
*In Vedanta it is natural to invite death
into spiritual practice.*

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Vedanta: Death and the Art of Dying

None of us can imagine ourselves ever ceasing to be. King Yudhishthira of ancient India when asked, "What is the greatest wonder in the whole world?" replied: "That we see people dying all around us and never think that we too will die." Even when we fall asleep, our sense of self persists throughout our dreams. And upon awaking from dreamless sleep, we know who we are as soon as our feet touch the floor. This "I" is the thread of continuity that runs throughout our lives, from birth to death.

Vedanta says that this "I" is but a faint reflection of our true nature, which is divine. Our divinity is the Atman — the higher Self — unborn and undying. Atman is one with God — Brahman, the existent reality which is pure consciousness. So if we cannot imagine ourselves to be nonexistent, it is because our essential nature is eternal, though we are unaware of it.

Most of us falsely identify ourselves with our little self, the ego, which blinds us to our eternal nature. Though fundamentally spiritual beings, we are deluded into thinking we are separate psycho-physical entities. From birth, the infant ego is falsely superimposed upon the Atman, pure Spirit. As we grow to adulthood, the ego inflates itself, reaching out more and more to identify itself with the body and mind. We say as a matter of course, "I am a man" or "I am a woman," "I am Hispanic" or "I am Caucasian," "I am standing" or "I am sitting," "I am happy" or "I am sad."

We extend the ego even further by claiming external objects and conditions as our own, such as "this car is mine" or "I am a Democrat." As superimpositions multiply, so does our ability to stretch the envelope of normalcy to include such fantastic claims as "we bombed Iraq," "I carry life insurance," or "I own a lot of property."

Though the ego continues to enlarge and identify itself with external objects of the universe, the inner Self remains utterly detached — the witness of all our actions. Yet, at the same time, this witness-Self makes possible all our mental activity by lending to the mind the reflected light of pure consciousness, without which our private illusions could not exist.

When we let go of our identification with the ego, we become liberated from the little self and exist in the Atman. But the further we become entrenched in an illusory reality of the ego, the greater are our chances of reincarnating from life to life. This is the law of karma and reincarnation, set forth in the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, the Brahma Sutras, and other Hindu scriptures. In the Gita (2.12–13), while preparing for war on Kurukshetra, the battlefield of life, Arjuna listens as his teacher, Lord Krishna, describes the law of reincarnation: "There was never a time when I did not exist," Krishna says, "nor you, nor any of these kings. Nor is there any future when we shall cease to be."

Just as the dweller in this body passes through childhood, youth, and old age, so at death he merely passes into another kind of body. The wise are not deceived by that.¹

From his cosmic standpoint, Krishna explains (2.22):

Worn-out garments
Are shed by the body:
Worn-out bodies are shed by the dweller
Within the body.
New bodies are donned
By the dweller, like garments.²

The Atman is encased, as it were, in three bodies: the gross (physical), subtle (mental), and causal (ego).³ At death, only the physical body dies; the subtle body — along with its underlying causal body — accompanies the reincarnating soul, the *jivatma*, effecting the conditions of its future birth.

During a person's lifetime, the gross, subtle, and causal bodies require nourishment in order to maximize their inherent potential. To remain healthy, we provide our physical body with food and exercise. To cultivate

healthy emotions and refine our mental faculties, we nourish the subtle body with artistic and intellectual stimulus. For the causal body — the innermost sheath of ego-consciousness veiling the Atman — yoga is the food that nourishes.

Yoga practices transform and renew the mind, spiritualizing one's consciousness so that the Atman may be revealed. However, this food is often neglected. By starving the causal body, which permeates our gross and subtle bodies, we starve our entire psycho-physical being. Thus most people remain sheathed in ignorance of their true nature and subject to the law of karma and reincarnation.

Before we can transform the mind, we must first understand it. Eastern psychology, formulated by Patanjali, one of the ancient seers of India, incorporates the law of karma into a time-tested metaphysical science of mind. The Sanskrit word *karma* means action: mental or physical. It also means the result of action. Past actions, springing from thought waves of desire, cultivate future desires, which, in turn, result in actions.⁴

What we call *character* is the sum total of our karmas, which are conscious and unconscious desires, thoughts, and actions. Like waves that disturb a lake's surface and then form sandbanks on the lake bottom, karmas ripple across the surface of the mind, which retains their residual effects as latent tendencies, or *samskaras*. These latent tendencies reside in the subconscious and unconscious recesses of the mind. Repeated karmas — such as resentments, acts of kindness, or outbursts of anger — predispose us to find occasions for their repeated expressions in our everyday lives. Thus thoughts and actions work on each other to form mental and physical habits. These habits are the building blocks of character, which constitutes the subtle body and — along with the causal body, or "I"-consciousness — cloaks the Atman.

