

DEATH DYING AND BEYOND

The Science and Spirituality of Death

For whether I live or die,
I am always.

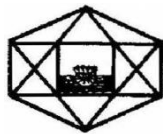
Sri Aurobindo

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Death, Dying And Beyond

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SRI AUROBINDO SOCIETY

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*No power can slay my soul; it lives in Thee.
Thy presence is my immortality.*

Sri Aurobindo

Life and Death

*"Life, death, — death, life; the words have led for ages
Our thought and consciousness and firmly seemed
Two opposites; but now long hidden pages
Are opened, liberating truths undreamed.
Life only is, or death is life disguised, —
Life a short death until by life we are surprised."*

Sri Aurobindo

Preface

Death, in one of its conceptions, leads us from mansion to mansion in our journey from this mortal world of darkness to the doorsteps of the sphere of deathless Light. But it leads us blindfolded, so to say, and little do we remember of the worlds beyond that are hidden to our mist-laden eyes. Little do we remember of the journey through the Night of death when we return to the grey light of our earthly days again. Our birth, in the conception of a mystic poet, is a sleep and a forgetting. And rightly so, since we remember not the physical womb that delivers us to see the light of our mortal days and feel the struggle of our mortal life. Nor do we remember our spiritual womb, the World-Mother's heart and lap from which we leaped forth as a soul of love and light to enter this zone of obscurity and unconsciousness. Not only the wherefore but we have forgotten also the why of our coming, the purpose of our earthly existence. Is it all a meaningless accident, a chance governing our fate? Or is accident only a term that covers our purblind Ignorance, chance only the lid that conceals a deeper plot and covers the future's face? We also do not remember what pitiless necessity took the ominous shape of death and pain. Nor do we understand what coerced the divine soul to the adventure of time and space if the only purpose of all this tragicomic drama of life is to return to That from which it came? What helplessness drove the soul out from its paradise to suffer this fall into obscurity and Ignorance, this short or long interlude with sorrow and tears? Or is the soul helpless against some dark and ominous power that has the right to mar God's work and cancel His force! And if that is so then who gave it this power and this right to drive the divine soul on the path of perdition and sin? What force coerced the immortal soul to forfeit its immortality and laid upon it the yoke of death? We do not see nor remember.

The material scientist shut in his own senses cannot help us. He sees no better for he too shares the malady called man and the forgetfulness that follows. He only strengthens the prison built by our senses by reinforcing its walls by the cement of a limited observation. The philosopher and the logician equally fail us by replacing realisation with imagination. The theologian seems to suddenly and magically transport us to a promised unseen land whose very ground we are unsure of and which lies disconnected with all that we feel and hope and aspire upon earth. The mystic simply bypasses the riddle rather than solving it by cutting the very knot of our quest by labelling the earth and all that it yearns for with that queer and paradoxical

label of illusion. According to him, there is no pain, there is no suffering, there is no sorrow, nor grief, nor death since there is in fact no you and I. There is only the One who does not die even as It is not born. The birth you experience is an illusion, the pain and struggle is an illusion, and the death and destruction is a greater illusion. For there is no birth and no death, no being and no becoming, there is in fact nothing, nothing, and only nothing and 'nothing' cannot die for it never was nor ever will be!! There is very little to choose between the eternal No of the materialist, his no to all that is beyond the ken of our senses and all that exceeds or transcends our human experience, and the eternal No of the spiritualist, his no to all that is of this world and share its agony and pain.

Yet we instinctively feel a deeper truth wake within us. It pushes us from behind to exceed ourselves, to dally with death and play ball with time and circumstance. It calls us through unnumbered bodies and births and invites us to solve the mystery of the riddling Sphinx. It laughs in the face of terror and fear, through the eyes of a child. It smiles at grief and pain, through the lips of a hero laying down his life for the triumph of truth. It fills us with peace and joy in the midst of destruction's dance, through a mind and heart identified with a deeper and higher Light. It leaps up from within as sympathy partaking of others' grief and the strength to succour and to solace. This memory and this deeper vision hid in our own depths surfaces in the silence and the words of a seer and sage.

Sometimes this deeper vision is lent to our blindness, this deeper truth revealed to our forgetfulness. As Sri Krishna to Arjuna, as Rishi Vyasa to Sanjay, Sri Aurobindo lends this deeper vision to man. Not only deeper but also new, the song of our soul conquering death, the saga of the spirit climbing heroically from birth to birth through life and through death, towards peaks of Beauty and Light and Love and Strength and Bliss. We begin to discover through Him that life upon earth is not a meaningless accident nor is our birth a forced sentence decreed upon us by some powerful Satan for an original sin. Not man but God created this beautiful and dangerous world and not man but He sustains it. The world is divine in the hiding just as man is divine in the seeking. The earth is the field of an evolutionary experiment, a supreme adventure that our souls have undertaken, and man is Divine in the making. Birth is the soul's great opportunity to work towards the intended fulfillment, death is a temporary pause to rest and to assimilate the gains of our labour. These and many other secrets are revealed to us by the supreme Grace of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother who laboured incessantly to make this adventure easy for man. Not only did they reveal to

us but also struggled and achieved all for us. It is to Them that we owe each and every drop of Light that may pass through these words even as we owe everything else to Them. To Them our endless love and gratitude. That may seem like stating the obvious, yet must the obvious be stated lest we take it so much for granted as to miss and forget it. For to forget the truth is the very seed and origin of death.

Smritibhranshadbuddhinasho Buddhinashatpranashyati

Words fail as we try to stammer our homage to the new vision of an integral Truth that They have brought down for us. So let me express it in the words of Sri Aurobindo himself whose deep Compassion and Love makes us see what we could never hope or imagine to see by our own efforts:

Seer deep-hearted

*Seer deep-hearted, divine King of the secrecies,
Occult fountain of love sprung from the heart of God,
Ways thou knewest no feet ever in time had trod.
Words leaped shining, the flame-billows of wisdom's seas,
Vast in thy soul was a tide washing the coasts of heaven,
Thoughts broke burning and bare crossing the human night,
White star-scripts of the gods born from the presses of Light
Page by page to the dim children of earth were given.¹*

Each page is an effort to distribute something of Their Light, adapted to the needs of our human language and its countless limitations to express the subtler mysteries of the earth and beyond. Each page is also a labour of love offered at the Divine altar by many hands through which the Divine weaves out His Works. This book too has been worked out through many a hand, each forming a part of the single plan. To acknowledge these helping hands is also to acknowledge and appreciate the many ways through which He works, for indeed infinite are the ways of the working of the Infinite. To begin with, the idea for a seminar on death was conceived by Vijay bhai and Dr Bisht. Not satisfied with all our scientific babble, Vijay bhai pursued the idea to its logical human limit, as an all-comprehensive book that would cover all aspects of

¹ Sri Aurobindo: *Collected Poems*, p. 603

the mystery of Death. The most important and difficult part of editing and co-ordination was readily and happily accepted by Shonar. Perfect to her task she went on to ensure that nothing was left incomplete, nothing half said; going through each idea, thought, sentence structure, grammar, and comma, to the selection of appropriate quotes and the entire layout of the book with a painstaking patience and perseverance. Her close scrutiny and insistent suggestions and queries are the cause of many an inclusion.

We must acknowledge the glad collaboration of all the team members who took out their precious time to go through the book and offer some very useful suggestions. Prominent among these are Shri Amal Sarkar, Dr Anand Kumar, Vijay bhai who leafed through the whole book, as well as elder brothers and co-travelers on the way. Then of course, the ever-smiling Srinivas who would bring out any required reference as if it was ready at hand. Kalyani and Rukmani-di also helped in the research for which I am grateful. Krishna proceeded with the final formatting, wrapping the gift in a neat package. Gitadi and Sushanto worked upon the cover image of death, feeling for the figure of the unseen destroyer of forms. Dr. Vandana, apart from taking the photographs of the mysteriously meaningful painting of Arun Joshi, performed the even more difficult task of persuading Sushanto to take out time from his very busy schedule. And of course the Ashram Press whose work comes so very close to the *Gita's* conception of *Yogah Karmasu Kaushalam*.

Behind the seen there is always a vaster unseen. And so must we also acknowledge the unsung labour of the gods who inspire and inform us with the messages from the beyond. This book would have been very difficult to write if the goddess of inspiration would not have kept the channels open. And beyond the gods stands She, Aditi, the Mother of the gods, the giver to us of the boon of immortality. As Yama tells Nachiketas, "*This is She whom thou seekest.*"

To Her, our Divine Mother, we offer this work. If it can awaken and initiate our earth-bound souls sleeping under the shadow of death, to a touch of Her shadowless Light; if it can remind us once again of our deathless being and open for us an inner passage from death to immortality, then this work would be amply rewarded.

From the non-being to the true being

From darkness to Light

From death to immortality

Om, Peace, Peace, Peace.

"This is a question which every person whose consciousness is awakened a little has asked himself at least once in his life.

...What is this monstrous force in which one takes part without wanting to, without understanding it? Why are we born, if it is only to die? Why all this effort for development, progress, the flowering of the faculties, if it is to come to a diminution ending in decline and disintegration?

...In persons who are sensitive, it produces horror; in others indignation.

...Some feel a revolt in them, others less strong feel despair and always this question arises: 'If there is conscious Will behind all that, this Will seems to be monstrous.'"

"From birth to death, life is a dangerous thing.

The brave pass through it without care for the risks.

The prudent take precautions.

The cowardly are afraid of everything.

But ultimately, what happens to each one is only what the Supreme Will has decided."

The Mother

Behind the Iron Mask — Introduction

Birth and Death are the two great original mysteries — the birth of this vast and complex universe in a seeming void, the birth of life and living beings in and out of a seemingly mechanical universe, the birth of a thinking, half-conscious creature called man from a seemingly unconscious, unthinking life.

So is death a mystery, the apparently dark void into which everything collapses, the great and the small, the high and mighty as well as the lowly and weak, the virtuous and the vicious, the pious and the wicked, the angels and demigods as much as the devils and the titans themselves. Death swallows all.

The great philosopher-poet was casually asked by one who gave him shelter for the night: “Who are you? Where do you come from? Where are you going?” These seemingly insignificant questions whose answers we often take for granted can change our life radically. The merely living can change into a thinker; the thinker into a philosopher-poet, the poet into a visionary-mystic, the mystic into one utterly identified in an inner ineffable union with God.

And as we move up through this ladder of self-transcendence, our self-view changes. And as our answer to this fundamental question ‘who are we’ changes, so do our answers to the other two fundamental questions, ‘where do we come from’ and ‘where do we go’.

The questions that Death asks of us upon the highways of life is symbolised in the story of the Sphinx — Who are you? If our answer is correct, it lets us pass. If not, we are slain by Death. Therefore, the body that knows not its immortality dies, whereas the soul that knows itself escapes. This truth applies as much to individuals as to entire civilisations.

*Thou thinkest term and end for thee are not;
But though thy pride is great, thou hast forgot
The Sphinx that waits for man beside the way.
All questions thou mayst answer, but one day
Her question shall await thee. That reply,
As all we must; for they, who cannot, die.
She slays them and their mangled bodies lie
Upon the highways of eternity.*

*Therefore, if thou wouldst live, know first this thing,
Who thou art in this dungeon labouring.*¹

Death forces us to raise this question and thereby change. Therefore, death to one point of view is a passage or perhaps even a precursor to this change. To another eye that sees yet sees not, because it sees only one half of the truth, or rather sees the apparent outward fact as the sole truth, death is the dark womb to which all returns. Day, from the point of view of earth, is only a brief or long interregnum compressed between two dark eternities of night, earth itself a small dot amidst an appallingly immense and largely empty space.

But the limits of our sight are not the limits of light. Light is hid in the darkest corners of the universe. Light is trapped in the dumb inertia of matter and stone, light climbs up in the plant and the trees, leaps to dynamic movement in animals, aspires through conscious thought in man. Night is only a concealment of Light or a depravity of our sight. Light blazing beyond our horizons is the birthplace of that which we truly are — the Light Supreme, the secret home to which we climb through the many-tiered stairway of Life and Death and Rebirth.

The poet of yesterday thus sang this ode to our immortal, deathless being:

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's star
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
Not in utter forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home...²*

And the poet of the future thus sings the song of immortality:

*O Force-compelled, Fate-driven earth-born race,
O petty adventurers in an infinite world
And prisoners of a dwarf humanity,
How long will you tread the circling tracks of mind*

¹ Sri Aurobindo: 'A Vision of Science', *Collected Poems*, p. 43

² William Wordsworth: *Ode to Immortality*

*Around your little self and petty things?
But not for a changeless littleness were you meant,
Not for vain repetition were you built;
Out of the Immortal's substance you were made;
Your actions can be swift revealing steps,
Your life a changeful mould for growing gods.
A Seer, a strong Creator, is within,
The immaculate Grandeur broods upon your days,
Almighty powers are shut in Nature's cells.
A greater destiny waits you in your front:
This transient earthly being if he wills
Can fit his acts to a transcendent scheme.
He who now stares at the world with ignorant eyes
Hardly from the Inconscient's night aroused,
That look at images and not at Truth
Can fill those orbs with an immortal's sight...
The earth you tread is a border screened from heaven,
The life you lead conceals the light you are.³*

But these are deeper things we are told. The issues of Birth and Death and Life may be very complex, may even be unsolvable riddles to man while the daily issues of an average person are different. He is not concerned so much with what or who is death but rather with what death does or means to him. To us who live in perpetual slavery to the senses, moved as puppets by the hundred and one strings of the heart and life's small and blind desires, death comes with a terrible face whose only task is to spoil the too brief and short-lived happiness of our human life. Death represents to us a blind and capricious god or a cruel and merciless demon who comes to snatch all that we hold dear to our life. What we see is a powerful god or Adversary or whatever else one may call it, who comes only to take, and if at all it gives anything it is only indirect and in the form of a release from our earthly bonds, a negative giving so to speak. However, it is our undue and ignorant attachment to darkness that makes him assume such a formidable figure in the human mind.

³ Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, Book 4, Canto 3, p. 370

And yet, life would become so very difficult, nay even impossible if this scavenging god whose presence one loathes didn't exist. It is his cosmic task perhaps to cleanse the darkest corners. He instinctively discovers darkness even in a cloak of light and swallows it as if by affinity. Does he swallow light as well? Shades of grey yes, but not the authentic Light of the Soul say those who have seen beyond its frightful form. But then we are not merely souls. The soul is indeed our true identity but we also assume a body and all that goes along with it. So, does it mean that apart from our soul, nothing will ever escape it? That all is foredoomed since the very beginning and amidst this grand dance of destruction, this grim specter of a universal collapse, the only thing that stands immortal is the naked soul divested of all its vestures?

If that were so, then life and creation would not be an act of God or of a deeper wisdom and love, but an accident and an aberration arising as a momentary bubble upon the Infinite's Timeless sea.

Not so, we are told by Sri Aurobindo. The destiny of the individual and of the earth is not the doom of death but the crown of conscious immortality. An Infinite wisdom and love has built this world out of Itself and an Infinite wisdom and love shall save it from doom and death.

*We whirl not here upon a casual globe
Abandoned to a task beyond our force...⁴*

But this too does not comfort our sense-bound view and death-bound life. Why, even the learned and philosophers are shaken by the spear-point of death. For even when we have conquered our personal tragedies and individual fear of death, we are still moved by grief and feel another's loss as our own. In the case of a sage, even though he may be enlightened and not shaken by personal grief, he may nevertheless be moved by the imperfection of this universe. A secret sense of oneness ties us inexorably with the creation's fate. Our individual victory is not complete till it is complemented with a cosmic victory. Our little hymn of light is swallowed by the noises of the world. Our ode to immortality drowned by an all-destroying thunder and roar of death. Our small or great efforts at individual liberation are as if marred by the endless servitude to a fixed and inflexible iron law to which all are bound. The clarity

⁴ Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, Book 1, Canto 4, pp. 58-59

of our inner sight is constantly clouded by dust thrown by the trampling hooves of time upon which death rides.

No doubt something lasts and grows and progresses even in a world seemingly governed by death. The ruins of great and mighty ancient civilisations buried below the dust of our feet are not the only truths. Something of their greatness, some essential spirit of their ancient might survives and reincarnates and takes form again. It breathes its force in new bodies and forms, now outwardly changed to suit the demands of the Time-Spirit. The ancient wisdom speaks to our modern hearts and lures us to the whispers of the gods. Out of the ruins of the past, the forms of the newer creation rise. Out of the pyre and the grave arises our deathless form defying annihilation's script, defying adverse fate.

But who has seen this? And who really knows? As for us, only a giant Ignorance and a dumb unthinking stillness surrounds us. And who can pierce this darkness? Not we in our present collective littleness. We can do nothing but cry and want and weep. We can do little except bear with a heavy and grudging heart the tragedies of time. Are we not ourselves bubbles and waifs upon Time's sea?

The answer to this is also the answer to our fate. If we truly are nothing but this, then surely we have to somehow bear our fate in the hands of a cruel destiny. Or hold out for the moment, but only for the moment, till death meets us again on some other unseen bend and unexpected turn upon the highways of life. But wait... we can also stare into the face of death with deathless eyes, return its mock with the carefree laughter of the soul, meet its dangerous challenge with the secret smile of the eternal within us. Moreover, we can turn this challenge into an opportunity for growing into strength and light and eternal life. We can overthrow its dark shadow with the inmost fire, that immortal god within us. We can, if we will, swallow the darkness by the shadowless Light that we are, and the deathless Self of whom we are an errant and adventuring ray. And what greater adventure than this adventure of death itself?

If we can do it, the better for us. But if we cannot, we too, as a race, will pass under the folds of death's darkness as others before us. But the march of evolution will not stop. It will move on till the god hidden in form and flesh grows and overthrows ignorance and overthrows suffering and overthrows tragedy and overthrows death. And if all darkness is the preparation of a greater dawn then we are perhaps close to yet another evolutionary dawn of humanity. The only choice then would be whether

we face the new dawn turned towards the sun of tomorrow or turn our face towards the dark denial that death represents...

*Even as of old man came behind the beast
This high divine successor surely shall come
Behind man's inefficient mortal pace,
Behind his vain labour, sweat and blood and tears:
He shall know what mortal mind barely durst think,
He shall do what the heart of the mortal could not dare.
Inheritor of the toil of human time
He shall take on him the burden of the gods;
All heavenly light shall visit the earth's thoughts,
The might of heaven shall fortify earthly hearts;
Earth's deeds shall touch the superhuman's height,
Earth's seeing widen into the infinite.⁵*

Death, to most of us, represents the grand finale of life's uncertain walk. The curtain falls upon all the great or small dramas of life. But is the end of an episode of life the final act or just a change of scene in the great epic that would continue to unfold itself in future lives — this is something that has ever fascinated the human mind. Here is a darkness that the half-luminous angels of rational thought cannot probe. A final, almost fatal agnosticism seems to be the last word of material science leaning heavily upon truths experienced by the physical senses. But what if there are senses subtler than those that we are accustomed to? What if there are realities other than the purely material ones? And, what if there is a Great Sense behind the sense-bound and apparently senseless view of life?

These are difficult questions that deny any easy and over-simplistic answer. These are uncomfortable questions as well, since a definitive answer to them is likely to change our entire self-view and world-view. The immense practical importance of these questions can be ignored only at the risk of allowing ourselves to live in a penumbra of perpetual Ignorance. And nothing could be worse than this that the inability of our probe into the mysteries of Death turns into an inability of our Life to arrive at its fullest possible perfection.

⁵ Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, Book 3, Canto 4, p. 344

There is no denying that death raises for us a question and therefore must the attempt be made to find its answer. One needs to probe death from all sides and see where the Trojan-wall allows us to enter into the dark and dangerous kingdom. To limit ourselves to only one approach, for example, a scientific approach based upon a purely material perception of life and death, is to do a great injustice to the cause of truth itself. For just as there are many faces of the One Truth so too there are many paths that lead to it. And if a path falls short of leading one to the reconciling station one might as well move on to a wider road that goes further, for indeed Truth is wider and greater than Its forms and no single formula can claim to contain or exhaust It. This has been the wisdom of the ages and in keeping with this we have made a small attempt to probe behind the iron mask through different means. Whether one finds behind it a *rictus sardonius*⁶ mocking at all the efforts of life, or, one meets behind the cold denial an inflexible pity and fathomless heart of a great and ancient god patiently labouring to work out a vast and grand theme, is something that is left for each one of us to discover. For truth is a personal quest where books and thoughts are only guide-posts and lighthouses in our never ceasing journey. The goal of our quest is outside all our present maps with only God within as our Guide and God without and around us as our sole authentic reference point.

Yet an infant step is the forerunner of a great and difficult climb. This book is also just such an infant step and we invoke Their Grace to turn this infant step into a journey towards the Right and the Light.

*He sails through life and death and other life,
He travels on through looking and through sleep.
A power is on him from her occult force
That ties him to his own creations fate,

And never can the mighty traveller rest
And never can the mystic voyage cease,
Till the nescient dusk is lifted from man's soul
And the morns of God have overtaken his night.⁷*

⁶ A fixed satirical smile full of bitter irony.

⁷ Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, Book 1, Canto 4, p. 72

"What is this then thou callest death? Can God die? O thou who fearest death, it is Life that has come to thee sporting with a death-head and wearing a mask of terror."

"Death has no reality except as a process of life. Disintegration of substance and renewal of substance, maintenance of form and change of form are the constant process of life; death is merely a rapid disintegration subservient to life's necessity of change and variation of formal experience. Even in the death of the body there is no cessation of Life, only the material of one form of life is broken up to serve as material for other forms of life."

Sri Aurobindo

What is Death?

Death – The Annihilator of Time's Works

For all our knowledge of life, death continues to remain a mystery. Just as we know something about the processes of life rather than about the life-principle itself, so also we know a little about the process of death rather than about the death-principle that exists as a universal force in Nature. We (the sense-mind at least) normally associate death with the visible dissolution of the physical form. But the principle of death is much more universal than that. There is first the process of decay and disintegration that is almost a part of all material forms that we know upon earth at least. Perhaps there could be or are forms of a subtler make, of a different substance-energy combination, if one may say so, that are more plastic and therefore less subject to the phenomenon of decay and death. The immortal gods existing on other planes of consciousness where matter is differently organised are supposed to have such a plasticity and a consequent immortality for practical purposes at least. Practical, because they too have their term of existence following which they dissolve back into their parent Source. Thus at a higher plane, death represents a beginning and end of things in Time, the great annihilator of its own works! For all events are worked out by the Time-Spirit and maintained and later even destroyed by it. That takes us immediately to the phenomenon of death beyond the mere visible dissolution of physical forms. We may thus say that there is death not only of physical forms but also of forms of thought, of ideas, of philosophies, sciences, arts, of great civilisations... death not only of mind-made structures but even of quasars and distant stars and galaxies. Whether they die or simply change their forms as both material and spiritual science confirm, is another matter but the existing form does perish, and that is the equivalent of death.

“The life of the society like the physical life of the individual human being passes through a cycle of birth, growth, youth, ripeness and decline, and if this last stage goes far enough without any arrest of its course towards decadence, it may perish, even so all the older peoples and nations except India and China perished, as a man dies of old age. But the collective being has too the capacity of renewing itself, of a recovery and a new cycle. For in each people there is a soul

idea or life idea at work, less mortal than its body, and if this idea is itself sufficiently powerful, large and force-giving and the people sufficiently strong, vital and plastic in mind and temperament to combine stability with a constant enlargement or new application of the power of the soul idea or life idea in its being, it may pass through many such cycles before it comes to a final exhaustion."¹

Death – A Partner in the Game of Life

Another idea about death is that it is a device of nature used as a process of life, albeit complementary to life itself. In other words, individual forms seen in isolation perish but by their death they only go on to strengthen the survival for a larger collective truth. Individual life forms in this view are seen as part of a great unbroken chain of Life or All-life, if we may say so. While the individual suffers the shock and defeat by death, the larger unity grows by this individual sacrifice. Yet the totality of the physical body continues to not only exist but even grow through this process. Take for instance, the fact that within a single lifetime, individual cells and groups of cells die several times. The human red blood cells for example have a lifespan of about 90-120 days. That means they change themselves through a process of internal destruction combined with a commensurate process of internal manufacture every three-four months on an average. The balance is evidently a delicate one. If the cells were to survive abnormally longer, that would create danger for the organism. It would block the blood vessels due to the excess of cells in the system. It would also lead to excess of old and therefore relatively less capable cells leading to an overall inefficiency in their functioning. Nature seems to respect efficiency more than mere age. In fact excess of red cells or for that matter the white ones or any other cells in the system leads to a threat for the life of the whole organism. What else is cancer but the relative immortality of a group of cells due to excess production (beyond the norm necessary for a smooth balance) combined with a degree of freedom from the whole that signals danger for the rest of the body! Here too we find a lesson from nature. Freedom does not exist in isolation but in relation with the whole. And immortality too will be meaningful if it comes only by discovering that part in us which is conscious of its

¹ Sri Aurobindo: *The Renaissance in India*, p. 334

oneness with the whole. There is nothing like immortality for the separate ego-self of man. That would obviously be a dangerous thing to happen and therefore neither nature's deep wisdom nor the boon of gods would allow it.

Death is a certainty, nay a necessity so long as we live in the separate ego-sense. As with the cells so also with more complex living systems. The individual organisms die and thereby make way for future growth which would become increasingly difficult if the past continued to linger ad-infinity as fetters around the feet of time that flees faster than we know. The body we are born with is not the body that eventually dies — if we live the average lifespan. It has changed over several times or shall we say died and reborn many times over. So rapid is the transition, so imperceptible the process, and so well coordinated a mechanism that we do not even notice it. The sense of being the same self and person continues even though everything is changed, as if something central takes care of the rapidity of the complex changes occurring within. So then when do we actually die and do we die at all except to the limited and narrow view of our fragmented self? Is death the spur towards recovering the Wholeness that we secretly are? Is physical death just yet another great transition, maybe too sudden and a bit prolonged so as to make us take notice of it? Is it a temporary decentralisation and dispersal till out of the dust we gather ourselves and rise again like the mythical bird of immortality, the phoenix, and resume the great epic of life?

The Two Faces of Death

Not only philosophy and mystic lore but science also recognises two forms of death. One that is natural and normal as a process complimentary to life, called *Apoptosis*; the other as something unnatural and superimposed upon the organism, called *Necrosis*. Death, through apoptosis is woven into the very fabric of life. The fingers of a six-week-old embryo separate following the death of cells located in the web between the fingers. The death of these specific cells allows the appearance of the hand as it is. Even before the full organism begins to breathe and before the heart begins to beat with new life, the game of death and life has already begun. Sometimes they play as partners as in the phenomenon of apoptosis, at other times as opponents, as in necrosis. Apoptosis, meaning 'falling leaves' in Greek, refers to the continuous process

of death within life, as natural and necessary for the body's physiological balance just as leaves falling from trees in Autumn are necessary for the fresh blossoms of Spring.

In apoptosis or programmed cell death, the dying cell sends signals to the neighboring cells which then engage in swallowing all the important organelles which can be utilised. The process is fine-tuned and perfectly coordinated. In contrast, death through necrosis seems to be an external superimposition necessitated perhaps by the conditions of life itself. We may call it an accident, something that perhaps could be avoided by human intervention. This itself will make life (and death) so much easier to handle! Necrotic cell-death is an abrupt process liberating toxins in the environment. The result is proneness to damage in the surrounding cells. The disturbance in favour of death leads to aging and death. On the other hand, a disturbance in favor of life leads to malignancies and therefore an even more premature death.

Thus, biologically as well as psychologically, we can distinguish two types of dying. One, where death appears as a liberator from a burdened past. The other comes as a face of terror destroying ruthlessly a beautiful gift, making the very first moment of birth also into a moment of death.

The Scientific View of Death

The material scientist has studied the phenomenon of death purely at the physical level. Physically, the scientists distinguish at least two levels of death. *Physiological or clinical death* wherein one observes external signs of the absence of life. Prominent among these is the absence of any form of brain activity as recorded electro physiologically, next there comes the cessation of respiration and the heartbeat. Of course, we know today that the breathing may stop much earlier and the heart may still go on beating for some time. The shadow of death then descends lower down and affects the liver, kidneys and other organs. This is the temporal march of death, from above downwards. As a last step there intervenes *cellular death* which leads to the final dissolution and decomposition of the very cells that constitute the body.

In other words, there is a period of time when the fundamental functions and processes that sustain life in the organism — breathing and circulation have stopped but the cells continue to live sustained by a minimum of life-force or by a past momentum. Once the decomposition sets in it is a sure sign that life has withdrawn completely without any possibility of return. Of course from a clinical point of view,

the person is considered dead when the brain-death has occurred irreversibly and the heart and respiration has ceased. At this point, the law permits cremation as well as organ transplant/ donation. It is believed that hereon it is only a matter of time for the degeneration to set in. This though true in most cases may not however be an absolute rule. For there are several instances on record of those declared clinically dead returning to life. To this we will turn later.

In fact there is a state of *suspended animation* where the respiration and heartbeat can stop for as long as 48 hours and yet life may resume thereafter. Some of those buried under debris for long and resuming their normal life afterwards may well be cases of suspended animation. It is a state where the energy transactions are withheld at a minimum much as an account may be suspended but not closed. This is well comprehensible from the yogic point of view.

Seen from a deeper perspective, the processes of life — respiration, circulation, etc., are simply some of the material means that nature uses to circulate the life-force within the body. The life-energy however also flows simultaneously through a subtler and supraphysical route. The yogis traditionally identify five such channels and movements of the life-energy within us. Under certain conditions as in trance or cataleptic states the life-energy may continue to flow and animate the body even though the physical means are no more at its disposal. This can provide enough energy for the minimum support of the physical body, much as a blind man under the stress of his disability may develop his other senses to compensate for his seeing. These things are obviously not so well recognised by a purely material science and therefore it erroneously regards the cessation of life processes and its material means as the cessation of life itself. *Life ceases when the force of life withdraws from the form that it animates and not when the material processes have stopped functioning.* Though in most cases the two occur hand in hand, yet, this subtle distinction is necessary and can have a practical bearing upon issues like organ transplant and burial.

There have been cases of premature burial necessitating sometimes laws to prevent cremation until decomposition sets in. According to Swami Abhedananda of the Sri Ramakrishna Order, "There have been cases of many prematurely killed by putting them into the coffin and burying them under the ground. As the premature burial is objectionable, so the premature embalming is objectionable. The embalmers have killed (unknowingly) many before they really died. They might have been revived and might have lived for a long time. Trance, catalepsy and ecstasy are the conditions

which resemble death. The outward signs are similar. But what happens to the soul after trance or ecstasy? Science does not know, because it denies the existence of a soul other than the mind. A person might go into a trance and remain in that state for hours. There are persons who can stop the heartbeat by their will. I know a Hindu Yogi who came to America a few years ago and who, in New York, went through all the medical tests to prove that he could stop his heartbeat at his will. The medical practitioners were all dumbfounded, and questioned how he could do it. It is possible, because it obeys the will of the individual, and the individual will commands and directs the organic functions."

This is not the only incidence of such a feat. There have been others even more rigorously authenticated, the case of Pilot Baba² for example who remained buried inside an underground air-proof chamber for twenty-one days and came out alive to the amazement of the scientists and the sceptics. The rarity of such events is only because it is still a *possibility* for most, a possibility not yet realised or even attempted. But the yogis in India have always known and frequently experienced a cessation of outer breathing and an activation of subtle breathing during deep meditations.³

In fact there are parallels in the animal world as well wherein certain animals mimic death including stiffness (rigor mortis) as a defensive strategy. These may be called for want of a better term, 'counterfeits of death'. The black bear for example can stay without food for around three – six months. During this period its heartbeat and respiration drops progressively to much below its normal. Certain species of foxes and other animals can lie stiff and motionless, practically without breathing to deceive the predators. Snakes resemble the dead when they go into collective hibernation. This is just a pointer that the traditional signs of death such as the stopping of heartbeats and respiration can be deceptive. Even modern science has recognised this and therefore the strict criteria are no more clinical (though still followed in practice) but electrophysiological (the electrical records of the heart and brain taken through the ECG and EEG must show a complete and sustained absence of activity). Naturally, if the animal mind can do things of this order then how much more can the human

² Pilot baba was an air force pilot whose plane crashed over the hills but he was miraculously saved. Since then his life took an inward turn. The feat described above was undertaken by him to demonstrate before the medical fraternity about the hidden possibilities of man that can be explored and developed through yoga.

³ Refer to Appendix I: What is Death? for the Paul Brunton episode.

mind and still more the mind of the yogi striving for conscious mastery achieve is left to anybody's guess. As we have already seen even scientifically it is not so incomprehensible today. It is just that the heartbeat and the respiration have so far been regarded as autonomic and therefore beyond the person's voluntary control. But so was gastric secretion and many other human activities regarded as autonomic and beyond the control of the human will. Today we know that human will can indeed master these. Extensive scientific research of yogic practices have revealed the latent possibilities of human will in controlling the brain waves and many other things, for example, the heart rate, gastric juice secretion, blood pressure, etc. Sri Aurobindo reveals in the essays on physical education that it is necessary to bring under voluntary control those activities of the body that are driven largely by a mechanical and subconscious will. It is this mechanical and subconscious will that assumes the autonomic pathways. With education, however, the body can override these pathways and link them to a higher and more conscious voluntary control. In fact we are on the threshold of learning that there are no ineluctable laws as far as the human body is concerned but only fixed habits that mimic law. And who knows we may well discover someday that death and aging themselves are nothing more than habits, bad ones at that!

Of course, both the material scientist probing the physical body and the spiritual scientist probing the soul and other subtle bodies, as well as their mutual relation agree on one point. It is this that cellular death and the consequent signs of decomposition are sure indications of death. The only exception to this would be mummification or desiccation. The commonest explanation of this phenomenon is attributed to dehydration and certain other chemical changes. But there are inner reasons as well of which we are presently ignorant. Nevertheless, we may become aware of these as we grow in inner sight and vision. The inner reason is that in such instances the 'spirit of the form' (that part of our material vitality that is in close link with the body) remains around the body. This supplies just enough vital forces to create an interchange with the environment and thereby prevents decay. But it also provides a certain degree of life to the dead. Perhaps this could have been one of the reasons for the tragic and mysterious deaths of those who were exploring the pyramids and mummies. We do not know but the immediate practical implication of all this is, that it is wise to wait for the process of withdrawal to complete itself before one undertakes any step towards the post-death rituals for the body of the deceased. To hurry through the process may mean that the consciousness of the person

inhabiting the body may lose some of the experiences embedded in the material cells. While this may be of little consequence to the mass of humanity, it would make a difference to one who is spiritually uplifted and whose body has gathered a wealth of inner experiences through the consciousness of its noble and worthy inhabitant.

There is nothing unscientific about this. Normally the traditional signs of death like the cessation of breathing and heartbeat and the stilling of brain waves is based on the assumption that these are vital functions under the control of an autonomic nervous system. The word autonomic (as opposed to voluntary) is itself an assumptive word indicating that this part of the nervous system works automatically without the control or intervention of our voluntary will. But this, after all, may be an assumption based on our present experience of the body and its functioning. It has now long been known that athletics (a voluntary activity) does tend to alter the way our autonomic nervous system functions. In other words, a voluntary activity can affect and alter the balance of functioning of even our most 'autonomous parts'. If so then where do we set the limits? Why can't one train the body to continue living for a longer time than feasible now, even after cessation of the heartbeats and respiration through methodical training? Why limit the scope of the human will when we have not discovered any such limiting pathways for it? In fact if anatomy is any indicator then the parts representing the conscious human will are the highest placed with possible linkages to all other pathways, one way or the other. The central seat of the body's will is in the brain, the most developed and, ontogenetically, the most recent in evolution, the prefrontal cortex. The parts controlling respiration and heartbeats are placed down below in the third layer of the brain. Keeping in view nature's logic of telencephalisation or to put it philosophically, ascent and integration, these lower parts have to be under the control of the higher. Recent evidence suggests it as well. It is just that we have not been trained to look at it from that angle but it can be developed methodically in such a way that our conscious mental will controls even the 'autonomous parts'. From our point of view that is indeed one of the things Sri Aurobindo has suggested for the body — to bring the now subconscious parts under a conscious control. It is perhaps just a question of reactivating these sleeping paths. The only problem remaining then would be of working out alternate means for the flow of the life-current. The yogi is precisely such an explorer discovering hidden possibilities of the body, mind and the soul, other than those normally known to man. Let us not brush away their heroically scientific and even path breaking efforts as mere dreams of some madmen. Dreams perhaps for the common lot who strive not for

something higher than what nature has provided but it is thanks to these dreams that we can still dare to hope and strive to conquer life and Nature. Thanks again to this madness that we can try to exceed ourselves and dare the impossible and reach out to the unreachable summits beyond our little humanity!

The Inner Dimension of Death

From an inner and occult point of view therefore death seems to encompass at least three distinct stages. To understand this we need to take a look at what holds the different organs of the body together in a smooth and harmonious functioning. Though the organs appear as separate and distinct entities, they are linked both anatomically as well as physiologically, mainly through the nerves, blood, glands and the lymphatics. Each is a specialised group of cells, yet they do not work in isolation but with a fine, intricate, delicate as well as complex balance that would beat the orderliness of a megalopolis. Where does this intelligent order come from except as an outer reflection of a vast and concealed intelligence hidden and working from behind in matter. Much in the same way as an event's coordinator who smoothly controls all different aspects of an event, even while not being directly involved in each aspect, this intelligence too, coordinates, orders, sets to motion a smooth functioning of the diverse systems in our material and other universes, from the galaxies to the atoms and subatomic particles. It differentiates itself at each level and plane of consciousness and each individual particle and aggregates, to further coordinate the billions of processes in our manifold and complex universe. The ancient seers saw this as a Consciousness-Force that permeates, operates and works everywhere. But this Consciousness-Force is obviously not a mechanical unconscious energy as is evident in its working at all levels but a vast and supreme Intelligent-Will that knows its steps and goal. This Intelligent-Will works in the body also to hold the diverse elements and processes together. In man, the mental being, its primary seat is in the brain, and it holds the replica of the body as a whole in the physical consciousness behind, so that the gross outer manifested body can be compared for faults and rectified to the extent possible. This central Will must abdicate first before the smooth and harmoniously coordinated functioning of the body begins to give way to a disorder, dispersal and death. The stages therefore:

First, is the stage of *Decentralisation*. The universal will that held the body as a single unit or its representative decides to withdraw. This is the most important unseen and occult-determining factor. It is this Will that gives us the sense of a cohesive whole and coordinates its manifold events despite the diversity of functioning of the different body tissues and organs. In the absence of such a Will the body organs may well end up destroying each other since each is like a little primordial organism specialised in operations and symbiotically linked to other organs/organisms. The force that holds all these together is the Will that operates in the organism. It is the same force that holds the atomic constituents and the distant stars and galaxies together and is therefore universal. Modern science recognises such a force of cohesion between the molecules as well as the cells. Yet it is not a blind and mechanical force but an Intelligent-Will as is evident from its operations. It is this Will that begins to decentralise thereby starting a chain reaction of disintegration, dispersal and finally death and decomposition.

Centralisation is indeed the process of focal concentration necessary for creating anything. For without such a centralising concentration there would be nothing but an indeterminate chaos. The universal planes of consciousness themselves are formed through a process of concentration and condensation of the One Consciousness. These universal planes in their turn get focused and reflected in an individual once again through the same process. The soul in us chooses the elements out of universal nature and channelises them through its Will so as to form a unique body with its unique life-mind constitution based upon its need of certain experiences for growth and mastery. It is like a gymnast choosing certain equipment out of a wide variety so as to develop one aspect of his body through a certain set of physical exercises. So too the secret soul in us chooses certain formations of nature including the difficulties and challenges so as to develop certain sides of our self-experience in each birth. The choice is made based upon its past experiences, the need for a certain developmental training in the present and most importantly, its hidden agenda for the future. It is this and not a mechanical machinery of karma and heredity that forms us. And it is from this deepest standpoint that we say that our soul is the author of our fate. Heredity, environment, karma are all nothing else but machineries and processes of nature that the soul uses to make its choices. It chooses our life and circumstance, it chooses the experiences of life and when the need for a particular experience is over and it can go no further, then it chooses to move out of a particular formation of nature, rest for a while to gather the essence of its experiences, and return back for further growth. The

Will of the soul binds it to the earth with a divine purpose and not some illusion or accident and it is the Will of the soul that makes it leave this house of matter and not some frightful agency of death.

Second, is the stage of *Withdrawal*. There starts a process of withdrawal wherein the mind withdraws followed by the life-force. This goes on till the body enters into a state of suspension of life activities. Here the vital functions stop but the body cells continue to hold the life-force reserves. The connection has not yet been severed and can re-establish itself under certain circumstances. This is the twilight zone wherein medical science may declare a person dead since his vital functions have stopped, yet there is some life in the body and therefore return is possible. It is a tacit recognition of this possibility that has led to a whole science of resuscitation. It has led to the inclusion of a new criterion in the certification of death.

A third and final stage supervenes — the *Point of No-Return*. Herein the life-force has withdrawn near-completely and whatever is left is busy with the process of disintegration. It is at this point that decomposition begins to set in and the being that inhabited the body moves on from the world that links the earth to the beyond.

Medical science is not yet aware of the first stage. It recognises the second stage in its outward aspects only and terms it as Clinical Death. The last is of course well known as the stage of decomposition or Cellular Death though here too, it is only the visible process (to the naked eye) that is described without any reference to the inner process. That leaves a big gap in our understanding. It is therefore that medical science is unable to explain cases of return, of NDE (near death experience) and of personality changes known in some of those who have survived death.

It is on this basis that we can also understand the pain of death. A question is often asked, is death painful? The answer is a yes and no. It is not painful once the central being has detached itself completely from the form and earth atmosphere. This may be easy for yogis and the spiritually accomplished but is by no means easy for the normal earth-bound mass of mankind. Though insensible to the outer surface, there is a real pain of death that arises due to a tearing of the life-force from the body and the subtle nerves that feed it. These nerves built of a subtle substance are attached to the gross body much as the physical nerves are. Their cutting asunder leads to an agonising wrench that constitutes the 'pain of death'. That is why there is so much attachment to life in the body and if the euthanasia enthusiasts were to know or experience it once, they will be likely to change their views regarding this matter.

“What is it that the Soul draws out from the body when it casts off this partial physical robe which enveloped not it, but part of its members? What is it whose issuing out gives this wrench, this swift struggle and pain of parting, creates this sense of violent divorce? The answer does not help us much. It is the subtle or psychical frame which is tied to the physical by the heart-strings, by the cords of life-force, of nervous energy which have been woven into every physical fibre. This the Lord of the body draws out and the violent snapping or the rapid or tardy loosening of the life-cords, the exit of the connecting force constitutes the pain of death and its difficulty.”⁴

The Tragedy of Inner Death

Thus we see that death is not just the stoppage of the body machine but even more importantly the driver-soul leaving behind a broken and frail machine. As the driver moves away, the force of life using the fuel of matter soon wears out. The machinery thence comes to a complete halt. We may envisage a situation wherein the soul leaves the body but the machinery continues. In such cases certain forces of the vital world may possess or inhabit the body temporarily and use it for its own destructive purposes. Such instances of a vital possession may arise following a seemingly spontaneous recovery or after an artificial resuscitation. The hallmark of such an event is a sudden personality change for the worse. Since it is the soul that gives man his true value, its absence leaves the field of the body a prey to the animal and demoniac forces from the nether worlds. There is a sudden downward tendency characterised by an increasing propensity to satisfy the crude and animal aspects of nature, a turn towards cruelty, an absence of faith and will, an absence of the urge to progress even outwardly, a missing of the finer and nobler movements that constitute our humanity, an undue appetite for vulgar display of power, wealth and sex.⁵ Such instances have been recorded in human history and passed off as psychotic madness due to brain damage but whose inner significance is yet to be discovered.

⁴ Sri Aurobindo: *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*, Vol.13, pp. 274-75

⁵ Could the latter part of King Solomon’s life be a reflection of this inner death? A seemingly just ruler in his earlier years he is supposed to have turned into an unreasonable and cruel tyrant in the later part of his life.

*Man harbours dangerous forces in his house.
The Titan and the Fury and the Djinn
Lie bound in the subconscious's cavern pit*

*And the Beast grovels in his antre den:
Dire mutterings rise and murmur in their drowse.
Insurgent sometimes raises its huge head*

*A monstrous mystery lurking in life's deeps,
The mystery of dark and fallen worlds,
The dread visages of the adversary Kings.
The dreadful powers held down within his depths
Become his masters or his ministers;
Enormous they invade his bodily house,
Can act in his acts, infest his thought and life.⁶*

This is a graphic description of certain severe forms of madness. Whatever be the outer cause, the real inner reason is always a possession (except in certain organic brain disorder). The 'possession' is not just a being but more importantly a force and a consciousness. And since everything in this world is essentially a play of consciousness and forces at different levels interacting with each other, here too this dark and clouded force of a lower consciousness disrupts the links of thought, colours our feelings with suspicion and fear or an exaggerated self-importance and undue vanity, alters the brain chemistry by filling the cells with a perverse force and finally creates confusion and forgetfulness; the soul unable to find the right instruments for its growth and self-expression decides to depart, and that indeed is the inner death. With the departure of the soul, there departs from us faith and will, hope and courage, love and light. What remains is an empty shell like an automaton. The body continues to live supported by an inert and dark force of life that drives it only to satisfy certain gross animal propensities or else turns it into a dumb unthinking stone that can neither think nor feel like a human being. Drugs work only at the last step of the process and for some time alter the balance since at least the physical substance

⁶ Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, p. 480

(which is the main instrument of expression and medium of growth) is prevented from disruption. But they are not enough. In others, the disorder silently and ominously creeps into the cells and tissues till the man gradually turns from good to evil like the black magician and cannibal in J.K. Rowling's books, or like Hitler, Mussolini and the perpetrators of Tianamen in real life. The gory history of many dictators is witness to what happens next.

*Impotent to quell his terrible prisoners,
Appalled the householder helpless sits above,
Taken from him his house is his no more...
This evil Nature housed in human hearts
A foreign inhabitant, a dangerous guest:
The soul that harbours it it can dislodge,
Expel the householder, possess the house.⁷*

Thus, Faith and Will are in their essence spiritual elements and derive from the inmost soul in us. Faith is the reflection of knowledge and Will the reflection of power, the two things that constitute the divine element within us along with that other element termed Ananda or a deep unconditional joy of being. Broken and deflected from their true purposes in our outer nature, they are yet the reflections or shadows of something true and deep in us. However, such a complete break is rare for it would mean an extreme form of regression (reverting back to a previous developmental stage of our evolution) to an animal existence. Nature usually does not allow such drastic regressions but we do encounter it sometimes in extreme cases. That as we have seen is indeed the real tragedy. The body's death is only a temporary pause in the soul's journey but the death of Faith and Will, of godward and upward aspiration, is a great fall and loss, a defeat of the soul at least for that particular lifetime.

*Often the pilgrim on the Eternal's road
Ill-lit from clouds by the pale moon of Mind,
Or in devious by-ways wandering alone,
Or lost in deserts where no path is seen,
Falls overpowered by her lion leap,*

⁷ Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, pp. 481-82

*A conquered captive under her dreadful paws...
The mortal perishes to God and Light,*

*An Adversary governs heart and brain...
His subtle defeatist murmur slays the faith...
From the veiled sanctuary the God retires...
This is the tragedy of the inner death
When forfeited is the divine element
And only a mind and body live to die.⁸*

The Pervertors of Life and Death

The presence of such demoniac forces in some form or the other have always been known in every civilisation. Indian yogis and mystics have classified them into three main types:

The *asuras* or the disturbers of light, who inflict doubt and pervert truth to suit their darker ends. These act mostly in the domain of the ordinary mind giving it an entirely wrong turn of thoughts and a distorted interpretation of all religious, scriptural and spiritual truths.

The *rakshasas* or the eaters of light, who eat away will and aspiration and faith thereby diverting all efforts towards hideous and diabolic ends. They act mainly in the domain of the vital life parts in man, giving to these an excess and inordinate sense of power and ambition, leading to its misuse for entirely selfish and egoistic purposes.

The *pisachas* or the robbers of light, stealthily enter through the doors of the senses exciting lower vital propensities thereby depriving man of whatever inner gains he may have made through the touch of his soul. Their field of action is in the most unguarded and vulnerable parts of the lower vital nature with its animal desires and give to such craving, a perverted hedonistic element with an excess of lust and greed.

It may be difficult for a sceptic shut in the prison-house of matter to appreciate that there are other and occult dimensions of our being and existence. Nevertheless, the evidence comes through the experiences of humanity, that there are indeed hidden levels of the universe whose nature unfolds before us sometimes. One such

⁸ Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, pp. 224-25

everyday entry into the inner realms is during the body's sleep, the other comes through the hallucinations of a psychotic. The full and conscious experience of these realms lies with the mystic and his visions and voices. Whether admitted by the die-hard sceptic or not, nevertheless the normal ordinary life of humanity is in any case an easy field for their action since the soul parts in us are relatively underdeveloped.

But even the relatively refined and developed human being, the pilgrim of truth has to safeguard against these beings that are on the watch out for those who are humanly striving to escape their fiefdom. It is not easy to play the detective upon them since they come wearing many appealing masks. It is only an awakened soul sense, a sincere aspiration unmixed with lower motives, and an unflinching trust in God or the Master which can save one from this inner downfall that is a far greater tragedy than the body's death. If the trust and faith are missing then one normally goes through the full curve of the experience, touches rock bottom if need be, then comes up again, invariably so since whether acknowledged through faith or unacknowledged by our outer nature, the deeper truth of soul and God and Grace are always there and stand behind the drama of life, to intervene and rescue and succour. Once the necessity of the dark experience is over, the being comes up again, the Will in us restarts its titanic climb after a period of inertia, faith wakes up again after a long or short period of slumber, hope is rekindled in the human heart and the Lord of Life resumes his rounds through the upward spiral of his journey.

*Here must the traveller of the upward way —
For daring Hell's kingdoms winds the heavenly route —
Pause or pass slowly through that perilous space,
A prayer upon his lips and the great Name...
Only were safe who kept God in their hearts:
Courage their armour, faith their sword, they must walk,
The hand ready to smite, the eye to scout,

Casting a javelin regard in front,
Heroes and soldiers of the army of Light.⁹*

⁹ Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, pp. 210-11

By its very nature it cannot perish but rise again and again till it has charted all time's curve, till it has discovered at last God, Freedom, Light, Immortality. The soul that has once taken the upward curve cannot rest and returns again and again till it arrives. The path shines once again and the soul relieved of passage through the inner night lifts up its head once again towards the sun. And above all we must remember the greatest truth of Grace that guards us in our passage through the Unseen and the Unknown.

*But there is a guardian power, there are Hands that save,
Calm eyes divine regard the human scene.¹⁰*

¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, p. 482

Appendix I: What is Death?

Paul Brunton was a British author and journalist who came to India with the view of recording his independent findings about the acclaimed yogis. A man endowed with a critical intellect, he traveled far and wide in order to understand the mystic phenomenon. He was neither credulous nor an avowed disbeliever. He searched impartially and recorded truthfully. His book In Search of Secret India is a record of his findings where on the one hand he exposes charlatans, and on the other hand, he is struck with genuine awe and admiration with cases that are authentic, delving in the supernatural. The book mentioned is a fine document both because of his lucid style of writing as well as his impartial and non-sectarian approach to things mystical. Reproduced below is an extract of a strange and authentic phenomenon that defies traditional scientific logic.

Stopping the Heartbeat – Fact or Fiction

'...After the celebrations of my visit are finally over, the old lady departs and we settle down to serious talk. I plunge anew into that matter of breathing which seems to play so important a part in Yoga, and which is wrapped in such secrecy. Brama regrets that he can show me no further exercises for the present, but he is willing to tell me a little more of his theories.

"Nature has measured our 21,600 breath-rhythms in every man, which he must use up daily and nightly from one sunrise till the next. Quick, noisy and tumultuous breathing exceeds this measure and therefore shortens one's life. Slow, deep and quiet breathing economizes this allowance, and so lengthens life. Every breath which is saved goes to build up a great reserve, and out of this reserve a man can draw extra years for living. Yogis do not take so many breaths as other men; nor do they need to for — but, alas! How can I explain further without transgressing my oaths?"

This reserve of the Yogi tantalizes me. Is it possible that a knowledge which is hidden away with so much pains cannot have something of real worth in it? If that is really the case, then one can understand why these strange men cover up their tracks and conceal the treasure of their teachings in order to ward off the superficially curious, the mentally unready and perhaps the spiritually unworthy. Is it likely that I,

too, may come within one of these latter classifications and eventually leave the country with little more than my trouble for reward?

But Brama is speaking again: "Have not our masters the keys to the powers of breath? They know how close is the connection between the blood and the breath; they understand how the mind, too, follows the path of the breath; and they have the secret of how it is possible to awaken awareness of the soul through workings of the breath. Shall I not say that breath is but the expression in this world of a subtler force, which is the real sustainer of the body? It is this force which hides in the vital organs, though it is unseeable. When it leaves the body the breathing stops in obedience and death is the result. But through the control of breath it is possible to get some control over this unseeable current. But though we bring our body under extreme control — even to the point of controlling the beats of the heart — do you think that our ancient sages had only the body and its powers in view when they first taught our system?"

Whatever I think about the ancient sages and their purpose, disappears in the intense curiosity which is suddenly aroused in my mind.

"You can control the working of your heart?" I exclaim in surprise.

"My self-acting organs, the heart, the stomach and the kidneys, have been brought to some degree of obedience," he answers quietly, without a trace of boastfulness.

"How do you do that?"

"One gains the power by practicing certain combinations of posture, breathing and will-power exercises. Of course, they belong to the advanced degrees of Yoga. They are so difficult that few persons can ever do them. Through these practices I have conquered somewhat the muscles which work the heart; and through the heart muscles, I have been able to go on and conquer the other organs."

"This is indeed extraordinary!"

"You think so? Place your hand upon my chest, just over the heart, and keep it there." With that, Brama changes his position, takes up a curious posture, and closes his eyes.

I obey his command and then wait patiently to see what is going to happen. For some minutes, he remains as steady as a rock, and almost as motionless. Then the beating of his heart begins to diminish gradually. I am startled to feel it become slower and slower. A thrill of eeriness spreads over my nerves as I distinctly feel his

heart completely stop its rhythmic functioning. The pause lasts for about seven anxious seconds.

I try to pretend that I am hallucinated, but my nervousness is such that I know the attempt is useless. As the organ returns to life from its seeming death, relief seizes me. The beats begin to quicken and normality is safely reached at length.

The Yogi does not emerge from his motionless self-absorption till some minutes later. He slowly opens his eyes and asks:

"Did you feel the heart stop?"

"Yes. Most distinctly." I am certain that there was no hallucination about the feat. What other strange Yogi tricks can Brama play with his internal mechanism, I wonder?

As if in answer to my unspoken thought, Brama says: "It is nothing compared with what my master can achieve. Sever one of his arteries, and he is able to control the flow of blood; yes, even to stop it! I, too, have brought my blood under some measure of control, but I cannot do that."

"Can you show me that control?"

He requests me to take his wrist and grip it where I can feel the flow of blood through his artery. I do so.

Within two or three minutes I become aware that the curious rhythm which beats under my thumb is lessening. Soon it comes to a definite halt. Brama has brought his pulse to a stop!

I anxiously await the resumption of circulation in his artery. A minute passes but nothing occurs. A second minute, during which I am acutely conscious of each second, likewise ticks itself away in my watch. The third minute is equally fruitless. Not until halfway through the fourth minute do I become conscious of a faint return to activity within the artery. The tension is relieved. Before long, the pulse beats at its normal rate.

"How strange!" I exclaim involuntarily.

"It is nothing." He modestly replies.

"This seems to be a day of strange feats, so will you not show me another?"

Brama hesitates.

"Only one more," he says at length, "and then you must be satisfied."

He looks thoughtfully at the floor and then announces:

"I shall stop the breath!"

"But then you will surely die!" I exclaim nervously.

He laughs but ignores the remark.

"Now hold your hand flat under my nostrils."

I obey him hesitantly. The warm caress of exhaled air touches and retouches the skin of my hand. Brama closes his eyes; his body becomes statuesque in its steadiness. He appears to fall into a kind of trance. I wait, continuing to hold the back of my hand immediately under his nose. He remains as still and as unresponsive as a graven idol. Very slowly, very evenly, the caress of his breath begins to diminish. Ultimately it completely ceases.

I watch his nostrils and lips; I examine his shoulders and chest; but in no single case can I discover any external evidence of respiration. I know that these tests are not final and wish to make a more exhaustive test, but how? My brain works rapidly.

There is no hand-mirror in the room but I find an excellent substitute in a small polished brass dish. I hold the dish under his nostrils for a while, and again in front of his lips. Its shining surface remains unmarred by any dullness or moisture.

It seems impossible to believe that in this quiet conventional house near a quiet conventional city, I have established contact with something significant, something that western science may one day be forced to recognize against its will. But the evidence is there, and it is indubitable. Yoga is really more than a worthless myth.

When Brama ultimately emerges from his trance-like condition, he seems a little tired.

"Are you satisfied?" he asks, with a fatigued smile.

"I am more than satisfied! But I am at a loss to understand in what way you can do it."

"It is forbidden me to explain. The restraint of breath is a practice which is part of advanced Yoga."

"But we have always been taught that man cannot live without breathing. Surely that is not a foolish idea?"

"It is not foolish; nevertheless it is not true. I can hold my breath for two hours, if I wish. Many times I have done that, but I am not yet dead, you see!" Brama smiles.

"I am puzzled. If you are not permitted to explain, perhaps you can throw a little light upon the theory behind your practices?"

"Very well. There is a lesson we can draw from watching certain animals, which is a favoured method of instruction with my master. An elephant breathes much more slowly than a monkey, yet it lives much longer. Some of the large serpents breathe far more slowly than a dog, yet they live far longer. Thus, creatures exist which show that slowness of breathing may possibly prolong age. If you can follow me so far, the next step will be easier for you to grasp. Now, in the Himalayas, there are bats which go into winter sleep. They hang suspended in the mountain caverns for weeks, yet they do not draw a single breath until they again awaken. The Himalayan bears, too, will sometimes sink into trance throughout the winter, their bodies apparently without life. In deep burrows of the Himalayas, when food cannot be found during the winter, there are hedgehogs which pass into sleep for some months, a sleep in which breathing is suspended. If these animals cease to breathe for a time, and yet live, why should not human beings be able to do the same?"

His statement of curious facts is interesting, but it is not so convincing as his demonstration. The common notion that breathing is an essential function in every condition of life is not to be thrown aside at a few minutes' notice.

"We Westerners will always find it difficult to understand how life can continue in a body unless breathing continues also."

"Life always continues," he answers cryptically. "Death is but a habit of the body."

"But surely you cannot mean that it may be possible to conquer death?" I enquire incredulously.

Brama looks at me in a strange manner.

"Why not?" There is a tense pause. His eyes search me, but they do it in a kindly way.

"Because there are possibilities in you, I shall tell you one of our old secrets. But I must first demand your agreement to one condition."

"And that — ?"

"You shall not attempt to practise any breathing exercise as an experiment, except those which I may teach you later."

"I agree."

"Keep your word, then. Now you have hitherto believed that the complete stoppage of breathing brings death?"

"Yes."

"Is it not reasonable to believe, also, that the complete holding of the breath within one's body keeps life within us for so long as the breath is held, at least?"

"Well — ?"

"We claim no more than that. We say that an adept in breath control, who can completely retain his breath at will, thereby retains his life current. Do you grasp that?"

"I think so."

"Imagine, now, an adept in Yoga who can keep the locked breath, not merely for a few minutes as a curiosity, but for weeks, for months and even for years. Since you admit that where there is breath there must be life, do you not see how the prospect of prolonged life opens up for man?"

I am dumb. How can I dismiss this assertion as preposterous? Yet how can I accept it? Does it not recall to memory the idle dreams of our European alchemists of medieval times, dreamers who sought an elixir of life, but who succumbed to the sickle of death one by one? But if Brama is not self-deceived, why should he seek to deceive me. He has not sought my company and he makes no effort to acquire disciples.¹

¹ Paul Brunton: *In Search of Secret India*.

"Death is the question Nature puts continually to Life and her reminder to it that it has not yet found itself. If there were no siege of death, the creature would be bound forever in the form of an imperfect living. Pursued by death he awakens to the idea of perfect life and seeks out its means and its possibility."

Sri Aurobindo

"...a fixed form was needed in order that the organised individual consciousness might have a stable support. And yet it is in the fixity of the form that made death inevitable. When the body has learned the art of constantly progressing towards an increasing perfection, we shall be well on the way to overcoming the inevitability of death."

