

Meaning of Death

Part 2 of 3

Franklin Merrell-Wolff

June 1977

The sixth hypothesis is the view that ultimate Consciousness, in the sense of absolute Consciousness, universal Consciousness, Consciousness as *Rig-pa*, and Consciousness-without-an-object-and-without-a-subject, is the ultimate all in all; and second, that the contrasting elements known as the psyche and the soma represent a derivation from this Root Consciousness, that in the last analysis the psyche and the soma are both of the same stuff, and therefore there is not a problem as to how the two entities known as the psyche and the soma can ever get together. It is the diametric opposite of the first hypothesis which saw consciousness as an accidental effect out of matter, but holds the position that both matter, or substance, and energy are functions of Root Consciousness.

It might be well to introduce at this time an observation that has a bearing upon the status of the philosophic point of view on which the sixth postulate or hypothesis is based. In the discussion which follows the first fundamental in the “Proem” of *The Secret Doctrine*, it is noted that the Ultimate is divided into three aspects or modes. These are *substance*, *dynamism*, and *consciousness*. These do offer us three perspectives, or points of view, for considering the Ultimate. One can view it from the standpoint of substance, or *Svabhavat*, from the standpoint of dynamism, or *Fohat*, and from the standpoint of consciousness. The various philosophies that one finds in the world do reflect these different perspectives. Thus, the various realistic or naturalistic philosophies may be said to be oriented to substance or matter. The earliest forms of philosophy seem to be so oriented. In my terms, this is orientation to the object. There are philosophies that are oriented to the dynamic principle, such as the Voluntarism of Schopenhauer and the Vitalism of Henri Bergson. Finally, there are the philosophies that are oriented to consciousness. These are most commonly called Idealism—the school of philosophy which emerged from Immanuel Kant in the case of the great figures known as Fichte, Shelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, von Hartmann, Nietzsche, and Spengler, and reflected again in the neo-Hegelians in England and in our own country. The philosophy which I have attempted to produce is not identical with Idealism, though akin to it. Idealism has been called the philosophy that orients to *that* which is consciousness; in other words, to what we call the self or the subject to consciousness. My philosophy, in contrast, is oriented to the consciousness itself with Idealism standing as a close modification of it. And because it is not quite identical with Idealism, I have called it Introceptualism.

Now, it is possible to take any one of these three orientations and to view the other two as functions of it. Thus, from the standpoint of a philosophy oriented to substance, dynamism and consciousness would be viewed as functions of substance. If one took the orientation to dynamism, then substance and consciousness would be viewed as functions of the energetic or dynamic principle. And finally, when the orientation is to consciousness itself, both substance and dynamism are viewed as

functions of consciousness. This is the position which is assumed in the sixth hypothesis concerning the relationship between the psyche and the soma.

The conception of Introceptualism is derived from five Realizations which I have developed and analyzed in my writings and in various tapes. The statement is a *transcriptive* report based upon these Realizations, but it also is arrived at *speculatively* by an analysis of consciousness and its relation to our cognition of the universe. Thus, the position has a dual derivation. Now, we must bear in mind that consciousness used in this sense, namely, the sense of Consciousness-without-an-object-and-without-a-subject is not the only kind of consciousness there is. In contrast, there is subject-object consciousness and there is also evidence that there are many states or levels of a subject-object type of consciousness, and this may be identified with the conception of consciousness as *shes-rig* as used in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Consciousness in the root sense is not to be viewed as simple awareness, which is our usual meaning of consciousness, but while including that, involving also the functions of substance and dynamism as component parts of the Root Consciousness. The universe with which we deal does undoubtedly have a certain objectivity, but in this philosophy that objectivity is not grounded upon the hypothesis that it is a non-conscious matter, but rather that it is not simply matter that is conscious, but a consciousness which has matter or substance as a function of itself which can be objective and relatively permanent. One of the advantages of this point of view is that it affords a general basis for the interpretation of all yogic *siddhis*. Manifestations that indicate a violation of the laws of nature, which are said to be part of the *siddhis* possible to a yogin, if viewed as events in an external physical nature, would be extremely difficult to explain. But if ultimately nature is a mode of consciousness, then all of the phenomenal manifestations of which we have heard would at once be in a universal or basic sense explainable. It is simply consciousness operating upon the stuff of consciousness. How this is done in the concrete technical sense is another problem altogether. The general view that affords an integrating statement is one thing. The specific technical process by which such phenomena are effected is another matter altogether.