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (4.4.5–6) explains how the law of karma predetermines the soul's future birth:

... As is one's desire, so is one's destiny. For, as our desire is, so is our will; as our will is, so is our deed; and as our deed is, so is our reward, whether good or bad.

We act according to the desires to which we cling. After death we go to the next world, bearing in the mind the subtle impressions of our deeds; and after reaping there the harvest of such deeds, return again to this world of action. Thus whoever has desire continues subject to rebirth.⁵

"But," says the Upanishad (4.4.6),

one in whom desire is stilled suffers no rebirth. After death, having attained to the highest, desiring only the Self, such a soul goes to no other world. Realizing Brahman, one becomes Brahman.⁶

What is the process of death? "One neither sees, nor smells, nor tastes," the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad describes (4.4.1–2, 6).

One does not speak nor hear. One does not think and does not know; for all the organs, detaching themselves from the physical body, unite with the subtle body. Then the [uppermost] point of one's heart, where the nerves join [the *sushumna*] is lighted by the light of the Self, and by that light the dying departs either through the eye, through the gate of the skull, or through some other aperture of the body.⁷ When one thus departs, life departs; and when life departs, all the functions of the vital principle depart. The Self remains conscious, and, conscious, the dying person goes to a new abode. The deeds of this life and the impressions they leave behind follow.⁸

Vedanta views death as a harvest time wherein the culmination of a lifetime's actions and desires determines one's future. At the moment of death, all souls momentarily rest in Pure Being, Brahman. Perhaps this accounts for the experience of light — often described as a tunnel or realm — which many, who have had near-death experiences, relate. The illumined soul merges into that state of Pure Being; whereas the bound soul emerges from it and journeys to interim realms of karmic retribution before assuming a future birth.⁹ Those who neither desired liberation nor freed themselves from the bondage of the ego will reincarnate. But those who have freed themselves from their little selves will remain in the Atman that is the Pure Being of Brahman. However, both Hinduism and Buddhism acknowledge that liberation can be gradual or sudden, depending on a person's level of spiritual attainment in life.¹⁰

According to the Bhagavad Gita there are two paths by which the departing soul may leave the body: the *deva yana*, or path of light, and the *pitri yana*, or path of darkness.¹¹ An illumined soul departs along the path of light and may temporarily reside in heavenly realms, such as *brahmaloka*, before final liberation. However, the unperfected soul travels along the path of darkness to temporary celestial or dark realms in order to live out the effects of good and bad deeds, and then reincarnates.

Thus, in Vedanta, we find two separate Hindu doctrines pertaining to the continuity of consciousness after death. The first is reincarnation, to which every person is subject. The second is eternal life, known in Sanskrit as *moksha*, or liberation. Moksha comes to those who through the practice of yoga transcend the ego and, in so doing, see through this

world-illusion, thus freeing themselves from the round of birth, death, and rebirth.

To those desiring liberation, Vedanta offers a smorgasbord of yoga practices. Each yoga, or path to union with God, corresponds to one of the four aspects of our human nature. *Bhakti yoga* is a natural path of purifying emotions by establishing a devotional relationship with God. In this way an aspirant can “ripen” the ego by raising it to the level of child, friend, or beloved of God. *Jnana yoga* appeals to the intellect because of its rigorous scientific and logical analysis of the nature of reality. The follower of *jnana yoga* refutes what is impermanent for what is abiding, a process which culminates in direct knowledge of the underlying immaterial reality of Brahman. For active temperaments, *karma yoga* subdues the ego by surrendering it to physical acts of selflessness and to service of God within others. For the contemplative, *raja yoga* calms, deepens, and centers the aspirant through the daily practice of withdrawing the mind from the external world and focusing it upon one’s ideal of God within the heart.

By nourishing the causal body in these ways — by ripening, negating, subduing, or forgetting the ego — the aspirant purifies the veils of the three bodies (body, mind, and ego) that encase the Atman. A balance of the four yogas spiritually integrates all aspects of our nature. Thus strengthened, we begin to perceive ourselves more as — what Stephen Levine so aptly states in his book *Who Dies?* — “spiritual beings with physical experiences rather than as physical beings with spiritual experiences.”

To intensify spiritual life, it becomes natural to invite death into our practices. Sometimes an aspirant may study scriptural passages pertaining to death: memorize them, live with each one for a period of days, and meditate upon it until one awakens to a deeper insight into its meaning. This is one type of meditation on death.

