

Chapter 13

The Art of Dying in Hindu India

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I originally became interested in the question of Hindu approaches to dying while doing anthropological research on the cultural and social dimensions of aging in northern India. Although biological aging is a human universal, how people think about old age, the manner in which they cope with physical decline and social losses in later life, and the positions they occupy in relation to family and society vary a great deal from one culture to another. There is also great cultural diversity in the way people deal with death and dying—a fact that provides the central theme of this book.

My own research was carried out in the 1970s in a major Indian city, among a population with very recent rural origins. Among these people I found attitudes toward aging and death that seemed much more positive than our own. There was a greater degree of acceptance of the inevitability of mortality, and more attention was given to preparing actively for the end of life. While the material circumstances of their lives were far less comfortable than our own, these people seemed better equipped, both cognitively and emotionally, to face the inevitability of aging, dying, and death. It would be foolish to idealize or romanticize the situation of older people in India. It would be misleading to suggest that for them the later years of life are free from stress or that their deaths are free from fear, suffering, and pain. Indians and Westerners alike are all too prone to accept the familiar stereotype of the “spiritual” Hindu who consistently treats his elders with the loving care, honor, and respect that his culture and religion prescribe. The reality, of course, is far more complex than this ideal. Nevertheless, there are real differences between Indian and American ways of aging and death. For Hindus these are grounded in certain key cultural conceptions about the nature of the world, human life, and the social order.¹

A central cosmological concept is that of *samsara*—“transmigration” or

“reincarnation.” All sentient beings are believed to belong to a continuum of life forms, from the most lowly insect to the highest living form, the human being. Birth, life, and death are part of a never-ending cyclical process. While the material body is mortal, the individual “soul” (*atman*) is eternal—at death it separates from the body and is reborn, after a period of time, in the body of another living being.

The ultimate goal of the soul is to escape from this cycle of rebirths, to attain *moksha*—“liberation” or “release”—and become reabsorbed into the oneness of the Universal Soul. The soul’s direction and rate of progress toward *moksha* depend upon how those beings in whose ephemeral bodies the soul is housed live their worldly lives. The causal principle is that of *karma*—“action.” Simply put, good actions lead to the accumulation of “merit” (*punya*) and speed one’s soul toward its ultimate release; bad deeds cause the accumulation of “sin” (*pap*) and retard the soul’s progress toward this desired end.

The circumstances into which one is born and the kind of experiences one has in life are also understood to depend upon one’s accumulated *karma*. Good *karma* from prior lives brings happiness and good fortune in this life, while the consequence of bad *karma* is misery and suffering. Likewise, one’s behavior in this life has consequences, for good or ill, in lives to come. If through one’s deeds one contributes toward the soul’s store of *punya*, one may hope for rebirth into a higher social station in the next life; one who commits evil deeds will suffer in the next life, in the extreme case being denied human rebirth and taking the form of some lower animal.²

There are said to be three possible “paths” toward liberation from the cycle of rebirths: selfless action, religious devotion, and spiritual knowledge. One may choose the path or paths that best suit one’s capabilities or inclinations, but all are long and arduous. Only through the most exceptional exertions can a person attain release for the soul in the course of a single lifetime. Spiritual knowledge is generally regarded as the superior path. Through it one comes to appreciate the Oneness of ultimate reality and recognizes the false or illusory nature of the phenomenal world. As long as one remains “caught in the net of *maya*” (illusion), one’s soul cannot attain *moksha*. To reach this level of spiritual understanding, it is necessary to cease involvement in worldly activities, cares, and concerns, with the ultimate aim of extricating oneself completely from all interpersonal attachments.

Acceptance of the notions of *karma* and *maya* is not inconsistent with an active approach to death. On the contrary, it is imperative that an aging Hindu prepare him- or herself appropriately for departing the world. In

Madan's words, "The ultimate and critical sign of the good life may be available in the manner a person attains his death" (1988, 122). The phrase "attain death" is crucial. The Hindu is urged to actively participate in setting the proper stage for his own dying.

