

Seminar on the Problem of Death

Part 1 of 2

Franklin Merrell-Wolff

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The thought has come to me that it might be well to have a seminar on the subject of death in the psychical meaning of the term. Death has two aspects: one is the ceasing of function on the part of the physical organism and its subsequent decay. But man is not only a physical entity, he is also a psychical being, and what death may mean in the psychical sense is a matter of far greater importance than what it means in the purely physical sense. We generally assume that the process of death is beyond any control of him who is dying, however, there are sources that say quite otherwise. In *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, edited by Evans-Wentz, in certain of the footnotes it is asserted that death can be a conscious process and that it can in considerable measure be an art. This was further enforced by the introductory remarks from Lord Woodroffe. He, who under the pseudonym of Arthur Avalon, contributed so much to our understanding of the Indian *Tantra*. Indeed, it may not be always true that the dying individual can do anything about the process, in fact that may be only exceptionally possible, nonetheless, if possible, it would make a considerable difference, from all that we can learn, if one directed his psychical awareness and powers in appropriate directions rather than letting the process take care of itself.

But before entering into this subject, there is another consideration that is of considerable importance. This is related to the conception of a psychosomatic unity. Is the *psyche* and the *soma*, or body, separable? There are differences of opinion upon this subject and if one assumes the position taken by certain writers such as Aristotle and Dr. Waltmann, it would appear that the *psyche* and the *soma* are not separate and not separable. If this is true, then the fall of the body would mark the fall of the *psyche*, and the continuation of consciousness in any sense beyond death would become very questionable. This has a considerable pertinence for us. First, for those who are orientated to homeopathy, Hahnemann promulgated the conception of a *soma-psyche* interconnection and implied that the healing of an individual is not only a physical process, but is also a psychical process. It is said that he derived this conception from the reading of *De Anima* written by Aristotle.

Now, there is little or no doubt that there is an interaction between the *soma* and the *psyche*, but how rigid this interaction is, whether it implies radically that the fall of the body means the discontinuance of all consciousness, or, on the other hand, is a looser interconnection so that in principle, while *soma* and *psyche* interact, yet they are in principle separable; and, thus, the fall of the body, or the *soma*, does not of itself imply the fall or discontinuance of consciousness in some form.

It has also importance in connection with the history of Christian theology. It may well be that the Christian view that man has but one body, namely, this gross animal body with which we are all familiar, and that continuation of consciousness

beyond death is dependant upon a literal physical resurrection of that body—an event supposedly becoming possible only with the resurrection of the Christ after he had perished upon the cross.

The Oriental view on this subject is very different and so was the view of Plato. Plato held that the body was a habitation and that the inhabitant, the real being, could occupy that body and could depart from it when the habitation fell and go on in a field of consciousness beyond. So, also, are the teachings, very explicitly on this point, by Sri Aurobindo. The implication runs all through the religious philosophy of the Vedanta and of Buddhism that there is something which continues, something which lives a course that is determined by a law of *karma*; and indeed it is implied that in a profound sense consciousness is not destroyable. I follow this latter position based upon my own experiences and my acceptance of these Oriental philosophies; and that, therefore, death in the psychic sense is something very different in its meaning from death in the physical sense. In other words, it is a change of form or state of consciousness, not the destruction of consciousness *per se*.

To bring this subject before our attention in a more tangible and realistic form, I will give a report of certain testimonies which I have received from individuals who have gone through the process of death part way, but were unable to make the full grade. There was a case of a man whom I knew formerly who was, as he claimed, a Christian Scientist, but one who at the same time was a thinker in his own right and not a mere repeater of the writings of Mrs. Eddy. He told me of a time when a friend of his was being treated for tooth problems by a dentist, and at one point ceased to breathe. Now, my friend happened to be present, and he proceeded to talk to this individual urging him to come back, and kept on talking and talking until finally the man's body began to breathe; and the man then protested against this annoyance of having to listen to a voice when he was in a most comfortable and delightful state in space. Note the fact that the individual came back to embodied existence reluctantly, that he reported enjoying the state in which he was very much indeed, and that he seemed to be in space of some sort.

