

# On Death

Franklin Merrell-Wolff  
September, 24, 1972

In the discussion with which we are concerned on the subject of death, I've tried to collect such testimonies as I could find both in the form of personal testimonies and some from literature.<sup>1</sup> However, I find that I did leave out one that is of particular interest. It was a testimony of an individual with whom I had had several contacts in the past and who has recently reestablished those contacts. This case is of an especial interest because there is a possibility that I may have known him in a previous body during this lifetime. He'd had this clear memory of fighting in the First World War, and that he was killed in Chateau-Thierry. He had memory of being in a bayonet attack. He seemed to have killed two Germans by the bayonet and then was killed himself by a bayonet thrust. And as he remembered it, he rose then above the field of conflict, which you may remember or have heard was one of the most bloody battles of that war. He felt the immensity of the conflict, and at higher levels found himself in a state of a kind of ecstasy—an ecstasy of combat, a kind of delight in the massive killing process. He ascended above that, in space, as it were, and then his memory train ceased.

In his present incarnation he was born in the same year, which was 1918, and he had the impression that I may have known him as he was in the previous incarnation. He had the impression he came from Santa Barbara. He once asked me if I remembered the name of such a person. I did not. However, there was one in the same company in which I was at the same time who came from Santa Barbara who, like myself, was oriented toward conscientious objection. I remember him loaning to me a book by Marie Corelli called *The Life Everlasting*, which I had read, and it's entirely possible that I still have a book loaned by him by John Haynes Holmes, who was one of the earlier proponents of the theoretical basis of conscientious objection. That book was found here recently in our collection and it has a name of a certain person whom our friend said he was going to look up, if possible, and locate this individual, if possible, in the military records.

The same individual remembered a portion out of an earlier experience, which apparently was death, going back about to the thirteenth century in southern France. This is somewhat amusing. It was in the days of the conflict in arms, you know, that made the tournaments where individuals drove at each other with long spears seeking to knock the other off of his horse; and he, though not belonging to the nobility occupied a certain position which led to an acceptance among the nobility. He kept the records, was a sort of a referee of such tournaments. Well, this experience he reported, it seems that he wasn't a person of very great ascetic tendencies; and that when his noble patron was away, he became very much interested in his patron's wife. And on one occasion the patron returned unexpectedly, and he was found in questionable circumstances, and the penalty for being found in such questionable circumstances was the severance of the body from

---

<sup>1</sup> See the audio recordings "Seminar on the Problem of Death," parts 1 and 2.

the head, which duly happened down in the dungeon of the castle. Then he remembers floating out through a grating in that dungeon, found himself outside moving about two feet above the ground or a kind of walk where he saw a certain formation and certain flowers growing along the side. And his first impulse was to go to a nun, with whom he had had only Platonic relationships, to tell her that actually you do survive the experience of death. He went to her but could not arouse her attention, and actually when he tried to touch her with his arm to arouse that attention, his arm passed right through her without producing any effect whatsoever. And then he found himself going on up in space and that was the end of the particular memory that he had.

Later, having a strong impression as to where this event took place, namely, in southern France at the time when the Pope had moved to France because protection of the Pope was inadequate in Italy at the time and the French king was strong, he looked up the area, in this present life, and apparently with success. It was a valley on the Rhone River in southern France. I won't attempt to pronounce it in correct terms but Auvergne, I think, is the name of it. He looked up one castle; it didn't fit the conditions. Then he learned of a castle that was across the river from the town where he was stopping. He went over there and that fit the description that he gave from his previous experience. He found the grating, he found the walk, and he found the plants with little flowers down there still existing.

That, I think, is an item that is of particular interest because of the checking that was involved. Of course, these are testimonies; these are not certainties, but we do move on the basis of less than certain knowledge. And this leads to a point that I've been thinking of this morning that I regard as of being quite important.

It is typical of the religious consciousness, as we know it in this world, that people feel that security is obtained only by categorical certainty, so that the religious individual tends to affirm his religious position as being unequivocally certain and that any other position which is in logical contradiction or other incompatibility with this position is necessarily false. But as this position is held by the different proponents of different religious points of view, a conflict arises between different categorically affirmed positions. And the result has been, over and over again, conflict in the form of war. Very great cruelty has been done in the name of religion which can be tied into this categoricism in religious conviction. And that leads us to the question of the possibility of taking another approach to the religious problem.

