

## Introductory Study Paper 6: DEATH and the Process of Dying

**When a man dies, there is this doubt: some say, he is;  
others say, he is not. Taught by thee, O King of Death,  
I would know the truth.**

*Katha Upanishad*



**To the question, 'Where does the soul go, when the body dies?'**  
**Jacob Boehme answered:**  
**'There is no necessity for it to go  
anywhere'**

Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*

**Never the Spirit was born;  
the Spirit shall cease to be never;  
Never was time it was not;  
End and Beginning are dreams!  
Birthless and deathless and changeless  
remaineth the Spirit for ever;  
Death hath not touched it at all,  
dead though the house of it seems!**

Sir Edward Arnold, *The Song Celestial (Bhagavad Gita)*

The study of the constitution of man as he is in life is a necessary preliminary to the understanding of death and the process of dying. Without this basic information, religious teaching about death is unable to give more than a somewhat vague account of a here-after related, in terms of happiness or suffering, to the merits or demerits of the life just ended. The theosophical teaching about death is inseparable from the whole system. In particular, the paragraph in the preceding paper describing man as threefold is directly relevant to this present study. The term 'soul' designates the thinking-feeling self of everyday experience, housed in the physical body, and is mortal like that body. This is the **personality**. Spirit alone, described as a spark or ray of the Divine Life, is immortal, the enduring **Individuality**.

The facts concerning the process of dying are given in some detail in *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, a unique volume of the theosophical teachings about man and the universe of which he is a part. The authors of these letters affirm:

**We tell you what we know, for we are made to learn it through personal experience.**

These Adept Teachers, known as Mahatmas ('great souls') or Masters of Wisdom, acquired their knowledge not from books but by developing within themselves the power to discover the truths of existence directly. This they did **by the training of faculties we all possess, but which they alone have developed to perfection ... have entered in spirit these various planes and states ... For long ages, one generation of Adepts after another has studied the mysteries of being, of life, death and rebirth, and all have taught in their turn some of the facts so learned.**

*The Key to Theosophy*

The subject of death and the process of dying is vast and complex, as it embraces the entire field of human existence. This introductory paper can do no more than point students to sources of reliable and extensive information.

The language in which post-mortem states and experiences are described must necessarily be the same as that used to describe the objects and events in the three-dimensional world of sensory experience. Expressions such as 'he has passed away', 'he has crossed over to the other side', while appropriate from the standpoint of those whose consciousness is centred in the physical world, seem no longer valid once the centre is shifted. People who have recorded near-death experiences use expressions suggestive of a sense of freedom, of release from limitations, of the enjoyment of a greater reality. However, in reading the literature descriptive of post-mortem states and events, students should take care not to materialize the non-physical or form rigid concepts patterned on the familiar world of the five senses.

Except for the moment described as the breaking of the silver cord - the final link between the higher and the lower principles - death is to be seen as a process rather than an event. With this in mind, one may attempt to sketch in broad outline the stages of post-mortem experience.

As consciousness leaves the physical brain, there takes place a rapid but detailed review of the life just lived. In accounts of near-death experiences, the descriptions of just such a review appear to corroborate the teaching. Hence the repeated advice to those present at the bedside of the dying to ensure calm and quiet, avoiding any disturbance of this important event.

With the breaking of the cord, the co-ordinating energy of prana is set free; deprived of its control, the constituent atoms and molecules of the physical body - each of which is a life - behave independently in the processes of decay, and the body disintegrates. The etheric double, now separated from its physical companion, gradually disintegrates likewise, and the entity passes into the kamaloka. But, as Boehme suggests, no movement takes place; what occurs is rather a change of focus, as when attention passes from the objective contemplation of a flower to a philosophic reflection on time and mortality.

**KAMA LOKA:** The semi-material, to us subjective and invisible, where the disembodied 'personalities', the astral forms called Kama Rupa, remain until they fade out from it by the completion exhaustion of the effects of the mental impulses that created these eidolons [astral forms] of the animal passions and desires. *Ibid.*

From its former mode of perception of an objective world through the outward-turned sense organs, the consciousness turns inward into a subjective state, as real as a dream. There now occurs an automatic rearrangement of the astral matter of the psychic vehicle, to form a series of shells or envelopes of decreasing density. This kamic or desire body is the kama rupa, the last of the terrestrial garments worn during the life on earth.

**KAMA RUPA:** The subjective form created through the mental and physical desires and thoughts in connection with things of matter, by all sentient beings. *Ibid.*

The phase that follows is one in which all that tended towards spirituality in the now discarnate consciousness separates itself from the grosser, more material tendencies of the psychic nature. It is described as the 'death-struggle', because it is the phase of final separation between the higher immortal Ego and the lower psychic elements of the personality. It is a process of purification in which the entity, the divine Triad of Atma-Buddhi-Manas, disengages itself from earth-bound interests and desires and assimilates all that was noble and spiritual in the efforts and aspirations of its personal representative.

Now follows the 'second death', when all temporal elements having been left behind, the entity passes into the devachanic state. Devachan is defined as the subjective state into which the Ego, the divine Triad, enters after its separation from the kama rupa and the disintegration of the lower principles. It is always described as a state of unalloyed happiness and fulfilment, and, with very few exceptions, is enjoyed by every human being in proportion to the spiritual quality of the earth life.

**DEVACHAN:** the 'land of gods', literally; a condition of mental bliss. Philosophically a mental condition analogous to, but far more vivid and real than the most vivid dream. It is the state after death of most mortals. *Ibid*

At the end of the Ego's sojourn in the heaven-world of Devachan, the processes of return set in, in obedience to cyclic law. The Ego puts forth a ray of itself, as it were, by which to resume its human pilgrimage until, sooner or later, after many more births and deaths, the goal of perfection is attained.

Law is one, universal, without exceptions. However, the uniqueness of each individual means that in fact, in the life after death, circumstances must alter cases, and no uniformity of effects can be looked for where there is a diversity of causes. The literature on the subject gives information about, for example, premature death by accident, suicide and other abnormal events. It also explains para-normal phenomena associated with deceased persons and pronounces unequivocally against so-called communication between the living and the dead.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

The principal sources of information about the theosophical teachings concerning Death and the Process of Dying are *The Key to Theosophy* and *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*. By consulting the Index of these two books, students can build up for themselves a fuller picture of the states and stages of the process as given by H. P. Blavatsky and her Teachers. G. A. Farthings's *Exploring the Great Beyond* and *When We Die* are compiled from the information made available in these essential texts. *The Theosophical Glossary* gives definitions and summarized information under particular heads - Kama Loka, Kama Rupa, Devachan, Spiritualism, Shells and so on. A detailed and comprehensive account is given by Dr Annie Besant in *Death - and After?* L. J. Bendit's *The Mirror of Life and Death* gives a very readable survey of post-mortem states, relating the information in the classical literature to studies in consciousness familiar to students of psychology.