety attacks and depressions. She had always been nervous about and over-protective of her children. Even when they had grown up and left home she still fretted about them. She tended to be at her most anxious when someone left her home or was late coming to visit. "Something dreadful's happened to them" she would say—though nothing ever did.

In our regression session she found herself as a young African boy who has gone into the forest with his father to hunt, leaving their small tribal settlement by the river for the day. On returning they hear gunfire and rush to the village, only to see bleeding corpses everywhere and white soldiers on a hideous killing rampage. The boy rushes ahead of his father to their family hut only to see the dead bodies of his mother and his two younger siblings bloody on the ground. Terrified he turns to see a soldier coming towards him. He is grabbed and his throat cut before he do anything. His dying emotions are a terrible mixture of anguish, grief and fear; he dies thinking: "we should never have left the family alone".

For a while in the bardo Marion discharges huge amounts of grief as she re-runs the horrible images of the boy's beloved mother and his dead brother and sister lying on the ground. Her body still trembles with the young boy's terror from when he is grabbed by the soldier. For a while she sobs uncontrollably "I should never have left them! How could I do that?"

"Where are you now? I ask her. I'm still there, looking at the bodies. I just can't believe it!" More sobbing ensues. I ask her how long she stays there. "Many days" she says, as the African boy, "but now the vultures have almost finished with them. It's horrible"

"What happens?" "I'm leaving now. I'm floating above, high above the village. But I can't stop thinking about what we did, how foolish we were" "Are you alone?" I ask. "I don't notice anyone. All I can think about is how we let them die. It's all our fault."

“It’s all over now. Be aware of that,” I say to her. “I’m never gonna forget. That must never happen again,” the young boy says.

To break out of the negative self-absorption of his/her guilt I say: “You’re not in a body now. Nor are they. Look around you? Who do you see?”

She breaks into tears again. “It’s my father. He’s reaching out to me. He’s telling me not to worry. There was nothing we could have done. We were totally outnumbered. It’s hard to hear him, but then he beckons me. “Look,” he says, “They’re all here!” And they are! My mother and the little ones. They are all shining and beautiful, their faces are radiant. They seem to know it’s over better than I do. “You’re never going to lose us” they say and suddenly I recognize them: *it’s my three children from this life!*. And at once I see what my anxiety has always been about and why I got so depressed when they one by one left home.

In this moving psychodrama I give Marion a big cushion to hold. She asks for another one as she hugs all the spirits of the lost family, caught between laughter and tears. “They’re telling me I’m not to blame, I’m not to blame!” The whole village is there. They’re having a big dance around the fire. It’s like they’re welcoming me home. And so they were!

Where the Soul Goes After Death

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause.
Shakespeare *Hamlet*

What I have observed after conducting or observing many, many regressions is that there are roughly three places that the departing spirit or soul will go as it leaves the body. There are therefore broadly speaking three states of evolution or devolution for the departing spirit :

Earthbound spirits: the departing spirit may stay on the earth, either fixed or wandering;

Unfinished or Troubled spirits: the spirit may go to a higher realm or bardo but in a state of confusion still obsessed with the life just departed; in most cases this confusion does not clear and is re-cycled into a subsequent re-birth;

Completed or Enlightened spirits: the spirit may be fully freed from the dross of earthly memories and go peacefully to an even “higher” level of bardo or pure realm of light.

The greater part of the work I do as a therapist working with past lives naturally concerns the first two of these categories, simply because it is the traumatic and tragic stories, with their fears, failures and stuckness that most clearly show us exactly where and how deep karmic patterns were established and how they are troubling us still today as unconscious patterns or complexes. We certainly meet many moving cases of transition in the third category of *Completed or Enlightened Spirits* but as a rule they tend to emerge only after much preliminary work has been done in clearing the more difficult past lives, after working, as the shamans would say, with the lost parts of the soul. Examples of the third type of transition will given in the next chapter.

