Death and Dying
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The Transition Called Death: Each of us must ultimately confront our mortality. For Hindus, this is not a fearsome prospect. We know we have been born and died before, and karma and reincarnation make the inevitable seem natural. One saint consoled, "Death is like falling asleep, and birth is like waking from that sleep." Simple. Other sages speak of death joyously as release from bondage, as return to our Source. The soul, the Vedas declare, is immortal. Still, we are attached and must cope, find understanding that will make death acceptable. Our Insight this month speaks traditionally of this personal, exalted and potent experience crowning life.

Our faith guides our transition from this world, offering solace to the suffering and those facing the foreboding certainty of death.

"Lead me from darkness to light, from death to immortality." This famed Vedic prayer proclaims the human urge to survive, to conquer death and to know the joys of illuminated consciousness. People often pilgrimage to an isolated place in expectation of a vision, be it a jungle of fauna and foliage or cement and glass. Every person is on a vision quest. But for all souls, at the time of the great departure, mahaprasthana, a vision comes as a tunnel of light at the end of which are beings of divine nature. Many having had the near-death experience have sworn their testimony of such transforming encounters. An American woman who "died" during childbirth, but was

brought back to life by quick medical action, recounted: "It was an incredible energy--a light you wouldn't believe. I almost floated in it. It was feeding my consciousness feelings of unconditional love, complete safety and complete, total perfection. And then, and then, a piece of knowledge came in--it was that I was immortal, indestructible. I cannot be hurt, cannot be lost, and that the world is perfect." Hundreds of people report similar experiences, affirming what Hinduism has always taught--that death is a blissful, light-filled transition from one state to another, as simple and natural as changing clothes, far from the morbid, even hellish alternatives some dread. A Vedic funeral hymn intones: "Where eternal luster glows, the realm in which the light divine is set, place me, Purifier, in that deathless, imperishable world. Make me immortal in that realm where movement is accordant to wish, in the third region, the third heaven of heavens, where the worlds are resplendent" (Rig Veda, Aitareya Aranyaka 6-11).

Most often, before our own death, we encounter its reality in the passing of friends or family. Our thoughts during the rites, termed antyesti samskara in Sanskrit, turn to God. We witness the end of another's life and ask, "What am I going to do with the remaining years of my own life?" All that is said during these times reminds us that life on earth is temporary. All our possessions, power, ego and learning will end. Seeing this truth we turn the mind toward God, toward life's ultimate goal, moksha, liberation, and toward the path of dharma that will take us there. We do this not in trepidation, but in assurance, faith and gratitude for the opportunity to progress spiritually in this physical incarnation.

Death is defined differently according to what people believe

themselves to be. If they are only the body and brain (as with humanists or atheists), then death is the end of sensory experience, of self. If we live once, death ends our only sojourn on Earth and is naturally dreaded. If we are born again and again, it loses its dread in light of the soul's pilgrimage to eternity. No matter how ill, how infirm our condition, there is a serene and consoling center of our being to which we can adjourn, the Source within. It is more us than our body, more us than our mind and emotion. It will not die. It does not hurt or fear. As physical debility and death draw near, we seek this center, whether we call it Paramatma, God, Self or Divine Consciousness. In the Krishna Yajur Veda, Katha Upanishad, Yama, Lord of Death, explains: "Death is a mere illusion which appears to those who cannot grasp Absolute Reality. The soul is immortal, self-existent, self-luminous and never dies."

It is the soul's subtle body, linga sharira, that stores the "thought-energy" experiential impressions of life, called samskaras. When the body dies, this nonphysical sheath continues as a constellation of subtle elements--dispositions, memories, desires, etc. It is within this subtle body that the soul, if needed, reincarnates, as described in the Shukla Yajur Veda, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (4.4.5-6): "A man acts according to the desires to which he clings. After death he goes to the next world bearing in his mind the subtle impressions of his deeds; and after reaping there the harvest of his deeds, he returns again to this world of action. Thus, he who has desires continues subject to rebirth." Death, according to Hinduism, is not the contradiction of life. Death and birth are two sides of life's cosmic cycle. The culmination of that cycle is liberation. As the venerable Satguru Yogaswami of Sri Lanka taught: "By getting rid of desire, man can put an end to birth altogether."

