

## Facing Death through Yoga and Meditation

By Swami Nishchalananda Saraswati

**O**ur attitude towards death is contradictory. We constantly see death around us, yet part of us thinks 'it will never happen to me'. Though we would rather not hear about it nor discuss it, it has a morbid fascination for us. We are attached to life and so we reject and deny our own death. In our desperation we pretend that our appointment with death will never arrive, whilst in our hearts we know that, of all events in our life, it is the most certain. As George Bernard Shaw once said:

*'Death is the ultimate statistic - one out of one of us dies.'*

And yet most of us postpone considering our own death until forced to by illness, old age, a near death experience, or the death of a friend or relative. We see the sand in the hour glass of time flowing away and we know that every moment is taking us closer to our own doom. On a deep, often subconscious level, we are terrified of death and this creates an underlying dissatisfaction in our lives. As Henry Thoreau so aptly put it:

*'Most people live lives of quiet desperation.'*

**Different Religious Viewpoints.** The materialistic viewpoint regards individual life as a chance occurrence in a vast, menacing and unknown universe. Death is seen as the snuffing out of individual life and the return to the bottomless void.

Religions seem to have very different attitudes towards death. In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is regarded as the closure of this life, after which one either goes heaven or hell depending on merit. In Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, death is viewed as a constant stream of endings in a cyclic process of rebirth and transmigration, one stage on a spiralling ladder of evolution, again determined by merit or lack of it. Other religions – Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Shintoism, Taoism, Confucianism and so forth – have similar beliefs. Of course, the previous analysis is rather simplistic; to go into the subtleties of each religion's belief on death you will have to study each religion in depth.

**The Yogic Point of View.** According to Yoga, death is regarded as an integral part of Life in a wider sense of the word – that is, Life as the Totality of manifest existence.

Birth is where Consciousness (the Underlying Intelligence) embodies Itself (through, of course, the medium of the mother). Life is where that embodied being (you and me) grows and expresses the potential of this Intelligence. And death is seen as a return to the Source from whence we came.

Yoga says, obviously, that the body and personality dies. It cannot be avoided. But our real nature – beyond the body and mind – is deathless. The purpose of Yoga is to realise this Deathless State even while we are alive. Then we know, on a deeper level, that we really are Immortal.

Of course, though the previous is also simplistic, it does give the basic Yogic viewpoint<sup>1</sup>.

**Facing Death Before We Die.** Yoga has always emphasised the importance of facing death before we die. Otherwise, at the point of death, we may be overwhelmed by extreme fear and, perhaps, by an all consuming feeling that we have wasted our lives. Moreover, according to

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<sup>1</sup> Here in Mandala Yoga Ashram, we conduct regular 2-week residential seminars on 'Confronting Death – a Yogic Approach'. If you are interested in investigating death more deeply on all levels (without actually dying!) come along.

Yoga, going deeper into the nature of death before we actually die gives us an invaluable opportunity of realising that aspect of our Being which is deathless. Death is seen as the opening of the door to Eternity and to Life beyond the ego.

**Fear of Death.** Fear of death is a major cause of human suffering. A few thousand years ago, the sage Patanjali in his classical text, the *Yoga Sutra*, wrote that the basic causes of human suffering are fivefold: *avidya* (spiritual ignorance), *asmita* (egoism), *raga* (desire or attachment), *dvesha* (denial or aversion) and *abhinivesha* (fear of death or clinging to life). This still applies today as it did then. By gaining a deeper insight into these five aspects of suffering, we can also gain a deeper understanding of our own death.

Avidya is not ignorance in an academic sense, but failure (or incapacity) to discriminate between That which is permanent - underlying Spirit or Consciousness - and those things which are impermanent - everything we can perceive through the mind and senses and every aspect of our daily lives including our physical body and personality. Avidya is a fundamental state of spiritual ignorance - of not knowing our Real Nature, of not knowing who 'I am.'

This ignorance leads to *asmita*, a total and all-consuming identification and obsession with our individuality. We assume that our existence is nothing but our personality and we become self-centred and full of self-importance.

In completely identifying with our personality, we become conditioned by *raga*, attachment or clinging to pleasure, possessions and friends - and also to its opposite, *dvesha*, aversion to pain, difficult situations and those people who don't bolster our ego. One feels attracted to those things which give pleasure and repelled by those things which give displeasure. We encourage events and people which reinforce our ego-sense and discourage events and people which diminish it.

Because we are identified with our personality, *abhinivesha*, fear of death, arises; we know that death brings our destruction as individuals. So fear of death comes from fundamental ignorance of our Real Nature.

**Is there Existence after Death or Not?** To go deeper in our understanding of life and death, our place in the scheme of existence and whether 'something' remains of us after death, we need to look at our spiritual ignorance, our ego (sense of individuality) and the functioning of our mind in terms of likes and dislikes. Yoga and Meditation help us to refine our perception and encourage this process of discovering what we are on a deeper level. In this way, we can gain insight into the nature of death and what is beyond, if anything.

In the *Katha Upanishad*<sup>2</sup>, Natchiketa<sup>3</sup>, arriving at the gates of Yama<sup>4</sup>, Lord of Death, asks:

*'O Yama, dispel this doubt of mine. Does a person live after death or does he not?'*

This is a fundamental question which each one of us should ask ourselves before we die - not on our death bed or tomorrow, but NOW. If we are to truly fulfil our lives we need to know, conclusively, the answer to this question. Yoga helps us in this endeavour.