1 Earthbound Spirits

Earthbound spirits account for roughly a third of the past life death scenarios I and my colleagues have encountered. Here the spirit leaves the body at death, but does not leave the earth at all. It may literally hang around the dead body, cling to it, sometimes try to get back into it. This is frequently encountered in regressions with people who have past life memories of being killed suddenly or violently, the worst cases being bombing attacks or being killed from behind or in one’s sleep. When a death is either extremely sudden or unperceived like this the person dying does not realize that they are in fact dead.

The confused departing spirit is left running whatever predominant mental tape was operating at the moment of death; not surprisingly such spirits will continue to reiterate the same thoughts after death *as if it still had a body*. “I’ve got to find my buddy,” says the soldier on the battle field who is blown up with a bomb. “I’ve got to find my child,” says the mother who is killed when separated from her child in the confusion of an attack on her village. “I’ll get him for killing me” says the spirit of the woman murdered by her jealous husband. And so her spirit clings to the house she had lived in, an angry, restless presence unaware that she is dead.

Many spirits like this literally wander. They may be looking for someone on the earth that they were previously deeply or passionately attached to. This is why in some traditions they are called wandering or hungry ghosts. Indeed there are also *thirsty* ghosts, those spirits whose attachment to the earth is the result of heavy alcohol or drug consumption which leaves that same craving for the substance that the person enjoyed so much when in body. So there are spirits of addicted beings that hover around the earth, sometimes around restaurants or bars!

From the perspective of working in the bardo it is actually very easy to see how ghosts “haunt” people on earth. It is not that they necessarily have any malevolent intent—some do, but usually it will be for someone also long dead—but more commonly it is the case that in their confusion they are continuing to do the things most strongly on their minds just before they died. Unfortunately since there is no body to carry out the task they are caught in a kind of endless repeating psychic tape loop.

When we encounter a part of the soul that is lost like this during regression work we can usually see very precisely how the person died and quickly ascertain what it is they’re still looking for. We can even talk to the spirit and say, “are you aware that this body is dead and you can’t get back into it?” Or, to the spirit of a soldier still wandering a battlefield: “your body is dead now and so are your comrades’ bodies. It’s no use looking for your comrades here. They’ve moved on”. Often the departing consciousness is immediately enlightened by such a question. “Oh, it’s no use for me trying to get back into this body. There’s nothing I can do with it.” At that point the soldier’s spirit might start to journey upwards and leave this lower realm. Or else we may help the spirit of a bereaved mother see that the spirits of her children are now in a higher realm and have actually fully recovered from the trauma of sudden death—children actually die much more easily than adults in most cases, because there is less mental or ego attachment (or what Freud would call “reality sense”)

Attached Spirits. Another reason why a spirit remains attached to the earth, is that it may come from a traditional or tribal culture, where there are extremely important and revered rituals for burial or cremation that actually are designed to allow the soul to complete and separate from its earthly experiences. Thus if a certain person dies prematurely or in situations where there is no proper burial given to his or her body—after a battle, say--their spirit may hang around the place of death wanting something done, waiting for the funeral to happen, and unhappy that it never happens. Like the others we have described this kind of spirit also becomes what we call a ghost, a fragment of the total soul that hasn’t been able to ascend yet either to the realms of the ancestors or to higher realms of spirit where it may ultimately be reintegrated with its totality.

Often a newly dead spirit stays attached to a place like a temple or a forest or sometimes it attaches to a person that it knew on the earth as a friend or helper. Sometimes a spirit simply wants solace, to be taken care of. This is the case of the spirits of young children. When young children die panic stricken in bombings, massacres and similar disasters, they most frequently don’t know where their mother is so they look for their mother on the earth plane. Often the spirit of such a child will cling to a person who looks friendly or motherly. It may go inside or attach to their energy field.