The Mother

The Why of Death

Death – The Paradox of Life

Is death inevitable? Do we have to die? If so, then why? This is a question that every sensitive mind raises one time or the other. The sting of death and its horror is not so much in the fact of our bodily disappearance but it lies in the abrupt end to all our hopes and dreams, ideals and sentiments, longings and attachments. It is as if a blind and giant unfeeling and unthinking force took a perverse joy in turning all happiness to dust. It is as if an irony of fate ultimately mocks at all human effort. Few see death as a release, except perhaps from long suffering. And here too the will to live is far stronger than the pain and struggle of life. Most feel helpless before its inflexible, harsh and iron law that afflicts one with grief and loss and pain. And yet most human beings at some point come to reconcile the inevitability of death with the jest of life. It is like a race where the final winner has already been declared even before the start and yet one is expected to run well right up to the end.

Perhaps it is because something or someone survives and even benefits from this race. Perhaps it is because thus alone can the spirit in us grow in strength and force and light. Perhaps it is in fact the soul itself that chooses this change of scene and clime through the dark and impregnable tunnel of death to experience new life and new adventures in other countries and forms and names.

Yet through all this, something has persisted in the aspiration and faith of man, that one lives and would live forever. A short story from the great Indian epic the *Mahabharata* brings home this truth in a paradoxical way:

The god of dharma, who in his frontal aspect is the god of death as well, confronts Yudhisthira, the crown prince in exile. He puts forth several questions before the prince who himself is none other than an embodiment of dharma itself. After being thoroughly satisfied with the wisdom of the prince there comes a last question — "*Kimashcharyam?*" (In other words) what is the most surprising thing in this world? Yudhisthira, the wise prince, replies pointing to a subtle paradox in human nature:

“The most surprising thing in this world is that though we all see death everywhere and everyday, yet somehow we believe that ‘I’ am not going to die.”¹

The story is often interpreted as pointing to the fatality of life but seen in another way it brings out a deeper truth that behind and despite all appearances there is a faith in man of his immortality. That we physically die is a phenomenal fact. That hid in us is a deeper consciousness of immortality is another subtler fact of our existence. And who knows if human life were not given to resolve this very paradox of the visible outer and the sensible inner truth. That there is an immortal consciousness within man is a fact testified by the spiritual scientist (something which we shall turn to later). But what about the material scientist? Here is an excerpt by someone working in this field:

“We can resolutely affirm that, in the actual terrestrial conditions of life, the immortality of the cell is an indubitable fact... And what characterises most a living organism is its potential immortality and not its death.”²

Indeed, as we do observe that unicellular organisms do not die. They live as if in perpetual immortality by transmitting their genetic material and thereby duplicating themselves through asexual reproduction. A complex and multi-cellular organism too dies only partially. Genetically it does not perish since it transmits the genetic material to other cells one way or the other. Besides, as we have seen, groups of cells perish and are reborn several times in a single lifespan of complex organisms. This lifespan also sometimes prolongs itself for a fairly long time as in certain species of plants and trees that given the appropriate conditions continue to throw fresh shoots up to hundreds of years and some even for millenniums. Trees like the *Ginkoba biloba* are known to exist from the Palaeozoic era of the dinosaurs right up to our own times. Closer to home, the big Banyan tree in Bangalore has been living and growing for at least a few thousand years! Even higher in the scale we see certain animal species, like the salamander and the lizard, rejuvenating entire limbs and body-parts if they are lost accidentally. Above all, if we do not brush aside history as mere fantasy when it goes beyond our understanding, then we do find records of rare instances in ancient Indian and Tibetan literature of an indefinite prolongation of life. The ancient Hindu scriptures state that the average lifespan of human beings varies markedly in each

¹ From the ‘Van Parva’ of the *Mahabharata* by Veda Vyasa.

² S. Metalnikov: *Immortalité et Rajeunissement dans la Biologie Moderne*

age. Thus, the kings and *rishis* of the golden age or the age of Truth are supposed to have lived for a thousand years. The lifespan thereafter has gone on decreasing until it has touched around a hundred in this iron age of matter or *Kaliyuga*. Even in our own times there are tales of those like Swami Brahmananda on the shores of Narmada who had lived beyond a few centuries at least. The *Ramayana* speaks about the lifespan in different epochs and the historian records the life of certain kings of that era as exceeding over a thousand years. One such story is especially interesting since it gives a subtle clue to the process of prolonging life in the body. *Whether a myth or a subtle hint* of a deeper reality, the story goes thus:

'Markandeya was an illustrious child of a pious couple. The couple had been childless for a very long time and received the child as a boon from the great god Shiva after engaging in an arduous *tapasya* (penance). But there is a flip side to the boon. It was prophesied that the child though of a great inner merit would however live only for twelve years. Thus the shadow of death continues to chase the boy till the hour of doom arrives. The god of death, meticulous in his account and unhesitating in his hard task, appears to take back the boy even as he is sitting before his favourite God Shiva in meditative silence. No sooner that the god of death commands the boy to follow him, Markandeya puts his arms around the Shivalinga and holds it tight. Then there appears from behind the shrine the great and luminous god, greater than death itself and asks death to release the boy from his clutches. Power bows down to a greater power and the god of death returns empty handed. Markandeya, in turn, is granted the boon of eternal life.'

Shiva in this story clearly represents the Eternal. It is only by clinging to the Eternal within us that we can arrive at immortality. To put it in another way, that which is given to the soul survives and death loses its hold upon it. While that which is given to mutable transient things perishes one day and death takes them away. To be free of our sense-bound vision that is ever lost in transient things is to be free of the fear of death or the hold that it has over us. *To rise above the little plot of the drama of mortal life to a higher and deeper vision that sees and embraces God everywhere is to discover immortality.*

Sri Aurobindo, the Seer-Poet, brings out the deeper subtler truth through the masterly stroke of poetic genius:

*I Morcundeya whom the worlds release,
The Seer, but it is God alone that sees!*

*Soar up above the bonds that hold below
Man to his littleness, lost in the show
Perennial which the senses round him build;
I find them out and am no more beguiled.
But ere I rise, ere I become the vast
And luminous Infinite and from the past
And future utterly released forget
These beings who themselves their bonds create,
Once I will speak and what I see declare.
The rest is God. There's silence everywhere.³*

Death – The Hooded Mask of Life

This question regarding the why of death has little sense for the physical scientist who does not give any more importance to the existence of life upon earth than in the formation of a lump of hard rock. For him this world and its events are a play of chance without any definitive aim or purpose. But what about the occult scientist and the spiritual realist? Here too we often find a dead end. Most philosophies simply accept death as part of nature and of life. It is a fact that has to be accepted, that's all. Is that really all or is there more to it? For in the vast economy of nature death too must serve a deep purpose. And since life is essentially about evolution through struggle then death too must be somehow contributing if not actually hastening this evolutionary purpose. Perhaps it is a goad that pulls us out of our inertia and the sense-bound life of small joys and grief.

Perhaps it teases us to think beyond the mere present and thereby pulls us out of the limitations of our thoughts.

Perhaps it gives to us an insatiable urge to probe the beyond.

Perhaps reminding us of the transient nature of things, it pushes us to further and further heights of perfection.

Or perhaps, we may well discover, as the Upanishadic sages did, that death indeed is a spur towards our immortality!

³ Sri Aurobindo: 'Morcundeya', *Collected Poems*, p. 117

Indeed, for we see how death of individual cells serves the larger purpose of the organism. *Disintegration and renewal of substance are both complementary processes and both are necessary for life.* It is necessary not only for collective life but for individual life itself. For what else is individual life but a smaller collectivity of cells just as the cell itself in turn is a conglomeration of still smaller units of life. And who knows we may well discover one day that even matter has life involved in it, is pregnant with life so to say. Seen thus we indeed discover that death is not the opposite of life but its complementary process. It is needed in the present state of the imperfection of life itself. In fact if cells did not get replaced through the agency of death, the organism as a whole would die much earlier of cancer than otherwise! Could it then be said by extending the logic of Nature that men die so that the larger unit of humanity and the entire earth-life may survive?

The very first thing that we need to be clear about is that all life is one. It is only in appearance that separateness exists for a purpose. Therefore to *a deeper sight death does not exist at all. It is the form that changes.* The force of life moves on from one instrument to another and would continue till it finds its purpose. The fine balance of the play of life and death has so far helped life establish itself through death. It appears as an opposition only to a fragmentary view of existence. We feel bad when we individually suffer the sting of death. And that's natural since every organism is shot through and through with the instinct to live and grow. But seen impersonally, these individual deaths pave the way for the survival and growth of the larger totality of living beings.

The real question therefore is why does the instrument of nature called the body break down after a certain point of time? We have seen the mechanism of the breakdown but a mechanism is after all just a process. Why does nature introduce this seeming error deliberately? What justifies this colossal waste of human effort if one day it has to be buried in the grave or go up in flames leaving behind a handful of dust and smoke? Is that all there is to life as a poet moved in a moment of pessimism puts it thus:

*Dust unto dust and under dust to lie
Sans wine, sans song, sans singer, sans end.*⁴

⁴ Omar Khayyam: *The Rubaiyyat* as translated by Edgar Fitzgerald

What the sensitive poet touched by the tragedy of life seems to miss out is the Great Mother's wisdom that is trying to reach out to a high post beyond our present maps. Dust mingles with dust to mutually enrich. The wine and the song end for a tastier wine and a lovelier song to follow. The singer returns to a mute ecstasy to learn of a sweeter song residing in the bosom of silence.

In other words, through the agency of death there goes on an *enrichment of matter*. The vibrations of a true consciousness imprinted in a cell are never lost. They awaken and continue to awaken similar vibrations in matter all over. The great mistake we make in all our understanding whether of God's ways or of Nature is to see ourselves as separate from the world and others. It is this that leads to a constant sense of struggle and discord with its culmination in death. But all life is one just as all force is one. The electricity in the clouds that brings down a tree in a flash is no different from the electricity that lights up the home. So too all life is essentially one and returns back to the One. It is only our excessive preoccupation and identification with the outer form and appearance that makes us feel that life is gone. Gone yes, but where — into the common pool of All-life. The flowers and leaves that fall upon the ground after their term of life is over, end up enriching the soil thereby increasing its fertility. The bodies of men of greater merit crumble to dust but their spirit survives and grows mightier by the fall. Their very death attracts many more souls to fill the vacuum and therefore aids the evolutionary process. To put it paradoxically, the spirit of Christ survives victoriously and rises from the cross to redeem those very men who executed him. The place of his martyrdom becomes a pilgrimage in times to come, to inspire people to the way of life opened by him. So too a Socrates is done away with, seemingly unceremoniously with a cup of hemlock, but he grows even more powerful by his death ushering in a new era in Greece. Guru Teghbadur gives himself to martyrdom but by this very act paves the way for the freedom of a nation from the shame and ignominy of an alien rule. The son of Arabia falls having been persecuted by his opponents but his sacrifice changes the face of a nation and brings sobriety and discipline among the very barbarians who victimised him. These and many such others are glorious examples but the same holds true at a lower level for the law is indeed the same, the only difference is that one may not see the evidence so visibly. All this hints at a deeper working that we do not quite understand. There is a greater mystery and all does not end with the death of the body and the mingling with dust.

The other and individual cause is that the soul, the true individual in us, has descended to *experience the Infinite on a finite basis*. The life-force by its very nature seeks change. Restless as it is in pursuit of an aim it still does not know or understand. There is in life this seeking and dissatisfaction with the present thereby urging it to move constantly to the new and the unknown. Normally and on a smaller scale, this happens through a variety of interests and different activities. Death is simply an extraordinary change, a leap across time, a radical jump towards the future. Though we have come to associate death with the sense of a tragedy, in reality, many a time a long life may well itself be unfortunate in our present state of imperfection and ignorance. Indeed the *Mahabharata* has this interesting tale of a curse bestowed upon the warrior chieftain Aswatthama. Following his heinous act of killing unguarded sleeping men and then trying to kill a baby in the womb by the use of a deadly missile, a strange curse is laid upon him by Sri Krishna, the hero of the war. It is not death for death would be instant, but the curse to live for 3,000 years wandering alone upon the earth carrying the stench of blood, the horrors of the war weighing heavily upon his soul. No doubt this gives him the chance of conscious purification, yet is the long life a painful one, when we have to carry the burden of our past and live alone in a world that has changed beyond our recognition. Human beings by and large, find it difficult to adjust psychologically to the rapid changes in the world around as they grow old. They fall back reminiscing about an old and foregone past as their support, sharing it with the friends of their generation. The older ones try to rebuild a familiar world that they have been habituated to, while the young who have not shared that environment find it increasingly difficult to relate with. There is therefore an increasing gap between oneself and the march of the world that ever moves forward one way or the other. There is an increasing sense of being out of tune with the people and places or with the spirit of the times. Death comes thence as a boon of sorts to give us the necessary relief and jump. Through death we become oblivious of the past in its outer details at least, and through rebirth we get a fresh lease of life, a leap through gaps of time to relive once again the dreams and ideals under newer and who knows maybe even better circumstances. Better or worse, one thing is certain — Death is a device that nature uses to replenish life. In this sense, it is more like a prolonged sleep that helps by making us forget the previous day and its acute troubles, thereby once again instilling within our hearts fresh hopes and strength to face life.

Therefore perhaps Nature in her deep wisdom and sense of balance has created this device of death. Once again returning to the mechanism of cells, there seems to

be at work an inbuilt programming. It seems that a cell normally generates a variety of molecules, some of which send survival signals while others send death signals to the cell. So long as survival signals dominate, the cell stays alive. Dominance of death signals leads to the phenomenon of programmed cell death, termed Apoptosis, meaning to fall away. This phenomenon of apoptosis has been engaging the attention of scientists since the last quarter of a century. Various regulatory enzymes have been identified in the series of chain reactions leading to death. The final common pathway appears to be due to certain enzymes called Caspases that attack and destroy crucial cell structures such as the proteins of the nuclear lamina. What is however of great interest is that the life-giving oxygen itself becomes a vehicle of death, by creating as a by-product of reactions certain molecules, leading to oxidative damage to the very cells it nourishes. Even physically we may say that death is nothing but life turning upon itself!

“Death is imposed on the individual life both by the conditions of its own existence and by its relations to the All-Force which manifests itself in the universe. For the individual life is a particular play of energy specialised to constitute, maintain, energise and finally to dissolve when its utility is over, one of the myriad forms which all serve, each in its own place, time and scope, the whole play of the universe. The energy of life in the body has to support the attack of the energies external to it in the universe; it has to draw them in and feed upon them and is itself being constantly devoured by them. All Matter according to the Upanishad is food, and this is the formula of the material world that ‘the eater eating is himself eaten’. The life organised in the body is constantly exposed to the possibility of being broken up by the attack of the life external to it or, its devouring capacity being insufficient or not properly served or there being no right balance between the capacity of devouring and the capacity or necessity of providing food for the life outside, it is unable to protect itself and is devoured or is unable to renew itself and therefore wasted away or broken; it has to go through the process of death for a new construction or renewal.

“Not only so but, again in the language of the Upanishad, the life-force is the food of the body, and the body the food of the life-force; in other words, the life-energy in us both supplies the material by which the form is built up and constantly maintained and renewed and is at the same time constantly using up

the substantial form of itself which it thus creates and keeps in existence. If the balance between these two operations is imperfect or is disturbed or if the ordered play of the different currents of life-force is thrown out of gear, then disease and decay intervene and commence the process of disintegration. And the very struggle for conscious mastery and even the growth of mind make the maintenance of the life more difficult. For there is an increasing demand of the life-energy on the form, a demand which is in excess of the original system of supply and disturbs the original balance of supply and demand and, before a new balance can be established, many disorders are introduced inimical to the harmony and to the length of maintenance of the life; in addition the attempt at mastery creates always a corresponding reaction in the environment which is full of forces that also desire fulfilment and are therefore intolerant of, revolt against and attack the existence which seeks to master them. There too a balance is disturbed, a more intense struggle is generated; however strong the mastering life, unless either it is unlimited or else succeeds in establishing a new harmony with its environment, it cannot always resist and triumph but must one day be overcome and disintegrated.

“But, apart from all these necessities, there is the one fundamental necessity of the nature and object of embodied life itself, which is to seek infinite experience on a finite basis, and since the form, the basis by its very organisation limits the possibility of experience, this can only be done by dissolving it and seeking new forms. For the soul, having once limited itself by concentrating on the moment and the field, is driven to seek its infinity again by the principle of succession, by adding moment to moment and thus storing up a Time-experience which it calls its past; in that Time it moves through successive fields, successive experiences or lives, successive accumulations of knowledge, capacity, enjoyment, and all this it holds in subconscious or superconscious memory as its fund of past acquisition in Time. To this process change of form is essential, and for the soul involved in individual body change of form means dissolution of the body in subjection to the law and compulsion of the All-life in the material universe, to its law of supply of the material of form and demand on the material, to its principle of constant intershock and the struggle of the embodied life to exist in a world of mutual devouring. And this is the law of Death.

"This then is the necessity and justification of Death, not as a denial of Life, but as a process of Life; death is necessary because eternal change of form is the sole immortality to which the finite living substance can aspire and eternal change of experience the sole infinity to which the finite mind involved in living body can attain. This change of form cannot be allowed to remain merely a constant renewal of the same form-type such as constitutes our bodily life between birth and death; for unless the form-type is changed and the experiencing mind is thrown into new forms in new circumstances of time, place and environment, the necessary variation of experience which the very nature of existence in Time and Space demands, cannot be effectuated. And it is only the process of Death by dissolution and by the devouring of life by Life, it is only the absence of freedom, the compulsion, the struggle, the pain, the subjection to something that appears to be Not-Self which makes this necessary and salutary change appear terrible and undesirable to our mortal mentality. It is the sense of being devoured, broken up, destroyed or forced away which is the sting of Death and which even the belief in personal survival of death cannot wholly abrogate."⁵

The following practical conclusions follow: Death is necessary to maintain *a balance between individual life and All-life*, between the part and the whole. If any individual or group were allowed to survive indefinitely in our present state of imperfection then that would mean the thwarting of other modes and forms of life. We could compare the process with cancerous cells that begin to grow rapidly at the cost of other cells thereby felling the whole organism. Due to ignorance of any other life and environment our attempt to mastery creates a natural reaction from all that is around us leading to progressive disharmony and death. The environment in which we live and breathe is not a vacuum. Our very effort at mastering the environment creates a kind of reaction from other forms of life thereby threatening our balance of energy.

However strong we may be, we cannot be stronger than the whole. Sooner or later it is a decided battle. Ego and Ignorance with their attendant consequence of separateness lead to disharmony with all that is around, culminating finally in death. Death becomes inevitable at some point or the other since *the balance of life is very precarious*. It is a question of one part against other parts. Human beings are very

⁵ Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, pp. 192-94

complex. Each part in us has its own reasonable or unreasonable demand. It is like a crowd where each one is jostling against the other and yet they have to be somehow kept together with a fair distribution of the force and energy that drives the body and mind in its various pursuits. That energy is one, it is the life-force or *prana* which supplies and feeds the different parts for their various activities. Now if one part tries to overshadow others and the regulating and balancing mechanism is not smooth enough, then there is an inner war of sorts. The result is a progressive disharmony, imbalance, disease and finally death. Added to this are the rapid and unforeseen changes in our inner and outer milieu plus our own habits that disturb the simple natural rhythm of life. The price we pay for this one-dimensional progress is a progressive dislocation and imbalance at other levels leading to disease and death. The inability of all the different parts in our nature to progress at the same pace and function harmoniously leads to an inner dislocation with disease and death as attendant consequences.

Life consumes life and thereby fells the form to death, so say the Upanishads and there is obviously a profound truth in this. The body is the fuel that is burned by the life-force to generate itself. Thus if there is not a constant supplement of the form from outside, the life-energy will start eating the body to replenish itself. This is what happens when we fast. The life-force continues to supply the energy required for maintaining the life processes and for mental and physical work, but it does so at the expense of the body. Sooner or later the flesh would wear off unless ways and means are found to replenish it. The same happens to animals in hibernation who sometimes do not eat, drink or pass urine for months. They survive but come out weak, having lost a substantial amount of weight.

Death of the material and finite physical basis of life is thereby used by the secret soul and life in us for *growth through a variety of experiences*. Each of these experiences from one life to another enriches us and unveils the many (nearly infinite) possibilities concealed within our soul. It is only through the agency of death that we can undergo a radical change of form and place leading to the varied experiences that the life-force in us demands for nurturing the soul.

Death – The Passport to Immortality

Thus seen we discover that death is not *just* a senseless passage from one life to another or a meaningless change of form driven by some mechanical law of karma but something much more. It is a forward journey wherein the soul in us breaks free from the chrysalis of one life that it has woven around itself for a certain experience. The crust is left behind but the essence is carried forward. This goes on till the butterfly is formed out of the moth and no longer needs the limiting casing of ignorance for its growth. Then are we freed from the law of death and birth since its purpose is over — the rediscovery of the infinite soul in finite terms. Through the repeated experience of death and rebirth we are made fit and ready to discover the immortal soul within us. In other words, *death is our passport to immortality*. That is what these repeated cycles are meant for. The secret soul in us grows through the experiences of many lives till it becomes strong and free. Strong, in the sense that it is no more weak and indifferently consented to nature's acts, a mere spectator of the complex drama of life but in fact an active participant, the decision-maker, *anumanta*. Free, in the sense that it is no more bound to the determinisms of nature but the author and artisan of its own fate, free of its circumstances of birth, free from life and death. Not that we cannot choose to be born again for that would be an imperfect and a conditional freedom, incompetence for a soul grown fully conscious of its divinity, but in that case, it is a conscious birth for a conscious work in Matter and upon earth. A soul that has arrived at freedom (traditionally called *mukti* or *moksha*) need not descend upon earth for the growing experiences. However, it need not cease from works upon earth either. A new possibility opens before it. The possibility of consciously helping other human beings to grow in soul terms and/or the new possibility of participating in the conscious transformation of matter and material life upon earth.

For indeed if freedom is the first term and need of the growing soul in us then unity is its second and even more important term. No soul is truly free from the clutches of death till there is even one soul struggling for freedom from the law of death. There is an essential freedom of the individual soul which at a point of time can become free from the cycle of birth and death. But this is a conditioned and partial freedom. For the soul though individual in its manifestation is always linked through the Universal Soul with all beings. Nor is there perfect peace and bliss of life as long as there is a single being striving for relief from pain and suffering.

Thus runs a significant verse in the Bhagavata⁶:

न कामयेऽहं गतिमीश्वरात् परामष्टद्धियुक्तामपुनर्भवं वा ।
आर्तिं प्रपद्येऽखिलदेहभाजामन्तःस्थितो येन भवन्त्यदुःखाः ॥

I desire not the supreme state with all its eight *siddhis* nor the cessation of rebirth; may it assume the sorrow of all creatures who suffer and enter into them so that they may be made free from grief.⁷

Savitri echoes a similar aspiration in Sri Aurobindo's great epic:

*Earth is the chosen place of mightiest souls;
Earth is the heroic spirit's battlefield,
The forge where the Arch-mason shapes his works.
Thy servitudes on earth are greater, king,
Than all the glorious liberties of heaven.
...In me the spirit of immortal love
Stretches its arms out to embrace mankind.
Too far thy heavens for me from suffering men.
Imperfect is the joy not shared by all.
...A lonely freedom cannot satisfy
A heart that has grown one with every heart:
I am a deputy of the aspiring world,
My spirit's liberty I ask for all.*⁸

Death serves as a grim *reminder of the imperfection and impermanence* of life. Instead of depressing us it should act as *a spur to goad us towards a greater perfection* since that is what death and indeed all apparent destruction secretly is. In our present state of ignorance and imperfection, death becomes necessary so that we may realise our deficiencies and do not get locked forever in a fixed and rigid and ignorant mould. It is a movement forward, the last stage of our growth in a single lifetime, the transit from

⁶ The *Srimadabhadgavat Purana* is the story of Sri Krishna, the Divine becoming human, so as to show us the inner path leading to Him. Book 9-21 – 12

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, pp. 686 and 649

greater to lesser ignorance. As Ignorance vanishes, death too shall vanish, having served its purpose.

*To weep because a glorious sun has set
Which the next morn shall gild the east again;
To mourn that mighty strengths must yield to fate
Which by that force a double strength attain;
To shrink from pain without whose friendly strife
Joy could not be, to make a terror of death
Who smiling beckons us to farther life,
And is a bridge for the persistent breath;
Despair and anguish and the tragic grief
Of dry set eyes, or such disastrous tears.
As rend the heart, though meant for its relief,
And all man's ghastly company of fears
Are born of folly that believes the span
Of life the limit of immortal man.⁹*

⁹ Sri Aurobindo: 'To Weep because a Glorious Sun', *Collected Poems*, p. 124

*"This world was built by Death that he might live.
Wilt thou abolish death? Then life too will perish.
Thou canst not abolish death, but thou mayst transform it
into a greater living."*

What is this Talk

*What is this talk of slayer and of slain?
Swords are not sharp to slay nor floods assuage
This flaming soul. Mortality and pain
Are mere conventions of a mightier stage.
As when a hero by his doom pursued
Falls like a pillar of the world uptorn,
Shaking the hearts of men, and awe-imbued
Silent the audience sits of joy forlorn,
Meanwhile behind the stage the actor sighs
Deep-lunged relief, puts by what he has been
And talks with friends that waited, or from the flies
Watches the quiet of the closing scene,
Even so the unwounded spirits of slayer and slain
Beyond our vision passing live again.*

*...a great departing Soul can say this of death in vigorous
phrase, 'I have spat out the body.'*

Sri Aurobindo

The Shroud of Death

Death – The Sad Destroying Voice in Things

Death in the human mind at least is associated with a number of psychological reactions. These reactions or responses spring from different levels of our nature. The nervous parts react with fear and horror, the senses with shock and disbelief, the sentiments with dismay and despair, emotions respond with the pang and pain of separation, the mind with the sense of an irreparable loss and helplessness. Sometimes other reactions can also intervene such as anger, guilt and even shame. All these reactions, especially fear, have deep subconscious roots and are extremely hard to eliminate.

Even when the mind is convinced, even when the heartstrings have been strengthened, even when the sentiments are under control, the nervous parts still react with a will to flee or fight the horror. Fear is also related with one's own death and is therefore more intimate.

However, the most common reaction experienced consciously by the mind is grief at the death of someone whom we love. There is a sense of tragedy associated with death in the human mind that is seldom seen in the animal world except among some higher mammals like the dog and the elephant. Even animals like the beaver and some birds have been observed as grieving after the loss of a mate or an offspring, but it is rare. The elephants on the other hand almost engage in a ritual-like behaviour following the death of one of the members of their group. They are also known to take revenge for the death of their young one and even exhibit behaviour contrary to the norm. Dogs are known to go through a process of grief following the death of their master or other canine companions.

The sense of tragedy however begins with the development of the rudiments of the sense-mind as in the higher mammals. It reaches its peak in a certain type of humanity living largely in the emotional and sensational mind. Then its association with tragedy begins to decline with the development of a more rational and philosophical mentality. Finally the tragedy and grief associated with death passes out

completely from the mind of the tranquil sage who dwells in oneness, as the 'Isha Upanishad' puts it beautifully:

तत्र को मोहः कः शोक एकत्वमनुपश्यतः ॥७॥

How shall he be deluded, whence shall he have grief who sees everywhere oneness?¹

Death itself appears at a certain stage in the evolution of life-forms and will one day disappear with the emergence of a higher form. So too the sense of tragedy arises at a certain stage of the development of mind and will pass away with the development going beyond the mind to a spiritual and supramental² nature.

The Sting of Death

We respond differently to the struggle and joy of life, so also to the pain of death. These different responses derive themselves from the different levels of consciousness at which we stand in a particular life, at a particular time. This level of consciousness is like a station or a vantage point from which each one of us views life and through which we transact with the world. As is the station, so is our understanding and response. In general, the higher our standpoint, the wider also it is, the more we are able to see holistically, the more also our personal autonomy and inner control over the circumstances. The reactions to death also follow a hierarchy of responses based on where we stand in our inner being. All the same, a large mass of humanity goes through certain more or less predictable stages when confronted with the sting of death.

A pioneering work has been done in this field by Dr Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. A woman with a mission, she has been fighting for understanding 'the dying' almost since the early years of her life despite many an obstacle, of which the most prominent

¹ Sri Aurobindo: *The Upanishads*, 'Isha Upanishad', Verse 7

² Sri Aurobindo has used this term to describe the level of consciousness beyond even the highest spiritual mind. This Truth-Consciousness contains the seed of everything and is therefore at once conterminous with oneness and multiplicity. The details of its action and effects are best read directly through their works.

one comes from our insensitive humanity and from those very physicians who deal with the phenomenon of death almost daily in their lives. The memory of strangely antagonistic reactions from her own hospital colleagues preoccupied her. She would see in the denial of doctors regarding the sensitivity towards the dying, a mirror of their own anxieties about death. The dying were often left alone and isolated, trends which the young intern was determined to fight and reverse. In 1969, she published her bestseller, *On Death and Dying*, a detailed critique of the then prevailing attitude of a conspiracy of silence over death in modern medical schools. It is thanks to her that we have today a closer look at what the dying undergo while facing the enigma of death. Some of these *stages* as noted by her are:

Shock, Disbelief and Denial

This is the sensory level of the experience. It is through the senses that we mostly come in contact with the world. The senses have no other form of knowledge than what they perceive at that moment. They know of no other reality. But also since the sense-mind lives in the moment, its reaction is seen when it directly faces the sense of a personal loss. The thinker anticipates the reality of death and prepares himself beforehand. But the average man driven by short-term objectives and experiences feels the pain suddenly only when the hour strikes him personally. To the senses, death inevitably means a permanent loss since it will be the end of all that the senses knew and felt. And since the mass of humanity lives largely still in the senses, shock and dismay are the most common and universal reactions. Sometimes the sense of shock may take the form of denial. Such patients may go into a false euphoria and even deny the symptoms to avoid bringing to awareness a painful prospect of confronting death.

Fear and Anger

The next level of consciousness closest to the sense-bound mind is the lower vital, and after receiving the data of loss from the senses it reacts with a characteristic in-built programming, exhibiting fear or anger or both. Fear of death may take various forms including a false generation of symptoms by the sense-mind. The physicians are well aware of cardiac neurosis wherein a patient who had an angina pain may often land up at the clinic with a pain of non-cardiac origin and is not easily reassured about the benign nature of his pain. Anger, on the other hand may lead to a self-destructive cycle of putting the blame on God or the physician or someone else for the

impending doom. The anger is actually at one's own helplessness, one's own limitations and imperfection but as is the case with human nature, it gets transposed on to something outside us, thereby trying to keep hope as well as passing on the responsibility of control elsewhere.

Bargaining

This is the next rung of the vital wherein one begins to explore means of thwarting off the danger by appeasing those who are felt to be controlling the agency of death. Here once again it is the physicians and the gods whom one tries to bribe or buy if only they could push death a little farther from their sight. We all know very well how physicians, astrologers, and priests alike exploit this weakness of man. As to gods we cannot say for they can exploit any movement of man for his ultimate good. People of an earlier generation and perhaps even now often promise certain things to God in return for something they badly desire. Whether God feels the same way about these things or not is another matter, yet it sometimes does help because faith is indeed a great power that can work miracles.

Depression

With nothing happening despite efforts, hope begins to run out. The emotions so far still hoping for a miracle that may or may not happen, begin to show signs of fatigue. A sense of failure and inescapable loss begins to slowly dawn upon the sentimental and emotional parts that are attached to life and the living. The natural result is grief and depression. It is at this stage that one may take an irrational course of action with regard to ignoring oneself and/or developing a death wish so as to get rid of the impending doom as soon as possible. Its extreme form is suicide and even willingness for an assisted escape from life's burden and pain. It is here that the proponents of euthanasia need to be cautioned. Patients in this phase may demand irrationally for euthanasia. To fulfill such a demand would mean playing as a tool in the hands of our irrational parts. And if the moment and state of consciousness under which one departs has any import, as we shall subsequently see, then that would mean a dark and burdensome exit for the struggling soul.

Acceptance

After emotions comes the stage of reason. Over a passage of time comes the rational acceptance of death. One accepts the inevitable and takes the exit as gracefully as one

can. There have been some very beautiful examples of a graceful departure especially strengthened by positive belief systems. For at the end of it, we discover that reason and faith are not mutually exclusive powers but rather complimentary ones. Faith can help greatly in strengthening reason, giving it the power of conviction that a dry and cold analysis lacks. So too we often use reason to justify our basic belief or faith (or the absence of it, which is another form of belief). Reason is like a good lawyer that can argue any case depending on the premises and the standpoint. Of course rational acceptance is different from a spiritual acceptance of death. The first is based on the mere fact of the inevitability of death and therefore even in the acceptance has a touch of negativity in it. The latter is based on the positive affirmation of the immortality of our soul and a divine evolutionary purpose that death must inevitably fulfill.

While we all encounter several instances of people who have faced death with understanding and courage, there is a story which in a sense contains and reflects an archetype of such a situation. The story goes thus:

King Parikshit has been accursed to die after a week through snakebite. Confronted with the prospect of imminent death, he goes through the predictable stages. Meanwhile, he also plans ways and means to ward off the fatal stroke through an elaborate *yajna* (sacrifice) that would destroy all serpents. The king attempts to isolate himself in a safe chamber where snakes cannot enter. Nevertheless he is well advised by a sage to spend his time reflecting upon what is death and contemplate the joy of God through the stories of Lord Krishna. He goes ahead with the advice. Soon he finds his fear unreasonable since all have to one day pass through the portals of death. The real issue emerges before him now, the prospect of dying before realising his soul. That is the real misery and not the mere fact of physical disintegration. The week turns out for him the most fruitful of all the moments of his life. Confronted with death, he feels an urgent and pressing need to discover the immortal soul within him. And so he does, thereby turning the curse into a boon and converting a moment of crisis into one of great opportunity. The week passes and death finds its way through devious means into the protected chambers of the king. And though it takes away his body, its sharp edge is blunted since the king has been inwardly transfigured and is prepared to face death in a luminous way.

We have seen men who are anxious till the last moments of their life as to what may happen to them. But we all have also witnessed some who have faced death with

rare serenity as if they were simply preparing themselves for a long transit through unknown lands. Especially so those who have lived for a higher and deeper purpose, those who have led a life useful and worthwhile for themselves and for others, those who could find some sense in the mystery of life — they are prototypes of those who are able to face the mystery of death calmly. On the contrary those who hold on to life as a private possession, always busy, always anxious for getting and having more and more, enter as if into a narrow and blind alley within, till death shakes them out from their little burrows, haunting them with horror and terror. As in other matters we see here too that the best of human beings is not necessarily the most qualified or literally educated, but one who has lived life a little less selfishly, a little more nobly. *The outer qualification is what we in our ignorance value. The inner quality is what God and Nature in their Wisdom find more meritorious.* After we have scraped through the various tests of life, we face the grand finale by the sternest of examiners, Death!

We see thus a whole hierarchy of reactions starting from the senses and climbing through the lower vital and sentimental parts of our nature right up to our rational parts if we allow ourselves time and reason.

“I told you this the other day about certain mystics: if they think the suffering inflicted upon them is going to help them cross the stages in a moment and give them a sort of stepping-stone to attain the Realisation, the goal they have put before them, union with the Divine, they no longer feel the suffering at all. Their body is as it were galvanised by the mental conception. This has happened very often, it is a very common experience among those who truly have enthusiasm. And after all, if one must for some reason or other leave one body and take a new one, is it not better to make of one’s death something magnificent, joyful, enthusiastic, than to make it a disgusting defeat? Those who cling on, who try by every possible means to delay the end even by a minute or two, who give you an example of frightful anguish, show that they are not conscious of their soul.... After all, it is perhaps a means, isn’t it? One can change this accident into a means; if one is conscious one can make a beautiful thing of it, a very beautiful thing, as of everything. And note, those who do not fear it, who are not anxious, who can die without any sordidness are those who never think about it, who are not haunted all the time by this ‘horror’ facing them which they must escape and which they try to push as far away from them as they can. These, when the occasion comes, can lift their head, smile and say, ‘Here I am.’

"It is they who have the will to make the best possible use of their life, it is they who say, 'I shall remain here as long as it is necessary, to the last second, and I shall not lose one moment to realise my goal'; these, when the necessity comes, put up the best show. Why? It is very simple, because they live in their ideal, the truth of their ideal; because that is the real thing for them, the very reason of their being, and in all things they can see this ideal, this reason of existence, and never do they come down into the sordidness of material life.

So, the conclusion:

One must never wish for death.

One must never will to die.

One must never be afraid to die.

And in all circumstances one must will to exceed oneself."³

Death – The Spirit's Goad and Soul's Opportunity

But is this the only possibility? What about the spiritual man? What about faith and attitudes and beliefs? Well they would arguably modify the stages or even totally surpass them. There are other ways of looking at the phenomenon, which comes with our higher development. The sense of evil and suffering as we have seen comes at a certain stage of human development and passes off at another stage. The purpose that this sense of tragedy serves is to help man seek for a life and Truth that is greater than the sense-bound formula. It is more of a goad and a spur to look beyond the present. The soul by its very nature is free from grief. It is made of the stuff of bliss and is forever aware of its eternity and immortality. It knows that life and existence do not cease with the cessation of the breath and the stopping of the heartbeat. Those who have come in touch with their soul even for a moment lose the sting of death. In fact we discover that the same circumstances are received and responded to very differently depending upon the state of our consciousness. This indeed is the key to counseling those who are reeling under the shadows of death whether their own or of others.

³ The Mother: *CWM, Vol. 4*, pp. 354-355

Working Through Grief, the Rational-Emotive Way

Modern science however denies for itself the existence of life beyond death or of the soul and therefore follows a slightly different approach. Most therapists trained in the western model essentially serve as facilitators to help one accept death as an unavoidable reality. The emphasis is on empathy from those around as well as from the physician, to allow the patient to speak out and discuss his fears, to help him release his feelings by the supporting presence of a therapist, to treat depression as and when it comes and finally, when he is through with all this and ready, then to appeal to his more rational parts to accept gracefully that which cannot be avoided. The whole process is termed working through the grief. Some therapists also remind the clients about their successful mastery of past failures, difficulties and tragedies.

As to the role of rituals, most social psychologists believe that one should go through these rituals as per one's personal beliefs. This is partly because these rituals have evolved over centuries as a method of handling the tragedy of death and therefore serve a purpose for those who believe in it. Besides the factor of personal belief, the rituals allow one to abreact (pour out and express one's feelings), since blocked emotions can become a nucleus for future pathologies and chronic depressions. The social gathering common to such occasions also increases the social support systems and one feels encouraged and strengthened by other members of the family and community. This may be especially necessary when the loss of the person also means loss of financial and emotional support. Finally, it also helps assuage the sense of guilt that may sometimes accompany deaths due to illness. Doing something for the dead by way of rituals seems to somehow compensate for not doing adequately what one could have done for the person while he was living.

Most persons given time and support, will come out of the sense of pain one way or the other. The greatest healers are of course Time and Nature supported by the God within. Some however, especially those with sudden, unexpected and untimely loss, or those who have not worked through the grief process and suppressed their emotions may enter into a state of depression called pathological grief. These will need special intervention techniques beyond our present purview.

Beyond Grief, the Spiritual Way

The crux of counseling lies in appealing to our logical and more refined parts like reason and higher emotions. But reason and higher emotions are not the only

possibilities in us. There are deeper and luminous parts, higher than reason, stronger than death. A permanent remedy lies in turning the moment of crisis into an opportunity for growth. For to the inmost soul in man, everything can and does serve as an occasion for growth. There is no grief in the spiritual parts of our nature. The same event that depresses us in the sentiments and shocks even the rational parts is seen very differently by the soul. There is a letter that Sri Aurobindo wrote to Dilip Kumar Roy⁴ in response to his query on the death of a famous and good-natured singer at a relatively young age. Why did such a fine flower fade away so soon, he seemed to have asked the Master. Here is what Sri Aurobindo wrote back to him:

“X had reached a stage of her development marked by a predominance of the *sattwic* nature, but not a strong vital (which works towards a successful or fortunate life) or the opening to a higher light — her mental upbringing and surroundings stood against that and she herself was not ready. The early death and much suffering may have been the result of past (prenatal) influences or they may have been chosen by her own psychic being as a passage towards a higher state for which she was not yet prepared but towards which she was moving. This and the non-fulfilment of her capacities could be a final tragedy if there were this life alone. As it is, she has passed towards the psychic sleep to prepare for her life to come.”⁵

The soul can use everything as raw material for its progress and this progress gives it a sense of true joy. What is loss to the emotions and the senses is seen by the soul as liberation from bondage and freedom from false and wrong attachments. After all, much of our pain and sorrow is not for the one who has departed but for ourselves. In fact as far as the other person is concerned he is on his journey forward, he will once again begin the adventure of consciousness and joy with a fresh body, experience other countries and climes and thereby grow. It is our egoistic attachments that seek to love that is the source of our misery when the person is lost. The same is true when we confront death. Rare is the soul who feels the pain of those left behind and therefore prays for a prolongation of life. For most the pain of confronting death is

⁴ The famous musician, singer, poet and writer of Bengal and also a disciple of Sri Aurobindo. He lived in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram for many years before settling down at Pune as a spiritual guru.

⁵ Refer to the Appendix II: The Shroud of Death for a complete version of the letter and personal case studies of Young Deaths.

because we would lose all that we cherish, from which we derive so much egoistic satisfaction. It is this egoistic attachment to ourselves, this tendency to put ourselves at the centre of our private world and God's world that death comes to shatter, a grim reminder that life and world and people were not created thinking of one's small ego and its little satisfactions as the goal, but for a larger purpose. That discover, for having discovered that, one shall be free from much of the suffering and agony of death. This advice of old that the god of death gives to Nachiketas⁶ is an eternal truth and holds as much water today.

Spiritual counselling will simply facilitate this process, the emergence of this truth from within, by leading the sufferer in his own way towards that and bringing it to his conscious awareness. This does not mean a lack of empathy but an empathy combined with a luminous understanding. A compassion that leans from above rather than struggles at the same level as the patient. The quintessence of this process is brought out beautifully by Sri Aurobindo's master-pen:

"...the soul understands, accepts, sympathises, but is not overpowered or affected, so that even the mind and body learn also to accept without being overpowered or even affected except on their surface... This does not mean insensibility to the struggles and sufferings of others but it does mean a spiritual supremacy and freedom which enables one to understand perfectly, put the right values on things and heal from above rather than struggling from below. It does not inhibit the divine compassion and helpfulness, but it does inhibit the human and animal sorrow and suffering."⁷

Naturally, the spiritual attitude and healing can only be practised if the therapist himself is living these truths. It is only when we have ourselves found the nearness of our souls that we can be truly convincing and help others discover its touch. It is not by preaching but through influence that the spirit acts best. It is well-known that the sense of suffering ceases in the presence of authentic spirituality. The spiritual man carries in himself an atmosphere of peace and joy and all who open to it naturally partake of that just as one breathes the air of the place one dwells in. But apart from this direct action spiritual healing can also help by encouraging the right attitudes

⁶ Refer to 'Ancient Texts' for the story of Nachiketas

⁷ Sri Aurobindo: *The Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 399

towards death, help one look at the larger picture beyond the physical body's frame and truly make even of death something heroically beautiful and meaningful.

In other words, spiritual counselling will focus on the true meaning of human life and even at the personal level assist in discovering the unique deeper sense of one's struggles and pain and inner ways to overcome them. The present affliction becomes thence a symbol of a deeper malady and therefore also an occasion for a more radical, total and permanent cure.

The essential ingredients of spiritual counselling for death and grief have been the following:

To remind the person of the *transient nature* of everything including the body and of those who grieve.

To remind him of the *immortality of the soul* or spiritual self in us that never dies.

To remind that each soul is essentially *alone in its unique journey* and it is only God, the ever-present reality that is a permanent friend and associate. All other associations are by their nature transient.

To remind that *grief does not help* the departed but only makes him suffer and struggle even more and that love and prayers are a much better way to overcome loss.

To remind that our *souls have the strength* to bear every tragedy. We are never given more suffering than our innate capacity and strength to bear it.

To remind that *good times follow bad times* and vice versa and that there is none who has not faced tragedies or struggle or suffering in life.

Finally, to see beyond death to the after-life and rebirth, to turn one's face to the future and to God who alone is true.

वायुरनिलममृतमथेदं भस्मान्तं शरीरम्।
ॐ क्रतो स्मर कृतं स्मर क्रतो स्मर कृतं स्मर॥

The Breath of things is an immortal life, but of this body, ashes are the end. OM! O Will, remember, that which was done remember! O Will, remember, that which was done remember.⁸

True as it is, this traditional counsel reflects shades of defeatism. The line is very thin between an enlightened acceptance of life and its difficulties and a fatalistic helpless submission to a blind fate. And while most of us would need this reminder at some point or the other, a premature and excessive stress upon this truth that is albeit one-sided, may instill a passive resignation in the being, which is not always healthy. The right approach should be to integrate this truth with a higher one that reconciles the urge to live and fight death with the fact of our material mortality. It consists in the will to live in the right manner, a long and healthy life, to reject and fight illness and death as a falsehood that has come to be associated with our souls and whatever its temporary utility, does not befit our spiritual stature. Therefore, one must will to strive so as to realise the divine and to serve Him or Truth (for those who do not believe in the Divine as a being) till the very last breath of our life. One must fight death not because of attachment to the body or for fear of these things but so that death and disease may become unnecessary for life's efflorescence upon earth. Each such individual effort would contribute in some way. And if we do it consciously we may also be able to learn many more secrets of our own inner life and progress till the very final moments. Of course this higher way is not easy and here again the line between an enlightened will to prolong life for a higher purpose or because one clings to life through blind and ignorant attachment, can be very thin. Yet this higher way is open for the few soldiers of light:

कुर्वन्नेवेह कर्माणि जिजीविषेच्छतँ समाः।
एवं त्वयि नान्यथेतोऽस्ति न कर्म लिप्यते नरे ॥२॥

Doing verily works in this world one should wish to live a hundred years. Thus it is in thee and not otherwise than this; action cleaves not to a man.⁹

⁸ Sri Aurobindo: *The Upanishads*, 'Isha Upanishad', Verse 17.

⁹ Sri Aurobindo: *The Upanishads*, 'Isha Upanishad', Verse 2.

To Grieve or Not to Grieve

"I can understand the shock your wife's catastrophic death must have been to you. But you are now a seeker and sadhak of the Truth and must set your mind to rise above the normal reactions of the human being and see things in a larger greater light. Regard your lost wife as a soul that was progressing through the vicissitudes of the life of Ignorance — like all others here; in that progress things happen that seem unfortunate to the human mind and a sudden accidental or violent death cutting short prematurely this always brief spell of terrestrial experience we call life seems to it especially painful and unfortunate. But one who gets behind the outward view knows that all that happens in the progress of the soul has its meaning, its necessity, its place in the series of experiences which are leading it towards the turning-point where one can pass from the Ignorance to the Light. He knows that whatever happens in the Divine Providence is for the best, even though it may seem to the mind otherwise. Look on your wife as a soul that has passed the barrier between two states of existence. Help her journey towards her place of rest by calm thoughts and the call to the Divine Help to aid her upon it. Grief too long continued does not help but delays the journey of the departed soul. Do not brood on your loss, but think only of her spiritual welfare."¹⁰

Some Practical Suggestions

Death is an event with a unique significance for each one. While the process of working through the pain takes some time, *life must move on*. To stagnate for long or to hold on to grief as a prized possession is only to prolong the misery. To get back to work, one's routine of life and pick up the scattered threads and restart the journey is most essential. The sooner it happens the better it is. The flying squadrons of the Air Force know this only too well. If there is a crash, the other squadron pilots are told to continue their flying, thereby diverting their minds from the tragedy and even bringing about a greater solidarity, as if those left behind were carrying on the baton of the unfinished task.

Prolonged indoor confinement as used to happen to widows in olden days only complicates the grief process. Depression thrives in such isolation and confinement

¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 462.

because it gives a greater opportunity to brood over the loss. Work is a great liberator by drawing our consciousness away from the parts that suffer and grieve. If the loss is too traumatic then it is helpful sometimes to change one's surroundings or to change the arrangements in the rooms. The human mind conditioned to patterns can trigger memories and formations of pain in the same surroundings by sheer habit of response. It is now well known that certain environments trigger certain types of responses in an individual or a group and therefore environmental manipulation is part of therapy.

This is especially true for *young children or adolescents* who are brought face to face with death due to the loss of someone very close such as a parent. Unlike adults who already have a cognitive framework and a developed reason and experience of past losses as their inner resources to draw upon in times of grief, the young are rather raw and have hardly seen the different cards dealt by life. A child has neither the experience nor a developed reason to cope with sudden tragedies like death of a loved one. It is therefore a great challenge for those involved in working through the grief of these young ones, to take care not to distort their self-regard and world-view following these events. Children, with their elementary and childlike logic, sometimes tend to blame themselves for the fate of the departed person. They also feel abandoned and terribly insecure, feelings that adults do not necessarily experience. Such experiences can influence the development of the child in radical ways. Some methods that help the process of handling grief in children are as follows:

- To provide emotional and social support to make them feel that they are and will be cared for in every aspect of life.
- To provide genuine love by others who could fill in the vacuum of the departed.
- To remind the child of the sweet memories and the goals that the departed would have liked to see fulfilled. This gives a cause to live and a sense of being with the loved one in one's hopes and ideals.

It really works for many children to believe that the loved one is watching them from somewhere and benevolently monitoring their progress. It instils security and a sense of communion. And this may not be just a prop for who knows what the departed spirit can and cannot do from the beyond.

Finally, so as not to distort their world-view, to remind them that it is God who is ultimately the parent of each and everyone and physical parents are only his representatives.

Given time and emotional support especially genuine love, most children will come out very well and even grow stronger through the tragedy. By their nature, children look forward to the future and as this future unfolds itself, the past tends to fade. Time itself is a great healer, especially when we move forward. Besides, ultimately we carry the healer always within each one of us, and no tragedy is greater than the strength to bear it.

Role of Rituals

As to rituals, we have already seen the view of traditional therapies based on the materialist model of man. From a deeper point of view the rituals had their origin in a subtle truth. It is this that those upon earth can help the onward journey of the departed. The occult basis is that after departure the soul lingers for a time in the earth atmosphere. Its prolonged nearness to the physical and vital worlds delays its onward journey and therefore keeps the soul bound to the vital sheaths, which is a source of continued suffering even after death. In the *shradha* ceremony of the Hindus, the whole occult rites and the mantras point towards leading the soul out of the world of the ancestors (*pitraloka*) to the world of the gods (*devaloka*). The *pitraloka* are the worlds closer to our own and subject to pain and suffering. The *devaloka* on the other hand, are the higher realms where happiness and harmony reigns and suffering reaches not. Once this conversion is over, the departed are prayed for and expected to benevolently help those upon earth since they have now gone to the spheres of a greater light and power.

Something similar happens in other religions as well. If we remove the outer details and look for the essence, we find that most religions believe in a period of transit when the soul is crossing the threshold of this material world and moving on to other realms. The general time for this crucial passage is anywhere from three – thirteen days. That's why the main ceremonies are on the fourth, tenth and/or the thirteenth day. Whether the present day pundits, a vast majority of whom are largely devoid of inner merit and occult knowledge, genuinely facilitate the process or not is another matter. But one thing is certain. It is this that for a certain period soon after departure, the soul has a difficult passage where it continues to experience earthly attachments making its transit painful. A constant earthward pull during this phase by excessive lamenting and sorrow among those left behind only makes the transit of the departed turbulent and painful. *Therefore it is important not to remember the departed with pain and especially not to create an atmosphere of sorrow in the surroundings.* On

the contrary, the right way would be to make the transit smooth by praying for the person with thoughts of genuine goodwill and love. Even forgetting the person and being indifferent would be better than grief whether felt or expressed since the vital sheaths respond through affinity of vibrations and not necessarily through physical seeing. Thus the sooner the process of grief is over, the better it is. According to one tradition, during the first three days, the immortal parts in us are separating from the mortal's world and adjusting to the higher spiritual world. This process can be facilitated by creating a spiritual atmosphere at the place of death. Washing the body, placing flowers and incense, offering prayers and spiritual readings for three days is a beautiful way of helping the departed and wishing them a safe journey. The best option of course is to be free of grief since after all the person whom we loved has not 'ended' but only passed beyond our mortal sight and will progress and move forward through another life.

A young man dying said:

*Insult me not with your cries of sympathy
When I soar in the land of eternal light and love.
It is I who should feel for you
For me disease, shattering of bones,
Sorrow, excruciating heartaches no more
I dream joy, I glide in joy, I breathe in joy evermore.¹¹*

Helping Hands

What about the physicians and the caretakers? There are two important aspects here apart from supporting those who are left behind. The first issue is regarding disclosing the grave prognosis or diagnosis to the terminally ill. The issue is not simple and somewhat controversial. It is known for instance that denial of a terminal illness tends to somehow prolong the life expectancy. On the other hand, not informing the implications based on present knowledge may amount to breach of trust and also make the patient indifferent and delay his seeking timely help or completing some last minute unfinished acts such as executing a will. Besides that, how much do we really know? Medicine is not an exact science at all and every physician worth his work knows that each patient is unique and the behavior of illness often unpredictable. So is it fair to play God and pass a judgment on the patient's life? It may only induce fear

¹¹ Quoted by Sri Paramhansa Yogananda

and bring one closer to death than otherwise. Fear indeed is a great ally of death and interferes with recovery. Perhaps the best recourse under the present state of our collective ignorance is to explain to the patient in simple terms about what's going on in his body and what can be and should be done about it. It is indeed an art to tell the truth, even a limited one without causing the reactions of hurt, fear, disgust and revolt. It is perhaps linked to our own inner state of goodwill more than anything else. That is the sense of the ancient injunction, *satyam vada, priyam vada* (speak the truth, and, speak it pleasantly). All prognostications however should be suspended and the physician and the patient must work together towards recovery as the goal till the very end. This, not because one clings to the body, but because the experience of struggle without giving up is helpful for the growing soul. And if one must depart at all then, it should be in an atmosphere free of fear.¹²

Counselling is not the only way to help those who are left behind. One can provide still more concrete help at a deeper spiritual and occult level by infusing peace (just as one injects a medicine), or forces of joy and harmony. Even uplifting music or an atmosphere of calm and light and strength created collectively by those involved in the care can work wonders.¹³ But habit and certain social traditions stand in the way and most gatherings on such occasions sadly only compound rather than assuage the grief by joining with the mourner's weaker parts rather than strengthening him. That is the real purpose of reading the scriptures and offering the flowers so as to create a soothing atmosphere. But these should be supplemented by inner methods of calling and instilling the healing and soothing forces from a higher sphere to rejuvenate and uplift. There are instances on record as to how the visit to a spiritual Master not just consoled the person but rather filled the being with peace and joy even in the face of an incident that would normally give rise to grief. Such help need not be through words but can be transmitted in silence through the influence of the Master. Here we must understand that peace, joy, strength, etc., are concrete and real forces and the Master knows how to handle them just as the material scientist knows how to handle the forces of steam and electricity. He bypasses the mental mechanisms of counselling

¹² Refer to Appendix II: The Shroud of Death for The Fear of Death and the Four Methods of Conquering It by the Mother.

¹³ Refer to Appendix II: The Shroud of Death for an interesting interview with someone who plays music specifically for the dying.

and directly injects the required forces just as an injection bypasses the complicated processes of the digestive tract and directly enters the blood stream.

Similarly, the Master knows life and death to be a single continuity and can therefore easily move from one to the other. It is we who make the difference since there is a whole zone of truth above and below and within that is concealed to our present sight. For the Master, death is not annihilation but a hiding behind the wall of senses. He knows how to get behind the iron wall and provide whatever necessary help to the person. He can even accompany the person to lead the soul safely and smoothly to the place of rest. Unlike our foolish and ignorant hearts, the Master does not abandon the contact with the death of the body but keeps it through life and death and afterlife and beyond till the soul arrives at the point it has aspired for. His concern is not so much for the body but for the soul. And since the soul is eternal, the relation between the Master and the disciple's soul (or the devotee and The Lord whom he adores) is also eternal and does not cease with the life in a single body.¹⁴

The Moment of Death

Here again we find that the purely materialist approach does not offer any answer. Seen from a materialist standpoint, it does not matter how and under what circumstances one dies. On the contrary, we have scriptures telling us of the extreme importance of the psychological and inner state of the person at the moment of final departure. A scripture as profound as the *Gita* speaks about this:

यं यं वापि स्मरन्भावं त्यजत्यन्ते कलेवरम् ।
तं तमेवैति कौन्तेय सदा तद्भावं भावितः ॥३॥

Whatever entity one thinks of at the time of death, he attains that and that alone in the next incarnation, simply because he has become absorbed in the thought of it.¹⁵

¹⁴ Refer to Appendix II: The Shroud of Death for an experience of a devotee with the Mother at the time of death.

¹⁵ *The Bhagvad Gita*: Ch. 8, Verse 6

This verse is often used as a defence against all one's life of selfishness stating that it does not matter as long as one remembers God at the time of death. True, but it must be read in conjunction with the other verses that precede and follow it, especially the one right after, that is:

तस्मात्सर्वेषु कालेषु मामनुस्मर युध्य च ।
मय्यर्पितमनो बुद्धिर्मा मे वैष्यस्य संशयम् ॥७॥

Arjuna, if you want to attain Me here and hereafter, then think of Me at all times. Even while fighting set your mind and intellect on Me. Thus thou shalt come to Me undoubtedly.¹⁶

Sri Aurobindo clearly states that this truth operates if one has remembered God all the while during one's life. The scriptures also tell us the two different paths that the soul follows at the time of its departure. One is the path of the ancestors (*pitrayana*) or the path of the southern solstice from which one has to return back after some time, that is take birth again. The other is the path of the gods (*devayana*) or the path of the northern solstice from whence one does not return to the world of sorrow. What is the inner logic of this?

Well, as we have seen, the moment of death is a moment of intense concentration. It is concentration in the inward direction so that the soul can progressively disengage itself from the physical body and go to rest into its native world of the fourth dimension. The process is therefore very similar to a meditative concentration except that here it takes an extreme form of no return. Now if one can use this moment of intense concentration facilitated or precipitated by nature itself, one can achieve a remarkable boost in one's inward journey. The Yogi therefore withdraws the soul by concentrating his consciousness in one of the higher centers of concentration which he has practised and possibly mastered during his life. On the other hand, the ordinary man is helplessly cut off from his body by the force of death and therefore feels the pain and the agony of being taken away.

Death is also a moment of intense oblivion and only that remains which has always been deep down in one's mind. It is like when confronted with a danger in a dream,

¹⁶ *The Bhagvad Gita: Ch. 8, Verse 7.*

whom do we call and remember? Not necessarily the gods whom we worship ritualistically on Sundays but that person or thing or Force to whom we are inwardly attached and deeply cherish. So too during death one tends to get stuck with the predominant tendencies of life. If one has always worried about money for instance, one tends to worry about money at the time of death as well, however absurd it may seem. So too if one has been very attached to one's children during life one thinks only of that attachment during death. So the great advice:

Remember Me at all times and fight the great battle of life. Thou shalt surely come to me.

The thrust therefore is that the significance of our death and meaningful departure lies in the significance of a meaningful life. It is not to say that life is a preparation for death. But just that we can make our death useful by leading a meaningful life turned towards the Divine. Death too is an instrument of god and can be used to give an extra evolutionary push to our lives beyond and hereafter if we can quit calmly in a state of Grace; in a state of concentration upon the Divine Presence within us. This is the best way to depart and creates the best conditions for an afterlife. Therefore the final injunction:

प्रयाणकाले मनसाऽचलेन
भक्त्या युक्तो योगबलेन चैव।
भ्रुवोर्मध्ये प्राणमावेश्य सम्यक्
स तं परं पुरुषमुपैति दिव्यम्॥ १०॥

At the moment of departure make your mind still unto Me and with devotion and the power of yoga unite unto Me. Concentrating in the middle of the eyebrows and balancing the different currents of prana thou shalt arrive to the abode of the Supreme Divine.¹⁷

¹⁷ *The Bhagvad Gita: Ch. 8, Verse 10*

Is the Moment of Death Fixed?

That brings us to the last question about the moment of departure. Is this moment of the fatal stroke fixed? Can the hour of death be postponed from an inner point of view?

The question is only of academic interest for the material scientist since as per material science the moment of death is not fixed. It is only the average lifespan of a species that is fixed and that too has a wide range in man at least. On the contrary, we have authentic instances of yogis predicting their hour of departure. A view more consistent with the experience of those who have come back (NDE) as well as with the logic of inner life would be that there may not be such an absolute fixity as is ordinarily supposed. Perhaps there are certain periods of life when for various reasons there is a strong possibility of death. The astrologers speak about such periods known in India as *mrityudasha* when the possibilities of death are very high. Possibility yes, but not necessarily the inevitability. But if by a higher will or spiritual intervention one is able to go through that phase then the hour of death may be postponed. Of course the common mass of humanity driven mechanically may be subject to a certain amount of fixed determinism with regard to life and death. With evolution this fixity must gradually give way to a greater mastery from within till we reach a point wherein we are in complete control of our destiny and circumstances of life and death. It is this extreme mastery that we see in the life of rare yogis who do not predict the hour of their death as much as they choose the time and circumstances. Even great beings (who are called in India as *vibhutis*) may be able to stall the hour of their death. The Mother recounts one such story with regard to Queen Elizabeth I, who on her deathbed, moved with the agony of her subjects gets up and remarks, "But one can die later."