To illustrate differences that we find in religious points of view, we'll start with the ben-Israel group of religions, each of which is *theistic*. These are Judaism, Christianity, and Moslemism. Fundamental to the point of view in each of these cases is the belief in the reality of an extracosmic divinity who is different from the cosmos. But in contrast to this we have religious points of view which are *pantheistic*, as that expressed by Spinoza in his *Ethics* in which the divinity is viewed as coextensive with the cosmos. And again, we have the point of view represented by the Vedanta philosophy characteristic of the teachings of Krishna and reaffirmed by Aurobindo, and which can be called *panentheism*, which differs from pantheism and theism in this respect. It is akin to pantheism in viewing the divinity as including the cosmos and all that is in it, but also that the divinity transcends the cosmos. So you have the statement in the *Bhagavad Gita* where Krishna is represented as saying, "I produce this universe from an infinitesimal

portion of myself, and yet remain apart.”<sup>2</sup> The divinity there is viewed as including the cosmos but extending beyond the cosmos in the transcendent. And finally, we have the point of view represented by Buddhism which is *nontheistic*, in which the concept of the divinity is abandoned completely and in its place there is the conception of law or principle as the root of all. And taking the place that the divinity occupies in the other forms of religiosity is the conception of the Buddha, which is extended beyond that of a human personality, as it was in the beginning, to a cosmic conception where there is a cosmic Buddha. But the Buddha, as an entity, is not the root from which all comes, but is itself a product of the evolution, of development.

Now, this fact that there are different points of view that have been expressed in connection with the religious feeling, and these views being such that we cannot reconcile them logically and reduce them to one explicitly valid position, leads to the conclusion that the categoricalism, the assertion that this is the truth without exception, is not justified. Now the question arises, is religion on a basis that is other than categorical possible? The answer that I would give, I think, can be affirmative. First of all, Buddhism is not as categorical as the other religious positions. There are different Buddhist philosophies which are not logically compatible, and yet the followers of these different Buddhist philosophies may be in the same monastery in entirely harmonious relationship with those who follow different philosophies. There is, thus, a certain acceptance of a principle of relativity with respect to philosophic positions implied here. This, thus, suggests a very great religious maturity in the Buddhist position. Now, this would imply that there is not one formulation of the truth that is categorically correct. Can we live with this? I submit it is possible to do so since that is the position that is true with respect to our science today.

In an older day, even no more ancient than that of Immanuel Kant, it was asserted by him that the categories of the understanding gave categorical truth, which hasn't proven to be so. I cannot go into this subject to any extent at this time. I have dealt with it elsewhere. But I will deal with the most certain truth that we know today, and that is mathematical, and will show that our mathematical truth is less than categorical. And this applies all the more to our general natural sciences, for we know that the early assumption that mathematics was built upon the basis of axioms that were known to be true does not stand up, so that today we view the starting point of any mathematical system as based upon fundamental assumptions or postulates. The fundamental assumptions or postulates are not affirmed as true. They are simply assumed and then we proceed to find the consequences that grow out of them. Now, on the basis of mathematics that has been so built, we today have a cosmic conception based upon the Riemannian geometry, and it works—this is the General Theory of Relativity. We do not know that the General Theory of Relativity is the final word. It is postulational. It works. But sooner or later we have found that the systems of postulates upon which we have based our thought in the past, sooner or later cease to work, and then a reformulation becomes necessary. Now, what I'm suggesting is that this principle of building upon postulates or probable truth may be carried over into the religious field so that we can

---

<sup>2</sup> Yogi Ramacharaka, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita* (Chicago: The Yogi Publication Society, 1907), 109. The actual quote is: “Know thou, Arjuna, that I manifested all this Universe with but an infinitesimal fragment of Myself—and still I remain, its Lord, unattached and apart, although pervading all.”

abandon the categoricalism that has been one of the greatest, if not the greatest, cause of war and other inhumanities of man with respect to man.

Now, there are good reasons why we should come to the conclusion that all knowledge in the ordinary sense is only probable knowledge and not certain knowledge and can never be certain knowledge. I refer to knowledge in the sense of both sense perception, where we have the well-known illusions in perception, and conceptual cognition—because these are dependant upon the principle of contradiction, the bifurcation or dichotomy that is essential to a process of manifestation so that we know nothing in this world except in contrast to its opposite. Thus, we could not cognize upness without contrast to downness, goodness without contrast to evil, and so on through all of the dualities, with the result that if we take any conception and treat it as an ontological ultimate, we have made a fundamental error, for there is the contradictory of that ultimate conception which has as much truth value as the original conception. Hence, ultimate truth not only lies beyond sense perception, but beyond conceptual cognition.