Many people walking around today, on this earth, do not know that they have spirits attached to them that they picked up either in hospitals, or in cemeteries, and sometimes from touristic visits to battlefields or old castles! The lost spirits see us as a sympathetic kind of energy which they can easily hook into. If we become aware of them there are easy ways to release them, in very much the same way that we help a soul fragment in regression move on to a higher awareness. In fact, the strategy that works best in helping any spirit or soul fragment that is in any way earthbound is simply to talk him or her and quietly remind them that their life is over and that they don’t need to stay on the earth any longer.

Where there has been mass killing on battlefields, or by bombings or earthquakes there will also be masses of spirits that are still confusedly attached to the earth. A person in regression may find he or she was one of many

who died together. A striking aspect of this work is that as well as releasing the soul fragment of the person being regressed we can also release whole groups of earthbound spirits who are similarly stuck. For instance, we may begin to release a soldier who was unable to leave his post during a battle and who is still miserable because he let down his buddies. In releasing him we ask him to talk to his buddies and tell them too that it is all over. In doing so there is a mass lifting off from this particular battlefield followed often by a joyful reunion in the higher planes.

This then is the first bardo level. It has elements of a hell, though it's not hellish in the traditional sense of a place of punishment; it is more correctly seen as a state where the soul is lost or out of place and thus needs conscious intervention to help him or her move on, either towards reintegration or rebirth.

2 Unfinished or Troubled Spirits

My soul, there is a country far beyond the stars...
Henry Vaughan

The most common regression experience of dying in a past life is where a person finds themselves leaving their body and simply floating upwards. This is true of both peaceful and violent deaths. Sometimes the departed spirit hovers over their body taking in that they have died and that it is all over; sometimes they may stay looking down over their body until it is buried or cremated then leave. What distinguishes this from the first category of spirits I called "earthbound" is that *here there is conscious awareness that one is dead*. This clearly frees the soul to travel "upwards" in to the higher dimensions of the bardo. This transition can actually be quite beautiful; one sees the earth from above, is shown a panoramic visionary overview of one's life and is sometimes shown the progress of those loved ones left on earth. Eventually there is a feeling of having arrived in another dimension, another realm.

But if the circumstances of death have been at all difficult or the person was emotionally disturbed in any way before they died—resentful, vengeful, guilty, lonely, or fearful, for instance—it is the intensity of those emotions and corresponding thoughts that will go with them, obscuring the potentially uplifting and reassuring aspects of the transition. In his well known commentary and translation of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* W. Y. Evans-Wentz tells us that "Buddhists and Hindus alike believe that the last thought at the moment of death determines the character of the next incarnation". The great spiritualist and visionary Emmanuel Swedenborg, who visited the bardo realms many times in his visionary journeys, declared something very similar in his treatise on *The World of Spirits*:

After death, a person is engaged in every sense, memory, thought and affection he was engaged in, in the world: he leaves nothing behind except his earthly body.

This principle is of paramount importance for our understanding of the death transition as it occurs in not only our past lives but also as it is anticipated in our present lives. It lies at the very heart of what we have discovered from regression work about "unfinished business"; *any psychological state or complex that is unresolved in one lifetime will simply continue in the bardo and be reprogrammed into the unconscious mind in a future incarnation-- until it is brought to conscious awareness and altered*

Once we understand this principle, however, we are in a strong position to consciously break the recycling of negative and debilitating psychological patterns. And in fact, nowhere are these old repetitive scripts to be found so clearly running as old repetitive scripts as in the bardo. Working in the bardo state is therefore a particularly direct and effective way to clear these patterns or *samskaras*.

But this is not always so easy. Contrary to the rather simplistic pictures of the after-death state derived from popular NDE literature and superficial regression experiences, it is simply not true that there is an automatic "life review" after death when the Higher Self explains the "meaning" of that life and helps us correct our mistakes. This only occurs in relatively peaceful deaths where the person is not mentally or emotionally obsessed by some unfinished issue.

