

*Lo! I listen to the song of union of the river entering into the sea.
The wide extended arms of death hold no fear for me,
For through its narrow gates
I shall pass on unto the sweet silence of Eternity.*

Swami Jyotirmayananda



Death and Reincarnation

Part Four by Sri Swami Jyotirmayananda

Behind the Dark Curtain of Death

Experiences After Death

Has anyone come from the World of Death to explain to us what it is like to die and to describe the after-death experience? There are spiritualists who have investigated this through mediums and communicated with the spirits of the dead. They have revealed various interesting details. They have stated that death does not terminate life and that spirits continue to live. They have also conveyed messages to living beings through a medium or by clairvoyant or parapsychological methods.

There are visionaries who have provided various descriptions of spirits after death: Angels leading the soul to different dimensions, descriptions of gardens, chariots, expansive fields for the virtuous, as well as descriptions of hellish conditions — filthy marshes, fires burning where a sinful spirit journeys after it is released from the physical body. Can these descriptions be true?

Spiritualists as well as religious visionaries are correct to a certain extent about their after-death descriptions. And yet the whole truth cannot be understood unless you are able to unravel the mystery of death. You do not have to believe in what others have said. Reflect and exercise your own reason and research the topic to verify and understand what they infer. To consider them completely false is incorrect. To consider them absolutely correct is irrational. These descriptions are symbolic statements that cannot be taken literally and at the same time cannot be dubbed as essentially false.

“Why then,” you may ask, “should spiritual and religious orators speak about death and after-death in symbols? Why not simply express the facts in clear and concise terms?” At this stage, you must seriously reflect upon this topic to understand the important reason. Most human experiences are perceived by the mind and senses — limited by the spheres of one’s ego-personality. All expressions of language are confined to the terms of sense perceptions. How then can it be possible to describe the experiences of death and after-death when they exist outside the conduits of the body, the nervous system and brain and outside the realm of sense perceptions?

Four Possible Directions for the Soul after Death

After death, there are four possibilities for the soul according to Vedanta: 1. If you attain Enlightenment within your lifetime, you are liberated from the cycles of birth and death and will not

reincarnate. That is called instantaneous Liberation (*sadyah mukti*) and that is the goal, the fruit of the ultimate success in life. Those who have attained release from all limitations — enlightened souls such as Jesus, Buddha, Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharshi and other Sages and Saints — were able, even in their lifetime, to transcend all the limitations of the mind. After death, they merge in the expansion of the Unity of Life. They transcend all forms of differences and multiplicity. They become all that exists, infinite and eternal. There is no possibility for them to reincarnate. This attainment is the goal of all religious scriptures, of all spiritual instructions, disciplines and developments. This is called *Moksha*, *Nirvana*, the Kingdom of Heaven, Divine Communion, God-realization or Self-realization. In brief, this is the perfection that one seeks, and it is for this attainment that one lives through various incarnations. But such enlightened souls are very, very few.

2. However, if you did not obtain Liberation in life due to spiritual obstacles, but created great purity of mind and developed intense devotion to the Divine Self (God), that force propels you beyond the lure of the world and leads you to continue progressing after death (without physical embodiment). That is known as *Krama Mukti*, the path of light or the Northern Path. “North” is a symbolic term for upward movement, a movement towards transcendence, towards the Absolute. As allegorically described in the Gita (Chapter 8, verses 24-25), when a soul follows the Northern Path, the deity of fire appears (*vairagya* or dispassion increases) and escorts him to the deity of Light (*viveka* or discriminative vision unfolds more and more). He is then led by the deity of the moon (Divine feelings blossom), and gradually moves on to increasing expansion in consciousness until he attains Liberation. He does not return.

3. The third possibility for the soul after death is called the Southern Path, the path of return. “South” is a mystic term for a movement in relativity. It does not refer to an actual direction. When a virtuous person dies with a predominance

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of positive impressions, they are progressing towards the final integration of their being — and yet they are not adequately prepared for the Northern Path. They have not attained that state of purity in which they can glimpse the expansion of life in its ultimate fullness, a state in which their very ego-center dissolves.

Allegorically speaking, on the Southern Path there is a mist that covers the intellect. The soul is escorted to the deity of the dark fortnight, then to the deities identified with the sun's southern journey. Since there is decreasing daylight as the sun turns to the south, this description implies that on the Southern Path there is a contraction in consciousness.

This type of death leads one to the astral plane, the subtle plane where he exists without the physical body. Here the subtle body has pleasurable experiences in a dreamlike condition, known as *swarga* or heaven. The impressions of virtue open windows to varying visions of expansion. He experiences joy in varying degrees, but not in its absolute fullness. When this intense form of joy has ended, he reincarnates into a suitable family to continue his spiritual progress — to gather further wisdom leading to the final dissolution of the complexes and limitations of the mind. The heaven we talk of in this context is not Libera-

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tion or the Kingdom of Heaven described in the Bible, but is a relative experience of pleasure in a subtle plane. Virtuous karma leads one to that type of experience.