Another instance was given to me by another friend who went through such an experience himself. He was a neighbor and was an automobile mechanic by profession. Once while in Oregon during a cold period, he lost consciousness through the action of becoming far too cold, and then, he said, he found himself in space in a most desirable state. Later, before it was too late, his body was found and it was brought back to life much to his annoyance. He says that he knows now what death is, and there is nothing to it.

The third testimony of such an experience was given to me by a Russian aristocrat. This was a person of more than usual parts and whose name I shall not mention since he would be known, but he belonged to the descendents of the family that ruled Russia for 158 years. He was of Tartar extraction. He was not only by birth an aristocrat, but in fact one of the *aristoi* in his own right. He told me that he had read three-fourths of his father's library by the age of seven. He was a captain in the Russian army at the age of sixteen; and this was not merely due to the preferential treatment that a member of the aristocratic class might receive, for he actually contributed means for the reduction of the loss of life that was being imposed by the German army in the First World War under the leadership of von Hindenburg, who had managed to lead the Russian invaders into certain swamps. He was very high in aristocratic circles, was

admitted to the secret archives of the government for one month; and he told me that he entered those archives as an idealist, as one with faith in human nature, and came out completely disillusioned concerning the action of man as representing the different governments of the world. Well, the account that I'm about to give grows out of a serious, nearly mortal wound which he received during military action. He told me that he was lying upon a bed, that the surgeons did not find him strong enough to operate, and he thought, and apparently they thought, that he was dying. He said an aunt of his was present and he asked her to take down notes of the process of death, since he himself felt that he was dying, thus there could be a record of the process as far as he could speak. He said he was proceeding in this way when all of a sudden he found himself, again, in space and in a state of exalted delight; but in this case, he decided that it was not right for him to depart, so he came back voluntarily, thereby revealing that he was more than an ordinary man; and he manifested in his body such increase of vitality that the surgeons judged it possible to operate, and did so, and he recovered. Note in each of these cases there is a reference to a being in space in a state of extraordinary delight which was greater than any of the desire to live in a physical body.

The next two cases are taken from literature. One report is in an insert that I once had which was taken from a medical journal being the substance of a lecture he had given to the graduating students of a medical school in Edinburgh. Among other things, he told of this experience. He was lying on a bed after eating a meal and had a severe case of indigestion which resulted, even, in his heart stopping its normal beat and fibrillating, as it was later determined. But he found his consciousness, or consciousness principle, as it were, in space above the city. He found that there was with him, though unseen, a mentor so that questions which arose in his mind were answered by this mentor. It is not clear whether the answer came as though it were sound heard outside, or simply as something in his own consciousness. He saw the city before him, and thus, therefore, was stationed in space; but, over the city was spread, as it were, a psychical net which consisted of lines moving at angles, probably right angles, to each other, and that at each crossing was a knot, and that that knot represented individuals in the city. It implied that any action, in the psychical sense, of any one individual had influence across these lines—greater in the case of those who were near, but still extending outward and diminishing with force only gradually. He could see also the objective city below him. He could see inside the dwellings, and could see the streets. He saw, then, his landlady come to his door, knock upon it, and then enter, then depart to a telephone, and saw at a distance someone answer the telephone, who then collected a bag and came as rapidly as possible to the place where he was dwelling, and then, as was later determined, gave to him an injection with camphor in it, and drew him back into body consciousness, much to his regret and distaste. Notice again, there was delight in the state in which he found himself and a sense of being in space, but in this case with more knowledge of an environment of some kind.

The next case is also taken from literature. This is the experience of Dr. Carl G. Jung. I shall read a portion of this account. It is to be found in the book entitled *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* and is part of Chapter 10 entitled "Visions."