From the standpoint of the sixth conception or hypothesis, the events which we commonly call birth and death are viewed as simply events contained within an all-encompassing Consciousness. These events do not affect the all-encompassing Consciousness. They are merely transactions, as it were, within it. The specific or empiric problem of birth and death viewed as events in Consciousness is another matter. One may ask what happens to the subject-object consciousness or *shes-rig*? This is an immediate practical problem. We have a general orientation from the standpoint of an absolute Consciousness which says these events are contained within the matrix of that Consciousness, but what happens to the specific concrete consciousness of the individual who is passing through the event called birth or death. Here we find evidence of certain transformations.

In *The Mahatma Letters*, the one known to us as Koot Hoomi has said more than once that if a man who dies knows that he is dead, he is either an adept or a sorcerer.¹ The implication is that the vast majority of human beings when they die do not know that they have died. At first sight this seems to be a rather appalling statement. But there is a

¹ A. T. Barker, ed., *The Mahatma Letters* (Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1923), 124-125.

way whereby we can arrive at a partial verification of this statement. Often the act of going to sleep has been called the little death. Now, there does appear to be a certain basic truth in this in the psychical sense, not in the physical sense. There is a certain shift in consciousness which we can analyze. When we fall asleep we're in a mode of consciousness that is organized to a different principle from that which applies to waking life, and all of us, I suppose, have had an experience of this in their familiar acquaintance with dreams. In the dream, one does not know that he has shifted from the waking state. He does not even know that he had been conscious in what we call the waking state. He is moving in a way of consciousness that seems perfectly normal to him, and yet it is organized on quite a different principle than the waking consciousness. There are certain things in the dream that are not present which are present in the waking state, and these are five in number. In the waking state, there is conscious discernment, there is judgment, there is discrimination, there is reasoning, and there is memory of past events or thoughts in the waking state. There is a certain directing of this waking consciousness—a capacity to make choices in a situation, a capacity to evaluate evidence and make judgments, as for instance, the judgment that a certain apparent body of water, because of certain peculiar features, is not in reality a body of water but a mirage. And from that judgment it is possible to make a decision as to how one should act with respect to that apparent body of water. There is, thus, conscious directedness. In the dream, however, there is not this conscious directedness. The dream moves autonomously, takes its own course, and there is not an analytic process in the dream that is capable of studying the dream while one is dreaming. This is the ordinary case. There is the situation where one awakens in a dream without destroying it, and that we shall consider later.

This then leads to our being able to divide consciousness into two forms: one is the discriminative or directed consciousness, and the dream consciousness is non-discriminative and autonomous, moves by itself, not consciously directed by the dreamer. This gives us two orders of consciousness. Now, in that dream, I have found I do not remember ever having been acting on the objective plane in what we commonly call waking consciousness. However, when I awake from the dream I may—from the sleep, I may remember the dream, and may be able to subject it to analysis and so forth as is done in analytic psychology. I have never been able to observe the process of going to sleep, for the very act of observing prevents the event of falling asleep. There is a break, therefore, in the continuum of objective waking consciousness and that other consciousness which replaces it in the sleeping stage. Possibly this is possible under certain orders of discipline, but I have, when in the lucid state, noted some transformations or shifts in consciousness that were analogous, and this I will outline.

First, in order to achieve a clear orientation, let us list three states, or shifts in states rather, which are essentially death-like. The first of these is the familiar little death or falling to sleep. Second, there is the ordinary death in which the physical body is dropped and the presumed psychical states that are produced by that transformation. And third, there is the transformation in consciousness which eventuates in that which is called Mystical Awakening, Fundamental Realization, or Enlightenment. All of us are familiar with the little death and what happens in it. All of us, presumptively, will sometime pass through the ordinary death in which the physical body is dropped, and there is, to be sure, some evidence that we have been able to garner about what happens in the psychical sense along with this death. But surprisingly, the evidence is rather

limited and difficult to come by. There is, third, the transformation into a higher state of consciousness which is generally called mystical or yogic.