If spiritual aspiration has not developed and you have not understood the illusion behind ego-consciousness, then all your aspirations and desires during your lifetime are always for egoistic enjoyment. You perform virtuous deeds, but always expect to go to a heaven where God will give you great rewards. Your mind thinks of heaven as a place where you will experience beautiful music and delicious, tasty dishes, where all the senses will be completely fulfilled. If that is your concept, then virtue will no doubt provide heavenly pleasures after death. However, that pleasure will terminate after the virtuous karma is exhausted, and you will return in a new embodiment.

4. The fourth possibility applies to those who die with the predominance of negative or vicious impressions. For them, the windows to expansion are shut. Therefore, there arises an intense experience of pain in varying degrees after death. Pain is not an independent entity. It is like darkness, which is merely the absence of light. When the intensity of painful karma wanes, they incarnate again to allow their soul to evolve further, until that blessed state is reached wherein they are liberated from all limitations.

People who return from the hellish worlds carry from their very childhood a perverted mind. They delight in killing frogs and lizards. They delight in causing suffering in others and they encounter frustrating circumstances in their lives that turn them into great rogues or monsters of humanity.

Under the third and fourth categories, there are innumerable sub-categories to which most people belong. What is important is the essence of the experience. As long as the karma of a person is mixed with mental limitations, he is not liberated. Therefore, after exhausting the experiences of either heaven or hell, the soul must be reborn to promote its evolutionary process. One's karma determines the next embodiment.

What Do We Mean by Heaven and Hell?

Are heaven and hell real? Figuratively, hell is the intense experience of pain and contraction, and heaven is the intense experience of joy and bliss and expansion. The mind, being the reservoir of previous impressions, manifests various visions and subtler experiences. Therefore, the individual is led to a dream world, as it were, after death. The experiences are without the brain and without the day-to-day realities from the physical plane. These experiences can be painful or pleasant depending upon the actions performed during the life of the person. Actions that are based upon universal harmony and love, free from gross complexes, create positive impressions. These impressions lead to the expansion of consciousness, here in life, and much more so, after death. It is the upliftment of consciousness that gives the sense of fulfilment, and therefore of joy.

After death, people who have performed actions for a worldly or heavenly result (*sakamya karma*), attain different heavenly regions (*swarga*) in the astral plane, where they exist with a subtle body, according to the nature of their good karmas. The results of whatever virtuous deeds they have performed lead them after death to the heavenly worlds, where, allegorically speaking, gods enjoy heavenly pleasures.

People who have not developed dispassion (*vairagya*), who do not know that there is something more than the pleasures of the senses, become intent upon doing good deeds with a particular result in mind. They hope to experience after death the heavenly planes that present subtle enjoyments they want to enjoy.

Here on this earth everything is limited by bodily realities. If you like a certain type of food, you can only eat one plate of food. After that you don't want any more. No matter how joyous a day might have been, you get tired and want to go to sleep. All forms of joy on this plane are limited.

In the heavenly realms, one enjoys immense pleasures of the senses and remains youthful, and there is no suffering caused by hunger and thirst. In the heavenly plane there is uninterrupted joy. If it is your fancy to eat ice cream, heaven will present to you a whole ocean of ice cream and you can sit licking it forever. That, in the minds of many people, is heavenly bliss.

In a similar way, actions sustained by gross egoism, hatred, anger, violence, deceit and hypocrisy lead to the contraction of consciousness by creating dark veils of mental complexes. The contraction of consciousness gives rise to the experience of pain, here in life and much more so, after death. Even in this life, you suffer internally when your actions are tinged with selfishness and cruelty; but you rejoice when you are able to express generosity, humility and other higher virtues.

One may ask, "Is it possible to experience heaven and hell the way they are described?" The descriptions are not entirely false, and the conditions can be experienced the way they are portrayed to a certain extent. The mind experiences pleasure or pain, happiness or grief, in the terms of symbolic forms, even as you would experience these impressions in dreams. The dream phenomenon is false, and yet the mind can perceive dream experiences as a reality during dream. In the same

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way, those who have built a strong symbolism within their mind of a particular form of heaven will, after death, experience joy through the appearance of that form.

To be more explicit, if you are a devotee of Jesus, and have a strong devotion to the symbolism of angels and archangels described in the Christian belief, you may encounter these forms as you separate your deeper being from your physical body. You may even feel that you are being blissfully led away through a beautiful garden or orchard, or you may witness scenes and sights of immense beauty. Another person whose mind has developed the impressions of a Hindu Heaven will see gods, heavenly gardens and streams of honey according to the symbolic impressions deeply embedded in his mind. The negative descriptions of hell should also be understood in the same way.

Experiences of Expansion or Contraction After Death

The spirit or soul survives death. Conjoined with karmas and mental impressions, the spirit transcends the body. In common parlance, people speak of the soul passing out of the body after death. They do not realize that the soul, being more elusive than all conceivable forms of subtle energies, is all-pervasive, and therefore it penetrates and permeates the physical phenomena. It does not move like a physical object.

