Chapter 20: Life After Death

Hindu Metaphysics’ Answers to Universal Questions about the “End of Life”

Death is the most fateful experience of each of our lives. But no Hindu really fears death, nor does he look forward to it. Death for the Hindu is merely transition, simultaneously an end and a new beginning. Over two thousand years ago Saint Tiruvalluvar wrote that “Death is like falling asleep, and birth is like awakening from that sleep.” In one of the ancient languages of our religion, the physical body had a name which literally meant “that which is always dropping off.” When key truths are understood and accepted about the nature of the soul and the cycles of birth, life, dying, death, afterlife and rebirth, all sense of foreboding and fear of death perish. Here we explore those realities.

What is the Eastern perspective on Death?

For Hindus, death is nobly referred to as “a new beginning.” Over two thousand years ago Saint Peter, the apostle of Jesus, wrote in his First epistle that “the body … is a temple of the Holy Spirit of God, a temple not made with hands.” In one of the ancient languages of our religion, the physical body had a name which literally meant “that which is always dropping off.” When key truths are understood and accepted about the nature of the soul and the cycles of birth, life, dying, death, afterlife and rebirth, all sense of foreboding and fear of death perish. Here we explore those realities.

What are the five bodies?

In Sanskrit, the bodies of our being are called kosa, which means “sheath, vessel, container or layer.” They are the sheaths through which the soul functions simultaneously in the various planes of existence. The kosas, in order of increasing subtlety, are as follows—vijnanamaya kosa: “Sheath composed of food.” The physical body, coarsest of the sheaths, is the vijnanamaya kosa. “Sheath composed of breath (vital energy).” Also known as the etheric or body, it coexists within the physical body as its source of life, breath and vitality, and is in contact with the astral body. The mind-forming sheath. “The lower astral body.” The instinctive-intellectual sheath of ordinary desire and emotion. “Sheath composed of consciousness.” The mental or cognitive-intuitive sheath. It is the vehicle of higher thought, understanding, knowing, direct cognition, wisdom, intuition and creativity. “Sheath composed of energy or life force.” Also known as the astral or mental body, it functions simultaneously in the astral/mental bodies. It is with these sensitive vehicles that we experience dream or “astral” worlds during sleep every night.

What happens at the point of death?

As the physical forces wane, all the gross and subtle energy goes into the mental and emotional astral body. If the person was prepared for death, sudden or otherwise, his mental and emotional astral body would have already been well schooled in readiness. Sudden death to such a soul is a boon and a blessing. At death, the soul slowly becomes totally aware in its astral/mental bodies, and it predominantly lives through those bodies in the astral dimension. The soul functions with complete continuity in its astral/mental bodies. It is with these sensitive vehicles that we experience dream or “astral” worlds during sleep every night.

In the illustration at left, a woman has just died. Her immediate soul is known as the anandamaya kosa: “Body of Bliss.” The inner or “in-between” world. Known in English as the subtle or astral plane, the astral body includes the pranamaya kosa, the manomaya kosa and the vijnanamaya kosa.

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Antarloka. A congested, distressful area where the Hindu also knows that death must come naturally. Even if you have the thought, "When you're dead, does your physical body and be "dead." A lot of people who are about to die do not believe in life after death that gets you into one of the seven worlds, realm of "demons." Equivalent to the Western term "hell," a gross region of the Antarlokha. A congested, distressful area where beings suffer the consequences of their own misdeeds in previous lives. Described as a place of torment, pain, darkness, confusion and disease, Antarloka is not a place where souls reside forever. Hinduism has no eternal hell.

What determines where one goes after death?
Where the soul goes in the astral plane at sleep or death is dependent upon his earthy pursuits and the quality of his mind. If the soul body itself is about to die, it will occupy the astral/mental bodies in the Devlokha. If somebody dies in the state of fear and anger, he will enter the lower worlds of those states of consciousness. And in that realm there would be hundreds of thousands of people in that same state of consciousness. The thought at death are the next sensations of the astral body. Even if you have the thought, "When you're dead you're dead," your astral body might just float over your physical body and be "dead." A lot of people who are about to die do not believe in life after death, so they remain hovering over their physical body when it is lifeless. Astral plane helpers have to come and "wake them up" and tell them that their physical body is dead and explain that they are all right and are alive in their astral body. It is often not getting them readjusted.

