

# DEATH AND AFTERLIFE

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## 1. Introduction

Human being is a person walking to his own death. Therefore, he is called *martya*: mortal, born to die. The Sanskrit word for death is *mrtya*, is derived from the Sanskrit root *mr* (means to die). The Latin equivalent is *mors* (*mortis*): death. As per the word meaning, every human being is born to die. This is because as an embodied being, the human being is subject to the operative dynamics of time. He is born in time, called to live in time, and destined also to leave the time-zone of his existence. This takes us to the questions on time and the nature temporality. What it means to say that human beings are temporal beings is of fundamental interest for philosophical investigations. Are we born in time only to cease to exist after a few years of existence? Is death really the end of the life-span or is there an afterlife? These are fundamental questions raised by all human beings.

## 2. The Nature of Temporality

Any being, with a material body subject to movement and change is having a time-bound, temporal form existence. Time could be described as a measure of durations of events and the intervals between them which could be counted second by seconds, minutes by minutes or hours by hours, as the twin hands of any clock would tell us, by their movements. What we call time depends on the movement of the planets, especially the earth and the sun. To be temporal means to be time-bound, i.e., tied up with the globes near or even afar. The entire universe, when there is any sort of material stuff is there, has the time factor governing these movements.

The human being, in spite of its soul, is a creature living on earth, moving on earth, watching the movements of the other globes, and accommodating themselves as to the time to work, to rest, to wake up, etc.

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Human beings live in time and they are temporal beings. In other words, we are temporal in nature. The question is: Is death the end of this life?

### 3. Is Death the End of Our Temporal Life?

All over the world we see a strong human tendency to go beyond death. Prayers addressed to God are seen in the scriptures. Already in the Vedic period, people offered sacrifices to restore the lost rhythm of the universe and thereby also to gain the gift of immortality. Life after death was a living quest. *Rgveda* says:

On the power of sacrifice which is grounded in highest heavens  
and by Cosmic Order in Cosmic Order established,  
[our Fathers] though mortal, attained immortal seats  
in those spheres above which firmly support the heavens (X.80.4)

Later in the Upanishads we find the famous prayer: “Lead me from unreality to reality, lead me from darkness to light and lead me from death to immortality” (*Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* 1.3.28). Already much before the dawn of Christianity human beings prayed for a good death and even practiced penance for the sins they would have committed.

In one of the older Upanishads we have the lovely story of a young boy, Naciketas who walked up to the house of the Lord of death to know the secret of death and the place where people go after death. Though Yama, the god of death, tried to persuade the boy from his quest with different worldly boons the boy insisted on knowing the mystery after death. After a long discussion finally Yama proposes a way to get out of the grips of death and attain Brahman. “When all the desires that dwell within the human heart are cast away, then a mortal becomes immortal and even attains Brahman” (*Katha Upanishad* 2.3.14).

The idea of immortality is illustrated in the story of the churning of the milk sea. According to the story, in answer to the prayer of the suras (meaning shining with light), God gave them a favour, the gift of immortality. This will not be given, however, without some effort from the part of the recipients. So it was suggested to them to churn a great milk sea in heaven. God Vishnu told them he himself will come in the form of tortoise and remain in the depth of the sea to help the churning. The suras could place on him the mountain called Mandana and churn the sea using a serpent called Vasukhi. When the churning was about to start, the asuras (not so shining people) came to Vishnu and complained against discrimination done to them, because they too are created by Vishnu. Vishnu in his characteristic generosity allowed them also to participate in

the churning. When they joined in the great churning, the asuras found that the suras are already on the head-side of the serpent and asuras are left over to the tail side. They protested and the suras agreed to move to the tail side. As the churning proceeded, Vasukhi was tired and vomited poison. The asuras thinking this would be the nectar of immortality consumed it immediately, not giving a drop to the suras and all of them died. By this time, the real nectar of immortality emerged to the surface of the sea and the suras took and ate it and became immortal.

