

DEATH AND ITS MEANING

"Men fear death," said Lord Bacon, "as children fear the dark." We regard death with fear and repulsion because it breaks [the continuity in our lives. Yet if we consider it simply and quietly, is it not actually a phenomenon which is as natural as birth? It is taking place all the time around us. The leaves fall from the trees and fresh leaves spring in their places. The cells of the body die by the million and new cells are manufactured and take their places. Every form of life perishes and yields place to a new. So universal, natural and apparently necessary a phenomenon cannot be devoid of a deep significance. Life exists in the midst of death. Look at any living form, whether an animal, a tree or a human being. There are always in that form forces which build up and forces which cause disintegration and decline.

No form lasts forever. It is by the death of the existing forms that Nature is able to move forward to other and better forms. Each form gives way to a fresh form in order that life may move upwards.

It may be thought: There is obviously the continuity of life as a whole, and more than that, its progression. But what of the individual — you and me? Whither do we go? The more Nature has been studied, the more does it appear that in its highest forms every manifestation of life is in some way unique with an individuality of its own, and this individuality must itself be an evolution by a continuous process isolated from others. The speculations, affirmations and intuitions of the greatest philosophers, of the most profound minds of all ages, agree on the theory or fact of the continuity of the individual human life, a continuity which is unbroken by death, but carried on by other means at another level.

It is not fanciful to think that life is a flow or movement, as Bergson has tried to explain, that as the stream passes through form after form, some of the experiences that come to it are impressed upon the stream, its waters being coloured in some way by those experiences. The flow or continuity is of each single stream, which remains as a distinct stream because of its individuality. In the case of a man this is really another way of expressing the truth of the survival of man, the final survival of some nature in him or aspect which is the essential part of himself; we might call it the soul.

Both in Hindu philosophy and in Theosophy there is to be found this view, that while there is death for the body, and deathlessness for the spirit, which is universal and yet present in each separate thing, in between there is the individual life, a consciousness, from which there is a periodic flux and reflux, which is governed both by the attraction of the Spirit, which is the life-star, and by the forces of matter. There is the deployment of consciousness, an advance into external conditions, which is followed by a withdrawal. This is the phenomenon of recurrence or repetition, of which we see so many instances

in Nature, in other words, reincarnation. Birth and death are but movements outwards and inwards. The forth going and the withdrawal are like waking and sleeping.

If we regard life as essentially independent of the body we wear, then the failure of the instrument cannot spell its extinction. The individual as a mental being can pass into a different state. There is the same consciousness, with its emotions and urges, the impressions it has received, the images it has formed, and all the reactions still in its memory. As all our mental images are kept alive by renewed contact, most of them must drop away after a time when the contacts are no more. So, when the individual entity, the conscious being, has moved away from the scenes by which his whole mind has been moulded, the tendency would be, first, for these scenes to fade out of his consciousness, and then for various tendencies to disappear, at least for their activities to cease, because of lack of scope and lack of stimulus. The entity, being removed from conditions with which he has been in rapport, to which he has been reacting, will naturally tend to become more withdrawn and live in a world of his own. The after-death state must be akin to sleeping and dreaming, being a state of withdrawal in which the conscious Ego is limited and enclosed by its own ideas, as we are in sleep, also with vivid experiences, as in dreams. The famous words, "Death, and his sister Sleep" show how a poet can intuit a truth of which he himself may not know the logical basis.

Then comes rebirth. One is often asked: Why is the individual born again? Perhaps we might give this answer: "You will be born next time for the same reasons for which you were born this time." In a scientific view, nothing can happen except as a result of forces which operate to produce the result. There have been obviously forces pertaining to the conscious being — which must be presumed to exist before birth, if we are not to regard it as a product of the body— through the impulse of which we were brought into incarnation this time. So long as these forces continue to operate we must come into a body again.

We come back to a new physical body without any previous memory. Each time we begin not as the old entity but as a practically new person. "Our life is but a sleep and a forgetting." We come back as a sweet innocent child, to begin a new chapter, to write in new characters a better story. The old tendencies may be still there, but until provoked and awakened they remain asleep.

Death may be for us the means of renewal, but what about separation from those whom we love, to whom we are attached? We have to unravel the mystery of the separation, how it arises, what it is meant to teach. We are not one physically, nor one in our minds, but we may be one if we go beyond the mind. In love that wants nothing for itself there can be no shadow of separateness. Death is a matter of time and there is unity only beyond the processes of time.

- *N. Sri. Ram.*

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so we may better understand ourselves and our place in the universe.

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