Spirit of Death

All traditions by and large believe in beings who come to take away the soul and help in separating it from the body. In Indian literature, such a being is known as *Yamadoot*. Mystic experience and the experience of few who have survived death does affirm that there is some grain of truth in this notion of a being. However contrary to popular belief they are not evil forces, much as the hangman obeying the orders of the judge

is not an evil person, but simply an obedient worker doing his assigned duty. So also these beings have possibly a certain fixed number of people allocated to them, the number required perhaps to maintain the balance of birth and death (just as the balance of energy and matter must remain constant at all times). If that be so then it stands to reason, or supra reason if one may say so, that there is a certain flexibility in their working which seems to us as an element of arbitrariness. They have a fixed number to take among those who are inwardly ready to die, let's say whose soul and inner being has made the decision to quit this present formation. Now if a person (his inmost soul and not just his fanciful outer being) makes a last minute decision to live for some more time for whatever purpose, it is quite probable that the spirit of death may go elsewhere to someone who is 'ready', and quite possibly this 'ready' surrogate may live in close physical proximity to the one originally intended.

The spirit of death too must bow and obey the command of the inner divinity in man, his secret soul.

Staring into the Eyes of Death

(Predicting the Unpredictable and Altering the Predictable) Authentic instances are known wherein people predicted their own death. Among some well-known instances are those of great yogis like Swami Vivekananda and Paramhansa Yogananda among others. Obviously one does not expect a yogi to go around beating his drum and make pronouncements that sound extravagant. Yet the hints are sufficient and point towards the subtler mystery of death and the fact that self-mastery is also one of the keys towards the mastery over death.

Even though seers may be able to predict the precise moment and place of death, they may not actually interfere with it since they know its purpose and the totality of the cosmic rhythms. There is a plane of consciousness of Time-eternity wherein the three modes of time — past, present and future — fuse and co-exist. The division is created due to the veil of Ignorance that hangs over the mind thereby dividing the one indivisible unity into small fragments. But the seer may rise into the house of undivided time and see things together in one sweep.

There is also the question of clairvoyant *dreams and visions*. The Mother recounts one such story wherein a man saw in his dream a boy asking him to enter a coffin. The next morning this man stood at the gates of the lift to go down when to his horror he

saw that the boy of his dream was the very same boy operating the lift. Awakened suddenly to the true significance of his dream the man politely declined, choosing to take the flight of stairs instead. No sooner had the lift descended than the wire snapped, killing all the occupants. Coffin indeed! There are many such instances of premonitory dreams and strange sudden inexplicable decisions that have saved or taken one's life through accidents. In another case, a colleague was suffering from an advanced stage of malignancy. An avowed rational atheist earlier, she had recently turned to the Divine. Perhaps the close brush with death along with tremendous goodwill in her nature opened in her an unexpected faculty of inner vision. Most of her visions were true and concerned largely her own inner and outer state, so much so that she could actually see the cancerous cells floating in her abdomen while the tests including the CT scan showed none. Around the 27 or 28 May 1991 she saw an interesting dream wherein she was unsuccessfully trying to move the needles of a clock that were stuck at 6:30. The colour of the clock was an unusual pink and she saw plenty of her favourite jasmine flowers all around it. The intuitive feeling about the dream was that she had six and a half more months to live. The clock suggested that. The colour pink and the presence of jasmine flowers (named purity by the Mother) suggested that the dream-vision was originating in her soul depths. This interpretation was however not told to her. But sure enough she left her body exactly six and a half months later on the 14 December 1991!

However, it must be noted that seeing oneself die in a dream does not necessarily indicate a premonition of death. More often than not it indicates the leaving behind or dropping of something of the past. It is therefore mostly a dream with a positive significance, important symbolically. On another level, one can also suggest that even physical death is a leaving behind of the past, so that our soul may move into the future.

There are also instances wherein the intervention of a higher power has seemingly altered the fixed and fatal stroke. The instance of the Mughal king Babur praying for his son's life in exchange for his own when the crown prince suffered a fatal illness is well documented in history. The story has it that as a result of his prayers the son survived while the father left his body. The ancient Indian tale of Ruru moves along similar lines. Ruru is a youthful *rishi* whose young wife Priyumvada is bitten by a snake and dies. The *rishi* is overcome by grief but soon composes himself and with all his occult knowledge travels to the nether worlds where lies the abode of Death. He

pleads there his cause so much so that Yama himself is moved. He agrees to return back the beloved of Ruru if the young *rishi* agrees to forgo half of his own life. The *rishi* readily agrees only to find the dead wife return back to life. Sri Aurobindo captures this significant tale in one of his beautiful poems "Love and Death":

*Thy dead I yield. Yet thou bethink thee, mortal,
Not as a tedious evil nor to be
Lightly rejected gave the gods old age,
But tranquil, but august, but making easy
The steep ascent to God. Therefore must Time
Still batter down the glory and form of youth
And animal magnificent strong ease,
To warn the earthward man that he is spirit
Dallying with transience, nor by death he ends,
Nor to the dumb warm mother's arms is bound,
But called unborn into the unborn skies.
For body fades with the increasing soul
And wideness of its limit grown intolerant
Replaces life's impetuous joys by peace.¹⁸*

These possibilities of partial conquest over death may be rare and not yet accessible to the mass of mankind that still must labour under the terrible yoke. Nevertheless they point to a deeper possibility that may well become more generalised in the race as mankind advances in its evolutionary march and the exceptional becomes the common, and the rare becomes frequent. The legend of Savitri conquering back her husband from the hands of death is just such a tale, opening doors to the possibility of conquering death by a higher power, the power of true love.

Thus we have a whole range of possibilities:

The lowest in the scale is the mass of humanity, not yet awakened to a deeper and higher possibility, who apart from rare instances of special intervention are *subject entirely to the law of death* even as they are helplessly driven by the force of life and desires.

¹⁸ Sri Aurobindo: 'Love and Death', *Collected Poems*, pp. 253-254.

Then there are those who can to some extent alter the balance and at least *stall the moment of departure* through a deeper will.

Finally we have the example of the rare yogis who have mastered their lives and are therefore *masters of their destiny and of death*. They are free from the law of death even though they seem to die like anyone else. Death becomes their instrument and not they its slaves. Such individuals can and perhaps always consciously choose the conditions of their departure and its hour. In other words, the secret of mastering death lies in the secret of mastering life.

The Question of Cremation

As to the method of cremation, it actually does not matter so long as sufficient time has been given for the connection to be cut. However, two considerations follow. One, the custom of burning is generally considered as more hygienic and acts as a last rite, even a symbolic one of cutting the earth-bound ties. Second, the giving of body to the fire is also a powerful symbol of purification since the soul has often been represented as fire by the Vedic seers. There is also the advantage that the relics left behind in the form of bones can be dispersed at the place of one's possible preference.

However, timing plays a crucial role. The Mother has described the state of some beings shivering during cremation since their bodies were being given to fire prematurely. The link was not yet fully cut (on an average it takes twenty-four hours as mentioned earlier) but most people find it inconvenient to keep the body for so long and rush through the disposal. This is unfortunate. But if one could wait till the final withdrawal has taken place, then it makes no difference whether one uses this method or that. For, once the soul has detached itself from the body with all its sheaths then it is just a corpse. Some may ask if burial is a better method? Not necessarily, since the body in this case may serve as an attraction to the earth for the departed as well as other forces that feed upon the corpse. Nevertheless, the bodies of those rare great souls (Mahatmas) were not burnt but given a burial called *samadhi*. The reason is that the body of a Mahatma continues to act as a transmitter of higher vibrations and thereby enriches the earth.

And what about the glorified pyramids with their mummies entombed within? It seems that the people of that age and land took death more as an extension of life upon earth. Considering the amount of money and manpower spent on the task, the

retinue and livestock as well as sometimes human beings buried alive to satisfy the comforts and desires of the king who was no more is highly questionable. This is not to deny a developed occult knowledge (knowledge of the hidden forces of life and death) among the Egyptians, but greater than occult knowledge is spiritual wisdom, which must inform and enlighten all knowledge. That seems to have been missed out or still not completely understood if the pyramids are any testimony to the age and times of the Pharaoh kings.

Mummification is often confused with embalming but the two are very different. Embalming is a modern procedure based on a material and chemical knowledge. It consists in preparing the body in such a way as to prevent decomposition for some days. It is a physical process. Mummification as practised in ancient Egypt was based upon an inner occult knowledge. There is the mind of matter, of the cells, that is the last to withdraw after which the body begins to disintegrate. The ancient Egyptians knew how to preserve this spirit of form through the special process of mummification. Thus the body did not disintegrate for long since the spirit of form was preserved. In fact some of those belonging to the royal lineage were themselves initiated into secret mysteries, like the daughter of a Pharaoh who was the head of a secret school of initiation in Thebes. The Mother has even mentioned that the mummified form of this woman is believed to have been responsible for quite a number of catastrophes and for obvious reasons. With regard to the curiosity that targets mummies the Mother has said, "You see, they begin by committing an outrage: these mummies are enclosed in a box of a particular form according to the person, with all that is necessary to preserve them; now, the box is opened, more or less violently, some wrappings are stripped away here and there to provide a better view... And considering that it was never ordinary people who were mummified, these were beings who had attained an appreciable inner power or who were of royal birth, people more or less initiated."

There are also other faiths that believe in leaving the bodies for the elements to wither naturally. However, such things are ultimately a matter of personal belief and it is best to follow the injunctions of one's own faith in this regard. Each method and practice has its own unique logic and justification and therefore is best left to one's inner belief system.¹⁹

¹⁹ Refer to Appendix II: The Shroud of Death for the *Wisdom from the Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

Death of a God

Is there a difference between the death of ordinary mortals and that of beings of a higher consciousness like saints and sages or incarnate gods and higher still, that most deceptive appearance of God in humanity — the phenomenon of the Avatara? Gods (beings of a higher luminous plane of consciousness) do not die except when they take up a human body for a particular work. But even here it is not the kind of death that we understand but a *conscious* withdrawal from the mortal to the immortal planes unlike the mortal's death which is an *unconscious* withdrawal. Is it the same as any other death? Surely not. Since these are cosmic powers their repercussions are also not individual but universal. The mere presence of such beings in a human form attracts forces of a higher dimension towards the earth thereby reducing much of our burden and opening the earth to higher things. Some rare beings may strategically absorb many of the darker forces to annul them through their own death much like Shiva did symbolically by consuming the poison of the earth.²⁰ The result is a partial victory of light even through death. Of course not all beings of this higher order disappear from the earthly scene with their withdrawal. Some continue to stay linked consciously to the earth until their work is over. The physical disappearance from the human sensory world gives them a great advantage since they can now fully focus and continue their earthly work without the constant interference of our petty minds. But we are easily deceived by appearances and fix a date for birth and death and think they are no more. However, those who have the fire in their heart can not only get the inner response but also see and communicate with them. Appearances deceive the mortal eyes, but not the eyes of the soul. And of all appearances the most enigmatically deceptive is the appearance of death!

I made an assignation with the Night;

²⁰ Legend has it that once upon a time the gods and the titans united their efforts to churn the ocean of consciousness and discover the nectar of immortality concealed within it. But before the nectar, there emerged out of the depths of the Inconscient the poison *Kalkoot*, which threatened the existence of every being. None knew what to do until moved by their agony, Shiva appeared on the scene to consume the poison and kept it in his throat earning him the name of *Neelkantha*, the blue throated one. The story is deeply symbolic for to conquer immortality one must first conquer the fear of death and be able to consume the bitter poisonous stuff of life without a wince.

*In the abyss was fixed our rendezvous:
In my breast carrying God's deathless light
I came her dark and dangerous heart to woo.
I left the glory of the illumined Mind
And the calm rapture of the divinised soul
And travelled through a vastness dim and blind
To the grey shore where her ignorant waters roll.
I walk by the chill wave through the dull slime
And still that weary journeying knows no end;
Lost is the lustrous godhead beyond Time,
There comes no voice of the celestial Friend,
And yet I know my footprints' track shall be
A pathway towards Immortality.²¹*

²¹ Sri Aurobindo: 'The Pilgrim of the Night', *Collected Poems*, p. 132.

Appendix II: The Shroud of Death

Young Deaths

Nothing hurts our human sensibilities and belief in a just and fair world as the death of a young one. While it is easier to accept death when one has lived an average lifespan, it is very difficult to accept an untimely death, with the sudden shattering of all hopes and dreams. Did a cruel god devise all this just to inflict pain? Is there a contrary power that mars the all-loving Creator's Work? Is it some ghost of a bygone karma returning from the land of the dead? Is it just to make us painfully aware as if through a shock, the transience and impermanence of earthly life? How to take it all and still carry on with life and hopes and dreams?

These are questions that do not find an easy answer. When Dilip Kumar Roy, the famous musician-singer-poet of Bengal who later became a disciple of Sri Aurobindo, asked this question in relation to the passing away of a young singer at the age of twenty-five years, what followed is an answer to the riddle and enigma of the paradox of life. The question and the full text of the reply he received is as reproduced below:

Dilip Kumar Roy: "But why did such a lovely flower fade away prematurely even before blossoming — thus casting a gloom on all who knew her and loved her for her exquisite singing and snow-pure character? And then look at the lengthening shadows all over the world! I do believe in Grace but it acts, I take it, only under certain conditions which seem exceedingly unlikely to be fulfilled by recipients such as we. So why waste your precious time and energy on such a world where the divine guidance looks almost accidental and out of place, to all intents and purposes?"

Sri Aurobindo: "The question you have put raises one of the most difficult and complicated of all problems and to deal with it at all adequately would need an answer as long as the longest chapter of my *Life Divine*. I can only state my own knowledge founded not on reasoning but on experience that there is such a guidance and that nothing is vain in this universe.

If we look only at the outward facts in their surface appearance or if we regard what we see happening around us as definitive, not as processes of a moment in a developing whole, the guidance is not apparent; at most, we see interventions occasional or sometimes frequent. The guidance can become evident only if we go behind appearances and begin to understand the forces at work and the way of their working and their secret significance. After all, real knowledge — even scientific knowledge — comes by going behind the surface phenomena to their hidden process and causes. It is quite obvious that this world is full of suffering, and afflicted with transience to a degree that seems to justify the *Gita's* description of it as this 'unhappy and transient world', *anityam asukham*. The question is whether it is a mere creation of Chance or governed by a mechanical unconscious Law or whether there is a meaning in it and something beyond its present appearance towards which we move. If there is a meaning and if there is something towards which things are evolving, then, inevitably, there must be a guidance — and that means that there is a supporting Consciousness and Will with which we can come into an inner contact. If there is such a Consciousness and Will, it is not likely that it would stultify itself by annulling the world's meaning or turning it into a perpetual or eventual failure.

"This world has a double aspect. It seems to be based on a material Inconscience, error and sorrow, death and suffering are the necessary consequence. But there is evidently, too, a partially successful endeavour and an imperfect growth towards Light, Knowledge, Truth, Good, Happiness, Harmony, Beauty — at least a partial flowering of these things. The meaning of this world must evidently lie in this opposition; it must be an evolution which is leading or struggling towards higher things out of a first darker appearance. Whatever guidance there is, must be given under these conditions of opposition and struggle and must be leading the individual certainly, and the world presumably, towards that higher state but through the double terms of knowledge and ignorance, light and darkness, death and life, pain and pleasure, happiness and suffering; none of the terms can be excluded until the higher status is reached and established. It is not and cannot be, ordinarily, a guidance which at once rejects the darker terms, still less a guidance which brings us solely and always nothing but happiness, success and good fortune.

Its main concern is with the growth of our being and consciousness, the growth towards a higher self, towards the Divine, eventually towards a higher Light, Truth and Bliss; the rest is secondary, sometimes a means, sometimes a result, not a primary purpose.

“The true sense of the guidance becomes clearer when we can go deep within and see from there – more intimately the play of the forces and receive intimations of the Will behind them. The surface mind can only get an imperfect glimpse. When we are in contact with the Divine or in contact with an inner knowledge or vision, we begin to see all the circumstances of our life in a new light and observe how they all tended without our knowing it towards the growth of our being and consciousness, towards the work we had to do, towards some development that had to be made — not only what seemed good, fortunate or successful but the struggles, failures, difficulties, upheavals. But with each person the guidance works differently according to his nature, the conditions of his life, his cast of consciousness, his stage of development, his need of further experience. We are not automata but conscious beings and our mentality, our will and its decisions, our attitude to life and demand on it, our motives and movements help to determine our course; they may lead to much suffering and evil, but through it all the guidance makes use of them for our growth in experience and consequently the development of our being and consciousness. All advance by however devious ways, even in spite of what seems a going backwards or going astray, gathering whatever experience is necessary for the soul’s destiny. When we are in close contact with the Divine, a protection can come which helps or directly guides or moves us: it does not throw aside all difficulties, sufferings or dangers, but it carries us through them and out of them — except where for a special purpose there is need of the opposite.

“It is the same thing though on a larger scale and in a more complex way with the guidance of the world movement. That seems to move according to the conditions and laws or forces of the moment through constant vicissitudes, but still there is something in it that drives towards the evolutionary purpose, although it is more difficult to see, understand and follow than in the smaller and more intimate field of the individual consciousness and life. What happens at a particular juncture or the world-action or the life of humanity, however

catastrophical, is not ultimately determinative. Here, too, one has to see not only the outward play of forces in a particular case but also the inner and secret play, the far-off outcome, the event that lies beyond and the Will at work behind it all. Falsehood and Darkness are strong everywhere on the earth, and have always been so and at times they seem to dominate; but there have also been not only gleams but outbursts of the Light. In the maze of things and the long course of Time, whatever may be the appearance of this or that epoch or movement, the growth of Light is there and the struggle towards better things does not cease. At the present time Falsehood and Darkness have gathered their forces and are extremely powerful; but even if we reject the assertion of the mystics and prophets since early times that such a condition of things must precede the Manifestation and is even a sign of its approach, yet it does not necessarily indicate the decisive victory — even temporary — of the Falsehood. It merely means that the struggle between the forces is at its acme. The result may very well be the stronger emergence of the best that can be; for the world-movement often works in that way. I leave it at that and say nothing more.

“X had reached a stage of her development marked by a predominance of the *sattwic* nature, but not a strong vital (which works towards a successful or fortunate life) or the opening to a higher light — her mental upbringing and surroundings stood against that and she herself was not ready. The early death and much suffering may have been the result of past (prenatal) influences or they may have been chosen by her own psychic being as a passage towards a higher state for which she was not yet prepared but towards which she was moving. This and the nonfulfilment of her capacities could be a final tragedy if there were this life alone. As it is, she has passed towards the psychic sleep to prepare for her life to come.”¹

Three things stand out: First is the deceptiveness of appearances. This is something that we encounter again and again in life but much more in our dealing with Death since it is an appearance that neither science nor reason can penetrate. Till we develop the faculties and instruments of a higher knowledge within us we have to

¹ *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me*, 1952 ed., pp. 516-21.

rely on the eye of faith and turn to those who have pierced the veil and seen through the darkness of death's night. Nothing is really lost, certainly not the person except to our sensory appearance.

Second, there are several factors at play in this complex play of world forces, factors helpful and harmful, things that aid and things that hinder. In this world play, truth and falsehood are locked together and everything that happens is not the direct expression of the Divine Will. There are accidents and delays. The symmetry we look for is not there except in our minds. Yet through all this the soul grows and that is the hope, and not an uninterrupted success and happiness in each and every life. The soul chooses and utilises all this as material for its upward progress. Life and Death from the soul's point of view are like a game of snakes and ladders. There is a joy in the game and a sense of achievement and mastery and victory against odds, even if it means losing the game a few times.

Finally the choice itself of the soul is not the choice that the vital and mind prefer which seek after an ignorant happiness and temporary gain alone. Thus a soul may decide to quit early if it finds a new body is needed to start life afresh and move faster as in the instance above. Or else it may leave even as a child if some trace of experience was all that it needed for the next rung. If the body is not able to support the inner soul then it must change. Many are the inner and subtle causes that we are yet to know and discover. Even the so-called accidents are ultimately used for the soul's quick progress. In fact greater the difficulty, greater the progress.

Strange Attachment – A Prophetic Poem

The letter reproduced below was written by a sixteen-year-old girl to her father on his birthday. It proved prophetic as she died of an accident five years later, at 21 years of age. The letter raises several questions (or perhaps answers them) for instance a certain capacity to foresee the moment of death, the disparity in the reactions of the outer human mind and the inmost soul and how one part feels sorrow while the other feels happy as it rises to the beyond. Of course this may not be the immediate experience of everyone but it is most certainly the essential experience. The letter is reproduced in its original form.

STRANGE ATTACHMENT

*A still body lay beneath me,
I felt a strange bond to it,
an attachment.
It belonged to me, and I longed for another
precious minute in it.
Yet, I could not get over the excitement
of being free.
I turned away and slowly began to rise.
I could not help but look back again,
Just one last glance.
The body lay there, it was still full of
scratches and blood.
Memories of the beautiful 21 years I had
spent it floated through my mind.
I rose and rose,
the painfull sound of sobs and people
weeping faded as I assended to my new home.
I felt alone yet happy, as I entered
a whole new world —*

- by A.

(31.1.95)

To papa,

Happy belated birthday. Sorry I'm late in giving you your present. Sorry for such a deprecing topic (death) it's the best I could do. Hope you like it. You'd better like it I worket dam hard.

'Luv'
always
A.

Behind the Iron Curtain – Encounters with Death

(The following are personal case histories of patients of the author)

Death has many faces. It sometimes comes as a reliever of human miseries, as if to give rest to someone who has walked hard and long on the rugged roads of life. To

the adventurer, it comes as a sudden surprise, cutting the thread of life to break the monotony of experience and allow a variation of theme. To others it appears as a destroyer who smashes things that were beautiful and grand even as it brings down things that are mean and ugly. It can act as a great leveller who balances everything — the wicked and the saintly, the good and the vile. Its most terrible mask is when it takes away the children.

Case One – Death of a Child

Arun was an 11½ years old child, asthmatic since the age of 1½. He required nebulisers and steroids off and on. The onslaught of asthma had however not daunted his spirits. He came from an extremely modest background but dreamed of big and grand things. Born in an Indian village, he was fascinated by the car used by the American President and even wanted to be in that seat. He also dreamt of flying aircrafts one day and visiting many foreign lands. These dreams were not compatible with his upbringing and his parents tried to stifle them. The family shifted from Jaipur (native place) to Bangalore (on transfer) in May 2000. The child made a strange remark that he would never go back to Jaipur again. This was surprising since the climate suited him well and his asthma had nearly disappeared. On 2 July 2000, the boy's mother had a dream where she saw a broken toy. This disturbed her very much. A few days later while offering incense to their deity she noticed the smoke rising towards a photograph of the child placed nearby. This disturbed her again and she felt a deep unease. On 8 July, the boy complained of a mild irritation in the throat which was relieved with hot drinks. The irritation returned on the morning of 9 July. There was no fever or breathlessness but the father thought it prudent to give him a check-up in a nearby hospital. The boy was admitted. Oxygen, nebuliser, asthalin and steroids were given. The child became breathless suddenly at 7.30 a.m. and he died at 8.30 a.m. despite all efforts.

The day prior to his death the boy had remarked, "My mother is an American." His puzzled mother told him that she was not an American. The boy insisted, "You will be." Was it a serious statement or a child's babble? Was it his past peeping through some window of his inner being left ajar, or was it a voice from his future calling him from unknown lands and distant climes? Was it a secret inner choice to shift scenes? We may never know. But looking back, one wonders. Questions like, do we choose to die, come up and demand an answer. Here was a child endowed with an expansive vital

who thought and dreamt big, yet was born with a weak body. His father often remarked, "You can't become a pilot with this problem of asthma!" His background and environment wherein he would have to struggle to realise his dreams too was not compatible. Was death an easy way out? Or was it simply that the body broke down under the pressure of a sudden surge of vital force (as happens on entry into adolescence)? In any case there was a disequilibrium. There were only two choices before the soul. One, to struggle and arrive at a higher equilibrium. The other, to succumb and change form to one more suited to the kind of experience it needed. He chose the latter.

This naturally does not console grieving parents and others who are left behind. One is deeply attached to the form. The soul seems far from us and its intimations too rare for our surface being to hear and understand. What helps those left behind is to get in touch with the soul. And then to invoke peace. Such a peace, if properly invoked, has the power to dissolve suffering. Parents caught up in the web of pain cannot do it themselves. The physician or someone else has to do it for them. A touch with the soul shows clearly that death is simply a passage the being chooses for its evolutionary journey. One realises that the one we loved is not lost but has only changed appearances. The final liberation from the pain of death is possible only for those who can enter into the sense of oneness that exists behind all separate forms. One sees then that what one loves in different forms and names is the 'One' who is never lost but ever exists under different guises and smiles at us unvaryingly through different eyes.

Case Two – Death, an Evolutionary Necessity

To wait for a near certain and slow death is a predicament worse than death itself. This too falls to the lot of some. Rajeev, a fourteen-year-old boy was brought for counselling by his parents since he felt depressed and contemplated suicide. The reason was a diagnosis of progressive muscular dystrophy, a disease with no known treatment and an invariable slow helpless death. The diagnosis had been made a few years before as he stood on the threshold of adolescence. Normally adolescence means more power, more capacity and a greater joy and thrill of life. But here was a paradox that stared at him. He had started losing his ability to run and walk and then even to stand. He could not stand even with support. Next to go was the power of his hands leading to a near inability to write or feed himself. His speech was also affected

and though clear in his mind he could not express himself fully. Bound to his wheelchair, he gazed at other boys with envy, and then with a growing sense of helplessness against his fate. When he came for treatment the thought uppermost in his mind was, "I can't do what others can do, so what is the point in living?" A sketchy dialogue followed in this way:

Counselor (C): I understand your state, but is it really true that you can't do what others can do?

Rajeev (R): Yes.

C: For instance?

R: Run or walk or play or eat or anything for that matter.

C: What about reading?

R: Yes (a glimmer in his eyes as he was indeed reading a lot).

C: And listening, to music for instance?

R: Yes, I like it.

C: And thinking?

R: I do a lot of that.

C: And praying?

R: Yes, I do pray.

C: You pray for what?

R: To be cured; (after a pause) to be completely cured, soon, from my disease.

I do not know what his outer nature meant but the impact of these words (vis-à-vis his outer destiny) opened a door of understanding within me. I felt there was a longing for a new body, a covert sanction to death. It seemed as if this life of his was a brief interlude where something was to be learnt from this state of abject outer powerlessness. What was it?

C: Supposing I tell you that there is something you can do which most others of your age do not do and perhaps cannot do.

R: What is it? (He looked up changing his stooped posture).

C: Now see, you can pray and think and read. You can combine these three and make it very powerful.

(The very mention of power, even a faint possibility of it made him see hope).

C: You see, it is called meditation.

He nodded yes.

(To my surprise he knew about it and had read something on it. Indeed of late he was reading a lot of religious books).

C: Now, can you imagine beautiful things?

R: Yes.

C: Even things that do not exist but you would like them to exist. Can you imagine them?

R: Yes, I can.

C: Okay, if someone told you that you had just one more moment to live and you can ask one boon, what would you ask?

R: To be cured.

C: Yes, but there is only one more moment to live.

(He contemplated this till he got the full import of the question, then spontaneously answered).

R: God.

C: Why don't you do it then? Try finding God. See your helplessness becomes a strength now. You are not distracted like other boys of your age. Your body is weak but your mind very powerful and concentrated. If there is a choice between body and mind then which is higher?

R: Mind.

C: And that you have in abundance. So don't waste it in negative thoughts. You can use your mind in pursuits that others can't follow.

He was visibly happy and cheerful. His parents were relieved. They had never thought of it in this way. I told them that death will come when it has to come. Why die before that by constantly thinking and fearing it? The session ended by giving a list of books for him to read and a set of mental exercises of imagination, will and thought. And of course the need of never giving up.

In this case too, there seemed to be an imbalance, a disequilibrium between mind and body where the life-force seemed to be turned towards feeding the mind. Whether this was the primary cause or secondary to his genetic defect, I cannot say. But in either case, death was clearly a mechanism used by Nature for renewing the experience of life with a new and perhaps better form more suited to the evolutionary needs of the soul. The 'cure' he looked for was perhaps too radical. Today scientists

can change a few organs or a few genes. But Nature, the great artificer, has been changing the entire body so that the soul can have totally new possibilities of progress. Death opens a new door to life even though it closes the door on the present one.

Case Three – Facing Death with a Smile

Can we transcend the horror created by the thought of death? The answer to this came to me from an eight-year-old while undergoing medical training as an undergraduate. I was attracted by this charming girl. In fact this eight year old fascinated all of us by her enthusiasm. She was bubbling with joy. To meet her was to feel refreshed and rejuvenated. Somehow we never tried to probe into her illness. She never looked sick. So we were startled one day when she asked us, "Do you know my disease?" We shook our heads in the negative. She said, "I have blood cancer." And then a big grin as if it was all a joke. We felt a stab of misery, of the utter helplessness of life, of the unpredictability of bodily existence. But the child's face reflected only joy. This very unpredictability made the game of life even more thrilling to her; the helplessness of the body awakened an inner strength; the misery of outer existence led as if to a greater happiness and joy!

As physicians, we are conditioned and trained to see and record gross physical facts and so the subtle escapes our notice. For instance, if we are perceptive enough, we notice that following physical death, there is the withdrawal of a glow that gives life to the form. We are so accustomed to this light that we fail to notice it unless it withdraws after death or is exceptionally brilliant in some rare human beings. At a psychological level, one may observe the 'given-up syndrome', or more rightly the absence of 'a will to live' some time before the downslide begins. As if something in the being chooses to quit and it is this that translates itself physically as a terminal illness. We are so preoccupied with the process that we do not see the cause. But this leaves many questions unanswered. The simplest is — why do some people succumb while others fight it out? Fred Hoyle rightly observed that there is something more than mere germs and immunity, for people still live despite poor hygiene and malnutrition when they should have been dead. There are perhaps many curtains behind the outer 'mechanism' of death and the 'inner will' that determines it.

As seen in these cases, one of the reasons is a disparity between the *life-force* and the body's capacity to sustain it. In the first case there was also a gross inner

disequilibrium both within the body and with the environment. That could have impelled the 'choice' of taking up a new body. I have seen in at least two other cases of young deaths (both in their early forties, dying of malignancy) where the disequilibrium between the inner aspiration and the outer milieu was quite marked. It was evident to an inner sense that their birth had been mainly to gather a particular form of experience, or more rightly to exhaust certain intrinsic tendencies so that they could start the evolutionary curve on a better and higher note.

The need for a particular intense experience appears to be the case with Rajeev, as the intensity of outer powerlessness indicates. Of course these things cannot be known unless one is acquainted with the person closely. And even then they may escape one's attention if one does not probe deep enough. Above all, there may still be many other inner causes. It is even doubtful if the conventional methods of science, limited as they are to the physical field of observation, can really throw light beyond the dark door.

The Fear of Death and the Four Methods of Conquering It

"Of all fears the most subtle and the most tenacious is the fear of death. It is deeply rooted in the subconscious and it is not easy to dislodge. It is obviously made up of several interwoven elements: the spirit of conservatism and the concern for self-preservation so as to ensure the continuity of consciousness, the recoil before the unknown, the uneasiness caused by the unexpected and the unforeseeable, and perhaps, behind all that, hidden in the depths of the cells, the instinct that death is not inevitable and that, if certain conditions are fulfilled, it can be conquered; although, as a matter of fact, fear in itself is one of the greatest obstacles to that conquest. For one cannot conquer what one fears, and one who fears death has already been conquered by it.

"How can one overcome this fear? Several methods can be used for this purpose. But first of all, a few fundamental notions are needed to help us in our endeavour. The first and most important point is to know that life is one and immortal. Only the forms are countless, fleeting and brittle. This knowledge must be securely and permanently established in the mind and one must identify one's consciousness as far as possible with the eternal life that is independent of every form, but which manifests in all forms. This gives the

indispensable psychological basis with which to confront the problem, for the problem remains. Even if the inner being is enlightened enough to be above all fear, the fear still remains hidden in the cells of the body, obscure, spontaneous, beyond the reach of reason, usually almost unconscious. It is in these obscure depths that one must find it out, seize hold of it and cast upon it the light of knowledge and certitude...

"The first method appeals to the reason. One can say that in the present state of the world, death is inevitable; a body that has taken birth will necessarily die one day or another, and in almost every case death comes when it must: one can neither hasten nor delay its hour... Reason teaches us that it is absurd to fear something that one cannot avoid. The only thing to do is to accept the idea of death and quietly do the best one can from day-to-day, from hour to hour, without worrying about what is going to happen. This process is very effective when it is used by intellectuals who are accustomed to act according to the laws of reason; but it would be less successful for emotional people who live in their feelings and let themselves be ruled by them. No doubt, these people should have recourse to the second method, the method of inner seeking. Beyond all the emotions, in the silent and tranquil depths of our being, there is a light shining constantly, the light of the psychic consciousness. Go in search of this light, concentrate on it; it is within you. With a persevering will you are sure to find it and as soon as you enter into it, you awake to the sense of immortality. You have always lived, you will always live; you become wholly independent of your body; your conscious existence does not depend on it; and this body is only one of the transient forms through which you have manifested. Death is no longer an extinction, it is only a transition. All fear instantly vanishes and you walk through life with the calm certitude of a free man.

"The third method is for those who have faith in a God, their God, and who have given themselves to him. They belong to him integrally; all the events of their lives are an expression of the divine will and they accept them not merely with calm submission but with gratitude, for they are convinced that whatever happens to them is always for their own good. They have a mystic trust in their God and in their personal relationship with him. They have made an absolute surrender of their will to his and feel his unvarying love and protection, wholly

independent of the accidents of life and death. They have the constant experience of lying at the feet of their Beloved in an absolute self-surrender or of being cradled in his arms and enjoying a perfect security. There is no longer any room in their consciousness for fear, anxiety or torment; all that has been replaced by a calm and delightful bliss.

“But not everyone has the good fortune of being a mystic. Finally, there are those who are born warriors. They cannot accept life as it is and they feel pulsating within them their right to immortality, an integral and earthly immortality. They possess a kind of intuitive knowledge that death is nothing but a bad habit; they seem to be born with the resolution to conquer it. But this conquest entails a desperate combat against an army of fierce and subtle assailants, a combat that has to be fought constantly, almost at every minute. Only one who has an indomitable spirit should attempt it. The battle has many fronts; it is waged on several planes that intermingle and complement each other... There is yet another way to conquer the fear of death, but it is within the reach of so few that it is mentioned here only as a matter of information. It is to enter into the domain of death deliberately and consciously while one is still alive, and then to return from this region and re-enter the physical body, resuming the course of material existence with full knowledge. But for that one must be an initiate.”²

Music for the Departing Soul

Does music help the departing soul in any way? We now know for instance the role of music in health and illness. Several studies indicate that the type of music we hear can help us recover or set in motion within us the forces of disease and disruption. But what about the extreme disruption that death itself is? We have in Greek mythology the interesting tale of Orpheus whose soul-stirring music following his beloved’s death moved even the king of Underworld Hades to give back to Orpheus his beloved. Was it just another myth or like all myths contains in its core the seed of a profound truth hidden from our earthbound sight?

² The Mother: *On Education*. CWM, Vol.12, pp. 82-87

There is also the tradition of chanting hymns and psalms and mantras in the East and West alike at the deathbed. Maria Parkes³ plays the harp for those who are near the gates of death. Involved intimately with hospice care for the terminally ill, she calls her role the end-of-life midwifery. Just as the traditional midwife delivers the body from the physical womb, Maria through her music assists and ensures the smooth delivery of the soul from the dark womb of matter onto its passage through the other worlds after death. Reproduced below is an extract of her interview in which she shares some of her experiences with us.

Q: Can we have a word about you as an introduction for our readers?

Well, I was born and brought up in the USA but have settled down in Spain. I have been coming to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram since 1971. My profession, music thanatology, is a field whose practitioners provide musical comfort, using harp, voice, and a special repertoire of music, at the bedside of patients near the end of life. In the music vigil itself, however, I do not let my personal faith interfere. As all of my fellow music thanatologists, we begin by becoming silent within as we observe the patient and try and feel what type of music might aid and give comfort. The music thanatologist needs to connect to their inner self and attune to the person's inner need at the moment. And then we begin. You see, it is important to understand that it is not a performance. If one takes it as a performance then it does not work. During the silence between musical offerings, applause or comment is discouraged. The patient and others present are simply asked beforehand to receive the music. The patient is of primary importance, but the family is also taken into account. It is recognized that the family members are experiencing grief, loss, change and a desire to support the patient. And they are encouraged to be present.

Q: How long have you been involved with this process of assisting the departure through music?

For nearly 10 years now, since 1994. I underwent more than two years of training at the only music thanatology school in the world, located in Missoula, Montana, USA. Since antiquity, music and medicine have a long tradition as allies in healing. Music

³ Maria Parkes and other music thanatologists can be contacted at: www.music-thanatologyassociation.com

Thanatology is a contemporary field rooted in that same tradition. It has developed over the last three decades through the vision and dedication of Therese Schroeder-Sheker. It is a rigorous program consisting of studies in medicine, harp, voice, medieval history, religion, and psychology.

Q: How did you get to know about it? Was it inborn, waiting to be discovered or did your interest awaken after some incident or chance meeting with someone?

Actually it all happened when I lost a friend in an accident. His death in the hospital lacked any warmth, beauty, or intimacy. I thought that there must be some better way of dying. And just about that time I learnt about this course. There were quite a few applicants and I happened to be among the lucky ones.

My teacher had an even more interesting story. While involved in the care of an exceptionally rough and difficult patient, she as if under an inner inspiration held the dying man and sang gently to him for nearly an hour. The person slowly became quiet and peacefully died in her arms. That turned her thinking about the role of music in relationship to the dying.

Q: Can you please enlighten us a little on this process of assisting the departure through music?

You see, it has a very interesting history. My teacher, Therese Schroeder-Sheker, told me that there existed a whole body of literature on this subject in the Latin world. Especially what we know now as the Gregorian chants were originally a collection of some of the finest hymns from the Western world as well as the East. These chants are in Latin and several were used in medieval times to soothe the soul in its passage through the other worlds.

In actual practice during the music vigil, we use a harp (usually a thirty one stringed instrument almost five feet high) and voice. There are preferably two of us who play from both sides of the patient, enveloping, or what could be described as bathing, the dying person with music, creating an atmosphere of serenity and beauty. I believe scientists have discovered something to the effect that one hears not only through the ears but also through the skin and the whole body. Hearing is, I believe, one of the last faculties to go which is why music plays a great role in the dying process. Whether conscious or comatose, hard of hearing or not, it can address physical and spiritual pain, restlessness, labored breathing, anxiety, sleeplessness, and

emotional distress. Even slow degenerative diseases such as ALS, multiple sclerosis, end-stage dementia and Alzheimer's are aided by music vigils. It also offers a transformative and helpful presence during the difficult experience of removing a patient from life support systems.

The music is termed 'prescriptive', that is, it is tailored to that particular patient's dying process. As to the type and technique, we prefer many chants without a fixed meter. And then it is a question of attunement. Depending upon where the person is in his or her process of dying, some respond better to short and simple melodies and others might need a musical whisper rather than a melody. I have seen a well-known concert pianist who refused with a gesture whenever someone tried to play taped classical music that she knew well. Perhaps she felt tied down by that and became immersed in memories. Whereas her 'being' really wanted to be free. But she responded very well to our simple music as it allowed her to go forward in her journey instead of becoming caught in the past.

Q: And how did you develop it? Is there some way to discover and develop this kind of music or does one rely on inspiration? More specifically would just any good, soulful music help or is there some specific type of music that is useful in this process?

It is both training and inspiration. There cannot be a fixed rule in this process. For each one it is different as I said. My teacher however used to be wary of recorded music. She never approved of it. It is like comparing a real painting to an image or photo of it. Something extra always comes when it is being played live. There is a greater connectivity. But then that may not be possible always. So one does with the next best alternative. We describe our music as being contemplative, drawing primarily on traditions of sacred song (Gregorian chants, hymns, prayer) and lullabies.

One of my personal favorites is a chant called *Ave Maris Stella*, written in France in 1100 AD. Although the monk wrote it well over a thousand years ago, one can still feel his great and genuine love for the Divine Mother through his words and the rhythm of his melody. For me, when I play and sing it, it is like praying to the Mother, so I can relate and connect to it much more personally.

Q: Do you have any views on the ancient practice of chanting incantations, hymns, psalms and mantras in the East and the West during the rituals following death?

I am sure the human voice and the sacred chants must have an effect. But then it should not be a performance and instead come from within. Although I like some mantras, I would not want some priest chant them mechanically for me when I need them.

Q: Could you please share with us some interesting incidents during the course of your sessions?

Oh! Plenty, I could narrate plenty of them. There was one vigil when I was playing for a lady who had been in a coma for quite some time. As I stopped for a while (we believe in alternating with sound and silence), she opened her eyes and asked why we had stopped playing the music! After a moment of shock on our part, we continued.

Another woman, the wife of a friend, had Alzheimer's and other problems and needed twenty-four hour care. She had not recognized anyone for over a year. Although she was not technically in the process of dying, I said that I would be happy to play for her. Her husband and daughter were present for the vigil. No sooner had I begun when she sat up, smiled, acknowledged her family and eagerly watched my hands on the harp with a huge smile on her face. She said little, but her family was able to connect with her again for over an hour before she again retreated into her own private world. I am happy to say that we repeated this vigil often, giving her and her family some final moments of communication.

The one that really struck me as exceptional was the case of the young boy who was on life support systems after being in a car accident. He was clinically dead with no brain function and the decision to remove him from life support systems had been made. The music continued to be played for his family and for the seemingly dead boy. And then after a moment, two tear drops rolled down his cheek as if the dead were listening.

On another occasion, while playing for a funeral, I distinctly heard another harpist and a voice singing. I looked around, totally surprised, expecting to see someone but there was no one playing or singing any music other than myself. Yet my experience was so very real it was like hearing me strike this tabletop.

These experiences are not only mine. All my colleagues have seen and heard so many small miracles that the music brings to the deathbed.

Q: What do you have to say to our euthanasia enthusiasts? Is it wise to cut prematurely the chord of life just because the person is seemingly irretrievably unconscious? From your account it seems that the unconscious is not really unconscious except to the outward eye. He is possibly somewhere awake in his depths waiting for some Maria to play an uplifting music to his soul!

Absolutely, I am not at all in favour of euthanasia. But then nowadays there are so many ways of prolonging life artificially, so I do not know, may be sometime people want to leave. But in general, I am against it.

Q: Have you noticed any difference in the believers and the non-believers in terms of their departure or at the time of their death?

You see, I have seen interesting things. Many persons who profess a belief do it ritualistically. I have seen regular church goers or even those professing faith in some Master show anxiety and fear of the unknown, asking 'why me?' Whereas I have seen some of the other types accept death so gracefully. A colleague of mine had the occasion to play for the head of a motorcycle gang who had lived, to say the least, a rather wild life. He gave up his body and welcomed death with serenity and peace. So there is something in our depths which is of much more importance than our superficial beliefs. That's all I can say.

Q: To sum it up, what would you recommend by way of assisting departure in the immediate period around death?

It is best to have a quiet atmosphere with family and friends around you. Of course I think that music helps enormously. But it is not for anyone. What I would suggest is that when one knows that they are terminally ill, to contemplate what you would like as a support for your last moments or days on earth. Do you want a special mantra, chant, or poem read? Is there some piece of music that you feel would support your journey out of this world? Is there someone you want present? This would be wonderful not only for the patient, but also it gives the loved ones remaining something to offer the dying. Everyone's birth is unique and so will be their death.

An Extraordinary Death

I returned to Pondicherry in the evening. Next morning I went to the daily balcony *darshan*. The Mother caught sight of me and smiled and kept looking at me for a long time. After this I went straight upstairs to see her. It was a lovely meeting, with the Mother looking deep and long into my eyes. I asked her if she would meet me for five or ten minutes alone in the course of the morning. She at once consented.

I had my interview at about 11:30. She was sitting in her chair with eyes half shut and I went and sat at her feet, placing my hands upon them. I asked her whether she had received the letter I had written after my Mamma's⁴ death, giving an account of what had happened and clearing up what I had considered as not quite understood. The Mother said:

"Yes, I got your letter, but it did not teach me anything I did not know. I had quite understood your earlier telegram and known exactly what had been happening. At the end of your letter you have asked me to tell you what took place on my side. I'll tell you.

"There was one thing of very special interest. When you first wrote to me about your Mamma, I put the decisive force which would make the soul's wish prevail. I found that your Mamma's condition began to improve. This showed that the soul had not wished to go. When I looked into the whole matter I found that she might linger on for a year or two, a long-drawn-out slow illness and not at all a pleasant period.

"Several days later, on getting news from you, I again did some working. Then I went to my room and while I was walking up and down a very extraordinary event happened. Suddenly the Supreme Will came down. You see, this Will does not always intervene. One puts forth consciousness but the Will does not act. It is rarely that the Will descends like this. It is a direct action from the Highest. Well, it came down with a view to take your Mamma's soul. And your Mamma's soul, instead of making any kind of reaction, most readily consented. Most willingly it offered itself to the Supreme Will. I would say that it was a very pretty gesture. Connected with the soul's movement, there was a human movement, a movement of love which said that she had troubled and

⁴ Mamma is the Hindi term for a mother.

bothered people enough with the illness and now wished not to trouble and bother them any more.

"Then the end came, and the soul at once, at a single sweep, jumped into my heart and passed into the Soul-World for rest. There was no passage at all through the intermediate worlds, no difficulty or halting anywhere. This was because the soul had so spontaneously and gladly responded to the Supreme Will. The Supreme Will took it straight to its destination."

I said: "Mamma was remembering you all the time. There was no name on her lips except yours. Whenever asked what she was thinking of, she said she was thinking of Mother darling. Even to the doctors she kept speaking of you, and your picture and Sri Aurobindo's were mostly on her chest."

"It must be because of this that her soul so readily gave itself to the Supreme."

"What about the open-eyed vision my sister Minnie saw?"

The Mother smiled, nodded and said: "One may say that it was in the right line. I remember reading of it in your letter. She saw my body transparent, didn't she?"

"Yes. I'm very glad at the beautiful thing that happened to Mamma at the end. What a fine end!"⁵

Wisdom from the Tibetan Book of the Dead

(The following are extracts taken from the Tibetan Book of the Dead, followed by the author's comments)

"The state of mind at the time of death is regarded as extremely important, because this plays a vital part in the situation one is reborn into. This is one reason why suicide is regarded in Buddhism as very unfortunate, because the state of mind of the person who commits suicide is usually depressed and negative and is likely to throw him into a lower rebirth. Also, it doesn't end the suffering, it just postpones it to another life."

⁵ Mother India, Nov. 1974 as noted in 'The Mother: Past-Present-Future' by Amal Kiran, pp. 106-107.

This is very similar to what is proscribed in other faiths. We shall see similar views of Hinduism on the above subject regarding the state of mind and the problem of suicide.

“When considering the spiritual care of the dying, it can be helpful to divide people into several different categories, because the category they are in will determine the most useful approach to use. These categories are: 1) whether the person is conscious or unconscious, and 2) whether they have a religious belief or not. In terms of the first category, if the person is conscious they can do the practices themselves or someone can assist them, but if they are unconscious someone has to do the practices for them. For the second category, if a person has specific religious beliefs, these can be utilised to help them. If they do not, they still need to be encouraged to have positive/virtuous thoughts at the time of death, such as reminding them of positive things they have done during their life.”

An extremely practical and helpful suggestion. Many of us as healthcare practitioners begin to contradict the person’s faith or try to impose our own. This only increases the conflict and anxiety level of the recipient. Being at the receiving end, he may nod a yes but this has little meaning since it is not supported by anything deeper. Such a faith has little power of effectiveness. Faith is a spontaneous thing, a thing of the soul and not of reason and argument. It will do well for the physician to respect the client’s faith and even use it to maximise the gains of counseling. Even if there is a need to widen the faith (and not replace it as we commonly try to do) it should be done gently, keeping in mind the unique past constitution of the patient and his aspirations for the future. Faith, like love, cannot be forced. It has to awaken from within or be inspired from without by a secret interchange between the patient’s soul and the physician’s.

“For a spiritual practitioner, it is helpful to encourage them to have thoughts such as love, compassion, remembering their spiritual teacher. It is beneficial also to have an image in the room of Jesus, Mary, Buddha, or some other spiritual figure that may have meaning for the dying person. It may be helpful for those who are with the dying person to say some prayers, recite mantras, etc. this could be silent or aloud, whatever seems most appropriate.”

Speaking of faith, the Mother mentions that for a whole year in Tlemcen⁶ in the early 1900's, she was busy creating a passage through the vital worlds for those who die so that anyone even with an iota of true faith can go through this painful passage in a state of protection and Grace. There are countless instances testified several times of her going into the inner worlds to help the departed. In fact it is part of the inner work taken by all genuine spiritual Masters to provide help not only as a guidance in this life but also a concrete protection in the lives hereafter including the interregnum passage of death. Here one must add that it is not only the faith in a particular outer form or figure but the inner faith and relation we put up, in other words, what the person means to us is of much more importance than the professed outer mechanical belief.

"However, one needs to be very sensitive to the needs of the dying person. The most important thing is to keep the mind of the person happy and calm. Nothing should be done (including certain spiritual practices) if this causes the person to be annoyed or irritated. There is a common conception that it is good to read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to the dying person, but if he/she is not familiar with the particular deities and practices contained in it, then this is not likely to prove very beneficial.

"Because the death process is so important, it is best not to disturb the dying person with noise or shows of emotion. Expressing attachment and clinging to the dying person can disturb the mind and therefore the death process, so it is more helpful to mentally let the person go, to encourage them to move on to the next life without fear. It is important not to deny death or to push it away, just to be with the dying person as fully and openly as possible, trying to have an open and deep sharing of the person's fear, pain, joy, love, etc."

We have here a further elaboration of what is written earlier. To ensure that the departure is in the best possible conditions is the task of those who are involved in the care of the dying. The Mother has especially emphasised the need to stay calm and direct a prayer and thoughts of love in favour of and on behalf of the person. Such prayers and thoughts act like a shield of protection for the departed soul. And also to

⁶ Tlemcen is a place in Algeria where the Mother spent some time discovering the deepest occult secrets and mysteries of life and death.

avoid grief and all its other forms that only increase the heaviness of the departed, make the journey painful and pull the soul earthward. It is for this reason also (besides the other inherent dangers involved) that planchettes and mediumistic séances are not advisable. It is seldom that the person summoned comes from the land of dead. Usually some other being or force of the vital world masquerades as the invited guest to have some fun at our expense (sometimes at quite an expense). These entities can read our feelings and wish and often communicate things favorable to our desires! A good number of such automatic phenomena are simply the product and creation of our own subconscious wishes and not an authentic brush with the other world.

“As mentioned previously, when a person is dying, their mind becomes much more subtle, and they are more open to receiving mental messages from those people close to them. So silent communication and prayer can be very helpful. It is not necessary to talk much. The dying person can be encouraged to let go into the light, into God’s love, etc. (again, this can be verbal or mental).

“It can be very helpful to encourage the dying person to use breathing meditation — to let go of the thoughts and concentrate on the movement of the breath. This can be helpful for developing calmness, for pain control, for acceptance, for removing fear. It can help the dying person to get in touch with their inner stillness and peace and come to terms with their death. This breathing technique can be especially useful when combined with a mantra, prayer, or affirmation (i.e. half on the in-breath, half on the out-breath).

“One of the Tibetan lamas, Sogyal Rinpoche, says that for up to about twenty-one days after a person dies they are more connected to the previous life than to the next one. So for this period in particular the loved ones can be encouraged to continue their (silent) communication with the deceased person — to say their good-byes, finish any unfinished business, reassure the dead person, encourage them to let go of their old life and to move on to the next one. It can be reassuring even just to talk to the dead person and at some level to know that they are probably receiving your message. The mind of the deceased person at this stage can still be subtle and receptive.

“For the more adept practitioners there is also the method of transference of consciousness at the time of death (Tibetan: po-wa). With training, at the time

of death, the practitioner can project his mind upwards from his heart centre through his crown directly to one of the Buddha pure realms, or at least to a higher rebirth. Someone who has perfected this training can also assist others at the time of death to project their mind to a good rebirth.”

It is said in the ancient scriptures that there are nine gates through which one can depart but the one most favoured and that which leads straight to some kind of a higher state is the departure through the crown. The yogis are known to draw the four lower breaths and merge it with the fifth one which is higher, and through a process of concentration release the whole thing through the crown. The Mother describes such a yogic departure while talking of X, (a well-known yogi in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram) as to how he could pump out each bit of his consciousness and project it straight into union with the Divine Mother, a rare feat of heroism and yogic concentration!

“It is believed that if the consciousness leaves the body of the dead person through the crown or from a higher part of the body, it is likely to result in a good type of rebirth. Conversely, if the consciousness leaves from a lower part of the body this is likely to result in rebirth in one of the lower realms. For this reason, when a person dies it is believed that the first part of the body that should be touched is the crown. The crown is located about eight finger widths (of the person being measured) back from the (original) hairline. To rub or tap this area or gently pull the crown hair after a person dies is regarded as very beneficial and may well help the person to obtain a higher rebirth. There are special blessed pills (po-wa pills) that can be placed on the crown after death which also facilitates this process.

“Once the consciousness has left the body (which, as mentioned earlier, can take up to three days) it doesn’t matter how the body is disposed of or handled (including the carrying out of a post-mortem examination) because in effect it has just become an empty shell. However, if the body is disposed off before the consciousness has left, this will obviously be very disturbing for the person who is going through the final stages of psychological dissolution.”

Here also the emphasis is on ‘once the consciousness leaves the body’. That is the crucial event. In other words, life and death are not like a switch on and switch off

phenomenon. That may be our sensory view but it is not the truth of things. There is an interval when the person is neither fully dead nor fully living. It is here that there is a role of both outer and inner human interventions. Beyond this it lies in the hands of spiritual and occult adepts who have mastered these domains.

“This raises the question of whether or not it is advisable to donate one’s organs after dying. The usual answer given by the Tibetan lamas to this question is that if the wish to donate one’s organs is done with the motivation of compassion, then any disturbance to the death process that this may cause is far outweighed by the positive karma that one is creating by this act of giving. It is another way in which one can die with a positive and compassionate mind.

“A Tibetan tradition which is becoming more popular in the West is to get part of the remains of the deceased (e.g. ashes, hair, nails) blessed and then put into statues, *tsa-tsas* (Buddha images made of clay or plaster) or *stupas* (reliquary monuments representing the Buddha’s body, speech and mind). These *stupas* for instance could be kept in the person’s home, larger ones could be erected in a memorial garden. Making offerings to these or circumambulating them and so on is regarded as highly meritorious, both for the person who has died and for the loved ones.”

The significance of relics of highly evolved persons is of course well-known. The body parts, or even the objects used and handled by such great yogis and mahatmas hold the vibrations and imprints of that Consciousness and can, if received with faith and receptivity impart it to those who worship them. Whether such a thing will be applicable to any other less meritorious or less evolved person is however suspect. In certain instances it may even be harmful for both by attracting to the earth forces of a lower order if that is what the person represented in his lifetime. The sword of a tyrant and oppressive king and the sword of a hero raised to protect the weak and oppressed obviously carry very different imprints. While our ordinary humanity cannot make out the difference, a yogi by feeling the sword will know its inner history and the type of psychological forces that used it.

The Kingdom Within

*There is a kingdom of the spirit's ease.
It is not in this helpless swirl of thought,
Foam from the world-sea or spray-whisper caught,
With which we build mind's shifting symmetries,
Nor in life's stuff of passionate unease,
Nor the heart's unsure emotions frailty wrought
Nor trivial clipped sense-joys soon led to nought,
Nor in this body's solid transiencies.*

*Wider behind than the vast universe
Our spirit scans the drama and the stir,
A peace, a light, an ecstasy, a power
Waiting at the end of blindness and the curse
That veils it from its ignorant minister
The grandeur of its free eternal hour.*

Meditations of Mandavya

*I will not faint, O God. There is the thirst,
And thirst supposes water somewhere. Yes,
But in this life we may not ever find;
Old nature sits a phantom by the way,
Old passions may forbid, old doubts return.
Then are there other lives here or beyond
To satisfy us? I will persist, O Lord.*

Sri Aurobindo

Beyond Death

Death – A Passage Through the Inner Worlds

Belief in any form of world other than our own has been common to all spiritual and religious traditions of humanity. While the eternal sceptic has continued to argue against its existence since the time of the Vedas and perhaps even before, it has not deterred others from believing in it. Some of course try to explain these other worlds as if these were material worlds existing in some other corner of the universe. Others have simply denied it without even giving a thought or investigating them. It is however probable that if these worlds exist then they would not be accessible to the methods of inquiry proper to investigating the material world.

Another domain (a qualitatively different one, that is to say) presupposes that there are other forms of substance-energy combinations than we currently know of. This assumption to begin with is certainly more open scientifically than the presumption that material reality is the sole reality. Physics today is facing this dilemma since many things and observations of this material universe cannot be satisfactorily explained if we treat the material world as the sole and closed reality. Reality escapes on both sides. There is a continuum of worlds interlacing with one another of which the material universe is only one in a series. Physics talks today of anti-matter or a dark matter, not sensed by us but existing nevertheless. Spiritual science talks about the sunlit and the sunless worlds of which our material world is a pale reflection and imperfect mixture. The Vedas speak about the seven earths or the seven principal forms of matter. Sri Aurobindo describes these different substance-energy states in great detail in the classic work *The Life Divine*, something that would make even the most stringent rationalist and the hardcore material scientist think again and perhaps open for him new horizons of self-discovery. The great epics of Milton and Homer and Dante, of Vyasa and Valmiki, the sublime genius of Shakespeare and Kalidasa, the magnificent tales of Odysseus, even the travels of Sindabad as narrated in the *Arabian nights*, the Puranas in Indian mythology, the abundant records left of the Sufis and other mystics strangely echo similarities despite being separated through large spaces of time and space. A most comprehensive and

exhaustive account of these several orders of the universe is found in Sri Aurobindo's magnum opus *Savitri*. This apart, the evidence comes from other sources as well such as the countless experiences of NDEs (near death experience), the experiences of the dark worlds that a psychotic undergoes, the rare visions of the clairvoyant occultist — these are all pointers to the existence of such worlds that we know not of in our waking outer consciousness. Yet unknown to our outer consciousness, they nevertheless influence our lives from within and around. It is only through death of the outer personality (which does not mean death of the body) that we have a chance of entering into these domains and pass through them to the beyond.

These inner domains have been divided by all mystics basically into two broad categories:

The Lower Hemisphere that is subject to time and death. This itself is further divided into worlds of matter, life and mind, arranged hierarchically, based on the degree of turbulence, greyness, crudeness, etc. into higher and lower worlds. Some of these worlds are objectively real, that is they are independent of human interference and have existed even before the advent of man. Others, like many of the heavens and hells, are objective creations of the human mind or else subjectively real and therefore dependent on the belief we put into them.

The Higher Hemisphere or the worlds of shadowless Light which are free from subjection to time and death. These are the worlds of Truth-Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. The soul normally transmigrates through the lower hemisphere till a certain line of its development is complete. Once it crosses the line and enters into the higher hemisphere then it is free and no more obliged to return, having escaped or transcended the domain of death. It can however still choose to come back for a specific work if it wishes to but the return thereafter is not obligatory.

The line dividing the lower from the higher hemisphere is talked of in the Upanishads as the golden lid covering the face of the sun. It is the Overmind¹ consciousness as described by Sri Aurobindo, the plane of the gods where the first shimmer of division starts. This has so far been the highest development possible for our earth-bound humanity.

¹ The plane from where differentiation starts, where the One Reality begins to definitively put on the appearance of many, just as light splits into a rainbow after passing out of the prism. It is the plane of the true gods from where vast but separate ideas originate.