The stories narrated point to the truth that immortality was a certainly a quest and it was available too. Since human being is not just a body with animal sensation, but also with a soul, which is spirit or consciousness by nature, this quest for immortality is natural. But, it is a gift to be earned as well. This does not mean that any human being can claim immortality to him/her unless it is given to him/her by the author of life who has created him/her with an immortal soul. Soul, spirit, is by nature immortal. Hence the question, what is human death?

Human being, as the word *martya* means, is a person walking up to his death. Every human being is endowed with enormous possibilities which can be realized in oneself. But whatever they be, one event or ordeal he/she has to face is to go through the pains and pangs or thrills and threats of death. He/she is said to be a Being-unto death. Every human being has to go through two kinds of death. One, which is normally understood as death, is the corporeal or bodily death, which is normally understood as the basic principle of life or power of life which kept this person living and operating is departing from him/her or is not operative any more. In human beings, death is understood as the departure of the soul, the ultimate principle of consciousness, operating in and through the body. In animals this is understood as cessation of the principle of life which is largely sensational. Some say that the animal does not die, in the strict sense of the word. They cease to be as the cells of their body get disintegrated. Human beings, because the soul is spirit and cannot be disintegrated, however, continue to live. When, where, how the soul is going to live without the body is really a mystery for us. Mystery does not mean it is meaningless or untrue or not to be experienced at all. It means only that when the human life transcends the temporal layers of existence, it also transcends the purely natural or rational level of understanding. Then what is that level of understanding, beyond reason? Religions generally say that this is experienced, rather than understood, in faith level. As mind's level is reason soul's level is faith, a superior knowledge depending on revelations

to which the sacred scriptures of religions belong, with genuine individualistic differences, but usually assuming a different source of light beyond the level of pure mental logic. In faith level we understand many things which our mind may initially object. If we accept the entire human being with bodily, mental and divine consciousness within, mind level is a lower level of knowledge, leading us to superior levels of consciousness, experiences which takes place in the depth of one's own soul. In this level death is not at all the end of life; death is an opening of a door to the next life, which we call life after death. Different forms of life after death appeared in human thinking and writing, especially in religious literature, as we shall examine in the following sections.

#### **4. Afterlife as a Chain of Rebirths in the Sea of *Samsara***

Rebirth is a form of explanation on afterlife, an ancient view prevalent in many parts of the world, and very much so in India. The Bhagavad-Gita discusses this problem rather elaborately relating rebirth to human actions (*karma*). “Of that which is born, death is certain, of that which is dead birth is certain. Over the unavoidable, therefore, thou oughtest not grieve” (*Gita* 2.27). The reason for rebirth is the bondage of the soul to the material results of the action. Action with desire and attachment binds. “Work (with desire) is verily far inferior to that performed with the mind undisturbed by the thoughts of results. O! Dhannanjaya, seek refuge in this evenness of mind. Wretched are they who work for results (material results only)” (*Gita* 2.49). Hence, the *Gita* suggests performing all actions without attachments and the resultant bondage of the soul to this world of actions, in the spirit of true yoga, that is, with the spirit of detachment, transcendence, equanimity and also a selfless desire to be united with God. This is the way by which the resultant bondage can be removed: “Being steadfast in yoga, O! Dhananjaya, perform actions, abandoning attachments, remaining unconcerned as regards success or failure. This evenness of mind is known as yoga” (*Gita* 2.28).

All these instructions are given that the souls remain free of attachment and bondage and may eventually reach the final goal which is soul's union with God, which again is interpreted in different ways by different authors such as non-dualism (*advaita*) of Sankara, qualified non-dualism (*Visistadvaita*) of Ramanuja and dualism (*dvaita*) of Maddhava. And in the last chapter Gita very clearly says that this aspired goal can be met: “Be of my mind, be devoted to me, sacrifice to me, bow down to me. Thou shalt reach myself; truly I promise unto thee, thou art dear to me” (*Gita* 18.65).