After death, the soul continues to exist in the astral plane along with the subtle impressions that are a result of its actions and experiences from various lives. These subtle impressions, called karmas, determine the experiences that the soul will have after death.

The astral plane, where the individual soul abides, is expansive and profound. However, the soul is not in complete communion with it. It is like abiding in the most picturesque place in nature—while your windows are securely boarded up! Outside lies the breathtaking horizons of feathery clouds, mountains clad with the golden

rays of the sun and a refreshing breeze, and yet you are not aware of all this. You are not able to enjoy the beauty and exhilaration that it offers.

Similarly, the soul has gathered its own particular karmas and limited impressions and has created a prison wall. Therefore, although infinite expansions surround the prison, the soul is unable to plunge into the bountiful horizons of this experience.

Virtuous actions consist of actions that promote harmony within and without; actions based upon love, understanding, kindness and sincerity; actions that arise out of a personality that is moving towards its integration. These actions open the windows in the prison walls of one's mental existence. And through these windows, one is able to experience expansion in varying degrees, giving rise to different intensities of joy. On the other hand, impressions of negative actions such as violence and hatred, actions arising out of a diseased personality, continue to create disharmony in one's being. When these negative impressions fructify, they shut the windows and lead to the contraction of one's experience. Virtue opens the windows to expansion, vice shuts the windows. But what is necessary is to break the walls of the prison and transcend virtue and vice through Self-realization.

The Astral Body Accompanies the Soul after Death

What happens to the soul when it has disconnected itself from the physical body? Death separates the astral or subtle body from the physical body. The astral body consists of the mind in its different planes: Senses, conscious mind, ego, intellect, subconscious and unconscious mind (*chitta*). The spirit involved in the astral body snaps the cords of vital bonds with the physical body, for its further evolution. According to Vedanta philosophy, when you die, the subtle body does not perish. It remains with your spirit and it is the only thing that you take

with you. You do not take your physical body or your possessions.

Explained in a slightly different manner by Vedanta, the subtle body, referred to as the *puryashtaka*, has eight constituents. The first is ignorance (*avidya*), a mystic obscurity in the innermost depths of your unconscious. It is called ignorance because we know nothing about it. The moment your mind turns inward, you encounter a veil in the form of “I don’t know.” That obscurity affects the subtle body and is responsible for the individual entering into the world-process.

The second is desire (*kama*) in the form of subtle expectations — subtle desires for the objects of the world. The third is impressions of action (*karma*). Every action that one performs, good or evil, creates its seeds or impressions. Those impressions (*karmas*) remain in the unconscious and are the guiding force behind the principle of reincarnation. The fourth constituent of the *puryashtaka* is the four-fold mind (*antahkarana*), composed of the unconscious (*chitta*), intellect (*buddhi*), ego (*ahamkara*), and the conscious mind (*manas*).

The senses (*jnanendriyas*) or ears, eyes, etc. and the organs of action (*karmendriyas*) or hands, feet, etc. have their subtle counterparts as the fifth and sixth components of the subtle body. You must realize that your physical senses are not your real senses. They are merely vehicles for the subtle principles that operate in the subtle body. The subtle life forces (*pranas*) and the subtle elements of ether, air, fire, water and earth (*sukshma bhutas*), which are the basic constituents of matter, constitute the seventh and eighth components of the subtle body.

What Power Guides the Soul After Death?

There is a mysterious power within the soul that comes from God, the Absolute. That is the power and wisdom that guides the soul after death. You are not guided by your own intellect. In this world

your intellect guides you if you want to travel to a certain country. You arrange for the tickets, you see a travel agent and you plan everything. But after death, nothing is in your hands. This is true even when you go to sleep. Your travels into dream are not chalked out by your ego. It is a subtle power, a subtle intelligence that guides you in sleep as well as after death. That subtle Hand leads you on according to your karma.

The Rehearsal of Death

What happens at the time of death is rehearsed by nature every day by producing the experience of sleep. In the state of deep sleep, you exist beyond your body and mind. Your existence in sleep is simple, and yet you do not view the prospect of losing all your acquisitions or the realities of your daily life as anything tragic. Death is very similar to going to sleep — an exact performance. From sleep, one returns to the same physical body and to similar physical conditions, but from death one comes back to another physical body and to different circumstances and relationships.

The Remedy for Repeated Deaths

As we have seen, those who have exhausted their karmas in the astral realm (after death), are sent back into the world in another embodiment. The soul returns and is reborn into another incarnation. If that pattern persists, death repeats after each embodiment. One continues the cycle of reincarnation.

Realizing the Self is the remedy for repeated births and deaths. That is the primary and most important duty of a person having entered human embodiment. If you are lacking wisdom and have not realized the Self, you are susceptible to experiencing repeated births and deaths. Positive and negative karmas will continue. It is only when you have attained Enlightenment that you become free of the karmic cycle.