A good death is one in which the dying person is in full possession of his or her mental and physical faculties and is fully cognizant of what is about to be experienced. There is time to assume the proper frame of mind for what is to come and to take adequate leave of family and friends. One is not overtaken by death but "lets go of life" deliberately and willingly. In contrast, "the 'bad' death is one for which the deceased cannot be said to have prepared himself. It is said that 'he did not die his own death'" (Parry 1982, 83). In the Hindu view, in contrast to our own, the sudden, painless death of an elderly person—as from a heart attack or stroke—is not regarded as a fortunate one, for the deceased had no time to ready himself for this most crucial passage. Deaths by accident or other violent means are regarded with even greater horror, both for this reason and also because of fears that the victim's embittered spirit may return as a ghost to afflict the living.

Only a person who has lived a long and full life can be said to die a good death; thus death ought properly to come in old age, not in childhood or youth. Ideally, one's spouse, children—including at least one son—and grandchildren should be alive and present at the deathbed. Death should come at home or at one of the sacred Hindu pilgrimage sites. Banaras is especially favored, for it is said that the souls of all who die in that holy city immediately attain *moksha* (Parry 1994, 27).

A person who senses that death is approaching should inform family members, refuse further nourishment, and be lifted from the bed to a spot on the ground that has been ritually purified for the purpose. Those present should read aloud some appropriate holy text or sing devotional songs to help fix the mind of the dying person upon the Divine. Then, at a moment deliberately chosen, the dying man or woman takes a final breath. When a very old person dies in this way, leaving many surviving descendants, his or her funerary rites are observed not with outward expressions of sadness but with a colorful and celebratory procession and joyous feasting in congratulatory appreciation of a life well lived and a death well died. Such a funeral is indeed often verbally and symbolically equated with a marriage party.

Hindus share a set of notions about the "ideal human life course" that are also relevant to understanding their way of death. Various ancient didactic treatises provide highly formalized and elaborated versions of a model of life stages (*ashrama*).³ The most common textual formulation posits four of these, a man being sequentially a Student, a Householder, a

Forest-Dweller or Hermit, and a Renouncer of the world.⁴ The physically mature, married, sexually and economically active Householder is at the center of the social order, all others being dependent upon him for sustenance. Occupants of the third and fourth *ashramas* are already on the social periphery as they turn away from mundane worldly concerns and ready themselves to depart this life.

In the words of Manu, the most well known of the ancient lawgivers, when a Householder "sees that he is wrinkled and grey, and [sees] the children of his children, then he should take himself to the wilderness" (Doniger 1991, 17). Entering the third stage of life, that of the Hermit, he hands over household affairs to his son and heir and devotes his energies to spiritual reflection and bodily mortification. Thus he begins to disentangle himself—physically and emotionally—from the bonds of *maya*. Having succeeded in this, he enters the fourth and final *ashrama*, renouncing the world completely in preparation for death.

What is the nature of the relationship between the religious conceptions and cultural ideals that I have outlined here and the actual circumstances, behaviors, and emotions of real individuals trying to come to terms with the personal experience of aging and death? A prominent Indian anthropologist answers this question for the Kashmiri Brahmans he has studied: "Death is . . . made bearable by its being treated as an opportunity for the individual soul to realize union with 'that' [universal soul] from which it has . . . separated" (Madan 1988, 137). But, we may ask, does such an abstract idea as *moksha* really enable the ordinary Hindu to face death with equanimity—any more than the notion that the soul of a virtuous man goes to heaven allows the average Christian to contemplate life's ending with pleasant anticipation?

In my view, the relationship between Hindu cosmology, on the one hand, and the emotional state of those who are old and dying, on the other, is much more complex than Madan's statement suggests. What the religious and cultural conceptions I have outlined do provide for the Hindu man or woman is a repertoire of meaning and explanation upon which to draw when trying to understand and cope with major life transitions. They provide "a map for living"—and for dying—that "defines human goals, outlines alternatives, and lays down principles" for action and thought (Hiebert 1981, 215). Individuals use this map selectively, in ways that suit their particular needs at particular times. Some people are more successful than others in deriving from it a sense of direction, comfort, and solace. Yet, however personally inclined or capable of making practical use of it in designing their own lives and deaths, few Hindus would disagree about the ultimate wisdom of trying to do so.