Accordingly, there is after death or let us say after the fall of the body, a period of transit recognised in most spiritual and religious traditions. The period of this transit and the minor details may vary but most mystic and occult experiences confirm that the soul journeys through many zones and levels of consciousness. Each such level or station is a world in itself and the transiting soul may linger for a long or short period based upon its predilections, tendencies and affinities. The process is as follows:

While we are normally aware only of this physical body, occult experience confirms that we have other subtler bodies made up of the vibrations of our thoughts, emotions, impulses and desires. The physical body is made up of dense vibrations of our heavy and dull gross matter, therefore it is called the gross body. Beyond it are the subtle, vital, mental and etheric bodies; besides those still others that the yogi knows as his higher unchanging and imperishable self. These bodies are like so many coats wrapped around the pure and immaculate soul just as layers of clothing are wrapped around our physical body. When the physical body dies it is akin to the leaving behind of the outermost cloak. But life and consciousness continue in the other bodies that do not automatically dissolve by the dissolution of the gross body. There is a short or long time lag before that happens. During this intervening period the soul experiences the vibrations of the corresponding worlds through which it is transiting. The worlds closer to earth are naturally more painful especially if they are heavy with grief of those left behind. Grief is like a chain that drags behind the rising soul and creates an unhappy condition for it. Even though the physical body is worn out, the being continues to experience sorrow and happiness as may be the case, since the vital body through which we experience happiness and suffering continues to linger. It is this experience of the vital worlds for which the terms heaven and hell are usually ascribed. This can be a very ambiguous condition and delay the smooth transit. Most of the ceremonies and rites after death are meant to facilitate the transit through these painful vital worlds. The transit is especially very painful if it is through suicide. The soul in such cases may actually enter the darkest worlds of gloom and therefore this way of transit is considered the worst, the dark transit to the sunless worlds. The same difficult transit awaits those who have persisted in gross forms of ignorance, coercing perversely the soul or by a wrong dissolution of life in the body. The 'Isha Upanishad' warns,

असूर्या नाम ते लोका अन्धेन तमसावृताः।
ताँस्ते प्रेत्याभिगच्छन्ति ये के चात्महनो जनाः॥३॥

Sunless are those worlds and enveloped in blind gloom whereto all they in their passing hence resort who are slayers of their souls.²

Most religious traditions therefore give a warning injunction against suicide.

After the transit through the vital worlds, one enters the mental domain. It is also possible, as is recounted in the occult knowledge of Yoga-Vasistha and the last sections of the *Mahabharata*, that different parts of the now fragmented being no more held together by any central will, simultaneously exist upon different planes and go through different experiences in the vital and mental worlds. There is a great deal of plasticity in our inner life and no rigid rules can be made. Nevertheless, generally speaking, the next stop for the soul is in the mental worlds where it is washed free and divested of its coat of thoughts and ideas and only those are allowed to pass on to the deathless psychic worlds that have been organised around the soul and helped in its efflorescence or touched by its divinity. The rest are dissolved here including the memories and attachments that existed due to habitual association of earthly life.

Finally we pass on to the higher psychic worlds where we rest for a while so as to assimilate the experiences of this life. After a period of reconstituting sleep, the soul is ready for a new adventure and another experience for embodied life. It wakes up from its psychic repose so to say, during which it has forgotten by dissolution much of its past and only that which is needed for its onward journey remains, although altered in soul forms and no more available to the outer mind. It sees its need of a future life, the necessary experience that it must yet undergo, and based upon this inner knowledge projects itself once again into time and space. A new drama of earthly life begins again under a different form and name. Therefore, all attachments to this or that opinion, place and circumstances of our birth, are a kind of ignorance since we keep changing our country and clime, even as we keep changing our habits, customs, environment as well as the people around us. Yet nature uses this attachment for the purpose of its creative work so that we may stay focussed upon the field of our present life and action. It is through the experiences of life and not those of death that we develop in consciousness and progress godward towards Light and Truth and Force and Freedom and Love and Bliss. The experiences after death are mainly a working out of the experiences of life that has just ended, an exhaustion of certain things that we started here which yet continue by past momentum even after the

² Sri Aurobindo: *The Upanishads*, Isha Upanishad, Verse 3

body's death, an assimilation that may be used as material for a future life. The real progress however occurs during life and not in death.

Like in all things, as in life so also in death, our own state determines the experiences we go through. We are indeed the artists of our fate in life and in death through the states of our consciousness. Just as departing in a state of luminous joy and peace opens us to the higher worlds of light so also departing in a state of depression or pessimism projects us straight into the worlds of gloom and darkness.

It is this and not some arbitrary judge outside who writes our destiny. We are like transmitters and receivers and we receive those things to which we choose to attune ourselves. The worlds of darkness as well as the worlds of light are no doubt there but we walk into them out of our own choice. This is one of the great secrets that we are here to learn in life as well as in death.

Self-Experience after Death

Is there a self-experience after death? One thing is clear that there are no satisfactory answers to these questions as far as our traditional materialistic science is concerned. And whatever data exists through the collective experience of humanity (which in itself is abundant) is often shrouded by a sense of mystique mingled with fantasy and superstition. The result is truth mixed with fiction fed on the milk of individual belief. Mainstream science simply disregards the evidence as fiction of the mind but that explains nothing. To disregard the very evidence and to infer even without studying is to throw away the baby along with the bath water. Not that there have not been serious studies and authentic reports. There is more than enough material available in both the East and the West that has been studied with regard to what we term today as a paranormal activity. But the divide is still there. There are the believers who believe and would continue to believe even if they had no encounter with the paranormal in their lifetime. And equally there are those who will continue to disbelieve even in the face of mounting evidence and personal encounters. Here, more than in any other field, the adage truly applies that the eyes do not see what the mind does not know. Or perhaps our eyes conditioned to a small spectrum of seeing cannot see beyond the limits fixed for them by the mind. But thankfully, the limits of our sight are not the limits of light. And so too the limits of our thoughts are not the limits of truth! The following case summarises this attitudinal divide very succinctly. It is an

account selected from a TV programme on the History channel appearing on 11 January 2004 at eight o'clock in the evening IST. It is again a prototype story reported with variations several times over:

A family of four with husband, wife and two adolescent girls moved into a household in California State. Soon over the next few weeks, the girls started reporting that they felt there was someone else present in their room. The parents initially ignored the whole thing as an adjustment process to the new surroundings. But things began to happen, first in the kitchen, then in the bedroom and study and then everywhere else. There seemed to be a design and the work of an intelligent force behind the mischievous activities. The couple finally decided to consult a specialist studying such phenomena after a very important document went suddenly missing from the table and was later found in a most unlikely place, the box-yard. The ghost-busters as, they are called, went around the house with gadgets picking up signals and confirmed the presence of a poltergeist (disembodied spirits as they are called in the West). By chance certain photographs taken by the couple revealed a very misty appearance in some of the photographs. What more evidence could one want? But then comes the scientific bias. The psychologists interviewed for their comments simply brushed the whole data aside attributing it to disorganised adolescent behaviour. In other words, the two teenage girls were simply playing pranks. The events and occurrences, the record of paranormal activity, the story of a traumatic death in that house nearly a decade ago, the missing file and even the photo evidence was simply brushed aside in a single stroke! No doubt an ingenious way of explaining away the phenomenon but the eleven-year-old had the last dig when she commented on the remarks of the psychologists, "Well let them come and live here and then say the same thing!" Let's hope the psychologists are listening.

In our own life we undergo different types or rather levels of self-experience at different ages. There seems to be a subjective self in us which is largely independent of our physical bodies and outer conditions and circumstances, even though these may be partly responsible for shaping it. This subjective self-experience may itself be a composite of many different parts that experience the world quite differently since they are primarily holding different stations of consciousness. These many selves have been called in the ancient Indian traditions as the many *purushas* or beings who exist independent of the body and can be separated from it, through certain forms of intensive yoga or naturally after death. But apart from these there are many smaller

parts that are capable of a certain degree of independent existence and self-experience. The soul and its deputy ego hold this motley crowd together during life, very imperfectly and chaotically when underdeveloped, but with sovereign mastery and power when developed. These parts also disintegrate after death and each goes according to its innate affinity to its own natural aggregate. These conflicting parts come together in life for an evolutionary resolution. After death, the jarring elements leave the soul free of conflict but also therefore free of the evolutionary struggle. 'No conflict no change' seems to be one of the lessons of life, and of death.

In other words, our self-experience is not determined by the physical body, it is only to a certain extent limited by it. A classic proof of this came recently to light in the now well-known case of Iranian twins who shared identical genes and identical life experience. Why, perhaps they even had one neural basis since their heads were fused together and the brains linked with a thin strip of neurons! They wanted their heads to be separated. Not so much because of physical discomfort of two bodies held together but because they realised that they were two different persons. One wanted to study law, the other journalism. One had an affinity for one type of programme, the other for quite another. Even their physical habits were different. One gene, two beings; one brain, two persons! If that were so, it is only logical to presume that there is a self in us independent of the body. In that case, it is quite natural that the self will not die or vanish with the death of the body but continue to exist independent of it. The only difference will be that while now it experiences life and people through the material sheath and its limited senses, after death it will experience life and worlds and beings with other non-corporeal senses, the kind which take over in our body's sleep and which are methodically developed by the yogi. It is the body that dies, while the self travels in other sheaths and other bodies through other worlds!

The Question of Ghosts

Modern mind discourages such queries and there is some advantage in doing so. For is not our ignorance a kind of safety? But a greater safety is truth, not the half-truth mixed with superstition and imagination, but the full truth which accounts for everything and finds the right place for all human and other experiences of life. To deny a phenomenon is easy. Far more difficult is to discover and unite each piece of truth in the jigsaw puzzle of life. To deny blindly is as much of a dogma as a blind

acceptance. So let us try to see through the eyes of those who truly 'observe' since their vision is 'whole', of not just the gross material worlds but the worlds beyond and after.

"What do you mean by a ghost? The word 'ghost' as used in popular parlance covers an enormous number of distinct phenomena which have no necessary connection with each other. To name a few only:

- An actual contact with the soul of a human being in its subtle body and transcribed to our mind by the appearance of an image or the hearing of a voice.
- A mental formation stamped by the thoughts and feelings of a departed human being on the atmosphere of a place or locality, wandering about there or repeating itself, till that formation either exhausts itself or is dissolved by one means or another. This is the explanation of such phenomena as the haunted house in which the scenes attending or surrounding or preceding a murder are repeated over and over again and many other similar phenomena.
- A being of the lower vital planes who has assumed the discarded vital sheath of a departed human being or a fragment of his vital personality and appears and acts in the form and perhaps with the surface thoughts and memories of that person.
- A being of the lower vital plane who by the medium of a living human being or by some other means or agency is able to materialise itself sufficiently so as to appear and act in a visible form or speak with an audible voice or, without so appearing, to move about material things — furniture or to materialise objects or to shift them from place to place. This accounts for what are called poltergeists, phenomena of stone-throwing, tree-inhabiting *bhutas*, and other well-known phenomena.
- Apparitions which are the formations of one's own mind and take to the senses an objective appearance.
- Temporary possession of people by vital beings who sometimes pretend to be departed relatives, etc.

- Thought-images of themselves projected, often by people at the moment of death, which appear at that time or a few hours afterwards to their friends or relatives."³

A close look at these can help us classify them into the following categories:

Disembodied Beings

Also known as ghosts or poltergeists, these are entities created when a part of the vital is suddenly thrown out following the death of a person. Usually following an extremely violent or traumatic death, these elemental entities act in a repetitive manner around a small area of their influence with which they are conversant. They usually do not have much power to harm except that by inducing fear, they open the consciousness to other harmful influences. Some such elemental entities may even be helpful and there is a whole group of occultists who perform petty magic and miracles through the service of these disembodied entities. Normally, a strong disbelief in their existence, an extremely rational mind, and above all, a strong belief in God serves as a shield against whatever little influence they may exercise. These are not souls but only fragments, and bits and parts of universal vital nature that have come to assume a seemingly independent existence.

Mediumistic Trance, Séances and Possession

These are states wherein a human being comes under a temporary or lasting influence or possession of beings from the other worlds, usually the lower vital worlds. They are capable of real harm by using the human body and mind for their own vicious influences. Certain cases of hysteria, obsessively exaggerated love of a weak sentimental type, certain forms of epilepsies, insanities, suicide and drug abuse may well be linked to a strong influence or even a temporary possession from these darker worlds. The worst of this category is the rare incarnation of these beings into a human mould as in the case of Hitler for instance, whence their power of destruction goes far beyond normal limits. Seldom of course one finds positive influences or partial incarnations of a higher vital, as in the case of some painters and sculptors like Michael Angelo for instance who claimed to be inspired by a higher force before executing any work.

³ Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, pp. 459-60

Speaking of Hitler, it is known that he received intimations from a being of another world of a diabolical nature. This being would give him precise indications about the army placements often defying logic, nevertheless tactical moves that would surprise everybody by their success. This was a dark being whose work was to spread terror and cruelty and mass destruction in the most horrible way. It wanted to pollute the human consciousness, filling it with carnage and horror, thereby pushing the evolutionary force back by a few thousand years. It is well-known that when this being would possess Hitler he would go into a convulsion of sorts, writhing on the carpet, even trying to chew it, uttering seeming inanities, terrified and subdued, only to come out of it and take the most outlandish but accurate or perfectly cruel decisions of the gory war. The description fits into that of a classic seizure. Seizure yes, but what was the force seizing this man who had hardly any inner refinement, yet let loose such a state of war-frenzy? Contrast this with the possession of a higher kind in the case of Joan of Arc who fought against the worst odds, again defying logic but in this case to free the people of a nation, inspiring rare courage against tyranny among the weak and the oppressed.⁴

Phenomenon of the Double

This is usually an authentic record of soul-seeing or identification with it. Here one sees oneself outside the body, as if in another body. One can also get projected into another Time-Space domain and consciously experience other worlds. This 'seeing' is one of the most authentic experiences and leaves little doubt about the soul's existence. It is more real than the physical seeing and those who go through it find their self-view and world-view profoundly changed for the better.

Communication with the Departed

Is it possible to help the departed in some way? Can we reach out to them? Can they hear us or communicate with us? These questions often arise and vex the heart and mind of those who are left behind. It is especially so when the departure is sudden, unexpected and before the natural span of life is over. The answers differ from person to person. Thus while it is possible to help the departed through inner as well as occult means, it is not advisable to pull them towards earth through the ambiguous and risky

⁴ Refer to Appendix III: Beyond Death for words of the Mother on asuric possession.

means of planchette, automatic writings, mediumistic trances, etc. There are valid reasons for this.

Firstly, such practices do not necessarily put us in contact with the actual departed. The vital-physical world is full of numerous elemental entities which are drawn through this lower and ignorant form of occult probe. They may enter into the atmosphere and have fun by mimicking the departed and answering questions. Most of the time they are really answering our desires, by telling us what we *want* to hear.

Secondly, our mind may start playing tricks with us. For we have a subliminal mind that is more powerful than our surface, waking mind. This mind in collusion with the vital imagination and the subconscious parts in us can fabricate reality, giving us the illusion of having contacted the departed. While this may provide some temporary solace to those grieving, it may also create an illusory world and a pull towards it. As a result, a person who is caught unawares may feel a greater and greater urge to live in this make-believe world.

Finally, even if we were to contact the departed, as it is sometimes possible especially when they are close to the earth atmosphere, it only creates unnecessary pain for their being. It ties them helplessly down to the earth, thus preventing any further advance.

The dead do sometimes communicate with us in the initial period especially in dreams and through some gestures, final acts, etc. This is especially in the first few days of the departure. However, frequent dreams especially after long periods need not necessarily indicate a communication from the dead. More often than not, these are images arising from our subconscious mind where these impressions are stored.

At times, the departed can also help us. This is especially true of highly evolved souls who can stay consciously near the earth to help other beings, in life as well as after death. Liberated from the bonds of the body they may even exercise a strong influence or provide guidance to those who are dear to them. In this regard, the Mother has mentioned how a pair of hands of a developed musician would enter Her hands sometimes and play the piano through Her hands. In another story, an English football team lost their star player in an accident just before the league matches. The team knew that they could never make it in his absence. Nevertheless they dedicated the matches to him and went on to win the championship, much to everybody's surprise. Most of the team players believed that the departed star had in some way

helped them win, and some felt his presence during the game as if he was running with them and looked around to see if he was actually there!

Here is an answer given by the Mother to the question of whether the inner being continues to *progress after death*:

“That depends altogether upon the person. For everyone it is different. There are people for example, writers, musicians, artists — people who have lived on intellectual heights, who feel that they still have something further to do, that they have not finished what they had undertaken to do, have not reached the goal they had fixed for themselves, so they are ready to remain in the earth atmosphere as long as they can, with as much cohesiveness as possible and they try to manifest themselves and continue their progress in other human bodies... I have seen the very interesting case of a musician who was a pianist (a pianist of great worth), who had hands which were a marvel of skill, accuracy, precision, force, rapidity of movement, indeed, it was absolutely remarkable. This man died relatively young with the feeling that if he had continued to live he would have continued to progress in his musical expression. And such was the intensity of his aspiration that his subtle hands maintained their form without being dissolved, and each time he met anyone a little receptive and passive and a good musician, his hands would enter the hands of those who were playing — the person who was playing at the time could play well but in an ordinary way; but at that moment he became not merely a virtuoso but a wonderful artist during the time he played. It was the hands of the other that were making use of his. This is a phenomenon I know. I have seen the same thing in the case of a painter: it was also a matter of hands. The same thing with regard to some writers, and here it was the brain that kept quite a precise form and entered the brain of someone who was sufficiently receptive and suddenly made him write extraordinary things, infinitely more beautiful than anything he had written before. I saw that taking hold of someone. It was in the case of a composer of music — not one of those who execute, but who compose, like Beethoven, like Bach, like C’ Franck (but C’sar Franck executed also). The composition of music is an extremely cerebral activity. Well, here also the brain of a great musician came in contact with one who was engaged in writing an opera and made him compose wonderful things and arranged on paper all the parts. He was busy writing an

opera and it is extremely complex for the performers who have to bring out in the music the thought of the person who has composed; and that man (I knew him) when he received this formation had a blank paper before him and then he started writing; I saw him writing, putting lines, then some figures, on a big, very big page and when he reached the bottom, the orchestration of the Overture (for example, of a certain act) was completed (orchestration means the distribution of certain lines of music to each one of the instruments). And he was doing it simply on a paper, merely by this wonderful mental power. And it was not only his own: it was coming to him from a musical mind that incarnated in him... there were so many violins, so many cellos, so many altos, all the instruments: some were playing this, others playing that, yet others playing other things, sometimes all together, at other times one after another (it is very complicated, not a simple thing), well, there, while playing, hearing or even reading (sometimes he took the score and read it) he knew which notes had to be distributed to which instrument, which notes had to be played by another, and so on. And he had very clearly the feeling of something entering into him and helping him.

Q. Do these beings who want to manifest themselves keep the same desire when they are born once again?

No, it is not the same thing. It is not the whole being, it is the special faculty which remains in the earth atmosphere, does not leave it and go away, which remains in the earth atmosphere in order to continue manifesting itself. But the psychic being can very well return to the psychic world and it is the psychic being which takes a body again. I explained to you the other day that before leaving the physical body, the psychic being decides most often what its next rebirth will be, the environment in which it will take birth and what its occupation will be, because it needs a certain field for its experience. So it may happen that very big writers and very big musicians take birth another time in somebody quite imbecile. And you say: 'What! It is not possible!' Naturally it does not always happen like that, but it may. There was a case in which the contrary happened: it was a violin player... well, that man had most certainly in him a reincarnation of Beethoven. Not perhaps a reincarnation of his entire psychic being, but in any case, that of his musical capacity. He had the appearance, the head of Beethoven, I saw him, I heard him (I did not know him,

I knew nothing, I was at a concert in Paris and they were giving the concerto in D major), I saw him coming on the stage to play and I said: 'Strange! How much this man looks like Beethoven, he is the very portrait of Beethoven!' Then it just started with a stroke of the bow, three, four notes... everything changed, the atmosphere was changed. All became absolutely wonderful. Three notes started off with such power, such grandeur, so wonderful it was, nothing stirred, all waited. And he played that from beginning to end in an absolutely unique manner with an understanding I have not met with in any other executant. And then I saw that the musical genius of Beethoven was in him... but perhaps Beethoven's psychic being had taken body in a shoemaker or anybody else, one does not know! It wanted to have another kind of experience.

"For what I saw in this man was a formation belonging to an earthly plane, it was mental-vital; and as Beethoven had disciplined his whole mental, vital and physical being around his musical capacity, that had remained in form, it was a living thing, and had incarnated in that man, just as it was, but not necessarily Beethoven's psychic being. In his former life it was the psychic being of Beethoven that had shaped all those other beings, the psychic being that had disciplined them around musical creation; but after his death, it cannot at all be said whether the psychic being remained there; it must have returned to the psychic world as is the usual rule. That however had been formed, had its own life, independent and existing in itself. It was formed for a certain manifestation and it remained to manifest itself. And as soon as it found a fit instrument, it entered there to manifest itself."⁵

Coming back to the question of communication with the departed, it is a messy and mixed affair. What is preferable is for those who are left behind to help the departed. This can and should be done as a last act of love and acknowledgement. We can help by:

- Remembering the departed with love and peace.
- Praying for a safe and peaceful journey.

⁵ The Mother, CWM, Vol.5, pp. 260-263

- Creating an atmosphere of peace and light and strength in and around the house and in the persons left behind so that the being of the departed can find shelter for a while if it needs to.
- Avoiding all grief and excess sentimentalism which pulls the being to the earth, making it linger unnecessarily in the painful physical and vital atmosphere.
- Offering the being to the Divine who is by far the best guardian.

Heaven and Hell – Fact or Fiction?

Myths and legends in every religion describe the presence of these happy or gory worlds, at times in elaborate detail. The description is sometimes so precise as to what kind of hell or heaven one would go to for a particular good or bad deed. Philosophically the position of these hells and heavens is not very tenable except that they fortify our belief in a fair and just world where ultimately the offender will be punished and the virtuous rewarded. But strangely the punishment and the reward seem to be disconnected to our earthly life. For the wicked is punished much later in a hell that gives no moral satisfaction to the sufferer and anyway does not prevent or undo damage that is already done to life and living beings here on earth. There is also another paradox in the traditional popular belief (which is not necessarily a correct belief), a fallacious and almost mischievous logic or caprice of universal justice — the wicked is punished almost twice, first in a hell hereafter and next upon earth in a future life in the form of poverty or disease or some such earthly affliction. Such a justice may be the creation of a revengeful mind but certainly not that of one who is the heart and soul of Love. So too with the heavens for which one waits patiently to recompense in some other world for our earthly trials and long-suffering goodness.

We wonder if in a world made by God would we not prefer justice a little earlier and in a more visible manner?

It is here that we misread everything or at least read our own intentions into God's. This world was not created to manifest justice, though some sort of justice exists but certainly not as we understand it. This world is essentially a field for growth and progress of the soul and it grows as much through the bitterness of struggle, suffering and fall, as it does through the sweetness of pleasure and the lure of transient perishable things. The lesson in the end is the same. Secondly, justice is there for each

one and almost instantaneous, but unseen except by our soul. Truth is profounder than our highest ideals and subtler than our strongest sentiments. Its wisdom is incalculable and its steps certain. In short, the reward of a good deed is independent of the persons towards whom it is directed, independent of the deed itself but solely dependent on the consciousness. Thus a genuinely selfless act, even if unrecognized by others or even despised by men who invariably misread in others their own petty motives, brings a happy inner condition, a sense of lightness and gladness, even a growth in wisdom and compassion, which takes us a step towards our liberation from the case of our humanity. Similarly a selfish deed, even if it is an act of philanthropy or seemingly great and good in the world's eyes, clouds our consciousness, binds it to the outposts of cheap pleasures and pain, gives brief and petty satisfaction and is inevitably followed after by a recoil of bitterness, restlessness and inner unhappiness. And what worse punishment than this that it clouds our soul which is the source of all true happiness and peace and wisdom and joy? This goes on through lives till we learn the lesson that our true repose lies in discovering that immortal thing within us and not outside.

And this would be a fair justice indeed than this crude notion that the downfall of my opponent in front of my mortal eyes will make me feel happy over his pain as if he were someone else other than me, in another disguise. Or this that I become rich by my honesty and therefore become an even greater slave to the petty pleasures of life and the weakness that follows them. It could be that the sufferer will grow in high endurance, preparing in him a stronger base for the manifestation of greater powers as and when he is ready for them. The soul in us, the only element that is truly wise, may even choose difficulty and defeat, things from which the desire-self and surface mind shrink in horror, as a means of its ascension. That is the logic of universal justice, a push towards growth and not a blind and ignorant human notion of retribution. And what kind of growth would it be if I refrain from evil, not because of any inner change in me, not because I am no more attracted to it but because of fear of hell? And what kind of growth would it be if I do good deeds not because they come naturally to me but because I am selfishly allured to an exact and calculated reward in heaven? Thankfully God is much less of a judge and more of a lover who has all the love of the mother and the wisdom of the master even when he seems to smite us. Even if hell there be, He would not make it in wrath as a prison for justice but out of love as a home for reformation.

Nevertheless occult experience does confirm that there do exist in some vital or other planes of consciousness, states of heightened joy and suffering. These may be largely creations of our mind existing as an annex in the mental world, not things that are true in themselves but are rather created by the human mind, by its beliefs and impressions. These are not the highest or lowest states of consciousness either but intermediary worlds of cosmic ignorance. In all likelihood they have little to do with universal justice but exist as typical worlds in their own right and for a deeper purpose in God's play. Nevertheless, the soul may for a while after death pass through these worlds by an affinity of its member and consequently experience what they stand for. This passage especially through the dark and painful vital worlds is not mandatory and even a sinful man who has faith in the Divine would generally bypass it. Yet some with a very gross and dense consciousness may linger there for a little longer, periods that may seem like eternity. Fortunately one can say 'seem like', for an eternal hell would be an anathema to God and take away all hope from mankind.

"Hell and heaven are often imaginary states of the soul or rather of the vital which it constructs about it after its passing. What is meant by hell is a painful passage through the vital or lingering there, as for instance, in many cases of suicide where one remains surrounded by the forces of suffering and turmoil created by this unnatural and violent exit. There are, of course, also worlds of mind and vital worlds which are penetrated with joyful or dark experiences. One may pass through these as the result of things formed in the nature which create the necessary affinities, but the idea of reward or retribution is a crude and vulgar conception which is a mere popular error."⁶

The Return to Earth – Rebirth

*Not soon is God's delight in us completed,
Nor with one life we end;
Termlessly in us are our spirits seated
And termless joy intend.*

⁶ Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 437

*Our souls and heaven are of an equal stature
And have a dateless birth;
The unending seed, the infinite mould of Nature,
They were not made on earth,*

*Nor to the earth do they bequeath their ashes,
But in themselves they last.
An endless future brims beneath thy lashes,
Child of an endless past.⁷*

If life after death is a mystery and a controversy, then rebirth after death is a still greater mystery. Opinions are divided even though a large body of experience and logic both suggest the validity of rebirth. Mystic experience cutting beyond the confines of religion, and individual experiences of recorded cases point towards the truth of rebirth. There even exists a type of psychotherapy that probes into the past lives through hypnotic regression. It is based upon the belief that many of our unhealthy tendencies, especially fears are due to a carry-over from some real event in a past life. There may be a good deal of truth in it. An instance (one among many) is documented wherein the roots of fear in a young child were traced to his unnatural death during war in a previous life. Dr Brian L. Weiss has reported a number of cases where he could trace the roots of his patient's illness in some past life experience. Dr Weiss was caught unaware when one of his patients began recalling past life traumas that seemed to hold the key to her recurring nightmares and panic attacks. His scepticism diminished and ended altogether when she began to channel messages from 'the space between lives' which contained remarkable revelations about Dr Weiss's family including his dead son. Using past life therapy, he was able to cure the patient and embark on a new discovery. Some of his important works include *Many Lives, Many Masters, Messages from the Masters, Mirrors of Time*.

Whatever the individual claims to the effects of recovery, it is interesting to note that the roots of our present problem lie buried in our bygone past. The body goes to ashes but not the karma. For karma is not just a physical action but even more an energy and a consciousness-state that continues to exist for better or for worse

⁷ Sri Aurobindo: 'Rebirth', *Collected Poems*, p. 51

beyond our present formation of personality. Even death cannot destroy karma though it does exhaust (scavenge) many tendencies of a particular life.

Indeed if we admit the possibility of an after-life then the possibility of another life and yet another life becomes the natural logical consequence. For if there is a soul that is divine in essence then it will be preposterous to presume that this divine element descends into matter and upon earth accidentally, and, realising its mistake and the earthly drama as a bad joke, decides to quit. Or to take the religious viewpoint, it would be absurd to give the soul only a single chance for its final allocation in heaven and hell, without any previous experience to guide or a later chance to make amends! Such a doctrine would not only be a *reductio ad absurdum*⁸ but also take away all significance from the soul's embodied earthly existence, as if it was a mere testing ground where one takes the exams first and learns later. And even that later learning is of not much use since the soul will presumably never get another chance to apply it!

Such misinterpretation of scriptures and twisting of the words of the great Masters and Incarnations is done largely to instill fear among unripe minds and weak hearts. Through this fear one hopes to win adherents for the faith by saying that since one will never get another chance to prove or correct oneself, the only hope of salvation therefore is the grace of the founder god who will judge in our favour and plead on our behalf if we accept him as our master. Such playing upon the fear of mankind is not unique to any particular religion but has crept in one form or another in all faiths. Maybe it was deliberately introduced at some point to prevent too much indulgence in what religions call as sins. It is however doubtful if fear has any power to change people. At best it modifies only the surface, at worst it introduces a falsehood, deceit and cunning to the sin making it even worse. What was obviously coarse until now, comes nicely packaged, even for the unsuspecting.

Few things have done more harm in damaging, distorting and perverting the human consciousness than fear has, whether it be religious or otherwise. And if rebirth has a purpose then the purpose cannot be just a waking up from a bad dream since in that case, it had no business to go into the sleep of self-forgetfulness at all. Rebirth like birth and death itself is justified only if the adventure of life leads to something that the soul would miss by itself in its native (and so-called unfallen) divine state.

⁸ Original Latin: Disproof of a proposition by showing the absurdity of its inevitable conclusion.

Reward and punishment are a mistranslation in the human mind of a much deeper truth. A better way to look at it is as a learning process. But that too is incomplete since what is it that the soul is here to learn and know which it does not know already in its secret self? The distinction of wrong and right, good and bad, have their relative and practical value in our present state and stage of evolution. Yet they are not absolute or even the original truths. The Divine Consciousness is not a judge weighing scales now in one's favour, now in another's. In that Absolute Consciousness there is none other than the One and all are nothing else but the same eternal One and His forms and symbols. The soul is here to engage in the self-manifestation of the One. And it is in this process that it brings out now this form, now another, dissolves one imperfect creation to work out another more perfect one, abolishes one structure so as to erect another that is more plastic and robust, closer to the divine Truth and Light and Love and Harmony and Ananda. Life, death and rebirth are incidents in this half-told tale that is moving from a lesser to a greater degree of perfection. The soul is here essentially to grow towards this intended divine perfection, a feat impossible in one life given the material offered to it by nature. Reward and punishment is how the ignorant vital in us looks at it. Learning through experience is how our mind iridescent with a spiritual light obscurely understands. But to the soul it is always an opportunity for growth towards Perfection. All joy is for it an imperfect hint of some hidden Ananda that has become distorted in surface phenomenon and appearance. So also, all pain is for it a pointer of the imperfection of our delight and a preparation for a higher and more intense and fiercer Ananda yet to be born within us.

To fully understand the mystery of death and rebirth we need therefore to understand the mystery of life. And is not the mystery of life engraved in bold terms in its seeking and aspiration itself? In his awakened consciousness man innately aspires for terrestrial perfection, erects figures and symbol-realities of a higher and purer truth, searches after true love and unmixed bliss. He hopes to bring infinity down in finite terms. Is it vain chimera or a deeper possibility for which the whole adventure of space and time stands justified? And if the pursuit of terrestrial perfection is valid as is indicated by the concealed aspiration in man, then rebirth becomes the sole possible means to arrive at it. Nevertheless the issue of rebirth raises the following questions:

- Is there a rebirth at all? And who or what is reborn?
- What is the mechanism of rebirth?
- What is the purpose and significance of rebirth?

Mystic experience the world over affirms the existence of rebirth. Even some major religions that apparently deny rebirth, still admit some sort of an afterlife. It is also possible that the truths these founders revealed were not fully understood by the followers during their lifetime. This has happened to all religions without exception and only those religions could partially escape it where fresh experiences and influences from within were allowed to once again reproduce the realisation and rediscover its true form. Here again we find that the Sufis and the Christian mystics did affirm the presence of rebirth even though the main body of followers denied it. Whatever may be the case, as stated earlier the balance of experience tilts in favour of rebirth.

Scientific studies especially by the now well-known Dr. Raymond Moody and others who followed him all suggest the possibility of rebirth. Hundreds of case reports exist in scientific literature where there has been a genuine recall of a past life. But as with NDEs and other paranormal experiences, there are those who believe it and therefore accept and readily quote the scientific studies. There are also those who do not believe and therefore with equal vehemence refute them. As mentioned earlier, it is indeed doubtful that this debate can be resolved by the methods of a material science whose instruments are limited by the material paradigm. The only certain way is to develop the consciousness and experience the hidden worlds and all that lies there waiting to be discovered by oneself. That is the only certain way. After all we do not conduct studies to prove that we are living or walking on the road or sleeping and eating and talking and breathing and all the rest that appears so very natural and normal to us. The scientist would take my word if I said I am experiencing hunger because he too knows by experience that something like hunger exists but he would not listen if I were to say that I am experiencing love for God or Peace, since he may not have experienced either. Similarly when the experience of other worlds becomes normal to man and nothing is sealed from his awakened eye then there will be no doubt left since knowledge of other worlds will be as natural as living here. Till then man has to necessarily lean upon the staff of faith and rely on the data brought down to us by the scientists of the soul who have glimpsed the Beyond. The story given below is one of such authentic case reports. It is by Alexandra David Neel, the famous explorer of Tibet:

“Countless tales are told throughout Tibet about extraordinary proofs of memory from previous lives and wonders worked by young tulkus to testify

their identity. We find in them the habitual Tibetan mixture of superstition, cunning, comedy, and disconcerting events. I could relate dozens of them, but I prefer to confine myself to the relation of facts connected with people whom I have personally known.

"Next to the mansion of the Pegyai Lama, in which I lived at Kum-Bum, was the dwelling of a minor tulkus called Agnai Tsang. Seven years had elapsed since the death of the last master of the place and none had been able to discover the child in whom he had reincarnated. I do not think that the steward of the lama's household felt greatly afflicted by that circumstance. He managed the estate and seemed rather prosperous.

"Now it happened that in the course of a trading tour, he felt tired and thirsty and entered a farm to rest and drink. While the housewife made tea, the *nierpa* (steward) drew a jade snuffbox from his pocket and was about to take a pinch to snuff when a little boy who had been playing in a corner of the room stopped him and putting his small hand on the box asked reproachfully: 'Why do you use my snuff-box?'

"The steward was thunderstruck. Truly, the precious snuffbox was not his, but belonged to the departed Agnai Tsang, and though he had not perhaps exactly intended to steal it, yet he had taken possession of it.

"He remained there trembling while the boy looked at him as his face suddenly became grave and stern, with no longer anything childish about it.

"Give it back to me at once, it is mine," he said again. Stung with remorse, and at the same time terrified and bewildered, the monk could only fall on his knees and prostrate himself before his reincarnated master.

"A few days later, I saw the boy coming in state to his mansion. He wore a yellow brocade robe and rode a beautiful black pony, the *nierpa* holding the bridle.

"When the procession entered the house the boy remarked: 'Why do we turn to the left to reach the second courtyard? The gate is on our right side.'

"Now, for some reason, the gate on the right side had been walled up after the death of the lama and another one opened instead. The monks marvelled at this new proof of the authenticity of their lama and all proceeded to his private apartment where tea was to be served.

"The boy, seated on a pile of large hard cushions, looked at the cup with silver-gilt saucer and jewelled cover placed on the table before him. 'Give me the larger china cup,' he commanded. And he described one, mentioning the very pattern that decorated it.

"Nobody knew about such a cup, not even the steward, and the monks respectfully endeavoured to convince their young master that there was no cup of that kind in the house.

"It was at that moment that, taking advantage of an already long acquaintance with the *nierpa*, I entered the room. I had heard the snuffbox story and wished to see for myself my remarkable little new neighbour. I offered him the customary complimentary scarf and a few presents. These he received with a gracious smile but, apparently following the trend of his thoughts regarding the cup, he said: 'Look better, you will find it.'

"And suddenly, as if a flash of memory had dashed through his mind, he added explanations about a box painted in such a colour, which was in such a place in the storeroom. The monks had briefly informed me of what was going on and I waited with interest to see how things would turn out.

"Less than half an hour later, the set, cup, saucer and cover, was discovered in a casket that was at the bottom of the very box described by the boy. 'I did not know of the existence of that cup,' the steward told me later on. 'The lama himself, or my predecessor, must have put it in that box which did not contain anything else precious and had not been opened for years.'"⁹

⁹ Alexandra David Neel: *Reincarnation of Lamas*

The Return to Earth – Karma

The soul moves on from one body to another through the cycles of death and rebirth as do the karmas that stick as labels indicating the stage where we stand in our evolutionary journey. It is a kind of reminder of the things we have not yet experienced, steps we have not yet climbed. This label of karma goes and returns with us in the form of our true mental, the true vital, the true physical — the three *purushas* projected by the soul to front this world and relate with it. These three inner *purushas* are withdrawn inside the soul in its reconstituting sleep and put forward again with the new birth. The rest of our outer being is swallowed in the darkness of death.

“The soul gathers the essential elements of its experiences in life and makes that its basis of growth in the evolution; when it returns to birth it takes up with its mental, vital, physical sheaths so much of its Karma as is useful to it in the new life for further experience.

“There may be what seems to be retrograde movements but these are only like zigzag movements, not a real falling back, but a return on something not worked out so as to go on better afterwards. The soul does not go back to the animal condition; but a part of the vital personality may disjoin itself and join an animal birth to work out its animal propensities there.

“...the soul, the psychic being, once having reached the human consciousness cannot go back to the inferior animal consciousness any more than it can go back into a tree or an ephemeral insect. What is true is that some part of the vital energy or the formed instrumental consciousness or nature can and very frequently does so, if it is strongly attached to anything in the earth life. This may account for some cases of immediate rebirth with full memory in human forms also.

“Note that the idea of rebirth and the circumstances of the new life as a reward or punishment of *punya* or *pāpa* is a crude human idea of ‘justice’ which is quite unphilosophical and unspiritual and distorts the true intention of life. Life here is an evolution and the soul grows by experience, working out by it this or that in the nature, and if there is suffering, it is for the purpose of that working

out, not as a judgment inflicted by God or Cosmic Law on the errors or stumblings which are inevitable in the Ignorance."¹⁰

In other words, there is little truth in the popular notion that the soul having taken a human birth can revert back to the animal form. The logic is very simple. There is a certain correspondence between the inmost soul and the outer and inner nature. The nature of a form originates and is supported by the individual soul. As the soul grows within towards its own perfection, simultaneously our nature also feels the pressure and develops along certain lines. Having developed beyond a point the individual soul or the psychic being cannot be held by an inferior nature. It is like trying to make a well built adult fit into a child's clothing! The body and the form are instruments of the soul; the mental and vital nature its driving force. Karma and rebirth are means for the soul to develop. As the soul develops, it takes upon itself a better and higher nature. Of course this higher and better nature should not be confused with a brilliant intellect or a strong and robust vital (though these too may be there), but a certain sensitivity to truth and discrimination between the true and false light, an urge for higher, nobler things, a refinement of mind and heart, seeking for truth, beauty, harmony and good, and above all a certain degree of selflessness that marks out an inwardly developed being from an underdeveloped one. Moreover, this qualitative change is still not the end but goes further and further till one has found the very source of all beauty and truth and harmony and bliss and the ultimate eternal good. Thereafter, there is an unfolding happy progression to higher and higher degrees of the Infinite. Progression and not regression, as suggested by the populist notion of rebirth to lesser forms. While a temporary regression within a certain range of humanness is quite possible, a marked regression from the developed human to an animal would contradict the very logic of things. And like life and death, rebirth too is a machinery to assist the evolutionary process and not a crude system of reward and punishment. That may be our primitive human view since we like to see things according to our own nature, but that is not the Divine vision or plan. Such a God who is busy finding faults and punishing us will not be God but a human judge and perhaps hardly even that! *It is not Justice but Love and Grace that sustain this world and it is Love and not Justice that will save it.*

What exactly is the nature of this law of karma? In brief it consists of the following:

¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, pp. 433-434, 445, 441

Every action (action includes not only physical but also emotional, mental, psychological, moral, and spiritual action as well) has its corresponding effect upon the consciousness.

The repercussion of action is not so much physical as it is psychological. A good action has the effect of making our consciousness grow in light and inner happiness (and not necessarily in outer reward). Again, a bad action binds the consciousness, making it dense and heavy. In essence the effect is of liberating or clouding the inmost soul. Having said that, let it also be clear that there may also be physical consequences.

The law is therefore essentially evolutionary and not punitive as is commonly misunderstood. Of course evolution is not necessarily synonymous with success and certainly not with the self-glorifying vain success that we often term as God's reward for our good deeds! Evolution moves through pleasure and pain, joy and suffering, often more through apparent suffering than through apparent pleasure.

The law of karma also works at a collective level and may account for some of the collective tragedies that befall us. An army marches into another nation in one age but the roles are as if reversed in another epoch of time. In this regard, says Sri Aurobindo, "... every time we use soul-force we raise a great force of Karma against our adversary, the after-movements of which we have no power to control. Vasishtha uses soul-force against the military violence of Vishwamitra and armies of Huns and Shakas and Pallavas hurl themselves on the aggressor. The very quiescence and passivity of the spiritual man under violence and aggression awakens the tremendous forces of the world to a retributive action; and it may even be more merciful to stay in their path, though by force, those who represent evil than to allow them to trample on until they call down on themselves a worse destruction than we would ever think of inflicting."

In another example the great and renowned Greek historian Herodotus while describing the war between the Greeks and the Persians describes how the Persian king, Xeres, led his army into Greece, invading Thrace and Macedonia, mowing down the swift and bold Athenians as well as the brave and courageous Spartans. But destinies reversed as Themistocles began to rout the Persian invaders and following hard on their heels occupied Persian cities including the last stronghold of Sestos. Throughout the tremendous narrative we get a feeling of conviction which serves as a reminder, that above the battle grounds there broods the spirit of Nemesis, a law of Providence against which even powerful monarchs are rendered powerless.

Even in recent times, could it be said that the instance of the American war against the Taliban government of Afghanistan following in the wake of the mutilation of the silent Bamiyan Buddha was a similar reaction at some occult collective level? We may never be able to say. But there is certainly more than what is revealed to the human eye.

“The ordinary theories are too mechanical — and that is the case also with the idea of *punya* and *pāpa* and their results in the next life. There are certainly results of the energies put forth in a past life, but not on that rather infantile principle. A good man’s suffering in this life would be a proof according to the orthodox theory that he had been a very great villain in his past life, a bad man’s prospering would be a proof that he had been quite angelic in his last visit to earth and sown a large crop of virtues and meritorious actions to reap this bumper crop of good fortune. Too symmetrical to be true. The object of birth being growth by experience, whatever reactions come to past deeds must be for the being to learn and grow, not as lollipops for good boys of the class (in the past) and canings for the bad ones. The real sanction for good and ill is not good fortune for the one and bad fortune for the other, but this that good leads us towards a higher nature which is eventually lifted above suffering, and ill pulls us towards the lower nature which remains always in the circle of suffering and evil.”¹¹

Finally, karma and its consequences are a learning experience for the growing soul. But what kind of learning? Not just the practical form of learning that we know of, but even discovering the truth of life and things, and developing the power to handle life and the materials it offers better and better with a greater and greater knowledge. The soul chooses the consequence and not some arbitrary judge outside us and when the learning is over and it has gone beyond the elementary stage of karmic schooling, then the previous level of karma need not apply unless it still needs it for developing some side of its persona. That is why every spiritual man worth his name has insisted that Grace can cancel karma. The very fact of entering into and walking the spiritual path begins to change the consequence of our karma. In other words, things are not as rigid as we make them out to be. Nor are they as ridiculously absurd as paying back

¹¹ Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, pp. 444-45

the karmic debt incurred by accepting a friend's gift and therefore having to pay him back in another life, with compound interest of course! Thus seen, the law of karma no more appears as an unchangeable, fatalistic doctrine. In fact, and on the contrary, it means that our present karma can change our future (therefore also the consequences of the past) for the better, or else there will never be any hope or scope for evolution and the human soul would sink down soon after a few lives into eternal perdition.

The complexity of the karmic law arises from the fact that man himself is a complex entity and physical actions are never physical alone. There is almost invariably a mental intent, a belief or an attitude, a vital motive, an emotional impulse, even our overall psychological constitution, and who knows how many other seen and unseen cosmic forces that push us to commit deeds beyond our conscious thought. It is not just a simple mathematical equation or a mechanical law of cause and effect that we have made it to be. It is the soul within and no arbitrary judge sitting above, that sees and learns and grows using the material from its own buried past to go through tragedies and falls even as it knows the taste of happiness and success. In all likelihood, the law of karma is a self-learning process with the Supreme Master and Teacher within each one of us.

To restate the law of karma, we may note the following: Karma is all outgoing energy (not just physical but all kinds of emotional, instinctive, impulsive, thinking, moral and spiritual efforts and energy) with which we relate to this world. The nature of consequences serve as a reminder as well as a pointer (among other things) that the world is essentially unified, held in a chain of oneness. Karma is an evolutionary mechanism. The soul grows from life to life in its elements of divinity and divine possibilities through the experience that ensues through karma.

Thus karma is not a source of bondage. The source of bondage is Ignorance and Ego. The nature of karma is only a reflector of our inner state. Yet even if we were to stop all action, as happens in a catatonic schizophrenic or a person in prolonged coma, it would not liberate us since the knot is in our nature and not in the action as such. Karma is not the original cause of birth and it is not what compels the soul to pass through rebirth again and again. The soul enters into the cycle of rebirth for an evolutionary adventure, something which is not possible in its unmanifest state. And it will continue to do so until its evolutionary purpose is over.

Also, there is no inexorable law of karma. Karma and its consequences can be dissolved in three main ways:

- By *purushartha*, that is learning what the consequences are trying to teach us, or in other words going to a higher level of our evolution. To take a very physical example, if one is a smoker, he is liable to suffer its consequences in the form of disorders of lung and heart. But the man may stop smoking after some time due to an inner change or realisation. Or else he may begin to exercise positive will and thought against illness. Such a person by learning or taking help from a higher plane of consciousness (using positive mental thoughts to intervene in physical mechanisms) changes the course of karma, so that the physical consequences may be entirely eliminated.
- By *tapasya*, that is exercising an inner will in the direction of an inner change. The logic here is that the roots of karma are within the tangled forest of our nature. It is these roots which need to change and not just their outer manifestations. The real knot of the problem is in wrong attachment and egoistic pride or perhaps an undue sensitiveness. First that needs to be tackled to dissolve the link, for after that the consequences become redundant. Let's take the example of a robber. It is not enough for this robber to simply wake up one day and apologise for the harm done through him, unless it is accompanied by a genuine sense of change for the better. Such a drastic change may or may not happen in one life, and certainly not through the recourse of law. The propensity towards evil in such cases remains until it is gradually thinned out, its grip loosened in other lives, perhaps it is even turned to some good use and finally dissolved. Alternatively, the person may suddenly wake up to the need of a radical change due to some shock. Then the need for *tapasya* comes to shorten the course of karma and dissolve its effects. An example from mythology is the well-known conversion of Ratnakar the robber into Valmiki the seer and sage, in a single life, dissolving his karma through *tapasya*.
- By *kripa*, that is to say Grace can completely annul Karma. For that indeed is the highest secret. There is however one catch here. Grace is not a machinery dictated by any law. Yet one can open to it and ask for it in all sincerity. What is necessary here is an inner sincerity and faith. An inner sincerity which does not go on repeating the same mistake under the pretext of laziness of will and an inability or even an unwillingness to change. And an inner faith that spontaneously trusts the Divine Grace and whole-heartedly believes that the Divine will lift one out of all troubles and difficulties. Such an intrinsic faith when combined with the strength of an inner sincerity works miracles and wonders. It

not only dissolves the karma but also liberates us entirely from all karma forever by taking the burden of the soul's journey entirely upon itself.

Finally, cessation from the chain of karma and consequently the cycle of rebirth, called *mukti* or *moksha*, is not the goal. It is only a passage towards a higher evolution wherein a being that is free from Ego and Ignorance (and therefore of the chain of karma) continues to work and be consciously reborn so as to fulfill God's purpose in humanity, that is the establishment of a Truth-Creation rather than a creation of Ignorance upon earth.

Recollections of Past Life

"Recollections last only for a time, not till rebirth otherwise the stamp would be so strong that remembrance of past births, even after taking a new body, would be the rule rather than the exception.

"You say 'Relationships of one birth persist in successive births, the chances depending on the strength of the attachment'. This is possible, but not a law — as a rule the same relationship would not be constantly repeated — the same people often meet again and again on earth in different lives, but the relations are different. The purpose of rebirth would not be served if the same personality with the same relations and experiences are incessantly repeated."¹²

Recollections of past life have often been reported even by the most sceptical individuals and under the most unassuming circumstances. What we have to understand about these recollections of past lives is that memory (any memory for that matter) is a function of the state of consciousness. We recollect things best by reverting to the state of consciousness in which we experienced them. That is why it is sometimes so difficult to remember extremely painful events (unless under hypnosis) since the mind *does not want to* relive it. To relive is actually to recollect. But we live and experience life on several levels simultaneously. Therefore too there are several types of recollections. Of these the most rare are the recollections of the soul. The soul

¹² Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 435.

does not care so much about the outer details as about the essence of things. The mind and vital however get engaged more with outer details of an event since they live so completely projected outwards. Genuine soul memories therefore relate to some exceptional soulful moments and movements of our life and not necessarily of our outer personality and name unless these too participated in the soul's experience. What normally passes off as past life recollections are usually fragments of the vital or mental consciousness and its corresponding memory attaching itself to some person's consciousness through affinity, or even to one's own if the rebirth is very soon after death or before these formations get dissolved. Such rapid rebirth would however mean a relatively undeveloped consciousness with very few soul moments to assimilate. Most human beings would require a longer period of assimilative rest before a return to earth for any vital, emotional or mental memory to sustain itself.

Often this blotting out of the tablets of past memories is held as an argument against the existence of rebirth. We might as well say that we did not exist as a one-year-old since we do not remember much of it! But thank God we do not remember past lives! We do not realise what a grace this Ignorance is at times. Imagine handling the problems and attachments of past lives when we find ourselves so incompetent to handle the present itself. The law that makes us forget is a law of wisdom. It is another proof of the karmic law not being one of mere retribution. Nature makes us forget the past so that we may move into the future having gathered the *essence* of past experiences necessary for our evolution. Besides there are gaps in our consciousness and in our transit from one life to another, through one layer of consciousness to another, through one state of consciousness to another, and we tend to become oblivious of that which is left behind due to selective concentration. This happens in dreams as well. We forget our dreams except those that happened just close to our waking state. It is due to the gaps of consciousness during transit from one inner world to another. Interestingly the dream may repeat itself when in sleep we once again enter the same domain. All the same, we can recover the past memory through a special process of reverse concentration as is used in hypnotic regression therapies or by tearing the veils between different states and becoming conscious of the gaps as through yogic development.

"There is no rule of complete forgetfulness in the return of the soul to rebirth. There are, especially in childhood, many impressions of the past life which can be strong and vivid enough, but the materialising education and influence of

the environments prevent their true nature from being recognised. There are even a great number of people who have definite recollections of a past life. But these things are discouraged by education and the atmosphere and cannot remain or develop; in most cases they are stifled out of existence. At the same time it must be noted that what the psychic being carries away with it and brings back is ordinarily the essence of the experiences it had in former lives, and not the details so that you cannot expect the same memory as one has of the present existence... ordinarily, it is only by yogic development or by clairvoyance that the exact memory of past lives can be brought back."¹³

Thus, what is of real significance is not the outer details of our life but our inmost hopes and aspirations, what we deeply and truly aspired, worked and struggled for. The other and outer details have only a secondary significance. In fact, each part of us carries its own memories and it is possible for something of this to attach itself to the new formation. But by its very nature, the soul memories will be very few and they alone have the capacity to endure the tides of time. Linked with the immortal essence in us, they can outstrip death. The experience of soul memory is more as a soul state, a fleeting glimpse or an inmost feeling, beautiful and true, thrown up suddenly against the backdrop of some minor and incidental outer detail. The mind and vital catching upon that minor outer detail can well build up a romantic tale out of it. The real greatness however does not lie in our outer appearance but in our inmost aspiration, not as much in what we were or are in our outer self but much more in what we inwardly are and can become. The psychic being or the true individual soul in us is the repository of this authentic inner story, concealed often to our outer view but self-revealed and remembered by the inner eye.

What applies to the individual applies to nations and groups as well. Just like the individual, there are group souls that participate in a collective action and destiny. Born from age to age, under different forms and names, they take up the thread of the work left undone. Nations (collectivity of people in a certain clime and of a certain psychological type) are also born, rise high and then fall, only to rise again and resume the unfinished journey. The earth itself, according to the tradition of the *yugas* or cycles dies (since all upon it is destroyed) and is reborn. It then quickly recollects and gathers the past merits (and problems as well) to move further towards a new age.

¹³ Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, pp. 437, 445-46

"There is such a thing as *yugadharmā*, the right institutions and modes of action for the age in which we live. For action depends indeed on the force of knowledge or will that is to be used, but it depends, too, on the time, the place and the vessel. Institutions that are right in one age are not right in another. Replacing social system by social system, religion by religion, civilisation by civilisation, God is perpetually leading man onwards to loftier and more embracing manifestations of our human perfectibility. When in His cosmic circling movement, He establishes some stable worldwide harmony, that is man's *Satya Yuga*. When harmony falters, is maintained with difficulty, not in the nature of men, but by an accepted force or political instrument, that is his *Treta*. When the faltering becomes stumbling and the harmony has to be maintained at every step by a careful and laborious regulation, that is his *Dwapara*. When there is disintegration, and all descends in collapse and ruin, nothing can stay farther the cataclysm that is his Kali. This is the natural law of progress of all human ideas and institutions. It applies always in the mass, continually though less perfectly in the detail. One may almost say that each human religion, society, civilisation has its four Ages. For this movement is not only the most natural, but the most salutary. It is not a justification of pessimism nor a gospel of dumb fate and sorrowful annihilation. It is not, as we too often think in our attachment to the form, a melancholy law of decline and the vanity of all human achievements. If each *Satya* has its Kali, equally does each Kali prepare its *Satya*. That destruction was necessary for this creation, and the new harmony, when it is perfected, will be better than the old. But there is the weakness, there is the half success turning to failure, there is the discouragement, there is the loss of energy and faith which clouds our periods of disintegration, the apparent war, violence, ragging, tumult and trample to and fro which attends our periods of gradual creation and half-perfection. Therefore men cry out dismally and lament that all is perishing. But if they trusted in God's Love and Wisdom, not preferring to it their conservative and narrow notions, they would rather cry out that all is being reborn.

"So much depends on Time and God's immediate purpose that it is more important to seek out His purpose than to attach ourselves to our own nostrums. The *Kala Purusha*, Zeitgeist and Death Spirit, has risen to his

dreadful work — *lokakshayakritpravridhas* — increasing to destroy a world, and who shall stay the terror and mightiness and irresistibility of Him? But He is not only destroying the world that was, He is creating the world that shall be; it is therefore more profitable for us to discover and help what He is building than to lament and hug in our arms what He is destroying. But it is not easy to discover His drift, and we often admire too much temporary erections which are merely tents for the warriors in this Kurukshetra and take them for the permanent buildings of the future.

“The Pandits are therefore right when they make a difference between the practice of the Satya and the practice of the Kali. But in their application of this knowledge, they do not seem to me to be always wise or learned. They forget or do not know that Kali is the age for a destruction and rebirth, not for a desperate clinging to the old that can no longer be saved.”¹⁴

The Soul's Choice

The important thing to understand here is that it is not our outer personality that is reborn but our inmost soul. Our name and form in this life to which we are so attached is nothing more than an outer contrivance put up by the soul. The real person is within, the personality is a mere mask. The word *persona* in fact means just that — a mask. It is this inmost person that chooses the next formation of its personality and the environment it would like to be born in, the kind of parentage, the experience it needs, etc. It is the soul that chooses our next fate and not some arbitrary force. And unlike our ignorant personality which is always seeking for pleasure and success, the soul may well choose a difficult life if it feels that is what will ensure its progress. Thus the soul inhabiting a king's body may choose to be born as an ordinary man or a commoner in its next life.

After a long or short period of assimilative rest (depending upon whether the previous birth entailed few or many soul experiences), the soul decides about its next agenda and then waits for an opportune moment and appropriate circumstance (not with a mental knowledge but a soul-vision) to plunge again into the great

¹⁴ Sri Aurobindo: *Essays Divine and Human*, pp. 57-58

evolutionary adventure. And for its further experiences it uses as much of its accumulated energy of past experiences or karma stored in the true mental, true vital and true physical, all of which are part of the psychic being. A new tale begins, a greater climb under a different form and name.

“As regards the stage at which the soul returning for rebirth enters the new body no rule can be laid down, for the circumstances vary with the individual. Some psychic beings get into relation with the birth-environment and the parents from the time of conception and determine the preparation of the personality and future in the embryo, others join only at the time of delivery, others even later on in the life and in these cases it is some emanation of the psychic being which upholds the life. It should be noted that the conditions of the future birth are determined fundamentally not during the stay in the psychic world but at the time of death — the psychic being then chooses what it should work out in the next terrestrial appearance and the conditions arrange themselves accordingly...

“The psychic being’s choice at the time of death does not *work out* the next formation of personality, it *fixes* it. When it enters the psychic world, it begins to assimilate the essence of its experience and by that assimilation is formed the future psychic personality in accordance with the fixation already made. When this assimilation is over, it is ready for a new birth; but the less developed beings do not work out the whole thing for themselves, there are beings and forces of the higher world who have that work. Also, when it comes to birth, it is not sure that the forces of the physical world will not come across the working out of what it wanted — its own new instrumentation may not be strong enough for that purpose; for, there is the interaction of its own energies and the cosmic forces here. There may be frustration, diversion, a partial working out — many things may happen. All that is not a rigid machinery, it is a working out of complex forces. It may be added, however, that a developed psychic being is much more conscious in this transition and works out much of it itself. The time depends also on the development and on a certain rhythm of the being — for some there is practically immediate rebirth, for others it takes longer, for some it may take centuries; but here, again, once the psychic being

is sufficiently developed, it is free to choose its own rhythm and its own intervals."¹⁵

Life therefore is a real adventure where the only things certain are the Goal and the Guide but it is up to each one to choose the path for reaching it. As is the will and faith, so is the man and so is his destiny. It is in this deepest sense that we can say that man is his faith:

श्रद्धामयोऽयं पुरुषो यो यच्छ्रद्धः स एव सः ॥३॥

Whatever the nature of a man's faith, that is the type of man he is.¹⁶

The Guide is the inmost soul and the sure compass in us and not the outer superficial soul of desire that misguides. The whole mystery of life is solved when this inner guide is found and we can consciously listen to it. Till then life remains a slave to the outer circumstances and inner forces.

Our destiny is written in double terms. Most of us regard the theory of karma in very outward terms. That is to say the outer actions are given predominant importance and so also the outer consequences. But just as there is a large unseen dimension of karma (the inner motives, intentions, faith, thoughts, feelings, past links, present evolution, constitution, etc. — things unseen by man but marked by the gods) so also there is a large unseen dimension of inner consequences (like inner growth, maturity, development of strength, perseverance, determination, soul growth, etc.) that often run even in seeming contradiction to the observed outer consequences.¹⁷

"It is not the personality, the character that is of the first importance in rebirth — it is the psychic being who stands behind the evolution of the nature and evolves with it. The psychic when it departs from the body, shedding even the mental and vital on its way to its resting place, carries with it the heart of its experiences, — not the physical events, not the vital movements, not the mental buildings, not the capacities or characters, but something essential that it gathered from them, what might be called the divine element for the sake of

¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, pp. 440-41, 444.