The yoga teachings of India (see Chapter 6) have helped us understand very clearly that there are several layers of imprinting that can occur in the subtle or energy body both in life and at the time of death. These layers are

referred to as “sheaths”, bodies or fields of energy and have several bands which ascend in frequency from the more physical to the more spiritual. Sogyal, as we saw, talks of how the mental body resonates at a higher frequency in the disembodied state. This mental layer is only one of several sheaths or bodies.

The Four Subtle Energy Fields and How They Carry Past Life Unfinished Business

We have so far been using the picture of a number of subtle energy fields or bodies (see Chapter 6) because it helps us see with greater precision in a regression the exact nature of the different kinds of imprinting of “unfinished business” that can accumulate in a difficult past life death. It may be useful to recapitulate the fields or bodies I most frequently refer to and issues typically associated with them. So I like to distinguish:

the etheric or vital field: this carries the imprints of all physical wounds, injuries, mutilations, sicknesses or body pains not healed or resolved in a particular lifetime

the emotional field (or astral body): this carries vivid memories of all unresolved feeling states and emotional traumas from past lives, such as *fear* of physical violence, *anger* at injustice, *depression* about a hopeless situation, *grief* at deep loss, *guilt* at cruel behavior, *shame* from abuse or humiliation, *worthlessness* from having failed in some way.

The mental field or (mental body): this carries all obsessive and repetitive thoughts such as “I’ll get back at them” “No-one cares about me” “I should have done more” “There will never be enough”. It also carries thoughts that have a negative or self-limiting impact on the self, thoughts which often directly perpetuate states in the *emotional body*; for example; “I’m no good, I failed them” “They’re all watching me” “I’ll never trust anyone again.”

The spiritual field (or causal body): this refers to the subtle field that strictly speaking does not belong to the individual but through which outside spirit forces influence or penetrate the other subtle bodies. This is the level at which spirit attachments not belonging to the individual are commonly found. The *spiritual field* may hold energies that interact with any or all of the other bodies in various ways, for example: spirits of dead children from a past life may attach to the uterine area of the *etheric field*; spirits of lonely or unhappy beings we once knew may attach to grieving parts of the *emotional field*; wronged or abandoned spirits may attach to the *mental field* which still feels guilty about betraying them.

Unfinished Physical Imprints in the Etheric Field

The devastating effect of the imprinting of physical wounds from past lives on the subtle energy field at the etheric level cannot be overestimated. It is in many ways the most radical discovery to be made in past life regression work and one which, when fully understood, has the potential to revolutionize how we approach physical healing. Here are some examples of how healing does in fact take place when the past life wound is remembered and released in the etheric field.

- *Sophie* had suffered from migraine headaches for many years. During a workshop she recovered a past life as a young girl in a nineteenth century mining town out west. Her father, an alcoholic had frequently molested her and brutalized her. A strong character she had answered him back on one occasion and he had taken an iron bar and hit her over the head crushing her skull. As Sophie re-lived this horrible death she felt a brief “splitting headache” as the bar cracked open her skull. Then she was beyond the body looking down at it and at her now remorseful father. As she felt her spirit moving away from the dreadful scene she also reported a huge lifting of energy from around her head. From that day onwards her migraines never recurred

- *Peter* suffered from chronic stiff shoulders and a very tight back which no amount of chiropractic or bodywork ever seemed to relieve. In a regression to a pre-historic past life as a South American peasant he finds himself as a captive of an ancient priestly tribe who were using most of his tribe for slave labor to build pyramids. He experiences many years of hardship carrying extremely heavy basket loads of rocks up slopes under the eyes of harsh overseers who viciously lash any slaves who stumble or slow down in their work. One day his body gives out and he collapses, semi-paralyzed, with compacted spinal vertebrae, never to work again. Left to starve he dies bitterly and in terrible back and shoulder pain. After his spirit reaches the bardo he is able to look down and see his body and know that he no longer has to do such literally back-breaking work. After a healing psychodrama in which he simulates pushing a heavy weight off his back he reports that his shoulders and back feel totally different. The pains do not return.

