

END OF LIFE ISSUES

UNDERSTANDING DEATH

“Death and Immortality” *Hermes*, December 1975

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The Soul is bound to the body by a conversion to the corporeal passions; and is again liberated by becoming impassive to the body.

That which Nature binds, Nature also dissolves; and that which the Soul binds, the Soul likewise dissolves. Nature, indeed, bound the body to the Soul; but the Soul binds herself to the body. Nature, therefore, liberates the body from the Soul; but the Soul must liberate herself from the body.

Hence there is a two-fold "death"; the one, indeed, universally known, in which the body is liberated from the Soul; but the other, peculiar to philosophers, in which the Soul liberates herself from the body. Nor does the one entirely follow the other.

Plotinus

In the *Bhagavad Gita* Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that he must meditate upon birth, death, sickness, decay and error. This particular strand in the *Bhagavad Gita* is central to Buddhist thought. It is not easy for us to put ourselves in the position of a Tibetan Buddhist, to whom meditation on death is not a morbid activity, reserved for a special period in one's life, a time of deep depression owing to the fear of imminent death. It is rather part of a process of meditation which is ceaseless. To meditate on death is to meditate on life. To ask any question that is significant about the fleeting experiences that come to the ego, bringing pain as well as what appears to be happiness, to understand any of these fleeting experiences, is impossible except in the context of the total continuum. It is indeed difficult for us to understand what it means to put death in its proper place and to consider it in a wider context....

If we wish to understand what is the kind of consciousness that we are going to preserve on the eve of death, or what perhaps may be the consciousness that we will experience soon after death, we must go back to the beginning. What do we remember about our consciousness as far back as possible, near the moment of birth? What conceivably could we have felt before we were born? Now these are questions that many people would find impossible to entertain, and yet the true philosopher, the man of meditation, the man who really wishes to see life as a whole, cannot shirk them....

This ancient Buddhist idea is not just a phrase. It is so important an aspect of this universe that Gandhi, who tried to resuscitate the teaching of Buddha, actually formulated a law. He declared that the willingness to kill is exactly in inverse proportion to the willingness to die. Some might think that there is truth in this statement, though formulated as a law it seems extravagant and pseudo-scientific. But not at all, when we grasp the idea of *tanha*, the desire for life. The greater the desire for life, the greater the craving for personal existence, the total identification of our consciousness with that which is fleeting and transitory and perishable and personal, the more intense our awareness of ourselves as separate from others, the greater is the impulse to survive, the Hobbesian fear of death which seems so crucial to all life and to all existence in society. The greater then becomes the violence, the willingness to kill, on the plane of thought or feeling as well as on the physical plane.

On the other hand, the person who does not feel so strongly, who has deliberately come to discern that this binding force which brought him into life is itself worthy of meditation and worthy of transcendence, such a man begins to loosen up this hold of his consciousness over his body and his material instruments. He then begins to see himself as others see him, as he sees a photograph of himself ten years ago, as in fact an illusory entity, a thing of no consequence or of no *more* consequence than *any* other thing. It is not necessary that he has to go from attachment to aversion. Aversion is itself a form of attachment. The man who denies loudly that he has any desire for life is deeply attached. It is not easy to master the process of getting beyond attachment and aversion, and seeing in its proper perspective the force of cohesion inherent in matter and in the forms of consciousness we consolidate. This force draws us into separative existence and engenders an ever-growing fear of death.

Death then serves simply as an opportunity to get away, temporarily, from the craving for personal existence. This force, although it seems so intense while it lasts, is still transitory. It is an interference with the pure vision of consciousness and therefore must come to an end. A great opportunity comes to each human being at the time of death. Either he sees the significance of what is happening and begins to take the first steps toward conscious immortality, *or* even after he has discarded the physical vesture – there are many universes and there are many vestures – he begins once again in a new form to live out his old attachments, to sublimate them, to refine and purify them. All his old loves may now become purer. They may become idealizations. But nonetheless he gets involved again in his continual craving for personal existence. And then of course his return to physical life becomes a natural thing, something involuntary to him, inevitable in nature.

Therefore we are told that if we want to understand what happens after death, we must first grasp "death consciousness." What is the state of consciousness that we possess just before we die? What is the mood in which we are prepared to receive this new experience, to enter this new world? The more we have a thirst for life, the more we assume that life is natural and death unnatural, the more we are terrified of the great world of the unknown, and the more we then put up a resistance to the natural opportunities for the freeing of consciousness that are available with the discarding of the mask of the physical body....

The crucial insight that we gain from Tibetan teaching is that immortality is not something to be achieved or won, not a prize to be awarded to a favoured few. Immortality is nothing but another aspect of mortality. Even now we either live immortally or live mortally. We either die every moment or we live and thirst, depending on whether we are focused upon the nirvanic or upon the samsaric aspect of embodied consciousness. If we are constantly able to sift the meaning of experiences and to see our formal vestures for what they are and pass from one plane of perception to another, then indeed it may be possible, when blessed with the vision of clear, pure light—the great vision of *sunyata*—to enter straightaway into that vesture which enables us to remain free from the compulsion of return to earthly life. But this cannot happen unless it flows naturally out of the line of life's meditation. It cannot happen all of a sudden. It is not some kind of special dispensation. It is itself a product of the working of Karma.