¹⁶ The *Gita*: Ch. 17, Verse 3

¹⁷ Refer to Appendix III: Beyond Death for the story *A Dream*

which the rest existed. That is the permanent addition, it is that, that helps in the growth towards the Divine. That is why there is usually no memory of the outward events and circumstances of past lives — for this memory there must be a strong development towards unbroken continuance of the mind, the vital, even the subtle physical; for though it all remains in a kind of seed memory, it does not ordinarily emerge. What was the divine element in the magnanimity of the warrior, that which expressed itself in his loyalty, nobility, high courage, what was the divine element behind the harmonious mentality and generous vitality of the poet and expressed itself in them, that remains and in a new harmony of character may find a new expression or, if the life is turned towards the Divine, be taken up as powers for the realisation or for the work that has to be done for the Divine.”¹⁸

Death thus seen is a means to assimilate the experiences of a particular lifetime and work out the future, much like a strategist would plan out the next day’s war when the sun sets. Death is also the final anvil on which our being is tested. All that is linked to the Divine Truth survives and continues enhancing us with each life while all that was given to the ego and its childish desire is destroyed thankfully by the dark and ruthless god. Therefore is death also a great liberator and its experience sobering to the restless desire-soul in us. All eyes we may deceive, but not the eyes of death. For there in that grim and sombre night, only the light of the soul and all that has gathered around it can survive. The rest is eaten up and swallowed by the darkness and returns to the uncertain and ambiguous fields of our collective Ignorance.

The Cessation of the Cycle of Birth and Death

The Ideal of Mukti/ Salvation/ Nirvana/ Moksha

Life, seen from the surface appears as a ‘tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing.’¹⁹ Few can ever escape the sting of life which is also a sting of death. Death seems to put a final seal upon the futility of all human effort. So much has this surface orientation preoccupied the human mind that even mystics and saints

¹⁸ Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 452

¹⁹ Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V

have declared that the only real utility of human life is to somehow find a door of escape from this impermanent, unhappy world. Called *mukti* in India, salvation and nirvana elsewhere, the highest goal kept for the human soul so far has been a final cessation from the cycle of birth and death and rebirth. This philosophy is based upon an obvious error that sees human birth and creation as an unfortunate accident or else the work of a dark and diabolic power before which even God stands helpless! The only solution proposed therefore is to somehow find a permanent release from the clutches of this dark mystery of God. But we do not pause to think as to what is this dark mystery. Is it a veil that the One has put upon Himself by His own choice; is it a shadow of His castaway past? Or is it a dark intrusion that is even more powerful than the One Himself, a dual being forever separate who can never meet and reconcile, only oppose and mar each other's work? And what could possibly persuade the Almighty God to suffer a downfall or a veiling as if a captive of His own mystery. There is obviously an important link missing that we need to discover.

There is no easy answer but if it is God or the One Divine who created this universe and all else in it, then there must be a purpose in this dark mystery as well. The purpose cannot obviously be to terrorise people into seeking escape into some nirvana since then the very act of apparent bondage becomes absurd and meaningless! Were the souls not already free before creation? Then why allow a fall in the first place (if it is a fall at all) and then say, "I'm sorry, but this is a mistake. Nevertheless I will rectify it by sending my angels to help you come out of the dark void." Karma is obviously not the force compelling the soul to assume birth for in the beginning there was no karma, nor can a cessation of karma and of birth be the last word of creation. Omar Khayyam, the great mystic, questions this in a meaningful verse:

*O thou, who with pitfall and with gin,
beset the road I was to travel in,
Woulds't thou with predestination around,
impute me for my fall to sin.*

The Ideal of Divine Life and an Evolutionary Transformation

The answer comes from Sri Aurobindo. He affirms that life upon earth is not an unfortunate accident but a field of evolution of the soul and its manifestation in material terms. The cycles of death and rebirth serve a definitive purpose. This purpose is no doubt first and foremost, the growth of the individual soul within us.

Having thus grown through the varied experiences of many lives, the soul arrives at a great point of departure. It is fully formed and therefore it is free, free to decide whether it wants to come back upon earth or not. It is not compelled anymore to do so since the first purpose of the cycles of death and birth are over. However it can also choose another line of development or work upon earth. This work is the transmutation of earthly life into life divine. To this we can turn later. But when can it be said that the soul has arrived at its freedom and what exactly does this freedom mean? Is this freedom only for the exceptional few or is it a state to which all would eventually arrive one day and towards which all of us are inevitably moving? Here is the Mother's answer to this:

"The closer one is to the beginning of the formation, the closer are the reincarnations; and sometimes even, altogether at the lower level, when man is quite near the animal, it goes like this (*gesture*), that is, it is not unusual for people to reincarnate in the children of their children, like that, something like that, or just in the next generation. But this is always on a very primitive level of evolution, and the psychic being is not very conscious, it is in the state of formation. And as it becomes more developed, the reincarnations, as I said, are at a greater distance from one another. When the psychic being is fully developed, when it no longer needs to return to earth for its development, when it is absolutely free, it has the choice between no longer coming back to earth if it finds that its work lies elsewhere or if it prefers to remain in the purely psychic consciousness, without reincarnating; or else it can come when it wants, as it wants, where it wants, perfectly consciously. And there are those who have united with forces of a universal order and with entities of the Overmind or elsewhere, who remain all the time in the earth atmosphere and take on bodies successively for the work. This means that the moment the psychic being is completely formed and absolutely free — when it is completely formed it becomes absolutely free — it can do anything it likes, it depends on what it chooses; therefore one can't say, 'It will be like this, it will be like that'; it does exactly what it wants and it can even announce (that has happened), at the moment of the death of the body, what its next reincarnation will be and what it will do, and already choose what it is going to do. But before this state, which is not very frequent — it depends absolutely on the degree of development of the psychic and the hope formulated by the

integral consciousness of the being — there is still the mental, vital and physical consciousness, united with the psychic consciousness; so at that moment, the moment of death, the moment of leaving the body, it formulates a hope or an aspiration or a will, and usually this decides the future life.”²⁰

Life upon earth is therefore a field of growth, a great opportunity to progress, an opportunity that even the gods covet. Birth, death, rebirth, and all our struggle and pain, even deep disasters help us in this development, which for the most part takes place unconsciously (unconscious for the surface mind). A point however comes when this secret is known and the soul can then progress freely using every event and circumstance consciously as a means for its growth.

²⁰ The Mother: *CWM Vol. 7*, 16 March 1955, pp. 86-87

Appendix III: Beyond Death

Possession by the Asura

"The death of Stalin (unfortunately not any more than the death of Hitler) has not changed the present state of the world. Something more than that would be necessary. For this is like the assassin who is guillotined: when his head is cut off, his spirit remains behind and is projected outside him. It is a vital formation and it goes and takes shelter in one of the benevolent spectators, who suddenly feels a criminal instinct in himself. There are many men like that, specially very young criminals who when questioned have acknowledged this. They have been asked: 'When did this desire to kill come to you?' and the frequent reply is: 'It got hold of me when I saw so-and-so executed.'

"So, this is of no use, the death of this one or that other. That does not help very much — the thing goes elsewhere. It is only one form. It is as though you did something very wicked with a particular shirt on and then threw away your shirt and said: 'Now, I shall no longer do harm.' You continue with another shirt on!

"If life has been converted into death, why doesn't it itself die? Because it protects itself well. What you say is quite true, but it takes good care not to incarnate on earth. And in the vital world there is no death, it does not exist there. It is in the material world that this exists, and it takes very good care not to incarnate.

"Was Stalin predestined to be what he was? Stalin? I am not quite sure that he was a human being... in the sense that I don't think he had a psychic being. Or perhaps he did have one — in all matter, in every atom there is a divine centre — but I mean a conscious psychic being, formed, individualised. I don't think so. I believe it was a direct incarnation of a being of the vital world. And that was the great difference between him and Hitler. Hitler was simply a man, and as a man he was very weak-minded, very sentimental, he had the conscience of a petty workman (some said of a petty shoe-maker), in any case of a little

workman or a little school-master, something like that, a very small conscience, and extremely sentimental, what is called in French 'fleur bleue', very weak.

"But he was possessed. He was rather mediocre by nature, very mediocre. He was a medium, a very good medium — the thing took hold of him, besides, during spiritism séances. It was at that moment that he was seized by those fits which were described as epileptic. They were not epileptic: they were attacks of possession. It was thus that he had a kind of power, which however was not very great. But when he wanted to know some thing from that power, he went away to his castle, and there, in 'meditation', there truly he invoked very intensely what he called his 'god', his supreme god, who was the Lord of the Nations. And everything seemed to him magnificent. It was a being... it was small — it appeared to him all in silver armour, with a silver helmet and golden plume! It was magnificent! And a light so dazzling that hardly could the eyes see and bear that blaze. Naturally it did not appear physically — Hitler was a medium, he saw. He had a sort of clairvoyance. And it was at such times that he had his fits: he rolled on the ground, he drivelled, bit the carpet, it was frightful, the state he was in. The people around him knew it. Well, that being is the 'Lord of the Nations'. And it is not even the Lord of the Nations in its origin, it is an emanation of the Lord of the Nations, and a very powerful emanation."¹

A Dream

(A story that deals with the subtlety of the karmic law in a manner that would make it comprehensible even to a child. Karmic law is not so much about outer rewards and outer punishments for outer deeds but more about the state of our consciousness and its effect upon our being. Original by Sri Aurobindo in Bengali. Translation from Bengali by Arindam Basu.)

A poor man sat in his dark room and thought of his miserable plight and of the wrongs and injustices in the kingdom of God. Overcome by *abhimān*² he spoke thus:

¹ The Mother: CWM, Vol. 5, pp. 377-79.

² This Bengali word cannot be translated. It means hurt pride and grief mixed with resentment against somebody from whom one expects love and better treatment. — Translator's note.

“People give the excuse of the Law of Karma to save the good name of God. If my present miserable existence is the result of the sins of my last life, if I was really such a great sinner, then the current of evil thoughts would still flow in my mind, the mind of a great sinner cannot become pure in a day. And take the case of Tinkori Shil; if the Law of Karma was true, then, considering his wealth, treasure, gold and silver, retinue of servants, he must have been in his previous incarnation a world-famous holy saint; but one does not see the slightest indication of that now in his present life. There is no one in the world who is more cruel, wicked and evil. No, the Law of Karma is a ruse of God, a doctrine to dupe the minds of men. Shyamsundar is the cleverest of the clever, he is safe because he does not come anywhere near me — otherwise I would have taught him a good lesson and exposed all his tricks.” No sooner had the poor man said these words than he saw his dark room flooded with waves of very bright light. A moment later the waves of light disappeared in the darkness and he saw a very beautiful, dark-hued boy standing in front of him with a lamp in his hand, smiling gently, but not saying anything. As he saw peacock-feathers on his head and bells on his feet, the poor man realised that Shyamsundar himself had come and given himself up to him. Embarrassed, he thought for a moment of falling at his feet, but he did not feel like doing so at all when he saw the boy’s smiling face. At last he blurted out, “Hey, Keshta³, why have you come?” “Why, didn’t you call me?” said the boy, smiling. “Just now you had such a strong desire to whip me, well, I’ve given myself up. Why don’t you get up and lash me?” The poor man felt more embarrassed, not due to any remorse for wishing to whip the Divine, but to chastise such a handsome boy in return for his love did not seem to be in good taste. “Look, Harimohan,” the boy spoke again, “those who are not afraid of me, regard me as their friend, even call me names but out of affection and wish to play with me, are very dear to me. I have created this world for the sake of play and have been always looking for playmates but don’t find any. Everyone becomes cross with me, makes demands on me, asks me for gifts, position, liberation, devotion, but alas! nobody wants me for my sake. I give what people want. What can I do but satisfy them or they’ll tear me to pieces. I see that you also want something. Being cross you want to whip someone and have summoned me to gratify that desire. I’ve come to take the lashings of your whip, *ye yatha mam prapadyante*, ‘in

³ A colloquial form of the word Krishna.

whichever way one approaches me.' But if you wish to hear about it before you beat me up, I will explain to you my method.

"Well, do you agree?" "Can you really?" asked Harimohan, "I see you've the gift of the gab, but why should I believe that a young immature boy like you can teach me anything?" "Come, see if I can," replied the boy smilingly.

Having said that, Sri Krishna touched Harimohan's head. Immediately electric currents began to spread through the whole body of the poor man; the Kundalini power, normally asleep at the base of the spine, shot up to the crown of his head in the form of a fiery serpent hissing loudly and his brain became filled with waves of vital force. The very next moment the walls of the room around Harimohan seemed to recede into the distance, the world of names and forms abandoning him, became unmanifest as it were in the Infinite. Harimohan lost his normal consciousness. When he came to, he found himself standing with the boy in a strange house and saw in front of him an old man sitting on a mattress, absorbed in deep thought. On seeing that face contorted by worries and grief-stricken, hopeless and sad, Harimohan just could not believe that it really was that of Tinkori Shil, the most powerful and leading man in the village. At last, full of fear, he asked the boy, "Oh Keshta, what have you done, sneaked like a thief into someone else's house? The police will come and thrash our lives out of us with a severe beating. Don't you know the might of Tinkori Shil?" "Very well, indeed," smiled back the boy, "but stealing is an old occupation of mine. I am on intimate terms with the police. There is nothing to fear. Now I am giving you subtle sight, look into the old man's mind. You know Tinkori's might, now see my power too." Then Harimohan could see into Tinkori's mind. He saw that it was like a rich city destroyed by enemy attack, so many goblins and demons of terrifying shapes entered that keen, powerful intellect and destroyed its peace, broke up its concentration and robbed it of its happiness. The old man had quarrelled with his favourite youngest son and driven him out; losing his beloved son born in his old age, he was overcome with grief, yet anger, pride, hypocrisy were sitting as sentries barring the door of his heart and denying entry to forgiveness there. Stories about the bad moral character of his daughter had been circulated; the old man was weeping after having hounded her out of his home; he knew that she was innocent but the fear of society and public opinion, vanity and his own selfish interests were stifling his love. The memory of a thousand sins made him shudder with fear, yet he lacked the courage and the power to purify those evil tendencies. From time to time the thought

of death and of the next life frightened him terribly. Harimohan saw that from behind the thoughts of death, fearsome messengers of Yama⁴ were peeping and knocking at his door. Every time there was such a knock the old man's inner being screamed, mad with fear. Witnessing this terrible scene Harimohan turned towards the boy with trepidation and said, "Goodness, what is this Keshta? I thought the old man was supremely happy." "That is my power," replied the boy, "tell me, now, whose power is the greater, Tinkori Shil's of the next district or Sri Krishna's who lives in Vaikuntha? Look, Harimohan, I too have police and sentries, government, law and judicial trials. I can also play like a king. Do you like this game?" "Good Lord, no," said Harimohan. "This is a very bad game, do you enjoy it?"

The boy replied, smiling, "I like all kinds of play. I like to whip, also to be whipped." "Look Harimohan," he continued, "people like you see only the surface of things and have not yet developed the subtle sight to see their inner truth. That is why you say that Tinkori is happy and you are miserable. This man has no material want and yet how much more is this millionaire suffering. Can *you* say why? Happiness is a state of the mind, so is suffering. Happiness and suffering are simply modifications of the mind. He who has got nothing and whose only asset is misfortune can be very happy even in the midst of danger. Notice also that just as you are not getting any satisfaction out of spending your days in acquiring dry merit and are always thinking of suffering, so also is this man doing the same, living out his days in dry demerit. That is why there is momentary happiness resulting from virtue and temporary unhappiness issuing from sin, and vice versa. There is no real joy in this conflict. I've got the picture of an abode of bliss; he who comes to me, falls in love with me, seeks me, puts pressure on me, even persecutes me, he gets from me by force as it were the picture of joy." Harimohan listened eagerly to Sri Krishna's words. The boy spoke again. "Understand this too, Harimohan, dry merit has become for you devoid of the sap of joy, yet you can't resist the power of its impressions, nor can you conquer that petty egoism. For the old man dry demerit has similarly become joyful, yet, being unable to renounce it because of the force of its impressions, he is suffering Hell in this life. This is called the bondage of virtue and vice. Unconscious impressions born of Ignorance are the chains of this bondage. But this terrible suffering is really very good for the old man because this will lead to his salvation and true welfare."

⁴ The God of Death.

“Keshta, you speak very sweetly,” said Harimohan, who was till now listening very quietly, “but I can’t really believe you. Pleasure and pain may be only states of the mind, but surely external conditions are their causes. Look, when someone’s mind is very distressed by hunger, can he be happy? Or can anyone think of you when he is suffering from disease or pain?” “Come, Harimohan,” said the boy, “I will show you that too.” Saying this, the boy again touched Harimohan’s head. As soon as he felt the touch Harimohan no longer saw Tinkori Shil’s house but a *sannyasi*⁵ seated absorbed in meditation, a large tiger lying at his feet like a guard, on the solitary, beautiful peak of a mountain, with a pleasant breeze blowing there. Harimohan’s legs, when he saw the tiger, refused to budge, but the boy dragged him near the *sannyasi*. Harimohan, unable to resist the boy’s strength, had willy-nilly to go. The boy said, “Harimohan, see.” Harimohan looked and saw the mind of the *sannyasi* like an open exercise book with the name ‘Sri Krishna’ written a thousand times on each of its pages. The *sannyasi*, having crossed the great gate of *nirvikalpa-samadhi*⁶, was sporting with Sri Krishna in the light of the supernal Sun. He also saw that the *sannyasi* had been starving for quite a few days and his body had suffered a lot during the previous couple of days from hunger and thirst. “What is this, Keshta?” asked Harimohan, “the saint loves you so much and yet he is suffering from lack of food and drink. Haven’t you any sense at all? Who will give him food in this forest infested by tigers?” “I will,” replied the boy, “but see another amusing thing.” Harimohan saw the tiger get up and break open a nearby ant-heap with a single stroke of a paw. Hundreds of small ants came out and climbing up the *sannyasi*’s body started biting him in anger. He was still absorbed in deep meditation, unperturbed, perfectly still. Then the boy sweetly whispered into his ears just once, “My friend!” The *sannyasi* opened his eyes. At first he did not feel the stinging bites, for the notes of Krishna’s flute — captivating, and cherished by the whole world — were still sounding in his ears as they had done in Radha’s ears in Vrindavan. After a while as a result of the constant bitings, his consciousness was drawn towards the body. He still did not move but full of surprise, thought, “How is it? this kind of thing never happens to me. No matter, Sri Krishna is sporting with me and biting me as a battalion of small ants.” Harimohan saw that the pain from the ant-bites was no longer affecting the saint’s mind, and that, feeling intense physical ecstasy after each bite, he sang the name of Krishna and danced,

⁵ One who has renounced all for the sake of spiritual liberation.

⁶ Yoga-trance in which all mental modifications are completely restricted.

clapping his hands in great joy. The ants dropped on the ground and fled. Astonished, Harimohan asked, "What kind of magic is this?" The boy also clapped his hands and turning twice on one leg laughed out loudly, "I am the only Magician in the whole universe. You will not understand this magic, it is my supreme secret. And did you notice? He could remember me even in the midst of such physical pain. And now see again." The *sannyasi* sat down again, calm and serene. His body still experienced hunger and thirst but Harimohan saw that his mind only felt those physical reactions but was not disturbed by or involved in them. Just then someone called out from the hill in a voice sweet as a flute, "Friend!" Harimohan was startled; it was indeed the voice, sweet as a flute, of Shyamsundar himself. Then he saw a beautiful, dark-hued boy come from behind the big rocks with a plate of excellent food and fruits. Harimohan, utterly confused, looked at Sri Krishna. The boy still stood beside him, yet the other boy who was approaching was exactly like Sri Krishna. The boy held up the lamp before the saint and shed light on the plate and said, "See what I have brought." "So you have come," smiled the saint. "Why did you keep me starving for so long? However, now that you have come, sit down, eat with me." The saint and the boy started eating from the dish, offered food to each other and also playfully snatched it away from each other. When they finished their meal, the boy disappeared into the darkness with the plate.

Harimohan was about to ask something but he suddenly noticed that neither Sri Krishna nor the *sannyasi* was there, nor the tiger nor the mountain. He was living in a respectable neighbourhood with his wife and family, was very rich, gave gifts to Brahmins and to the poor daily, and said his *sandhya* prayers thrice a day following the code of conduct laid down in the scriptures and shown by Raghunandan. In fact, he was leading the life of an ideal husband, father and son. But at the same time, he was shocked to find that there was not the slightest neighbourliness or joy of living among the residents of that respectable district, that they considered the mechanical observance of the external rules of conduct as spiritual merit. He was now as miserable as he had been happy a moment ago. He seemed to feel very thirsty but could not get a drop of water; in fact he was eating dust, only dust, endless dust. Leaving that place hurriedly he went to another part of the town. There he saw in front of a huge mansion a big crowd from whom a paean of blessings arose. Harimohan went forward and found that Tinkori Shil was sitting in the verandah and distributing a large amount of money to the people assembled there, no one was going back disappointed. Harimohan laughed out loudly and thought, "Is this a dream? Tinkori

Shil a great philanthropist!" Then he could see Tinkori's mind, and realised that greed, jealousy, ambition, desire, selfishness and a thousand other frustrations and evil tendencies were clamouring: "Give, give, satisfy us!" Tinkori had suppressed them for the sake of gaining moral merit, fame and pride, left them unfulfilled and had not driven them out of his mind. Just then someone took Harimohan for a hurried tour of the other worlds. He saw the hells and the heavens of the Hindus, Moslems, Greeks, Christians and so many others. Then he found himself again in his own house, sitting in the familiar torn mattress and leaning on a dirty pillow and Shyamsundar standing in front of him. The boy said, "It's very late at night, if I don't go home now, everyone will tell me off and chastise me. So let me tell you something in brief. The hells and heavens you saw were all of the dream world, imaginary. When man dies he goes to a heaven or a hell and experiences the consequences of his past life. You had acquired some moral merit in your previous life but love had no place in your heart, you loved neither God nor man. After death you were living in that respectable neighbourhood and enjoying the fruits of the tendencies and impulses of your mind as they were in your previous life. Having done that for sometime you did not like it any more, your vital nature became impatient, so you went to live in a hell full of dust; in the end, when you had enjoyed the fruits of your merit, you were born again. But because in that life you did not really do much to help anyone in need apart from making the obligatory charities and keeping up a code of mere external conduct dry and joyless, there is so much want in this life. And the reason why you are living a life of conventional piety and accumulating merit is that good and evil tendencies are not entirely exhausted by experience in a dream world but only by experience of their results in this world. Tinkori was a great philanthropist in his last life and he is now in this embodiment a millionaire and without any want as a result of the blessings of thousands of people. But because his mind was not purified, he has had to satisfy unfulfilled vicious dispositions by evil acts and thoughts. Have you understood the Law of Karma? Not reward or punishment — but the creation of evil from evil, of good from good. This is a natural Law. Sin is evil, from that is suffering; virtue is good, from that comes happiness. This arrangement is there for the sake of the purification of the mind and heart, for the destruction of evil. You see, Harimohan, this earth is only an insignificant fraction of my varied creation, but you are all born here to exhaust evil by works. When people are free from the clutch of good and evil and of merit and demerit and enter the Kingdom of Love, then they become free from the life of action. You too will have this freedom in your next life. I will send my favourite sister, Shakti,

(‘Power’) and her companion Vidya (‘Knowledge’) to you. But look, there is one condition, you will become my playmate and not ask for liberation. Do you agree?” “Keshta,” said Harimohan, “you have bewitched me. I feel a great desire to take you on my lap and show my deep affection, there is no other desire left in my life.”

“Harimohan, did you understand anything?” asked the boy with a smile. “Yes, of course,” replied Harimohan. Then, on second thought he asked, “I say, Keshta, you have cheated me again. You have not given any reason for creating evil.” Saying this he grasped the boy’s hand. He, however, withdrew his hand and said rather gruffly to Harimohan: “Go away! You want to get all my secrets out in one hour!” He suddenly put out the lamp, moved away and said, smiling, “Well, Harimohan, you completely forgot to lash me. I did not sit on your lap being afraid of that — there is no knowing when pressed and angered by external suffering, you may suddenly start teaching me a good lesson. I don’t trust you at all!” Harimohan extended his hand in the darkness but the boy moved further away and said, “No, I am postponing that satisfaction till your next life.” Saying this he disappeared somewhere in the dark night. Harimohan woke up listening to the jingling anklets and thought, “What kind of a dream did I see! I saw hell and heaven, and in it I addressed God in the most intimate manner and told him off as if he were a small boy. What a great sin! However, I feel great peace in my heart.” Harimohan then started remembering the dark hued boy’s captivating form and kept on saying from time to time: “How beautiful, how very beautiful!”⁷

⁷ Sri Aurobindo: *The Chariot of Jagannath*, 1972 edition.

"To see the composition of the sun or the lines of Mars is doubtless a great achievement; but when thou hast the instrument that can show thee a man's soul as thou seest a picture, then thou wilt smile at the wonders of physical Science as the playthings of babies."

The Guest

*I have discovered my deep deathless being:
Masked by my front of mind, immense, serene
It meets the world with an Immortal's seeing,
A god-spectator of the human scene.*

*No pain and sorrow of the heart and flesh
Can tread that pure and voiceless sanctuary.
Danger and fear, Fate's hounds, slipping their leash
Rend body and nerve, the timeless Spirit is free.*

*Awake, God's ray and witness in my breast,
In the undying substance of my soul
Flamelike, inscrutable the almighty Guest.
Death nearer comes and Destiny takes her toll;*

*He bears the blows that shatter Nature's house:
Calm sits he, formidable, luminous.*

Sri Aurobindo

The Ancient Debate

The Ancient Debate – Does the Soul Exist?

“My soul knows that it is immortal. But you take a dead body to pieces and cry triumphantly, ‘Where is your soul and where is your immortality?’”¹

The controversy about the existence or non-existence of the soul is as old as the ages. The Katha Upanishad which deals specifically with this issue of death in great detail, starts with this query itself:

देवैरत्रापि विचिकित्सितं पुरा न हि सुविज्ञेयमणुरेष धर्मः।
अन्यं वरं नचिकेतो वृणीष्व मा मोपरोत्सीरति मा सृजैनम्॥२१॥

Even by the gods was this debated of old; for it is not easy of knowledge, since very subtle is the law of it.²

There have been schools of thought in ancient India who did not believe in any life other than this material one. Notable among these was the philosophy of Charvaka whose sole injunction to men was to eat, drink and be merry since there is no hereafter. And why not, since if material reality is the only reality and if this matter is nothing more than a chance and accidental combination of chemicals and gases, then there is no sense in any other impulse except to enjoy life regardless of consequences to oneself or others, till dust bites dust. The Charvakas continue to exist even today in another form and name, but so do the Nachiketas³ and the seekers and seers of greater and deeper truths. And there is also this aspiration in man, an aspiration not just for joy but also for peace and truth and love and beauty and perfection and permanence. The whole story of evolution, the intelligible and intelligent order that drives the atoms and the stars, all point towards a Cosmic Intelligence and Being

¹ Sri Aurobindo: *Thoughts and Aphorisms*.

² Sri Aurobindo: *The Upanishads*, Katha Upanishad First cycle, Verse 21, p. 218

³ Refer to Ancient Texts for the story of Nachiketas

working within the heart of the Universe. How will the ancient controversy be resolved? By an un hoped for improvement in the instruments that record events? By instruments that are sensitive enough to record subtler truths? By an unprecedented development of the human consciousness? By not just a few exceptional individuals but in the generality of the race? In our present state of collective ability (or inability) for knowing, we can choose to trust and then explore till faith turns into concrete and effective knowledge. Or else we can choose not to trust and thereby justify our blindness ad infinitum. For one thing is certain — if we never seek, we will be unlikely to find the truth even if it were to stand right before our eyes!

In other words, the issue of existence of the soul as with all subtle and profound truths cannot be settled by an armchair discussion or a seminar and debate in the prestigious centers of learning. For even the most esteemed centers of excellence excel only in the mental domain and have little knowledge as yet of what lies beyond the range of our embarrassingly limited senses. This limitation is our common inheritance as a race, just as the limitation of spoken language is the common inheritance of the animal world. However, at least in the case of the human being, we have also inherited a hidden but deep urge to overcome our shortcomings and in this case, it is the possibility of exploring and realising deeper truths within us. But before we turn towards that let us first settle some of the common arguments of the die-hard materialist who does not believe in the presence of the soul. The arguments are as given below:

Argument No.1: *The soul does not exist since I do not see it.* This can be stated semi-humorously with a limerick —

'My name is Benjamin Jovit
I am a graduate from Bellial college
All that is knowledge I know it
And all that I do not know is not knowledge.'

Fair enough. But the real question is — have we tried to truly *see* it. Not all can see the electron. And many have not seen even what lies beyond the boundaries of their native place. This constant belief upon the testimony of our senses is a frightful slavery. For our senses only weave reality and not reveal it as it is. This is now known to science, which has hence graduated from the science of appearances to the science of probing deeper truths. Spiritual science also does the same, only it goes still deeper

since it does away even with the limitations of physical instruments on which material science relies so much.

Argument No.2: *These 'deeper truths' are not verifiable.* The truths of the soul are both subjectively as well as objectively verifiable. The soul can be felt as well as seen. That has been the constant truth of all yogic experience. Of course this verification cannot be done in the material way, that is to say you cannot reproduce the soul in a test tube much as you cannot reproduce many other things like feelings and thoughts. The laboratory in which the soul is tested is not the physical but a psychological one; it is the grand laboratory of our own nature which has been created as a testing ground for the soul. The 'deeper truths' and existence of the soul can be verified if one fulfils the conditions necessary for discovering it.

Argument No. 3: *Even if it is there it is experienced by the few.* This is also not true. While the full experience of the soul takes time and patient effort to develop, its results are felt fairly commonly in life. It is only because we are ignorant of the reason and conditioned negatively against it that we choose to ignore it or else call it a chance factor. In fact according to occult experience we get in touch every night with our soul. The common experience is that so often we wake up in the morning to find many of our problems sorted out somehow. We feel better and positive once again (except of course in states of active illness). The reason is that the soul's contact for a few moments is enough to rejuvenate us. That apart, moments of spontaneous trust in life, the feeling of gratitude, courage that is fearless in the face of death, an attraction towards beauty and truth and good, an impulse towards God and Freedom and Unity and Harmony, all true love for the sake of love, noble generosity and self-giving, the repulsion against hypocrisy and falsehood, inspirational thoughts and poetry with a sublime touch in it, genuine faith and compassion... all owe their origin to the soul. These qualities are not a product of the mind and even a most brilliant mind or a strong vital devoid of the soul's touch will not possess it. They develop like so many flowers only when the soul within us begins to grow and actively participate in our life.

But even where these things are not present or their opposites abound, it is not that the soul is absent, but merely that it is as yet dormant or underdeveloped. As a tree sleeps inside the hard shell of a seed, as the body of a giant sleeps shut in a tiny little gene, as the universe and a billion stars and galaxies slept in a single concentrated point before the big bang, as a tremendous power sleeps within the smallest atom, so too this little baby-god sleeps in humanity. There it is nurtured by

nature through many cycles of birth, fed by the milk of life-experience till it wakes up one day and reclaims its kingdom. The only certain way of knowing the truths of the soul is not through mental debates; one has to find the soul, as a physical scientist takes pains to discover the hidden structure of the unseen and unfelt atom, or as an adventurer undertakes the arduous and hazardous journey for discovering new continents. And all who have undertaken this have found the effort and the labour worthwhile. After all, the soul is not some cheap imitation gem which can be found easily in a nearby Sunday mart. There is a price for it and the price is not easy for the human consciousness which does not know what it is exactly bargaining for. The price of discovering this true and immortal self in us is to give up the insistence of the false 'I', the surface soul made up of ego and desire. This is what Yama tests Nachiketas for, tempting him with many a boon to satisfy his earthly longings and desires. But when Nachiketas turns down the offers one by one, he is then found by death to be a fit candidate for inquiring into the nature of the soul.

Which brings us back to the question — *what is the soul?* Most of us use the term confusedly. Firstly, it is confused with some higher parts of our mind, especially in modern psychology which uses the two terms soul and mind as if interchangeably. It is true that in many human beings the soul is involved (stationed for experience, hidden as it were) in the mind and expresses itself indirectly through mental movements, through the word so to say. Yet the two are as distinct as the sun and the moon in relation to the earth. In our night, the moon reflects and thereby represents the sun. Both hang in the sky, and the moon being closer feels as a more important part of us. Yet all its light is a borrowed one. When the sun shines, the illusion disappears and we know the source that had lit up the moon and helped us journey through the night.

The second confusion is with any non-material reality, like ghosts and disembodied beings, which the Western occultists often use the word soul and spirit for. Indeed the soul is non-material or better still, composed of a substance differently organised than our matter, a fourth dimension vibration-energy. But while it is indestructible, these other non-material entities like ghosts and disembodied beings can be dissolved and have a term of life after which they disintegrate and disappear.

A third confusion is by the present day humanist whose belief in higher things is coloured by the scientifically sceptic temper of our times. Therefore it replaces soul with our moral conscience, that nagging hunchback rider of 'should I, shouldn't I' created by the conditioning of the mind to tone down the vital and its excesses. Now

the soul too distinguishes the true from the false and is indeed the true discriminator, but it is not judgmental. It is not like a critic pointing harsh fingers and inducing guilt but a gentle swan separating milk from water, taking one and leaving the rest for whatever purpose.

The halfway explorers of spiritual life create a final confusion. They use the expression soul to denote that plane of consciousness which is the stable, unchanging basis of all phenomenon — the Self or *atman*, that stands above all manifestation, impartial witness, base and indifferent support of all. However, the *atman* is not something individual. No doubt it is also indestructible as the soul is. But it is the One and the same for all. Transcending this universal Self or *atman* above and beyond all, yet holding in itself and becoming all things that in all time can be, is the *paratpara* Purushottam or the *paramatman*. But also the One who is all becomes the *individual jivatman*, for its evolutionary adventure. This individual *jivatman*, while itself remaining outside manifestation still presides over it by sending its projection in Time and Space. This individual projection is like the deputy who has to participate and work for the great evolutionary labour, help it grow and grow by it. It is this which is called the *antaratman* when still a sleeping baby inside the womb of nature. It is this that develops and becomes an individualised psychic being, the *chaitya purusha*. It is this that is born with the body's birth and this that goes into the cycles through death till it is born again. Yet it remains always the indestructible immortal self.

This inmost soul, the psychic being is the true 'I'. The false 'I' that is destroyed by death is the ever changing 'I' of the ego. The ego is a formation of nature due to the shadow of the individual psychic being falling upon it. The Greek myth puts it beautifully in the tale of Narcissus where the youthful Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection. This reflection of the true soul in the waters of universal nature is the ego. It leads to a temporary and false identification with aspects of nature as Me and Myself, separate from others. The psychic being in contrast, though distinct and individual is yet always aware of its universality and knows itself as the center of the One Universal Divine. This is the true individual in us, which death cannot destroy.⁴

Behind each atom of existence there is found the divine spark that has descended into the dark nescience of matter to carry the evolutionary journey forward. For the

⁴ Those desirous of a deeper study on the subject of the soul and the subtle truths of its different aspects can turn directly to the words of Sri Aurobindo, especially *Letters on Yoga*. The same book can also be referred to for a description of the different planes and orders of the worlds.

soul this evolution means the bringing out of all the various possibilities concealed in the dumb abyss of matter — the possibility of will and impulse and desire, of movement and life and feelings, of thought and aesthetics and creativity, of poetry, science and art and philosophy, of spiritual ascension and soul force. As these possibilities emerge out of matter through a joint venture of the soul within calling the intervention of the respective planes above, the soul too grows by the experience. The little spark seemingly lost in the crypts of matter begins to grow in strength and stature till after many births it attains its full stature — *angusthamatra purusha* or the size of a thumb as described in the Upanishads. It is then and only then that it can exert a sort of free choice and mastery over destiny. Till then it uses all experience as a strengthening wine. It is only with its growth that there comes a turn towards spiritual life, an attraction for the sublime and the beyond, an urge towards the true and the good and the beautiful, a conscious aspiration for divinity. Till that happens the soul hints its presence through indirect signs — nobility and goodness, sincerity and goodwill, kindness and compassion, light and wisdom, forgiveness and gratitude, fortitude and perseverance, generosity and forbearance, strength and courage. It may be noted that the much talked about religiosity is not necessarily a sign of a developed soul. Religiosity is an ambiguous sign. It is not the fact of worshiping that is important, not even the name and form that one may bow down to, but what the conception of Divinity is for the seeker and the nature of his seeking. A God of wrath sought after by fear and for inflicting pain upon our enemies is certainly nowhere near the emergence of the soul. Whereas an atheist who identifies himself with beauty, trees and flowers and beasts and earth and humanity, willing to sacrifice his life for protecting the noble and the good is already beginning to reflect the soul in the mirror of his nature. Likewise, the emergence of the soul does not necessarily mean a brilliant mind or a strong and robust life force. The soul has its own intelligence and knowledge and force and dynamism but they are qualitatively very different from the mind.

But this is not the last step and the soul can grow further. With the flame growing into a fire, there comes a conscious aspiration for the Divine, a faith that not even a mountain of difficulties can shake, a devotion that can suffer a lifetime just for a glimpse of one's Beloved, a surrender to the Divine which knows no bounds, a light that no clouds of doubt can hide, a love that seeks no return and is sufficient unto itself. And with this comes about the well-known signs of an inner and rather

infectious Peace that surpasses all understanding and a causeless unconditional joy, ready to face each and everything in life with a benevolent smile.

In some rare individuals the soul can expand even further, growing from a tiny luminous seed through a soft and sublime deathless flame to a rapturous fire calling all the while the downpour of Light and Love towards the shadowless sun, lighting up the firmaments of the universe.

The whole story of human life and of the earth's life can be understood and rewritten in soul terms, the soul playing with nature and the two growing mutually.

Yes, it is a unique gift to the earth and our mortal frailty, a more than adequate recompense if one may say so. The gods do not have it and therefore do not know about it as indeed Yama points out to Nachiketas. The demons and other beings of fixed and non-evolutionary worlds obviously do not know it. It is man who is the privileged child to have within him the one and only son of God, the immortal soul. And as to how to find the soul, it is best to let one who has had the experience answer this all-important question:

"This is the first thing necessary — aspiration for the Divine. The next thing you have to do is to tend it, to keep it always alert and awake and living. And for that what is required is concentration — concentration upon the Divine with a view to an integral and absolute consecration to its Will and Purpose. Concentrate in the heart. Enter into it; go within and deep and far, as far as you can. Gather all the strings of your consciousness that are spread abroad, roll them up and take a plunge and sink down.

"A fire is burning there, in the deep quietude of the heart. It is the divinity in you — your true being. Hear its voice, follow its dictates."⁵

The Sheaths of the Soul

The soul is clothed in many sheaths which are like integuments that protect the divine seed till it becomes ready and mature to express itself. For a long time in its journey of growth this miniature divinity experiences the world-Self through these sheaths which

⁵ The Mother: *CWM Vol. 3*, p. 1

are arranged hierarchically as an evolutionary ladder. These sheaths reflect only one or few of the several aspects of the world and are therefore also called as casings of Ignorance. Yet these partial and imperfect and indirect glimpses are necessary before the individual soul can wake up to its true divinity and the experience of the integral truth and undivided reality of Oneness. Towards this end, the soul moves from life to life and from birth to birth through a series of partial identifications with one or the other sheaths. This identification with the various sheaths of lower nature makes it forget its own deeper truth which is held in the background as the support, while the surface identified with outer nature struggles and suffers and strives. Thus identified (a necessity for the experience), it erroneously feels "I am this or that impulse and sensation", "I am this or that feeling and desire", "I am this or that thought and opinion", "I am this or that idea and idealism." This identification creates a false sense of self called the ego. The result is that the individual regards himself as a separate ego (since he experiences the world differently from others and not yet in its entire truth) and other individuals as not-self with whom he can associate or disassociate, depending upon whether they nurture or hurt the identity of his ego-self.

Death comes therefore as a release to smash this false ego-identity, necessary for the moment no doubt, but nevertheless not a permanent and settled truth. This de-identification through death is seen as a tragic loss since we are attached and cling to this false view of self. But soon the sheaths dissolve one by one during the intervening period after death. As that happens, we begin to forget our ego-identity of who we were in our outer aspects, and wake up to the true soul. After a short or long period of reconstituting rest (depending upon the degree of inner development), the individual soul returns through rebirth. Now it must choose to identify with yet another aspect of the same sheath or climb to the next higher level. For this evolutionary climb it will use those 'karmas' (previous energies) that need to be worked out for its upward ascent. The steps of the ladder are woven by the fine fabric of karma spun by the loom of the world-forces. We supply the thread, the cosmic Divine uses the loom, so that by It's Infinite wisdom the consequences lead only to an inner growth and progress of the individual divinity, — the *psychic consciousness* within us. And what is this individual progress of the soul but the emergence of the various divine possibilities hidden in it. Karma in this light becomes a means for this emergence rather than a primitive tribunal of reward and punishment. But beyond the individual and the *cosmic (Universal Divine)* there is the third aspect of the trinity, the *Transcendent Divine*, who

intervenes here and there in the play, through spiritual aspiration, through Grace, and makes the evolutionary journey shorter and easier to bear.

Finally, through these cycles of birth and death and rebirth, the individual soul completes the variety of experiences necessary for its schooling. It is now mature and ready for knowing itself. Hence comes an urge and identification with spiritual life and we enter into a high-speed momentum spacecraft of our journey. A time comes when this inner Self-awareness of the true soul in us is complete and we are free. It is then that the individual soul can make a momentous choice. Since the initial necessity of the cycle of birth and death and rebirth is over, it can choose not to be reborn again and escapes death. This is what is meant in the great Upanishadic saying:

...by the Ignorance crosses beyond death and by the Knowledge enjoys Immortality.⁶

But also, if the individual soul so wills, it can enter into a higher cycle of evolution. Here it apparently renounces its individual freedom and once again consciously enters into the cycle of birth, except this time to work upon and transform the sheaths of universal Ignorance. It starts permeating them with its own light and force as well as by the force and truth and light of the higher worlds till these sheaths themselves become translucent dresses and not the obscure and dark veils that they presently are. This transformation of the sheaths and elements of Nature would mean a momentous change for the world-consciousness. It would mean firstly compressing the evolutionary journey and secondly making it a thing of freedom and joy and not the painful struggle that it has now become. This new phase or chapter of evolution has been opened for the earth and souls by the yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Surely, this was the secret intention of the Supreme Divine Himself but naturally this second evolutionary cycle was not possible until a sufficient number of individual souls had arrived at the needed degree of inner development. That time has come now, the time for the freedom of earthbound souls from cosmic Ignorance, the time for freedom from Death. It means a transformation of Death from a dark and destroying ruthless god to one who is the luminous carrier of a greater life. It also means a transformation of unconsciousness of the sheaths so that when the individual soul wraps them around, it no more confuses itself for the sheaths since the sheaths

⁶ Sri Aurobindo: *The Upanishads*, Isha Upanishad, Verse 11

themselves become conscious mantles of the inner light. So there is no forgetfulness and loss of soul-consciousness in birth, nor any forgetfulness and loss of world-consciousness in death.⁷ All would be a single movement, a conscious change from one state to another, with no gaps of consciousness in between. And, naturally, with the transformation of Death and unconsciousness, there would be the inevitable transformation of the darkness of Ignorance into Light, of falsehood into Truth-vision and Truth-revelation, of division into Oneness and Love.

But what are these sheaths and levels that for the moment at least cling to the soul as ill-fitting attire or appear as rungs of a ladder in its journey of self-transcendence? They are arranged in a horizontal and vertical fashion. The *horizontal arrangement* is fairly easy to understand. It simply means that our nature has a surface activity which is away from the inmost soul in us and an activity which is nearer. That which is farther and therefore a confused mass of some sensations, desires, habitual reactions, nervous impulses, a jumbled and mostly aimless patterns of thoughts and feelings, is our *surface self*. Many of us live identified with it most of the time and know nothing or little else as to our identity except this outer name, form and superficial responses of nature. But deeper, we have an *inner/being* that is closer to the soul and therefore less restricted in its activity, freer and truer in terms of our self-expression. This inner being is composed of an inner mental, inner vital and even an inner physical. It is also called the *subliminal* in us because it is behind the surface. While the surface consciousness is aware of little else but the outer and the gross, this inner being is open to the depths as well as to the heights, to the abysses as well as to the sublime. This still makes for a mixed territory, even though it is a vaster area with deeper possibilities. Therefore deeper still are those parts which are identified with the soul during its long drama of life — the true mental, true vital and the true physical in us, the repository of our seeds of karma, which need to be worked out for our evolution through future lives. Death snatches away or dissolves everything except those parts which are identified with the soul. To put it figuratively much of our personality to which we are often so passionately attached is swallowed up by the great devourer death but the person, the true being and the king within our fragile bodies and minds remains and returns and grows.

⁷ Please note that a deathless body is not a body that the user is compelled to wear forever. There will be a willed change of the outer garment without any loss of consciousness. To the outer eye however it may seem like death.

“What was the divine element in the magnanimity of the warrior, that which expressed itself in his loyalty, nobility, high courage, what was the divine element behind the harmonious mentality and generous vitality of the poet and expressed itself in them, that remains and in a new harmony of character may find a new expression or, if the life is turned towards the Divine, be taken up as powers for the realisation or for the work that has to be done for the Divine.”⁸

In terms of our progressive individual self-awareness, we have the *vertical layers* as follows:

The Gross Physical

This is naturally linked to the material world and has a certain degree of interdependence with it. Our atoms constantly exchange themselves with the world-matter, either naturally enriching or sometimes depleting each other. The gross physical is itself a creation of a long evolutionary journey of matter out of the *inconscious*⁹ and therefore has its own subconscious past strongly imprinted upon it. It is as if supported on the base of a *subconscious*¹⁰ energy, insistent and aimless that repeats itself mechanically over and over again, reviving the dead past. The animal and other stages of evolution are there as a concealed memory and an automatic habit or a subconscious mechanical action in the body. It is these ‘subconscious’ habits of responses that are called laws of the body and provide a great resistance to evolution and change. They were no doubt necessary at one point but have become an encumbrance at another stage much like the appendix in man. The stages of our past are reproduced in the womb and often expressed in our psychology, behaviour and life. While on the one hand, its denseness provides stability to the form, on the other it is responsible for the inertia to change. A mechanical fixity, repetitiveness and rigid inertia are the obverse side of stability. That is why it is so difficult to change things in the physical nature, including illnesses which repeat themselves with a tenacity that would surprise even the strong-willed by their persistence. And that is why this last

⁸ Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, p. 452

⁹ A state of entire oblivion (not an absence) of consciousness, a state of total forgetfulness of the Consciousness, the dark womb of things.

¹⁰ The first stir of consciousness as it wakes up again from its Inconscious state. Still a drowse and forgetfulness but not entirely. Some vague movement as if of seeking for something.

change, the change of physical form itself will be the crown of victory of the Spirit over Matter.

This gross physical sheath appears concrete to us since it is the one most perceptible to our gross senses. Much of our science, especially modern science attempts to study and master this alone.

The Subtle Physical

Behind the gross physical there lies a less rigid, more plastic matter or the true physical in us. Being less rigid and limited, it has an innate sense of the body as a whole and has even a sense of closeness with the inner physical dimension of the world.

All rightly pursued physical culture can awaken it and thereby provide a natural holistic healthy cover to the gross body. All diseases must pass first through this sheath (composed of the subtle physical on one side and the vital on the other) before attacking and lodging themselves in the gross physical body. In its density this sheath appears as hot air surrounding a physical object. Apart from consciously pursued physical culture, a right inner psychological condition strengthens and reinforces this sheath. On the other hand, depression, fear and other similar gross and limiting movements damage and cut holes through it.

This sheath is therefore a kind of watershed between the gross physical world and the forces and energies of the other hidden worlds. Its importance in health and diseases is therefore immense. It is indeed the true physical in us of which the gross outer is often a rough caricature.

The Vital

This is the life-force in us. This energy of life manifests as movements of fear and rage, reproduction and movement in lower life forms. The same energy expresses itself as the principle of desire and ambition, the force of feelings and passions and sentiments in the average humanity. In the rare individual, it climbs still further to supply the energy and fuel for higher pursuits, dynamisms, deep and true emotions, aesthesis, creativity and urge to grow inwardly. These three levels are called correspondingly the lower, middle and higher vital. When our consciousness is identified with this sheath, we live in our surface desire-soul and mistaking it for our deeper self go about the rounds of life trying to gratify this or that desire. But deeper than this is the true or inner vital in us which knows itself as a projection of the soul, an instrument and

warrior and worker for and of the Divine. Converted and surrendered it supplies the fuel for our spiritual askesis and progress as well.

The part of the vital sheath in close contact with the physical and supplying its needs is the *physical-vital*. Equally so, there is a sub-layer of the vital drawing upon the physical, closely using the body as a means to express reflex instincts and sensations, known as the *vital-physical*.

Similarly, that part which supplies the vital fuel for the mental activities, is called the *vital-mental*. This sheath, on the one hand adds force and vigour to the mind and on the other (if the being is downwardly oriented or stationed below) it can, in collusion with the vital mind drag down and draw the thoughts to a lower and petty level.

The Mental

This is the domain of thoughts and reason rather than of emotions and passions. It is a filter that cuts reality into small bits and pieces, tries to understand each bit separately and then tries to reassemble each fragment to build up the whole. It is thus a linking consciousness, trying to build a bridge between the world as it sees and experiences it and the world as it intuitively believes, hopes or wants it to be. It is therefore a mediator divinity, essentially a movement of Ignorance but trying to climb towards knowledge and Light and Oneness. This growth out of ignorance to knowledge is in itself a gradual process through several rungs. The lowest of these is the *physical mind* tied solely to the sense data and has a purely material view of things. It is therefore full of doubts about any higher and suprasensible truths. Sinking below it becomes the *material mind of the cells* which works incessantly and mechanically as a rewinding spring of a watch to set the cellular machinery in motion.

The *vital mind*, placed just above the physical in the evolutionary hierarchy is in contrast, full of imaginations and subtle manipulations, ever seeking newness and change, sometimes for its own sake, and can use twists of logic to conceal truth and distort facts, all in order to support our vital ego and its impulses. It is in this sense the devil's advocate in us, justifying every desire and impulse, often concealing them with nice acceptable and even holy words! Naturally it is very necessary to play detective with this part which is like a subterfuge and a cover for the forces of darkness hiding in a cloak of false light, woven of brilliant argument. It is a mind turned downward and outward to explore and satisfy the needs of body and life.

Above is the birth place of the *thinking mind* which uses the power of reason to organise life and probe deeper into the reality behind forms and appearances. But it cannot arrive at the total truth since its method is one of comparison and contrast rather than a holistic vision. It strives and strains towards truth but cannot find it leaving us on the dry shores of agnosticism.

To know the integral truth, it must renounce its inferior movement of cutting and rebuilding and leap from analytical reason to an intuitive perception, revelatory sight and inspirational insight. These latter would form the higher ranges of the mind or the *spiritual mind* as a whole. Awakened, it can create the true thinker, philosopher and poet in us, one in touch with the deeper meaning and purpose of life.

This spiritual mind is essentially a mind growing progressively towards truth-discrimination, truth-vision, truth-perception and truth-intuition. Indeed behind our outer surface mind there lies a much vaster range and power of an inner mind that is not so bound with the surface view.

The spiritual mind itself climbs through several ranges. Sri Aurobindo has classified it as follows:

Higher Mind with clarity of thought as steady sunshine, seeing the world as a symbolic image of a deeper truth.

Illumined Mind with a force of illumination and sight replacing thought.

Intuitive Mind with its arc of lightning revealing what is hidden in the depths or behind the veils of nature through a sudden luminous sight.

Overmind which is the birthplace of original ideas, each creating a vast world-system of its own.¹¹

Beyond Mind is beyond the highest ranges of the spiritual mind — there is the infinite field of a Self-luminous Supramental Truth knowledge and Truth-power, the world of Bliss from which our souls fell into this obscure life of small joys and sorrows. Of these things nothing can be or need be spoken since they go beyond the domain

¹¹ A detailed exposition of these levels would go beyond the scope of this book. The interested reader is advised to refer to the original works of Sri Aurobindo for guidance, especially *Letters on Yoga*.

of the 'word' and have to be accessed, known and realised through the experience of the soul's identification with them.¹²

Apart from those who consciously pursue a deep and intense yoga, is there some experience of these other layers in normal humanity? Well, there are at least two types of experience that come very close to these hitherto hidden layers, if not the soul itself. These are the Out-of-Body Experience (OBE) and the Near-Death-Experience (NDE).

Out of Body Experiences (OBEs)

"Many of us have experienced dreams in which we find ourselves flying. We rush through walls, cross distances with ease and at times we wonder — in the dream state itself — how it is that we can do so. The fact of the matter is that it is in our subtle body, the vital body, that we fly. That body does not have the limitations of the gross physical body and it has a different rhythm and movement.

"Similarly a few of us have the experience, even during the waking state, of finding ourselves emerging out of the physical body and moving around. We see the body lying flat below, we see all the surroundings as they are; if we are adventurous, we go to visit friends and see what they are doing. Mostly they are unaware of our presence. Some of these out of body subjects try to make themselves seen or felt by means of some sound, etc. but they do not always succeed. Very often these out of body experiences (OBE) are involuntary. Some, however, are willed and systematically executed forays. The latter are evidently safer because one has conscious possession or direction. At times the persons who are out of the physical body find it difficult to get back smoothly into it. There may be some sudden movement or a sense of shock necessitating the return; or the subject may want to get back but may not know how to do it. Some try to get in through the feet or the head and they meet with resistance. When they wake up they find themselves in pain, a kind of trauma. The Mother advises re-entry through the heart as the safest way. If

¹² This of course is a brief statement. For more details on these sheaths and their functions, the reader is advised to refer to the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, especially the chapter on 'Planes and Parts of the Being' as described in *Letters on Yoga*.

one is fortunate enough to enjoy the protection of the Guru or the Divine, the mere remembrance — with or without utterance of the Name — is enough to effect a smooth return.

“In either case, whether the experience is in dream or in a waking consciousness, it is in the subtle body that we go out. As we all know, the gross physical body is only the outermost. It is also the densest or the central body. There are a number of other bodies surrounding it in all directions, above, around, below.¹³ It is the smallest of them all. Each of them passes through the physical. Each body is subtler than the previous one. Thus around the physical is the vital body; around the vital is the mental body; around the mental is the causal and the bliss body. The Upanishad terms them, significantly, sheaths, *koshas*. We may note in passing that between the gross physical and the vital there is a subtle-physical sheath corresponding to what the Theosophists call, the Etheric body. It is the meeting ground of the *annamaya*, material-physical and the *pranamaya*, the vital. These sheaths or bodies correspond to planes or worlds organised on the same principles. Each body has affinity to its corresponding plane of consciousness or existence.

“We said that the physical body is the smallest. Each of the other bodies is larger than the previous one as we expand. The vital body is larger than the physical, the mental larger than the vital and so on. We need to become conscious of these various states of being, our subtle bodies, and if we choose, learn to come out of these bodies, one by one. This process is called Exteriorisation. The Mother describes how it is possible by following a discipline, to come out of the physical body in the subtler vital body, thence in the mental body, thence in the causal body. She speaks of as many as twelve possible exteriorisations before one arrives at the border of the world of Forms.

¹³ There appears to be a slight contradiction when we say that the physical is the outermost and there are other bodies above, around or below it. In reality it is the other bodies that surround the physical since they are subtle. But as far as human sight is concerned we see the gross physical first and therefore any contact with the other bodies, if at all, is seen and felt as ‘afterwards’ in a deeper dimension and therefore as if within.

"One can participate in any of these worlds by entering into them in the corresponding body. The Mother remarks that if we know how to do it, we may visit the vital world and replenish our energies in a fraction of time. Only we must go to the right region. For there are unpleasant places where just the opposite may take place leaving us drained. It is also possible we may be attacked by some malevolent beings of the vital world and such occurrences may leave a mark on the body. We must have a Guide and be assured of protection. Otherwise there is always the danger of some accident, injury or even death. For when the being goes out in any of these subtle bodies it is always connected with the physical body by means of a silvery cord. This cord is liable to be cut by some shock or unfriendly interference by some unfriendly beings."¹⁴

"... If that link were to be snapped for any reason, it would be impossible for the person to come back into the body. It is for this purpose that in occult practice one is advised never to expose the body to such risks during the OBE (out-of-body experience). Either there must be absolute safety of solitude or there must be someone guarding the body. There are elements in the subtler regions which could harm; the protection of the Divine or the Guru keeps off this danger.

"It is not wise to undertake these journeys out of the body, in a light manner, without taking the necessary precautions. The Mother insists that one must be absolutely free from fear. The person must place himself — his body included — in the protection of the Higher Power. He must ensure that there is no likelihood of any kind of interference or interruption — physical or psychological — during his exit. A psychological movement on the part of anyone with a strong will-power can be as tangible, if not more, as the physical. Above all the person must stay cool and know what is to be done at the crucial moment. Most often remembrance of the Divine or one who represents the Divine, or utterance of that Name is enough to put him back

¹⁴ M.P. Pandit: *Commentaries*

into the body. Occasionally a knowledge of the technique of repairing the damage is needed.”¹⁵

OBEs are another line of evidence regarding the existence of a self independent of the body. They have been well known and recorded since ancient times. Egyptian occultists spoke of it as ‘the double’. Even modern psychiatry recognises and thereby validates this experience though it tries to explain it away through mind and brain mechanisms. It is however not advisable to dabble into these things without an adept guide since it may be quite dangerous. This is so because the body acts as a big shield. Its grossness is itself a safety against many intruding forces from other worlds. A journey out of body exposes one to the danger from other worlds some of which may be hostile to life. The cord that attaches the sheaths beyond to our physical body may be severed by these mischief makers leading to an untimely departure. Some sleep related deaths and illnesses may be attributed to this occult phenomenon of the body being exposed to a greater danger during our out of body sorties in the vital worlds.

Near Death Experiences (NDEs)

The pioneer work in this field was done by Dr. Raymond Moody who is the first medical doctor to have done a systemic study of these experiences in people who seem to have been revived after death. These revivals were not only medical. Many were instances of spontaneous recovery after a close brush with death, often unrecorded by the medical physicians who were understandably busy with the pulse and the breathing. Besides as is well known, the eye does not see what the mind does not know. Dr. Raymond Moody took up the challenge and interviewed many such persons who had escaped from the clutches of death for one reason or the other. The result is a fascinating account of afterlife. Dr. Moody himself does not draw conclusions but leaves it for the readers. But he does make it clear that the personal record and the ensuing experience that he underwent can testify that the statements are authentic. Besides they are similar, cutting across boundaries of time, place, gender, education and belief systems. In his bestseller *Life after Life*, Dr. Moody says,

¹⁵ M.P. Pandit: *Commentaries*

"Despite the wide variation in the circumstances surrounding close calls with death and in the types of persons undergoing them, it remains true that there is a striking similarity among the accounts of the experiences themselves. In fact, the similarities among various reports are so great that one can easily pick out about fifteen separate elements which recur again and again in the mass of narratives that I have collected. On the basis of these points of likeness, let me now construct a brief, theoretically 'ideal' or 'complete' experience which embodies all of the common elements, in the order in which it is typical for them to occur.

"A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly through a long dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside of his own physical body, but still in the immediate physical environment, and he sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from this unusual vantage point and is in a state of emotional upheaval.

"After a while, he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a 'body', but one of a very different nature and with very different powers from the physical body he has left behind. Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and to help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before — a being of light — appears before him. This being asks him a question, nonverbally, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the major events of his life. At some point he finds himself approaching some sort of barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet, he finds that he must go back to the earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. At this point he resists, for by now he is taken up with his experiences in the afterlife and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love and peace. Despite his attitude, though, he somehow reunites with his physical body and lives.

"Later he tries to tell others, but he has trouble doing so. In the first place, he can find no human words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes. He also finds that others scoff, so he stops telling other people. Still, the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life."¹⁶

Such experiences have been later documented and researched scientifically and if we remove the dramatic personal effects added by the experiencing individual's consciousness (the husk) and keep the essence (the kernel) we will still have a large body of an extremely useful data to build an entirely new understanding of life and death. But scientific dogmatism and prejudice stand in the way. The relics of the reductionism model continue to haunt us and prevent us from a fuller enquiry into the deeper mysteries. The mainstream body of scientists continues to laugh at these experiences as imaginations of a stressed mind or the hallucinations of a schizophrenic. Even worse they call it a lie since they are unique to the experiencing individual, subjective and therefore non-verifiable for the most part. But hallucination is just a word that labels without explaining. And if individual subjectivity is unreal then some of the most commonplace things that have changed history like love, hate, anger, fear are all equally unreal.