Another way of meditating on death is to follow the example of great mystics, such as Ramakrishna, who sometimes chose to meditate at night in a cremation ground. In India, this is possible — one of the most famous cremation grounds being Manikarnika Ghat on the bank of the river Ganges, in Benares, the City of Light. There Ramakrishna had the vision of Mother Kali, the Divine Mother of the Universe, walking amidst the funeral pyres of the deceased, untying the knots of their ignorance, as Lord Shiva whispered into their ears the mantra of final liberation.

Any pilgrim can visit Manikarnika Ghat. At dusk one may take a boat down the river Ganges and watch as swathed bodies are borne to the steps

of the ghat and placed on pyres to await the eldest family member's sandalwood torch. It is impossible to forget the haunting sounds of chanting and wailing, the smell of hot ash, and the golden hue of sunset reflected on the Ganges at that time. It is a vivid memory of death — and of profound and tangible holiness.

Followers of *jnana yoga* who discriminate between the real and the unreal, the permanent and the transitory, systematically impress upon themselves the impermanence of their own body and mind and its three states of consciousness: waking, dream, and dreamless sleep. This is another type of meditation on death.

The meaning of *sannyas*, final vows in the Vedanta monastic tradition, is renunciation or death of the ego. As one swami of the Ramakrishna Order explained:

Christ said: "I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."¹² So *sannyas* is a new birth — birth into the Spirit. But attachment to the world must die in order that one can be born into the Spirit.

In other words, only through the eyes of the Spirit can we see the world-illusion as it really is and experience Brahman — the Supreme Self — pervading it, ourselves, and others.

In receiving *sannyas*, a candidate undergoes a two-day ceremony during which one symbolically performs one's own funeral service as well as that of one's relatives, seven generations before and after one's own life. This Vedic ritual symbolizes the death of the ego and represents the handing over to God of one's relatives for their final liberation as well. After this ritual, the candidate becomes a ghost, as it were — dead to the world — and goes into solitude to contemplate his or her rite of passage into *sannyas*.

The next morning at the auspicious *brahma-muhurta* — two hours before sunrise — all *sannyasins* in the monastic community gather to chant the sacred *sannyas* mantras, as the "ghost-candidate," seated before the blazing *viraja homa* fire, offers oblations into the fire of Brahman, symbolizing the burning up of all past karmas. The new *sannyasin* then receives from the guru the ochre garment, a new name, and the four *sannyas mahamantras* ("great" mantras) that empower one's spiritual rebirth. For three days following the fire ceremony, the *sannyasin* begs food from door-to-door, returning to the monastery or convent to share a portion of their alms with the guru and other *sannyasins*. The monastic then sits alone

under a tree to eat what the Lord has provided and contemplate the life one has entered.

For many Vedantists, mantra initiation by the guru is another transformative rite, symbolizing the death of the ego and spiritual rebirth. In order to sharpen concentration and quicken spiritual progress after initiation, swamis of our Order sometimes exhort their students to meditate as though Yama, the King of Death, is standing at their back. To illustrate this point, Ramakrishna used to tell his disciples the story of a student who asked his teacher, "Sir, please tell me how I can see God."

"Come with me," said the guru, "and I shall show you." He took the disciple to a lake, and both of them got into the water. Suddenly the teacher pressed the disciple's head under the water. After a few moments he released him and the disciple raised his head and stood up. The guru asked him, "How did you feel?" The disciple said, "Oh! I thought I should die; I was panting for breath." The teacher said, "When you feel like that for God, then you will know that you haven't long to wait for his vision."¹³

Tim, who first used to frequent our bookstore, was a unique example of this kind of yearning for God. When Tim was diagnosed with AIDS, patients like him died a social death long before their physical death. "My disease has become my guru," Tim disclosed to me, as one by one his friends declined to see him. During this painful transition of several years, time became precious to Tim and so did his visits to the Vedanta temple. At first he came once a week — then twice, thrice and finally daily. As AIDS increasingly ravaged his body, Tim sought refuge in the peaceful atmosphere of the temple as often as three times a day, struggling to practice the meditation instructions he had received from his spiritual teacher, the swami in charge of our center. During his last year of life, Tim was hospitalized several times. Each time he was released, we heard similar stories of his mistreatment and social outcasting, often paid to AIDS patients.