## 5. *Sunya and Nirvana*

Prince Siddhartha, the later Buddha, born and brought up in a palace was not very happy with the palace amenities and comforts of life. The vision of human suffering, old age and death of people moved his compassionate heart, all the more so, because all of them as per the rebirth belief are going to be born again to repeat the same ordeal of life and death. How to put a stop to this process of rebirth, Siddhartha thought very deeply, desirous of finding out a solution. The determined search had a result. Siddhartha was enlightened and became the awakened one, the Buddha. Rebirth is the fruit of desire, because of the clinging attachment (*thrsna*) to the world, to the pleasures of the world, to all the passing superficialities of the *samsara*, namely the world which is always moving, changing and thus radically unreliable. *Kama* or desire to relish these passing superficialities makes human beings literally slaves to this world, tied down by the fetters of unfreedom and bondage. Buddha, therefore, proposed desirelessness as the way. He used the pali word *nekkama* (*na-kama*) instead of the Sanskrit word *nishkama*, because the solution was proposed to the common folk and not specially to the elite of the society who used Sanskrit (*Samskrtam* – well done, opposed to *pra-krtam* – pre-done).

*Nekkama* theory advocated the renunciation of all binding desires in all their forms. Two schools of philosophy developed in the course of time: the theory of emptiness (*sunya-vada*) and a theory of the abode of wisdom (*alaya-vijnana*). The dynamics of life after death is now presented as *sunya* and the soul, as it is, not sticking to any creature in any way, simply dissolves or extinguishes flame of existence (*nirvana*). The word *sunya*, though it is negatively articulated is not mere negativity or unqualified pure nihilism. Rather the Buddhist *sunya* calls our attention to the incomprehensibility and the ineffability of that One (the upanishadic *tat-ekam*), the really real (*satyasa satyam*) which is everywhere, but also nowhere. It is ever concealing and revealing, and baffles the thinking mind, struggling to understand the incomprehensible. It is a vast expanse of ‘nothingness,’ which perhaps is everything as well; but to the thinking mind eager to gasp the ungraspable, it escapes the grip leaving the subject, in utter incomprehensibility as an overwhelmingly grand nothingness around. One cannot name it, it always eludes or slips, one cannot touch it, it is untouchable, but it is there frightening and fascinating, as a combination of *sat-asat*, as Sankara calls it later. When the aspect of *asat* dominates, it is *maya*, illusion, nothingness an experience of *sunya*. But

when the counter part of *sat* dominates you have *satya* (truth), the claim of *sat* (being) over you. *Sunya* is ultimately the negation of the negation we see in all creatures, characterized by limitation, a kind of negation of existence. A limited form of existence is not understandable in itself, unless it is somewhere related to the fullness of being. And to come to this fullness the finite intelligence has to pass through a kind of *sunya* experience of all what is finite, creatively, dependent, ever moving to change and extinction (*nirvana*).

Even in the Christian mystical theology, the holy soul aspiring to progress in contemplative prayer has to pass through the dark nights of senses, intellect, memory and will. St John of the Cross, the great mystical theologian, calls it the night of purification. In effect it is a kind of *sunya* experience with regard to everything that is not God; the soul is saying to everything *neti, neti*, not this, not this, until it reaches God in whose image God has created this aspiring holy person. I am not saying the Buddhist *sunya* is exactly the same as the dark nights about which St John of the Cross describes. The greatest difference is the silence about God in *sunya* mysticism. According to John of the Cross it is the Holy Spirit, the divine consciousness within, which guides the soul through the nights of purification and also through the further stages of divine union. The Buddhist *sunya* experience did not stop there. It was only one of the schools.

Buddhism very soon moved to another school of thought, in which the *jiva* (soul) was seen as the abode of wisdom (*alaya-vijana*) or at least participation in the true nature of reality which is the abode of wisdom (*alaya-vijnana*). Each soul has to realize this. Buddhism also speaks of Bodhisattvas, the realized souls, coming down to earth even after their physical death, in order to assist other souls in finding their way to liberation.

