

Emotional, inspiring, unforgettable—such was a talk on Buddhism, textiles, and a philosophy of dying given by **Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick** last March 31 at the Graduate Center.

The professor of English at the Center—who has made public and written about her long experience with cancer, which was discovered to be incurable three years ago—offered a three-tiered presentation: as she talked, she showed slides from her recent travels through Asian countries; she also presented an installation of her fiber art, in the form of a dozen or so large stuffed figures hanging from the ceiling, clothed in different kinds of cloth, paper, felt, and *soie mariée*, in varying shades of indigo blue. Sedgwick did not talk about the slides, which were mostly of statues, prayer flags, and temples (I particularly remember a bronze deity wearing a pink cap, and five beautiful squares of green fabric flying against the sky), but rather let them drift by as she spoke.

The lecture connected her interest in fiber art with her deepening interest in Tibetan Buddhism—a “wild and woolly” strand of that religion, she says—and with her own experience of the “bardo of dying.” She noted how the experience of an alien, Eastern culture suddenly becoming very personal to her corresponds to her suddenly intimate relationship with her own mortality.

Sedgwick explained that the bardo (Tibetan *bar*—in between + *do*—suspended, thrown) is the space between contracting a terminal illness and death itself. Given the present state of medicine and the nature of certain illnesses like cancer and HIV, this space can be quite an extended one, as there are no “cures,” only early diagnoses. Sedgwick writes in a short handout for her talk that the bardo of dying (like other bardos, such as rebirth, falling asleep, or dreaming) is “electric with spiritual possibility as well as with pain and loss.”

The hanging figures Sedgwick created represent aspects of her experience in the

A BUDDHIST “ART OF DYING” (& DYEING)

In the Bardo with Eve Sedgwick

Maggie Nelson, a doctoral candidate in English at the Graduate Center, reports on a moving lecture by a renowned CUNY writer on literature, gender, and sexuality—and cancer patient.

bardo: “the disorienting and radically denuding bodily sense generated by medical imaging processes and illness itself” on the one hand, and “the material urges to dress, to ornament, to mend, to re-cover, and heal” on the other. She ranged widely, comparing Buddhist thought with critical theory, pedagogy, and psychoanalysis, pointing out how these are all different ways of knowing that can sometimes collapse into “things known.”

In talking about the forms of academia, Sedgwick related the habit of taking down others’ arguments with the need to cover up or call attention to the patchiness of our own. Further, she connected this habit with the larger problem of how, in the face of real dread, anxiety, and self-doubt,

we cast around frantically for identity.

Sedgwick spoke from a podium in the rear as we in the audience faced the screen. This increased the effect of her voice coming from a strangely suspended place and evoked a sense of meditation rather than scrutiny. The large stuffed bodies dangling in the room both obscured and framed one’s vision. When I tried to look at Sedgwick, for example, I would see her torso, but a translucent blue shawl hanging from one of the figures covered her face.

Latecomers bumped into the figures on their way to sit down. The effect was both comic and eerie, as the swinging figures seemed both alive and also lifeless, even lynched. This play between the animate/inanimate relates to the Buddhist

precept that all living creatures and objects—rocks, flowers—have souls, and that the supreme goal is enlightenment for ALL beings, not just humans.

I feel tempted to call Sedgwick’s discussion of her illness “brave,” but that word, often used to declare triumph over or denial of fear, doesn’t seem quite right. Is there a word for the kind of bravery that incorporates fear, vulnerability, and radical doubt? Perhaps the better word is “generous.”

Sedgwick reminded us that, in Buddhism, human being-ness is a privilege in that it is a good place from which to make spiritual progress. Throughout “In the Bardo” I was overwhelmed by her generosity in revealing what making use of this privilege might feel like. To conceive of death as a moment of “potent opportunity” demands a reorientation and retraining of our minds. As she points out, this practice prepares us for the moment of death, even if we suffer a more abrupt bardo—say, we are thrown through a car window and killed instantly.

Sedgwick’s emphasis is on how to respond in a crisis—how to develop a mode of being in the world in which kindness, open-mindedness, and liberation come naturally to us. Such a practice is, as she put it, “hard, chancy, and important.” The intention of “In the Bardo” is clearly stated: to celebrate “coming to loving terms with what’s transitory, mutable, even quite exposed and ruined, while growing better attuned to continuities of energy, idiom, and soul.”

At one point Sedgwick noted in passing that all the guidebooks to Asia she read forewarned travelers to be sure to give and receive gifts with both hands. Her lecture was given in such a spirit, and it was an honor to be present for it. I thank her with both hands. ♦

Several of Eve Sedgwick’s figural compositions in fiber hanging were installed in the common area of the English Program for her talk.