I have known at least something of the latter, and have made reports concerning it. This is clear, that consciousness in the mystical state moves upon another basis. It is not the familiar waking state that involves judging and conscious discrimination. One finds himself in a state of consciousness that, as it were, possesses him rather than he, as an ego center, possessing it; and it develops on its own lines. The form of this development, as I know it, involves a state of unimaginable delight, a sense of being here, for the first time, in real contact with reality. This latter is so strong that the world of ordinary experience appears to be no more than a meaningless phantasmagoria which proceeds to begin to vanish from his consciousness as something completely unreal. I found, however, that it was possible to prevent this vanishing to continue to a culminating end. Somehow the will is very effective here; for instance, I found that there was a tendency for even the memory of waking consciousness to tend to disappear. This I stopped, and it was done very easily. Thus, in my experience, there was retained an awareness of the outer world which occupied a minor position, a subordinate position, but was not destroyed. Meanwhile, the other consciousness which was of such supernal value and had such a strong sense of being the real reality was in the dominant position. It could be that if one entered into a deep *samadhi* where there was a complete break with the outer consciousness, in other words a blackout of the outer consciousness which might be accompanied by a catatonic trance, there would not be this overlapping of two types of consciousness, or a holding of two types of consciousness at the same time. But by means of holding the two types of consciousness at the same time, it was possible for the analytic consciousness of the waking state, to submit the inner consciousness to an analysis and to make something of a report concerning it.

There are some important points concerning the lucid state of consciousness which I think should be made at this time. The literature gives the impression that in order to obtain these lucid states it is necessary to go into a state of *samadhi* which involves definite trance—trance in the form that involves a discontinuance of the awareness of relative consciousness. But in the literature there is indication that one entering this state may have difficulty returning from it. For instance, in the biography of Ramakrishna it is stated that he once was locked in a state of trance for six months and was, at least apparently, unable to withdraw from it. It was not so complete as to involve the complete cessation of our organic processes in the body, and it is said that his disciples managed to give him some food. But there is evidence that this state can be so deep that there is a cessation of the heartbeat, and of the breath, and of other vital processes, and that the body is in a death-like state, but the organism is not subject to breakdown. And the reports indicate that this state may be greatly extended. It is also indicated that one may drop into this state, even spontaneously, by simply taking certain postures, as has been reported by Sir John Woodroffe in his *Serpent Power*.

At the time of my experience, I was aware of these possibilities. I did not have present a supervising guru, as personally present, who presumptively would have had the power to prevent my going into such a state and remaining in it for a protracted time. But at that time in 1936, there did develop spontaneously in my own category of capacities an ability to divide the consciousness, and place the relative or subject-object consciousness,

as it were, upon the sidelines while another part of the consciousness went through the development. I had never gained this power by any training in this lifetime. It was present spontaneously, and I knew how to use it. In this way a blackout of outer consciousness was prevented. I was aware of the environment as a subordinate part of the total consciousness. I was aware of my presence in a physical body. At the same time, a deeper part of the consciousness went through the transformation which was reported in *Pathways*, and again in *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*, and also on other occasions. In each case, a different aspect of the total experience was brought to the foreground. Here is an item of psychological interest, what might be called a conscious splitting of consciousness as a substitute for a blackout or catatonic *samadhi* trance. Whether or not the consciousness would develop in a different way or to a greater depth in a blackout *samadhi* trance, I do not know. But, one advantage of the split consciousness is that there is a recorder, as it were, on the sidelines that can report the process in the other part of the consciousness which passes through the transformation. This is a capacity latent in us which I think is of considerable importance, but I have never found it discussed in any literature with which I am familiar.