At death you leave through a nerve ganglia of consciousness, a chakra. Each chakra is a window, and at death it becomes a portal, a doorway. The tunnel of light that is experienced by so many people at the point of death is the portal they are going through, the window, the chakra. Passing through the tunnel is leaving this world and going into another. So, it is the state of mind at death that gets you into one loka or another. At the moment of death, you have the opportunity to stabilize yourself in the highest chakra you have experienced in this life. The dying should always remember that the place where one will reincarnate is the place that he is thinking about prior to death. So, choose your desires wisely. The last thoughts just before death are the most powerful thoughts in creating the next life. Secret questionings and doubts of Hindu belief, and associations with other belief systems will automatically place him among like-minded people whose beliefs are alien to Hin duism. A nominal Hindu on Earth could be a selfish materialist in the astral world. The Hindu also knows that death must come naturally in its own course, and that suicide must accelerate the intensity of one's karma, placing one in a

In between: Having experienced death, a woman continues her spiritual journey in a refined area of the subtle worlds. Below her are depicted the lower regions of fear; anger and hurtfulness. The heavenly realm of the Gods is shown above and to her left.

What should one do to prepare for death?
Being prepared to die and whether it happens suddenly or slowly, intuitively each individual knows exactly what he is experiencing and about to encounter. You don't need any counseling. It is a blessing to know when you are going to die, because then you can prepare for it, make a decision whether you are going to be reborn, do intense sadhanas, make preparations. When one knows he is going to depart the physical body, he should not be emotionally attached to the reality of it, and that is a wonderful blessing for them, as they can prepare for his great departure. In turn, family and friends should release him, be happy. Don't cry, you will make him unhappy. The sadness at death comes from the wrong attitudes. Western thought has to be reversed. He should consciously go over his wealth, his properties, he be the executor of his own will taking care of everybody, not leaving these things to others to deal with after his passing. After everything is settled, all personal possessions disposed of, then he enters a less meditative state after the emotional fracturing, trying to exit the highest chakra, evoking the process of life, which results in death. The ideal is to leave through the top of the head, through the door of Brahman, to get into the highest place, and not have to come back. The dying person should, at the time of transition, concentrate awareness at the top of his head and willfully draw in all the energies from the chakra, from the right legs and arms, one after another, then the energy within the entire torso, and all the energies within the body, from the soles of the chakra, up to the third eye and crown chakras. With all the energies drawn into the top of his head, he will leave through the highest chakra he experienced this lifetime. This would put him in a great place in the spiritual world.

Prolonging the life of the individual body must be done by the individual himself. Medical assistance to such people tends to create fear and anxiety about death. This temporary entanglements must again be faced and resolved. When one knows he has sustained is to incarcerate, to jail, to place that person at the point that the natural will of the person interferes with the process of death. Therefore, the Hindu knows that the belief in reincarnation is a blessing to know when you are going to die, but dying is not such a dramatic experience really. Every night you die and leave your body.

The fear of death is a natural instinctive reflex. We encounter it sometimes daily, once a month, or at least once a year when we come face to face with the possibility of obliteration of our personality and of leaving the conscious mind. The fear of change or fear of the unknown is an ominous element in the destiny of a human being. The study and comprehension of the laws of reincarnation can alleviate this fear and bring an enlightened vision of the cosmic rhythms of life and death. It is a simple process, no more fantastic than other growth problems we experience daily. Death, like birth, has been repeated so many times that it is no mystery to the soul. The only problem comes with conflicting beliefs, which produce fear and anxiety about death. This temporary ignorance soon subsides when the failing forces of the physical body reach a certain level. At this point, the superconscious intelligence, the soul itself, is there.

What must we return to a physical body?
Certain karmic causes are resolved only in the physical world. This is due to the fact that on the refined inner planes only three or four of the higher chakras are activated; the others are dormant. For nirvānā samadhi, all seven chakras, as well as the three major energy currents, have to be functioning to sustain enough kundalini force to burst through to the Self. At the right time, the soul is reborn into a flesh body which will best fulfill its karmic pattern. In this process, the current astral body—which is a duplicate of the last physical form—is sloughed off as a lifespan shell that is due course disintegrates, and a new astral body develops as the new physical body grows. This entering into another body is called reincarnation, “re-occupying the flesh.” Generally, the soul, at the time of conception, chooses the body he will inhabit but does not actually enter the womb until the infant body takes life and begins to move and kick.

During our numerous lives Earth, a remarkable variety of life patterns is experienced. We exist as male and female, often switching back and forth from life to life as the nature becomes more harmonized into a person exhibiting both feminine nurturing and masculine power. Therefore, the Hindus knows that the belief in a single life on Earth, followed by eternal joy or pain is utterly wrong and causes great anxiety, confusion and fear. Hindus know that all souls reincarnate, take one body and then another, evolving through experience over eons of time. Like the caterpillar’s metamorphosis into the butterfly, death doesn’t end our existence but frees us to pursue an even greater development. Reincarnation ceases when consciousness has been well performed, earthly karma is resolved, God is fully realized and moksha, liberation, is attained.