

On Death

By Shri Dattabal

Hindus face death stoically, believing the well-known verse in the Gita : "Just as a person casts off worn-out garments and puts on others that are new, even so does the embodied soul cast off worn-out bodies and take on others that are new." Atheists consider death as a mere cessation of biological functions. For christians it is the gate to heaven or hell.

The Pyramids are for me the greatest poetry written on death. Egyptians believed in reincarnation-not in an Indian way but in their own. They thought the dead inhabit caskets of flesh and will come back to life; hence they emblamed the bodies for future resurrection. It is not the Egyptians' belief but their solemn attitude that makes one feel the poetry in the Pyramids and which reveals their faith in eternal recurrence. Huge stone blocks that are the Pyramids, standing amidst the vast expanses of rolling sand with the sun pouring down heat and life ! To me it is a picturesque description of life. The apex of the Pyramid pointing towards the sun is a symbolic representation of human aspiration, skyrocketing towards the matrix of life. The Pyramid is a hieroglyph of life and death.

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Death has amused poets, thrilled philosophers, majestically awed religionists and consoled those without hope. It has a charm like Mona Lisa's mystic smile. It has an aura of the unknown. The face of death is not necessarily hostile but the subconscious has an ingrained fear of death. It is the fear of death that gives men the biological intuition to save themselves. A search of life includes a search of death. Levy-Bruhl says :

In all uncivilised races everywhere, death requires to be explained by other than natural causes. It has frequently been remarked that, when they see a man die, it would seem as if it might be the very first time such a thing had happened.

"Is it possible ?" Asks the sophisticated Westerner of himself, "that these people do not know that everybody must die sooner or later ?"

The primitive never considered death in this light. In his eyes, the causes which inevitably bring about the death of a man in a certain (fairly definite) number of years-causes such as failure of the body organs, senility, diminution of functioning power-are not necessarily connected with death. Does he not see a decrepit old man still alive ? If therefore at a given moment death supervenes, it must be because a mysterious force has come into play.

Philosophers like Hegel treat death as not merely cessation of biological function but as the highest act of love. Hegel says :

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Love is precisely this identity of the divine and the human, and this reduction of consciousness to finitude is pushed to its extreme, namely death; thus here the intuition of unity in its absolute stage is the highest intuition of love. For love consists in relinquishing one's personality, property and so forth. Death is love itself; in death absolute love is being revealed.

For atheists and agnostics death will remain the eternally unanswered question. Atheists cannot romanticise death because they treat it simply as the cessation of biological function. Christ and Christians, on the other hand, looked upon death as the sublimation of life. For them it was not a puzzle but the solution in eternity through Christ. Biblical prophets treated death, not as an enigma, but as a road to heaven where celestial beings carry out the work of God who presides over them.

Greeks and Indians had a rare kind of vital force for an inquiry into death. Socrates was in ecstasies when he confronted death. For him death was the culminating point for his spiritual pursuit. He was intuitively sure that his soul was going to be steered through the oceans of the unknown safely by the captain of life who is God or, in his dialect, 'demon'. Here I am reminded of Tagore's line :

"O, My Lord, be captain of my journey, the journey has started. Be captain of my journey."

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As against the intuitive vehemence of Socrates, Sartre says :

"We have to conclude, against Heidegger, that, far from being my own possibility, death is a contingent fact, which, as such, escapes me by principle... I cannot discover my death, nor wait for it, nor take an attitude towards it, for it is that which reveals itself as indiscoverable, that which disarms all expectations."

Sartre is perfectly right in freeing him-self of attitudes. Rightly or wrongly, religionists are attitude-takers. **Hindus believe that death is a gate through which the soul passes to be reincarnated. "Just as a person casts off worn-out garments and puts on others that are new, even so does the embodied soul cast off worn-out bodies and take on others that are new."** This verse from the Gita is indicative of a classic Indian attitude towards death. Like Socrates and as against Sartre, Hindus face death stoically, not with the romanticism of Christians.

But what is an actual experience of death ? How does one feel while dying ? Here is David Snell's experience. Snell got a severe reaction from penicillin. He was losing consciousness and felt life gradually being withdrawn. But it seemed as if he was witnessing the whole scene from outside his body. Ultimately, like Dante, he perceived an effulgence of which he was part and parcel.

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Similarly De Quincey's mother had an unusual experience. While being drowned, she could perceive, like in a film, her whole life in a few seconds—a sort of 'aerial view.'

Yoga teaches that man is made of five sheaths. These sheaths interpenetrate each other. They are the physical, the vital, the mental, the intuitive and the transcendental. Yoga says : "At the hour of death the life-force in the physical is gradually withdrawn into the vital and then the conscious becomes aware of the vital, then the life-force in the vital is withdrawn into the mental, and then consciousness becomes aware of the mental, and so on. Ultimately, in the transcendental sheath, consciousness, impregnated with the life-force, hibernates, waiting for an appropriate body."

De Quincey's mother's and Snell's experiences tally with the yogic explanation. Seeing the whole life serially is a capacity of the mental sheath, conglomerate of the subconscious and unconscious mind. Yoga teaches us how to hibernate or to have a conscious death. The practice includes withdrawing the life-force from top to toe.

The *Kathopanishad* says : "Those who perceive mundane allurements perish; those who seek immortality remain."

Indian life is predominantly guided by the above philosophy. Whatever may be the outcome of such

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philosophy, one fact remains : courage to go to the abyss of death and find reality.

As Tolstoy has said, no sane man refuses to think about death in his loneliness. Life is a process of perennial unfoldment and death is a process within a process.

But let us hope the hope of Goethe at the time of death : "Light more light."

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Rhapsodies

Stop my songs orally,
You will find my heart singing still.
Stop my heart.
And you will find my cells singing.
Stop everything.
And you will find God singing.