Our concern here is not with the elucidation of the value and content of the awakened consciousness, but rather with the noting of a basic characteristic of it as a type of consciousness. It is autonomous; in other words, self-developing. It is not directed, discriminative consciousness; although, the relative consciousness on the sideline was that directed discriminative consciousness, which carried with it memory of life in this world. In being autonomous, in that respect and that alone, it was like the dream consciousness. Dream consciousness, of course, is on a much lower level, but in this one respect it has the same characteristic. It develops of itself. It is not something that one by effort thinks out, or employs judgment in its development; although, the relative consciousness on the sideline faced judgmental problems in connection with a discriminative report concerning this consciousness. This complex situation must be born in mind and it is very important. Now, then, the level of this consciousness is supernal, that of the ordinary dream consciousness is very mundane indeed; but they had in common, as I've already said, this quality of being autonomous.

What happens, then, in the case of the transformation known as death in the ordinary sense where the physical body is dropped? Remember, we are concerned here only with the psychical process. The implication is that one goes over to a state in which he finds himself in an autonomous consciousness. Now, if one is in an autonomous consciousness without the presence of the discriminative or directed consciousness, he could very well not even know that he had died. On the other hand, this is suggested, that if one could go through the psychical part of the death process with the relative consciousness upon the sideline observing it, he would know that he had passed from one level of consciousness to another, that therefore he had died to one level of consciousness and was aware in another level of consciousness, and thus not enter into that state where he does not know that he has died.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead speaks of a death “swoon”² as an early stage in the process of dying, in the psychical sense. This implies a break in the continuum of

² W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 105.

relative consciousness. Now, an individual comes out of this swoon into the states of consciousness that belong to the other side. From all of the reports that we have concerning this other side, the state of consciousness is very delightful indeed, very attractive. And there could very well be a strong inclination to just go along with it and not attempt the rather austere task of maintaining a relative consciousness that belongs normally to what we call the waking state, the living state, at all. But this would be hard work; it would involve an austerity. So, one lets himself float into the domain on the other side not knowing that he has ever been in any other domain ever and just simply enjoying himself. He would be taken up with the fun of dying. To become conscious of that fact that he had shifted to another level of consciousness would require an act of austerity, a forgoing of the fun in order to maintain the relative consciousness, and he'd have to be a well-disciplined individual to be able to do that. Nonetheless, this I imagine is an important part of the problem of attaining adeptship, in which it is possible to know, so we are given to understand, that one has in fact departed from the objective plane of so-called waking consciousness into another level of consciousness, knows that the two levels exist, knows that there is some relationship between them, and it is possible to take a position in which one is aware of the laws governing the two levels, and can, conceivably, under the appropriate conditions, make communication across from one level to the other. In that case, the individual may be said to be awake and to have died without dying—to have died as a physical entity, but not to have died in the psychical sense.

Another point noted in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is that when an individual departs from the body in a psychical vehicle the mind becomes unsteady. To correct this condition it is directed that a lama, or a spiritual preceptor, shall read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to the dying one in order to remind him of what has happened and to instruct him as to what steps he may take. This is a rather disturbing fact. It would seem that being in a physical body involves a certain anchorage with respect to our thought processes, that when we have lost this anchorage it is though we had lost a base of reference with respect to which our thought and memory is oriented. The reading by the lama is intended to overcome this deficiency. Perhaps we might say that it is an effort to recall in the dying one the elements of the waking state of consciousness. Then instruction is given as to what move should be made.

Now, the important message of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is this: that at the moment of death—I presume not quite necessarily the physical death, but a deeper death—one is confronted by what is called the “Clear Light” at its highest level. If he can enter into this Clear Light, or perhaps more exactly permit the Clear Light to take him over, and then can remain in it, can learn to function in it, and can carry along with him consciousness in the relative sense, or *shes-rig*, then he becomes at that moment a *Dharmakaya*. He has attained the highest state of the consciousness of a Buddha. I've gone through a report of this material in another tape called *A Seminar on Death*,³ and will not repeat that material here. But this I would suggest, that if one faces the Clear Light, that there must be maintained in the consciousness of the individual a state which we may call balance. As I've had some experience of what a state of balance in

³ See the audio recordings, “Seminar on the Problem of Death,” parts 1 and 2.

consciousness may be, I might suggest something of it. If we are in a state involving any affect, any inclination one way or another, a state of delight or a state of depression, or a state of seeking or reaching out to something, or a state of avoidance of something, we are not in a state of balance. The state of balance would be one in which there is what might be called a neutral consciousness—not reaching out anywhere, not avoiding anything—and in holding this state the Clear Light envelopes one and takes him over.

