

# Conscious Dying

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Just yesterday, as I was brooding before the regular Sunday meeting, the thought came to me that it might be well to put forth a tape on the subject of conscious dying, and so I shall attempt the handling of this subject matter upon this tape. First, as to a clarification of our terms: we ordinarily think of death as the opposite of life. I would suggest that an approach to this subject is attained in better form, and more revealing form, to think of death as the opposite of birth, and that both are modes of life. Ordinarily, men think of dying or death as a ceasing to be, as a termination of life, or a termination of consciousness. I wish to suggest that this is the wrong approach, that it is wiser to think of being born, or birthing, as at the same time a process of dying to a mode of life that existed before, namely, the intrauterine life, and a being born into the kind of life and form of consciousness—that which is characteristic of the world here as we know it. In other words, whenever there is a birth, there is also a death; we might say, a coming and a departure—a coming into one mode of living and consciousness and a departure from another mode of living and consciousness. Now, when we come to what we view as the terminus of our life here—when the body is clearly dropped and the conscious entity is no longer within it or capable of functioning through it—that also is, on the other side, a coming to birth in another realm of consciousness. So, that when there is a dying, there is also a birthing, just as in the initial case, when there is a birthing there is also a dying. There is a certain symmetry in this that is characteristic of the principle of balance, and there are reasons why we should regard balance as a very important aspect of the total nature of Being. Having thus defined the sense in which we shall view what is commonly called dying and being born, we will bring in certain other considerations.

Ordinarily, life in a body ceases dramatically, and an entity that was able to communicate with us is no longer able to communicate with us. The body goes through certain processes that are known well to the medical world, and it starts a process of disintegration. That body ceases. But we're not concerned with the instrument or vehicle of the formerly living entity. We are concerned with what happens to that entity. Now, in the history of our race, this has been a subject handled mostly by the religions; there are many dogmas concerning it that are justified only by a reference to a statement in some book. However, within recent years we seem to be able to derive some knowledge by the empiric process, by the listening to reports of individuals who have apparently departed from their bodies for a brief time because of some crisis, like the stopping of the heartbeat; and then, because of medical effort that has reestablished the beat of the heart, the individual has returned to consciousness in this body and biological processes continue. Work has been done on reports of these individuals, some of whom have been able to return and bring back with them a memory of something that happened to them, such as being in a vehicle where they were quite conscious, which, nonetheless, could pass through, as it were, those who were living in this world; they could move their arm, for instance, through material objects without

being restricted; and then, [they] have gone in to an inner state of consciousness. A very common report is that they pass through what seems to be a dark tunnel with a light at the end; sometimes it has been referred to as a deep, dark valley. When they come out into the light, they are in another environment which has certain features that are very commonly reported concerning it: that in this environment there comes a being to them which has a *light* quality and has been called a being of light; that this being of light exudes a quality of great compassionateness, and that there proceeds, in the presence of this being, a recovery in memory of all the experiences of the life which are thus displayed before this being of light; that there is a sort of differentiation here between qualities that are good and qualities that are negative, and that the negative qualities may be burnt away, as it were, or somehow transformed or removed; that the attitude of this being of light is in no sense condemnatory because of qualities that are less than desirable. This seems to be reported very commonly.

If one is also familiar with *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* he finds the statement that at the moment of death one is confronted by the Clear Light and that it is possible for him to assimilate himself to this Clear Light, and that it is highly desirable that he should do so. If he does so, and becomes identified with the Clear Light, he becomes a *Dharmakaya*. And the point is made that this state of consciousness is a balanced combination of the indeterminate cosmic whole, as it were, combined with a determinate objective entityhood; a consciousness that participates in the transcendent whole in its raw immediacy and yet, at the same time, is individuated. This, then, would be the vehicle of a full Buddha. Now, this is—as we understand the philosophy—the goal of man, the approximate goal of man, is the attainment of Buddhahood. Here the implication is that the opportunity to attain this state is afforded every individual at the moment of death, although very few have the strength and understanding to achieve this objective. It seems to be implied that if this objective is attained, the series of karmic births that we have known, which are compelled by karma, ceases; that thereafter there is no obligatory incarnation, although it seems to be true that voluntary incarnation remains possible.