There is another difficulty with the NDEs and the OBEs. In some instances certain psychedelic drugs and especially the dissociative anaesthetic Ketamine have induced similar experiences. What actually happens is that these anaesthetics stun the outer consciousness thereby releasing or dissociating the inner being which is suddenly free from the clutches of the body-mind and therefore wanders to distant lands as happens in dreams. The only difference is that dreams are spontaneous and the inner consciousness is linked strongly to the body even though there is a withdrawal from the surface due to sleep. Anaesthesia in comparison is an induced state of inner withdrawal and a more complete dissociation of the inner and the outer consciousness, therefore gives a greater possibility of experiencing the worlds and life beyond. Death is an extreme withdrawal beyond the control of outer will and after a point, an irreversible one. This is the link between sleep, anaesthesia and death. Anaesthesia and death are close cousins in one way and their actual association is well known. Thus, it is not Ketamine or any other anaesthetic that explains the NDE but the

¹⁶ Refer to Appendix IV: The Ancient Debate for individual cases of NDE

withdrawal of consciousness facilitated by the drug (as also happens in death) which gives the explanation. The NDEs and OBEs that happen spontaneously occur up to the doorways of the mind-body interface. They return back from the threshold and do not enter beyond. The tunnel experience or the light at the end of the tunnel which people touch is the threshold. Beyond is the domain that becomes independent of material basis.

Beings and Guardians of the Other Worlds

The soul while in transit meets the beings and forces of other worlds. Depending upon the inner development and affinities, the soul may linger in these worlds, get in touch with these beings, and receive help or encounter hindrance in its onward journey. Our body while living provides a marvellous protection because of its denseness. But after death we stand as if exposed to all the forces of this complex universe. It is true that modern science is unable to recognise these forces and beings as of now. But that is because modern science is equipped for studying only the material phenomenon and forces. It is still in its infancy with regard to the subtler worlds and their mysteries. That is why though it has to some extent mastered the physical forces very well, it fails in mastering the psychological forces that govern our mind and thought and will. We can predict the trajectory of a star with reasonable accuracy but cannot predict the direction of motion of a worm since for all our advancement we have no way of knowing the intent and will behind life. The psychologist may be in a better position to know, if only he could get rid of the materialist assumption and bias, and see with open eyes what moves humanity. The mystic communes with the worlds, the schizophrenic walks into their trap, the average man has a daily brush with them in his dreams, yet all this data lies unstudied and unused because of our *a priori* assumption that material reality is the only reality!

Nevertheless, the beings of these hidden worlds (hidden to our limited sight) can be roughly divided into three broad or general categories:

The Gods

These are essentially benevolent powers of the Divine and in their true station belong to the levels above the thinking mind. These are forces of Light and their characteristic action is to create in those who are open Wisdom, Strength, Harmony and Perfection. Some of them however send their projections and emanations into the lesser worlds of mind and life and body, to work as forces of Light, in a limited way. Such a

projection creates miniature divinities, which though diminished in force and functions are a little closer to the human mind and therefore easier to understand.

The Titans

These are essentially malevolent powers that have defected from the Divine Will and in their true station dwell in the subconscious caves and abysses of consciousness. These are forces of Darkness and their aim is to perpetuate doubt and confusion, weakness and depression, division and hatred, impulsiveness and impatience. These too, in an attempt to wrest the higher powers and forces by violence send up their fuming breath into the chambers of mind and life and body, corrupting our thoughts and feelings and acts. In return they have a hold and sway upon the human consciousness by flattering egoism and perpetuating Ignorance.

The Intermediate Beings

These are essentially beings of transition with mixed powers. They are stationed in the worlds of mind, life and matter and govern their movements from behind. Some of them are benevolent while others are deceptive and often drape themselves in forms imagined and created by the human mind. These may be used by the forces of darkness to deceive the human being through divine appearances.

The departed in their journey after death may meet some of these beings and unless equipped with an inner knowledge or open to Light through an inner faith in the Divine, they may be tricked to stay for a longer or shorter period in these deceptive worlds. Captive of these forces, they may linger till the illusion and the spell is broken by a benevolent power or Grace or simply because the part of nature responding and open to that plane dissolves, leaving behind only the immortal soul.

In Conclusion

In spite of so much of data, there remain many sceptics of such occurrences. Fortunately truth is not decided by a democratic vote but stands in its own right even if there is not a single individual who observes or knows it. There are objective verifications which bring back reliable data of other worlds just as scientists bring from the moon. If we therefore care to truly understand, and not just mock in a false scientific pride without even studying the facts first, we can safely draw the following conclusions:

There is some kind of a self-experience after death. Physical death is not the end of our self. Something is there that continues to experience just as we continue to experience things in another mode during our body's sleep, and who knows whether we do or do not continue to experience the self in another mode, say in coma for instance. This has ethical implications on taking away the life of those in prolonged coma. Since the self-experience is continuing, it is not advisable to cut it abruptly through death. The absence of memory on return to outer senses or another life is no proof either. We seldom remember our dreams and even more rare is to remember in a dream that we are dreaming! In our waking consciousness we seem to dwell in another sense of self than in our sleeping state. Each of these has a different kind of state-dependent memory. So too the worlds of death and other planes of consciousness are different from the physical world that we are normally aware of. In fact we have these four fundamental states of consciousness:

- *The outer or waking state* that we are mostly aware of. It is our most superficial state of existence wherein we interact with a fragment of the outer world as it appears to our gross senses. This world presents to us a distorted appearance of reality, mostly of the physical, fine for our immediate practical purposes but ineffective for any deeper understanding of life.
- *The inner subliminal or dream state* consisting of many worlds within and of which we can become aware by a methodical development of the subtle senses as the mystic does or else during certain altered states as in dreams, drugs and mental illnesses. There have been interesting instances of abnormal and detailed learning (or memory) of certain forms of literature in a language totally alien to one's own and which one had made no attempt to learn by the waking mind.
- *The sleep state* or the higher and deeper transcendent regions of which our waking consciousness generally knows nothing about. We do indeed enter these states and regions in our body's sleep but cannot bring back any memory of it to the outer surface-mind due to absence of bridges. All these states are experienced by us everyday during sleep and indeed just as it happens in death, we touch those regions of imperishable light and bliss for a few moments and return back refreshed and rejuvenated. Death is a prolonged reconstituting sleep wherein the connection with the body is fully snapped.

- *The sheer transcendent state* that wraps up the other three within itself and is primarily for the rare yogi who has passed beyond the sphere of death.

Yet we can become aware of these other worlds through a methodical development of the inner or subtle senses, or more accurately by releasing the senses from the grip and conditioning by our waking mind that perceives only the outer life as real. Spirituality in fact liberates us from this material conditioning and therefore equips us to better understand this world and the other worlds hidden behind the material one. Indeed we are relatively free of this conditioning in childhood but as we grow towards adulthood we become conditioned and limited by the existing belief systems and governing principles of our time. Today we see such a transition from the extreme rationalistic age that denied every form of subjectivity towards the emergence and acknowledgement of the subjective side of life. The fact of experiencing the physical body as something that is separate and distinct from the self is an indication that the power of the senses does not come from the organs that conduit them. It comes from another layer of consciousness deeper than the physical. The method of investigating these subtle and deeper truths therefore would be through a methodical development of the subtle senses or by evolving out of the present mind the most refined sixth sense, what is termed as intuition in ancient psychology. A blind and ever doubting denial would be as damaging as an unquestioning acceptance. One is the superstition of the irrational man, the other the superstition of the rationally ignorant. It is difficult to say which is better! No wonder the great Greek visionary Socrates aptly remarked as the closing remark before drinking the hemlock: "But now it is time to depart, for me to die, for you to live, but which of us is going to a better state is unknown to everyone except God."

Finally, if we admit the testimony of the subtle senses, then after its release from the physical casing, the soul undertakes a rapid or prolonged rest while transiting through the other worlds — the subtle physical, the different levels of the vital (the presumed location of the heavens and hells), mental and other higher worlds, till it reaches its final resting place in the native psychic world. During this transit the soul sheds its investitures one by one in the corresponding worlds and undergoes different experiences, pleasant or unpleasant, depending upon an inner affinity of the various parts of its nature. The nature of the worlds it will pass through, the time of transit, the type of experiences, will depend largely on the quality and nature of its life while in the physical body. Our deeds are like imprints that attract certain experiences whether

in this world or another much as a TV antenna attracts vibrations depending on attuning our choices to one channel or another. This is only natural and serves as a learning and growing experience to the soul rather than being a crude system of reward and punishment. One may say that the blind wall of matter is torn apart through the mechanism of death, and it can then see through the façade, behind the choices it made and the people it loved. This happens in life also if we are truly awake but can happen much more concretely and intensely after death. Therefore, we may say, that while positive and active progress is possible only while in the body, a sort of passive progress through negative and positive learning consequences takes place after death as well. To understand the apparent contradiction here, let's just say that the school of life teaches us to make choices and grow and change as a result. This growth is not possible after death but one can learn many things about hidden realities if one is conscious. The bulk of progress is during life since the presence of the psychic and the holding together of different elements of nature makes this possible. After death, the progress is only on the plane of a certain kind of knowledge and not at other levels.

As always we cannot make general rules. This is only a pattern for the mass of humanity. Rare developed souls can reverse the balance and continue to consciously choose and act and even meditate after death thereby progressing uninterrupted. These can also help the earthly play while being on the other side since they have arrived at a high degree of consciousness. Subsequently they may return to resume their further growth in and through the earthly play.

*Our science is an abstract cold and brief
That cuts in formulas the living whole.
It has a brain and head but not a soul:
It sees all things in outward carved relief.*

*But how without its depths can the world be known?
The visible has its roots in the unseen
And each invisible hides what it can mean
In a yet deeper invisible, unshown.*

*The objects that you probe are not their form.
Each is a mass of forces thrown in shape.*

*The forces caught, their inner lines escape
In a fathomless consciousness beyond mind's norm.*

*Probe it and you shall meet a Being still
Infinite, nameless, mute, unknowable.¹⁷*

¹⁷ Sri Aurobindo: 'Discoveries of Science III', *Collected Poems*, p. 168

Appendix IV: The Ancient Debate

(The following excerpts have been taken from *Life After Life* written by Raymond Moody.)

The Myth of Our 3-Dimensional Universe

Many people have made remarks to the effect that, "There are just no words to express what I am trying to say", or "They just don't make adjectives and superlatives to describe this". One woman put this to me very succinctly when she said, "Now, there is a real problem for me as I'm trying to tell you this, because all the words I know are three-dimensional. As I was going through this, I kept thinking, "Well, when I was taking geometry, they always told me there were only three dimensions, and I always just accepted that. But they were wrong. There are more". And, of course, our world — the one we're living in now — is three dimensional, but the next one definitely isn't. And that's why it's so hard to tell you this. I have to describe it to you in words that are three dimensional. That's as close as I can get to it, but it's not really adequate. I can't really give you a complete picture."

The Experience of Peace and Calm

Many people describe extremely pleasant feelings and sensations during the early stages of their experiences. After a severe head injury, one man's vital signs were undetectable. As he says, "At the point of injury there was a momentary flash of pain, but then all the pain vanished. I had the feeling of floating in a dark space. The day was bitterly cold, yet while I was in that blackness all I felt was warmth and the most extreme comfort I have ever experienced..."

I remembered thinking, 'I must be dead.'"

The Dark Tunnel of Death

During a severe illness, a man came so near death that his pupils dilated and his body was growing cold. He says, "I was in an utterly black, dark void. It is very difficult to

explain, but I felt as if I were moving in a vacuum, just through blackness. Yet, I was quite conscious. It was like being in a cylinder which had no air in it. It was a feeling of limbo, of being half-way here, and half-way somewhere else.”

Out of the Body

“I was seventeen years old and my brother and I were working at an amusement park. One afternoon, we decided to go swimming, and there were quite a few of the other young people who went in with us. Someone said, ‘Let’s swim across the lake’. I had done that on numerous occasions, but that day for some reason, I went down, almost in the middle of the lake... I kept bobbing up and down, and all of a sudden, it felt as though I were away from my body, away from everybody, in space by myself. Although I was stable, staying at the same level, I saw my body in the water about three or four feet away, bobbing up and down. I viewed my body from the back and slightly to the right side. I still felt as though I had an entire body form, even while I was outside my body. I had an airy feeling that’s almost indescribable. I felt like a feather.”

A young informant states, “It was about two years ago, and I had just turned nineteen. I was driving a friend of mine home in my car, and as I got to this particular intersection downtown, I stopped and looked both ways, but I didn’t see a thing coming. I pulled on out into the intersection and as I did I heard my friend yell at the top of his voice. When I looked I saw a blinding light, the head-lights of a car that was speeding towards us. I heard this awful sound — the side of the car being crushed in — and there was just an instant darkness, an enclosed space. It was very quick. Then, I was sort of floating about five feet above the street, about five yards away from the car, I’d say, and I heard the echo of the crash dying away. I saw people come running up and crowding around the car, and I saw my friend get out of the car, obviously in shock. I could see my own body in the wreckage among all those people, and could see them trying to get it out. My legs were all twisted and there was blood all over the place.”

Seeing the Body

Emotional responses to this strange state vary widely. Most people report, at first, a desperate desire to get back into their bodies but they do not have the faintest idea

about how to proceed. Others recall that they were very afraid, almost panicky. Some, however, report more positive reactions to their plight, as in this account:

"I became very seriously ill, and the doctor put me in the hospital. This one morning a solid gray mist gathered around me, and I felt myself get out of my body, and I looked back and I could see myself on the bed below and there was no fear. It was quiet — very peaceful and serene. I was not in the least bit upset or frightened. It was just a tranquil feeling, and it was something which I didn't dread. I felt that maybe I was dying, and I felt that if I did not get back to my body, I would be dead, gone."

Pure Consciousness

Dying persons are likely first to become aware of their spiritual bodies in the guise of their limitations. They find, when out of their physical bodies, that although they may try desperately to tell others of their plight, no one seems to hear them. This is illustrated very well in this excerpt from the story of a woman who suffered a respiratory arrest and was carried to the emergency room, where a resuscitation attempt was made. "I saw them resuscitating me. It was really strange. I wasn't very high; it was almost like I was on a pedestal, but not above them to any great extent, just maybe looking over them. I tried talking to them but nobody could hear me, nobody would listen to me.

"The doctors and nurses were pounding on my body to try to get IV's started and to get me back, and I kept trying to tell them, 'Leave me alone. All I want is to be left alone. Quit pounding me'. But they did not hear me. So I tried to move their hands to keep them from beating on my body, but nothing would happen. I couldn't get anywhere. It was like — I don't really know what happened, but I couldn't move their hands. It looked like I was touching their hands and I tried to move them — yet when I would give it the stroke, their hands were still there. I don't know whether my hand was going through it, around it, or what. I didn't feel any pressure against their hands when I was trying to move them."

Perception

Perception in the new body is both like and unlike perception in the physical body. In some ways, the spiritual form is more limited. As we saw, kinesthesia, as such, is absent. In a couple of instances, persons have reported that they had no sensation of

temperature, while in most cases feelings of comfortable 'warmth' are reported. No one among all of my cases has reported any odours or tastes while out of their physical bodies. On the other hand, senses which correspond to the physical senses of vision and of hearing are very definitely intact in the spiritual body, and seem actually heightened and more perfect than they are in physical life. One man says that while he was 'dead' his vision seemed incredibly more powerful and, in his words, "I just can't understand how I could see so far". A woman who recalled this experience notes, "It seemed as if this spiritual sense had no limitations, as if I could look any where and everywhere".

The Being of Light

What is perhaps the most incredible common element in the accounts I have studied, and is certainly the element which has the most profound effect upon the individual, is the encounter with a very bright light. Typically, at its first appearance this light is dim, but it rapidly gets brighter until it reaches an unearthly brilliance. Yet, even though this light (usually said to be white or 'clear') is of an indescribable brilliance, many make the specific point that it does not in any way hurt their eyes, or dazzle them, or keep them from seeing other things around them (perhaps because at this point they don't have physical 'eyes' to be dazzled).

Despite the light's unusual manifestation, however, not one person has expressed any doubt whatsoever that it was a being, a being of light. Not only that, it is a personal being. It has a very definite personality. The love and the warmth which emanate from this being to the dying person are utterly beyond words, and he feels completely surrounded by it and taken up in it, completely at ease and accepted in the presence of this being. He senses an irresistible magnetic attraction to this light. He is ineluctably drawn to it.

Sensation of Being Pulled Back

In a few instances, persons have expressed the feeling that the love or prayers of others have in effect pulled them back from death regardless of their own wishes. A woman told me, "The doctor had already said that I was gone, but I lived through it. Yet, the experience I had been through was so joyous, I had no bad feelings at all. As I came back, I opened my eyes, and my sister and my husband saw me. I could see their

relief, and tears were pouring from their eyes. I could see that it was a relief to them that I did survive. I felt as though I had been called back — magnetised back — through the love of my sister and my husband. Since then, I have believed that other people can draw you back.”

In the Moonlight

*...A strange unreal gospel Science brings,
Being animals to act as angels might;
Mortals we must put forth immortal might
And flutter in the void celestial wings...*

*Through chemistry she seeks the source of life,
Nor knows the mighty laws that she has found
Are Nature's bye-laws merely, meant to ground
A grandiose freedom building peace by strife.*

*The organ for the thing itself she takes,
The brain for mind, the body for the soul,
Nor has she patience to explore the whole,
But like a child a hasty period makes.*

*"It is enough," she says, "I have explored
The whole of being; nothing now remains
But to put details in and count my gains."
So she deceives herself, denies her Lord...*

Sri Aurobindo

The Inflexible Iron Law of Death and the Dilemmas of Human Law

Ethical Issues involving Death and the Dying

Death raises many an ethical question and as with everything else related to death, none have a simple answer. The reason is that we do not know with certainty the state of an individual who is dead or is in coma. We do not know whether there is an inner psychological life going on during coma or after death, independent of the body. We do not know whether the surface choice of a man reflects the choice of his soul or is it simply rendering into mental terms, the recoil from pain of the nervous and sensational parts of his being. For man is not made up of one piece. Our reason often cancels the choice made by our emotions. Our emotions can be at war and at variance with our vital desires. Our sentiments may play at cross purposes with our idealism, not to speak of the inmost soul within us which may not consent or agree to the ignorant choice made by our surface being! The physicians and caretakers, well-wishers included, are not much help either since it is not only the man on the deathbed but all those around him who are also afflicted by a general ignorance of these deeper issues.

So how are we to decide about the ethical issues arising out of death? The one simple, practical answer is that no hard and fast rule can be made about these things. Each case has to be dealt with as uniquely independent. The person who is called upon to decide has to be guided by the highest light available to him. This highest light may be the prevalent norm during his time or else that other equally ignorant and imperfect but nevertheless partial light of reason. The best of course is if the person can command the deeper vision of his soul. But that is rare. So until that happens, the answer is to do whatever best one thinks or can, without letting oneself sway towards one extreme or the other, and by offering the act to God within, seeking for the growth of a deeper vision. As long as one does not have the arrogance of the intellect but instead is armed with an opening to a higher power, this greater seeing will dawn sooner or later. And even if it isn't soon enough, this act of offering with humility will be like a corrective to balance the general state of our ignorance and its

many errors. It is against this background and with the greater Light now available to us than the narrow and ill-lit lamp of rational ethics or an equally imperfect body of religious or social conventions that we shall turn to the specific issues.

To name a few of the ethical dilemmas, there is euthanasia, artificial life support, resuscitation, post-mortem examination, abortions, suicide victims and survivors, homicide, capital punishment and animal experiments. A lot depends upon the premises we hold dear to our heart, our individual belief systems and conditioning to existing norms. It is difficult to generalise. For many are the strands along which our nature moves and what is best in one situation may not be applicable in another. To hold one single principle or standard, however high, as an infallible ideal to be followed by all under every circumstance may be a dangerous oversimplification of human nature and its possible movements. At the same time to leave each one to decide as they please or will, may be an even greater risk in the present state of our collective ignorance. Only broad outlines can therefore be attempted; the gaps have to be filled up by each one according to the need of the hour and the situation.

Broadly speaking, ethics rests upon two main pillars as its lampposts — first, the consideration of what is truly good and, second, what is nobly beautiful. Both of these are relative values. At best these are crutches that we hold to walk in our journey through the forest of human ignorance. At worst these are fetters that we tie to the growing soul and its limitless expansion. A little consideration of real issues will reveal the difficulty.

Suicide

Until recently, suicide was a punishable offence. Rarely was it understood that the act of suicide is in itself a punishment, a kind of self-punishment that the person inflicts upon himself in a state of gloom. The cosmic laws are not forgiving either since as we have seen, the scriptures describe this particular mode of exit as among the worst ones, from an inner point of view. "Sunless are those worlds..."¹ Whether the cosmic laws have changed or not, there is nevertheless a little more humane understanding of the suicidal situation. With spreading awareness of psychological illnesses and their hold upon the human mind, the suicidal man is seen more as a victim of a pathological state of mind rather than a criminal. Most suicides are done in a state of

¹ Sri Aurobindo: *The Upanishads*, 'Isha Upanishad', Verse 3

depression under whose spell they see the world and themselves in a negative way. There is usually an exaggerated sense of self-depreciation, a heavy inner state called *tamas* in the parlance of the Indian mystic. It is this dark and heavy principle of *tamas* that comes over and clouds the soul, throwing the nature into a state of utter despair much as the world would so thrown if it came under the spell of a prolonged eclipse. The adverse and hostile forces take advantage of this inner eclipse and get hold over the human nature. These terrible agencies thereby distort perception in a most unreasonable way, create an abundance of confusion, suggest failure, and fill the heart with gloom and self-pity. The ego-sense doubling up upon itself enters into utter despair, abandoning hope and will and faith. Once faith is lost, then all is lost or seemingly so. Suicide as the only escape is the last extreme suggested by the dark whispers of this nether world. Reason, emotions, will, impulse are seized and perverted by this darkness. Our soul, the only sure guide, is thrust far behind a thick veil and its promptings and word of hope and courage do not reach the outer nature and the receiving brain. The parts of vital impulse are finally fully seized and made to act out the gruesome tragedy. A curtain falls upon the inmost sun-touched parts and in ruin ends the epic of a soul.

The soul suffering this darkened state and caught in its terrible mesh needs help and perhaps does cry out for it. But the outer nature is obviously closed to every available help and needs a persistent effort to pull the inner light out so as to illumine the dark outer chambers once again. Maybe the soul under these circumstances is helped to depart with minimum possible struggle, but of this inner transaction nothing much can be said and besides it would differ from case to case. Generally speaking, however, it is dragged by the heavy chains of *tamas* and the cloak of its darkened nature acts as fetters in its upward journey. One thing is certain — it is absurd to justify assisted suicide under any circumstance. A case was recently reported wherein a mother assisted in the suicide of her son, who pleaded for her assistance while undergoing physical pain. The mother could have been better informed and known that this pleading of the son was really an aberrant and perverse mistranslation of the will to be free from the pain. Suicide does not help the situation but only makes it worse. What if the physical pain and the illness or the outer circumstance leading to the psychological pain is unchangeable? Well, even if it were so, there is still much that can be done. One can help the person in becoming *detached* from the physical pain and its ensuing circumstances. One can help the person develop the right inner attitude and face the difficulty with *courage, perseverance* and *faith*. One can help the

person see the *light of reason* and assess the situation realistically. Most often things are not so bad as we perceive them to be. There is a silver lining behind every dark cloud, a positive by the side of every negative. It is the task of well-wishers and counsellors to bring out this silver lining in bold relief and present the positive perspective which the individual himself is unable to see. This positive need not be necessarily on the same plane. An outer insurmountable problem may carry a deep inner possibility of growth — a growth in *wisdom* that inevitably follows if we care to wait and see after we have weathered the storm; a growth in *strength* that comes when we have faced the rigorous and uncertain trials of life; a growth in *compassion* and a generous understanding of others when we have confronted and struggled with our own difficulties. All these are no cheap or easy gains and if the moment of intense inner crisis can be used to acquire them, then we will find our pain more than rewarding and grow mightier with each stroke of what we in our ignorance term as misfortune, failure and fall. To assist the soul in emerging and stepping out from behind the clouds, even using the moment of crisis for this purpose, is the only true assistance. In contrast, to aid the person in his suicidal impulse is to unwittingly fall prey oneself in the hands of the dark and hostile forces that sometimes come upon us. Therefore, all talk of assisting suicide or legalizing it is a dangerous plea, a cover for increasing the darkness and suffering of the world, and certainly not reducing it as we may be ignorantly led to believe.

As a matter of fact, the grief generated after such a death in the home and surrounding atmosphere is much more dense and heavy. Those who are left behind often suffer from nightmares, undue guilt and are sometimes themselves caught by the impulse to die. The reasons for this may be more than what our superficial psychology may suggest. The person departing under such a burdened state of the soul naturally leaves a thick black trail in the occult worlds which begins to attach itself to those who are near and dear. Thrown out of the body through a sudden violent act, the consciousness may remain confused and not knowing whether one is with or without a body, it seeks shelter somewhere. The atmosphere of most hospitals is often felt heavy by perceptive people because of such disembodied beings. Some actually find place in others who are sick, which is one cause of the sicknesses taking a turn for the worse. Some patients may return with heavy limbs, feeling inexplicably exhausted, a common experience attributed to prolonged sickness or effect of drugs. But there may be other causes. A case was recently reported on the Discovery channel about a woman who was discharged from hospital after a minor surgery but developed

unexplained exhaustion on return. The surgeons washed their hands off while the physicians put her through a series of tests but to no avail. After sixteen years of suffering, she consulted an occultist whose clairvoyant vision saw a disembodied being who after suicide had taken shelter in the patient's body. The being was released from the woman's body through certain occult practices and she became free of her heaviness. Such things may actually be more common than we choose to observe and record. And it is true that there may not always be good and expert occultists at hand to deal with these problems. But there is a simpler way to tackle this in the everyday life of average human beings. It is to bring peace in the atmosphere and create a zone of deep spiritual vibrations through faith, concentration and whatever outer means we may have at our disposal. The disembodied beings dissolve soon if they are not fed by the vitality of others. And no meal is tastier to this dark state than the bitter taste of grief, suffering and fear.

One last word about a common misconception. There is a prevalent view which is undoubtedly ignorant, that the yogi's *samadhi* and departure by choice is the same as suicide. Nothing can be farther from the truth. We have already seen that the possibility and power of *iccha-mrityu* (self-willed departure) develops at a certain high stage of our inner self-development. Along with this power and will are given the inner knowledge of the means, the hour, the precise indication, and the wisdom to discern between an impulse to throw away life in a fit of despair vis-à-vis the decision to leave the shell of this body because more work is not possible with the existing frame. The first is a state of helplessness in nature that sets in because the soul is utterly veiled; the second is a luminous state of the soul that has earned its rest since it stands master over its nature. The first is a state of gross and thick coating of ignorance, the second a state of knowledge, not only knowledge of one's own self, but also the knowledge of the cosmic forces and their movements. Besides, even the process used is very different. The man under a spell of depression whose nature is held captive by the hostile forces chooses violent physical means for his exit. The yogi, in sharp contrast, departs of his own choice by an inner process of withdrawing his consciousness from the physical and detaching his soul from the different sheaths. The first therefore is an utterly unconscious movement, the other a luminous and fully conscious one. Of course such yogic withdrawals are very rare and never recommended, nor even possible for the common humanity. One should not delude oneself into believing that one is in an exceptional state and can decide about one's hour to quit. These things are usually a cover for some defeatist part in our nature that

wants to avoid the struggle, spiritual or otherwise, and gives up easily for lack of perseverance in nature. One should not confuse the two. Therefore the dictum for most of us is a calm indifference towards death, neither to will it nor to be afraid of it.

Homicide and Capital Punishment

If suicide is anger turned upon oneself then homicide is anger turned against others. Anger, gloom, frustration, self-depreciation, these are part of the internal constitution of a suicidal man which attracts the dark adverse forces. The homicidal man is under the sway of very similar forces. He is caught up in a net of a morbid lower-vital state of anger, jealousy, frustration, suspicion, etc. Some of those committing homicide (and this may be a sizable number) are seized by beings with a strong and vital impulse to kill. Driven by this uncontrollable urge to slay, these beings and their human representatives combine a vicarious insensitivity to pain (one's own and other's) with a perverse pleasure in acts of violence. Cruel in their thoughts and deeds, with very little beauty and nobility of an inner life, or soul-development, these beings are upon earth only to create destruction and chaos. The *Gita* revealing the internal constitution of such an extreme asuric type of humanity describes them thus:

Given over to egoism, power, arrogance, desire and wrath, these maligning characters despise Me dwelling in their own and others' bodies.

These vile men of the world, despising and cruel and evil, I cast into continual Asuric births.

Drawn into the Asuric womb birth after birth, these deluded ones, O Kaunteya (Arjuna), not attaining to Me, go eventually to the lowest state of being.²

The fate of such men of evil deeds is as bad as slayers of their own bodies since they have obviously closed the doors to Grace. However, this state of perdition is not permanent and absolute. Having touched rock bottom of their consciousness, chastened by this experience of darkness and its aftermath, they once again come up to enter the normal evolutionary cycle. It is believed that these two (suicide and homicide) are *utkata* karmas, that is to say karmas whose repercussions are inevitable

² The Gita: Ch. 16, Verse 18-20.

and cannot be mitigated by subsequent good deeds. While *utkata* karmas are hard to remove by our own efforts and take many lives due to the strong impress (creating a strong predisposition to commit the same act, suicide for example, in other lives as well), they can not only be mitigated but totally effaced from the soul by the action of Grace. Therefore the famous injunctions of the *Gita* again and again, to leave things in the hands of Grace for them to be worked out.

सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं प्रज।
अहं त्वा सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः ॥६६॥

Abandon all dharmas and take refuge in Me alone. I shall deliver you from all fear and evil. Do not worry.³

Now such a provision of inner consequence already exists in the cosmic law. But what about our human law? Humanity can take one of the two positions. One is to punish murder with murder (capital punishment). While this could be an understandable albeit purely emotive human reaction at the spur of the moment, is the impulse to punish the killer by killing him much different from the original act? Revenge and hate, individual or collective, stands much at the same level as jealousy and fear and anger. We have also to take into account the occult fact that most of these offenders are under the possession of dark and violent hostile forces. The body of the individual is destroyed through capital punishment but the force *escapes*, only to take hold of other individuals who are in the same frequency. It is said that following a guillotine execution, the force or being inhabiting the one executed would soon depart only to inhabit some other body in the crowd, someone who is open and receptive, thereby perpetuating its reign in one body or another!⁴

Besides, recent research claims that it is yet to be proven substantially and irrefutably that capital punishment acts as a deterrent. People who commit such ghastly crimes act under a strong impulse over which they have little conscious or rational control. While they are being swept and swayed by this violent impulse their minds are neither attuned nor receptive to any reason, rational arguments or the previous experience of others. Why, even their own experience of previous

³ Sri Krishna in the *Gita*: Ch. 18, Verse 66

⁴ A Hollywood film called *Fallen* has tried to illustrate this phenomenon, giving its own interpretation to it.

punishments does not deter criminals, as any police record file would suggest. An inner change is needed and capital punishment certainly cannot bring that about. In fact what most people fail to realise is that serving life imprisonment is far more difficult to bear than losing one's life. In the course of serving such a sentence, cut off from one's family and a life of freedom, the prisoner is likely to go through a series of introspective phases, each of which can prove both torturous as well as enlightening, for it is no lie that the way to truth is long and difficult. If, at the end of it, he comes out a better human being, then that would leave a more lasting impact on people rather than a speedy delivery from this world.

An interesting parallel occurred in very recent times. A news item reported the atrocities committed by the American and British soldiers towards the Iraqi POWs. An important point was missed in the report which expressed surprise that these atrocities on Iraqi POWs were committed in the same prison where Saddam and his men used to torture their captives in much the same way. Could it be that the very same forces that had possessed the dictator's regime suddenly seized the soldiers who entered these places? Is it the same phenomenon wherein the oppressed who seize power themselves become the oppressor? Of course, the American soldiers were not the oppressed in this case, but perhaps there was something of a transfer of forces knowingly or unknowingly, between the older regime and the present one. We have to learn much about the play of these occult forces that seize men as puppets and play mischief and havoc upon this world. The Mother has something very interesting about this occult phenomenon:

"The death of Stalin (unfortunately not any more than the death of Hitler) has not changed the present state of the world. Something more than that would be necessary. For this is like the assassin who is guillotined; when his head is cut off, his spirit remains behind and is projected outside him. It is a vital formation and it goes and takes shelter in one of the benevolent spectators, who suddenly feels a criminal instinct in himself. There are many men like that, specially very young criminals who when questioned have acknowledged this. They have been asked: 'When did this desire to kill come to you?' and the frequent reply is: 'It got hold of me when I saw so-and-so executed.'"⁵

⁵ The Mother: CWM, Vol.5, p. 377

What this seeing means with relation to TV and public executions in certain countries is anybody's guess.

A better strategy than execution would be to isolate the murderer through some kind of a prolonged term and then to work towards reforming him. Mere isolation can never be enough. One has to also simultaneously provide some kind of a reformatory atmosphere which brings about a change in the inner being of the individual. Numerous instances are quoted to illustrate that wild animals lose their natural born propensities in the atmosphere of a sage or enlightened being. It is as if the power of his peace counteracts their tendency to attack and harm. We have the famous example of Angulimala, a man who garlanded himself with the fingers of those whom he killed, turn into a highly respected monk known as Ananda (the very opposite of suffering that he inflicted upon others) through Buddha's Grace. Such examples, and there are others, are not isolated individual cases but instances that open up a general possibility for the race. And while we cannot transform our prisons into ashrams overnight nor transform our jailers in one go, we can however introduce a ray of hope even among those who are considered as 'the fallen ones'. Such experiments have been done in recent times among prison inmates by a few daring police officers and with rewarding results.

Anton Chekov in an interesting story, *The Bet*, reveals this truth in a remarkable way. Two men, a businessman and a lawyer, take a bet as to which is better, capital punishment or life imprisonment. The lawyer advocates for the latter since he is of the opinion that men can change. The businessman, on the other hand, believes that it is not possible for anyone to live for a long time in isolation without suffering much more than the short term intense suffering of the man who is sent to the gallows. The bet has it that the lawyer must prove his point by actually staying in isolation in a room provided by the businessman. He will be provided with whatever he needs except that he will have no contact with the outer world of humanity. If the lawyer completes the term successfully he will win the bet as well as a huge sum of money from the businessman. Years roll by, the lawyer spends most of his time reading and writing. The businessman in the meantime goes through the ups and downs of life. But as the last few weeks and days of the bet draw nearer, he grows increasingly restless. He has suffered great losses in his business and now dreads the prospect of losing money through the bet to the lawyer. As the days close upon the businessman, he draws a nasty plan to do away with the lawyer. A day before the bet comes to an

end, he steps stealthily into the lawyer's room while he is asleep with an intention to kill him. But before he can execute his plan, his eyes catch sight of a piece of paper whose contents startle the businessman. It says something to the effect that the lawyer has in all these years realised the vanity of life. He does not need any money now and has come to peace with himself. Having realised this he has already decided to deliberately lose the deal by walking away from the room five minutes before the fixed time. The businessman is touched and shaken and walks out of the house quietly, perhaps deeply moved.

Even in this section, we have to distinguish the act of homicide from the patriot facing the bullet, or the man of war battling for his country, and of course the judge doing his duty by sending the criminal to the gallows — all are moved by a very different impulse and therefore cannot be put in the same category. This difference is important since there exists a body of thinkers who make a fetish of non-violence as if all killing is evil. These men of little thinking would let the world be run over by forces of terror and darkness. Such weak souls and weaker minds often take refuge in popular religious beliefs or a sentimental idealism without caring to probe the deeper issues involved. Love and kindness and gentleness and peace and non-injury to living beings is no doubt divine but we must also see and recognize the divinity in strength and courage and hard sacrifice that lays down its body at the altar of a higher truth or to save humanity. That the sacrifice and courage is physical does not make a difference to its essential nature. Therefore again the *Gita*, which so beautifully describes non-violence as an important divine attribute, nonetheless exhorts Arjuna to fight and slay the champions of evil but with a difference — not with personal hatred, anger, jealousy or any of these lower motives that delude our minds and souls, but with a larger vision and truth that sees the divine in all beings and hates not what it slays. Therefore when we speak of killing we have to draw a distinction between the different intentions which inspire an act. In a sense it is true of all action. Law itself recognises this and draws a line between *actus rea* (the has to be 'guilt' action) and *mens rea* (the has to be 'guilt' intention). The essential thing is whether the motive behind it is a selfish gain (as in aggression resorted to for monetary or power gain purposes or even for religious domination or the forced domination of one group over the other) or there is a larger purpose involved (as in a war of self-defence, protective violence, etc). The first is a low and ghastly act, the other noble and courageous. To fight a just war as an inner offering and for the purpose of a greater

truth is equally divine and cannot be done away with in the world in its present stage of evolution.

Violent Deaths

Violent deaths as in accidents or mass catastrophes form a separate category from an inner point of view. The suddenness of the event may create confusion in the individual who is violently thrown out of the body. He may not realise at once that he is dismembered thereby making a part of his most elementary physical-vital consciousness linger in the earth atmosphere for a longer time. Sometimes these vital formations can hover around the spot of the disaster, enacting the scene over and over again, what some people perceive and label as ghosts. This formation can grow and prolong its life by feeding on the fear of people, thereby prolonging its own misery as well as of others. Of course this temporary vital formation should not be confused with the soul that sooner or later breaks through every sheath of bondage and ascends upwards to its true home and resting place.

In the case of mass deaths as in war or catastrophes, this vital-physical part thrown out in great numbers can form a considerable sticky mass in the earth atmosphere. This mass can itself become a nidus (nest or a breeding place) for the emergence of new and unknown diseases affecting the body and mind. Outbreaks of diseases following such mass catastrophes can multiply geometrically as the mass grows following more and more deaths, and are what are called epidemics. It is only the natural disintegration of this amorphous vital substance due to the cessation of the disaster or the intervention of an unseen higher force that can dissipate the sticky form and clear the earth-atmosphere of its illness, restoring health and peace once again. Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) could have originated in such a way following the recent Gulf War just as an influenza epidemic followed the First World War.

Sudden deaths due to unforeseen accidents and violence cause much greater pain in those who are left behind and especially if the event is an untimely one (much before the average life expectancy). It has the power to radically influence one's self-view and world-view. The western psychologists recognize the aspect of deep outer trauma to the emotional being that such events can cause. But if we probe deeper, quite often one can see that the event has over a period of time facilitated the emergence of the soul. Perhaps it is the very shock and helplessness of things that

draws out the deeper entity since nothing else could cope better. Perhaps the event suddenly shakes us and we see the utter vanity of all our efforts. There are a good number of examples that we all encounter in our lives which repeatedly testify to this strange paradox wherein an outer misfortune serves a great and ultimately positive inner end. A middle-aged person once recounted his story. He lost his father when this man was still in his mid-teens (about fifteen years of age). His father, a man deeply devoted to God, died at the age of forty-seven in a car accident. Worse, the accident occurred within a couple of weeks after his return from a visit to his spiritual Master. The event shook the family and the boy for about a few months. Life became topsy-turvy and uncertain. But after the initial phase was over, one day the boy went quietly and sat in his father's room where there was a corner dedicated to his master for meditation. As this lad sat ruminating about the uncertainties of life and future, he somehow struck at a thought. He wondered what his father would do in the face of life's uncertainties. The answer that spontaneously came to him was that even his father would advise him to turn to God and seek help. Now instead of cursing God for the event, he started relating with Him praying for strength and peace and guidance and even worldly help of every kind. And the young boy began to perceive a hidden and benevolent Hand shaping his own and his family's life in every way. The event changed him forever and for good!

But not all are fortunate enough to develop a spontaneous faith during their hour of crisis. And so what will apply in their case?

Well, the essential element is the same. It is to remind the person as to what his loved one would have truly wished and hoped for the one left behind. To fulfil those dreams and hopes and aspirations, to carry on with life as if in a logical continuation of a single effort of the great force of Life itself manifesting through different bodies, becomes a point of re-emergence of the sunken life force of those aggrieved. It gives us a sense of continuity and through completing the unfinished deeds of the departed, even a sense of victory over death. A classical example is the instance of Madame Curie, an atheist, who following the sudden demise of her husband due to a car accident, went on to complete his unfinished work which became a means for others to live on.

There is in each one of us something deep and true which may come out during hours of intense crisis and personal loss and by its emergence from within us, conquer

suffering by an inner strength, conquer pain through a smile, conquer death through its inherent sense of continuity and immortality.

Therein lies the crucial role of a therapist. Counselling in such cases is a very delicate and sensitive thing. The counsellor has to be very sensitive to the personal pain as well as the outer difficulties that may arise due to the sudden event. But he must also know the direction towards which the being and consciousness of the person has to be gently led, the utility of all moments of deep pain and crisis, and assist, if he can, the delivery of the inmost soul through this dark and painful labour.

Abortion

Abortion is another sensitive subject with certain religions at least. It hinges upon this singular issue that abortion is akin to taking life. But what when the choice is to be made between saving the mother's life or the foetus? To say that abortion is unjustified under all circumstances and is sinful may lead to an act of a greater ignorance. Also, what about the emotional and other preparedness of the parents to receive the child? Is it better to necessarily bring the child to life and then condemn him to a worse fate? And what if one had the precise vision about the child and the entry of the soul? The tales of yore are full of such examples, for instance in the *Mahabharata*, Rishi Vyasa suggests to Dhritrashtra to destroy the new-born child (none other than Duryodhana). A similar story is recounted with regard to the birth of Shishupal, Jarasandh, and Ravana. In fact Ravana's father, a sage himself, tells his wife that this womb is carrying a *rakshasa* and should therefore be destroyed. But the mother refuses. Although they are stories recounted in our ancient literature, such visions or intuition have been experienced by people all over the world. Unable to easily authenticate or prove such an event usually leads to the trivializing of this phenomenon at best or using it conveniently to justify infanticide at worst.

As to the time of entry, it refers to the moment when the soul enters in contact with the physical body. If the soul has accepted to take up a body for whatever purpose, then its decision needs to be given full importance and other considerations can be set aside. But if that has not yet happened then it is a different thing.

Here again occult knowledge comes to rescue us from the impasse. Taking life is wrong, especially human life. True, but this is based upon the principle that there is within living beings, especially the human, a conscious soul which is like a delegate

divinity. This soul takes up a body for a certain human experience necessary for its growth. To take away life is therefore considered as if one is interfering with the divine plan of the soul. It is here that we need to have the precise knowledge about the *time of ensoulment* of the human body. According to certain traditions, it is perhaps after the third month that the soul chooses to come into contact with the human body while it is in the womb. As far as the formation of vital life-processes, it happens somewhere around the fifth month or so. And if a sustainable and viable living form is considered, that comes even later around the seventh month. This is of course one viewpoint and allows for exceptions depending on individual consciousness of the mother as well as the soul that is seeking an opportunity for being born once again. The final decision in this regard should be left to the physician and the expectant mother and not with the moral police force. A moral law devoid of wisdom and compassion is only a façade behind which hypocrisy thrives. There should be therefore no ethical, moral or spiritual objection to any abortion before the third month to say the least. Incidentally, even medically, the abortions are advised during the first three months only and very seldom later and only under exceptional circumstances. Most planned abortions take place in fact during the first month itself when the foetus has hardly formed beyond a mass or bundle of cells. So in essence there is neither any scientific basis in the moral argument, nor an occult basis. Considering all this and the benefit that it may bring to the living mother-to-be there should be no ethical objection for a timely abortion done to protect the physical and mental well-being of the woman. This is especially so in the case of unwed pregnancies which are on the increase now-a-days. To punish or condemn such a woman and the child-to-be with a life of shame and ignominy by forcing her to continue the pregnancy is nothing short of torture, a cruelty worse than that inflicted upon the yet-to-be-conscious unborn.

Organ Transplant

Viewed from a certain standpoint organ transplant is not only ethically justified but spiritually laudable. After all is it not an act of compassion and inner detachment? However although it may be justified as an act of compassion, it may not necessarily be an enlightened compassion.

The spiritual view is not confined to the outer and practical momentary good of an individual, but more importantly the inner good. Spiritual vision is not cabined within

the confines of outer life as our rational mind is but looks at the complex play of forces in and around. Therein comes the difficulty. Should the body organ of an inwardly developed person be handed over to a criminal's body for use or abuse later on? Does each organ, nay each cell have a consciousness of its own? And is not the whole body one and therefore isn't it dangerous to dislocate it and thereby confuse the body consciousness?

A story is recorded of a heart recipient who started to get nightmares of violent deaths following the transplant. It was later discovered that the donor was actually a murder convict! The story is no more fantastic or improbable considering the knowledge we have now that memory does not reside in any particular area of the brain alone but is spread throughout the body! The cells are perhaps far more conscious than we imagine, their imprints more faithful and enduring than we understand. Would the soul, if consulted, agree to prolonging life at this cost?

Of course this may not matter in most cases wherein the donor and the recipient are both equally and largely part of the mass of our humanity, struggling and stumbling in the darkness of gross ignorance. To be more specific, before the process of individualisation, we live largely in the realm of an amorphous mass of humanity driven largely by certain subconscious instincts and needs. Here, interchange is the law since there is very little individuality. Since a lot of inner interchange takes place at this level, it does not matter whether there is an additional physical interchange. In fact a conscious act of donation, blood for example, is a very good preparation for this stage of inner self-development. It is a conscious recognition that we are all essentially one and that the manmade external barriers of caste and creed, nationality and religion have to be transcended by a larger sense of human unity. Organ donation like blood (the simplest and most common organ transplant is blood donation) is a physical reminder of this fact of unity and therefore good. Also there is an obvious difference between short-term exchange of the physical material as for example blood (where the cell life is relatively short) and the permanent replacement of an organ like the kidneys.

But there intervenes another stage of human development wherein the being gets crystallized and individualized so to say. At this point and as consciousness grows, we begin to become aware of the beneficial and harmful effects of our associations and interchange with others. At this stage we begin to exercise choices and are no more driven by certain fixed norms, social, religious or otherwise. We are no more part of a

herd but a conscious humanity. At this stage, one cannot make general rules and it will depend upon each case. Those who feel that organ donation helps them grow or become wider in their consciousness may continue to do so. But some who are very sensitive are prone to suffer a change of inner and outer atmospheres. They have a different field of work and action and line of growth. These are the ones for whom organ donation or reception may not necessarily be good. As of now we do not consider these subtler psychological issues during organ transplant. A future psychology may well do so.

But finally we arrive at a still higher stage of internal self-development beyond the individual. We begin to pass beyond the realm of the normal humanity. At this stage we have to be very conscious of all interchange, psychological as well as physical. Certainly organ donation or receiving at this stage is not at all advisable. One has to get rid of a fearful attachment to the body, learn to calmly see all events as part of a larger plan, learn to look beyond life and death. Even if one feels that life has to be prolonged in the body for a certain higher purpose, it has to be left in the hands of that Higher Power rather than resort to desperate and dubious physical means. Great Masters who have not blinked twice before sacrificing their lives and bodies for the sake of human progress, have however, strange as it may seem, seldom indulged in organ donation. It is not because they are not compassionate but because their compassion works in a higher way, at a very different dimension than merely giving sanction to prolonging the old maladies in worn out bodies, especially when they see that death itself is a means adopted by Nature for performing the most radical organ transplant of the whole body. Why deprive the person of this total change into a completely new body by doing such patchwork upon the old?

Since so much depends on the level of consciousness of both the donor and the recipient, no general rule can therefore be made regarding this issue, with the solution differing from case to case.

Post-mortem Examination

The necessity of a post-mortem examination for forensic purposes in order to bring a culprit to task cannot be questioned. So also perhaps in the study of anatomy by medical students for the moment at least, although one hopes that one day better means may emerge for this kind of study. What is doubtful however is the need of

post-mortem simply for legal purposes as for example in clear situations of accidents or where post-mortem is not likely to yield any useful information. It is also doubtful whether the method of post-mortem has really helped the cause of science. The rationale is that by studying the dead body we can establish the cause of death and grow wiser for the future. But the dead body reveals only a few physical signs, not the deeper inner cause or psychological antecedents of the illness. Unfortunately this method of enquiry into purely physical causes continues to haunt our science as a relic of our past stress upon reductionism. The whole approach has so completely biased us in favour of physical causes and their inter associations that we have for long remained blind to deeper psychological and even molecular causes. Now that we are waking up from the stupor of a purely material approach, we need to rethink about our methods of treating the dead the way we do in our hospital premises, mortuary and post-mortem tables. To mutilate a body that has served the ends of a higher consciousness in the name of science needs to be rethought. Science, yes, but what about the higher science that sees the body not as a mechanical but a conscious machine!

In other words, the stress on post-mortem is based on a model of man that believes the body to be an unconscious machine and illnesses having purely physical causes. But wisdom grows and today we are approaching a point where the inner causes are becoming more and more important than outer ones. That apart, the real question is that whether the body something like an automaton or a mechanical tool which has no reaction to its mutilation as long as the mind is asleep? Many are now beginning to believe that this is not true. The body has its own inherent consciousness and it takes time before the full connection of the soul is severed from the body. To mutilate a body during this crucial phase is to bring an inner pain and even some kind of a loss in terms of the riches of consciousness for the departing soul. The least that a dead man would want is to depart peacefully and gracefully rather than turn around and see the house he inhabited being broken into pieces because the dweller is going away! But science is yet to see the dweller and is yet to discover the consciousness of the body which is not just a lump of clay. Till it does that (as it must one day) the least we can do is to treat the body that has served as a vehicle for the soul with respect and a minimum of sensitivity expected from our human stature.

Resuscitation and Artificial Life Support

Resuscitation is about reviving those who have technically died. It is also sometimes about prolonging life in those who are living on the edge of life and death. Revival within a certain period of time before the cord of life is snapped is very much possible. Yogis in India have always known the art of returning from the land of the dead. What the ancient mystic knew how to do consciously through spiritual and occult means, the modern scientist does semi-consciously through material methods. However, a yogi may not wish to interfere with the processes of nature since he knows that in the strange and vast economy of nature, both life and death serve a certain common purpose. Nevertheless authentic instances do exist of a yogi's intervention in reviving the dead, of bringing back to life – man or beast. As for prolonging life or saving from imminent death, one comes across many instances (such as the one quoted below) which medical science would call miracles and explain away as chance factors.

“The 14th of July is a remarkable day in the history of the world. On that day, we commemorate the French Revolution, ‘La Prise de la Bastille’ which took place 200 years ago. The same day in 1996, was a fearful and unforgettable day for me but in a different way.

“At 1.15 p.m. my husband had gone to the library and I was watching TV while my six-year-old son and nine-month-old daughter were playing. I went to the kitchen to drink some water when suddenly my son came rushing to say that the baby had put something in her mouth. I ran to her. She was crying a lot and was looking at me pathetically. When I opened her mouth wide, I could see a small cone shaped plastic object (it was part of a plastic toy) stuck in her throat near her ‘uvula’. I tried to remove it but in vain and her throat started bleeding. In course of time her crying decreased since she was suffocated. To my horror, I couldn't see the ball anymore, it had descended further down her throat. A cold fear gripped me as I watched with frightened eyes my baby turning blue. With the help of my landlord, I rushed to the nearest private nursing home. There was no time to waste. Every second the baby's condition was deteriorating. On my way to the clinic I kept calling to Her to save my child. On reaching the nursing home I rushed to the doctor's chamber where we were stopped by a staff nurse. I pushed her aside in order to be attended to immediately.

"The doctor was busy talking to some people. I yelled to him to look at my child immediately and I babbled out what had happened. He asked me to relax and started checking her heart beat, her pulse, etc... I became jittery because I thought some more time was being wasted as he didn't make any effort to remove the object from her throat. Finally, he turned solemnly to me and said, 'I am sorry, but your baby died ten minutes ago.'

"'No!' I cried out. I couldn't believe it. It was too horrible to accept. Everything had happened too fast for me to digest. 'You should have brought her here immediately, why did you delay? After everything is over you have brought her to me. What can I do now? You can take her away.' I tried to convince him that I had rushed to the hospital immediately. If the baby had been ailing from some illness then it would have been understandable, but a baby who was very active and playing happily only a few minutes ago, was now lying lifeless. I realised that once dead, she is gone forever, nothing can bring her back. So I was determined that the doctor should try everything to revive her. I told him to remove the object from her throat, it could be that with the airway unblocked she would revive. He thrust his huge hand into her tiny mouth, struggled for a few minutes and removed it. He scolded me again for what had happened, perhaps because of his own frustration at not being able to do anything! It could be that with a proper heart massage, she would revive. He started massaging her heart, shaking her at times, but nothing happened.

"He lost hope, but not I. I pleaded and pleaded fearing that I would lose her forever. But it had already been almost 30 minutes since she had been declared dead. All he could tell me was that she was dead, and that I could take her away. But I kept fighting and kept hoping. 'I am not taking her till something is done.' The doctor calmed me down and began explaining many things to me.

"He made me feel her pulse and listen for her heartbeat. There was no heartbeat, no pulse. Then he opened one of her lifeless eyes and told me to watch the pupil which was not responsive to light. Then he lifted her hand and let it fall, it fell lifelessly on the examination table. He did the same with her leg. He declared that she had all the symptoms of a dead person. Fearing that he would stop trying, I kept insisting that he do something. Then quite suddenly,

he lifted the child off the table and ran up the stairs to the operation theatre, followed by some junior doctors and other staff.

"In the operation theatre, the doctor started massaging her heart and gave the baby oxygen and intravenous drips.

"Outside the theatre I was praying for my baby's life. I was praying to Her every second to save my child. At the human level everything had been tried and had failed. Now it was up to the Divine. Only She could do something. I had surrendered completely to Her. If she was saved then she would have a whole life to live, so much to do and be. Otherwise she would be gone forever. But with the ticking of time, my hope was fading.

"As the doctor did not come out even after half an hour, I finally lost all hope. I said to myself, 'If that is Her decision I must accept it.' At that time my husband arrived at the hospital. He did not know the seriousness of the situation. I felt more guilty since all this had happened in his absence.

"Inside the doctor was trying everything that medical science had to offer. After trying for about thirty minutes to no avail, he left the child for dead. He was coming out of the theatre towards me when one of the O.R. boys came rushing behind him to say that her heartbeat had started. The doctor rushed back to the theatre and started massaging her heart again.

"That morning at 2.00 a.m. she regained consciousness and opened her eyes. The nurse came running out and called me in. Inside my child was lying helpless with an oxygen mask strapped to her face and I.V. tubes in her hands and legs. Two staff nurses were holding her arms and legs so that the I.V. flow would not be interrupted. Now that she had survived, I wanted to check immediately whether her brain was affected so I called her name. She looked at me. I said, 'Hello!' hoping she would raise her hand for a handshake as I had taught her to do. She tried to lift her right hand. I was ecstatic for I knew my child was not only alive but mentally all right as well. She had heard me, and I knew the Grace had filled my life.

"After three days, just before leaving the hospital, we went to the doctor to express our gratitude. He said, 'It's I who should thank you for your

persistence. Again and again, I told you she was dead. She had all the symptoms of death which I demonstrated to you. But you were commanding me and like an instrument in the hands of the Lord, I tried doing something which I thought to be impossible. God is great. It's a miracle. Thank you for insisting, otherwise I would have committed a great sin. She is born again in my hospital."⁶

Does this authenticate the scientist's action? Yes and No. Yes in the sense that it authenticates the possibility and probably points to the fact that modern science has unwittingly entered the threshold of the occult domain. It is moving in areas of which it has as yet only a very superficial knowledge. This superficial knowledge mainly consists of the material side of the processes that form an interphase with life-energy and the vital worlds. These are powerful discoveries giving one an unprecedented capacity to manipulate life. And it is here that one has to be careful wherein comes the 'No' part of it. Power without full or deeper knowledge creates a dangerous imbalance and can be a very harmful thing. A commensurate inner development and deeper knowledge is needed. The material side of the processes known, the scientist has to also explore the other shore of boundlessness and all that is contained in between. This knowledge cannot come by studying material processes alone whose seams have already burst beyond the confines of our gross matter. We need to complement the knowledge of material processes with the knowledge of occult worlds whose material organization is different from our own.

It is therein that lies the knot of our difficulty. A precise knowledge is needed to know the actual will of the being, a knowledge of how far the dead (or near-dead) had walked away from the domain of life and material world and how much of his consciousness would be lost forever by this revival, a knowledge of what force comes back after the resuscitation, the vital being of the person under ALS or some other vital force masquerading from the other worlds and possessing or taking hold of the body. Instances of radical personality change, and that too for the worse following survival after prolonged and near fatal illness have been documented in history. What about prolonging life in a body that the soul has already decided to quit? What if life returns and continues but not the soul and the body becomes a prey for certain vital forces to feast upon during the interim period?

⁶ *Golden Chain*, February 1999

The answers would lie in expanding the base of our knowledge from the mere material chemistry to occult chemistry as well. That it would happen one day is the hope for the future. For if it does not then this blind and powerful material manipulation would be foredoomed to self-destruction.

Euthanasia

Euthanasia is a paradox of sorts. The traditional role of the physician is to save life. But here he is expected to *take away* life. The justifying rationale is that a very important task of the physician is to relieve the patient of the burden of suffering and pain. Just as one of the means that nature uses to relieve our miseries of one life at least is to send us for a while into the sleep of death. So also when the doctor is aware that there is no further hope to live and that prolonging survival would only mean to prolong the patient's agony and pain, then it would be better to assist him in his departure or at least deny any active support that would be merely extending his pain. Accordingly as the case may be, euthanasia is categorised into two types: active and passive. Active euthanasia is like assisted suicide wherein the doctor in some way assists the patient to die through his active intervention (in favour of death). The patient in this instance may be mentally alert and makes his choice and just as one prays to god to grant life or death so too here he calls upon his human physician god to grant him death. The issue centers around the right to die with dignity. Dr. Jack Kevorkian who invented the suicide machine achieved notoriety in the USA for active euthanasia. Though convicted of manslaughter, he called himself a social activist who was delivering people of their pain!

Passive euthanasia involves withdrawal of life-support systems in the terminally ill. Whatever it may be, the following questions arise in our consideration of the subject of euthanasia:

Could it be that the person opting for death is labouring under some form of depression and needs treatment for the same rather than granting him the death wish?

Is the choice of his surface being also the choice of his inmost soul? We know that man is a complex entity and often harbours contradictory wills. A part of him may want a temporary respite from suffering through death but another part may not like to give up the struggle and perhaps yet another part may be actually enjoying it! So

the question is, which part is in front when he is choosing to embrace death? Is it his nobler and higher part as in the case of the hero who sacrifices his life for the nation? Or is it his lower vital part that is in love with tragedy and therefore seeks death as a tragic end to the drama of life? Or is it his rational but ignorant part that knows not the significance of suffering when it comes in our earthly life? Or is it the worst in him, a nervous recoil from pain and a shrinking from the horror of the battle of life? It is not easy to know and therefore the decision to quit needs to be questioned, the patient led to deeper understanding of himself through his pain and not simply complied with as an ignorant mother would comply with each and every wish of the errant child.

What type of karma do the doctor and the patient and the relatives incur when they become active assistants of death rather than the creative children of life and light?

Who decides that the hour of death is close and there is nothing more that can happen? Based upon existing knowledge (or ignorance) and the law of probability, miracles do happen. And the greatest miracle is not necessarily the last minute personal survival of a dying man but a transformative change in his consciousness, helping him to face death with the certitude of immortality. Can we predict when this inner enlightenment will come and will it be wise to take away that possibility by focusing too much on the pain of the body?

Who knows what is transpiring within the consciousness of the individual while he is outwardly comatosed or even suffering?

Is the decision of family and friends due to genuine concern for the terminally ill? Or is it a nervous shrinking from the sight of another's pain and worse still, a means to relieve themselves of their own suffering of taking care of the terminally ill?

The sole remedy is to grow in our consciousness but till we can do that it may be better as a general rule not to interfere too much with nature's play in and around oneself or to play god while one is still a struggling human being.

The coma and unconsciousness of the body and mind does not necessarily imply an unconsciousness of the soul. And who are we to limit the possibilities for the soul that may be using this narrow window of opportunity called coma and death to realise itself? Who can say when we shall wake up from our sleep and at which fortunate moment realise that we are essentially deathless and divine? Here is a real life story

penned by a medical doctor trained in the Western paradigm that shakes the very foundations of our belief and actions.

“Karen had slipped into a coma. There was involvement of every organ of her body, including her brain, and literally no other chemical agent to be tried. There was nothing we could do. After viewing the CT scan and seeing the diffuse brain involvement, it was easy to see why. We expected each day to be her last. Her eyes were fixed and unresponsive, her breathing shallow. Her heart was still strong, as we knew it would be. However, the disease (acute leukemia) was ravaging her blood system and brain, and there was evidence of opportunistic pneumonia involving both lungs. We knew that she would soon die.

“I began to have a tremendous dread of Karen dying while I was on call. I did not want to pronounce her dead. It came to a point where I hoped that her death would come on nights that I was away from the hospital because I feared that I would not be any emotional support for the family, or that I would even be able to perform my duties as a physician. This family had come to mean so much to me.

“It was a Wednesday night, and Karen had been in a coma for four days. I was the chief resident on call for the wards. I spoke with the family and peeked in on Karen. I noticed her breathing was very shallow and her temperature quite low. Death could be imminent. I selfishly hoped to myself that maybe she’d wait until tomorrow to die. I went about my chores until about 3.00 am, when I finally tried to get some sleep. At 4.00 am I received a STAT pager to Karen’s room. This puzzled me somewhat because we were not going to make any heroic interventions. Nevertheless, I ran to her room.