The third door, the door which I emphasize and call Realization, also has evidence of a certain relativity in it. In the *Buddhist Logic* there is a reference to this by Dharmakirti, where he refers to what is called the *intelligible intuition*. He affirms that every sensuous intuition is followed by a moment of intelligible intuition, and by that means we make the bridging across to conceptual cognition. But it is affirmed in the volume that the intelligible intuition is the function exclusively of the Saint, and it is only a moment of this that is granted to the ordinary individual, and there is no further use of the intelligible intuition as an essentially different form of cognition. I do introduce something which corresponds to this in the conception of Realization, a conception used by Sri Aurobindo quite independently of me, as a third mode of cognition that is not reducible either to sense perception or conceptual cognition. I have had experience of five of these—three of them that would qualify, apparently, as in conformity with Aurobindo's conception of mental Realization, two of them that would seem to be transcendental—in part they tended to confirm earlier preconceptions, in part they added to it, and in part they modified radically the thought or implications that grew out of an earlier Realization. Thus, the fourth Realization, which led to what might be called the vestibule to *Nirvana*, produced the strong feeling of the unreality of the whole manifested universe, that it was all a *maya*; it confirmed the *mayavadic* point of view. Yet, after that, the fifth Realization emphasized the principle of equilibrium, and of a balance between the *sangsaric* and *nirvanic* poles, introducing, thus, the conception of the equipollency between *Nirvana* and *Sangsara*—a position which is maintained in the later phases of Buddhism. And that you cannot, therefore, affirm a higher reality of the *nirvanic* state than of the *sangsaric* state, but that these two represent simply the highest of the dualities. And they are resolved in a still higher state, a still more transcendent state, which may well be that of *Paranirvana*, which stands in a position of neutrality between the inconceivable bliss of *Nirvana* and the suffering of *Sangsara*.

Now, I introduce this in connection with our discussion of the subject of death for the reason that we do not have certainties concerning that which will follow the transition of this body; and it may well be that the problem of death is the very most fundamental basis for any religion whatsoever, because it is the problem that most, in the end, is our largest problem—the mystery of death—and a mystery we cannot avoid. And I,

therefore, insist upon the dealing with this problem in an unemotional and rational spirit as part of the adventure before us. Typically we avoid thinking about it. We will say, as a general proposition, since people have died in the past, it's probably true that I shall have the experience of death. In fact, there's a logical reason why you can say with even greater assurance that death has a certain inevitability—what we call death at least—on the principle that anything that is the product of becoming is of necessity subject to the law of decay. Where there's birth, it must be balanced by the inverse movement. This is affirmed in Buddhism, but I think we can see it as necessary in a logical sense. Such being the case, we seek, therefore, the best knowledge we can—testimonies from those who have gone part way and couldn't make the full grade and come back. There's one interesting story in this connection of a person I won't name at this moment, who was very far in the process of dying—external evidence indicated death had happened—and a priest was there giving the last rights, but this party was aware of the consciousness of the priest. He wasn't thinking about the last rights. He was thinking about his next meal. And this party became so indignant that she came back to life again. And I think we owe this priest a good deal. So, what I'm suggesting is the willingness to dare upon probable truth and not insist upon certainty before taking a position. That's the best we have in science, and I'm submitting, it is also the best we have in religion. We have an adventure before us.

Now, of all the sources that have dealt with this problem, the one that seems the most reliable is *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* is less understandable and is further from the scientific spirit. I'm not acquainted with certain literature of the Middle Ages that deals with the same problem. But this particular volume has the advantage of suggesting how this knowledge is acquired, and that satisfies our demand for a reasonable presumption. In fact, I can myself see a possible way of research in this dimension, for I have verified it is possible to set up a superposition of one's consciousness upon another consciousness so that you can experience it as though it were your own. I did that with respect to certain problems, and have proven, therefore, that it can happen. Well, extend that to the point where one superimposed his consciousness upon that of a dying individual. He could then witness and draw back the knowledge of the states through which such an individual passed. It is suggested in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* that this method has been employed as a kind of research by those who were qualified to do it. So, this gives us a presumption in terms that are like those of science in our sense, so that we may take it as a probable truth, assume it is valid, and carry out the preparation in its terms, and then see what happens. It might be quite interesting. Unfortunately, it's difficult to report your discoveries back.