Both in Hinduism and Buddhism liberation is always understood as the liberation of the soul (spirit) from the bondages of *karma*, and *kama*-born rebirth. Effectively it was liberation of the soul from the body and body bound bondages to this world. Liberation of both body and soul and the dead rising again with body and soul was not seriously taken into consideration.

## **6. Death as a Preamble of Resurrection**

As we have already seen life after death was part of religious faith almost in all religions. This was almost always, however, the story of the departed

souls. A promise of a new life with the resurrection of the body is not clearly treated, and was not usually expected. Mary Magdalene went to the tomb of Jesus, not expecting resurrection, but to embalm the body of Jesus according to the traditional Jewish customs. To her great surprise, however, she did not see Jesus in the tomb, instead got a message from the angels: “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (Luke 24:5) Because the resurrection idea was not there, she was naturally very sad. Even after Jesus spoke to her, she could not recognize him. This is because the mind does not expect something like that. Hence resurrection of Jesus was a great surprise also to her even though she had witnessed how Jesus had called the dead Lazar to life.

“Dust you are, to dust you return” (Genesis 3:19). We often see this inscription written large on the coffins in which the dead bodies are carried to their burial places. When the Word became flesh, the Word did not choose a human body to return to the dust from which human bodies have come. Thus the body of Jesus, though in everything like us, except sin, is a body designed for the Word.

Very likely, this is the first human body, God the Father ever designed, a body for his Son, the Word, when he comes down on earth in the form of human being. In the likeness of this body which was externally in the mind of God, God created the first parents. And Jesus himself says: “Before Abraham, was I AM” (John 8:58). The Word exists from the very beginning, contemplating everything what is going to happen, including his own incarnation, not primarily because of sin and the need of reparation, but because it was His delight to be with human children. According to this view the idea incarnation was not necessarily a thought after sin. But when sin maligned the divine rhythm in the world, the incarnate God, who came in the fullness of time, took upon himself the suffering in the world, which is nothing but awareness of disorder in all levels of awareness namely of the senses, the mind and the soul and all sorts of agonies they bring in. Thus Jesus restored the rhythm of the universe which was lost by sin.

Blessed Virgin Mary was specially thought of as “Immaculate,” because the Word could become flesh in this immaculate body unstained by sin. It is this body that is now resurrected, conquering the sting of death. St Paul says:

For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying

that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:53-57).

The idea of resurrection entirely changes the sad feelings of doom, destiny and sorrow associated with death; death is no more a threat but it can be faced even as a thrill.

### **7. A Call to the Graceful Offering of Life to God**

Is death a call to threat or thrill? This entirely depends on the level of your consciousness formation. If your consciousness longed to see God, to be with him forever and ever, is the most rewarding and surprising end of your temporal or earthly life. It could be a thrill to enter into next phase of life, all the more so because now you enter into an open area of everlasting life, obviously an area of amazing thrill with no shades or shallows of fear. It will be just the opposite, however, if you have a timid, wavering consciousness, a consciousness of no decision for what is real and genuine, what is light and darkness and ultimately what is true love and selfish greed. An earth-bound, ego-centred consciousness looks at death as threat, an intolerable question mark hanging over his head and an inevitable hook which he cannot avoid, in spite of his wealth, weapons, amenities and ambitions. To such a person death is a fatal departure from all that he/she stood for. It becomes threat depending upon the accumulated crust sticking on to the consciousness which could have been otherwise a crystal clear reflection of his/her own God whose image this person is. As St Paul says, “we have this treasure in jars of clay” (2 Corinthians 4:7). If the dying person’s life was totally focussed on the jars of clay rather the divine treasure inside the total break of this jar will be miserably threatening, even to the extent to an inescapable doom. There is nothing to wonder; everyone reaps only what has been sown.