Incidentally, the main part of the *Katha Upanishad* is devoted to Yama's reply. Read the text yourself, but remember that his answer can only be understood if we deepen and refine our perception through Meditation.

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<sup>2</sup> One of the major Upanishads, a Yogic text, which is concerned specifically with death.

<sup>3</sup> A young boy who was ardently searching for meaning in life.

<sup>4</sup> Yama: Personification of the process of death.

Interestingly, one can see parallels between the early life of the sage Ramana Maharshi and that of Natchiketa. When he was 16 years old, Ramana arrived at the gates of Yama. That is, he nearly died, or at least he felt that he was dying. He laid down on the floor of his room and resigned himself to his death, only to realise that some part of his Being, or rather, a fundamental part of his Being, was not dying! This totally transformed his understanding of life and death. His confrontation with death brought him a transcendental realisation and life-saving wisdom. For the rest of his life he was able to bring solace and transformation to multitudes of people world-wide. His mere presence was a living testimony to the Immortality of the Spirit.

**Dying in Loneliness.** Until quite recently, both in the East and West, one generally died surrounded by relatives and friends (if one was lucky!). In the present era, more and more people are dying alone and neglected in hospital. Moreover, there is little guidance for the dying. This causes enormous suffering to millions of people who die uncared for, unloved, lonely and stricken with fear of the unknown. Work pioneered by people such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Stephen Levine, among others, has led to the establishment of the Hospice Movement and the exploration of ways of helping people to cope more effectively with death.

It is when we are in the presence of the dying that we recognise our inability to deal with death (both of others and our own) and its accompanying feelings of helplessness.

If someone close to you is dying, what do you do? Do you shrug your shoulders, take a few tranquillisers, have a cigarette, go for a walk, or perhaps preach religious and philosophical inanities which you don't believe in yourself? The death of a friend or relative is difficult and traumatic, but we often add to the despair of the dying person, instead of helping them to die more peacefully. Unless we have deepened our own understanding of the nature of death, we may exacerbate the situation by sowing the seeds of hopelessness. By confronting death, our own death - now - whilst life is in full flow, and gaining insight into its nature, we are empowered to more effectively help others in their dying days or moments. Yoga helps us in this process.

**Near Death Experiences (NDE) - a Glimpse Behind the Scenes.** During the past few years, a number of books have been published which give anecdotes of people who have clinically died, but who have gone 'beyond' and come back to life. They have been enriched, so to say, by a glimpse behind the scenes. Most speak of a mystical experience which has transformed the quality of their daily lives.

Science is also investigating this phenomenon<sup>5</sup> of Near Death Experience, mainly by collecting anecdotal evidence from all over the world. People's experiences tend to follow cultural and religious biases (for example, Hindus often see images of Yama, the Messenger or Harbinger of Death); but there are also common themes which transcend culture and religion, such as encountering deceased relatives or friends, or spiritual figures or *devas* (beings of light). The majority of people who recount their experiences of NDE are not cranks, but normal, even sceptical, people from all walks of life, and from all religious, or even non-religious, backgrounds.

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<sup>5</sup> Excellent work is being done on this subject by Prof. Ian Stevenson, University of Virginia, US, as well as by Dr. Satwant K. Pasricha, Additional Prof. Department of Clinical Psychology, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), Bangalore, India.

In this way, science is realising what Yoga has always said: that our existence does not end with the death of the physical body. The phenomena of life and death are far more complex than we are led to believe.

**Centres which Help Us to Die Consciously.** In different parts of the world, centres are opening up to help people die consciously, to help remove fear and to achieve Altered States of Consciousness (ASC) through the process of death. Yoga practice can play an indispensable part in the functioning of these centres since its very purpose is to open us up to ASC.

**Meditation Opens Our Eyes.** Meditation is a means of confronting death whilst we are still alive. This is not just morbidity but can lead us to a deeper understanding of what we really are as human beings. It gives us an insight into the deeper implications of death and our nature as embodiments of an underlying Intelligence. Meditation gives us access to Reality. This is why Meditation is such an important part of Yoga and other spiritual disciplines. It gives us a glimpse into that aspect of us which is unchanging, or undying.

This path of consciously confronting death has already been explored by Yogis who have handed on their teachings and wisdom to us. It is for us to gain from their experiences and to find out the deeper nature of death, and life, for ourselves. But we should begin this investigation NOW whilst we are alive. We should not postpone as most of us do.



**Useful books to read on death:**

- 'Death - the Greatest Fiction' by Osho
- 'Who Dies' by Stephen Levine
- 'The Human Encounter with Death' by Grof & Halifax
- 'Beyond Death' by Grof
- 'Meditation and the Art of Dying' by Pandit Usharbudh Arya
- 'The Facts of Death' by Simpson
- 'Life after Life' by Raymond A. Moody
- 'The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying' by Sogyal Rinpoche
- 'Other Lives Other Selves' by Roger Woolger
- 'Death - The Final Stage of Growth' by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross
- 'A Year to Live' by Stephen Levine pub. Thorsons (Harper Collins).