

9. DEATH

Living in ignorance, considering themselves wise and well-learned, the ignorant wander, confused, hither and thither, like the blind leading the blind. Deluded by the illusion of wealth, like children, they cannot see what lies beyond death. “There is only this world, there is no other”, they say, and wander from death to death. (*Katha Upanishad*)

The fact of death brutally confronts the human being with something that relativizes his life and puts an end to the carefree doings of his day-to-day activities. Nevertheless, in the majority of cases, it is ignored until it is close upon us. In the *Mahabharata*, to the question “What is the most astonishing thing in the world?” the wise Yudhishthira responds: “Day after day, countless people go to the abode of death, and yet those who remain alive believe themselves to be immortal.” And Sigmund Freud observed:

We have shown an unmistakable tendency to put death aside, to eliminate it from life. [...] We cannot, indeed, imagine our own death; whenever we try to do so we find that we survive ourselves as spectators. The school of psychoanalysis could thus assert that at bottom no one believes in his own death, which amounts to saying: in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his immortality.

Sogyal Rinpoche relates his astonishment upon seeing how the modern world deals with death:

When I first came to the West, I was shocked by the contrast between the attitudes to death I had been brought up with and those I now found. For all its technological achievements, modern western society has no real understanding of death or what happens in death or after death. [...] despite [Christian] teachings, modern society is largely a spiritual desert where the majority imagine that this life is all that there is. Without any real or authentic faith in an afterlife, most people live lives deprived of any ultimate meaning.

The cells making up the body, the plants and animals, the mountains and seas, the sun and the galaxies (and even, the Hindus would say, the universes and the gods): everything is born and dies without cease. Birth (the entry into time) and death (the exit) are necessary conditions of existence in this world.

Jean Servier echoes the universality of the tenacious belief in life after death:

In every civilization, the same affirmation is strikingly evident, without ever being undermined by the palpable evidence of death. [...] Doubts of this kind [regarding life after death] have never been voiced by any society or civilization. Ethnologists have never, apart from in the West at the end of the 20th century, recorded any people who believe that death is the end of the human adventure. And what is more, one must distinguish between the philosophy preached by certain intellectuals and the profound faith of the people, even when that faith is hidden and when that philosophy is not very self-assured.

In 1975 Raymond Moody surprised the world with his book *Life After Life*, in which he narrates the experiences of 100 people who had been declared clinically dead, yet returned to life and told of their experiences. This book changed the attitude of many with regard to death, and gave rise to the appearance of other similar works.

Those who were interviewed by Moody—as well as many others researched afterwards by other scientists—tell of experiences such as hearing a strange sound, the sensation of leaving the body and seeing one’s own body from outside, the impression of passing through a dark tunnel with a light at the end; the meeting with deceased loved ones (including those whose death was unknown to them), a luminous, spiritual being, an intense happiness, peace, and love, the retrospective vision of one’s own life and finally, after the discovery that it was not yet their moment to die (in general after arriving at a kind of final dividing line), a reluctant return to the body. In some cases, disagreeable experiences were also mentioned.

It is common amongst those who have passed through an NDE to say that they have never experienced such great peace as during that time. In a study by Dr. Jeffrey Long, 76.2% of those who had passed through an NDE experienced “incredible peace or pleasantness”. Likewise, the vast majority (74.4%) thought that they were “more conscious and awake than normal”; these people described their mental functioning as very lucid, and their sensations as much more vivid (for example, many have indicated that they had 360° vision). The sense of time and space was different, and they often affirm that what they experienced cannot be described in words. Those who have gone through an NDE firmly believe that it was a question of something entirely real—for some, it was more real than any other experience in their life, and at any rate it was very distinct from a dream—and that they had in fact visited the world beyond the grave.

Hundreds of articles on NDEs have been published, many in prestigious scientific and medical journals, which means they cannot be ignored. Many of the scientists and physicians—often skeptical at the outset—who have seriously researched the matter have become convinced that these are real experiences, albeit inexplicable within the usual parameters of medicine. Jeffrey Long sets forth nine points that confirm the existence of a life after death:

1. It is medically inexplicable to have a highly organized and lucid experience while unconscious or clinically dead.
2. NDErs may see and hear in the out-of-body state, and what they perceive is nearly always real.
3. NDEs occur during general anesthesia when no form of consciousness should be taking place.
4. NDEs take place among those who are blind, and these NDEs often include visual experiences.
5. A life review during the NDE accurately reflects real events in the NDEr’s life, even if those events have been forgotten.
6. Virtually all beings encountered during NDEs are deceased at the time of the NDE, and most are deceased relatives.
7. The striking similarity of content in NDEs among very young children and that of adults strongly suggests that the content of NDEs is not due to preexisting beliefs.
8. The remarkable consistency of NDEs around the world is evidence that NDEs are real events.
9. NDErs are transformed in many ways by their experience, often for life.