This need not be the case, however. The human being is created in the image of God and the word image means an unalterable reference to the original and for the well being of the image, the image should always fall back to the original. That is why St Augustine said “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” *Confessions* (1,1-2, 2.5,5). So there is a journey to life after death, but that is really made before death, but you reach this goal only at the moment of death. In this journey to life after death, but really made before death,



preparing ourselves to death, one has to die to all that is evil, untruth and to all that stand against one’s own inner most consciousness. As the Psalmist says, “For your sake we are killed every day” (44:22). For such a person death is not a threat at all. Death now becomes a surrender of one’s self to God, as Jesus cried from the Cross: “Father, into your hands I place my spirit” (Luke 23:46) Death is the last act a human being can do for God. If it so happens death is not a threat at all, but a happy invitation to a life which is prepared for you by the Lord. The words of Jesus during his conversation with his disciples during the last supper present this idea very clearly. He says: “Do not be worried and upset. Believe in God and believe also in me. There are many rooms in my father’s home, and I am going, to prepare a place for you. I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am” (John 14:1-3). Here, death is not a threat, but a sweet invitation. Of course all disciples of Jesus died as martyrs witnessing their unshakable faith in the Lord. We also see many saints suffering during their life time.

Some of them even offer themselves as victims of holocaust that they may more intensely participate in the suffering of Christ and thus also participate in the salvific mission of saving souls. The great saints of our own time, St Theresa of Lissieux and St Alphonsa are brilliant examples for this. Suffering does not mean death has a wrong message. Jesus died in bitter sufferings. When selfish people distort the rhythm of the universe for their on hold of power, superiority and control, the holy souls offer themselves as victims of sacrifice, to restore the balance of distortion by their self sacrifice. Their death will be painful, but not fearful or threatening. They do feel also an inner thrill of joy in the midst of suffering, because in that way they become harbingers of a healing touch to many who suffer. In the theology of the mystical body of Christ, this vicarious suffering is possible and acceptable. St Paul says: “Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church” (Colossians 1:24). For all of these saintly people, suffering or death is not a threat, rather an invitation to enter into life-everlasting.

## **8. Conclusion**

One thing Christianity believes is that you can welcome your death with peace and serenity of mind. Though the reason may not grasp many things happening around you, the faith can accept the unacceptable, if we have deep faith in afterlife and if the conscience is clean. This is possible not

just to Christians; but the doctrine of resurrection does strike a different note in the song on afterlife.

St Paul says: “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). It is through his own death Christ brought life, establishing a kingdom of heaven, not of this earth, but for our life after death. It is through his own acts of suffering and reparation he restored justice and the divine rhythm which was basically destroyed by sin, the rise of human consciousness against the divinely established rhythm in the universe. The life after death Jesus promises is not a life under any worldly kingdom. It is a kingdom based on the reign of God’s own consciousness operating in and through all the good-hearted human beings. He has promised a life to us, as he himself said to Pilot, “my kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36).

The entry to this kingdom, which is life after our corporeal death, is based on the basic principle of love, the reflection of God’s true nature, in all who want to enter. The entry to this life after the death is denied to all, no matter to what religion you belong to, who neglected love to the other human beings. There in that heavenly kingdom God who is love reigns, love is the only norm for entry permit, and all will reflect God in their way as you see your image in a mirror and will shine like stars in heaven. It is what Christian doctrine calls the communion of saints, communion of hearts, all in one.

I would like to conclude this paper quoting from the *Upanishad* and from the Book of Revelation, which shows great family resemblance. *Katha Upanishad*, one of the oldest Upanishad says about the final state as follows: “There the sun does not shine, nor the moon, nor the stars. Then how will fire shine. All follow Him who shines forth and by His rays all are illumined” (*Katha Upanishad* II.2.15). The book of Revelation in the Bible describes the final state as follows: “The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it” (Revelation 21:23-24). From a Christian point of view, in this phase of life after death there is only one centre which is God or the Lamb of God, representing Jesus, there is only one light by whose light everyone shines forth.