The Indian men and women I came to know in the course of my research all took for granted that the soul is involved in an eternal cycle of rebirths. They frequently cited *karma* as the main causal principle for human misfortune, though very often it was described as operating in the short term rather than over the course of a series of rebirths.⁵ Thus they suggested that unkind, selfish, or immoral deeds were often punished in a person's present life, perhaps in the form of a painful final illness and a lingering death. As one old man put it, "According to the deeds a man does, so is his death. If he does good deeds, he dies easily and doesn't have to suffer much pain. He who does bad deeds, who commits sins, gives pain to others, God gives the fruits of that right here." Not surprisingly, on the other hand, people tended to blame their own misfortune and suffering on "fate" or "predestination" (*bhagya*), thereby relieving themselves of the responsibility implied in the *karma* theory.

When explaining how they were preparing for their own deaths, these old people tended to emphasize the paths of religious devotion and spiritual knowledge, rather than the accumulation of merit through good deeds. This tendency is consistent with the textual view that the path of "selfless action" is most appropriate for those in the Householder stage, fully engaged as they are in worldly affairs. Many older men and women reported devoting considerably more time and effort to religious worship, contemplation, and self-reflection than they had in earlier years. The elderly were always heavily represented among those frequenting temples and gathering for devotional recitations and singing.

Older people rarely expressed a concern with improving their lot in the next life. More often they spoke about working toward that more distant goal of escaping the round of rebirths altogether. None, however, dared to hope that their meager efforts in the few years remaining to them would be sufficient to ensure the immediate attainment of their soul's ultimate goal.

The notion of a human life span divided into distinct periods—with certain activities, behaviors, concerns, and attitudes appropriate to each—provided these Hindus with a ready framework for thinking about life in general and about their own lives in particular. It provided a guide for how to act and even to feel as they progressed through the life cycle. They often made explicit reference to "life stages," asserting—in line with the textual formulation of these—that in old age one should withdraw from active work and allow oneself to be housed, fed, and cared for by one's sons and daughters-in-law. They agreed that at this stage of life one should rein in one's desires and follow an ascetic regimen, cultivate an attitude of indifference to food, dress simply, and eschew worldly forms of enjoyment, particularly sexual expression. In practice, most older men and women

appeared to follow these prescriptions for living to a considerable degree, aided not only by the strength of their own personal inclinations but by social pressure from those around them.

The metaphors of world renunciation and escape from the net of *maya* were frequently employed when elderly men and women imparted what they considered the essence of their outlook on life. An inability to achieve peace of mind was commonly attributed to the inhibiting effect of *maya*, which makes one care excessively about household problems. As one man explained, many older people "are too much involved with their family members. Even up to the time of their death they are not able to detach themselves from the family. They keep suffering from worry over the difficulties all of them are having."

Others are more successful in cultivating detachment. Several men claimed to have already "left the world" or to have "become Renouncers," although to all appearances they were living like anyone else—residing in the bosom of the family, socializing with their peers, and taking active roles in community politics and ceremonial events. What they meant to communicate was that their *mental* state was one of non-attachment to the world, despite their continuing *physical* presence within it. In the words of one, "After turning everything over to my son, I said to myself, 'Let me leave everything and take *sannyas* [Renunciation].' Yes, even while continuing to live at home, it is as if I am in the Renouncer stage of life." Thus, while for most aging Hindus the extreme course of complete physical withdrawal from the world and its inhabitants is hardly either attractive or feasible, the knowledge that detachment from worldly concerns is required for spiritual advancement has distinct consequences for the kind of attitude they attempt to cultivate in contemplating life's end.