At the beginning of 1944 I broke my foot, and this misadventure was followed by a heart attack. In a state of unconsciousness I experienced

deliriums and visions which must have begun when I hung on the edge of death and was being given oxygen and camphor injections. The images were so tremendous that I myself concluded that I was close to death. My nurse afterward told me, "It was as if you were surrounded by a bright glow." That was a phenomenon she had sometimes observed in the dying, she added. I had reached the outermost limit, and do not know whether I was in a dream or an ecstasy. At any rate, extremely strange things began to happen to me.

It seemed to me that I was high up in space. Far below I saw the globe of the earth, bathed in a gloriously blue light. I saw the deep blue sea and the continents. Far below my feet lay Ceylon, and in the distance ahead of me the subcontinent of India. My field of vision did not include the whole earth, but its global shape was plainly distinguishable and its outlines shown with a silvery gleam through that wonderful blue light. In many places the globe seemed colored, or spotted dark green like oxydized silver. Far away to the left lay a broad expanse—the reddish-yellow desert of Arabia; it was as though the silver of the earth had there assumed a reddish-gold hue. Then came the Red Sea, and far, far back—as if in the upper left of a map—I could just make out a bit of the Mediterranean. My gaze was directed chiefly toward that. Everything else appeared indistinct. I could also see the snow-covered Himalayas, but in that direction it was foggy or cloudy. I did not look to the right at all. I knew that I was on the point of departing from the earth.

Later I discovered how high in space one would have to be to have so extensive a view—approximately a thousand miles! The sight of the earth from this height was the most glorious thing I had ever seen.

After contemplating it for awhile, I turned around. I had been standing with my back to the Indian Ocean, as it were, and my face to the north. Then it seemed to me that I made a turn to the south. Something new entered my field of vision. A short distance away I saw in space a tremendous dark block of stone, like a meteorite. It was about the size of my house, or even bigger. It was floating in space, and I myself was floating in space.

I had seen similar stones on the coast of the Gulf of Bengal. They were blocks of tawny granite, and some of them had been hollowed out into temples. My stone was one such gigantic [granitic] dark block. An entrance led into a small antechamber. To the right of the entrance, a black Hindu sat silently in lotus posture upon a stone bench. He wore a white gown, and I knew that he expected me. Two steps led up to this antechamber, and inside, on the left, was the gate to the temple. Innumerable tiny niches, each with a saucer-like concavity filled with coconut oil and small burning wicks, surrounded the door with a wreath of bright flames. I had once actually seen this when I visited the Temple of the Holy Tooth at Kandy in Ceylon; the gate had been framed by several rows of burning oil lamps of this sort.

As I approached the steps leading up to the entrance into the rock, a strange thing happened: I had the feeling that everything was being sloughed away; everything I aimed at or wished for or thought, the whole phantasmagoria of earthly existence, fell away or was stripped from me—an extremely painful process. Nevertheless something remained; it was as if I now carried along with me everything I had ever experienced or done, everything that had happened around me. I might also say: it was with me, and I was it. I consisted of all that, so to speak. I consisted of my own history, and I felt with great certainty: this is what I am. “I am this bundle of what has been, and what has been accomplished.”

This experience gave me a feeling of extreme poverty, but at the same time of great fullness. There was no longer anything I wanted or desired. I existed in an objective form; I was what I had been and lived. At first the sense of annihilation predominated, of having been stripped or pillaged; but suddenly that became of no consequence. Everything seemed to be past; what remained was a *fait accompli*, without any reference back to what had been. There was no longer any regret that something had dropped away or been taken away. On the contrary: I had everything that I was, and that was everything.