On the last day of Tim's life, a senior nun and I went to visit him. The stench in his hospital room was unbearable, syringes and bloodstained pads left in the room by his night nurses. Tim was semi-conscious, in obvious pain, and seemed to be suffering an inner turmoil, as though his soul was alternately drowning and gasping for breath. As is the Hindu custom, we offered Tim Ganges water — holy water — and he opened his mouth to receive the drops. There was a palpable sense of urgency in the room. We began to chant aloud the name of God: the name of Tim's Chosen Ideal. Minutes passed before we noticed that Tim's mouth was moving:

he too was silently chanting the name of God. Tears trickled down his cheeks from the outer corners of his eyes. Then suddenly, in his semi-conscious state, Tim lifted himself up from his bed and turned to face us. A blissful smile bathed his face. Overcome with emotion, we left the room. When I returned, Tim was quiet and indrawn, tears still trickling down his cheeks. Ten minutes later, Tim passed away.

As nuns we have witnessed death and have served many devotees in the process of dying. It is a privilege: each death is memorable and, in its own unique way, a kind of meditation. Just before one dies, Ganges water is often administered and sometimes verses from sacred scriptures relating to death are read or chanted aloud in Sanskrit or English. These rituals purify the body and mind of the dying.

It is the Hindu belief that, at the moment of death, the most prominent thought in one's consciousness comes forth to determine the course the soul takes after leaving the body.¹⁴ It is, therefore, very auspicious for the dying to hear the name of God chanted aloud by those present at the bedside. Throughout spiritual life, an aspirant repeats the mantra, or sacred name of one's Chosen Ideal, and, in so doing, it permeates the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious layers of the mind. As a result, before death, when the mind is no longer able to remain focused, the spiritual aspirant's most predominant thought stored in the subconscious — the mantra — bubbles up of its own accord to the conscious mind.

After a great soul passes away, the body is ceremonially bathed, and *arati* — a ritual waving of lights — is performed, honoring the special sanctity that is felt around the body at that time. The body is not touched for two hours in order to allow the soul's unhindered departure. During that period scriptures are chanted aloud and devotees come to pay their final respects. Before cremation, the body of a great soul is often carried three times around the temple. In India, the closest attendant to the deceased then lights the funeral pyre. After a period of thirteen days, during which disciples refrain from taking meat and try to increase their spiritual practices, a feast is given to the monastic community to celebrate the final destination of the soul.

Is Vedanta's attitude toward death life-negating? By facing death, meditating upon death, and ultimately embracing death, the Vedantist overcomes a normal instinctual fear with the courage of religious conviction, the strength of spiritual practice, and the ground of philosophical reason. As Swami Vivekananda wrote in a letter dated January 20, 1895, to an American woman who had lost her father:

... Coming and going is all pure delusion. The soul never comes or goes. Where is the place to which it shall go, when all space is *in the soul*? When shall be the time for entering and departing when all time is *in the soul*?

The earth moves, causing the illusion of the movement of the sun; but the sun does not move. So... nature is moving, changing, lifting veil after veil, turning over leaf after leaf of its great book — while the witnessing soul drinks in knowledge, unmoved, unchanged.

He continued:

... All souls that ever have been, are, or shall be, are all in the present tense... standing at one geometrical point. Because the idea of space does not occur in the soul, therefore all that were ours, are ours, and will be ours. They *are* always with us, *were* always with us, and *will be* always with us. We are in them. They are in us. ...¹⁵

With this knowledge, every death with which we are faced — whether one's relatives, friends, spouse, and ultimately one's own — becomes an opportunity to expand our definition of consciousness, and — if we are open to it — to expand our *own* consciousness, and thus transcend death.

Notes

1. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, trans., *The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita* (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1969), 40.

2. *Ibid.*

3. See Taittiriya Upanishad 2:2–5.

4. See Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, trans., *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1971), 1.2.

5. Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal* (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1947), 177–78. *The edited translation is mine.*

6. *Ibid.*, 178. See also Bhagavad Gita 8.9–15.

7. The sushumna is the spiritual channel situated within the spinal column, extending from its base to the brain, through which awakened spiritual energy rises within the human body. It is also called the pathway to Brahman.

According to one of the scholars of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Satprakashananda: "The impressions of karma gathered in the mind are lit up by the luminous self as in the dream state. Those thoughts, experiences, and desires that prevail at the time determine the way the self departs." See Swami Satprakashananda, *The Goal and the Way* (St. Louis, the Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 1977), 178.

8. Prabhavananda and Manchester, *The Upanishads*, 176.

9. Swami Satprakashananda, *The Goal and the Way*, 180–81.

10. Cf. Bhagavad Gita 8.23–26. With gradual liberation, the soul ascends to various realms: from the solar sphere (the universe) to the lunar sphere (abode of the gods); the electric sphere (a state where cosmic *prana* and *akasha* are almost indistinguishable); *brahmaloka*, the state of primal causal energy — *Mahat* (the