In reflecting upon these two references to a light experience in the transition which men commonly call death, the thought forced itself upon me that it was a reference to the same event; in other words, that the Clear Light of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and the being of light in Moody's book *Life After Life*, were the same referents. I took this question up with one who was in a position to have some positive knowledge on the subject and she confirmed my impression; in other words, we have here a certain verification.

Now, as to the state one finds himself in, I have had individuals tell me of their experience when they have passed into something like the death experience and were later brought back to outer life. In the cases that I know, they always speak of a strong positive orientation to the state of consciousness they find themselves in when they are over on the other side. When they have been brought back by the manipulations of persons who found their bodies, or dealt with their bodies, they resented this—they would have much preferred to stay over on the other side. Moody, in his book, reports

this as very common. I also talked to one individual who has devoted a considerable time to the death problem, particularly from the perspective of the individual who is facing death because of a lethal disease, but she seemed to have had an initiation such that she was carried through this process and experienced at least the early stages of it, and she confirmed the view that it is a supremely delightful experience; so much so, that she was concerned that if this knowledge became general, then there would be a tendency among human beings to commit suicide in order to attain the state in which one enters after the event that men call death.

It looks as though it is something very attractive, but there is also evidence that it is not so with all individuals; that the problem of those who commit suicide is very different, that suicide involves a sin against nature for which a penalty is exacted; and that those who die prematurely, as by accident or disease, do not have the same experience but may go into a kind of sleep in which they dream until a cycle of time is completed when they then will continue through the after death process. There seems to be the implication that there is an important difference between legitimate dying and illegitimate dying. One who dies, for instance, in war at the age of twenty, or so, but who had a normal life determined by karma which would be of seventy years, or so, would have to linger in a state, perhaps, of a kind of dream until the seventy years was completed, and that then the process could continue. Or, perhaps, if it is death during wartime, particularly, there may be a reincarnation with the old astral. And I've met one individual who claims to have a memory of such an experience, of having died in the first World War with the impression that he had known me before that death, and that he was an individual that had come from a certain city; and, in point of fact, there was an individual that I knew when I was in the army that did come from that given city and we had some conversations together. Yet this individual was born again and possibly with the same astral body. It might be a case of two embodiments and one incarnation.

These reports which I have given are of individuals who did not complete the death process; rather they went in briefly and then came back. It therefore would not represent the complete story. The best source that seems to be authentic concerning this subject matter in a deeper sense is to be found in what is known as *The Mahatma Letters*. This purports to be, and I believe it to be, the work of adepts, who, with their special powers, have been able to investigate this field of the after death state. It is stated there that there is a state of swoon that is typical after death; that memory is very limited in the case of most human beings, in fact, it is so limited that most individuals do not even know that they have died even though they are conscious, sooner or later, upon this more interior plane. The statement is even to the effect that if an individual dies and knows that he is dead, he is either an adept or a sorcerer.

While it may seem weird that an individual could die and not know that he's dead, nonetheless, I've had certain experiences, or imperiences, that render it quite comprehensible to me. And this involves a reference to a certain principle in the organization of the different planes of consciousness. Some place in *The Secret Doctrine* it is stated that the planes of consciousness in this world, or this total domain

of existence and being, are such that if an individual moves from one plane of consciousness to another, as from plane *a* to plane *b*, from the perspective of plane *b*, plane *a* and its consciousness seems unreal, like a *maya*, or like a dream. Now, I've had this experience back in 1936 and since then. When moving from one plane to the next, I've found that the earlier state or consciousness did seem unreal; and it even had a certain tendency to disappear from my memory—a process which I stopped by a simple act of will. I've also had, repeatedly, an experience of moving from plane *a* to plane *b*, in which from the latter perspective plane *a* seemed unreal, and then moving back to plane *a*, from which perspective the experiences on plane *b* seemed unreal. It worked both ways. Now, if this unreality is sufficiently strong in one sense of it, it could tend to be forgotten. If the movement into death, as we normally conceive of it, is from one plane to another—and that I would say is inevitable—the same thing could happen, and the memory of the life lived here could very easily become dreamlike in character, or *maya*-like and lose the force of having reality value. Then one would find him in this other state, with a different kind of consciousness, operating by different type of structure, where the categories that apply to the consciousness of earth life no longer apply.