For Jeffrey Long, attempts to offer a physical explanation are doomed to failure, for

they are but efforts to salvage the materialist paradigm from being so manifestly cast into doubt:

Over twenty different “explanations” of near-death experience have been suggested by skeptics over the years. If there were one or even several “explanations” of NDE that were widely accepted as plausible by the skeptics, there would not be so many different “explanations”. The existence of so many “explanations” suggests that there are not any “explanations” of NDE that the skeptics agree on as plausible.

Raymond Moody, pioneer in this field of study, observes:

I have yet to find one [person] who hasn't had a very deep and positive transformation as a result of his experience. [...] All the cholars and clinicians I have talked to who have interviewed NDEers have come to the same conclusion: they are better people because of their experience.

Grossman wonders, in astonishment, why such a crucial discussion is systematically ignored:

The evidence for an afterlife is sufficiently strong and compelling that an unbiased person ought to conclude that materialism is a false theory. Yet the academy refuses to examine the evidence, and clings to materialism as if it were *a priori* true, instead of *a posteriori* false. [...] a failure that is especially perplexing when one considers the immense importance the question of an afterlife has for human beings. [...] The academic establishment is in the same position today as was the bishop who refused to look through Galileo's telescope. [...] There is much confusion on this point, because many people equate science with materialist metaphysics, and phenomena that fall outside the scope of such metaphysics, and hence cannot be explained in physical terms, are called “unscientific”.

Sam Parnia observes:

Arch-sceptics will always attack our work. I'm content with that. That's how science progresses. What is clear is that something profound is happening. The mind—the thing that is “you”—your “soul” if you will—carries on after conventional science says it should have drifted into nothingness.

The *Garuda Purana*:

Even as every one is watching, one leaves off everything and dies. [...] His riches recede from him in the house itself and his kinsmen turn away at the cremation grounds with friends. The fire consumes the body but the merit and demerit accompany him. The body is burnt by fire but the actions perpetrated by him keep his company.

We see that the only thing that accompanies man after death is his *dharma*, or conduct; what he has made of himself with his good or bad actions (*karma*). In the same way, in ancient Egypt it was believed that the only thing that remains with man are his deeds. According to Plato, the only thing we can take with us beyond the grave is our *paideia*, or “education”.

According to Sogyal Rinpoche:

We often wonder: “How will I be when I die?” The answer to that is that whatever state of mind we are in *now*, whatever kind of person we are *now*: that's what we

will be like at the moments of death, if we do not change. This is why it is so absolutely important to use this lifetime to purify our mind-stream, and so our basic being and character, while we can.

Is the one condemned to Hell tortured by demons? According to the interpretation of saints, it is their own passions that make them suffer. William Law says:

Whilst man indeed lives among the vanities of time, his covetousness, envy, pride and wrath may be in a tolerable state, may hold him to a mixture of peace and trouble; they may have at times their gratifications as well as their torments. But when death has put an end to the vanity of all earthly cheats, the soul that is not born again of the supernatural word and Spirit of God, must find itself unavoidably devoured or shut up in its own insatiable, unchangeable, self-tormenting covetousness, envy, pride and wrath.

For Frithjof Schuon,

Those who enter Hell are not those who have sinned accidentally, with their “husk”, so to speak, but those who have sinned substantially or with their “kernel”...

Only those go to Hell who, if God brought them forth, would do all they could to return; the perpetuity of Hell thus inheres less in the rigor of the Judgement than in the nature of the damned.

After death, what we are will be our world, once the great “inertia” of the body, which tremendously limits the world and attenuates both happiness and suffering, has been cast aside. We will be what we have achieved with our soul during our life on Earth. If we have filled it with light, our world will be luminous; if we have chosen darkness, fear, hate, and ignorance, our world will have those characteristics. Each one of us prepares during this life our world after death; a world that will be in harmony with the nature of our soul and for which we alone will be responsible. Thus it is said in the *Shatapatha Brahmana*: “Man is born in the *loka* [world] which he himself has created.”