Now, an important point should be made here, one does not take over the Clear Light. That would be a presumptuous assumption of the ego. The Clear Light possesses him, takes him over, and all ego consciousness either vanishes or occupies a subordinate position. In this consciousness he has become universal, as it were. But in another place in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, it speaks of the combination of this consciousness as *Rig-pa* with another consciousness, *shes-rig*, as a combination which is equivalent to becoming the *Dharmakaya*.⁴ It's not the same as a universal Consciousness which has no center, but it is a combination of a universal Consciousness with a centered kind of consciousness, and this combination is said to be the *Dharmakaya*. It is also stated in a footnote that it is very difficult to maintain this kind of balance,⁵ there being a tendency to move one way or another in the consciousness, to be either delighted or repelled or take some active attitude, but it should be a very still state. And yet, this is one in which, normally, the human being is not prepared to function. What I suggest is that he remain still in his consciousness until he becomes completely adjusted to the change. And then in great quietude, in a state that is devoid of all affect one way or another, devoid of all craving or repulsion, but completely still, he may begin to be able to function in this consciousness. I shall not here go through the different steps that are outlined in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* beyond this limited statement. I have done so elsewhere.⁶ But the problem is that even though one is familiar with this particular literature, it drops from his memory after he's gone through the process of death and he does not recall it. It is the office of the lama reading to him, to bring this back to his memory and to direct him as to what actions he should take in his consciousness.

There is a place in *The Secret Doctrine* where the organization of being and consciousness is briefly discussed. It is there said that this organization is on the order of several planes of being and consciousness, that these planes are such that when an entity passes from one of the planes to another plane, he has a strong sense of the reality of the plane in which he currently is located, and that the plane he has left seems unreal.⁷ In other words, it may seem to vanish like a kind of *maya* vanishing, or like the apparent snake in a rope vanishes. It is as though it were at least of no value or even may seem not to be at all. It is not at that place determined how many planes of being there may be, but for other reasons and in other places, it is indicated that the prime organization is in terms of a septenary construction—seven major planes of being and consciousness with sub-planes. And how many sub-planes there may be, or sub-sub-planes is a question not wholly determined. The important point is that in the transition from one plane to

⁴ Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 96.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 97

⁶ See the audio recording, "On the Tri-Kaya," part 2.

⁷ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1 (Adyar: The Theosophy Company, 1897), 71-72.

another, the plane from which the consciousness of the individual departs takes on the character of being totally unreal, and it is in that place asserted that this continues until the individual has awakened to absolute Consciousness. The implication is that when one has awakened to absolute Consciousness, he can have an awareness of the relativity of the planes, but so long as that consciousness has not been awakened, each plane seems to be exclusively valid when the individual is upon that plane of consciousness. This would explain a good deal. The process of dying, psychically considered, would be a movement from one plane of consciousness to another. Whether this is a major movement between the major planes or a movement as between subordinate planes is not now evident. But if one moves over to the plane which is entered by the event of psychical death, he finds himself in a familiar domain. It's the normal domain. And that which he has left, the plane which he has left, seems unreal, and may even vanish from his memory.

I've had a similar experience connected with the breakthrough into the higher consciousness in those days of 1936, where I saw the mundane order tend to vanish into a sort of meaningless phantasmagoria, and that there was even a tendency to lose the memory of the experiences I had known in that mundane order. Although, as I've said elsewhere, I managed to stop this disappearance in the memory, and as a result I knew the world of ordinary experience was a fact in which I had moved, and in which I was in one part of my consciousness continuing to move, meanwhile having myself centered in the higher consciousness. And remember, I had on the sidelines the relative consciousness which was witnessing and recording this process. This makes quite understandable the statement of the writer of *The Mahatma Letters* when he says that the ordinary individual when he dies does not even know that he has died. The memory of life in the mundane order would be eclipsed, and one can easily see that now he would seem to have always lived upon the plane in which he currently finds himself. In a lucid period I had a certain experience repeatedly, even induced it voluntarily and experimentally for the study of it, that has a bearing upon this point.