One thing that I was able to do back in 1936 was to effect a certain division in consciousness whereby the ordinary relative consciousness of waking life remained present while another portion of the consciousness went through the process of transition. And by reason of this relative consciousness being present, I was able to record what happened, and also able to correctly evaluate the sense of “unrealness” which attached to the passing from one plane of consciousness to another. So I can appreciate very readily the possibility that one could die and not know that he has died. He'd be living in another domain of consciousness, organized on a basis of different categories or patterns, and the life that he'd lived in this world, if remembered at all, would seem like a dream, and be, to him, unreal and might then even tend to disappear from his awareness. This, therefore, brings up a point that would be of prime importance in connection with conscious dying, for as I conceive conscious dying, it would involve the knowing that one was going through the transition and that one could discount the tendency to view the earlier consciousness as unreal, bearing in mind his instruction on that subject matter, plus, perhaps, experience which he may have had.

When an individual is born into this world, he comes through a birth tube. When he goes through the process which we commonly call dying, the reports indicate that he goes through a tunnel, a dark one with a light at the end; in other words, another kind of a tube. And now here there could be a question: which is primarily the birth in these two cases? While we—from the perspective of this world—think of the process of coming into existence as an infant in this world as birth while there is a dying to the intrauterine life, there is also the similar process at the time of death judging by the evidence that we have. May we not view the passing through the tube to the inner planes as a more important kind of birth rather than as a death? That, in fact, the coming into this world is in the larger sense, more significantly, a kind of dying? And that the departure from this world is, more significantly, a kind of being born to a richer

and more worthwhile kind of experience. In other words, we cannot be sure that we are not really the dead, while living here, and that, essentially, we are being born when we go to the other side or within. This is just a thought to be dwelt upon.

Most people in this world pass through abnormal deaths: as through illness, accident, suicide, murder, starvation, and the like. A minority have the experience of dying from old age when the cycle, predetermined by karma, has been completed. Natural death therefore, here, is the exception rather than the rule, unfortunately. Now, in connection with conscious death, I am making this suggestion: that if an individual has lived out his cycle that is provided by his karma and that he continues to live, the death can be chosen without being a sin against nature; and it can be chosen under certain conditions.

Now, it is possible to live longer than the prescribed cycle of nature, and for this I shall have to refer to something that has been given in a certain article called “The ‘Elixir of Life’” which was published in one of the first six volumes of *The Theosophist* during the period of H. P. Blavatsky’s editorship of it.<sup>1</sup> The author of this article is said to have been one who had failed in a certain initiation with respect to the process of extending the life cycle, but he was authorized to report what he had learned in this experience, with certain limitations imposed upon him. A point made in that article was to the effect that if one reinforces the natural will to live that is in the organism by a conscious will to live, and can maintain it unbroken, he will not die so long as that conscious will to live is maintained. In other words, it would be possible for him to extend his living in this world beyond the normal cycle that had been provided for him by karma. In fact, another point is made in that article to the effect that if at the same time he proceeds to “densen” his next subtler vehicle, the following process will consummate. There will come a time when the body itself will drop—that though it can be maintained alive beyond its normal cycle, the gross body cannot be kept alive indefinitely simply by the act of conscious will. But, if at the same time he proceeds by some process, which is not described in the article, whereby he “densens” the next inner vehicle, which I presume is the *linga sharira*, commonly known as the astral body, he will continue to live objectively and visibly to others, even after he has dropped his gross physical body, and can extend his incarnation, as it were, for an extended time, even up to 1000 years. He would not have his original true gross body but would have a “densened” subtle body.

Now, the thought has come to me, suppose one maintained this will to life over a period of many years—and, in fact, I have done so for the past 35 or 40 years—but did not succeed in “densening” the subtle vehicle so that it was physically visible. Nonetheless, he would have a vehicle which he could enter at death and occupy in the domain which is reached through death, and would function there as the entity that was known as John Smith or by any other name out here, and would not forget his life here.

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<sup>1</sup> G. M. (Godolphin Mitford?), “The ‘Elixir of Life’—From a Chela’s Diary,” parts 1 and 2, *The Theosophist* 3, no. 6 (March 1882): 140-142 and no. 7 (April 1882): 168-171.