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- *Carmella* was quite anxious about of the physical dimension of past life work when she saw it demonstrated in a workshop and asked me if it was safe since she was taking medication for a mild heart murmur. I told her not to worry and she underwent a regression that did indeed focus on her heart pain. She sees herself as a the bodyguard of a Scottish warlord. The loyal soldier perishes on a battlefield with a pike in his chest close to the heart region. In the bardo he realizes he can now leave his post near his master where he has remained stuck at the moment of his death. It is actually the mental imprint that has kept him attached: “I mustn’t leave my master unprotected” is the thought he dies with. From the bardo he is finally able to let it all go and, in a healing psychodrama, allow the pike to be pulled out. This results in a huge release of energy in the heart region followed by much emotional release. Some months after the workshop Carmella wrote to me to say that the heart murmur had stopped and she no longer needed medication. She wrote up her story in a local magazine.

When we are deeply regressed and have these memories in a fully embodied consciousness they are extraordinarily vivid. To recall the phantom pain of having a sword in one’s side, or of having one’s flesh burned, or one’s head cut off puts us in touch with deep traumatic residues that have actually persisted across lifetimes. Such physical memories, that have nothing to account for them in the current life, turn out to be embedded in what is literally the subtle energy field that surrounds and penetrates the physical body. (Some researchers have called this “cellular memory” but this metaphor unfortunately begs more questions than it actually answers) These old traumas, inherited though the subtle field, are consistently found in our work to re-imprint in the current body as rashes, birth marks weaknesses in certain limbs, organic problems such as a weak bladder, a weak heart and so on.

Healing of physical/etheric trauma takes place in the bardo though a combination of detachment from the old scene—knowing that it is over, deciding to let go—and calling upon a variety of spiritual or imaginal strategies to re-organize the subtle body itself. In the cases of Peter and Carmella a psychodrama of having the heavy load removed or the pike pulled out transformed the frozen residue of pain for both of them; it was like erasing an old program or tape that had been running in their unconscious minds and bodies.

Sometimes people who die severely wounded in a past life death find themselves conducted by spirit helpers in the bardo realm to a spiritual hospital where they receive various forms of healing, often entailing light. Sometimes spirit animals will come to suck out poison, clean a wound or strengthen an area of the subtle body by literally lending some of their energy to it. Such kinds of healing are well known in shamanism.

It is also well known in shamanic initiatory visions that even when the subtle body is dismembered it can be re-constituted. In regression work in the bardo we have often helped replace severed heads, severed limbs, burnt skin or helped close gasping wounds using transfusions of light, ministered by spirit healers and spirit animals. It would be impossible to overestimate the power of the spiritual imagination to heal in these higher realms.

Unfinished Thoughts and Feelings and The Scars They Leave

The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to.
Shakespeare *Hamlet*

When someone dies suddenly or prematurely they are inevitably going to have many conflicting and unresolved feelings and thoughts at the time of their death. Whether or not there are physical traumas there is usually no escaping deep grief, say, at the loss of children or loved ones: so many of the stories we meet are fraught with the human tragedies of abandonment, betrayal and exile. There may be rage at the injustice of it all, even strong vows to avenge. Or we may die ashamed and humiliated following some punishment or banishment. Or else we may be a powerful person such as a leader or chieftan who has failed his or her followers and feels so responsible for the suffering and death of others, that he or she dies consumed with guilt.

All such thoughts and feelings, if they are present with great intensity when we die, will follow us with absolutely no diminishment of intensity into the after-death realm of the first bardo. Hindu and Buddhist wisdom has always known this sad but fundamental fact of transition; Swedenborg re-discovered it for the west. So it is no surprise that much of the confusion that souls find themselves caught up in the bardo is generated primarily by their feeling states and negative thoughts. So powerful can these persistent feeling states be that they can completely blind the transiting soul to its new state of being. Many feel caught in the endless reiteration of their rage at their persecutors; others seem lost in a cloud of despair or depression; still others seem determined to hide, tormented by overwhelming guilty thoughts such as “I could have saved them”.