The *Garuda Purana* says: “Two words: *mine* and *not mine* signify bondage and release. By *mine* the person is bound and by *not mine* he is released.” And Abu Said AbulKhayr: “There is no Hell but selfhood, no Paradise but selflessness.”

“If I die in a state of mortal sin I shall go to hell for all eternity.” Puzzling teachings and abominable, coming from a religion professing to represent on earth the God of love. [...] evil is by definition (in this attempt to state the problem) the transitory, the vanishing, the suffering in the process. It cannot in the nature of things coagulate into an eternal form—hell. To speak of eternal hell is (in this mode of thought) a contradiction. It would be the same as to speak of an eternal transitoriness or changefulness. But the eternal is by definition the unchanging.

Oriental traditions declare that all living beings will return, sooner or later, to their origin: the Divinity, the Absolute, whence they issued. Is there room for this possibility in monotheistic religions?

In the history of churches and Christian theologies there periodically arises,

disappears and once again arises the doctrine of the apocatastasis. “Universal salvation”; the “restitution of all things”, that is, humanity and all of creation, to its primordial state; the salvation of all beings, including demons and damned souls, was put forth by some Church Fathers.

The doctrine of the apocatastasis enjoys a certain rank in the tradition of Orthodox Christianity. According to Archbishop Kallistos Ware: “It is heretical to say that all must be saved, for this is to deny free will; but, it is legitimate to hope that all may be saved”.

In the words of Ramakrishna:

All will surely realize God. All will be liberated. It may be that some get their meal in the morning, some at noon, and some in the evening; but none will go without food. All, without exception, will certainly know their real Self.

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates says: “We recall an ancient tradition: the souls depart [to the next world] from here, and then again return and are born from the dead.”

Hinduism, Buddhism, and other oriental religions (Jainism, Sikhism, etc) believe in the transmigration of souls (*punarjanma*: born again, re-birth: in the West popularly known as “reincarnation”). This belief was, in a more or less explicit way, widespread throughout the ancient world. The Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans (at least in their educated versions), the Celts, Aztecs, Mayans and Incas, the tribes of America and West Africa, Australian aborigines and so on; all shared their own version of this belief.

There has been much speculation as to whether the transmigration of souls was something accepted by ancient Christianity; several Fathers of the Church and saints of the earliest Christian era seem to have defended this idea. ... Whether primitive Christianity defended the transmigration of souls or not, the Church distanced itself early on from the idea until in the year 325 it was condemned by the Council of Nicaea. Every religion, in conformity with its perspective, will emphasize different aspects, and this inevitably entails advantages and disadvantages.

Transmigration is upheld by various branches of Judaism. The Kabbalah accepts it, and clearly expounds upon it, for it considers that one terrestrial existence is insufficient to gain the necessary purification to achieve the ultimate goal: union with God. Isaac Luria goes into detail on the subject of transmigration (*gilgul*: cycle) in his teachings, and for Hasidism, a popular mystical way in Judaism, it is a fundamental idea. However, and in spite of its diffusion in mystical circles, this idea has been rejected and contested by many Jewish philosophers and teachers.

That—as in Hinduism and Buddhism—it is a question of something much more profound than just an individual “tourist excursion” through different beings (such as “reincarnation” is sometimes envisaged today) is evinced in interpretations such as this:

If Adam contained the entire soul of humanity, which is now diffused among the whole genus in innumerable codifications and individual appearances, all transmigrations of souls are in the latest resort only migrations of the one soul whose exile atones for its fall.

If there is survival after death, this is a fact of vital importance for our perception of existence, our values, our moral standards and our entire life on Earth. Instead of ignoring death and trying to avoid confronting it until there is no way out, we ought to consciously prepare ourselves to receive it. Consciousness of death results in a correct hierarchy with regard to the things that are important to us and a discernment between priorities and non-essential things.

According to the *Chandogya Upanishad*: “Now, verily, a man consists of will. As he wills in this world, so does he become when he has departed hence. Let him with this knowledge in mind form his will.”

For the sage, death is the culminating moment of life. As Saint Ambrose of Milan said: “The foolish are afraid of death as the greatest of evils, but wise men seek it as a rest after their toils and as the end of evils.” According to the Tibetan Buddhists, for the consummate yogi “death [...] is the moment of ultimate liberation—the crowning moment of their realization, and the consummation of their practice.”

To identify ourselves more and more with our deepest soul and liberate ourselves from the ties of the passional mind: this ought to be the primary task in our life. Buddha’s last words were: “All conditioned things are perishing. Strive diligently to attain the goal [nirvana]”.