In trying to understand the basis for the characteristic Hindu approach toward aging and death it is important not to ignore the influence of the material and social environments in which they live. Death is a more familiar event for Indians than it is for us, both because mortality rates are somewhat higher than ours and because most deaths occur at home rather than in the hospital or nursing home. There is in Hindu society a familiar, "hands-on" relationship to dying and death that is minimally mediated by specialist professionals. Most adults have had, more than once, the experience of watching over a loved one in the throes of death, often a drawn out and painful passing. They have washed and prepared corpses for their final rites. Men have helped carry funeral biers to the cremation ground and have watched as they burned. They have ignited the funeral pyres of their deceased parents and, at the prescribed moment, cracked open their skulls with a wooden staff to release their vital breath. They have personally

gathered together the ashes and bone fragments to dispose of them in the religiously prescribed manner.

In Indian society death is also spoken about more openly than it is in ours. Old men and women may often be heard to state quite cheerfully that they are ready to welcome death at any time, that they have lived long and satisfying lives and are prepared for the end. Doubtless they talk this way not only because it is considered culturally appropriate to cultivate equanimity in the prospect of death, but because the very act of repeatedly speaking of it helps them to achieve that state. In the same vein, a vigorous woman in her fifties described to me how once, after the death of a close relative, she had secretly followed the male-only funeral procession to the cremation ground and forced herself to watch for several hours the fiery destruction of the body. This experience, she maintained, helped her to come to terms with the prospect of her own eventual death.

An older man or woman who follows the culture's normative guidelines for appropriate behavior in old age—allowing adult children to run their own lives and manage their household without interference—reaps clear personal benefits. If a person does become incapacitated, he (or she) is much more likely to be cared for willingly and well if he has already developed good relationships with his sons and daughters-in-law. Most old people live in the same household with these family members and it is this younger generation who will take on the care of an aging invalid. In India the retirement or nursing home is almost unknown, and old people, particularly in rural areas, rarely use hospital facilities. Aside from practical limitations on access to modern medical care, old age and its afflictions are typically held to be simply part of the nature of things—and because they are incurable it is futile to seek treatment. Furthermore, if one goes to the hospital one risks the awful possibility of dying away from home and family.

What message does this review of the Hindu art of dying have for us? Clearly there would be little point in proposing our wholesale adoption of a set of alien cosmological notions and social norms. However, there are real lessons to be learned from Indian openness to speaking about death and to entering into a dialogue with loved ones about the prospect of their own deaths. There is also a lesson to be learned from the way that Hindus situate death for the old in the milieu of the home and family rather than that of the medical institution with its specialist caregivers. Finally, we may learn from the Hindu's conscious recognition and acceptance of his own mortality and his consequent striving to prepare for a good death. None of these lessons, nor the recommendations to which they lead, are new—all have been discussed and debated for years by scholars, medical practi-

tioners, and the general public. But my discussion of a living culture in which these benefits are realized may serve to further support the many voices that today call for a new approach to how we die in America.

Notes

1. It should be pointed out that all Indians are not Hindu. Over 10 percent are Muslim, and there are significant adherents to Christianity and other religions as well. Many non-Hindu Indians share the overall cognitive orientation toward aging and death that I describe here, but my specific focus is on the use Hindus make of their own religious, cosmological and normative concepts as they grow older and face the prospect of their own mortality.
2. See Keyes and Daniel (1983) for a number of useful essays on popular understandings of this concept in various regions of India and southeast Asia. Another excellent collection of papers focusing on Hindu textual traditions is O'Flaherty 1980.
3. Shrinivas Tilak (1989, 15–51) provides a good historical overview of the development over time of the life course model in the Hindu textual tradition. For a more technical discussion, see Olivelle 1993.
4. The models provided in the texts apply explicitly to the male life course. Woman appears only as her husband's companion and helpmate. When he enters the fourth *ashrama* and renounces the world, his bond with her is one of those that he severs. Among the people I studied, however, a three- or four-stage model of the life course was commonly used to frame discourse about women's lives as well.
5. For elaboration of this point and further information about attitudes toward aging and death in this community, see Vatuk 1990.

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