From thousands of regressions we have learned that the departed soul in distress needs very much the same kind of therapy it lacked on the earth—a chance to vent his or her feelings, to release the grief or shame, to ask for forgiveness or simply to find some spiritual reconnection with that which has been lost. So the bardo becomes very much a place where we have the opportunity to generate simple spiritual psychodramas that allow either the cathartic release of feelings, or the possibility of reconciliation with those we had conflict with on earth, or else reunion with those we have been separated from. Here to end is a case that shows again the complexity of the feeling states and negative thoughts we can encounter in the bardos and how they can be resolved through simple psychodrama, reflection and what in the old spiritual traditions used to be called *metanoia*, which is to say, a change of heart.

Juan’s Story: the Boy who was Hanged for Stealing Bread

Juan was a social worker who consulted me because he suffered from what we sometimes call “performance anxiety”—he hated to speak out in groups or in public. The most challenging thing for him was to give reports about his social work cases in front of a group of peers. He would always be terrified of them ridiculing him, criticizing him behind his back. He was convinced that he would make some terrible mistake in front of them—although nothing remotely like this had ever happened

We started his regression using the phrase most loaded for him; “I’m going to make a mistake. I’ll get it wrong.” As he lay on the mat his words quickly became “I’ve made mistake. I’ve done something wrong. I’m going to die!” His whole body had become rigid and his hands spontaneously went behind his back. “What’s happening? Where are you?” I ask.

“They’re all looking at me. It’s awful. I’m so ashamed. I’ve done something they tell me is wrong” “What did you do?” I ask. “I’ve stolen. It was bread. I was starving. And now I’m going to die.”

He is a 10 year old boy in a medieval European town who has been caught for stealing and been dragged before a magistrate. Condemned to be hanged he is being marched through the street and the crown are jeering at him, though he hangs his head in shame. As he mounts the scaffold his body gets more and more tense. In a miniature psychodrama I gently suggest the hangman’s rope with a folded towel around his neck using absolutely no pressure. Suddenly he convulses, his back arching. He chokes, momentarily goes quite blue and than falls back on the mat quite limp. Then the tears come—and the rage! “How could they do that! I never hurt anyone. There was never any work. No-one gave a damn about us on the street. I hate them! I hate them!” “See them all” I instruct him. “I see that pompous, hypocritical judge! You disgusting, heartless pig! And the burgers—so fat and comfortable in their furs and finery. What did they ever care!”

I let him rage for a while, knowing that this sense of injustice was buried beneath all the fear at the hanging and all the humiliation. “Are they all like that?” I ask. “No, not at all. Many of the townspeople know me and like

me. They're telling me it was nothing! It's just the rich protecting their interests. *They* don't blame me. Life isn't fair! The rich rob and steal with impunity.

“The ordinary people are all gathering round me now in the spirit world. I feel good with them. They actually admire me, how I survived for so long on the streets; I was orphaned it seems. No wonder I chose social work as a profession today!” They're telling me I must speak out against social ills, that I should be proud of my work. I feel much stronger now. Phew, to think I was carrying all that.” He feels his neck. “This has always been stiff,” he says, “and I hate polo necked sweaters and ties!” I tighten the towel around his neck a little. “Pull it off” I say. He does so, firmly. “Now your neck is free,” I say. “Wow, that feels different,” he says.

Juan called me some time later to say all his anxiety at public presentations had gone—and that guess what? He had been asked to give talks at a local youth facility and had actually enjoyed it!

In both these past life stories the bardo or after-death is essentially a place to let go of the old emotional, mental and physical patterns. We used simple forms of psychodrama to encourage Marion and Juan to express their grief, their rage and their pain, encouraging them both to go beyond their fear to a place where they knew with great clarity and reassurance that the past was truly over. And much more than that, by connecting with the spirits of those they had known on the earth they broke old patterns and forged strong new ties which pulled them out of the repetitive isolation of their old suffering.

Below: William Blake. *Jacob's Ladder*