He would have passed through the transition consciously, and know that he had passed through the transition; and by holding on to his memory through the division of consciousness that I referred to before, would know that he had passed in, would remember his life out here, would still continue to be the John Smith that he was out here, and operate with full objective consciousness even though he had passed in to an inner plane. This would, of course, involve something of adeptship; it would not be the ordinary death. Apparently, in the ordinary death one does not retain memory of his past life out here, and it may be doubtful that he would still know himself as John Smith. But if he did this consciously, retained his astral vehicle, he could have a continued life on those inner planes with memory of that knowledge and experience which he acquired here continuing with him, and knowingly so, knowing that he had shifted from one plane to another and was the same empiric identity that he was when he was on this plane. That would be a very desirable kind of transition.

In the last fourteen months or since Gertrude has departed, I have had two experiences which seem to be connected with the dying process.<sup>2</sup> In the first instance, I woke up and heard my last breath and it was an agonal or rattle breath. I felt that I was dying and immediately and instinctively stopped the process—much to my disgust—because, with reflection, I realized here was a legitimate opportunity for death that I had muffed, and going in was the thing which I most desired. However, out of these experiences valuable information has come. In the case of the second one, which happened on the 13th of February, I seemed to be coming out through the death channel, and as I finally arrived in outer consciousness and was aware of myself lying in bed, I found myself in a state in which it seemed that I was in a state of balance between the dying process and the continued waking process.<sup>3</sup> It seemed that I could will to go either way. It was a state of a subtle balance. Now, what I wish to suggest here is that when one is in such a state of subtle balance, it is possible, by a conscious act, to choose to enter the transition which men commonly call death, and that one, at such time, can do so legitimately. This, to be sure, is an impression that I had; I cannot categorically affirm that I am valid here, but I'm reporting what I experienced.

Now, this I suggest, that when one has reached the point where he has maintained life beyond the point where death would have occurred by karmic decree, then departure from this life as a voluntary act is legitimate and not to be regarded as suicide. He has fulfilled his obligation to nature, or to karma; has maintained his life by holding constantly the will to live, and now has a right to effect a disposal of that life, either to maintain it longer on the outer plane or to cancel it, and doing so legitimately and thus not being guilty of suicide in the invidious sense. In other words, if one maintains his life beyond the karmic termination of it, it is a life at his own command and he may terminate it without karmic guilt.

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<sup>2</sup> This material is more completely presented in the audio recording, "Dialogue with Brugh Joy," part 6.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this experience, see the audio recording, "Running Commentary Following Gertrude's Death," part 7.

The problem in connection with conscious dying is this: that he must first find himself in that state in which he could with equal ease turn in the direction of continued life or turn towards the dying process, then consciously chooses to enter into the dying process, holding his objective consciousness present with him. Then he would pass through the channel of death consciously, retaining his objective consciousness with the memory of the past life; go through the process of meeting the being of light, or the Clear Light; and then consciously accept the Clear Light itself, holding himself continually in this state of critical balance. This is a state that can be experienced—I have experienced it. Now, if he accepts the Clear Light, he then becomes, as I have said, according to the statement in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a *Dharmakaya*, and is in a position to manage his future life. He can dwell, then, upon the inner planes without loss of consciousness of his past life because he can discount the sense of unreality that comes from the passing from plane to plane and would still be objectively awake. He might still function as a student of the different planes of being; he may be still concerned with the good of humanity, and may operate upon the problems connected with that humanity from an inner status. He might have to act through some individual or individuals who have the capacity of channeling and who are in incarnation upon this plane, but his consciousness would be objective and he would not be involved in the simple delight of a *devachanic* state of consciousness. He could deal with the planes objectively though he, himself, was no longer living in an animal, physical body. This would be a position of real functioning with some degree of power in it. I regard it as the most desirable kind of death that one could attain.

I may have, here, outlined some of the principles that are necessary for it, and now I shall review them. First, that he has maintained his life by maintaining the will to live so that he has continued to live beyond the point where karma would have sentenced him to death; that this life, which is not produced by nature for him, but is properly his own, he is at liberty to terminate without involving the guilt of suicide. Second, that in this state of subtle balance between living and dying, he may choose dying legitimately and consciously, and proceed inward. The difficulty that I see in doing this lies a good deal in connection with the breath. There must be a willingness to accept the termination of the breath knowingly; and this may be where a real difficulty lies. But if one succeeds in this, he is in a position of real capacity to render objective service to humanity.