“The nurse greeted me outside the room and grabbed my arm. ‘Karen wants to talk to you.’ I literally thought this nurse was crazy. I couldn’t imagine what she was talking about — Karen was in a coma. At this point in my life, my scientific, Newtonian way of thinking ruled my thoughts, primarily because this is the approach we are trained in day in and day out in medical school. I had neglected other, more important spiritual aspects of my being, ignoring the instinct that knows what reason cannot know.

"I went into the room, and to my amazement, Karen was sitting up in bed. Her mother was on the left side of the bed, her father on the right. I stood next to the father, not saying anything, not knowing what to say. Karen's eyes which had been glazed over for four days, were now clear and sharp. She simply stated, 'God has come for me. It is time for me to go.' She then hugged us tightly, one at a time. These were strong hugs, hugs that I keep thinking were impossible. I could only visualize her CT scan and the severe degree of brain damage. How could this be?

"Then Karen lay down. But she popped back up immediately, as if she had forgotten something. She went around the bed to each of us again, with her penetrating eyes fixing our stares. No hugs this time. But her hands were strong and steady, squeezing our shoulders as she spoke. 'God is here,' she said. 'Do you see him? Do you know him?' I was scared. Nothing in my experience could explain what was happening here. There was nothing else to say, so I mumbled, 'Yes. Goodbye. Thank you.' I didn't know what to say. The entire time, I kept visualising that CT scan. Then Karen lay back down and died — or I should say, she quit breathing and her heart stopped. Her powerful spirit went on living.

"It was years before I could tell that story, even to my wife. I still cannot tell it without feeling overwhelming emotions. I know now that this experience is not something to be understood through the limited viewpoint of the scientific realm. We are, in essence, spiritual beings in a spiritual universe, not primarily governed by Newton's laws, but by the laws of God."⁷

Killing of Animals

This important issue has somehow received scant attention of mankind so far. Though there have been certain individual efforts or even sometimes general efforts guided by religious or humane sentiment, it is only recently that the plight of animals being slaughtered is being noticed. So merciless has been the hand of the killer that some species have come close to extinction. Here we need to remember the spiritual as well

⁷ James C. Brown, M.D (as retold in *Chicken soup for the Soul*, 5th Portion)

as material truth that 'man-animal-plant-material' form a single chain linked by such a oneness that an unenlightened disruption of any part of the whole threatens the entire chain itself. But that apart the issue involves deeper facets of human life and our outlook towards life itself. The question can be answered in two parts — the general and the individual.

Generally speaking, animal killing is done, for four main reasons:

- For food whether for purposes of the palate, taste or sometimes health and nutrients (though current views on the subject hardly justify it).
- For commercial purposes like ivory, leather, fur, etc.
- For medicinal and research purposes.
- For purposes of self-defense as for example killing a poisonous or wild animal to preserve one's own life or another's.

Now, the real issue is which of these purposes really helps in the evolutionary march of humanity and preserves the balance of life upon earth (*lokasangrahartha* of the *Gita*). The blind and merciless killing for commercial interests (including fancy food and some drug firms) is obviously far from evolutionary. With regard to health one can envisage certain situations wherein meat or soup (let us exclude unfertilized eggs from the issue) may be understandable as for example in areas with hardly any vegetation, or with people involved in vigorous muscular activity (like athletes or warriors and army-men) or sometimes in cases of severe debilitating illness. Here the principle is that given a choice of survival higher forms that are closer to an expression of divinity are to be preserved over the lower, although such a choice would really be rare, in modern times at least. Besides, we should not forget that nature has provided us with a digestive tract that is primarily suited for vegetarian food. Much of the justification of eating animals is deep down an argument for the sake of justifying the taste buds and nothing more. A balanced vegetarian diet is not only healthy but also prevents quite a few diseases that non-vegetarians are prone to. These are now proven facts that are no more in the sphere of ambiguity. The same would apply to a certain extent with regard to drug research as well. But only to a certain extent. The line between genuine trial for the interests of medicine and commerce/research for its own sake is often thin. Most animal research can truly be done away with. But commerce and ambition (promotions through paper publication) stand as a barrier on the way; human insensitiveness and cruelty perpetuate our own animality.

Unfortunately, in our present stage of Ignorance wherein the average man depends so much on allopathic treatment, it is difficult to say which is a better choice. But then let us also hope and work towards a future wherein we no more need medicines from outside for health and healing. That would be the real solution. But so long as men continue to depend upon allopathic drugs, it is difficult to do away completely with animal research. It will be like taking the crutch away from a lame man before teaching him to walk. Finally, animal killing or for that matter even human killing for self-defence (as in a defensive war) is naturally justified and perhaps even an act of courage leading to soul-development and protection of others.

But for now the dilemma exists and the question remains as to how we are to tackle it individually? The rule is the same here — to do what helps in the evolutionary march of the individual Divine within us. If there is a conflict between an outer conduct done for purely external and commercial reasons and the natural awakening to an inner law then there is no doubt that the inner law is to be respected. It is only the Divine Will whose command, if one has clearly received it, can and does transcend both, the outer and the inner. For both these lesser standards are ultimately partial and therefore ignorant ways of seeing and feeling, albeit necessary for the moment. The Divine alone knows and sees the whole truth. In other words, while we must respect the growing inner sensitivity in us which is like the softer cover of a seed (in contrast to the hard and insensitive outer cover) yet we should be careful not to make a fetish of any single ideal (including non-violence) or become a social activist driven by an emotional idealism (unless that is what we are presently called upon to do by our nature). One should also be sure that the shrinking from violence is not a recoil of the sensory-nervous parts (pity and *jugupsa*) but a genuine need of the inner being. The true solution can only come by the growth of our soul whose authentic light can truly guide us through all dilemmas.

“Nature in her deeper aspect as a conscious spiritual Power is concerned with the growth, by experience, the spiritual development of the souls she has in her charge — and these souls themselves have a say in the matter. All these good people lament and wonder that unaccountably they and other good people are visited with such meaningless sufferings and misfortunes. But are they really visited with them by an outside Power or by a mechanical Law of Karma? Is it not possible that the soul itself — not the outward mind, but the spirit within has accepted and chosen these things as part of its development

in order to get through the necessary experience at a rapid rate, to hew through... even at the risk or the cost of much damage to the outward life and the body? To the growing soul, to the spirit within us, may not difficulties, obstacles, attacks be a means of growth, added strength, enlarged experience, training for spiritual victory? The arrangement of things may be that and not a mere question of the pounds, shillings and pence of a distribution of rewards and retributory misfortunes!

“It is the same with the problem of the taking of animal life under the circumstances put forward by your friend in the letter. It is put on the basis of an invariable ethical right and wrong to be applied to all cases — is it right to take animal life at all, under any circumstances, is it right to allow an animal to suffer under your eyes when you can relieve it by an euthanasia? There can be no indubitable answer to a question put like that, because the answer depends on data which the mind has not before it. In fact there are many other factors which make people incline to this short and merciful way out of the difficulty — the nervous inability to bear the sight and hearing of so much suffering, the unavailing trouble, the disgust and inconvenience — all tend to give force to the idea that the animal itself would want to be out of it. But what does the animal really feel about it — may it not be clinging to life in spite of the pain? Or may not the soul have accepted these things for a quicker evolution into a higher state of life? If so, the mercy dealt out may conceivably interfere with the animal’s Karma. In fact the right decision might vary in each case and depend on a knowledge which the human mind has not — and it might very well be said that until it has it, it has not the right to take life. It was some dim perception of this truth that made religion and ethics develop the law of Ahimsa — and yet that too becomes a mental rule which it is found impossible to apply in practice. And perhaps the moral of it all is that we must act for the best according to our lights in each case, as things are, but that the solution of these problems can only come by pressing forward towards a greater light, a greater consciousness in which the problems themselves, as now stated by the human mind, will not arise because we shall have a vision which will see the world in a different way and a guidance which at present is not ours. The mental or moral rule is a stop-gap which men are obliged to use, very

uncertainly and stumblingly, until they can see things whole in the light of the spirit."⁸

*Not so shall Truth extend her flight sublime,
Pass from the poor beginnings she has made
And with the splendour of her wings displayed
Range through the boundaries of Space and Time.*

*Clamp her not down to her material finds!
She shall go further. She shall not reject
The light within, nor shall the dialect
Of unprogressive pedants bar men's minds...
The intellect is not all; a guide within
Awaits our question. He it was informed
The reason He surpasses; and unformed
Presages of His mightiness begin.⁹*

⁸ Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, pp. 449-51

⁹ Sri Aurobindo: 'In the Moonlight', *Collected Poems*, pp. 59-60

The Triumph-Song of Trishancou

I shall not die.

*Although this body, when the spirit tires
Of its cramped residence, shall feed the fires,
My house consumes, not I.*

Leaving that case

*I find out ample and ethereal room.
My spirit shall avoid the hungry tomb,
Deceiving death's embrace.*

Night shall contain

*The sun in its cold depths; Time too must cease;
The stars that labour shall have their release.
I cease not, I remain...*

Transformation

*My breath runs in a subtle rhythmic stream;
It fills my members with a might divine:
I have drunk the Infinite like a giant's wine.
Time is my drama or my pageant dream.
Now are my illumined cells joy's flaming scheme
And changed my thrilled and branching nerves to fine
Channels of rapture opal and hyaline
For the influx of the Unknown and the Supreme.*

*I am no more a vassal of the flesh,
A slave to Nature and her leaden rule;
I am caught no more in the senses' narrow mesh.
My soul unhorizoned widens to measureless sight,
My body is God's happy living tool,
My spirit a vast sun of deathless light.*

Sri Aurobindo

Towards a Vision of the Future

Behind the Veil of Death

Death is our present reality yet is immortality the secret aspiration in man and therefore our future potentiality. Whatever higher things we seek in life have already been granted by the highest Self in us. Mankind has aspired deeply among other things for permanence of life; for vanquishing suffering, evil and pain; for conquering old age, disease, infirmity and death. Each age of mankind has seen the revival of this aspiration of terrestrial perfection and permanence albeit in a language appropriate to the age concerned. Thus in the early intuitive dawns of mankind the aspiration of immortality takes the form of discovering the immortal spiritual principle within us, the immortal soul and our true Self beyond grief and death. In the historic and mental ages¹ of mankind, we see this impulse manifest in preserving the works of art and science, of moral and mental values, of the cultural ethos that would ensure some kind of racial immortality through the best achievements of the age. Down the line and in the heroic and vitalistic ages of mankind, we have the bard singing glories of the deeds of kings and knights. We also see huge structures built around the dead with all facilities for their enjoyment of an afterlife. Here, as in ancient Egypt, afterlife is considered as a means for men and women to enjoy the vital pleasures of this life albeit in an exaggerated form. The hells and heavens of the Puranic and other legends are largely a superimposition of this world view on an aspect of afterlife that has some semblance to our earthly joys and pains. Seen from an occult angle, these hells and heavens are largely creations in the vital worlds. In other words, they do not have a permanent reality and are constructs of the human mind. Closer to earth they portray something of its impulse to joy and suffering. Or truer still, our earthly joys and sorrows are a pale reflection of these attics of the vital worlds, which cast some light of happiness and shadows of suffering upon our human days. In our present day material age, this impulse to immortality has taken a material form, for example, the efforts

¹ The four ages of mankind – the *satya*, *treta*, *dwapara* and *kali* also referred to as the age of gold, silver, bronze and iron are ages when the Divine Energy works correspondingly at the spiritual, mental, vital and physical stuff of our collective being.

towards an indefinite prolongation of life in the body through physical means for achieving a genetic continuation rather than a social and cultural one, and most of all in the attempts towards achieving physical immortality. Whether such a mere physical prolongation of life without a commensurate transformation of our inner psychological existence will be a boon or a bane is anybody's guess. But the efforts are there and are likely to go on until one day we are able to combine all these separate efforts into a single whole and achieve a simultaneous permanence of a perfected spiritual, psychological and physical existence.

But for now we labour and struggle under the yoke of suffering and impermanence and realise that there is a need to understand the real reason if we wish to find the true solution.

The Scientist's View on Death and Immortality

Science has for long now been divorced from philosophy. Therefore it does not even raise the question of why. It simply seeks to find the how. And that it does with utmost perfection. But since the how of things is only a process subservient to something else that is deeper, all means to correct the process alone are likely to fail. Nature will devise fresh means for the final exit. Even if we were to block all material avenues of death by controlling each and every process, yet Nature will create new doors just as new diseases have replaced the old ones. In fact, the scientists have been trying to retard aging and to achieve immortality by various means since the last four decades or so. In its understanding of death science has moved on from cryonics² through errors of metabolism onto genetic manipulation. These are reasonable approaches but they touch only the fringe of the problem. Nevertheless, they indicate one thing, that the mind of the race is moving towards the conquest of disease and death. The imperfect means it employs now do not matter since the urge is true. Science will truly

² Cryogenics is the science of preserving the dead body by freezing it below sub-zero temperatures through liquid nitrogen. It is believed that bodies thus preserved under controlled conditions will one day come back to life after 50-100 years. The experiments done in Russia attracted quite a few millionaires paying a fortune for waking up one day again to life. This is based on the finding that some extinct animals frozen below ice have been found to be basically intact with no deterioration in their anatomical structures. Others believe that the ice crystals formed due to sub-zero temperatures is bound to damage the cells.

understand the secret of life and master it when it has understood how *life becomes matter*, and not as it is now striving to know the means and conditions under which matter becomes living. One has to reverse the view and see from top below to truly understand. Sooner or later, the biological sciences are bound to stumble into the territory of the occult much as physics stepped into the inner terrain unwittingly and thereby came closer to the hidden dimensions of matter. So too there are hidden dimensions of life that we need to understand and enter into for discovering the secret of prolonging youth and preventing decay.

Scientifically, the physical causes of death are the following:

Natural Aging

Aging is supposed to be regulated by the genetic makeup. It is scientifically believed that each species has a more or less fixed average lifespan. Normally in other mammals, this span is limited to the reproductive cycle except in man. Man's lifespan is delinked to the reproductive age. Nevertheless it has so far been believed that the physical being of man is so constituted that after a certain age, a progressive decline will inevitably follow. There is a gradual decline in the mental capacities like memory, a decline in stamina, a decline in the capacities of the heart and lungs and other vital organs, a decline in physical prowess. Of course, there may be a gain in wisdom and experience of life. The genetic errors and the molecular toxins continue to multiply till the body reaches a point of no return. Death comes then as a natural, inevitable consequence. Recent research however refutes this over-simplistic theory. Efforts are on to reduce the toxic and oxidative damage of the body, to manipulate the genetic material, to replace the old and decrepit organs with new and fresh ones. Not only this, it is now common knowledge that regular and methodical physical exercises can delay the aging process. Though the role of medicines like Vitamin E in retarding aging is very doubtful, still such efforts of science are indeed laudable and in the right direction, so far as physical aging is concerned. If science can discover the material basis of aging and the ways and means to retard it, that would truly be some achievement. However aging is only one of the physical factors responsible for death. There are other factors as well.

Disease

Death due to diseases fall under a vast and diverse range. Broadly however, these are genetic disorders, infections, injuries, inflammations, poisoning from within

(metabolic) or without, and degeneration. There are other causes as well. Here again efforts are on to prevent and cure them. The illnesses once considered incurable are coming closer to cure. Efforts are on to reduce the side effects of the drugs to a bare minimum by specific molecules. Even genetic diseases are coming in the range of manipulation. The problem however is that by its very nature the human body (like other physical bodies) is built on the basis of ignorance (that is a divisive mental consciousness). Therefore it has a strong sense of self and not-self. The result is a constant conflict with life around it. A body built of such a fabric cannot be immune from diseases. It may master one disease but fall prey to another. It may wipe out one illness but new ones will crop up, new diseases, new strains of germs more immune, new chemical and other hazards. The causes of illness are far more subtle and deeper and unless these are tackled there is little hope of making human life disease free, though we may replace the existing diseases with new ones.

“That death is caused by disease is a superficial explanation. How does disease come about? The Mother observes that the fact that one is ill shows that something is ill in his being. Disease and death are results of some disharmony in the being. Either the body fails to keep pace with the progress of the soul or it is unable to adapt itself to the universal movement. In either case, there is an inner disharmony and outer illness, disintegration and death follow as a consequence.”³

Thus the real causes of illness are subtle and connected to the imbalance between the life-force within the body and around it. A perfect balance is not possible so long as the body remains what it is. It is only a new body, built on the basis of oneness and of a truer substance that can be perfectly immune to diseases.

Accidents and Poisoning

It is obvious that life being what it is, an adventure in a dangerous charming world, there is little we can do by way of physical science to stop causes of accidents and poisoning except to grow the consciousness of the body. That indeed is the aim of all physical culture, to develop consciousness, mastery and balance and control. This would make the body more alert and conscious of any impending disaster thereby

³ M.P. Pandit: *Commentaries*

facilitating timely preventive action. If a rational physical culture can be combined with yogic processes which bring even the autonomic nervous system under control, then the mastery over diseases of diverse origin (including poisoning and degeneration and accidents and aging) can be near complete. Near, but not fully and not yet as a natural law of the body, for which the very body must undergo a great change, the kind envisaged through the Yoga of Supramental transformation. To this we can turn later. The Mother notes an interesting instance:

“Once, in Paris, I was crossing the Boulevard Saint Michel... I had decided that within a certain number of months I would achieve union with the psychic Presence, the inner Divine, and I no longer had any other thought, any other concern. I lived near the Luxembourg Gardens and every evening I used to walk there — but always deeply absorbed within. There is a kind of intersection there, and it is not a place to cross when one is deeply absorbed within; it was not very sensible. And so I was like that, I was walking, when I suddenly received a shock, as if I had received a blow, as if something had hit me, and I jumped back instinctively. And as soon as I had jumped back, a tram went past — it was the tram that I had felt at a little more than arm’s length. It had touched the aura, the aura of protection — it was very strong at that time, I was deeply immersed in occultism and I knew how to keep it — the aura of protection had been hit and that had literally thrown me backwards, as if I had received a physical shock. And what insults from the driver! I jumped back just in time and the tram went by.”⁴

Some blind people have been known to develop these subtle senses to help them compensate for the loss of sight. A methodical development of the subtle senses through yoga and becoming more and more conscious in our physical parts may well be one answer to the problem of accidents in times to come.

Occultism and the Alchemy of Life and Death

Material life as we know it is not the only life. Behind embodied life there is a plane of life-consciousness with its own unique energy and properties. The occultists in every

⁴ The Mother: *CWM, Vol. 10*, pp. 132-133.

tradition of past and present have always been aware of it. There are special techniques to become aware of this life-energy behind our material processes. There are also means by which we can learn to manipulate them. This is exactly what knowledgeable Reiki masters do and some tantrics of yore used to do. By this manipulation of the inner life, one can temporarily, for a short or long period, superimpose the law of a higher plane on a lower plane. This can help in preserving youth, prolonging life, even for very long periods of time. The lamas of Tibet, the Hatha and Raja yogis of India, the Buddhist traditions and the tantrics of Nath Sampradaya have all tried to unleash this hidden force of a greater life-energy and thereby conquer disease and decay for long time. Certain Vaishnava schools have made attempts to dwell in the subtle inner body and also attempted *kayasiddhi*, specialised procedures for rejuvenating the body. And finally there have been efforts to prolong life in the body by the superimposition of another and higher dynamism of the life energy. But all these efforts as far as we know are not linked to immortality of the physical body. They are efforts at prolonging life in the physical body by *adhyaropan*, the imposition of another law, and for the moment (as long as the forced superimposition continues) dispense with the physical laws. But all this is not a conquest since the laws of the physical body do not change as such. It is not a natural possession of physical immortality. And obviously physical immortality without a corresponding purification and perfection of inner consciousness and outer nature would mean an immortalisation of man's imperfection and ignorance. The story of 'Trishancou' illustrates this well. An early king of the solar dynasty seeks to reach the home of the immortals in his physical body through the *tapa-shakti* (the power accumulated through askesis) of Rishi Vishvamitra. The Rishi *tries* over and over again but fails each time since the king is essentially impure in his physical consciousness and thus is not granted entry into the immortal's world while still in his physical body. An integral purity and perfection of consciousness is a precondition for physical immortality. But short of this one can have and realise the essential immortality by discovering and living in one's soul. Is there a possibility of prolonging youth through subtler yogic means? After all we do observe that the species that live longer like the tortoise also take fewer breaths per minute. So also the heavy breathers like dogs and rabbits live relatively shorter lives. In fact a whole science of breath regulation called *pranayama* has been known since antiquity in India. Among the other effects of *pranayama*, a well-known and significant effect is prolongation of life and delaying the aging process. And finally we do also see a certain linkage between reproduction and

lifespan. Most species, barring man have their lifespan limited by their reproductive capacity. That is to say, they live up to the age they can reproduce and not beyond. Human beings are an exception to this general rule as if Nature has given us a lease of life for purposes other than living only for propagating the species. But as in the case of breathing, there may be a deeper linkage between sexual reproduction and death, a subtler truth that we have yet to discover. Ayurveda does speak about *brahmacharya* and sexual continence as one of the means of prolonging youthfulness and vital vigour.

Pranayama and Brahmacharya

In ancient India, material existence and physical processes were seen as conterminous with the subtler ones. Thus the physical breath was seen as a means not only of bringing in oxygen but also and simultaneously as a vehicle to draw the vital-force or *prana* (also called 'chi' in Japanese). The heart was not only an organ necessary to pump blood but also a physical means to circulate the *prana* within the body. It may be noted that *prana* in this context refers to the fuel or energy used by the body and the mind for their diverse processes. If we compare the body to an engine, then *prana* is the fuel used for driving it, mind is the technology behind the motion of the wheels and the engine, whereas the driver, the man behind the steering wheel whose decisions can change the course of the engine is the secret soul within us. Thus each part has its right place and function, none can be ignored. If the engine is of a weaker make or poor design it can run only for limited purposes. So also if the fuel is not efficient energy-wise, throwing more smoke than fire and steam, it will be a poor fuel. In the human body also, this fuel or *prana* is of five types — two of poor quality used for driving the body for lower motives like eating, reproduction, anger, etc. It is the old version of *prana*, the animal *prana*, so to say. Then there is the middle *prana*, which is used for slightly more human motives like attachments, sentiments, etc. Finally we have the two upward currents of *prana* utilised for mental and higher pursuits. The lower form of *prana* that looks after the body is supplied largely through material processes whereas the higher forms are subtler. The life of an average man is governed largely by lower motives and therefore utilises the inferior fuel for driving the body. A better type of humanity with a slightly higher orientation naturally draws a better quality. But the best fuel of *prana* is drawn quite naturally by those who are turned upward in quest of a higher spiritual life. They naturally draw *prana* in its purest form. Similarly, the technology of the engine or the mind's movements and finally the

experience and expertise of the driver are all important for the smooth functioning of the body. Nevertheless, the regulation of breath through *pranayama* is a psycho-physical means to increase and regulate the five currents of *prana* and balance them in the system. The physical means were nature's devices to which our body forms have got habituated and accustomed. The yogi could however do away with the outer device by learning to draw *prana* in other subtler ways and circulating it by force of will. At the same time the average human being who could not do this, that is go beyond the limits set by nature could nevertheless use this knowledge for drawing more vital energy within the body by perfecting his breath.

Poverty of breath leads to a diminution of the life-force, its eventual depletion and petrification thereby predisposing one to diseases and aging. *Pranayama* or breath regulation is a means to halt this depletion of life-energy within us. Of course mere *pranayama* is naturally not enough if one continues to allow depletion through other means especially the lower motives and channels. In fact an excess of unregulated life-energy flowing through the lower channels is precisely the deeper psychological basis for what we call as vices. *Pranayama* in such situations would only worsen the situation by increasing the quantum of life-force without regulating its flow. It is like overloading a system without enhancing its power to contain and bear more weight and force.

The word *pranayama* indeed means regulating the flow of life-energy in its movements through the five channels. This fivefold movement of *prana* as mentioned earlier is divided into two lower currents, one middle and two upper currents. When there is a predominant flow through the lower currents there is very little left for higher purposes of life. Being thrown out downwards soon depletes the *pranic* reserves. Therefore it has been said by the ancient wisdom that each sexual act is actually a step towards death. The same of course would be true of other lower movements of *prana* like anger, jealousy, fear, etc. It is here that we have the psychological basis of *brahmacharya*. This is a means to convert the *prana-shakti* (life-energy) within us for higher purposes. This is best done through will and changing of life's motives, by consciously turning the *prana-shakti* in us for higher and vaster rather than for lower and narrower purposes, through an opening to a higher consciousness beyond mind and as a corollary preventing the flow and loss of life-energy through lower channels of lust, anger, hate, etc. It is much like the transmutation of energy that we talk of in physics and is indeed the subtle basis of

sublimation of energy that we recognise in modern psychology. But this too would only lead to a prolongation of youth and not a complete conquest over death.

Sri Aurobindo sheds light upon the rationale of *brahmacharya* and its process —

“... if the sex-fluid is prevented from being spent away, it turns into *tejas* and *ojas*. The whole theory of *brahmacharya* is based upon that by the yogis. If it were not so, there would be no need of *brahmacharya* for producing *tejas* and *ojas*. It is not a question of vigour and energy *per se*, but of the physical support — in the physical support the *ojas* produced by *brahmacharya* counts greatly. The transformation of the *retas* into *ojas* is a transformation of physical substance into a physical (necessarily producing also a vital-physical) energy. The spiritual energy itself can only drive the body, like the vital and mental, but in driving it, it would exhaust it if it has not a physical support. (I speak of course of the ordinary spiritual energy, not of the supramental to be, which has not only to transmute *retas* into *ojas* but *ojas* into something more sublimated.)”⁵

“The contrary opinion of which you speak may be due to the idea that sex is a natural part of the human vital-physical whole, a necessity like food and sleep, and that its total inhibition may lead to unbalancing and to serious disorders. It is a fact that sex suppressed in outward action but indulged in other ways may lead to disorders of the system and brain troubles. That is the root of the medical theory which discourages sexual abstinence. But I have observed that these things happen only when there is either secret indulgence of a perverse kind replacing the normal sexual activity or else an indulgence of it in a kind of subtle vital way by imagination or by an invisible vital interchange of an occult kind, I do not think harm ever occurs when there is a true spiritual effort at mastery and abstinence. It is now held by many medical men in Europe that sexual abstinence, *if it is genuine*, is beneficial; for the element in the *retas* which serves the sexual act is then changed into its other element which feeds the energies of the system, mental, vital and physical — and that justifies the Indian idea of *brahmacharya*, the transformation of *retas* into *ojas* and the raising of its energies upward so that they change into a spiritual force.

⁵ Sri Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, pp. 1517-18.

“As for the method of mastery, it cannot be done by physical abstinence alone — it proceeds by a process of combined detachment and rejection. The consciousness stands back from the sex-impulse, feels it as not its own, as something alien thrown on it by Nature-force to which it refuses assent or identification — each time a certain movement of rejection throws it more and more outward. The mind remains unaffected; after a time the vital being which is the chief support withdraws from it in the same way, finally the physical consciousness no longer supports it. This process continues until even the subconscious can no longer rouse it up in dream and no further movement comes from the outer Nature-force to rekindle this lower fire. This is the course when the sex-propensity sticks obstinately; but there are some who can eliminate it decisively by a swift radical dropping away from the nature. That, however, is more rare.”⁶

Yet as we have seen, we are far from conquering death as a species. And if there is a reason to life and a reason to existence then there must be a good enough reason for death, for the moment at least. The inner methods are also processes and capitalise on manipulating still deeper forces of nature than the physical scientist manipulates. Occultism in this sense is like chemistry learning and playing with the inner combination of forces. Yet it is still the domain of the how, leaving the why untackled and therefore the original cause remains intact. Death though pushed back a little remains unconquered. The reason is that the stuff of the body remains unchanged. It is like using high voltage energy from electricity or the sun to drive an engine which has been designed by nature to be driven mainly by coal or steam. Though electrical and solar processes are submerged within and run as an undercurrent they are not the main means or vehicles for energy transmission and exchange within the body. It is still largely air (steam) or chemicals (coal). The nerves do use electrical transmission in places. An odd gland responds to the solar energy but not the body as a whole. Even if we could draw energy directly through the sun, unless there is a change in the constituting consciousness of the body it will still be subject to decay and age and consequent death. For these are but processes, and not the real inner reason for the existence of death. Even if all the outer causes are

⁶ Sir Aurobindo: *Letters on Yoga*, pp. 1511-12.

mastered death will find its entry through the door of ignorance within the human body. And the body will change only when the consciousness within changes.

Quest for Immortality – The Two Approaches

The Indian tradition has given a lot of attention to this subject of immortality. Through a significant series of myths it has pointed out basically two different approaches to the problem. One is the asuric or the demoniac way typified in the tales of Ravana, Hiranyakashapa, Trishanku, Jarashandha and others. These beings were attracted towards immortality for the sake of prolonging their ego's empire indefinitely. Meaning thereby they wanted physical immortality without changing within in their consciousness. For this they try many outer, inner, subtler and occult means, including great *tapasya* and mastery over deeper forces of nature. Still their efforts are foredoomed to failure since immortality for them would mean a great imbalance in All-life whom these gigantic egos are out to devour. Death finds some way or the other to reach their doorsteps. The message is clear, you cannot forcibly wrest the cup of immortality from the hands of Eternal life, certainly not by clinging to the body out of fear or vanity. Fear is in fact a dangerous ally of death and one who strives for immortality must be therefore free of all fear and attachment.

The other method is the way of the gods and godly beings. The tales of Markandeya, Savitri, Hanuman, Narada, Nachiketas symbolize this other approach. These do not strive for immortality per se but for some other higher spiritual good that they may serve through their bodies. They are granted immortality as a boon or gift of Grace and not as a result of some arduous *tapasya* done for egoistic purposes. The story of Bheesma who was granted the gift of *Ichha-mrityu* is especially touching. A man of godly bearing and rare wisdom, he himself reveals the means of his death to his opponents since he feels that thus alone he can serve the cause of truth. Though potentially capable of prolonging life indefinitely, yet he is not attached to it as the frightful and fearful *asura*.

Especially significant in this regard is the legend of the churning of the ocean.⁷ The gods and the titans join hands to churn the ocean of life together to bring out the

⁷ Story from the *Vishnu Purana* (The legends of Lord Vishnu): Dashavatara. Koormavatara retold in English.

nectar of immortality buried in its depths. Many things come out as a result of the great churning, but the two groups continue to strive unfazed and unallured. They continue to churn till just before they hit rock bottom, there appears the most potent poison, *kalkoota*. There is a furore as to who would take it. The answer is obvious — who else but the great god Shiva who is eternal life dancing over death. That danger gone, now comes out the great elixir, but also the subtlest of tests devised by the preserver of the worlds, Vishnu. Knowing the hidden intention of the titans, the great god assumes the form of a world-alluring figure, Viswa-mohini. The titans are shaken as their hidden lusts come out to the surface. Their gaze and desire is now fixed upon the alluring form and thereby they miss the nectar. But the gods who are in the secret confidence of the preserver himself, keep their gaze fixed upon the aim and thereby succeed in getting the nectar. Modern science is similarly in the position of the *asura* who tries to forcibly snatch and take away the powers of nature to serve the egoistic purposes of man. And nature does reveal it quite a bit through this excess violence of force, but not the last secrets. Therefore is all effort without the true knowledge and right attitude foredoomed to collapse like a house of cards.

The Traditional Spiritual View of Immortality

The energies of mind, life and body, however powerful, are as yet subordinate energies moving in the fields of a cosmic ignorance. The issue of death cannot be settled here. This is not the plane where the power for physical immortality can be found, though a relative mastery and prolongation of life may be possible by tapping these powers. This relative mastery is also useful and necessary as a first preliminary step towards the final mastery. One of the great significances of life upon earth is to master outer and inner nature. At the animal level, the field of this mastery is limited to certain gross things in the outer environment. With man and the advent of mind with its capacity to reflect upon itself and introspect, the field of self-mastery extends to one's inner nature as well. All ethics, science especially the psychological sciences, art with its pursuit of perfection, occultism, meditation, are so many means to move towards this mastery. But all these are incomplete means. They are not perfect in power because they are not perfect in their knowledge. The seat of authentic power and knowledge lies even deeper than our natural combination of mind-life-body. It lies in the secret adytum of our inmost soul.

The traditional spiritual view, higher than the scientist's and the occultist's, reaches deeper into the very spiritual fount of nature. The soul in us is the divine element and therefore authentic and true. Being divine in its essence, it is also immortal and eternal. It does not perish with the destruction of the body nor with the return and dissolution of the elements of life and mind into their native worlds. The first genuine step towards immortality is taken when we touch and begin to dwell within our soul. We then begin to share the consciousness of immortality that is natural to the soul itself. The fear of death leaves us forever since we know its unreality. The false 'I' of the ego, which is a conglomeration of the mind-life-body self, is dissolved by death. But death cannot touch the immortal soul in us and nothing can destroy it. The true 'I' never perishes. To find this soul and live in it is to discover the secret of immortality even while we continue to function in an otherwise perishable body.

Most spiritual traditions do not resolve the mystery of death. They only make it deeper by bypassing the question. The mystic has so far regarded life as a field of sorrow and impermanence where everything dies. Birth therefore is seen as an occasion of sorrow since it is bound to bring along with it grief and suffering and pain. Being born again and again is seen as a source of prolonging one's misery by entering repeatedly into this transient, unhappy world where death takes its prey at will and nothing can save us from its grip, not even good deeds or a powerful mind and body. The only solution left is to somehow cut the knot of birth. The soul that arrives at this departure does it by one of the two methods. One is by going deep within using one or more powers of nature — the mind, emotions or will, until one gets at the secret soul. Once this true self is touched, one wakes up from the stupor of a false identity. With this knowledge one cuts the bonds of false attachment and desire or retires into solitude till these things fall off by starvation and the soul denuded of its sheaths returns back to its origin. The second method is to go higher and higher with the help of the mind and its power of meditation. The ascending mind reaches ultimately a state of impersonality or the static Self. The whole effort of the practitioner then is to dwell in that state more and more by increasingly retiring into his inner solitude and the stillness of his Impersonal self till the body and mind wear off and drop in a natural way. There are other lesser known methods as well like the method of constantly witnessing nature and observing without sanctioning its activities till they drop off as a flower would wilt, unsupported by the sap that nourishes it. Whatever be the means, the immortality sought by the mystics is the immortality of the soul within or of the higher Self above.

As to immortality of the body, all spiritual traditions seem to have passed a final verdict of *anityam asukham* (this transient suffering world where neither permanence nor delight can dwell). Thus far and no further stops all search and ends the mystery. Having realised the soul and its convincing immortality, the hold of death is gone forever and so also of birth. The purpose for which we came to earth is over. The drape of illusion is torn from our mist-laden eyes and we make the final-most exit into some heaven of *mukti*, salvation, nirvana.

“Be thyself, immortal, and put not thy faith in death; for death is not of thyself, but of thy body. For the Spirit is immortality.”⁸

The End of Death, the Death of Ignorance

“To free the self is but one radiant pace”...

“A first betrothal of the Earth to Heaven...”⁹

But not the last word, not the final seal of God’s work or the sign of His sanction to our efforts. There is a still greater work to do, a still greater problem to be understood, and a still greater mystery to be solved. All that we realise by discovering the immortal soul in us is who we truly are. Knowing our true self frees us individually from the clutches of sorrow and suffering. But to know oneself is only the beginning of another line of progress. It consists in knowing what we came here to do, our purpose beneath the stars, our real work amidst this wilderness. If the purpose of the soul was simply to free itself from nature then there was no need for it to accept the bondage at all! It is a weird logic to believe that the soul, though divine becomes somehow helplessly bound by nature and has then only to cry for its release from this pitiable state. What a waste of all creative effort of God or whoever else that would be if the whole drama began just so that after millions of years we realise its utter futility and walk out of the play, shocked and dazed and bitter. That would not only be a bad creation but a terrible folly to boot. Here must we pause and reconsider whether it is the folly of the Creator who made this intriguing world where our souls have strayed unwittingly or unwillingly, or is it the folly and impatience of our blinded hearts attracted to the lure

⁸ Sri Aurobindo: *Essays Divine and Human*, p. 159

⁹ Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, pp. 312, 531

of escape due to which we are unable to see the purpose even when it stares us in the eyes. The purpose of creation must also be the secret purpose of the soul adventuring in time and space. That purpose, if we care to see it, is obviously the evolution of more and more perfect life forms upon earth and a correspondingly higher and higher consciousness as well. There is an ascending evolution in Nature through which Nature seems to be working out the development of higher and higher forms. Higher in capacity of life and its powers, higher in capacities of feeling and willing, higher in capacities of mind and of knowledge, and most importantly higher in terms of soul-vision and soul-force. But is this the end? Is this imperfect creature called man the summit of Nature's evolutionary effort? Not so, says Sri Aurobindo.

Life and creation have a deeper purpose than simply bondage and later a doorway of escape. The soul, that is the seed of divinity in us has not ventured here simply to return empty handed and naked back to its source just as it came. Life in Sri Aurobindo's vision is not an unfortunate accident, creation not a meaningless tale. It is rather the supreme means for a progressive unfolding of the divine possibilities hid in the soil of matter in the form of the divine seed. These are the deeper and higher truths of life itself — the truth of Knowledge and Light, the truth of Freedom and Peace and Bliss, the truth of Harmony and Love, the truth of a collective and terrestrial perfection of life upon earth. Nature tends towards that, revealing these possibilities as hints and stray glimpses in an exceptional individual here and there. But what is found in one is also latent in another. It is only a matter of time for the race to discover what the individual has uncovered within himself. But that this higher possibility may manifest itself fully in all its many sided perfection and not occasionally and partially, what is needed here is the preparation of the soil and the climate. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother gave their lives to realise this vision of Divine Perfection of our earthly life. Through decades of an intense *sadhana* they discovered the roots of the problem and the cure. Not only did they discover it but worked it out for man. The soil and the climate could be made ready for this higher possibility of a Divine Life upon earth if a higher than mind principle, the Supramental Truth-Consciousness, could establish itself upon earth. That would hasten this divine outflowing of the race. Right now we are governed by the mental principle which in its very nature is imperfect, leaving us with the choice of either leading an ignorant and imperfect life or else quitting it by ascending to one of the spiritual planes of consciousness beyond our ordinary human mind. But beyond even the spiritual planes there exists the sun blaze of a Supramental Truth-Consciousness where ignorance and suffering, limitation

and division, falsehood and error, disharmony and imperfection has no place. Its presence upon earth would mean the natural appearance of truth and oneness, harmony and delight, love and light *upon* earth and not away from it. It would also naturally mean an evolution of the human race into a race of *Supramental gnostic beings*¹⁰ just as the advent of mind evolved our humanity out of the unthinking animal. At its apex it would mean the transmutation of the very stuff of our bodies so that this mortal and perishable bag of bones becomes a home of light, a translucent mantle that does not hold back and hide the inner light of the soul but transmits and even enhances its beauty and radiance. With the appearance of this divine body and the end of Ignorance there would end the reign of Death.

What would that mean? Firstly that there will be a change in the inner consciousness of human beings so that they would become in their inner constitution and psychological nature more and more open and receptive to the higher forces of light and love and harmony and truth. Nevertheless these beings though conscious of a higher Light and Law will still have the limitations of the physical body constituted in the animal way. That means that for some time a division will persist with a transformed inner consciousness in a section of humanity ready for the evolutionary leap and an unchanged outer consciousness resisting and dragging it behind towards our animal past. An improved software in an unchanged hardware so to say! But this inner growth will press further and further from within outwards till the very physical body begins to undergo the necessary transmutation, a body fully expressive of the inner divinity and not hiding and obstructing it. The very presence of this new being of Light and Truth will radically alter the balance of earthly life just as the presence of man has altered the balance of animal and plant life and even of the material life upon earth. For, this new being will handle everything with the full and true consciousness, the simultaneous consciousness of the part and the whole, the simultaneous knowledge of the truth of its inner and outer working, the simultaneous insight and intuition of the moment's need and the vision of eternity. These higher beings will escape the law of death since they will be fully conscious. That does not mean wearing

¹⁰ A new creation embodying the Supramental Truth-Consciousness moved by the very highest Truth alone, just as we at present embody the ignorant mental-consciousness, which is the chief source of our error and grief and suffering and evil and death. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother took upon themselves to establish this principle of Truth Consciousness upon earth so that by its pressure a new race of Supramental beings appear in due course. This great and momentous event, the supramental descent, took place upon earth on 29 February 1956.

the same body forever. But a conscious changing of the body by an act of supraconscious will without any intermediary stages of forgetfulness, loss of consciousness and helpless subjection to a blind mechanism (blind to our ignorance) which death now represents. Those still subject to Ignorance will no doubt continue to die and be born the present human way but a higher knowledge and power lent to them by this beautiful and luminous 'other' will take away much of their pain and suffering that the existence of death carries now. Death then will become an instrument of Light and not a blind unthinking law that it has now assumed for itself before a humanity helpless before its dark and ambiguous veil. Just as with the advent of mind, the forces of nature which appeared as blind for an animal have assumed a different meaning for man who can now harness and use them for a greater good, so too with the advent of the new being the forces of death and destruction will become instruments of a higher will which will harness and use them consciously for a greater good.

How, you may ask. Death at present deals with us the way forces of Nature dealt with man till he became aware of Nature's reality. Death is also a similar universal force, not all evil, not all good. Rather he seems to be a villain trying to become a do-gooder, like all the forces. The reason is that it chose to be autonomous and therefore cut off from the Integral truth. The psychic being as it develops to perfection can bring it back to surrender to the Truth as we find in tales of *Ichhamrityu* and other notable legends. After that happens and the growing soul of man has mastered death it will be able to use its powers to harness life and to recreate a balance. Death has been indeed used by the Luminous ones as an instrument, for example to destroy the unnecessary past, to remove an obstruction on the way to the future or even to destroy conscious evil as Sri Krishna did. In the same way, man will be able to use the force of death to remove all that obstinately stands in the way of the evolutionary future of mankind. Of course this assumes that one would have reached a stage of evolution to such a height where one is the natural possessor of an unerring wisdom, that sees truth even more concretely than one sees a material object. Such a vision of truth is conterminous with Compassion and to that luminous eye even destruction becomes an act of compassion, releasing the soul from a material encasement where it was trapped in the prison house of a dark and fallen nature. This is surely very, very different from the senseless killing in the name of religion or an ideal or even a high sentiment which are nothing else but ignorance fabricating the name of truth. Such people often quote the *Gita* or other religious authority to justify an act motivated by

their own blindness. The *Gita* itself clarifies this by extolling non-injury to others (*ahimsa*) as a divine quality to be practised by one who is still struggling in the maze of the ignorance. But it equally emphasises that it is a midway point and the soul in man has to one day ascend beyond this duality by growing into the authentic soul, seeing beyond the relative good and the relative evil born of our ignorant outlook and ascend to his home in the permanent and divine Good.

Therefore says Savitri whom Death tries to intimidate but ends up being conquered and intimidated himself — “Live, Death, awhile, be still my instrument.” It is not just a change of outlook towards death but a change of capacity and power in dealing with it.

Sounds like a fairy tale. Well, no more a fairy tale than the appearance of thinking man amidst the immense void of space, out of the cosmic dust. No more a fairy tale than the emergence of poetry and philosophy out of the dumb heart of a cave-man. No more a fairy tale than the reptile crawling in dark holes in the bowels of the earth developing wings of a bird and spanning the skies.

Perhaps, but one day our human mode of feeling and communicating may itself become utterly incomprehensible to a future man. For one thing is both consistent with the logic of Nature as well as of God, or the logic of Science and the logic of spiritual philosophy, that such an unsure imperfect creature called man cannot be the apex of God’s creativity or of Nature’s. Man by his very nature is destined to be a transitional being for the gap is still wide between what he hopes for and what he has, between his actuality and his possibility, between his dream visitations and his present day mundane reality.

How can we participate in the process?

By bringing the future closer to us through an inner door, opening to the new consciousness and receiving its influx into our lives.

By a conscious aspiration and changing ourselves in the direction of the future. By unburdening ourselves of that past which seeks to perpetuate the reign of Ignorance and ties us down to littleness and pettiness of thought and endeavour and action.

Or perhaps by simply being happy and hopeful as a child full of enthusiasm and wonder, free of conditioning and arrogant mental pride.

Even if we do not participate, the future will still force itself upon us. Nature did not seek permission from the fish before removing the fins and the gills and replacing

them with lungs and limbs. It goes about the task set for it by the secret Time-Spirit whose passing breath is felt by a few, heard by fewer still.

“A Witness of creation, if there had been one conscious but uninstructed, would only have seen appearing out of a vast abyss of an apparent non-existence an Energy busy with the creation of Matter, a material world and material objects, organising the infinity of the Inconscient into the scheme of a boundless universe or a system of countless universes that stretched around him into Space without any certain end or limit, a tireless creation of nebulae and star-clusters and suns and planets, existing only for itself, without a sense in it, empty of cause or purpose. It might have seemed to him a stupendous machinery without a use, a mighty meaningless movement, an aeonic spectacle without a witness, a cosmic edifice without an inhabitant; for he would have seen no sign of an indwelling Spirit, no being for whose delight it was made. A creation of this kind could only be the outcome of an inconscient Energy or an illusion-cinema, a shadow-play or puppet-play of forms reflected on a superconscient indifferent Absolute. He would have seen no evidence of a soul and no hint of Mind or Life in this immeasurable and interminable display of Matter. It would not have seemed to him possible or imaginable that there could at all be in this desert universe for ever inanimate and insensible an outbreak of teeming life, a first vibration of something occult and incalculable, alive and conscious, a secret spiritual entity feeling its way towards the surface.

“But after some aeons, looking out once more on that vain panorama, he might have detected in one small corner at least of the universe this phenomenon, a corner where Matter had been prepared, its operations sufficiently fixed, organised, made stable, adapted as a scene of a new development, — the phenomenon of a living Matter, a Life in things that had emerged and become visible: but still the Witness would have understood nothing, for evolutionary Nature still veils her secret. He would have seen a Nature concerned only with establishing this outburst of Life, this new creation, but Life living for itself with no significance in it, a wanton and abundant creatrix busy scattering the seed of her new power and establishing a multitude of its forms in a beautiful and luxurious profusion or, later, multiplying endlessly genus and species for the pure pleasure of creation: a small touch of lively colour and movement would have been flung into the

immense cosmic desert and nothing more. The Witness could not have imagined that a thinking mind would appear in this minute island of life, that a consciousness could awake in the Inconscient, a new and greater subtler vibration come to the surface and betray more clearly the existence of the submerged Spirit. It would have seemed to him at first that Life had somehow become aware of itself and that was all; for this scanty new-born mind seemed to be only a servant of life, a contrivance to help life to live, a machinery for its maintenance, for attack and defence, for certain needs and vital satisfactions, for the liberation of life-instinct and life-impulse. It could not have seemed possible to him that in this little life, so inconspicuous amid the immensities, in one sole species out of this petty multitude, a mental being would emerge, a Mind serving Life still but also making Life and Matter its servants, using them for the fulfilment of its own ideas, will, wishes, — a mental being who would create all manner of utensils, tools, instruments out of Matter for all kinds of utilities, erect out of it cities, houses, temples, theatres, laboratories, factories, chisel from it statues and carve cave-cathedrals, invent architecture, sculpture, painting, poetry and a hundred crafts and arts, discover the mathematics and physics of the universe and the hidden secret of its structure, live for the sake of Mind and its interests, for thought and knowledge, develop into the thinker, the philosopher and scientist and, as a supreme defiance to the reign of Matter, awake in himself to the hidden Godhead, become the hunter after the invisible, the mystic and the spiritual seeker.

“But if after several ages or cycles the Witness had looked again and seen this miracle in full process, even then perhaps, obscured by his original experience of the sole reality of Matter in the universe, he would still not have understood; it would still seem impossible to him that the hidden Spirit could wholly emerge, complete in its consciousness, and dwell upon the earth as the self-knower and world-knower, Nature’s ruler and possessor. ‘Impossible!’ he might say, ‘all that has happened is nothing much, a little bubbling of sensitive grey stuff of brain, a queer freak in a bit of inanimate Matter moving about on a small dot in the universe.’ On the contrary, a new Witness intervening at the end of the story, informed of the past developments but unobsessed by the deception of the beginning, might cry out, ‘Ah, then, this was the intended miracle, the last of many, the Spirit that was submerged in the Inconscience

has broken out from it and now inhabits, unveiled, the form of things which, veiled, it had created as its dwelling-place and the scene of its emergence.' But in fact a more conscious Witness might have discovered the clue at an early period of the unfolding, even in each step of its process; for at each stage Nature's mute secrecy, though still there, diminishes; a hint is given of the next step, a more overtly significant preparation is visible. Already, in what seems to be unconscious in Life, the signs of sensation coming towards the surface are visible; in moving and breathing Life the emergence of sensitive mind is apparent and the preparation of thinking mind is not entirely hidden, while in thinking mind, when it develops, there appear at an early stage the rudimentary strivings and afterwards the more developed seekings of a spiritual consciousness. As plant-life contains in itself the obscure possibility of the conscious animal, as the animal-mind is astir with the movements of feeling and perception and the rudiments of conception that are the first ground for man the thinker, so man the mental being is sublimated by the endeavour of the evolutionary Energy to develop out of him the spiritual man, the fully conscious being, man exceeding his first material self and discoverer of his true self and highest nature."¹¹

*When darkness deepens strangling the earth's breast
And man's corporeal mind is the only lamp,
As a thief's in the night shall be the covert tread
Of one who steps unseen into his house.
A Voice ill-heard shall speak, the soul obey,
A Power into mind's inner chamber steal,
A charm and sweetness open life's closed doors
And beauty conquer the resisting world,
The truth-light capture Nature by surprise,
A stealth of God compel the heart to bliss
And earth grow unexpectedly divine.
In Matter shall be lit the spirit's glow,
In body and body kindled the sacred birth;
Night shall awake to the anthem of the stars,*

¹¹ Sri Aurobindo: *The Life Divine*, pp. 849-51.

*The days become a happy pilgrim march,
Our will a force of the Eternal's power,
And thought the rays of a spiritual sun.
A few shall see what none yet understands;
God shall grow up while the wise men talk and sleep;
For man shall not know the coming till its hour
And belief shall be not till the work is done.*¹²

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother probed the purpose of earthly life and its rendezvous with death and found its ultimate solution. Not for themselves was their labour. They had already seen and walked several times over the hidden and occult territories of existence, known its powers and limitations, trod the traditional spiritual paths, discovered once again the immortality of the soul, realised the eternal, immutable Self, known the taste of Nirvana and the boundless freedom of the Infinite, charted for all times to come for earth and humanity the maps of Consciousness and filled in the gaps of its unknown dimensions, uncovered the secret pages from the hidden scripts of the past — and yet the paradox of life upon earth and the ultimate mystery of birth and death remained to be satisfactorily solved.

The issue was not just the escape of one or many souls from the clutches of death but the very purpose for which this immortal stuff dallies with mortality. If life upon earth was just to realise the immortality of the soul and the true Self then there was no reason to take this plunge into creation at all. Is the drama of pain and suffering justified in the name of karmic justice or whatever else if the end were to be the same as the beginning — that is, the soul that already knew itself once again knows itself after an intermediate period of apparent self-forgetfulness? The escapist solution cannot satisfy a serious quest. It can at best soothe a weak and tired heart needing some rest after the struggle. But man seeks for more and not just an escape from the drama of life. He seeks also for truth and love and bliss and peace and perfection amidst (and not away) from this troubled restless world. Something within us continues to strive for terrestrial perfection with hope and prayer. Ignorance, one might say. But wherefrom came this Ignorance clouding the native self-knowledge of the soul? Or perhaps we have missed the whole sense and meaning of creation! It is this that Sri Aurobindo discovered, not as an armchair philosopher musing upon the

¹² Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, p. 55

enigmas of life but as a spiritual warrior conquering unknown domains of knowledge, hitherto undiscovered so far. A full justice can never be done to His work for mankind and earth in a short book or many books even.

But for our present purposes we can now turn to some of the salient aspects of His discovery that are of immediate relevance to us.

Life upon earth is not an accident, spiritual or chemical but a willing self-plunge of the Spirit. And since the Spirit is All-Knowledge and All-Power, this plunge could not be a helpless subjection to some dark and mysterious (or mischievous) force of Satan or *Maya*. All has come out of the One Self and is sustained by It to serve a great purpose in the grand scheme. Even matter is nothing else but an act of the Spirit. The Spirit has become matter, so to say, even as it has become everything else.

Since Spirit has become matter it is logical to see that it is matter that must discover its own spiritual reality. In other words, all life is a process of discovery of its own spiritual reality. The new definition of this self-discovery is in material terms. The delight of being at the origin of all things must also taste the delight of becoming. Becoming what? God in clay, or shall we say God smiling through divinised matter, perfectly adapted to receive and transmit His Delight and Force and Truth and Light and Love and all else that is now and always contained in the silent folds of the Spirit. It is to manifest in material life upon earth, the eternal Perfection above.

This cannot happen in a trifle. Therefore there are stages and processes, a gradual and apparently painful progression towards a greater future. The pain is due to the resistance. Yet in the secret Providence of things this is unavoidable. A too rapid unfolding may mean dissolution rather than a new creation. One cannot carve a beautiful sculpture out of entirely soft clay. The chipping of the stone is a slow process and goes on till the Image concealed and imprisoned within its crude contours is released to its utmost perfection. Nature is working towards this New Creation or a divine creation upon earth. This alone can justify the long labour, explain the ensuing suffering for a greater and as yet unrealised delight, and make perfect sense to the mystery of life upon earth. Not so much to find the soul alone (though that is necessary as a first step) but to find its own divine fulfilment.

This new and diviner creation in material terms necessarily means the appearance upon earth of a new and divine being. It will be a race of beings who would be fully governed and driven by the Truth of the Spirit and no more by the body's hunger, vital impulses and desires, and the mind's ignorant dictates as it is now. This means

the appearance upon earth of a new species whose very centre of consciousness and source of functioning would be radically different than what we have today. While it will be presumptuous for any of us to envisage the details of this new species, if we may call it so, suffice it to say that man like everything else that proceeded before him is a transitional being. Just as out of the ape there arose the phenomenon of man, so too out of man there shall arise this New being who will be radically different from man not only in his inner consciousness and constitution but also and finally in the very body itself. This would necessarily imply many successive and intermediary stages. One such stage will naturally be a being whose consciousness is radically and fundamentally changed but whose body is yet to undergo the needed divinisation.

This change of form and with it a corresponding change of the powers of consciousness has been happening so far over millenniums and this is what we call evolution. But evolution as described by Darwin is only half the story with its most important causal link missing. The missing link is filled up in science by the neat and ambiguous word 'Chance'. By chance this world sprang up, by chance the dust under our feet began to breathe and crawl, by chance again the crawl changed into a run and a flight, and yet again by another stupendous chance this lump of clay began to feel and think and introspect, consciously seek for beauty and truth and higher things! Underlying this fictitious chance, there is the unseen thread of consciousness that weaves out one form after another and would continue to do so until the perfect form arrives. And the perfect form will be naturally that which can hold the breath and full force of the Spirit without breaking, and contain delight without spilling, spoilage and degradation. It would also mean the end of disease, suffering (of all kinds, including material suffering) and death.

Death itself has evolved or been imposed upon living things out of an evolutionary necessity. If death were not, then imperfect forms would multiply ad infinitum as virus and bacteria do. We need not imagine what a frightful world there would be if forms of Ignorance (limited and partial knowledge and power) continued to multiply. If nature is foredoomed to imperfection then surely earthly life will become a prison for the soul.

The same would not be true for a being of true and total Knowledge, a Gnostic being, since harmony will be the very law of his existence. He would be free from the law of death even physically, but he will not be misusing this freedom to perpetuate itself and exterminate all other species. And his freedom will not be limited by a

helpless continuance in the same body for that too would be a limitation, but a freedom to change the body consciously by an act of will and without going through the process of death.

Death in other words is a necessity when life struggles with imperfection and reels under ignorance. Death will no more be necessary when Ignorance changes into Gnosis, imperfection into divine Perfection (and not what we call as human perfection which even at its best is a creation of ignorance), and suffering into the Immortal's *Ananda*. As of now, Death is a temporary release from earthly joys and suffering; the joy that ends too soon into its opposite, the suffering that necessarily follows when the immortal soul assumes the mask of imperfection, ignorance and limitation. It will drop off and cease to exist when all life will become a wave of the Supreme *Ananda*.

A Glorious Body

"In the very, very old traditions, there was a tradition more ancient than the Vedic and the Chaldean which must have been the source of both, in that ancient tradition there is already mention of a 'glorious body' which would be plastic enough to be transformed at every moment by the deeper consciousness: it would express that consciousness, it would have no fixity of form. It mentioned luminosity: the constituent matter could become luminous at will. It mentioned a sort of possibility of weightlessness which would allow the body to move about in the air only by the action of will-power and by certain processes of control of the inner energy, and so on. Much has been said about these things.

"I don't know if there ever were beings on earth who had partially realised this, but in a very small way there have been partial instances of one thing or another, examples which go to prove that it is possible. And following up this idea, one could go so far as to conceive of the replacement of material organs and their functioning as it now is, by centres of concentration of force and energy which would be receptive to the higher forces and which, by a kind of alchemy, would use them for the necessities of life and the body. We already speak of the different 'centres' in the body — this knowledge is very widespread among people who have practised yoga — but these centres could

be perfected to the point where they replace the different organs by a direct action of the higher energy and vibrations on matter. Those who have practised occultism well enough, in its most integral form, it could be said, know the process of materialisation of subtle energies and can put them in contact with physical vibrations. Not only is it something that can be done, but it is something which *is* done. And all that is a science, a science which must itself be perfected, completed, and which will obviously be used for the creation and setting in action of new bodies which will be able to manifest the supramental life in the material world. But, as Sri Aurobindo says, before this can be done, it is good to utilise all that we have in order to increase and make more exact the control of physical activities. It is very obvious that those who practise physical culture scientifically and with coordination acquire a control over their bodies that's unimaginable for ordinary people. When the Russian gymnasts came here, we saw with what ease they did exercises which for an ordinary man are impossible, and they did them as if it was the simplest thing in the world; there was not even the least sign of effort! Well, that mastery is already a great step towards the transformation of the body. And these people who, I could say, are materialists by profession, used no spiritual method in their education; it was solely by material means and an enlightened use of human will that they had achieved this result. If they had added to this a spiritual knowledge and power, they could have achieved an almost miraculous result... because of the false ideas prevalent in the world, we don't usually see the two things together, spiritual mastery and material mastery, and so one is always incomplete without the other; but this is exactly what we want to do and what Sri Aurobindo is going to explain: if the two are combined, the result can reach a perfection that's unthinkable for the ordinary human mind, and this is what we want to attempt."¹³

"The supramental body which has to be brought into being here has four main attributes: lightness, adaptability, plasticity and luminosity. When the physical body is thoroughly divinised, it will feel as if it were always walking on air, there will be no heaviness or *tamas* or unconsciousness in it. There will also be no end to its power of adaptability: in whatever conditions it is placed it will

¹³ The Mother: *CWM Vol. 9*, pp. 86-88.

immediately be equal to the demands made upon it because its full consciousness will drive out all that inertia and incapacity which usually make Matter a drag on the Spirit. Supramental plasticity will enable it to stand the attack of every hostile force which strives to pierce it: it will present no dull resistance to the attack but will be, on the contrary, so pliant as to nullify the force by giving way to it to pass off. Thus it will suffer no harmful consequences and the most deadly attacks will leave it unscathed. Lastly, it will be turned into the stuff of light, each cell will radiate the supramental glory. Not only those who are developed enough to have their subtle sight open but the ordinary man too will be able to perceive this luminosity. It will be an evident fact to each and all, a permanent proof of the transformation which will convince even the most sceptical.