Resolving the Karmas: Many who have had a near-death experience speak of having come back to complete unfinished obligations to children, parents or friends. It is a great blessing to know of one's impending transition. A Hindu approaching death works diligently to finish all his "business" of this lifetime, the alloted portion of his total karma carried into this birth to face and resolve. If death comes while loose ends remain (misunderstandings unresolved, misdeeds unatoned for or obligations unfulfilled), another lifetime may be required to expire that karma. Thus, an aging or ailing Hindu will be seen going around to friends and enemies, giving love, help and blessings, working to resolve conflicts and differences, offering apologies and fulfilling all known obligations. Ideally, he executes his own will, distributing his properties and duties to heirs, charities and endowments, not leaving such tasks to others.

That done, he turns to God, reads scriptures, attends temple and amplifies meditation and devotion. He may pilgrimage to sacred spots or retire to a secluded place to practice japa and yoga sadhanas. The family takes care not to disturb these efforts, nor his retirement from social obligation or interaction, realizing he has entered life's final stage, that of the renunciate, or sannyasin.

Making the Transition Consciously: Knowing that a conscious death is the ideal, the Hindu avoids excessive drugs or mind-numbing medical measures. He cultivates detachment as death approaches, knowing that loss is not suffered when something is given up voluntarily, only when it is taken from us by force. He is grateful for life, but not angry with or fearful of death. Dying is not unlike falling asleep. We have all

experienced death many times in past lives. The astral body separates from the physical body, just as in sleep. The difference is that the silver cord connecting the two breaks at the moment of transition, signaling the point of no return.

Scriptures speak of leaving the body through one chakra or another, departing in a level of consciousness of a particular chakra, which then determines where in the inner worlds a person will find himself after death. Those who depart full of hatred and resentment go to the world of those who also died in lower consciousness. Those with love in their heart enter a world where abide others with similar attainment. Therefore, during transition a person must strive to be in the highest possible state of consciousness, concentrating on the top of the head and holding to lofty thoughts as he succumbs. A woman in California narrated: "Shortly before my husband died, he held my hands and asked me to recite the Lalitha Sahasranama and to say the mantra we were initiated into. He repeated after me in a loud voice when suddenly his face began to shine with a luster, and he became overjoyed and beaming. He started almost shouting in joy that he was seeing the temple and the Deities--Siva, Ganesha and Muruga--smiling at him. In this glowing way he passed away shortly thereafter while I recited the mantra in his ear."

Those who die suddenly, through accident or murder, have no time to prepare. Traditionally, full death rites are not performed after such deaths, because rebirth is expected almost immediately. For the same reason, rites are not accorded children who die young, before adolescence. In India, bodies of accidental-death victims and children are buried in a common grave or put in a river. Since neither is possible in

Westernized countries, cremation is accepted.

Funeral and Memorial Rites: Hindus traditionally cremate their dead, for swifter, more complete release of the soul. Burial, which preserves the bond, is generally forbidden. Death's anniversary is called Liberation Day. For saints, it is celebrated rather than the day of birth. To some extent, the funeral rites serve to notify the departed soul that he has, in fact, died. It is possible for a disoriented soul, not understanding that he is on the other side, to linger close to the physical plane. He can still see this material world, and even observe his own funeral. Some of the ritual chants address the deceased, urging him to relinquish attachments and continue the journey. The rites are also for the living, allowing the family to say a respectable and dignified "farewell," to express grief, loss and the mosaic of emotions they naturally encounter. The deepest significance of the funeral rites lies in their yoking the inner and outer worlds, Bhuloka and Devaloka, and their recognition that a family consists not just of its living generations, but its ancestors as well. Often a group of souls will sequentially incarnate into the same extended family, so that, for example, a grandson may be the returned soul of the father. In this way collective karma and dharma are worked through. Those in the inner worlds help relatives living in the outer world. When their turn comes in the outer world, they strive to attain spiritual progress that is only possible in physical incarnation. Ceremonial uniting of the deceased with his forefathers and yearly honoring of ancestors keep open the inner communication which makes the family prosperous and preserves its longevity.