Something else engaged my attention: as I approached the temple I had the certainty that I was about to enter an illuminated room and would meet there all those people to whom I belong in reality. There I would at last understand—this too was a certainty—what historical nexus I or my life fitted into. I would know what had been before me, why I had come into being, and where my life was flowing. My life as I lived it had often seemed to me like a story that has no beginning and no end. I had the feeling that I was a historical fragment, an excerpt for which the preceding and succeeding text was missing. My life seemed to have been snipped out of a long chain of events, and many questions had remained unanswered. Why had it taken this course? Why had I brought these particular assumptions with me? What had I made of them? What will follow? I felt sure that I would receive an answer to all these questions as soon as I entered the rock temple. There I would learn why everything had been thus and not otherwise. There I would meet the people who knew the answer to my question about what had been before and what would come after.¹

Here we have a particularly comprehensive account of an exceedingly interesting and valuable experience. The text goes on to say that there appeared a disturbance far down to the left, and that an entity appeared who proved to be his attending physician, and this entity said to him that he brought a message from the people of earth asking Dr. Jung to return; and as a result of that, Dr. Jung woke up, so it is stated, in his body, and then spent a considerable time in bed having a continuation of certain remarkable

¹ Carl G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961), 289-291.

experiences, but finally becoming well enough to continue with work he still had to do; and, in fact, said that he thereafter wrote some of his most valuable books.

Now, there are items of particular interest here. One thing that stands out is that the view of the earth is dominated by the color blue. This same quality is reported by the astronauts as they look back at the earth. It therefore suggests that the vision was objective. It would suggest that the space, if not actually the same space in which we commonly live, was nonetheless a some sort of co-space that gave perception in objective terms akin to our perspective of observation with which we are commonly familiar. Another feature of particular importance is the report of the painful exfoliation—an experience in which it is stated that everything that Dr. Jung had—the memory, and the possession of his experiences and thoughts, and so forth—were stripped away from him and that it was a very disagreeable process. But then it appeared that after having been stripped, he found that he had with him all that he had been, all that he had experienced, in, evidently, a different sense, for now he was identical with his experience, with his own history, and not simply one possessing it as an object of consciousness. This is a point of very great interest indeed, for it fits something which is stated in the Theosophical literature; that after death, in the ordinary sense, there follows, sooner or later, a second death in which there is stripped away that which one has acquired in the life, and such as is worth retaining is taken up into another level of consciousness and there assimilated. I won't go into the technical part of this, but all of the students are familiar with it. But it is interesting as bearing out this point. It is stated in that literature that those items that are of only transitory importance, or only mundane in their bearing, are stripped away and remain stripped away; whereas, those items of experience and thought which have a spiritual value, a value that is more permanent in the life of the enduring entity are taken up and become a part of a higher level of consciousness. This would seem to explain the reason why the state of wealth following the state of poverty was as though the entity was identical with this content of consciousness, that it was not simply an external possession. He was identical with his own history. It was, therefore, more than a memory.

This account of Dr. Jung's is one of the most interesting statements that we have. To us of the West, it has a special importance, in as much as it is the testimony of a qualified, articulate Western mind speaking to Western man in the restrained language of the scientist; whereas, so much that we have from the Orient is doctored up with flowery speech and well-nigh impossible figures that leave us guessing as to what is real and what is fancy—a fact that makes much of those materials that come from Oriental sources of limited value to the more austere and factual Western mind.

One other instance has come before my attention, but very recently, which marks a rather definite deviation from certain characteristics which are true of all the five instances reported so far. This individual had been in the German army at the age of 16, and had been wounded severely, and at one time thought he was dying. He said the experience was one of panic-terror. He said he had not been a praying man, but at that time he did start to pray; and then the experience was transformed into one of delight. This variation I find to be of a good deal of importance. It does imply that the experience of death, if one has not made a preparation for it, can be even one of panic-terror; and that would indicate that it is a matter of premier importance that we should prepare ourselves

for a transition which it does not seem very probable that any of us can escape. We are far too inclined to focus our attention entirely upon the affairs of external life, leaving to nature or to the action of other entities, real or supposed, the handling of the problem of transition, and making no preparation for it. It would appear to me that this is a very foolish course of action indeed, for we have every reason to believe that the span of an ordinary lifetime, even though it were one of a hundred years, is but a fleeting moment in the totality of the history of the individual, and that preparation for the transition to that other domain could well be a matter of the highest importance for every individual whatsoever, especially those who have reached and surpassed the traditional threescore and ten. Do not forget that the Orientals have told us that preparation for death is important, that at least with some of us it is possible to do something about it insofar as it is a psychical event.

