Death
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Death

Door to Immortality

Each month our educational center section provides the Hinduism Today staff with a 'kind of group meditation. Individually we ponder our subject, and together we discuss it in detail. These past 30 days our meditation was on death. You might think we had a morbid March. Not so, since, as U.S. General George Patton rightly noted, "For Hindus death is the most exalted experience of life."

This idea is sometimes hard for non-Hindus to grasp - especially for atheists facing Eternal Oblivion and for those of the semitic faiths which define death as a kind of punishment for man's sin and disobedience. According to this view, death is the ultimate sign of man's spiritual failure, a belief which understandably arouses instincts of denial and injustice. We may feel shamed, penitent, guilty and graced, not to mentioned frightened. And that's a long way from exultation.

No such thoughts attend the dying and death of a Hindu. Of course, there is much sadness surrounding the passing of friends and family, but that is honest acknowledgement of our love and attachment to life and to each other. Inside we know that death is OK, it is natural. Inside we know that the soul, even if it was less than perfect in this life, is continuing its appointed journey toward Liberation and will, in time, reach the other shore. Such knowledge is reassuring, whether the death is another's or our own. Thus, Hindus called death by a lofty name - Maha Samadhi, "the Great Superconscious State." And to be near an awakened soul at the time he or she gives up the body is considered one of the most auspicious and blessed of opportunities.

If we see death as the opposite of life, then life is good and death is bad. But if we see life and death not as hostile but as collaborative parts of a greater whole

called samsara (the cosmic evolutionary cycle of birth-death-rebirth), then life is good and death is also good. Both are part of the Cosmic-What-Is.

That being so, the pious Hindu approaches death as a mediation and a sadhana, as a spiritual opportunity. The physical body's impending demise compels him to practice detachment which yogis find easy but which is so difficult to achieve in the tumult of life. Yama's nearness brings an urgency to strive more than ever, to plunge deeper into consciousness in a renewed search for the Divine Self. No longer can he put it off. No more excuses about lacking time for the quest. No more distractions. Death's knock at the door reminds him of what is transient and what is eternal, and he knows instinctively who to embrace.

Impermanent though life is, we are getting more of it these days. It is estimated that the average life span for prehistoric man was only 18 years. In ancient Greece and Rome it was 20-22. Alexander the Great, having conquered the world, died at the ripe old age of 32. Sankara, having conquered the mind, also died at 32. Obviously, the quality of life does not correspond too directly with its quantity. In Europe in the Middle Ages, life expectancy increased to about 33, then to 36 by the 18th century. By 1841 it was 40 for an Englishman, and 42 for his wife. Today it is between 69 and 70 for men, 75 women. A person living to 80 will see 1,000 full moons and 30,000 sunrises. By Hindu tradition, the natural length of human life is 120 years, and some believe this was once the norm in India.

Down through human history, the study of death has fallen almost exclusively to shamans, mystics and theologians. In the 20th century, science joined the fray and added a new term to the English language: thanatology, the study of the medical, psychological and social problems associated with dying. (One scientist humorously noted that, statistically speaking, the death rate for homo sapiens has remained constant throughout recorded history, holding steadily at 100%.)

One reason for the new emphasis on scientific analysis is that death is rapidly changing. Technological systems of life-support have introduced abstruse moral, legal and medical questions above what exactly constitutes death. Our choice for Most Bizaare: Americans having their heads removed and frozen (at great expense) in hopes future medical advances will conquer presently incurable diseases. Where, how and with who we die is also changing. One academic, Geoffrey Gorer, has described the way in which, from being a socially recognized inevitability, death has become an embarrassing private trauma in which almost all outside solace,

except from intimates, is deemed an intrusion. Today in North America 75-80% of all deaths occur in hospitals. Death, once the family's duty and joy and pain, has become the work of strangers, specialists for whom the dying are a paid duty. Many terminal patients are under sedation, so instead of the conscious death Hindus esteem, there is a dim and drugged insensibility.

In hospitals these days it is forbidden to speak openly of death. Doctors now use words like "terminality," revealing how medical science too defines our passing more as taboo than exultation. Not to worry. There are others who see that the big D can be ennobling and liberating. Partly in response to the exorbitant mechanical end-game played in so many hospitals, groups are organizing to regain control over this all-important experience. People want to die where they lived, near nature's soothing presence, with friends having tea in the next room or listening to the bells from a nearby temple. They are claiming it as their right by fighting medical and legal battles in growing numbers.

Death is personified in most cultures. The Greeks called him Thanatos, and to the Romans he was Mors. IN India he is Yama, riding on a black water buffalo, green in color, dressed in red. The pigeon and owl are his messengers, his weapon is a mace. He carries a noose, called kala-sutra or "black threat," with which he snares the life force, prana, and draws it from the body. He is also called Mrityu, "death," Kala, "time" and Dharma Raja, "King of Justice."

There is much to be said of the Hindu insights on death, and only a fraction of it fit into the four pages you will find at the center of this issue. We intend to do more in the future and welcome readers' contributions. Our objective is to share the message of the awakened ones who conquered death and knew the body's dissolution as freedom from bondage, as liberation into the Light, as a flowing of the finite into the Infinite. They asked us to think fearlessly about death, to fathom its meaning. They urged us in exiting life to let go of the ego and be the immortal Self which time and again shrugs off the shackles of sorrow.

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