The Vedas proclaim, "When a person comes to weakness, be it through old age or disease, he frees himself from these limbs

just as a mango, a fig or a berry releases itself from its stalk" (Sukla Yajur Veda, Brihadharanyaka Upanishad: 4.3.36).

Rites of Transition

Hindu death rituals in all traditions follow a fairly uniform pattern drawn from the Vedas, with variations according to sect, region, caste and family tradition. Most rites are fulfilled by the family, all of whom participate, including the children, who need not be shielded from the death. Certain rites are traditionally performed by a priest but may also be performed by the family if no priest is available. Here is a simple outline of rites that can be performed by Hindus in any locality. Variations are noted and suggestions made for Hindus in Western countries.

1. As Death Approaches

Traditionally, a Hindu dies at home. Nowadays the dying are increasingly kept in hospitals, even when recovery is clearly not possible. Knowing the merits of dying at home among loved ones, Hindus bring the ill home. When death is imminent, kindred are notified. The person is placed in his room or in the entryway of the house, with the head facing east. A lamp is lit near his head and he is urged to concentrate on his mantra. Kindred keep vigil until the great departure, singing hymns, praying and reading scripture. If he cannot come home, this happens at the hospital, regardless of institutional objections.

2. The Moment of Death

If the dying person is unconscious at departure, a family member chants the mantra softly in the right ear. If none is

known, "Aum Namo Narayana" or "Aum Nama Sivaya" is intoned. (This is also done for sudden-death victims, such as on a battlefield or in a car accident.) Holy ash or sandal paste is applied to the forehead, Vedic verses are chanted, and a few drops of milk, Ganga or other holy water are trickled into the mouth. After death, the body is laid in the home's entryway, with the head facing south, on a cot or the ground--reflecting a return to the lap of Mother Earth. The lamp is kept lit near the head and incense burned. A cloth is tied under the chin and over the top of the head. The thumbs are tied together, as are the big toes. In a hospital, the family has the death certificate signed immediately and transports the body home. Under no circumstances should the body be embalmed or organs removed for use by others. Religious pictures are turned to the wall, and in some traditions mirrors are covered. Relatives are beckoned to bid farewell and sing sacred songs at the side of the body.

3. The Homa Fire Ritual

If available, a special funeral priest is called. In a shelter built by the family, a fire ritual (homa) is performed to bless nine brass kumbhas (water pots) and one clay pot. Lacking the shelter, an appropriate fire is made in the home. The "chief mourner" leads the rites. He is the eldest son in the case of the father's death and the youngest son in the case of the mother's. In some traditions, the eldest son serves for both, or the wife, son-in-law or nearest male relative.

4. Preparing the Body

The chief mourner now performs arati, passing an oil lamp over the remains, then offering flowers. The male (or female, depending on the gender of the deceased) relatives carry the

body to the back porch, remove the clothes and drape it with a white cloth. (If there is no porch, the body can be sponge bathed and prepared where it is.) Each applies sesame oil to the head, and the body is bathed with water from the nine kumbhas, dressed, placed in a coffin (or on a palanquin) and carried to the homa shelter. The young children, holding small lighted sticks, encircle the body, singing hymns. The women then walk around the body and offer puffed rice into the mouth to nourish the deceased for the journey ahead. A widow will place her tali (wedding pendant) around her husband's neck, signifying her enduring tie to him. The coffin is then closed. If unable to bring the body home, the family arranges to clean and dress it at the mortuary rather than leave these duties to strangers. The ritual homa fire can be made at home or kindled at the crematorium.

5. Cremation

Only men go to the cremation site, led by the chief mourner. Two pots are carried: the clay kumbha and another containing burning embers from the homa. The body is carried three times counterclockwise around the pyre, then placed upon it. All circumambulating, and some arati, in the rites is counterclockwise. If a coffin is used, the cover is now removed. The men offer puffed rice as the women did earlier, cover the body with wood and offer incense and ghee. With the clay pot on his left shoulder, the chief mourner circles the pyre while holding a fire brand behind his back. At each turn around the pyre, a relative knocks a hole in the pot with a knife, letting water out, signifying life's leaving its vessel. At the end of three turns, the chief mourner drops the pot. Then, without turning to face the body, he lights the pyre and leaves the cremation grounds. The others follow. At a gas-fueled crematorium, sacred wood and ghee are placed inside the

coffin with the body. Where permitted, the body is carried around the chamber, and a small fire is lit in the coffin before it is consigned to the flames. The cremation switch then is engaged by the chief mourner.