There are three volumes, at least, that deal with this subject. One is a volume that was composed during the Middle Ages; another is the relatively well-known *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, and finally, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. I am not really familiar with the first two, but I have studied the last. What the source of this volume is is lost in certain uncertainty. Editors claim that it may be very ancient in its roots, perhaps even contemporary with *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*; but at any rate, it has been assimilated to Buddhistic thought, and it is stated that the steps that are here revealed have been verified by those who have had the power to go over the process in consciousness—pass through the physical process of death itself. The presentation here has much that has an alien sound to our ears, but it is pointed out that the pattern was oriented to the cultural and religious background of the Tibetan people, and that those who did not have that cultural and religious background would not have the same experience, but an experience conforming to that which was normal to them. At any rate, this much seems to be rather typical of the process as there delineated. One could pass through the whole process consciously, but most typically he passes first through what is called a death swoon from which he later awakens and may not even know then that he has left his gross physical body, but that later he does make the discovery that he is no longer in that body, but in something else that is subtle, something that could well correspond to what has been called the *linga sharira*, or astral body; that he can be aware at such time of the objective environment, of those who may be grieving because of his passing; and may be conscious of what may be done with those items which he had left—items of a material sort; that he may become indignant because things are used that he does not regard as appropriate; that he may attempt to communicate, but cannot produce any effect upon the consciousness of those who remain. This, bear in mind, is a picture of the ordinary death. It is not a picture of one who has attained something of yogic power.

The feature in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* which I find to be of supreme importance is a statement recurring over and over again which I have found nowhere else in either Theosophical literature, or the Buddhistic *sutras*, or the Vedantic *shastras*; and that is that the deceased, immediately upon entering into the state of the *bardo*, is presented with that which is called the Clear Light—first of all in its highest form and then gradually in descending forms of adequacy and purity until such time as he may be reduced to the limited objective of seeking birth again either in this world or in some other *loka* of either a pleasant or unpleasant sort. This which is offered to him repeated is called the Clear Light, and acceptance of it, giving himself over to it, in its first

presentation is said to be equivalent of entering into the *Dharmakayic* state, the highest possible state for a man to reach, and then later at lower states identified with the *Sambhogakaya*. This would correspond to the states of consciousness of the highest forms of yoga, and the peculiar feature of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is that it states that it is offered as a possibility to everyone who enters the *bardo*. But that if the *karma* is unfavorable, if the candidate is not prepared, he will revolt, will be repelled by the Clear Light, and will seek to go otherwise. This is very interesting. It would imply the very highest possibility as the immediate event after death.

I would translate Clear Light as Pure Consciousness, for it is traditional that light is a symbol of consciousness, and clarity has a meaning essentially that of purity. It is that which is unmade, unformed, uncreated, that which is the original stuff of which all that appears as formed is produced. It is the one thing which is not merely an appearance or a *maya*, but which is absolutely real. That is the meaning conveyed. To accept this is to accept the highest possibility of consciousness, in fact, the highest possibility of yoga itself; and the remarkable fact is that, if this text is true in fact, it is offered to all as an opportunity even though they are not prepared to accept it. But there is a question that remains, "Would one in accepting the Clear Light, or the Pure Consciousness, sever himself completely from all of the rest of humanity, or could he accept it and also retain a correlation with the processes in the manifested universe or *Sangsara*, as it is called by the Buddhists?" I consider the latter to be a real possibility, and that the ideal course would be to accept the highest possible, and then to contribute from that to those who have need in this world or in other *lokas* in the endlessness mass of inner possibility.