“The bodily transformation will be the supreme spiritual rebirth — an utter casting away of all the ordinary past. For spiritual rebirth means the constant throwing away of our previous associations and circumstances and proceeding to live as if at each virgin moment we were starting life anew. It is to be free of what is called Karma, the stream of our past actions: in other words, a liberation from the bondage of Nature’s common activity of cause and effect. When this cutting away of the past is triumphantly accomplished in the consciousness, all those mistakes, blunders, errors and follies which, still vivid in our recollection, cling to us like leeches sucking our life-blood, drop away, leaving us most joyfully free. This freedom is not a mere matter of thought; it is the most solid, practical, material fact. We really are free, nothing binds us, nothing affects us, there is no obsession of responsibility. If we want to counteract, annul or outgrow our past, we cannot do it by mere repentance or similar things, we must forget that the untransformed past has ever been and enter into an enlightened state of consciousness which breaks loose from all moorings. To be reborn means to enter, first of all, into our psychic consciousness where we are one with the Divine and eternally free from the reactions of Karma. Without becoming aware of the psychic, it is not possible to do so; but once we are securely conscious of the true soul in us which is always surrendered to the Divine, all bondage ceases. Then incessantly life begins afresh, then the past no longer cleaves to us. To give you an idea of the final height of spiritual rebirth, I may say that there can be a constant

experience of the whole universe actually disappearing at every instant and being at every instant newly created!"¹⁴

We started with the necessity and inevitability of death. Let us end with the certainty of the end of death and of all that it so far stands for; the end of ignorance and falsehood and with it the end of evil and suffering and pain:

*The incarnate dual Power shall open God's door,
Eternal supermind touch earthly Time.
The superman shall wake in mortal man
And manifest the hidden demigod
Or grow into the God-Light and God-Force
Revealing the secret deity in the cave.
Then shall the earth be touched by the Supreme,
His bright unveiled Transcendence shall illumine
The mind and heart, and force the life and act
To interpret his inexpressible mystery
In a heavenly alphabet of Divinity's signs.
His living cosmic spirit shall enring,
Annulling the decree of death and pain,
Erasing the formulas of the Ignorance,...
The supermind shall be his nature's fount,
The Eternal's truth shall mould his thoughts and acts,
The Eternal's truth shall be his light and guide.
All then shall change, a magic order come
Overtopping this mechanical universe.
A mightier race shall inhabit the mortal's world.
On Nature's luminous tops, on the Spirit's ground,
The superman shall reign as king of life,
Make earth almost the mate and peer of heaven
And lead towards God and truth man's ignorant earth
And lift towards godhead his mortality....
All shall be drawn into a single plan,
A divine harmony shall be earth's law,*

¹⁴ The Mother: CWM Vol. 3, pp. 175-177

*Beauty and Joy remould her way to live:
Even the body shall remember God,
Nature shall draw back from mortality
And Spirit's fires shall guide the earth's blind force;...
The Spirit's eyes shall look through Nature's eyes,
The Spirit's force shall occupy Nature's force.
This world shall be God's visible garden-house,
The earth shall be a field and camp of God,
Man shall forget consent to mortality
And his embodied frail impermanence.
This universe shall unseal its occult sense,...
Even there shall come as a high crown of all
The end of Death, the death of Ignorance....
These separate selves the Spirit's oneness feel,
These senses of heavenly sense grow capable,
The flesh and nerves of a strange ethereal joy
And mortal bodies of immortality.
A divine force shall flow through tissue and cell
And take the charge of breath and speech and act
And all the thoughts shall be a glow of suns
And every feeling a celestial thrill...
Nature shall live to manifest secret God,
The Spirit shall take up the human play,
This earthly life become the life divine.¹⁵*

¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, pp. 705-11

Our Godhead Calls Us

*Our godhead calls us in unrealised things.
Asleep in the wide fields of destiny,
A world guarded by Silence' rustling wings
Sheltered their fine impossibility.*

*But part, but quiver the cerulean gates,
Close splendours look into our dreaming eyes,
We bear proud deities and magnificent fates;
Faces and hands come near from Paradise.*

*What shone thus far above is here in us;
Bliss unattained our future's birthright is;
Beauty of our dim soul is amorous;
We are the heirs of infinite widenesses.*

*The impossible is the hint of what shall be,
Mortal the door to immortality.*

Sri Aurobindo

*"In that movement of Time and Becoming God appears to our conception or experience of him by the evidence of his works as the divine Power who ordains and sets all things in their place in the movement. In his form of Space it is he who fronts us in every direction, million-bodied, myriad-minded, manifest in each existence; we see his faces on all sides of us... He appears to us too in the universe as the universal spirit of Destruction, who seems to create only to undo his creations in the end, — "I am all-snatching Death," **aham mrtyuh sarvaharah**. And yet his Power of becoming does not cease from its workings, for the force of rebirth and new creation ever keeps pace with the force of death and destruction, 'and I am too the birth of all that shall come into being.' The divine Self in things is the sustaining Spirit of the present, the withdrawing Spirit of the past, the creative Spirit of the future."*

The Many Faces of Death

The Many Faces of Death

The presence of death has strongly influenced life upon earth. Much of the struggle for survival that we observe at the animal level has been the direct result of death upon our planet. This struggle for survival far from being a disaster has so far only helped in the enrichment of life. The force of evolution has utilized this struggle for developing greater capacities and powers in nature. It has created a kind of race for the development of more and more perfect forms, forms more plastic and adaptable, forms more harmonious and beautiful and, who knows, one day it will go on to create forms that are perfect and divine. Strength, endurance, plasticity are all a direct result of the dance of death whose ruthless steps break the barriers of weakness and fragility and excite and induce the emergence of all that can hold a stronger life. Not only strength, but beauty and harmony as well have been indirectly the result of death. There is a saying pregnant with this truth that the most beautiful stones have been tossed by the winds, washed by the waves, and shaped to perfection by the strongest storms.

At the human level we know how the presence of death has strongly influenced our thoughts, feelings, impulses, motives and behaviour. Its stamp is cast upon our science, arts, law, polity, philosophy and practically everything else. So powerful has been its influence that even spiritual philosophies have not been able to escape acknowledging its presence in life. Much of our human thought and action is driven by this awareness of death — the believer and the non-believer, the moralist and the hedonist, the Dionysian no less than the Apollonians — all seem to be justifying their diverse stands based on this one point of agreement about the certainty of death. Since death seems to be the one certain thing amidst an otherwise uncertain and precarious life upon earth, one justifies oneself based on one's outlook of death. The man of goodness says, "Since life is short, let me be remembered tomorrow through my deeds." The evil doer through an equally powerful logic says, "But why, but why must I strive for good since death brings an end to all things? Let me rather enjoy and profit and sleep as much as I can and in whatever way, till in the final sleep of death I lie." The happy-go-lucky or the go-getter says, "Ah! Let me make the best of each

moment since life is brief." And the man of sorrows says just the opposite, "Ah! What is the use of my striving since in any case life is brief." The religious man driven by the haunting spectre of death goes on to seek solace in a life beyond. But the physical scientist acknowledges death in the life of this planet and then goes on to find ways and means to push it a little further.

Things as diverse as the science of life and the science of doom have both been born from the womb of death. In short death has coloured every sphere of life, nay it is woven into each and every fabric of life.

So much for our everyday familiarity with this one certainty, and yet we may ask — do we really know death? The answer is obvious. And though we know next to nothing about it we do take certain positions, albeit unconsciously, about death in our life. These are the various attitudes that man has adopted towards death. Or the different psychological and philosophical positions that death has instilled in our life. Let us see these different positions one by one so that we may know all the masks that this great shadow wears to hide itself.

The Tragedy in the Heart of Time

Most of us associate death with the great uncertain end of things. This uncertainty about life, the suddenness of death, the inevitability of an end to all our dreams, is interpreted by the human mind as a tragic fate. But is it really so? A calm and steady look will reveal to us that death has assumed this form not so much to terrify us as to fortify. It is this suddenness and unexpectedness that makes us vigilant. It is the inevitability of loss at the physical level that turns our hearts attached to appearances towards a deeper love, a love which is independent of the physical frame, independent of the circumstances of our body, independent even of life and death. There is such a possibility of deep love in human nature; to love despite the separation of bodies and it is the presence of death that awakens this possibility in man. Seen thus we discover that our sense of tragedy too serves a great purpose. The pain of separation when physical bodies part, the agonizing wrench that the heart feels when it has to perforce drift away from the object of one's love, the suffering that hangs as a cloud upon our souls by the loss of our loved one are nothing else but an imperfect hint and an ignorant attempt to discover the oneness that is our secret truth. We should neither seek this tragedy nor try to escape it when it befalls us. Rather we should use it as a

lever to go deep down within ourselves and discover the oneness that exceeds all change and which time cannot pursue and snatch.

A love beleaguered with the stress of sorrow and separation is the present reality in our imperfect state, yet an immortal, unfading love mightier than death and stronger than time is our future possibility and secret destiny.

The Dance of Destruction

Death is seen as the great destroyer of all things. Men, countries, empires, civilisations, all become a heap of ashes and dust one day. The creative work of centuries, the mighty invincible races, the great and swift moments of life, all slain by death turn into the pages of an uncertain history. Death seems to cast a spell of doom upon all our efforts. But let us ask ourselves if really it is so? Or is it only the forms of men and races and civilisations that perish and from its ashes newer and stronger forms arise, forms more robust, more durable, more plastic in wideness, more adaptable in their circumstances? Thus goes on the march of civilisations through and in spite of death from a lesser to a greater perfection. And so will it go on defying death till the last line of imperfection is crossed. The ancient Indian thought saw it well that behind the dance of death, there is the loving rhythm of Shiva, destroying our imperfections but also simultaneously shaping them anew towards a greater perfection. Death is a mask of Shiva, one of his great moods seen in isolation and divorced from the creative beats of his steps, whose rhythm the world is compelled to follow.

The Great Leveller

This is another image of death that we secretly admire, perhaps even cherish. Is it not justice itself that death sees the great and the mighty and prosperous fall even as the lowly and weak and poor have fallen? Maybe. But the falling of the strong and prosperous does not spare the agonies of the weak and the maimed even though it may provide some solace of retribution to the rebellious heart. Equally, all that is rich and strong is not necessarily bad. Both prosperity (even outer prosperity) and strength (even physical prowess) are also divine. The divine is not only the bare ascetic sitting ash-smearred on the snow peaks, clad with nothing but the sky, but is also the arm of

God battling in the world and governing empires through the ages. It is not only the wounded heart writhing in pain over its hurt and fallen pride but also the proud and the fortunate.

Yet the question is left unanswered, what is this great leveller doing upon earth? Well, to each his own, even though there seems to be an outer similarity of fate. To the weak and the poor, death comes to give a release and fresh chance to strive for a better fate. To the strong and the fortunate, it is a reminder that we own nothing and all our riches and possessions will be taken away one day. Thereby it exhorts each of us to do our best, to regard ourselves as trustees and put all we have for a lasting use, so that when we pass away under the shadows, and our strength and joys of life fail, yet do we leave behind the works of our creative might and energy, which is but God's.

The Grim Accountant

One of the roles ascribed to death and his dark angels is to keep an unflinching account of our deeds and misdeeds. Precise and unswerving, meticulous to the penny are the grim accountants who refuse all barter and bribe. There are neither temples dedicated to the god of death, nor offerings made by devotees (if indeed there are any) since all these are of no avail. Yet are there legendary instances like that of Nachiketas and Savitri, who have shaken off the noose and the snare, snatched back from death what was truly theirs and returned triumphant from the dark and dangerous kingdom where hope thrives not, nor earthly longing and love. Even if these are rarities and are as yet individual victories, yet they point towards a general possibility — the *possibility* of one day changing this grim and inflexible law. Yet what is this law essentially made up of? What does the god of death measure in his scales?

He measures all that we have given to the ego (individual and collective ego) and on the other scale he keeps all that we have given to the eternal truth of life, to God within and the world. He mercilessly destroys that which belongs to the ego since such are the orders he carries in his breast from of old. But all that is truly divine, the immortal soul and its qualities and deeds are returned back and recycled, in another form if we like, since that it cannot touch. But it tests them thoroughly, its anvil is the most accurate where our pleadings, sentiments, idealisms and the many covers behind which our selfish selfhood hides are of no avail. Only that which is truly divine and

pure can pass unhurt and unwounded through its kingdom and yet survive. Its eyes are merciless and regard with relentless scrutiny.

The Ironic Critic of God's Work

Its method of doubting all as undivine unless proved otherwise has justifiably earned death the name of an Ironic Critic. Nothing is true in its eyes except itself. There is no other eternity for death except itself since of old he has this singular experience of seeing all things perish except of course the human soul. And the soul it cannot see since its empire does not extend up till there. It is a strange irony of death itself that while it can pierce into the subtlest shades of darkness and rip off the most brilliant camouflage of light, yet are its eyes blinded to the Light that shines in all beings. Concealed in a particle of dust and revealed in man, death cannot see this divinity and therefore only frowns at it. Yet God grows on despite its frown. Life evolves from atoms and gases to plants and trees and animals and man. And with life evolve the powers and knowledge concealed in the secret soul that is a delegate divinity upon earth. Men do not give up hope and pursuit of earthly perfection because there is death, but in fact speed up with time and get to work with redoubled effort and urgency, precisely because it *is* there.

The Dark-Browed Sophist of the Universe

It is death that is directly responsible for much of the pessimism we encounter in life. Most schools of philosophy paint a grim and depressing picture of this world since there is so much uncertainty, unpredictability, and impermanence in it. Even schools of spirituality, subtly breathing the gospel of death have given up hope for any earthly perfection since nothing stays permanently, neither love nor hope. Our heights break off too low and the hearts that dare and aspire, tire too soon. So where is the hope for earth? Death seems to laugh at every dream of human perfection by razing it to ground sooner or later.

But if we pause and look with the calm and steady eyes of the ancient sages, we shall discover that this impermanence and unpredictability, this uncertainty is a boon of sorts. It means that things can and do change and therefore there is hope for everyone.

Because there is impermanence, therefore is our ignorance too impermanent, only a passing phase in evolution.

Because there is uncertainty therefore one can never condemn anyone and can instead be ever hopeful for a change. Because there is unpredictability therefore one can come out of even the worst situation and hope can shine through the darkest clouds.

Because things are not fixed forever therefore is there hope of a change for the better, for all of us.

In fact ignorance and impermanence go hand in hand but neither ignorance, nor impermanence is permanent. This is what we need to remind ourselves when death paints before us a dismal picture of the world and the universe.

In the end it is God's world and not death's, who is in effect only a delegate teacher. We may hear what he has to say but believe him not. We may lend our ears to him but not our hearts and souls. For he says only one half of the truth — 'the truth that slays.'

We must answer him with the other half of the truth — 'the Truth that saves.'

The Shroud of Mystery

Death is the last veil where the limits of our knowledge cease to be. It is the last earthly barrier we must cross to be a candidate for truth and immortality. In the famous legend of the Sphinx, we see this truth driven home. Sphinx, the strange devouring beast and the symbol of death, has an even stranger puzzle to ask of all who would cross the Theban desert to the other side. "Who is the creature that walks on four in the morning, on two at noon and on three in the evening." None can answer correctly and are therefore devoured. But one man, the legendary hero Oedipus says with remarkable wisdom, "I am the answer." And now it is the turn of the Sphinx to die.

This legend like many others carries within itself the seed of a great truth. The Sphinx, a creature unreally real, is a symbol of Death, something so real in everyday life to which all of us lend our own unique form and meaning. Oedipus the traveller, is the adventuring soul of man journeying through the desert of Time towards its authentic kingdom from which it has been expelled even as a child. The soul in man is journeying to regain its kingdom after having grown to full stature, strong and wise

having gone through the whole adventure. But the final test of its wisdom and power lies in whether it has discovered itself or not. Death asks this question to all of us at the end of the road of life. If we have discovered who we are then it lets us pass and death is no more for us since we have regained our eternal kingdom. If not, then we return into the womb of death to return again and again to the cycle of birth and into the forest of life till we learn the lesson. The answer of Oedipus is also symbolic. On the face it appears to be a statement of man's physical life but holds a deeper truth concealed in it. The man on four is the animal-man supported almost helplessly by the world around. He is as ignorant and helpless as a child is. The man on two is the humanised-man, assured of his powers and prowess yet lacking in wisdom and maturity. The man on three has learned to lean upon the staff of faith and has discovered the third element in him, the support of his secret soul. It is not just an ordinary staff but the sceptre carrying the sign of his regality, the royal power as well as the true knowledge. Death dies and the last puzzle of man's life is solved when man knows himself. Such is the fate not only of individual men but also of all groups and forms of life that know and rule the world but know not themselves. It is also the fate of religion and science, both of which do not answer the one most important question about who we are. Behind the shroud of death, behind this hooded mask, lies the face of a secret deity that is our own. Death can cover it as a drape covers the body but it can slay it not. Yet the question remains what need had God to hide Himself in this mask of an ominous and terrible shape? What secret necessity compelled our soul to wrestle with this ancient powerful Adversary who seems to be stronger than life itself? Here fails our knowledge, here pauses our philosophy, here stops our vision and wisdom. And he who can answer it is he who shall live forever. He who shall know this dark secret is he who shall enjoy an endless term in time and timelessness both. But as the *Upanishads* rightly point out — "they who know only our dark and divided state dwell in darkness; yet, they who know only the bright body of God in a greater darkness dwell."¹ We need to know both and know them not just as two opposites but also as a single reality. He who thus knows both as one is he who truly knows. For at the end of all our material and spiritual pursuits, this is the last step of reconciliation — God and Life and Bliss and Love and Light and Truth with their apparent opposites.

¹ Sri Aurobindo: *The Upanishads*, Isha Upanishad, Verse 9

'Into a blind darkness they enter who follow after the Ignorance, they as if into a greater darkness who devote themselves to the Knowledge alone.'

The Seal of Ignorance

If we follow the clue given to us by life we shall see that death is a grim and a last reminder of our imperfect state. This imperfection is due to ignorance; ignorance of who we truly are and of the true nature of things, of the oneness and unity underlying this world of apparent division and multiplicity. It is this ignorance born from the womb of a false and illusory sense of the ego-self that constitutes the pain of life and much of its struggle. However, this ignorance itself is not a uniform tearing of the veil lest we are blinded, a premature shedding and its darkness prevent too rapid an efflorescence, an early thing but a continuum with necessary stages of growth. Death of the outer crust of the divine-seed hid safely in the case of ignorance. The repeated experience of death and pain provides the heat needed for ripening the case and prepares the seed within to bear light when it splits open to the sun. Death serves the purpose of creation through opposition. It retards and slows down the movement and tests each element over and over again till all is ready to be delivered to the Light. That is why it is rightly called the dark mother of all things. This dark mother checks us thoroughly for all our weak and tender spots of ignorance, putting her finger where it hurts most. Death and pain are the first teachers of life, who are intent only on training us and care little for the reactions and the tantrums we throw against them. So long as ignorance lasts, death will have right over earth. The end of ignorance will also mean the end of death.

The Changing of Our Robes

The soul in us is immortal. It is the body that dies. This is the ancient fundamental truth that each one of us has to rediscover in our own way. When the scales of ignorance fall away from our eyes, the first thing we discover is the eternity and immortality of the divine element in us. This is the true immortality, the immortality of the soul in us. We discover that we are not the body that perishes but the soul that death cannot slay. Weapons cannot cleave or wound it; fire cannot burn it; water cannot wet it, nor the wind dry it. In short, it is independent, free and above the material circumstances of the body. Death, to this new outlook appears as nothing more than a changing of our robes. The sting and sense of tragedy passes away and we see death as simply a temporary station and gateway through which the caravan of

life must pass towards its ever-nearing goal. Since whether we know it or not, the wheel of life never really stops, and helplessly, beyond our control, we are driven towards the supreme destination of our soul. Through night and through day, through the adventure of victory and fall, through birth, death and afterlife, the adamant march of God goes on.

The Passport to Immortality

Death to this new vision becomes a spur towards immortality. If it were not for death man would rest content with ignorance and mistake his ego-identity for the true self. What is worse, he would continue to expand the empire of his ego and prolong ignorance and its by-product pain indefinitely. Therefore must we pass repeatedly through the portals of death so as to reach a greater life. Death stands across our path as a stern ticket collector and does not allow any premature passage to the other worlds. By doing this it binds our sight to this material world. This too is a great service, since an early and easy visa for other worlds would so much enamour the soul in its infancy that it may well forget the true field of its work — that is the earth — and keep slipping into the beyond. But death stands in the way and it is only through its dark and narrow portals that we must pass towards the higher hemispheres where death is not nor grief nor pain. This dark tunnel of death through which we sometimes pass is actually a night of God into which we step before emerging into the greater lights of the beyond.

The Instrument of God

If we persist in gazing into the eyes of death without fear or terror, without undue pessimism or loss of faith in the mighty creative Energy, the One Original *Shakti* that has built this many tiered world, then we will discover at the end of our search that death like everything else is an instrument. But an instrument in whose hands? In the hands of Him alone who has hurled these myriad creatures and universes and ages into Time and Space. Unseen by our gross and even subtle senses but visible to the eye of faith and known as intimately real to our deeper heart and soul, His Hand not only creates but also sustains and supports us through all our bitterness and struggle and fall. This Hand of God is ever close to us and keeps in His unshakable grasp the one thing for which our souls have entered into this drama of creation — the crown of

conscious immortality, the boon of pure and unmixed Truth and Bliss, the taste of a transcendent Love and inner Peace, the touch of Oneness, the manifestation of an eternal Perfection here upon earth. And again it is His hand that smites and smashes to dust all that must pass out for a greater renewal. We in our Ignorance see a senseless, meaningless, bodiless force, pulling down the empire of our hopes and our fragile castles. But when we grow in vision and strength, then we see that this too is God — Chhinnamasta² destroying Her own body by Her own force since it has served its purpose, or Kali dancing before us destroying with a pitiless and fierce love all that is not ready. Our little human ego crushed by Her embrace and unable to bear the pressure of Her intense and all liberating, all purifying fire of love cries in defense. If only it knew that the Hand that smites us is the same hand that supports and succours. The Hand that brings us down is also the Hand that creates and lifts us high. There are no two Gods but only One and He is moved only by the Light and Love in His bosom, in creation as much as in destruction. Death is only an ignorant instrument. Divorced from his one integral truth, he sees only his role. Little does he know that he too is used for shaping out a higher Good and when that happens, he too will realise his true divinity and be transformed by the same Hand that now sustains his mask of ignorance. Already we see God grow up from the stone into the leaf and plant and tree, live and feel in an animal and think and reflect and seek himself in man. Already we see hints of a greater realm touch upon earth and leave its quivering in matter, a touch which comes from a transcendent deathless realm and inspires the prophet tongue and moves the heart of the inwardly attuned sensitive seer-poet. Already God moves ahead tracing the path of a greater Life before us. Despite death, despite hate, despite war, despite failures, the soul in man aspires for love and peace and climbs beyond death to the home of immortality.

The Being of Death

All this is he and yet we may ask who he is? Is he real or unreal, is he just a shadow or a palpable being, is he just a formation of the human mind or a person created and deputed by God, is he an original truth or an energy that has deviated from its aim

² The great goddess who destroyed her own head into many parts. An incarnation of Kali who destroys herself when it seems she is destroying others. All is herself and her destruction is also an act of love. This is the symbol.

leading to much avoidable confusion? The answers to these questions are the very last ones on death and exceed the limits and scope of the human mind. They belong to the realm of the Spirit, to a domain that transcends the reaches even of our highest mentality. The truth and mystery of death is subtle, one which even the gods know not. So says Death to Nachiketas. Ask not this boon but any other for none knows me. Yet Nachiketas persists and, likewise, there is in all of us a dormant or active Nachiketas whose thirst for knowledge and fire of seeking is not satisfied with the usual answers. Our science and experience of life cannot help us. We have to die while living to know this and few have even attempted it.

In all traditions there have been such rare geniuses of the soul. And their collective experience does affirm that there is indeed such a being who is responsible for the cessation of our earthly existence. And he has a vast and complex organization whose net is cast far and wide and sinks deep into the fabric of our earthly tissue of life. Yet how did this dark mystery come into existence? What secret necessity gave him such an ominous and formidable shape of terror and what force sustains his reign? Here we find even the mystic experience fumbling. He is, that is all, and we must somehow escape his net. But as to the how and why of his existence, there is a hush of conspiracy that hangs around most spiritual philosophies and their supporting vision. The Hindu of course sees his dual role, the twin role of the god of death as well as the god of dharma (here in the sense of a keeper of the law). That explains, symbolically at least, the deeper role that he plays. He is also depicted as carrying a noose in his hands and riding on a buffalo. This also is perhaps a symbolic image. The buffalo is an inert animal, reminding us of the dull inertia towards which everything tends to sink, except that which is given to Light and united with it. The noose here is a paradox since in its function it actually severs the cord with which the soul gets attached to and lost in material life. Therefore its own noose is a kind of reminder to the soul to get rid of the noose of false attachment to material existence. But still the mystery of his origin and dissolution or whatever other destiny remains a question mark.

The Transmutation of Death

Are we to forever struggle under his hard and harsh inflexible law, individual cases of escape and partial victories apart? Is his reign as eternal as God's? To answer that, it is imperative to first understand the origin of death itself.

“There is a very old tradition which narrates this. I am going to tell you the story as one does to children, for in this way you will understand:

‘One day ‘God’ decided to exteriorise himself, objectivise himself, in order to have the joy of knowing himself in detail. So, first of all, he emanated his consciousness (that is to say, he manifested his consciousness) by ordering this consciousness to realise a universe. This consciousness began by emanating four beings, four individualities which were indeed altogether very high beings, of the highest Reality. They were the being of consciousness, the being of love (of *Ananda* rather), the being of life and the being of light and knowledge — but consciousness and light are the same thing. There we are then: consciousness, love and *Ananda*, life and truth... And naturally, they were supremely powerful beings... They were what are called in that tradition the first emanations, that is, the first formations. And each one became very conscious of its qualities, its power, its capacities, its possibilities, and, suddenly forgot each in its own way that it was only an emanation and an incarnation of the Supreme. And so this is what happened: when light or Consciousness separated from the divine Consciousness, that is, when it began to think it was the divine Consciousness and that there was nothing other than itself, it suddenly became obscurity and inconstancy. And when Life thought that all life was in itself and that there was nothing else but its life and that it did not depend at all upon the Supreme, then its life became death. And when Truth thought that it contained all truth, and that there was no other truth than itself, this Truth became falsehood. And when love or *Ananda* was convinced that it was the supreme *Ananda* and that there was no other than itself and its felicity, it became suffering. And that is how the world, which was to have been so beautiful, became so ugly...

“It is said also... that the Divine wanted his creation to be a free creation. He wanted all that went forth from him to be absolutely independent and free in order to be able to unite with him in freedom, not through compulsion. He did not want that they should be compelled to be faithful, compelled to be conscious, compelled to be obedient. They had to do it spontaneously, through the knowledge and conviction that that was much better. So this world was created as a world of total freedom, freedom of choice. And it is in this way that at every moment everyone has the freedom of choice — but with

all the consequences. If one chooses well, it is good, but if one chooses ill, ah well, what's to happen happens — that is what has happened!

“The story may be understood in a much more occult and spiritual sense. But it is like all the stories of the universe: if you want to narrate them so that people may understand, they become stories for children. But if one knows how to see the truth behind the symbols, one understands everything.”³

Death therefore is a shadow of God who swallows up all that He has left behind in His blazing trail. He is God's instrument for destroying imperfect forms. Death sees its dark womb alone as the origin of things. Since its nature is to swallow, it tries to swallow not only the past but also the future and the present. This happens because cut off from its origin and the deeper truth that gave it birth, it forgets God's Whole. Therefore too its darkness hangs as a veil around the face of the Eternal, slowly uplifted as consciousness evolves and moves further. The day man is ready to see the Eternal face to face and manifest His Perfection in life, that day death will disappear from human life at least, or rather human life will change into life divine, a life free of ignorance and death. This will happen when man has got rid of his ignorance and life has fulfilled itself in God. Death has to be transformed into a being of Life from which it originally emerged. This will become possible as life progressively centers itself on its divine origin and is no more cut off by the veil of ego and ignorance and desire. Death is nothing but life fallen from its purpose of constant progression towards the divine, through a swift and natural efflorescence of the divine element within man. A divinisation of life is therefore also a divinisation of death. When man refuses to live for and by the separative ego and begins to live for the divine not only in his soul as he does now in rare moments and in rare beings, but also in parts of his nature, then the reign of death will end. And that hour will surely come.

*For in the march of all-fulfilling Time
The hour must come of the Transcendent's will:
All turns and winds towards his predestined ends
In Nature's fixed inevitable course
Decreed since the beginning of the worlds
In the deep essence of created things:*

³ The Mother: CWM Vol. 5, pp. 372-374

*Even there shall come as a high crown of all
The end of Death, the death of Ignorance.
But first high Truth must set her feet on earth
And man aspire to the Eternal's light
And all his members feel the Spirit's touch
And all his life obey an inner Force....
The frontiers of the Ignorance shall recede,
More and more souls shall enter into light,
Minds lit, inspired, the occult summoner hear
And lives blaze with a sudden inner flame
And hearts grow enamoured of divine delight
And human wills tune to the divine will,
These separate selves the Spirit's oneness feel,
These senses of heavenly sense grow capable,
The flesh and nerves of a strange ethereal joy
And mortal bodies of immortality.
A divine force shall flow through tissue and cell
And take the charge of breath and speech and act
And all the thoughts shall be a glow of suns
And every feeling a celestial thrill.
Often a lustrous inner dawn shall come
Lighting the chambers of the slumbering mind;
A sudden bliss shall run through every limb
And Nature with a mightier Presence fill.
Thus shall the earth open to divinity
And common natures feel the wide uplift,
Illumine common acts with the Spirit's ray
And meet the deity in common things.
Nature shall live to manifest secret God,
The Spirit shall take up the human play,
This earthly life become the life divine.⁴*

⁴ Sri Aurobindo: *Savitri*, pp. 708, 710-11

The Fear of Death

*"Death is but changing of our robes to wait
In wedding garments at the Eternal's gate."*

*"Although Death walks beside us on Life's road,
A dim bystander at the body's start
And a last judgment on man's futile works,
Other is the riddle of its ambiguous face:
Death is a stair, a door, a stumbling stride
The soul must take to cross from birth to birth,
A grey defeat pregnant with victory,
A whip to lash us towards our deathless state.
The unconscious world is the spirit's self-made room,
Eternal Night shadow of eternal Day.
Night is not our beginning nor our end;
She is the dark Mother in whose womb we have hid
Safe from too swift a waking to world-pain.
We came to her from a supernal Light,
By Light we live and to the Light we go."*

*"A secret Will compels us to endure.
Our life's repose is in the Infinite;
It cannot end, its end is Life supreme.
Death is a passage, not the goal of our walk..."*

Sri Aurobindo

Ancient Texts

An Ancient Indian Tale: The Secret of Death

Far back in time, life may have been different in its outer aspects, but the inner quest was the same. So also with Nachiketas, a child of faith and simple sincerity. His father Vajashravas is holding a *yajna* (sacrifice) and as is symbolic of the worldly wise he chooses to offer the old and infirm, unyielding cattle and cows to the gods. It may be noted in passing that in the symbolism of the Vedic and the Upanishadic period, cows represented Light or all our upward striving for true knowledge. The gods are the powers of Light who bring down the gifts of true knowledge and other inner riches to man. The sacrifice spoken of here is therefore not an external ritual but an inner act. Here Vajashravas keeps his best things for himself and offers the worst and the useless for the cosmic good. It may be possible that in this ancient tale pregnant with significant symbols, Nachiketas, the child himself may be a representative of the inmost soul in man and Vajashravas, the king, our hard exterior ego-bound consciousness, pursuing all true things either mechanically or half-heartedly, a thing which our inmost soul despises and abhors. As is common to these tales, deeper truths are interwoven with some actual episode which is mostly an outer scaffolding, the husk hiding the kernel. Coming back to the story, the king's brilliant son Nachiketas, unable to swallow this insincerity on the part of his father, questions his action. When ignored, he puts it in a most pointed way: "To whom do you give me, father." The father angered at this rather disrespectful intrusion says: "I give you to Death." The sensitive boy takes it to heart and waits for death without food or water for three days. Thereupon, Death moved by his sincerity appears before him but not with a view to take him away since obviously his hour has not yet come. Instead, the terrible god appears as a giver of boon and a knower of the secrets of Time and the subtle mysteries of life hidden from mortal sight. In an almost reversal image of death, the great god is apologetic for having not responded to Nachiketas calling upon him for three days. Therefore, he grants him three boons. His first boon is peace of mind for his father, truly a noble gesture for a boy who is given away to death by an angry father. The second boon he asks for is to learn the secret of the heavenly, deathless

fire. Who else but death himself to speak of the fire that it cannot slay? But it is the last boon which is the most enigmatic one. Nachiketas asks Death to disclose the truth of immortality. Death tries his utmost to dissuade Nachiketas, offering countless worldly riches instead — sons and grandsons with a long life, much cattle and elephants and gold and horses; a very long life as an emperor of any portion of the earth of his own choice, wealth and pleasure and women and chariots and anything else that he may desire. But wise Nachiketas counters him intelligently: “Will not all these wither away with time and thou take them away one day?” He insists upon his one aspiration, to know the secret of secrets, that over which even the wise men and gods debate. What follows as a colloquy between the god of death and the spirit of Nachiketas forms the quintessence of ancient Indian thought on the subject. It is symbolic that even Death can be persuaded to yield, even its inflexible law can change and its secret revealed if we know how to persist and persevere against the dark denial.

Here are a few excerpts from the dialogue, selected from the ‘Katha Upanishad’:¹

अविद्यायामन्तरे वर्तमानाः स्वयं धीराः पण्डितमन्यमानाः।
दन्द्रम्यमाणाः परियन्ति मूढा अन्धेनैव नीयमाना यथान्धाः॥५॥

They who dwell in the ignorance, within it, wise in their own wit and deeming themselves very learned, men bewildered are they who wander about stumbling round and round helplessly like blind men led by the blind.

न साम्परायः प्रतिभाति बालं प्रमाद्यन्तं वित्तमोहेन मूढम्।
अयं लोको नास्ति पर इति मानी पुनः पुनर्वशमापद्यते मे॥६॥

The childish wit bewildered and drunken with the illusion of riches cannot open its eyes to see the passage to heaven: for he that thinks this world is and there is no other, comes again and again into Death’s thralldom.

श्रवणायापि बहुभिर्यो न लभ्यः शृण्वन्तोऽपि बहवो यं न विद्युः।
आश्चर्यो वक्ता कुशलोऽस्य लब्धाश्चर्यो ज्ञाता कुशलानुशिष्टः॥७॥

¹ SABCL, Vol. 12, pp. 245-256

He that is not easy to be heard of by many, and even of those that have heard, they are many who have not known Him, a miracle is the man that can speak of Him wisely or is skilful to win Him, and when one is found, a miracle is the listener who can know Him even when taught of Him by the knower.

न नरेणावरेण प्रोक्त एष सुविज्ञेयो बहुधा चिन्त्यमानः।
अनन्यप्रोक्ते गतिरत्र नास्त्यणीयान् ह्यतर्क्यमणुप्रमाणात् ॥८॥

An inferior man cannot tell you of Him; for thus told thou canst not truly know Him, since He is thought of in many aspects. Yet unless told of Him by another thou canst not find thy way to Him; for He is subtler than subtlety and that which logic cannot reach.

न जायते म्रियते वा विपश्चिन्नायं कुतश्चिन्न बभूव कश्चित्।
अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥१८॥

The Wise One is not born, neither does he die: he came not from anywhere, neither is he anyone: he is unborn, he is everlasting, he is ancient and sempiternal: he is not slain in the slaying of the body.

हन्ता चेन्मन्यते हन्तुं हतश्चेन्मन्यते हतम्।
उभौ तौ न विजानीतो नायं हन्ति न हन्यते ॥१६॥

If the slayer think that he slays, if the slain think that he is slain, both of these have not the knowledge. This slays not, neither is He slain.

अणोरणीयान्महतो महीयानात्मास्य जन्तोर्निहितो गुहायाम्।
तमक्रतुः पश्यति वीतशोको धातुप्रसादान्महिमानमात्मनः ॥२०॥

Finer than the fine, huger than the huge the self hides in the secret heart of the creature: when a man strips himself of will and is weaned from sorrow, then he beholds Him; purified from the mental elements he sees the greatness of the Self-being.

पराञ्चि खानि व्यतृणत्स्वयम्भूस्तस्मात्पराङ् पश्यति नान्तरात्मन्।
कश्चिद्धीरः प्रत्यगात्मानमैक्षदावृत्तचक्षुरमृतत्वमिच्छन् ॥१॥

The Self-born has set the doors of the body to face outwards, therefore the soul of a man gazes outward and not at the Self within: hardly a wise man here and there, desiring immortality, turns his eyes inward and sees the Self within him.

पराचः कामाननुयन्ति बालास्ते मृत्योर्यन्ति विततस्य पाशम्।
अथ धीरा अमृतत्वं विदित्वा ध्रुवमध्रुवेष्विह न प्रार्थयन्ते ॥२॥

The rest childishly follow after desire and pleasure and walk into the snare of Death that gapes wide for them. But calm souls, having learned of immortality, seek not for permanence in the things of this world that pass and are not.

अङ्गुष्ठमात्रः पुरुषो मध्य आत्मनि तिष्ठति।
ईशानो भूतभव्यस्य न ततो विजुगुप्सते। एतद्वै तत् ॥१२॥

The *Purusha* who is seated in the midst of our self is no larger than the finger of a man; He is the Lord of what was and what shall be. Him having seen one shrinks not from aught, nor abhors any. *This is That thou seekest.*

अङ्गुष्ठमात्रः पुरुषो ज्योतिरिवाधूमकः।
ईशानो भूतभव्यस्य स एवाद्य स उ श्वः। एतद्वै तत् ॥१३॥

The *Purusha* that is within us is no larger than the finger of a man: He is like a blazing fire that is without smoke, He is lord of His past and His future. He alone is today and He alone shall be tomorrow.

अस्य विस्त्रंसमानस्य शरीरस्थस्य देहिनः।
देहाद्विमुच्यमानस्य किमत्र परिशिष्यते। एतद्वै तत् ॥४॥

When this encased Spirit that is in the body, falls away from it, when He is freed from its casing, what is there then that remains? *This is That thou seekest.*

न प्राणेन नापानेन मर्त्यो जीवति कश्चन।
इतरेण तु जीवन्ति यस्मिन्नेतावुपाश्रितौ ॥५॥

Man that is mortal lives not by the breath, no, nor by the lower breath; but by something else we live in which both these have their being.

यदा सर्वे प्रमुच्यन्ते कामा येऽस्य हृदि श्रिताः।
अथ मर्त्योऽमृतो भवत्यत्र ब्रह्म समश्नुते ॥१४ ॥

When every desire that finds lodging in the heart of man, has been loosened from its moorings, then this mortal puts on immortality: even here he tastes God, in this human body.

यदा सर्वे प्रभिद्यन्ते हृदयस्येह ग्रन्थयः।
अथ मर्त्योऽमृतो भवत्येतावद्भ्यनुशासनम् ॥१५ ॥

Yea, when all the strings of the heart are rent asunder, even here, in this human birth, then the mortal becomes immortal. This is the whole teaching of the Scriptures.

शतं चैका च हृदयस्य नाड्यस्तासां मूर्धानमभिनिःसृतैका।
तयोर्ध्वमायन्नमृतत्वमेति विश्वङ्ङन्या उक्क्रमणे भवन्ति ॥१६ ॥

A hundred and one are the nerves of the heart, and of all these only one issues out through the head of a man: by this his soul mounts up to its immortal home, but the rest lead him to all sorts and conditions of births in his passing.

अङ्गुष्ठमात्रः पुरुषोऽन्तरात्मा सदा जनानां हृदये सन्निविष्टः।
तं स्वाच्छरीरात्प्रवृहेन्मुञ्जादिवेषीकां धैर्येण।
तं विद्याच्छुक्रमृतं तं विद्याच्छुक्रमृतमिति ॥१७ ॥

The *Purusha*, the Spirit within, who is no larger than the finger of a man is seated for ever in the heart of creatures: one must separate Him with patience from one's own body as one separates from a blade of grass its main fibre. Thou shalt know Him for the Bright Immortal, yea, for the Bright Immortal.

Nachiketas's Three Boons²

Nachiketas is the young aspiring human being still in the Ignorance — *naciketa*, meaning one without consciousness or knowledge. The three boons he asks for are in

² Collected works of Shri Nolini Kanta Gupta

reference to the three fundamental models of being and consciousness that are at the very basis, forming, as it were, the ground-plan of the integral reality. They are:

- the individual,
- the universal or cosmic and
- the transcendental.

The first boon regards the individual, that is to say, the individual identity and integrity. It asks for the maintenance of that individuality so that it may be saved from the dissolution that Death brings about. Death, of course, means the dissolution of the body, but it represents also dissolution pure and simple. Indeed death is a process which does not stop with the physical phenomenon, but continues even after; for with the body gone, the other elements of the individual organism, the vital and the mental too gradually fall off, fade and dissolve. Nachiketas wishes to secure from Death the safety and preservation of the earthly personality, the particular organisation of mind and vital based upon a recognisable physical frame. That is the first necessity for the aspiring mortal — for, it is said, the body is the first instrument for the working out of one's life's ideal. But man's true personality, the real individuality lies beyond, beyond the body, beyond the life, beyond the mind, beyond the triple region that Death lords it over. That is the divine world, the Heaven of the immortals, beyond death and beyond sorrow and grief. It is the hearth secreted in the inner heart where burns the Divine Fire, the God of Life Everlasting. And this is the nodus that binds together the threefold status of the manifested existence, the body, the life and the mind. The triplicity is the structure of name and form built out of the bricks of experience, the kiln, as it were, within which burns the Divine Agni, man's true soul. This soul can be reached only when one exceeds the bounds and limitations of the triple cord and experiences one's communion and identity with all souls and all existence. Agni is the secret divinity within, within the individual and within the world; he is the Immanent Divine, the cosmic godhead that holds together and marshals all the elements and components, all the principles that make up the manifest universe. He it is that has entered into the world and created facets of his own reality in multiple forms: and it is he that lies secret in the human being as the immortal soul through all its adventure of life and death in the series of incarnations in terrestrial evolution. The adoration and realisation of this Immanent Divinity, the worship of Agni taught by Yama in the second boon, consists in the triple sacrifice, the triple work, the triple union in the triple status of the physical, the vital and the mental consciousness, the mastery of

which leads one to the other shore, the abode of perennial existence where the human soul enjoys its eternity and unending continuity in cosmic life. Therefore, Agni, the master of the psychic being, is called *jatavedas*, he who knows the births, all the transmigrations from life to life.

The third boon is the secret of secrets, for it is the knowledge and realisation of Transcendence that is sought here. Beyond the individual lies the universal; is there anything beyond the universal? The release of the individual into the cosmic existence gives him the griefless life eternal: can the cosmos be rolled up and flung into something beyond? What would be the nature of that thing? What is there outside creation, outside manifestation, outside Maya, to use a latter day term? Is there existence or non-existence (utter dissolution or extinction — death in his supreme and absolute status)? King Yama did not choose to answer immediately and even endeavoured to dissuade Nachiketas from pursuing the question over which people were confounded, as he said. Evidently it was a much discussed problem in those days. Buddha was asked the same question and he evaded it, saying that the pragmatic man should attend to practical and immediate realities and not waste time and energy in discussing things ultimate and beyond that have hardly any relation to the present and the actual.

But Yama did answer and unveil the mastery and impart the supreme secret knowledge — the knowledge of the Transcendent Brahman: it is out of the transcendent reality that the immanent deity takes his birth. Hence the Divine Fire, the Lord of creation and the Inner Master — *sarvabhutantaratma, antaryami* — is called *brahmajam*, born of the Brahman. Yama teaches the process of transcendence. Apart from the knowledge and experience first of the individual and then of the cosmic Brahman, there is a definite line along which the human consciousness (or unconsciousness, as it is at present) is to ascend and evolve. The first step is to learn to distinguish between the Good and the Pleasurable (*sreya* and *preya*). The line of pleasure leads to the external, the superficial, the false: while the other path leads towards the inner and the higher truth. So the second step is the gradual withdrawal of the consciousness from the physical and the sensual and even the mental preoccupation and focussing it upon what is certain and permanent. In the midst of the death-ridden consciousness — in the heart of all that is unstable and fleeting — one has to look for Agni, the eternal godhead, the Immortal in mortality, the Timeless in time through whom lies the passage to Immortality beyond Time.

Man has two souls corresponding to his double status. In the inferior, the soul looks downward and is involving in the current of Impermanence and Ignorance, it tastes of grief and sorrow and suffers death and dissolution: in the higher it looks upward and communes and joins with the Eternal (the cosmic) and then with the Absolute (the transcendent). The lower is a reflection of the higher, the higher comes down in a diminished and hence tarnished light. The message is that of deliverance, the deliverance and reintegration of the lower soul out of its bondage of worldly ignorant life into the freedom and immortality first of its higher and then of its highest status. It is true, however, that the Upanishad does not make a trenchant distinction between the cosmic and the transcendent and often it speaks of both in the same breath, as it were. For in fact they are realities involved in each other and interwoven. Indeed the triple status, including the Individual, forms one single totality and the three do not exclude or cancel each other; on the contrary, they combine and may be said to enhance each other's reality. The Transcendence expresses or deploys itself in the cosmos — he goes abroad, *sa paryagat*: and the cosmic individualities, concretises itself in the particular and the personal. The one single spiritual reality holds itself, aspects itself in a threefold manner.

The teaching of Yama in brief may be said to be the gospel of immortality and it consists of the knowledge of triple immortality. And who else can be the best teacher of immortality than Death himself, as Nachiketas pointedly said? The first immortality is that of the physical existence and consciousness, the preservation of the personal identity, the individual name and form — this being in itself as expression and embodiment and instrument of the Inner Reality. This inner reality enshrines the second immortality — the eternity and continuity of the soul's life through its incarnations in time, the divine Agni lit for ever and ever growing in flaming consciousness. And the third and final immortality is in the being and consciousness beyond time, beyond all relativities, the absolute and self-existent delight.

The Gita

If the Upanishad lays down the broad theoretical framework for the subject of death and immortality, the Gita turns it masterfully into its practical application. The problem of the average worldly man is not so much of a striving after immortality but a cognitive frame to face the spectre of death that haunts his life and interferes with the right law of

action due to his blind and nervous-sensorial attachment to life. The Gita enlightens our will and teaches us the attitudes we need to develop in facing death in our everyday life.

Gems from the *Gita*

नासतो विद्यते भावो नाभावो विद्यते सतः।
उभयोरपि दृष्टोऽन्तस्त्वनयोस्तत्त्वदर्शिभिः ॥१६॥

That which really is, cannot go out of existence, just as that which is non-existent cannot come into being. The end of this opposition of 'is' and 'is not' has been perceived by the seers of essential truths.³

“That which really is, cannot go out of existence, though it may change the forms through which it appears, just as that which is non-existent cannot come into being. The soul is and cannot cease to be. This opposition of is and is not, this balance of being and becoming which is the mind's view of existence, finds its end in the realisation of the soul as the one imperishable self by whom all this universe has been extended. Finite bodies have an end, but that which possesses and uses the body is infinite, illimitable, eternal, indestructible.”⁴

अविनाशि तु तद्विद्धि येन सर्वमिदं ततम्।
विनाशमव्ययस्यास्य न कश्चित्कर्तुमर्हति ॥१७॥

Know that to be imperishable by which all this is extended. Who can slay the immortal spirit?⁵

अन्तवन्त इमे देहा नित्यस्योक्ताः शरीरिणः।
अनाशिनोऽप्रमेयस्य तस्माद्युध्यस्व भारत ॥१८॥

Finite bodies have an end, but that which possesses and uses the body, is infinite, illimitable, eternal, indestructible. Therefore fight, O Bharata.⁶

³ Verse 2.16

⁴ Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 57

⁵ Verse 2.17

य एनं वेत्ति हन्तारं यश्चैनं मन्यते हतम्।
उभौ तौ न विजानीतो नायं हन्ति न हन्यते ॥१६॥

He who regards this (the soul) as a slayer, and he who thinks it is slain, both of them fail to perceive the truth. It does not slay, nor is it slain.⁷

न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचि-
न्नायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः।
अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो
न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥२०॥

This is not born, nor does it die, nor is it a thing that comes into being once and passing away will never come into being again. It is unborn, ancient, sempiternal; it is not slain with the slaying of the body.⁸

वेदाविनाशिनं नित्यं य एनमजमव्ययम्।
कथं स पुरुषः पार्थ कं द्यातयति हन्ति कम् ॥२१॥

He who knows it as immortal eternal imperishable spiritual existence, how can that man slay, O Partha, or cause to be slain?⁹

वासांसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय
नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि।
तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्णा-
न्यन्यानि संयाति नवानि देही ॥२२॥

⁶ Verse 2.18

⁷ Verse 2.19 — This verse needs to be read in conjunction with the other verses. For it is not a blind justification to kill as is sometimes supposed but rather an invitation to the deepest truth of our soul, that which is forever unstained. It is when we live in this inmost truth and its unperturbed poise that we can truly slay without guilt if that be the Will of God within us. But so long as we dwell in the Ignorance of Nature and act by and for the ego then we cannot escape the inner consequences of our deeds. This is what the *Gita* repeatedly points out to us — to live beyond the apparent good and the apparent evil, to ascend beyond the individual and social, even beyond the mere moral and such other temporary constructs and standards of our mental ignorance to the highest and eternal truths of the spirit, to live and act from the summits of our soul and for God.

⁸ Verse 2.20

⁹ Verse 2.21

The embodied soul casts away old and takes up new bodies as a man changes worn-out raiment for new.¹⁰

“He has spoken of the physical life and the death of the body as if these were the primary realities; but they have no such essential value to the sage and the thinker. The sorrow for the bodily death of his friends and kindred is a grief to which wisdom and the true knowledge of life lend no sanction. The enlightened man does not mourn either for the living or the dead, for he knows that suffering and death are merely incidents in the history of the soul. The soul, not the body, is the reality. All these kings of men for whose approaching death he mourns, have lived before, they will live again in the human body; for as the soul passes physically through childhood and youth and age, so it passes on to the changing of the body. The calm and wise mind, the *dhīra*, the thinker who looks upon life steadily and does not allow himself to be disturbed and blinded by his sensations and emotions, is not deceived by material appearances; he does not allow the clamour of his blood and his nerves and his heart to cloud his judgment or to contradict his knowledge. He looks beyond the apparent facts of the life of the body and senses to the real fact of his being and rises beyond the emotional and physical desires of the ignorant nature to the true and only aim of the human existence.”¹¹

नैनं छिन्दन्ति शस्त्राणि नैनं दहति पावकः।
न चैनं क्लेदयन्त्यापो न शोषयति मारुतः ॥२३॥

Weapons cannot cleave it, nor the fire burn, nor do the waters drench it, nor the wind dry.¹²

“Finite bodies have an end, but that which possesses and uses the body, is infinite, illimitable, eternal, indestructible. It casts away old and takes up new bodies as a man changes worn-out raiment for new; and what is there in this to grieve at and recoil and shrink? This is not born, nor does it die, nor is it a thing that comes into being once and passing away will never come into being

¹⁰ Verse 2.22

¹¹ Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 56

¹² Verse 2.23

again. It is unborn, ancient, sempiternal; it is not slain with the slaying of the body. Who can slay the immortal spirit? Weapons cannot cleave it, nor the fire burn, nor do the waters drench it, nor the wind dry. Eternally stable, immobile, all-pervading, it is for ever and for ever. Not manifested like the body, but greater than all manifestation, not to be analysed by the thought, but greater than all mind, not capable of change and modification like the life and its organs and their objects, but beyond the changes of mind and life and body, it is yet the Reality which all these strive to figure."¹³

अव्यक्तोऽयमचिन्त्योऽयमविकार्योऽयमुच्यते।
तस्मादेवं विदित्वैनं नानुशोचितुमर्हसि॥२५॥

It is unmanifest, it is unthinkable, it is immutable, so it is described (by the Shrutis); therefore knowing it as such, thou shouldst not grieve.¹⁴

"There is no such thing as death, for it is the body that dies and the body is not the man... and what is there in this to grieve at and recoil and shrink?... who can slay the immortal spirit?"¹⁵

अथ चैनं नित्यजातं नित्यं वा मन्यसे मृतम्।
तथापि त्वं महाबाहो नैवं शोचितुमर्हसि॥२६॥

Even if thou thinkest of it (the self) as being constantly subject to birth and death, still, O mighty-armed, thou shouldst not grieve.¹⁶

"Even if the truth of our being were a thing less sublime, vast, intangible by death and life, if the self were constantly subject to birth and death, still the death of beings ought not to be a cause of sorrow. For that is an inevitable circumstance of the soul's self-manifestation. Its birth is an appearing out of some state in which it is not non-existent but unmanifest to our mortal senses, its death is a return to that unmanifest world or condition and out of it it will again appear in the physical manifestation. The to-do made by the physical

¹³ Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 57.

¹⁴ Verse 2.25.

¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 58.

¹⁶ Verse 2.26

mind and senses about death and the horror of death whether on the sick-bed or the battlefield, is the most ignorant of nervous clamours. Our sorrow for the death of men is an ignorant grieving for those for whom there is no cause to grieve, since they have neither gone out of existence nor suffered any painful or terrible change of condition, but are beyond death no less in being and no more unhappy in that circumstance than in life."¹⁷

जातस्य हि ध्रुवो मृत्युर्ध्रुवं जन्म मृतस्य च।
तस्मादपरिहार्येऽर्थे न त्वं शोचितुमर्हसि ॥२७॥

For certain is death for the born, and certain is birth for the dead; therefore what is inevitable ought not to be a cause of thy sorrow.¹⁸

देही नित्यमवधोऽयं देहे सर्वस्य भारत।
तस्मात्सर्वाणि भूतानि न त्वं शोचितुमर्हसि ॥३०॥

This dweller in the body of everyone is eternal and indestructible, O Bharata; therefore thou shouldst not grieve for any creature.¹⁹

"When we have known ourselves as this, then to speak of ourselves as slayer or slain is an absurdity. One thing only is the truth in which we have to live, the Eternal manifesting itself as the soul of man in the great cycle of its pilgrimage with birth and death for milestones, with worlds beyond as resting-places, with all the circumstances of life happy or unhappy as the means of our progress and battle and victory and with immortality as the home to which the soul travels."²⁰

अन्तकाले च मामेव स्मरन् मुक्त्वा कलेवरम्।
यः प्रयाति स मद्भावं याति नास्त्यत्र संशयः ॥५॥

¹⁷ Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 58.

¹⁸ Verse 2.27

¹⁹ Verse 2.30

²⁰ Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 58

Whoever leaves his body and departs remembering Me at his time of end, comes to my *bhava* (that of the Purushottama, my status of being); there is no doubt of that.²¹

“The body is abandoned, but the soul goes on its way... Much then depends on what he is at the critical moment of his departure. For whatever form of becoming his consciousness is fixed on at the time of death and has been full of that always in his mind and thought before death, to that form he must attain, since the Prakriti by Karma works out the soul’s thoughts and energies and that is in real fact her whole business. Therefore, if the soul in the human being desires to attain to the status of the Purushottama, there are two necessities, two conditions which must be satisfied before that can be possible. He must have moulded towards that ideal his whole inner life in his earthly living; and he must be faithful to his aspiration and will in his departing.”²²

यं यं वापि स्मरन् भावं त्यजत्यन्ते कलेवरम्।
तं तमेवैति कौन्तेय सदा तद्भावभावितः ॥६॥

Whosoever at the end abandons the body, thinking upon any form of being, to that form he attains, O Kaunteya, into which the soul was at each moment growing inwardly during the physical life.²³

“The *Gita* here lays a great stress on the thought and state of mind at the time of death, a stress which will with difficulty be understood if we do not recognise what may be called the self-creative power of the consciousness. What the thought, the inner regard, the faith, *śraddhā*, settles itself upon with a complete and definite insistence, into that our inner being tends to change. This tendency becomes a decisive force when we go to those higher spiritual and self-evolved experiences which are less dependent on external things than is our ordinary psychology, enslaved as that is to outward Nature. There we can see ourselves steadily becoming that on which we keep our minds fixed and to which we constantly aspire. Therefore there any lapse of the thought, any infidelity of the memory means always a retardation of the change or

²¹ Verse 8.5

²² Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 280

²³ Verse 8.6

some fall in its process and a going back towards what we were before, at least so long as we have not substantially and irrevocably fixed our new becoming. When we have done that, when we have made it normal to our experience, the memory of it remains self-existent because that now is the natural form of our consciousness. In the critical moment of passing from the mortal plane of living, the importance of our then state of consciousness becomes evident. But it is not a death-bed remembrance at variance with or insufficiently prepared by the whole tenor of our life and our past subjectivity that can have this saving power."²⁴

कविं पुराणमनुशासितारमणोरणीयांसमनुस्मरेद्यः ।
 सर्वस्य धातारमचिन्त्यरूपमादित्यवर्णं तमसः परस्तात् ॥६॥
 प्रयाणकाले मनसाचलेन भक्त्या युक्तो योगबलेन चैव ।
 भ्रुवोर्मध्ये प्राणमावेश्य सम्यक् स तं परं पुरुषमुपैति दिव्यम् ॥१०॥

This supreme Self is the Seer, the Ancient of Days, subtler than the subtle and (in his eternal self-vision and wisdom) the Master and Ruler of all existence who sets in their place in his being all things that are; his form is unthinkable, he is refulgent as the sun beyond the darkness; he who thinketh upon this *Purusha* in the time of departure, with motionless mind, a soul armed with the strength of Yoga, a union with God in *bhakti* and the life-force entirely drawn up and set between the brows in the seat of mystic vision, he attains to this supreme divine *Purusha*.²⁵

"We arrive here at the first description of this supreme *Purusha*, — the Godhead who is even more and greater than the Immutable and to whom the *Gita* gives subsequently the name of Purushottama. He too in his timeless eternity is immutable and far beyond all this manifestation and here in Time there dawn on us only faint glimpses of his being conveyed through many varied symbols and disguises, *avyakto akṣ arah*"²⁶

सर्वद्वाराणि संयम्य मनो हृदि निरुध्य च ।
 मूर्ध्नाधायात्मनः प्राणमास्थितो योगधारणाम् ॥१२॥

²⁴ Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 281

²⁵ Verses 8.9-10

²⁶ Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 282

ओमित्येकाक्षरं ब्रह्म व्याहरन् मामनुस्मरन्।
यः प्रयाति त्यजन् देहं स याति परमां गतिम्॥१३॥

All the doors of the senses closed, the mind shut in into the heart, the life-force taken up out of its diffused movement into the head, the intelligence concentrated in the utterance of the sacred syllable OM and its conceptive thought in the remembrance of the supreme Godhead, he who goes forth, abandoning the body, he attains to the highest status.²⁷

“That is the established Yogic way of going, a last offering up of the whole being to the Eternal, the Transcendent. But still that is only a process; the essential condition is the constant undeviating memory of the Divine in life, even in action and battle — *māmanusmarayudhyaca* — and the turning of the whole act of living into an uninterrupted Yoga, *nitya-yoga*.”²⁸

मामुपेत्य पुनर्जन्म दुःखालयमशाश्वतम्।
नाप्नुवन्ति महात्मानः संसिद्धिं परमां गताः॥१५॥

Having come to me, these great souls come not again to birth, this transient and painful condition of our mortal being; they reach the highest perfection.²⁹

“To know him so and so to seek him does not bind to rebirth or to the chain of Karma; the soul can satisfy its desire to escape permanently from the transient and painful condition of our mortal being.”³⁰

*I saw the mornings of the future rise,
I heard the voices of an age unborn
That comes behind us and our pallid morn,
And from the heart of an approaching light
One said to man, “Know thyself infinite,
Who shalt do mightier miracles than these,
Infinite, moving mid infinities.”*

²⁷ Verse 8.12-13

²⁸ Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 283

²⁹ Verse 8.15

³⁰ Sri Aurobindo: *Essays on the Gita*, p. 283

*Then from our hills the ancient answer pealed,
"For Thou, O Splendour, art myself concealed,
And the grey cell contains me not, the star
I outmeasure and am older than the elements are.
Whether on earth or far beyond the sun,
I, stumbling, clouded, am the Eternal One."³¹*

³¹ Sri Aurobindo: 'A Vision of Science', *Collected Poems*, pp. 43-44

"Shall I accept death or shall I turn and wrestle with him and conquer? That shall be as God in me chooses. For whether I live or die, I am always."

Sri Aurobindo

In the Moonlight

*...The old shall perish; it shall pass away,
Expunged, annihilated, blotted out;
And all the iron bands that ring about
Man's wide expansion shall at last give way.*

*Freedom, God, Immortality, the three
Are one and shall be realised at length;
Love, Wisdom, Justice, Joy and utter Strength
Gather into a pure felicity...*

*This is man's progress; for the Iron Age
Prepares the Age of Gold. What we call sin,
Is but man's leavings as from deep within
The Pilot guides him in his pilgrimage.*

*He leaves behind the ill with strife and pain,
Because it clings and constantly returns,
And in the fire of suffering fiercely burns
More sweetness to deserve, more strength to gain.*

*He rises to the good with Titan wings:
And this the reason of his high unease,
Because he came from the infinities
To build immortally with mortal things;*

*The body with increasing soul to fill,
Extend Heaven's claim upon the toiling earth
And climb from death to a diviner birth
Grasped and supported by immortal Will.*

Sri Aurobindo