6. Return Home; Ritual Impurity

Returning home, all bathe and share in cleaning the house. A lamp and water pot are set where the body lay in state. The water is changed daily, and pictures remain turned to the wall. The shrine room is closed, with white cloth draping all icons. During these days of ritual impurity, family and close relatives do not visit others' homes, though neighbors and relatives bring daily meals to relieve the burdens during mourning. Neither do they attend festivals and temples, visit swamis, nor take part in marriage arrangements. Some observe this period up to one year. For the death of friends, teachers or students, observances are optional. While mourning is never suppressed or denied, scriptures admonish against excessive lamentation and encourage joyous release. The departed soul is acutely conscious of emotional forces directed at him. Prolonged grieving can hold him in earthly consciousness, inhibiting full transition to the heaven worlds. In Hindu Bali, it is shameful to cry for the dead.

7. Bone-Gathering Ceremony

About 12 hours after cremation, family men return to collect the remains. Water is sprinkled on the ash; the remains are collected on a large tray. At crematoriums the family can arrange to personally gather the remains: ashes and small pieces of white bone called "flowers." In crematoriums these are ground to dust, and arrangements must be made to preserve them. Ashes are carried or sent to India for deposition

in the Ganges or placed them in an auspicious river or the ocean, along with garlands and flowers.

8. First Memorial

On the 3rd, 5th, 7th or 9th day, relatives gather for a meal of the deceased's favorite foods. A portion is offered before his photo and later ceremonially left at an abandoned place, along with some lit camphor. Customs for this period are varied. Some offer pinda (rice balls) daily for nine days. Others combine all these offerings with the following sapindikarana rituals for a few days or one day of ceremonies.

9. 31st-Day Memorial

On the 31st day, a memorial service is held. In some traditions it is a repetition of the funeral rites. At home, all thoroughly clean the house. A priest purifies the home, and performs the sapindikarana, making one large pinda (representing the deceased) and three small, representing the father, grandfather and greatgrandfather. The large ball is cut in three pieces and joined with the small pindas to ritually unite the soul with the ancestors in the next world. The pindas are fed to the crows, to a cow or thrown in a river for the fish. Some perform this rite on the 11th day after cremation. Others perform it twice: on the 31st day or (11th, 15th, etc.) and after one year. Once the first sapindikarana is completed, the ritual impurity ends. Monthly repetition is also common for one year.

10. One-Year Memorial

At the yearly anniversary of the death (according to the moon calendar), a priest conducts the shraddha rites in the home, offering pinda to the ancestors. This ceremony is done

yearly as long as the sons of the deceased are alive (or for a specified period). It is now common in India to observe shraddha for ancestors just prior to the yearly Navaratri festival. This time is also appropriate for cases where the day of death is unknown.

Hindu funeral rites can be simple or exceedingly complex. These ten steps, devotedly completed according to the customs, means, and ability of the family, will properly conclude one earthly sojourn of any Hindu soul.

Recommended Resources: Caring for Your own Dead, Lisa Carlson, Upper Access Publishers, PO Box 457, Hinesburg, Vermont 05461. Dialogue with Death, Eknath Easwaran, Nilgiri Press, Box 477, Petaluma, California 94953. Funeral and Other Sacraments After Death, Jnana Prabodhini, 510 Sadashiv Petha, Pune 411 030, India. Grihya Sutras, Sacred Books of the East Series, Motilal Banarsidass, Bungalow Road, Jawaharnagar, New Delhi 7, India. Hindu Samskaras, Dr. Raj Bali Pandy, Motilal Banarsidass. Life After Life, Raymond A. Moody, Bantam Books, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Meditation and the Art of Dying, Pandit Usharbudh Arya, Himalayan Institute, Honesdale, Pennsylvania 18431. The Transition Called Death, Charles Hampton, Theosophical Publishing House, 306 West Geneva Rd, Wheaton, Illinois 60187. Dilemmas of Life and Death, S. Cromwell Crowley, SUNY Press, Albany, New York 12246.